

Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 317 pp.

During the past decade oral history has become one of the main tools for studying the identity of Soviet Jews on the eve of and during the Holocaust.¹³ In this book by Anika Walke, Jewish identity is examined on the basis of interviews with some survivors of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, who were either children or teenagers during the war. They were members of the Pioneers, the Communist children's and youth organization, and found themselves in partisan units in Belorussia. The author interviewed her subjects in the 2000s. Her work focuses on the traumatic perception of the war as experienced in the Holocaust, and the discrimination, both on ethnic and gender grounds, experienced by Jewish women during the war.

Written well and with clarity, this book is well worth reading. It contains many interesting observations and provides much information that helps us understand the Holocaust in Belorussia. This relates particularly to the profound trauma experienced by the survivors due to their own persecution and to their loss of dear ones. Walke presents a subtle and convincing analysis of her interviewees' remarks concerning the Nazi violence toward the Jews, the way the survivors reacted to this violence, and the discrimination against Jews on the part of Belorussian partisans. The author highlights the dramatic alternation in the survivors' perception of their situation in the context of their previous, childish and idyllic, pre-war view of the non-Jews around them.

During the war the subjects of her book suffered from robbery, demoralization, and denunciation. After that the young Jews found themselves living under the severely militarized

¹³ Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); Anna Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto 1941–1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

atmosphere that prevailed in the ranks of partisan units. In dealing with questions of the complex reactions to Jews in the ranks of the partisans and the difficulties of the life of Jewish young people in this difficult environment, the book in no way minimizes the role of Soviet partisans in Belorussia in saving the lives of these Jews. While the discrimination against Jews and women in partisan units is not a novel topic in itself,¹⁴ Walke expands on the existent literature by exploring the impact of “double discrimination” against those who were both Jews and women.

It is in this context that Walke analyzes the distinction among the partisans between male and female roles, a distinction that was heightened by the Soviet statist concept that dominated during the war years. This concept focused on the defense of the country, and accorded active resistance to the enemy much greater priority than the value of human life. According to Walke, the idea of the ancillary role of women in an essentially male fight against the enemy led to an increase in the discrimination experienced by young Jewish women in the ranks of the partisans. Walke believes that such an attitude toward women paralleled the patriarchal structure that still dominated Soviet society. Such male domination was incarnated on the national level by Stalin and on the level of partisan units by their commanders. This view of women as playing an auxiliary role in an essentially male fight resulted in young Jewish women being assigned to kitchen duty or other domestic duties rather than to combat roles. This situation prevailed despite the high motivation of the young Holocaust survivors to serve in fighting units in order to take revenge on the Nazis for murdering the survivors’ dear ones.

The author correctly observes that, with all the positive changes in the position of women, including Jewish women, in Soviet Belorussia during the pre-war period, male domination continued in terms of leadership roles. This was clearly demonstrated during the war. The most blatant example of discrimination against women was manifest in the area of sexual

¹⁴ See Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin’s Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); and Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Belski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

coercion, a topic to which Walke returns more than once. She stresses this aspect despite the clear reluctance of her interviewees to discuss this topic. However, unfortunately she does not make clear the reasons for this reticence. Several questions should be asked in this respect: Was the disinclination of older women in the 2000s to discuss this an echo of the general avoidance of the topic of sex in Soviet discourse in general or was it connected with traumatic sexual experiences they had undergone either personally or as part of a group of females? Could the reticence of the interviewees stem from experiences of sexual threat or violence that were even more traumatic than their experiences in regard to less intimate topics? These differences might reflect both their lives in the ghetto and aspects of their lives with the partisans.

One response of the subjects of Walke's book to the traumatic experience of war falls within the framework of Jewish "peer-to-peer support and communality." This was the establishment of the Jewish family partisan unit of Shlomo Zorin, in which some of the "Pioneer-Partisans" found themselves. Like other family brigades, this one was distinguished from other partisan units, whose main goal was to cause harm to the enemy. The main purpose of the Zorin unit was to preserve the lives of Jewish survivors regardless of their usefulness in combat, their age, or their sex.

Such Jewish family units provided interesting material for considering the author's concept of double discrimination. On the one hand, of course, the Jews in such units did not suffer from discrimination on ethnic grounds. On the other, since the proportion of women was much higher than in the more common, non-family partisan units, the problem of the subordination of women in the Jewish family units emerges more clearly. Furthermore, within the framework of the partisan movement as a whole such family units fulfilled a domestic, i.e., an auxiliary or "female" function.

In regard to the postwar period, as an indicator of discrimination in regard to former members of Jewish family units, Walke states that women who had been in Zorin's unit found it difficult to obtain the officially recognized status of an ex-partisan. However, there is another additional reason for this phenomenon

apart from anti-Semitism. Without denying the existence in Belorussia of a trend toward discrimination against Jews in the postwar Soviet Union, protection played a significant role in the 1960s and 1970s. Non-Jewish officials who had been partisan fighters occupied key posts in all levels of leadership. As could have been expected, they awarded favored status to those they knew personally, regardless of the function they fulfilled during the war. For this reason, it is likely that Jewish women whom the officials knew from general partisan units found it easier to gain favored status than could women who were part of Jewish partisan units.

Apart from illuminating the position of Jews and women in the partisan movement, Walke's book also discusses the complex issue of Jewish identity. According to the author, a formal Jewish identity was prevalent among young Soviet Jews during the prewar period. She believes that their identity was not an essential one, but based on the legal category of "nationality" that was included from 1932 in the internal passports of Soviet citizens. Walke concluded that the majority of her interviewees viewed themselves as Soviet children who were in no way distinguishable from their Belarussian or Russian peers.

