

## REVIEW ESSAY

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***Beyond the Pale: The Holocaust in the North Caucasus.*** Ed. Crispin Brooks and Kiril Feferman. Rochester. xiii. 302 pp. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020. Notes. Bibliography. Chronology. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$75.00, hard bound.

The history of the Jews in the North Caucasus during the Holocaust, which is the subject matter of the present collection—both its articles and the analytical introduction by its editors, Crispin Brooks and Kiril Feferman—differs from the events that took place in many other regions of the USSR. These differences stem primarily from the peculiar features of the Nazi policy vis-à-vis the local population, including the differentiation between several categories of Jews. The collection demonstrates these peculiarities most clearly in the case of the Mountain Jews, whose racial origins puzzled the Nazis right up to the liberation of the region by the Red Army in early 1943; the disagreements among the Nazis on this question enabled many of these Jews to survive. As several articles in the collection (Andrej Angrick, “‘Operation Blue,’ Einsatzgruppe D, and the Genocide in the Caucasus;” Stephen Tyas, “The Kaukasier Kompanie [‘Caucasian Company’]: Soviet Ethnic Minorities, Collaborators, and Mass Killers;” as well as Sufian Zhemukhov and William Youmans, “Rescue and Jewish-Muslim Relations in the North Caucasus”) demonstrate, some of the Mountain Jews—the collective farmers in Bogdanovka and Menzhinskoe—were annihilated, while others—the communities in Nalchik and Mozdok—survived. As for the local Ashkenazi Jews, their fate was similar to that of their brethren in other Nazi-occupied regions of the USSR—albeit with more extensive use of gas vans—despite the peculiarities of the North Caucasian Nazi policy. This is demonstrated in the articles by Angrick and Tyas, in Andrej Umansky’s “Mass Executions in Krasnodar Krai: Cross-Checking Sources for the Holocaust in the North Caucasus,” and in the Introduction. Nevertheless, it was the influx of Ashkenazi Jewish refugees from Ukraine, Belorussia, Bessarabia, and Leningrad in the second half of 1941 and the first half of 1942 that turned the North Caucasus into one of the key regions in the history of the Holocaust in present-day Russia. During the rapid advance of the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1942, tens of thousands of Jews were unable to evacuate for the second time, and so perished. Kiril Feferman’s balanced article “Dwelling at the Foot of a Volcano? Jewish Perspectives on the Holocaust in the North Caucasus” describes the challenges of evacuation in this region and explains the reasons that prevented many Jews from evacuating for a second time.

Some of the fascinating features of this region reflected in the collection are its complex ethnic tapestry and the impact of local factors on the degree of collaboration of the population with the Nazis—and, conversely, on their involvement in rescuing the Jews. This question applies both to the members of the various North Caucasian ethnicities and to the local Cossacks (Angrick; Tyas; Crispin Brooks, “In the Shadow of ‘Mass Treason’: The Holocaust in

the Karachai Region”). Using the example of the Holocaust in the Karachai Region, Brooks refutes the common perception of members of local ethnicities as eager Nazi collaborators; a view that would be used to justify the mass deportation of these ethnicities by the Stalinist regime in 1944. As evidence, he cites the fact that the Karachai Region was ethnically divided into two zones, which were inhabited by Karachais and Russian Cossacks, respectively. His thorough analysis shows that, on the whole, the Karachais and the Cossacks were roughly equally implicated in the murder of Jews during the war, and that the degree of their involvement depended largely on the policy of the *Einsatzgruppen*, which made use of the services of members of local ethnicities (the problem of local collaboration is also addressed in the articles by Angrick and Tyas). According to Brooks, the Stalinist deportations in the last years of the war were motivated by desire for revenge for these peoples’ earlier resistance to the harsh Soviet collectivization policies, and by the desire to pacify this unruly region; they are not to be seen as retribution for the Karachais’ alleged collaboration with the Nazis.

The collection as a whole demonstrates that the situation in the North Caucasus varied from region to region, and it is no accident that so much effort has been made to create a detailed reconstruction of the Holocaust in specific places: Rostov, Krasnodar, Voroshilovsk, Maikop, the zone of the spa towns in the area of Teberda, and Budenovsk. These regional differences, which are clearly set out in the Introduction, are also apparent in the articles, both those that deal with the North Caucasus as a whole (Angrick, Tyas) and those that cover specific regions: Krasnodar Krai (Umansky’s article about the murder of the Jews in this region and Irina Rebrova’s article “‘We Were Saved Because the Occupation Lasted Only Six Months’: (Self-) Reflection on Survival Strategies during the Holocaust in the North Caucasus,” which focuses on the depiction of the Holocaust in interviews with Jews who were children or adolescents during the war); Rostov-on-Don (Christina Winkler’s article “The Holocaust on Soviet Territory—Forgotten Story? Individual and Official Memorialization of the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don,” which deals with the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don and with the politics of memory in present-day Russia, based on events at the murder site of Rostov Jews in Zmievskaia Balka); and the Karachai Region (Brooks).

