

**Review essay**

Person, Katarzyna. *Warsaw Ghetto Police: The Jewish Order Service During the Nazi Occupation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

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Jewish Order Service (JOS or simply ghetto police) existed from September 1940 to the Spring of 1943, charged with policing the Warsaw Ghetto in which the city's Jews were confined by the Nazi authorities. Although this is far from the first monograph on the Warsaw Ghetto, is the first with a focus on the individuals who policed it, who, over the course of the ghetto's lifetime, became as loathed as the Germans owing to their well-founded reputation for violence and corruption. Katarzyna Person, a Polish historian with a professional interest in the Warsaw Ghetto, provides a generally chronological account of the JOS, scrutinising its objectives, day-to-day activities, perception and self-perception, and role in the Holocaust.

Firsthand accounts of the Warsaw Ghetto were published and made available even in the immediate aftermath of the war. These early accounts painted uniformly grim picture of the ghetto police as violent stooges of the SS – “the plague of the Jewish organism”, as diarist Chaim Kaplan put it.<sup>1</sup> Works by trained historians took a similar line against the ghetto police. Isayah Trunk's *Judenrat*,<sup>2</sup> for example, contains a general survey of the Jewish police across several ghettos,<sup>3</sup> with the police understood principally as a

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Chaim A. *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*. Edited by Abraham I. Katsh. Bloomington, United States: Indiana University Press, 1999, 389.

<sup>2</sup> Trunk, Isayah. *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*. New York, United States: Stein and Day, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Chapters 18 and 19.

mechanism by which the Holocaust was carried out. Person properly historicises the relatively abundant primary evidence to produce a complete account of the JOS from the perspective of both the policemen and those they were tasked with policing, arguably treating the policemen as rational actors with their own agency for the first time. A great deal of evidence is drawn from the Ringelbaum Archive, into which a large variety of testimony was despotised during the occupation (diaries, documents, memoranda, posters, among other things) by both police and civilian, allowing us to reconstruct the contemporary viewpoints of each group.

Chapters 1 and 2 cover ground familiar to those well-acquainted with the historiography of the ghettos during the Second World War. In chapter 1, Person observes that bribery and patronage (*Protekcja*) of Judenrat officials (to whom the JOS was nominally subordinate) was essential to gain a spot in the JOS. Consequently, those moneyed and with connections to powerful individuals – that is, lawyers, merchants, and other white-collar workers – were overrepresented in JOS demographics. Meanwhile, Chapter 2 outlines the establishment and goals of the police, summarising the rationale of both Jewish and German officials.

Violence and corruption (Chapter 3) at the hands of the JOS was inescapable in the ghetto. Policemen rarely missed an opportunity to solidify their relative privilege in the ghetto, typically advanced through extortion or looting in the course of their duties at the price of losing one's place in the wider community. Corruption and the violence it required, was not an incidental part of ghetto life, Person explains, but a systemic one. For the rank-and-file police who had little to no contact with the comparatively comfortable administrators, gaining bribes “contributions” (mafia-like extortions) was a

necessary source of income, a salary-in-kind. Moreover, the police played a pivotal role in the black market, and thus the ghetto economy as a whole. From their stations at the ghetto walls, JOS personnel smuggled in food from the rest of Warsaw, without which many Jews would starve; the rations provided by the German authorities were by design nutritionally insufficient.

Beyond being stigmatised for joining an organisation considered collaborationist, enlistment in the ghetto police was tantamount to abandoning one's Jewish heritage, explicable only by an "assimilation complex" (analogous to the Western idea of a "self-hating Jew"): "The policemen were perceived as strangers because of their assimilation ... and as such they were not considered to be real Jews" (p.78). This supposedly explained the disposition toward physical cruelty on the part of many policemen; exacting beatings upon Jews was a way to satisfy the assimilationist's sense of inferiority. Person places special emphasis on the symbolic value attached to membership in the JOS, building an understanding of why the police were viewed with such hostility for reasons deeper than the JOS' record of violence. On this point, Person more firmly roots an observation made by Aharon Weiss decades ago, that "those people who organized themselves into frameworks outside of the Judenrat considered the Jewish Police, from its very inception, to be a foreign body implanted upon the Jewish community."<sup>4</sup>

There was an obvious dissonance between what the police were supposed to represent, and what they actually got up to on the streets. In Chapter 6, Person gives the reader an overview of the ultimately futile attempts by the Judenrat and JOS to restore

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<sup>4</sup> Weiss, Aharon. "The Relationship between the Judenrat and the Jewish Police." In *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi-Occupied Europe 1933-1945*, 201-18. Jerusalem: Yad Vahsem, 1979, 209.

discipline to the police. The reasons for the administration's failure were again systemic: higher-ranking officers siphoned off food meant for the lower-ranking, poorer paid officers, and used their influence and resources to avoid punishment. There was an "as if" rule of law in the same way that there was an "as if" police force, or an "as if" Jewish government. Consequently, the whole package of disciplinary measures fell completely flat. Meanwhile, the media campaign channelled through the German-sanctioned newspaper *Gazeta Żydowska* only linked the Judenrat more tightly with the contemptible behaviour of the police.