She states that Soviet Jews, especially young ones, did not consider themselves to be members of a specific ethnic community and that their religion or ethnicity, which have been generally considered to be basic to Jewish identity, did not form the framework of their daily life. Walke believes that Jewish identity largely consists of religion, which lost its importance in the USSR due to the limitations on learning Hebrew and reading the Torah, attending synagogue and observing the Sabbath. Therefore, her view of the identity of Jews in Minsk corresponds to the definition of "thin culture" that Zvi Gitelman has employed in regard to Soviet Jews.¹⁵ Walke assumes that during the war years young Belorussian Jews were conscious of their Jewish identity only because of Nazi anti-Semitic policy and actions and/or because the local non-Jewish population gave them reason to be conscious of it.

¹⁵ Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identity in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Walke is not concerned with the fact that under Soviet conditions certain aspects of religious life became transferred from the public domain to that of the family and, thus, could continue to exist there among Jewish adults in various variants or combinations precisely on the level of daily life. Hence, to varying degrees, such religious elements that contribute to Jewish identity could have been and were passed on to children and young people. Nor does the author deal with other, non-religious, forms of Jewish identity, including the language spoken in the home by the members of the older generation (not only among themselves but also, including with their children and grandchildren) or the choice of first names given to children. In Minsk, for example, where one third of all the residents were Jewish and where there was a widespread and vibrant Yiddish culture (see Bemprad¹⁶) many people spoke Yiddish even on the street or spoke Russian with a heavy Yiddish accent. In addition, a sizable proportion of the older generation retained some elements of religious life, with many boys, as Walke herself notes, being circumcised. In parallel, the Belarusian childhood friends of Walke's interviewees or, at least, the parents of these friends remained within the framework of their own traditional norms and ideas. Such ethnic differences were clear for them although the young persons may not have appreciated the central role these played in their ethnic self-identification.

Walke's conclusions are open to debate. This point is highlighted by the opposite conclusions reached by Jeffrey Veidlinger on the basis of interviews he conducted in Yiddish among Jews who had lived in the former Romanian occupation zone of Transnistria, now in Ukraine. His interviews present quite a different image of a generation that in its daily life was tied to Jewish culture and was definitely characterized by an ethnic consciousness. That was the case even though, according to socio-cultural indicators (including the level of acculturation), the Jews of Belorussia, those studied by Walke, and the Jews who lived in the part of Ukraine studied by Veidlinger did not differ greatly in the

¹⁶ Elissa Bemprad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

pre-war period. In the case of Belorussia many of the Jews in Minsk had their origin in small Jewish towns and, to varying degrees, remained bearers of that shtetl culture. Even under conditions of 20th century Soviet urban life, their culture influenced their children even despite the children's relation to that culture.

Walke's book constructs a Jewish view of the war on the basis of her view of the almost complete lack of Jewish communality in the pre-war years. In this regard the question arises as to whether her interviewees might have associated her questions about their ethnic identity with negative identity (the term used by Lev Gudkov¹⁷), constructed mainly on the basis of the lack of equality during the war years and of postwar state anti-Semitism. In that case, there is an unintentional obfuscation of the difference between equality and ethnic indifference. Under conditions of inequality young people began to pay more attention to the differences between their own family and their environment. From this point of view, one may well conclude that there was the religiosity of the family in the ghetto. Furthermore, the level of understanding of events, evaluations, and generalizations may have changed according to the aging of the heroes of the book: in other words, events of the wartime period may often have been evaluated in the context of a more mature viewpoint than the pre-war one.

There are also the more general questions of the memory of the war and of subjectivity in the relating of events of several decades ago. Walke herself presents a very interesting and important example of two completely different versions given of such a central and traumatic event in the life of a child as the death of a mother.

Important topics for further research remain. These include the degree to which the interpretation of the war is affected by factors of the postwar situation of the person who is giving the interview, e.g., the place of postwar residency, marriage (whether in a mono-ethnic [Jewish] or a mixed marriage), attitude toward religion, image of the ideal Jew, etc.

¹⁷ Lev Gudkov, *Negativnaia identichnost': Stat'i 1997-2002* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004).

In conclusion, the book *Pioneers and Partisans* encourages us to further consider these and other questions, hopefully including in succeeding works by Anike Walke herself.

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Jennifer Suchland, *Economies of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. 280 pp.

Economies of Violence is an important work, because it explicitly discusses a blurry distinction between the losers and victims of globalized economic activity. It provides convincing answers to a number of critical questions. What determines whether certain people are cast as victims in need of saving or losers whose plight is taken as an inevitable consequence of their inability to win economic competition? This is not a trivial question, and this study convincingly demonstrates that precarious labor and economic exploitation are common for both those involved in sexual work and those toiling for pennies in other industries, in services or manufacturing. Even the distinction between these lines of work can be thin and blurry.

The power differential between employer and employee may be so great that voluntary labor may quickly transform into forced labor, depending on whether or not the employer is a person or entity respecting basic human decency. If not, the employees are clearly open to abuse and exploitation since they often lack the power to prevent such treatment or to exit without ruinous consequences for themselves and their loved ones. For women working in domestic environments, for example, good working conditions depend on many factors, but the power undeniably concentrates in the hands of their host families. The same is often true about the people working in sweatshops or in agriculture, and the weaker and more vulnerable the person, the more precarious and less voluntary such work must feel.