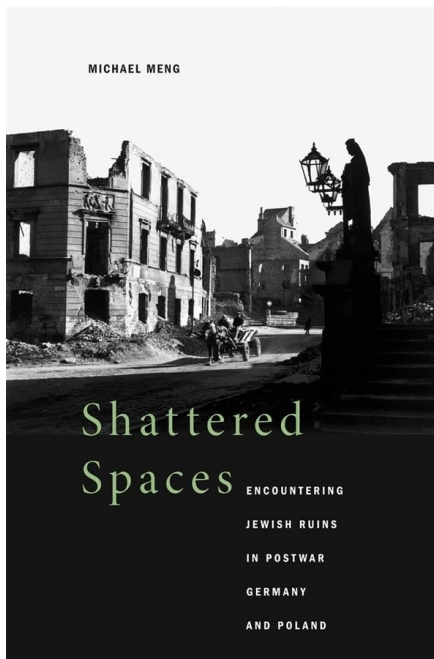


2011 Hans Rosenberg Book Prize Laudatio

Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Harvard University Press, 2011)

Michael Meng has produced a meticulously researched and compellingly argued comparative study of the “Shattered Spaces” of Jewish ruins in postwar Germany and Poland. Methodologically innovative, this engaging volume combines a far-reaching transnational historical approach with close attention to local conditions as they change over the postwar decades, demonstrating that historical memories—and the fraught politics of memory—are shaped as much by regional politics and intensely local circumstances and personalities as by national agendas and international trends. Crossing Cold War borders in history and historiography, Meng revises much conventional wisdom about the divergent approaches of “free” and Communist Europe to the “saved remnant” of decimated European Jewry, both its people and its artifacts. Drawing on a remarkably broad array of multilingual sources, archival and published, contemporary and secondary as well as evocative photographs, he insists,



provocatively and persuasively, on similarities and significant interactions without flattening crucial differences between Polish and German wartime or postwar experiences. Meng delves into several exemplary sites in the two Germanies and Poland, Berlin and Warsaw, as well as Potsdam, Essen, and Wrocław, illuminating neglected interconnections among an equally varied set of (often highly contested) developments from urban reconstruction and preservation to antisemitism and “heritage” tourism, paying particularly welcome attention to the tangled politics of restitution. Meng presents a cogent introduction to the history of Jewish life in Central Europe before, during, and then after the war when regimes and communities confronted Jewish survivors and the material remains of what had been thriving communities. In the general triumph of amnesiac modernist rebuilding over memorializing restoration or reconstruction of an exterminated multicultural past, he diagnoses not only an

urgent need for reconstruction in war-torn spaces—playgrounds and housing rather than ghostly synagogues and cemeteries—but also “The Anxiety of the Holocaust,” in regard to “abject” contaminated objects of memory, even as certain non-Jewish or anti-fascist sites of memory were rather eerily resurrected. Meng shows that both modernist renewal and preservationist reconstruction effaced specifically Jewish sites, until the disruptions of 1968 and then 1989 generated new interest in Jewish spaces as potential sites of what he intriguingly terms “redemptive cosmopolitanism,” a complex phenomenon resting uneasily on the border between

a forthright interrogation of the past and a desire for a mythic redemption from history's sometimes unbearable ambivalence. Exquisitely attuned to the multiple registers of the post 89 memory boom in eastern and western Europe, Meng explores its unabashedly touristic and commercial aspects, its exploitation of multiple “abject” victim narratives, and the fraught but real return of Jewish life and culture to still haunted spaces in Germany and Poland as “distinct form[s] of managing the past.” But this is not a cynical book about “Shoah Business” or the hype of a new “Jewish Renaissance:” informed, critical, and empathetic, it evinces a deep appreciation of the complexities inherent in trying to approach a lost past and claim responsibility for that disappearance. *Shattered Spaces* provides not only an investigation of a painful postwar era but also a thoughtful guide to the present and future in a post-Cold War Europe in which the workings of this “redemptive cosmopolitanism” and the retrieval of Jewish traces continue to play out in complex and unpredictable ways.

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