

### On the Social History of Persecution

**Veranstalter:** Christian Gerlach / Christoph Dieckmann / Nikita Hock / Janina Wurbs, Historical Institute, University of Bern

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How to write social histories of persecution? Arguably, it is only since the 1990s that victims have come into historians' focus. The international digital conference took stock of what we know and developed new comparative perspectives, providing a suitable platform to encourage lively discussions based on 14 pre-circulated papers. In his introductory remarks, Christian Gerlach (Bern) outlined three possible ways to use social history for the study of persecution: 1) a quantitative approach, which allows us to include groups and patterns; 2) one that concentrates on social relations in a qualitative manner; and 3) a focus on social forces and conflicts. To get straight to the point, all papers fell into the second and third categories. Particular emphasis was placed on the Holocaust against the Jews and the persecution of other groups during the Second World War (11 out of 14 papers). One paper tackled Northern Mozambique during the Independence War (1964–1974), another examined survival strategies in the Armenian genocide, and one compared forced labor in the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide. The conference was organized in themed panels: labor; clandestine life of refugees; collective action and emotions; family and kinship; space; and violence as a social process.

The first panel on labor featured three papers on the shifts in the socio-economic status of Jews, non-Jewish Poles, and Armenians. Noting that historians have paid minimal attention to social relations in the Polish countryside, LUKASZ KRZYŻANOWSKI (Warsaw) explored the roles of the village head (*softys*) and his deputy (*podsoftys*), forced to navigate the Nazi occupation in what Krzyżanowski called a „liminal position“ between the village community and the German

administration. Their duties included providing labor supply and deciding over the fate of Jewish fugitives caught by villagers.

In his paper on Armenians' survival strategies, HILMAR KAISER (Yerevan) tied survival to labor in the Erzurum and Dersim provinces. Survival depended on the extent of government control in remote areas, Deraa military authorities, savings and funds from relatives or organizations, begging and stealing, and prostitution near railway stations.

CHRISTIAN GERLACH (Bern) presented the first insights into the informal employment of Jews and Armenians, explicitly separating it from both persecution and rescue activities. He argued that Jews and Armenians underwent proletarianization in low-qualified and unsteady jobs, often in rural areas. The ensuing debate reinforced the need for further comparisons –although the categories historians may use were up for discussion, notably „slavery“ and „slave labor.“ The participants agreed that labor offers a good starting point to explore social relations under persecution.

The second panel on clandestinity and refugee life prolonged these first reflections. In his paper on refugees' persecution in Northern Mozambique during the War of Independence (1964–1974), ANDREAS ZEMAN (Bern) used interviews to illustrate the high mobility, the preoccupation with food, and the refugees' shifting loyalty between the nationalists of FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and Portuguese military forces.

In the same vein, MASHA CEROVIC (Paris) explored Nazi-occupied Belarus as a „makeshift society of refugees.“ She pointed out collective and individual coping strategies and multidirectional movement flows. The discussion raised an important question: How can historians analyze flight, escape, and movements when our tools try to fixate these very people in terms of ethnicity, religion, or social class? Belarus, with 2 million deaths, 1 million people out of the country, and 3 million homeless after 1945, and Mozambique, with its 1 million refugees and another one of displaced people, certainly belie any such stability. The participants also debated the adequacy of „homelessness“ and

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„communities of survival“ and agreed that Jewish survival in Belarus deserves more attention.

The third panel on collective action, effects and emotions began with a paper by JANINA WURBS (Bern) on Jankiel Herszkowicz (Yankele), the well-known street singer who took up Yiddish songs from the 19th century but also wrote his own lyrics in the Łódź ghetto. Wurbs explored Yankele's songs, which often served as a daily source of information, and their themes: food, hunger, distribution of resources, and the ghetto's social dynamics.

ANNA SHTERNSHIS (Toronto) moved the subject of Yiddish songs further into the Soviet Union and introduced a collection of songs written during the war and collected in its aftermath by a group of Soviet scholars around Moisei Beregovsky. Concise in their form and rhyme to allow for easy memorization, these songs inform us about Soviet Jews' various experiences. The persecution even intensified calls for unity among Jews after 1942, which had not been the case before the war. The lively discussion – and the collective appreciation for the immediacy of these songs – concentrated on the historical value of songs and related cultural material: the intimate and emotional aspects, but also voices of the time that are rare for the Nazi-occupied areas of the Soviet Union. Here, sound history in its broadest sense promises many new insights.

The fourth panel dedicated to families opened with a paper by ANNA HÁJKOVÁ (Warwick) on queering „kinship formation“ in the Holocaust, a term she prefers to „non-biological families“ and „surrogate families.“ Kinship bonds designate „units of people, chosen or created by accident, who shared emotional support, confidential knowledge, and resources.“ Such a queer lens, which has emerged not the least thanks to Hajkova's efforts, is certainly difficult to achieve – most survivors rarely spoke about the nature of their ties.

Changes in emotional bonds and ideas of masculinity were also present in the paper by DALIA OFER (Jerusalem) on the diary of Ruben Feldschu (Ben Shem), one of the most prominent figures of the Zionist Right in interwar Poland. Ofer exemplified the perse-

cution's shattering impact on each family's internal balance and men's self-image as fathers, husbands, and brothers.

