Digital Studies of Suicides of Jews in Hamburg during the Holocaust

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Today many historical documents serve the process of remembrance and are important sources for our study of the Holocaust. Local memorial books of German Jewish communities hold a wealth of information about Jewish victims. Based on deportation lists and other sources, the Memorial Book of Jews of Hamburg, for example, recalls not only victims of the Holocaust, but in its digital format opens up new avenues of study.

The Hamburg memorial book entails, for example, information about suicides. The social, economic, and physical assault on Jews, which commenced once Hitler came to power in 1933, created a atmosphere of fear and despair, where ending one’s life was potentially driven by a desire to preserve individual dignity and agency while at other times an act of hopelessness.

Suicides of German Jews during the Holocaust combine individual circumstances and choices and collective fates. A 73-year-old physician from Hamburg wrote his wife after Kristallnacht: “My dear Else! I cannot live any longer and do not want to live anymore. Let me sleep quietly, do not call a doctor and don’t let them take me to a hospital. Thank you for all your love. Your H.” Sources like these speak of an individual’s inability to continue to live and the preponderance of suicides around historical events like Kristallnacht make an individual’s choices part of what a historian described as a “mass phenomenon”. The wider social practice of suicide sheds light on the radically changing social and economic conditions of Jewish life in Nazi Germany along with the fear and despair they engendered.

Up until 1938 suicides in Hamburg seemed to have occurred infrequently, but from 1938 onwards the taking of one’s life represents a wider social phenomena as statistical analysis makes visible. By looking not at individual cases but at the overall frequency of suicides we glean insight into how the changing circumstances registered in the lives of men and women. In Hamburg, suicides dramatically increased after Kristallnacht and gained a startling momentum with the onset of deportations in the fall of 1941. Of the 359 suicides recorded in the memorial book substantially more men than women took their lives. Yet the obvious gender differences in

Suicide by Gender

Sum of Number of Records for each Gender. Color shows details about Gender. The marks are labeled by count of Number of Records.
suicides rates were only pronounced for the pre-war period. They became virtually meaningless with the beginning of the deportations.

Moreover, predominantly older individuals took their lives, which is less surprising considering that the average age of remaining Jews steadily increased. Age stands out particularly for the height of suicides between 1941 and 1942. Of the over 200 individuals who took their lives during this period, 130 men and women were between 61 and 80.

The memorial book also allows us to trace the internal migration of German Jews. Emigration often became a means to survive, but internal migration within the borders of the German Reich appears as a contributing factor to larger suicide rates. 211 Jews, who had moved to Hamburg more likely committed suicide than those who had been born in the city. The discrepancy is at times more pronounced and possibly points to a greater isolation amongst Jews who had moved to the city, with a smaller network of individuals to rely on, and fewer choices to deal with the adversity of life amidst war and in a racialized society.

Further Readings

Konrad Kwiet, The Ultimate Refuge Suicide in the Jewish Community Under the Nazis (1984)

Reference