

**Tobias Metzler: Tales of Three Cities. Urban Jewish Cultures in London, Berlin, and Paris (c. 1880–1940) (= Jüdische Kultur, Bd. 28). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2014. 412 S., 84.00 €.**

London, Berlin, Paris – these three cities were once paragons of industry, modernity, high and low and even in-between culture, and everything else that the denizens who flooded through the gates of these metropolises would later write, read, draw, sing and dance about. The populations in all three exploded

toward the end of the 19th century, with growth driven by both foreign (rural and urban) as well as domestic rural immigration. Tobias Metzler has woven an intricate tale of the Jewish experience of these dynamic centres drawing on both the experiences of the local (more or less) established Jewish communities and the newer immigrants.

The book is divided into three main sections, each of them focuses on one of these cities. He has created something of a chronology and narrative for these three histories – slices of London, headed “Unity and Diversity”, are predominantly from the last decades of the nineteenth century; Berlin “Community and Modernity” are, for the most part, from 1905–1933; and finally Paris, “Exile and Refuge”, focuses on the period 1920–1940.

Despite the (loose) chronological framework, there are a number of recurring themes such as anti-Semitism, inter-communal problems vis-a-vis East European Jewish immigration and, perhaps most striking, sections which look at how the various representative bodies struggled to control and order the increasingly secular and fractional communities experiencing exponential population growth.

To its merit, *A Tale of Three Cities* is a somewhat easy-to-read but nonetheless academic title which will interest both historians and the uninitiated in equal amounts. The shelves in Jewish Studies libraries are overflowing with single-disciplinary monographs paying scant regard to transnational commonalities and patterns within Jewish urbanisation. Metzler has made use of these as well as introducing copious amounts of diverse – literary, scholarly, journalistic – primary source material to create interesting, and at times refreshing, portraits of urban Jewish life. His use of Jewish community organs and publications (in fascinating sections Metzler discusses how communities used guide books to spatially and socially map their cities) in each of the cities brings home the radical shift in urban Jewish communal life at a time when secular and political institutions were usurping the traditional leadership role of the religious kehillot.

Nonetheless, the book’s eminent readability and its assortment of promising niche topics is negated by the more serious structural and superficial problems running through the work. It simply lacks the kind of consistent methodological structure essential to any book with such bold scope. Secondary source theory is, for the most part, introduced in footnotes and not applied to the primary source material at hand where the diffuse material is

often deployed to create the narrative and not, in its ordinary function, as a justification for it. This is certainly not helped by Metzler's (often banal) use of theoretical prose which is rarely applied to the matter at hand or leaves one wondering if it is an historical text or a visual artist's mission statement e.g. in his discussion of Jewish emigration to Paris in the 1930s he writes:

“It is through distinct places such as the train station as point of arrival or the hotel room as first accommodation that the refugee initially experiences the new urban environment. These liminal spaces represent a link between the processes of crossing boundaries between familiar and unknown realms and the fluidity of the new urban environment, itself an in-between-place between the hope to return and the prospect of having to move on.” (p.242)

The following discussion of hotel rooms and cafes as “transitory spaces” for Jewish émigrés is as tedious as it is abstruse and it begs a number of questions such as, whether hotels and cafes in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Berlin and London were not also intrinsic to the bohemian and avant-garde (even bourgeois) cultures in those cities? The answers are not forthcoming.

Perhaps more distracting is his propensity to vacuous rhetorical prose. In his introduction, he writes: “This study seeks to identify paradigmatic elements of urban Jewish cultures in urban contexts” (p. 14) or, later on: “The urban space [...] played a decisive role in the process of competing urban Jewish cultures.” (p. 118) “Where else?” one asks oneself. Or the particularly obscure description of cities as being “characterised by the simultaneity of liberating promises and the subordination under the regime of modern rationality.” (p. 24) Needless to say, there is no discussion of how a rational modern logos subordinated the liberating promises of the Jewish minorities.

Rather than engaging with his theoretical theme of general urban development and how Jews have influenced or been influenced by this, Metzler uses, with the exception of his mapping thesis, different methodological categories for each city. For example, in London we are told that “Studying Jewish philanthropy, thus allows insights into the complexities of urban Jewish identity formation” (p. 104) yet this (interesting) concept is not applied to the other cities. If indeed, as his introduction purports, Jews played an important role in the “emergence and extension of modern urban cultures” (p. 14) and that the “modern city fundamentally shaped the fabric of modern Jewish communities, influencing the ways Jews tried to live as Jews” (pp. 16–17) there is little or no

discussion in general, or in comparative terms, of how this influencing and influence took place.

There is much space given to a purported clash of Western and Eastern Jews (*Ostjuden*) with, sadly, little discussion of the heterogeneity and histories of the various groups. More fruitful and certainly more pertinent would have been a broader discussion of the fundamental changes to organised Jewish life using the very urban categories of confessional apathy, secularisation, political radicalisation, or mixed marriages. In fact, beyond Metzler's Jewish East-West paradigm there is an alarming lack of space given to other Jewish cultures and developments. Instead, each community in each city at each period is described in terms of their (discrete) struggles and reactions to the historiographical categories of anti-Semitism [Berlin], colonialism [London], and life as *Émigrés* fleeing Nazi persecution [Paris]. Indeed, his discussion of Paris is less a discussion of Jewish urbanisation and more a description of the experience of Jewish *émigrés* in the 1930s, which leads one to ask why Paris and not, say, New York was used in the tri-city comparison. To confuse matters more, he parachutes a short section on Jewish *émigré* experiences in Shanghai into the epilogue.

His use of statistics, particularly in the Berlin section, is also questionable. At one point he claims that Jewish unemployment circa 1928 was "rather high" at 3.500 without any reference to the general or group-specific unemployment figures at the time (p. 228). This last issue points toward one of the most significant failings of Metzler's work: each of the cities treated had other (larger) minority populations. Was Jewish experience, their projected "otherness", discrimination, or heterogeneity, different to say the Irish or Chinese experience in London? Or the (Christian) Russian and Polish experience in Berlin? In a purported discussion of how urban spaces defined and were defined by the social and cultural tropes and trajectories of a particular minority, the criteria for the unique or particular contribution and development of that minority should be outlined in contrast to other (or at least one other) coeval competing groups and interests. Without this, the theoretically and methodologically challenging discussion of the uniquely evolving Jewish identities becomes a more mundane narrative social history – a minority report.

These problems are all greatly exacerbated by what, even in generous terms, can only be described as an editorial dog's dinner. It is always a challenge to write something in a foreign language, a fact I am uncomfortably reminded of each time I try to hammer out an email in the *schöne Sprache* of my adopted

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home. However, Harrassowitz publishing have done the author a grave injustice by not poring over the document before it went to print. Each page has at least one conspicuous grammatical mistake or numerous spelling mistakes. But this is not simply at a superficial level; the sheer number of mistakes, clunky unnatural phrases, mixed metaphors (“pour oil onto troubled waters”, p. 125), archaic or discriminatory nouns (“Jewess”, p. 274), and missing punctuation, all too often leads to problems of interpretation.

The many problems within the book are somewhat mitigated by a number of sub-chapters which offer fascinating but all too brief glimpses into the Jewish urban experience in Berlin, Paris and London. In particular the London section offers, despite its failings, an excellent starting point for general reading on Jewish London at the time and a promising starting point for more detailed works – a silver lining, however, this is not. *Caveat emptor.*

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