Finally, examining Eastern Galicia through a micro lens, NATALIA ALEKSIUN (Jena/New York) argued that family networks and surrogate relatives could indeed facilitate survival – but their study also points to limited agency and the impact of class, age, and gender. Participants then discussed the porous boundary between what is narratable and ultimately unspeakable, and the manifold meanings of „family.“ No consensus on the terms materialized: here more than elsewhere, historians move in what Christian Gerlach called a „minefield of normativities.“ However, the idea that kinship often emerges other than as a biological and stable unit is a valuable foundation for future social histories of persecution. Overall, abandoning exclusive concepts such as sexual or family identity is important for our understanding of victim behaviors.

The fifth panel on space opened with a paper by TIM COLE (Bristol) on Holocaust geographies. Building on his previous work, Cole focused on survivor Helen Farkas's retelling of space and her survival strategies within the camp system. His paper extended our knowledge of Nazi spatiality and called for studies of movements between camps and ghettos.

NIKITA HOCK (Bern) singled out one of these spatial survival strategies: hiding in attics and rural areas in Eastern Europe during the war. In particular, Hock focused on descriptions of sound, which help refine our understanding of relationships among hidden Jews and rural communities. Both papers prompted a lively discussion about relational and mental geographies, bodies, perceptions, and survival rooted in specific spaces. The participants agreed that social histories of persecution should combine all these spatial aspects into what Cole dubbed „multi-scalar narratives.“

The last panel on violence as a social process featured JASON TINGLER (Marion, Ohio), who made a case for multipolar perspectives on Chełm's multiethnic society during the war. The general breakdown of social norms resulted in mutual killings be-

tween ethnic Poles and Ukrainians, the hunting down of Soviet prisoners of war, and robberies of local populations by partisans.

Finally, CHRISTOPH DIECKMANN (Bern) reflected on sound to better approach Jews' lived experiences. Singling out various survivors' depictions of sound, he concerned himself with this „fundamental and unsolvable tension“ between narration and silence. The two papers prompted participants to consider temporalities, such as day and night, and methods to reconstruct past sounds.

In the final discussion, Moritz Feichtinger (Bern) pulled together these diverse threads. Violence as a social action challenges us to rethink how we incorporate class, age, and gender into our case studies. Meanwhile, concepts such as norms, gender, margins, topography, agency, family, and kinship now firmly belong to our toolboxes. Feichtinger noted that future work would need to study age, bodies (which were not mentioned explicitly before the fourth panel), territory, and technology. Undoubtedly, the intriguing role of silence will attract more attention as well. Anna Hájková and Masha Cerovic equally highlighted the importance of intersectionality, semantics, and speakability. Several participants noted the collective wish to enlarge the focus from the Holocaust to other instances of persecution, but, perhaps inevitably, the conference kept going back to the Nazi genocide. In the end, this should not be seen as a flaw but as an invitation. On the one hand, Holocaust studies have reached such a degree of sophistication that the field as a whole will inspire other social histories of persecution. On the other hand, the sheer diversity of persecution contexts requires that theoretical frameworks from gender and queer studies, and the imperative to study social groups together, be more fully incorporated into Holocaust studies. The conference concluded with the possibility to publish an edited volume, which would help further disseminate these fascinating insights into violence and persecution.

#### **Conference overview:**

*Welcome and introduction*

*Labor*

Chair: Natalia Aleksion (Touro College, New

York)

Lukasz Krzyzanowski (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw): Outsourcing the Occupation. Power and Labor in Local Communities of German-occupied Provincial Poland

Hilmar Kaiser (Yerevan State University): Strategies and Parameters of Survival. Deportees during the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918

Christian Gerlach (University of Bern): Comparing Jewish labor in Poland 1942-1945 and Armenian labor in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1918

*Clandestinity/refugee life*

Chair: Julia Richers (University of Bern)

Andreas Zeman (University of Bern): Caught between the „guerilla“ and the colonial state: refugee life in Northern Mozambique during the independence war (1964-1974)

Masha Cerovic (EHESS Paris): Strangers in a Strange Country. Refugees in Belarusian Society under German Occupation (1941-1944)

*Collective action/affects and emotions*

Chair: Nikolaus Wachsmann (Birkbeck College, London)

Janina Wurbs (University of Bern): Auditory quarrels, rage and collective action. A street singer and his audience within the web of the Ghetto society

Anna Shternshis (University of Toronto): People Fall Down Like Flies. Soviet Yiddish Songs Documenting the Holocaust

*Families*

Chair: Carmen Scheide, University of Bern

Anna Hájková (University of Warwick): Queer Kinship and Holocaust Victims

Dalia Ofer (Hebrew University, Jerusalem): Diverse Voices. Family Members and their Struggle in the Ghetto

Natalia Aleksion (University of Jena): Uneasy Bonds. Jews in Hiding and the Making of Surrogate Families

*Space*

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Chair: Silvia Berger Ziauddin (University of Bern)

Tim Cole (University of Bristol): Space and Place.Placing Everyday Life during the Holocaust

Nikita Hock (University of Bern): Hiding in the Attic. Sounds and Social Situation

*Violence as a social process/migration*

Chair: Francesca Falk (University of Bern)

Jason Tingler (Clark University): An Ecosystem of Genocide and Mass Atrocity. The Holocaust and Neighborly Violence in Nazi-Occupied Poland

Christoph Dieckmann (University of Bern): Forced Migration and Sound in Early Postwar Accounts of Jews

*Final discussion*

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