

**'In The Cage, Trying To Get  
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thHerschel Grynszpan at his first interrogation, one day after  
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Scembassy in Paris, November 8, 1938

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I learned much from it. For example, the fact that on the eve of World War II, the Jewish population of just two Polish cities, Warsaw and Łódź was larger than the entire Jewish community in Germany. I was also reminded of a few telling details, such as the fact that right up until a few months before the war's outbreak in September 1939, the Polish military was training young Zionist paramilitaries – principally members of the Irgun – for their departure to Palestine with a view to making much trouble as possible for the British authorities there in the hope of persuading them to accept the creation of a new Jewish state. Or that not so long prior to the joint German-Soviet invasion of Poland in autumn 1939 Hitler had proposed to Warsaw an alliance with the goal of invading the Soviet Union. (Poland refused).

As Snyder notes, moreover, to attempt to understand 'the life and death of European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s is, almost by definition, to engage with [Hannah] Arendt'. Pointing in particular to her seminal work [\*The Origins of Totalitarianism\*](#), Snyder notes that Arendt highlighted what he calls 'the

elemental connection between statelessness and mass murder'. In doing so Arendt was also pointing to a central theme of Snyder's most recent book, [\*Black Earth: The Holocaust As History and Warning\*](#). And as he expresses that thesis here with reference to Hitler's effective annihilation of many of the states occupied by the Nazis during the early states of World War II:

The denial of civil rights to Jews within states was one form of repression. The destruction of states themselves rendered Jews vulnerable as nothing else could. Hitler's aspiration to rid the earth of Jews could only proceed to completion after the states themselves were destroyed.

Nor is this a purely historical point. When we consider the appalling destruction of minority communities in the 'destroyed states' of our time – most notably Iraq and Syria – the continued relevance of this insight becomes all too grimly apparent.

## **'In the Cage, Trying to Get Out'**

[Timothy Snyder](#)

[\*\*The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan: A Boy Avenger, a Nazi Diplomat, and a Murder in Paris\*\*](#) by Jonathan Kirsch, Liveright, 336 pp., \$27.95

[\*\*On the Eve: The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War\*\*](#) by Bernard Wasserstein, Simon and Schuster, 552 pp., \$32.50

[\*\*Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and\*\*](#)

[the Making of Fascist Slovakia](#), by James Mace Ward, Cornell University Press, 362 pp., \$39.95

**À l'intérieur du camp de Drancy**, by Annette Wieviorka and Michel Laffitte Paris: Perrin, 382 pp., e23.00 (

Herschel Grynszpan shot the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris on November 7, 1938. The Nazis claimed that the young man was an agent of the international Jewish conspiracy, and that his act of murder was an early salvo in the "Jewish War" against Germany. In fact, he was a confused and angry teenager who, like thousands of European Jews in late 1938, was unwanted both in Poland, where he was a citizen, and in Germany, which he knew as home. Both Germany and Poland were pursuing policies designed to get rid of Jews, Berlin with deadly but hidden purpose, Warsaw with cynicism and calculation. Anti-Semitism, however, did not unite the two governments but rather ruined their mutual relations. People like Grynszpan were caught in the middle. He was the victim not of German-Polish agreement but of a growing German-Polish conflict.

In Poland in 1938, an authoritarian clique in power had to deal with public anti-Semitism as well as opposition from an anti-Semitic party, the National Democrats, that had never run the state by itself and organized pogroms as a challenge to public order. There were three million Jews in Poland, a tenth of the total population, a third of the urban population. There were about as many Jews in the Polish cities of Warsaw and Łódź as there were in all of Germany, or for that matter in all of Palestine.

In domestic policy the Polish regime copied some of the tactics of the National Democrats, founding a ruling party that did not admit Jews and presenting mass Jewish emigration as a goal of foreign policy. Polish leaders supported the



establishment of a state of Israel with the most expansive possible boundaries. In secret the foreign ministry and the ministry of defense supported the right-wing Zionist militants of Betar and Irgun. Young Jewish men were trained on Polish military bases and then sent back to Palestine to make trouble for the British Empire in the hardly hidden hope that the British could be driven out, or at least induced to permit mass emigration of Jews from Poland.

