Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album, Paris, 1940–1944 by Sarah Gensburger (review)

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A seventh chapter on Jean Améry discusses his philosophical exploration of the suffering he was subjected to as a prisoner of the Nazis. It provides a contrast to the preceding chapters on Nazi philosophers and their legatees. The book ends, somewhat unexpectedly, with a sharp critique of the contemporary Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his idea that monotheism fosters intolerance, which finds an outlet in violence. The chapter seems rather loosely connected to the first segment of the book. One could say that the book as a whole shifts away from its initial focus on philosophers submitting to Nazism to a concern with the Jewish people, their vulnerability, suffering, and religious traditions. The Arendt chapter criticizes her underestimation of antisemitism; the Améry chapter captures his suffering in concentration camps; the section on Assmann points to the tradition of tolerance in Judaism, against Assmann's picture of intolerant monotheism.

The movement from one theme to another is peculiar, given the brevity of the book. There are about ninety pages of text, around ten of which are translations of interesting pieces by Schmitt and Jünger. Most chapters are about ten pages long and Segev frequently inserts long quotations from philosophers and commentators. This does not always give the author sufficient space to reconstruct the relationship between the works of prominent philosophers and National Socialism, its ideology, rise to power, and program of genocide. It is, as a consequence, also a little difficult to discern the book's distinctive contribution to this controversial topic. If some of the chapter summaries presented above seem brief, it is partly due to the constraints of the review format, and partly due to the book's length.

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Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews: A Photographic Album, Paris, 1940–1944. By Sarah Gensburger. Translated by Jonathan Hensher with the collaboration of Elisabeth Fourmont. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 216. Paper $35.00. ISBN 978-0253017444.

Witnessing the Robbing of the Jews artfully examines an album of photographs taken by Germans plundering the property of French Jews. The album was arranged by Allied occupation forces after the war and preserved by the Federal Archives in Koblenz. These pictures document Operation Furniture (Möbel Aktion), the institutionalized robbery of French Jews, directed first by Alfred Rosenberg's Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) and then by Colonel Kurt von Behr's Dienststelle West (of the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories) from 1942 to 1944. This evidence, likely compiled originally by Rosenberg and von Behr as proof of their productivity, showcases the massive theft of everything from valuable art to the kitchenware, radios, light bulbs, and mattresses from 38,000 homes "abandoned" by Parisian Jews during

the height of their incarceration and deportation. In presenting us with this material, Sarah Gensburger blends analysis of historical photographs with an impressive collection of survivor testimony and displays a sweeping familiarity with both the documentary evidence and historiographical context of Germany's pillage of Jewish assets during the Holocaust.

This book's most meaningful scholarly intervention is to revise academic work privileging the economic utility of the Holocaust. In opposition especially to Götz Aly's controversial *Hitler's Beneficiaries* (2005), Gensburger interprets these photos as proof that Operation Furniture and other forms of mass pillage never benefitted the Third Reich materially. Rather, systematic looting belonged to the larger process of complete annihilation, eliminating the physical traces of Nazi victims by transforming personal possessions into goods that were frequently destroyed due to their shabby condition and lack of functionality. Instead of propping up the economy of everyday Germans during the war, the ransacking of all Jewish possessions resulted from the overwhelming ideological urge to destroy every remnant of European Jewry.

Gensburger supports her interpretative claim in part by critiquing the ways in which textual historians of the Holocaust use archival images. Pointing out mistakes by well-known historians like Martin Dean in *Robbing the Jews* (2008) and others, she does much more than highlight the errors of colleagues. In one case, she shows how Aly mislabeled photos from the album under review: his captions misrepresented images of packed crates of art as material goods intended for transport to the civilian population of Germany. In this manner, she directly weakens his assertions of a strong economic dimension to the genocide (64–65). Gensburger also strengthens the book's central point by contextualizing each photo. In one example, she identifies the illusory nature of an image of interned seamstresses turning stolen garments into skirts for German girls of the Reich. She quotes former inmate Erna Herzberg, who suggested that almost no skirts were ever actually produced. Herzberg and others only reused fabric for occasional items made to order by National Socialist elites. What appears to be evidence of targeted plunder was actually a photo staged by von Behr or Rosenberg so that they could maintain autonomy over their economically unproductive action and retain laborers who fulfilled their personal requests (106–107). Such layered analysis unveils the complexity of using photographs as primary sources, illustrating the rigorous scrutiny that such analysis requires.

