



Cordelia Heß. *The Absent Jews: Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*. New York–Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017. 334 pp + 1 map, 1 table. ISBN: 978-1-78533-492-4.*

Cordelia Heß is a historian employed at the University of Greifswald. Her main areas of interest are social conflicts in the Baltic cities and towns of the late Middle Ages, social perceptions at that time (and their effects on the epochs that followed), and Christian-Jewish relations in the Baltic region, which intertwines with research on German historiography, in particular with research on issues connected to Jews (“Judenforschung”) conducted during the Nazi period in Prussia.

The need to review the current state of knowledge about the Jewish presence in the State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia and interest in historiographical research has resulted in Heß’s latest book, *The Absent Jews: Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*. As Heß notes, the work encompasses as many as two books, one devoted to Kurt Forstreuter, a historian and archivist studying the history of Prussia, and the other presenting Jewish-Christian relations in Prussia, particularly during the Teutonic period (p. 5).

The work is divided into seven chapters, supplemented by an introduction and a summary. The first chapter summarises the state of research and outlines the historiography on Jews in Prussia. The second chapter describes Forstreuter’s activities, discusses his membership in the NSDAP, and compares him to other researchers representing the “Ostforschung” (i.e., research on the East) movement. The third chapter presents Forstreuter’s engagement during the war, his archival research, and his post-war activities. Here, the author mentions property theft in the occupied territories organised by the state, the export of archival materials, and mass executions, and at the same time attempts to present Forstreuter as a cog in a great machine of plunder and destruction. In the fourth chapter, Heß analyses the hypothesis about the existence of the oldest anti-Jewish record in the legislation of the Order (“Landesordnung” of 1309). In the fifth chapter, she considers the lack of numerous references regarding Jews (as well as Muslims) in the Teutonic Order’s chronicle tradition. The sixth chapter focuses on the accusations included in the chronicles (*Chronicum Olivense*, *Chronik des Preußenlandes* by Johan von Posilge, and *Detmar Chronicle*) which are directed against Jews as bringers of the

* This text is an extended version of the review in Polish published in *Roczniki Historyczne* 83 (2017): 321–324.

plague or blood libel. The last chapter is an attempt to pinpoint the evidence for the presence of Jews in Prussia.

The core of the work is Heß's thesis concerning Nazi-inspired statements in the historiography with regard to the presence of a Jewish population in Prussia. The author posits that previous research had wrongly assumed that there were no Jewish settlements in the Baltic territories of the Teutonic Order. The author accurately maintains that, in other territories ruled by the Order, there were no prohibitions to settle; for example, in Franconian Mergentheim the Jewish community could settle freely. Heß also points to another example of policy favourable to the Jews, namely, the decision to allow the continued settlement of Jews in Neumark, bought by the Order in 1402. These examples serve as arguments to negate the claim that the Prussian lands supposedly had a special significance for the Christian world in line with the Teutonic Order's thought that these areas, newly seized from Pagan rule, were intended as a new Promised Land free from religious dissenters.¹ Heß sees Kurt Forstreuter (1897–1979) as the creator of this latter theory who by presenting his theses operated within the framework of Nazi historiography.

In rejecting Forstreuter's claim, Heß refers to both contemporary Polish historians and her own findings. As examples of current trends, she mentions articles by M. Broda and S. Józwiak. Unfortunately, the author did not read them thoroughly. The text by M. Broda² is devoted to Jewish doctors and contains only the information on the three Jewish doctors mentioned by their first names who were granted permission to stay in the territories of the State of the Teutonic Order. Mentioning the text by S. Józwiak³ does not confirm the researcher's arguments. Even though Nieszawa (addressed by S. Józwiak) was part of the Province of West Prussia in the 15th century, it was not ruled by the Order. It was founded in 1425 (not at the beginning of the 15th century as Heß states), and it is confirmed that Jews were present there only from the 1440s (the oldest mention dates from 1444); Heß equates both phenomena, assuming that Jews had inhabited the town since its foundation.

¹ Zenon H. Nowak, "Dzieje Żydów w Prusach Królewskich do roku 1772," in *Żydzi w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej: materiały z konferencji "Autonomia Żydów w Rzeczypospolitej Szlacheckiej": Międzywydziałowy Zakład Historii i Kultury Żydów w Polsce Uniwersytet Jagielloński 22–26 IX 1986*, ed. Andrzej Link-Lenczowski and Tomasz Polański (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), 136.

² Michalina Broda, "Żydowskie lekarze w państwie zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach w późnym średniowieczu," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 240 (2011): 435–443.

³ Sławomir Józwiak, "Kontakty komturów toruńskich z Żydami z Nowej Nieszawy w latach czterdziestych XV wieku," *Rocznik Toruński* 29 (2002): 39–48.

Furthermore, the evidence for the thesis formulated by the researcher, which she provides herself, is not convincing. She recalls the entries from the town record books of Toruń, Chełmno, and Gdańsk which mention people described as “Jode” or “Iode” (p. 235), which she interprets as proof of the presence of Jews in the Prussian towns and cities. Unfortunately, Heß does not mention in the main body of her text that the names of these people are Christian, such as Nicolas or Christoph; this information can only be found in the footnotes (pp. 266–267). The presence of Christian names with epithets suggesting Jewish provenience should not surprise because it is known that the Grand Master had declared his financial support for the families of converts.⁴ Similar efforts were made by the Prussian bishops whose aim it was to prevent the new Christians from reconverting to Judaism (which is certified by the preserved *Księga formularzowa biskupstw pruskich*, the so-called *Formularz z Uppsali*.) Heß is familiar with this source, but she interprets it in a specific manner: although she mentions the presence of a number of Jewish converts, she states that this proves that there were local Jewish communities. She firmly rejects the notion that potential converts may have come to the Order’s lands later on.