In Germany, Hitler had already made Jews second-class citizens and proclaimed his hatred of them and his intention to eliminate them. The Nazi leadership was far more anti-Semitic than the general population, for whom Jewish matters in general had little salience. Less than 1 percent of the German population was Jewish, and most German Jews would be induced to emigrate by repression and theft. "World Jewry," the wraith that haunted Hitler's speeches, was mostly present, even in the Nazi mind, beyond the borders. In 1938 Hitler, Göring, and Ribbentrop confused Polish leaders by proposing to them as common interests a war against the Soviet Union and the deportation of the Jews.

The Poles, though fearful of Soviet power and desirous of reducing their Jewish population, did not see how those two goals could be pursued at the same time. Surely a large-scale continental war would disrupt any plan for Jews to emigrate? The group of Polish "colonels" who ruled the country, though quite cynical after their own fashion, could not begin to anticipate where Hitler's logic would lead after 1938: toward the mass killing of Jews under the cover of war.

In any event, German policy in 1938 was bringing Jews to Poland rather than drawing them away. After the German annexation of Austria (or *Anschluss*) in March 1938, some twenty thousand Jews with Polish citizenship living in Austria tried to return to Poland. After humiliating pogroms, Austrian Jews were subjected to a systematic policy of expropriation and forced emigration devised by Adolf Eichmann. As these

methods were then applied to German Jews, Polish diplomats feared that the tens of thousands of Polish Jews living in Germany would also seek to return. The foreign ministry decided to exclude Polish Jews abroad from the protection of the Polish state.

Right after the *Anschluss*, the Polish government demanded that all of its citizens living abroad register with embassies—and in October, right before the deadline, instructed its ambassador in Berlin not to stamp the passports of Jews. The Germans could see where this was headed, and responded by deporting about 17,000 Polish Jews to Poland in late October. Very often these were people whose entire lives had been spent in Germany and whose connection to Poland was quite limited. Grynszpan's parents, for example, had moved to Germany in 1911, before an independent Poland had been established. Their children had been born in Germany.

Grynszpan's parents had sent their son, then fifteen years old, to an aunt and uncle in Paris in 1936 to spare him from Nazi repression. By 1938, both his Polish passport and his German visa had expired, and he had been denied legal residency in France. He faced what his biographer Jonathan Kirsch perceptively calls the "existential threat of statelessness." His aunt and uncle had to hide him in a garret so that he would not be expelled. They shared with him a postcard from his sister, mailed right after the family was deported from Germany to Poland: "Everything was finished for us."

The young man had some sort of disagreement with his aunt and uncle about how to react to the family tragedy, and left the house in a rage. The next day he bought a gun, took the métro to the German embassy, asked to meet a German diplomat, and shot Ernst vom Rath, the one who agreed to meet him. It was, he confessed to the French police as he allowed himself to be arrested, an act of revenge for the suffering of his family and his people.

Kirsch has a dramatic story, and he tells it well. There is a climax: Hitler and Goebbels seized upon the murder as an occasion for the first national German pogrom, the *Kristallnacht* of November 9 and 10, 1938. There is the long, slow denouement: Grynszpan, when the Germans later got hold of him, changed his story, and claimed that Rath was his lover. German jurists dutifully added a violation of Paragraph 175, the ban on homosexual intercourse, to the list of the charges against Grynszpan. This of course implicated Rath, whom the Nazis wished to present as a blood martyr, in crimes of a sexual and racial character involving a minor. Kirsch argues that Grynszpan believed that Hitler would not be able to tolerate his testifying about a love affair on the witness stand.

Kirsch's version (which here follows an earlier book by Gerald Schwab\*) credits Grynszpan with an intelligence he did not always display, but this defense had already been suggested to him in France by a lawyer, and he had a long time to consider his strategy. Most likely the crime was political but the defense was calculated. Rumors about a sexual connection between Grynszpan and Rath were current after the shooting but seem unlikely to be true. Kirsch, to his credit, is interested in the purported homosexual relationship only as a possibility to be considered and analyzed in order to clarify what happened.

Bernard Wasserstein has set himself a difficult task in *On the Eve*, his history of the Jewish Europe of the 1930s: to hold the attention of readers who already know how the story will end. His research is superb, but in an important respect he has written a work of art rather than of social science: he seeks to convey a moment rather than arrive at an explanation. The pertinent epigram is from Simon Dubnow, the founder of modern Jewish historiography: "The historian's essential creative act is the resurrection of the dead"—which in this case means the murdered. The challenge comes with a double

edge if we remember that Dubnow himself is one of those murdered, shot in Riga in 1941 during the Holocaust.