The depiction of Jewish victims frequently excluded from historical narratives constitutes another intriguing element of this book. Gensburger fills a "memory hole" that devalues the Jewish spouses of gentiles and so-called *Mischlinge* that inhabited the internment camps of Paris and whose conditions were more tolerable than most forced labor facilities. As comparably fortunate Jews who largely escaped both deportation to Auschwitz and the horrors of the notorious Drancy concentration camp, internees at camps like Levitan, Austerlitz, and Bassano formed the primary labor force of Operation Furniture. The gaze of National Socialist photographers frequently

relegated these prisoners to the margins of the images, making plundered goods the focal point rather than the people tasked with sorting them. Using oral testimony, Gensburger endows these survivors of Nazism with agency, combating what she calls the "anonymization" of people ignored by German perpetrators and contemporary memory of the Holocaust alike. Juxtaposing images of these inmates, who usually had their heads down while working or their backs to the lens, with stories by former laborers in these camps, the study brings to life the experiences of an overlooked prisoner population.

Gensburger could improve her otherwise outstanding study by including even more statistical data surrounding Operation Furniture. While the author masterfully draws on past research and works with survivors to glean meaning from the photographs, she does not entirely clinch the case that this plunder had more to do with racial antisemitism than economic greed. Despite the compelling nature of the analysis, she requires more quantitative material to demonstrate definitively that most of the goods stored in museum basements and sorted at internment camps never made it to the civilian population of Germany. Nonetheless, she masterfully turns this album of photographs into a dynamic history of Nazi looting, making it essential for both scholars and teachers of Holocaust history.

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Inside Concentration Camps: Social Life at the Extremes. By Maja Suderland. Malden, MA: Polity, 2013. Pp. xiii + 336. Paper $25.27. ISBN 978-0745663364.

Die an der TU Darmstadt eingereichte Dissertation (2007) von Maja Suderland wurde im Original auf Deutsch (*Ein Extremfall des Sozialen,* 2009) veröffentlicht und liegt nun in originalgetreuer englischer Übersetzung vor. Hauptanliegen der Studie ist es, die Vorstellung des Historikers Kurt Pätzold zu widerlegen, dass es im nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager keine "Häftlingsgesellschaft" (Wolfgang Benz/Barbara Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, 2005) gegeben habe, da "Willkür, Gewalt und Terror" den KZ-Häftlingen jede soziale Gestaltungsmöglichkeit verwehrt hätten (4). Dieser Vorstellung stellt Suderland die These des deutschen KZ-Überlebenden und Soziologen Paul Martin Neurath entgegen, der in seiner 1943 an der Columbia University in New York eingereichten Dissertation zur sozialen Welt des NS-Konzentrationslagers schrieb, dass die Gesellschaften innerhalb und außerhalb des Konzentrationslagers sich nicht durch ihre grundlegenden Ideen ("basic concepts") sondern nur durch ihre Verhaltensregeln ("rules of behavior") unterschieden hätten (7). Dieses Neurath-Zitat ist das konzeptionelle Bindeglied zwischen dem theoretischen und empirischen Teil der Studie Suderlands, die den Anspruch erhebt, die "grundlegenden Ideen" von Gesellschaft innerhalb und außerhalb des Konzentrationslagers zu erkunden.

Methodisch geht sie dabei wie folgt vor: Zunächst lotet sie auf der Grundlage