One notable feature of the collection is the wealth of statistical data it contains, with occasional discrepancies between the figures given in different articles. The contradictory nature of the data is acknowledged by the editors themselves in the Introduction, yet the discrepancies remain striking. Thus, Angrick, in his solid article on the activities of *Einsatzgruppe D* units in the North Caucasus estimates the number of victims killed in Zmievskaia Balka near Rostov at several thousand (possibly a little over two thousand), whereas Winkler’s article gives a figure of 15,000–18,000 Jewish victims (78, 244). These divergences reflect the problematic nature of the various sources of information. Angrick’s study is based primarily on data from German archives, whereas Winkler chose to draw on ChGK estimates. The problem persists even if we restrict ourselves to the Soviet sources—as shown by Irina Rebrova, who cites the available minimum and maximum estimates of the number of victims for the North Caucasus as a whole, which differ by a factor of 1.5: from 58,070 to 87,600 victims (228).

Therefore, I sympathize with the ambition of some of the contributors to resolve these problems, or at least, to give the most plausible picture of the Holocaust in specific locations. The desire to correct the available data is most clearly articulated in Andrej Umansky's article on the Holocaust in Krasnodar Krai, where he updates the estimates of the ChGK (the Extraordinary State Commission). Some scholars believe that the numbers of victims given in ChGK documents are overestimates, since the Soviet authorities had an obvious interest in exaggerating their claims for restitution against Germany. At the same time, the very possibility of arriving at accurate estimates, particularly on the basis of testimonies by local residents, is still an open question. Despite the exceptional status of the North Caucasus—most of which was occupied by the Germans for only a few months, and where the eyewitness testimonies were derived from recent recollections—we may still be skeptical of the ability of the locals, who had had no special training, to produce coherent estimates. At the same time, the idea of adjusting ChGK data on the basis of twenty-first-century interviews with individuals who were children or adolescents during the war is just as questionable. How accurately can those people recall the number of victims after all these years? This brings us to a more general question: how much of the information in their recollections—which goes beyond personal experience, but requires generalizations—can be regarded as sufficiently sound?

As a partial answer to these doubts, we may cite the meticulously written theoretical section of Rebrova's article, which contains a detailed analysis of the problem of Holocaust memory among individuals who were either children or adolescents during the war, and of the impact of postwar and recent events on their memories, especially in cases of persons who had been very young during the war (she defines this as "post-story," 220). Her article is largely derived from the interviews she has collected. Incidentally, we should note that this problem is not at all easy to solve; in her study of how the survivors, former children and adolescents, build their narrative, Rebrova herself occasionally falls into the trap of using this data as a historical source, rather than as a narrative that reflects these individuals' wartime and postwar experiences. Obviously, for scholars of the Holocaust in the USSR, there are no clear guidelines as to the correct interpretation of oral history in general, and later testimony in particular; the present collection of articles on the North Caucasus is a vivid illustration of this problem.

Another equally interesting issue, which is touched upon in the Introduction and in many of the articles, is the attitude of the local population to the Jews and the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the authors fail to give a detailed answer to the question of whether the natives of the North Caucasus differentiated between the evacuees on the basis of nationality, or whether they simply divided the population into "us" and "them," as was common in other regions. Here, too, the peculiarities of the North Caucasian situation entitle us to assume that, on the whole, the members of Caucasian ethnicities made a threefold distinction between: "us" (the Caucasians), including the Mountain Jews; the Cossacks, whom they had known for many years; and a generalized category of "aliens," who had arrived from other regions of the country during the war. Is it possible that, according to the picture presented in

Georgi Derluguian's overview, "The Caucasus: A Rock in the Grinding Wheels of World History," all the recent arrivals were still classified as "Russians" by the natives? In other words, could the Caucasians actually pick the Ashkenazi Jews out of the larger mass of evacuees, who dressed, spoke, and behaved differently from the locals? These questions are particularly important for our interpretation of the data laid out in the article by Sufian Zhemukhov and William Youmans. In the cases described by the authors, were the locals aware of the Jewish origin of their new neighbors, or did they learn of it only as a result of the Holocaust? It is interesting to read the authors' thoughts on the role played by the remarkable Circassian tradition of hospitality (Adyghe Xabze), which aided the survival of many of the evacuees, including the children in the village of Beslenei. However, the article is somewhat vague as to the impact of this tradition on the willingness to aid Jews in particular: did the local situation differ from other German-occupied regions? We are bound to feel pride at the noble behavior of the local Circassians who helped the evacuated children in these years of hardship. However, it is not clear how many of the thirty-two rescued children were Jewish, nor whether the locals themselves were aware of this at the time.

Obviously, the authors' chosen method, to look at individuals' last names, is unreliable: some of the names they cite are actually Russian, while others could be either Jewish or German. One would also wish for a clearer understanding of whether present-day views held by North Caucasians affect their interpretation of the past. This influence is most clearly seen in Winkler's article about the present-day Russian politics of memory vis-à-vis the Holocaust. She analyzes it on the basis of the notorious Zmievskaia Balka commemorative plaque affair, where the local authorities of Rostov removed the references to Jews and insisted for a long time on the Soviet-era formula "innocent Soviet citizens," thereby obfuscating the essence of the Holocaust. Based on the interviews she has conducted in Rostov, Winkler claims that the interviewees actually possess fairly extensive knowledge about the Holocaust, including the extermination of the Roma, and that their views are incompatible with the official Russian concept of memory. While these conclusions are fascinating, I would like to see a more detailed explanation of how the group of interviewees was selected.

All in all, this is a very interesting collection of articles, which does much to advance our knowledge of the Holocaust and Jewish history during World War II in the specific region of the North Caucasus. At the same time, the collection makes us realize how many questions have yet to be answered by scholars of the Holocaust in this region.

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