We cannot forget the Holocaust when we read of the Jews of the 1930s, nor does Wasserstein expect any such thing. But we must remember that our knowledge of a Holocaust in 1941 cannot have been shared by Jews in 1938, and more broadly that the meaning of lives cannot be reduced to the motives of the murderers. Wasserstein meets Dubnow's challenge with a dozen thematic chapters about Jewish ways of life; one of the later ones, on "youth," is perhaps the most representative and the finest. For young people (such as Grynszpan) formed entirely by the 1930s, this moment was everything they had, all they knew of life. In essays written by Jewish schoolchildren in Poland, Wasserstein finds a haunting collective loneliness.

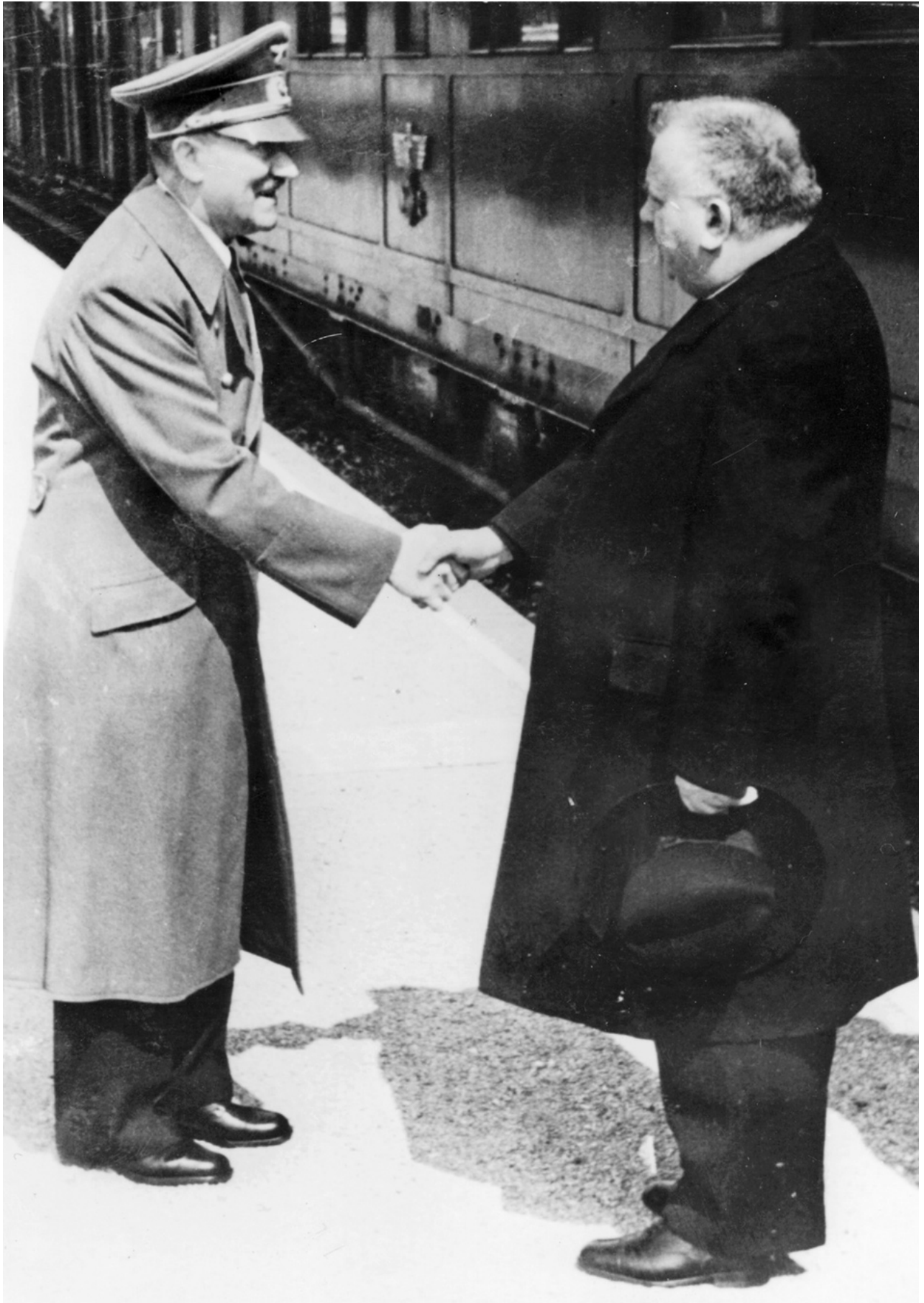
In earlier sections devoted to Western and Central Europe, Wasserstein calls attention to the absence of children, seeing the smallness of Jewish families as evidence of an individualist "road toward collective oblivion." This seems to take the demographic doomsaying of the 1930s too seriously. For one thing, as Wasserstein acknowledges a few pages later, Jews had smaller families in Western and Central Europe not because they were in despair about the fate of their people but because they had become bourgeois. Their low fertility rates, low infant mortality, and long lives anticipated the demographic transition of postwar Europe. For another, Jews in the major Jewish homeland, Poland, were still reproducing at a fairly high rate; without emigration the Jewish population grew by about 50,000 a year. And as the Polish origins of the Grynszpan family remind us, in Germany immigration rather than reproduction was the natural source of demographic growth.