Through her examination of the JOS, Person develops the concept of the "grey zone", an idea originally conceived by Primo Levi in his influential work *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi recognised an often blurred distinction between victim and perpetrator amongst Jews in the context of common Nazi persecution. Although Levi had at the top of mind the kapos (prisoner-functionaries) when formulating the grey zone, Person finds the concept useful in explaining the actions of the Jewish ghetto police. Person invokes Levi's axiom that "The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate" (p.156).

Until the publication of Person's book, relatively little historiographical attention was paid to understanding the ghetto policemen as men,<sup>5</sup> real people navigating the cruel conditions of daily existence imposed by the Nazi occupation. Echoing Levi, Person interprets enlistment in the JOS and all the behaviour it engaged in as the result of a

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<sup>5</sup> Note that women were not admitted into the Jewish Order Service.

“wartime morality.” (p.60) “[On] the street there was a struggle for survival: those who were unable to buy themselves out or who had no one to denounce were lost” (ibid.). Person advances the more useful, less morally perspective judgement of police actions put forward recently by Yevgeny Finkel, that “Emotionally and morally controversial, collaboration can nonetheless be a rational strategy for survival.”<sup>6</sup> Constant reminders of one’s mortality enhanced the basic instinct to survive. Under these circumstances, writes Person, the “the borderline between gaining material resources necessary for survival and trying to get rich was blurred, and it soon became difficult to draw a distinct line between the two” (p.92).

The murderous trajectory of German policy towards the Jews of Warsaw is the main focus of chapters 5 through 9. In these chapters, we find an array of self-justifications and self-rationalisations made by the police for their wanton violence and obedience to increasingly outrageous German orders. Some explained that bribes fed them and their family. Others, like one Stanisław Adler, thought it “it was preferable to catch than to be caught.” (p.97). Such rationalisations became unsustainable as the character of their duties became less justifiable, tasked with rounding up beggars and people chosen to be deported to Treblinka, involving the trauma of what Natalia Aleksion has termed “intimate violence” (p.128). These assignments and the reactions to them are covered in chapters 7 through 9. The unpopularity of the JOS was by this point irrecoverable, Person writing, “During the deportations, the earlier hostility toward Jewish Order Service members turned into hatred. They were completely excluded from the

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<sup>6</sup> Finkel, Evgeny. *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust*. Princeton University Press, 24 May 2018, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691172576.001.0001>, 73.

community...” (p.137). Person reproduces an especially powerful piece of evidence of the mental deterioration of the police, a poem by Władysław Szlengel about his resignation from the JOS in disgust of his actions.<sup>7</sup> It is notable that it was around this time that most police penned their testimony, as if gearing up for a postwar reckoning.

There was a postwar reckoning of sorts. The final chapter before the conclusion outlines the postwar honour courts created to ascertain the guilt of suspected ghetto policemen. The defences of accused policemen are worth noting. Virtually all were unapologetic, emphasising the unimportance of individual action against the vastness of the German war machine.<sup>8</sup> But with the decimation of the Jewish community, there was little appetite for actual vengeance. Finally, Person ends on a summary of the historiography of the Jewish ghetto police, warped for many decades by the ideological predilections of Polish Marxism-Leninism.

In sum, Katarzyna Person’s volume on the JOS offers the fullest account of the ghetto police yet published. On one hand, it provides a simultaneously concise and detailed account of its function, organisation, violence, corruption, and on the other, it gives a number of convincing explanations (but not justifications) of members’ actions. The seriousness with which Person scrutinises police motives and actions is of singular importance, likely to stand as its most valuable contribution for years to come.

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<sup>7</sup> Reproduced in full by Person (p.130): “I don’t know what’s true, what’s right what’s the duty anymore / I go my own way, the end, that’s all.”

<sup>8</sup> Although he did not explain it at trial or before an honour court, policeman Calel Perechodnik is a notable exception, seeing no honour in the line of work he got himself into. See Perechodnik, Calel. *Am I a Murderer?: Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018. <https://go.exlibris.link/LdkRzzhZ>.

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