The extreme difficulty of movement in the late 1930s thus becomes the theme of the book. After the United States restricted immigration in 1924 and the British limited migration to Palestine in 1936, most Jews knew that their fate, whatever it might be, would come in Europe. Although

German and Polish restrictions on citizenship policies toward Jews set the final trap for families like the Grynshpans in 1938, these policies were part of, and in some measure a reaction to, the global constriction of emigration. The Évian Conference of July 1938, on the issue of Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution, had demonstrated that no major country was willing to take the Jews of Germany—and, to Warsaw's frustration, the far more numerous Jews of Poland were not even discussed. Insofar as Jews in Poland were moving at all, it was from the small towns to the cities. Wasserstein gives excellent descriptions of Jewish urban misery, although much of the misery was, of course, simply urban and not particularly Jewish. Polish peasants, whose unemployment rate was even higher than that of the Jews, were also flooding the cities.

Wasserstein writes of "New Jerusalems," the cities that Jews considered to be special. In Poland this was Vilna (Wilno in Polish, Vilnius for Lithuanians, whose capital it is today), where the historian Simon Dubnow, among many others, gathered historical and ethnographic materials for YIVO—the Institute for Jewish Research (today in New York). From the neighboring Soviet Union, the other European country with a Jewish population in the millions, Wasserstein chooses Minsk: notable indeed for its Soviet-era Yiddish culture, at least before the Stalinist Great Terror of 1937–1938 and the Holocaust.

One of Wasserstein's many achievements is to integrate Soviet Jewish experiences,



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Adolf Hitler and the Slovak leader Jozef Tiso, Salzburg, Austria, July 1940

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The large number of Jewish victims of Soviet power was mainly a function of the repressive character of the Soviet state at the time. Despite all the bloodletting, the Soviet Union was

then the only officially anti-anti-Semitic state in the world, and it assimilated more Jews into its system than any other country had done. Wasserstein points to what he considers an unmistakable sign of this integration: many Jews in the Soviet Union forsook their God. Whereas most Christians in the USSR admitted to their beliefs in the 1937 census, only 10 percent of Jews did.

Wasserstein doesn't know Polish or Russian. Perhaps as a result his account of the integration of Jews into the two major Slavic cultures can seem a bit more exotic than it actually was; but he does know, aside from German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and French, the languages of his other two "New Jerusalems": Dutch for Amsterdam and Ladino for Salonika. Each city is presented in impressively credible detail, and the juxtaposition of all four illustrates, about as well as can be done, the multiplicity of the different Jewish cultures in Europe. Wasserstein himself clearly loves languages, and they give him an occasion for brief moments of erudite playfulness in a work whose tone is generally calm and earnest. His confident multilingualism permits an interesting European counterhistory of mass literacy and mass politics. Christian national elites were eager in the first third of the twentieth century to raise up the Christian masses to democracy, socialism, or nationalism by teaching them to read. Male Jews, for the most part, were already literate in a language or two or three. They were bemused or afraid or, sometimes, fascinated by the cultures around them.

The missing chapter is about the Jews who tend most to fascinate us, the writers and the scientists. Leaving them out is the most interesting, and perhaps the most un-Jewish, move that Wasserstein makes. Sigmund Freud figures not as the founder of psychoanalysis but as the author of a self-reflective note about his Jewish identity; Julian Tuwim appears not as the most-read Polish poet but as an example of ambivalent self-regard; György Lukács is not the leading

Marxist philosopher of his time but only an admirer of the “foggy” Jewish nationalism of Martin Buber. In a kind of postmodern chivalrous gesture, only the achievements of Jewish feminists get close attention. There is no consideration of the “contributions,” as Wasserstein says with irony, of Jews to European culture. This choice denies the reader any vicarious sense of superiority (“we made the culture and they destroyed it”) or any redeeming access to the uses of adversity (“look what we did despite it all”). With a supple but irresistible force, this insistence on the typical experience and not on exceptional achievement holds the book squarely in the category of social history: a portrait of a people, a collective one.

Wasserstein restores, as well as anyone could, a moment of life. He even begins a kind of reclamation of life from death. The suicides that followed the tragedies of 1938—the *Anschluss* in Austria, the deportation of Jews from Germany to Poland, and *Kristallnacht* in Germany—were not only predictable consequences of oppression but rather attempts, at least in some cases, to preserve the shape of a life whose continuation, in the new circumstances, could only corrupt. Yet the suspense can only be maintained for so long; these tragedies, though presented again and again in human terms by Wasserstein, are also general turning points, beginnings of an ending. By the time Wasserstein reaches Grynszpan and his deed in late 1938, in a chapter entitled “In the Cage, Trying to Get Out,” the darkness is falling.

The absorption of Austria into the Third Reich in March 1938 led to a German-Polish-Jewish refugee crisis in October, which in turn led to Grynszpan’s assassination of Rath and to *Kristallnacht* in November. The *Anschluss* was also the beginning of the end of the European state system. Hitler, much encouraged by his unexpectedly rapid success, pressed onward toward Czechoslovakia. At Munich in September 1938, the French and British abandoned their Czechoslovak ally, allowing

Germany to annex the rim of mountainous territory called the Sudetenland. Hitler, further emboldened, moved in March 1939 to destroy the remaining Czechoslovak state.

The Jews of western Czechoslovakia were absorbed into the Reich along with a "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia." The Jews of the farthest reaches of eastern Czechoslovakia, the region known as Subcarpathian Ruthenia, found themselves under Hungarian rule after Berlin granted Budapest this territory in the First Vienna Arbitrage of 1940. The destruction of Czechoslovakia left these Jews stateless, and Hungary refused to recognize about 20,000 of them as its own citizens. Hungary would expel these people in 1941, and they would become the victims of the first large-scale shooting action of the Holocaust.

In Hitler's disposition of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia became an independent state, subordinate to the Reich but formally sovereign. As James Mace Ward shows in his finely researched biography, the Slovak leader Monsignor Jozef Tiso understood this new beginning as a chance for Christian, national, and social revolution. The end of Czechoslovakia deprived the Jews of their previous civil status; the new Slovak state denied them equal citizenship and deprived them of property rights. Tiso wanted Slovaks to seize Jewish property and take up Jewish professions, and thus expand the national middle class. The Jews, suitably impoverished, could then be deported to the Reich as laborers, as was arranged in October 1941. Slovak leaders asked, that December, for assurances that Jews sent to Germany would never return. This was superfluous: the endpoint of the deportations was Auschwitz.

In March 1938 the Warsaw government expressed no objection to the annexation of Austria, and in September 1938 it actively supported the partition of Czechoslovakia. After these two easy triumphs, though, Hitler turned again to Poland, and now his tone was far less cordial. The German proposals to the Polish government in late 1938 and early 1939 remained

incoherent. There was some vague assurance that Poland could share in the spoils of a German-Polish war against the Soviet Union, as well as some incomprehensible hints of a common solution to the Jewish problem. Far more precise were German demands: that Danzig, then a free city in which Poland had important interests, be ceded to the Reich; and that Poland allow an extraterritorial highway to connect Germany with East Prussia.

Polish leaders understood that even a victory against the Soviet Union alongside Germany would be a defeat, since Poland would surely become a German satellite the moment it became a German place d'armes. For Polish public opinion and to Polish leaders, the German plans for Danzig and the highway were themselves intolerable violations of sovereignty. Poland decided to resist such German demands and risk war. Great Britain and France then endorsed Poland's independence and offered security guarantees. When the Polish foreign minister visited London in April 1939, he still was hoping to persuade the British to allow Jewish settlement in Palestine. In May the Polish army was still training the Irgun.

Hitler wanted war in 1939, and was not choosy about allies. Although his ultimate goal was, as he had been telling the Poles for years, an attack on the USSR, he was perfectly willing to make an arrangement with Stalin if it served his immediate aims. Thus in the summer of 1939 Hitler changed his basic conception from that of an attack on the Soviet Union with Polish help to an attack on Poland with Soviet help (with the Soviets, of course, to be betrayed later on).

This is where Wasserstein, quite understandably, ends his study: with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, the de facto German-Soviet alliance that doomed Poland. We are shown a photograph of the forlorn delegates at the World Zionist Congress as they hear the news of the arrangement between Hitler and Stalin. As they immediately understood, this meant a German war on Poland and Nazi domination over millions of

Jews. It also opened the way to a German attack on the Western European nations of many of the delegates. The session ended early so that the delegates could hurry home; Chaim Weizmann closed the meetings with his prayer that "we shall meet again, alive."

Poland was quickly defeated by the joint German and Soviet invasions of September 1939. Britain and France provided no meaningful assistance to Poland but did declare war on Hitler's Germany. Herschel Grynszpan, then still in a French jail awaiting a trial, asked to be able to join the French army. In June 1940 France fell almost as quickly as had Poland. Grynszpan was now hastily evacuated to the south. The French often allowed people in his situation to escape, but Grynszpan, fearing the Germans, wanted to remain in French captivity. He wandered through the south of France, the territories that came to be governed by the collaborationist Vichy regime, searching for a French prison that would take him. Meanwhile German diplomats filed a formal request for his extradition, which the new Vichy authorities quickly granted.

Grynszpan's position, here as throughout his short life, was both glaringly unusual and yet highly representative. Vichy was eager to rid itself of foreign Jews. Grynszpan was in the worst possible legal position for a Jew in France, lacking both French citizenship and foreign citizenship, since Poland, according to the Germans, had ceased to exist as a state. After his deportation to Germany, where the Nazis failed to arrange a show trial, he was killed, although the precise circumstances of his death, according to Kirsch, are unknown.

We know a good deal, thanks to the careful chronicle of Annette Wieviorka and Michel Laffitte, of the fate of Polish and stateless Jews in Vichy France in general. They were rounded up, often with the help of the French police, dispatched to the holding camp at Drancy outside Paris, and deported to Auschwitz. So despite everything, Grynszpan was in one way typical. He belonged to the largest group of victims.

Polish Jews were well over half of those murdered in the Holocaust overall. And Polish Jews were also the largest group of Holocaust victims in France itself. More Polish Jews residing in France were killed than were French Jews. In this sense, the Holocaust in France was a chapter of the Holocaust in Poland, and in the history of statelessness.

Hannah Arendt noticed in her wartime writings and then in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* the elemental connection between statelessness and mass murder. She observed from France the events of 1938, as Jews were forced back and forth in what Wasserstein calls "refugee tennis." The denial of civil rights to Jews within states was one form of repression. The destruction of states themselves rendered Jews vulnerable as nothing else could. Hitler's aspiration to rid the earth of Jews could only proceed to completion after the states themselves were destroyed. Where any vestige of sovereignty remained, as in Vichy France and Slovakia, Jewish policy could change and deportations could cease, as indeed happened in both places in 1943. Where sovereignty was completely removed, Jews had no chance, either at home or abroad. Polish Jews were at greater risk of death than anyone else in German-occupied Poland—but also in Vichy France. Arendt's point was stronger than she realized herself.

To try to understand the life and death of European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s is, almost by definition, to engage with Arendt. Ward ends his book with a citation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but Wasserstein misses few opportunities to disagree with her, and Kirsch energetically denies her strange interpretation of the Grynszpan case as a Gestapo conspiracy. And yet the Grynszpan case itself, when considered against the broader setting of the events of 1938, confirms Arendt's broader point. Grynszpan was not, as the Nazis claimed, a representative of a "Jewish War" declared by a Jewish international conspiracy against Germany; but he and his family were typical victims of a particular tactic of the war



against the Jews, the deprivation of citizenship. Several governments acted in the late 1930s to deny Jews citizenship or to destroy states where Jews were citizens. Nazi Germany combined the ambition of eliminating the Jews with the eradication of sovereignty that allowed that ambition to be realized.

1. *\*The Day the Holocaust Began: The Odyssey of Herschel Grynszpan* (Praeger, 1990). [↵](#)