It seems that an interesting piece of evidence which may confirm the author’s thesis is the Order’s legislation from the 14th century, known thanks to subsequent chronicle notes (the oldest preserved reference is thought to be in the 16th-century chronicle by Simon Grunau). The chronicle note mentions the prohibition against Jewish settlement in the territories of Prussia from 1309. The author interprets this information not as the confirmation of the thesis present in the historiography, but as proof of Jewish settlement in Prussia prior to the Gdańsk Pomerania conquest of 1308. What is interesting is that the author is not consistent in her argumentation as, in another part of her work (p. 171), she claims that it would be unlikely to formulate such a prohibition. Drawing conclusions where there are no resources is also a part of the author’s argumentation. For example, according to the author, the lack of the preserved (even fragmentary) Jewish population records kept by the Teutonic Order’s State is supposed to indicate that the Order’s policy towards religious minorities was rather benign and not that there was a lack of Jewish communities in the territories of the Teutonic Order’s State (pp. 239–240).

Besides searching the chronicles to find references for the presence of a Jewish population (or at least of people who converted from this faith), Heß has found other evidence of positive relations between the Order and the Jews. She refers to laudatory passages on the Old Testament Israelites in the chronicles. In her opinion, glorifying the bravery of Old Israel’s fighters proves the fondness of the Or-

⁴ Nowak, “Dzieje,” 137.

der's chroniclers for the Chosen People (pp. 176–177, 221–224). However, such interpretation proves a lack of knowledge of the medieval tradition (and later) the interpretation of Jewish history. Old Testament characters were, in principle, supposed to be interpreted as ascendants of those Jews who would receive the word of Jesus, whereas contemporary Jews (for the chroniclers) were mere descendants of recreants.

Later sources, other than chronicles, that mention Jews are overinterpreted by the author. According to Heß, the documents from 16th-century Royal Prussia, for example the complaints of Prussian cities and towns about Jews to the Polish king (the oldest from 1528) or the prohibition against the settlement of Jews and Scots in Royal Prussia from 1551 (pp. 262–264) are supposed to be evidence that there must have been a large Jewish community somehow inherited from the Teutonic Order.

The author is aware that identifying the existence of a large Jewish community in the absence of material traces (such as synagogues or other monuments) is difficult. Not only does she not specify how large the Jewish community in Prussia might have been, but she also does not present any credible hypothesis as to where the mentioned community might have come from. Mutually excluding guesses that such communities existed, but did not have to leave traces, or that Prussian towns and cities were not attractive to Jews, or that Jewish communities in Poland were too small to send settlers to Prussia, stand in contradiction to the general assumption of the work, which is the existence of a thriving Jewish community.

The author justifies the absence of motifs regarding Jewish and Muslim settlement in the territories of the State of the Order in Prussia in the historiography of the Teutonic Order by pointing to the personal prejudices of previous historians, in particular Kurt Forstreuter, as well as to the successful propaganda of the Teutonic Order (p. 199). Heß wrongly ascribes the authorship of the thesis on the absence of Jewish settlement in the article “Die ersten Juden in Ostpreussen” in *Altpreußische Forschungen* to Forstreuter. In fact, Forstreuter himself refers the reader to a work from 1925, namely, *Der preußische Staat und die Juden*⁵ by Jewish researcher Selma Stern. It is worth noting that the author lists Stern's work in the bibliography (and even mentions it in the first chapter) but does not mention her thesis.

In addition, the part devoted to Forstreuter and his work during World War II contains a number of mistakes, inaccuracies, or misrepresentations. The example of the latter is the claim that, as part of his activity as a NSDAP member, Forstreuter was supposed to prompt the plunder and destruction of several archives, especially

⁵ Selma Stern, *Der preußische Staat und die Juden*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1925).

the Jewish ones, and that there is supposed to be a correlation between his activity and war crimes (pp. 288–289). While the involvement of German researchers in the official robbery of archival materials is documented, further conclusions by the author are difficult to justify. She connects the expulsion from Poznań voivodeship, ethnic cleansing in the Zichenau region (“Regierungsbezirk” Zichenau), or mass murders of Lithuanian Jews with Forstreuter’s presence in the respective places. Comparing the dates of the murders committed by the “Einsatzgruppen” with the dates of archives being removed does not confirm the participation of the German historian in the former criminal activity.

In the biographical section, Heß attempts to investigate what the combat trail of the archivist may have been. She establishes that, at first, he remained in Poznań voivodeship, then in those lands incorporated into the Reich which had not been under German rule before, namely, Płock, Ciechanów, and part of Mazovia (Zichenau), as well as the Suwałki region, before he went to Warsaw. After the aggression of the Third Reich on the U.S.S.R., Forstreuter came to the territories of Lithuania and the District of Białystok (“Bezirk” Białystok). In this case, Heß comes to specific conclusions from silence as well, for example, by not being able to determine what precisely Forstreuter may have done in the territories occupied in 1939, only claiming that he ceased publishing any kind of works from the outbreak of the war until the end of 1939 and most probably enjoyed his war involvement (p. 106).

In the description of a business trip in the incorporated Mazovia, Heß draws attention to Forstreuter’s visit to the Płock ghetto which was supposed to initiate his efforts to preserve Jewish documents before the community was permanently exterminated (pp. 108–111). The author also describes the rivalry between the archivist and the SS for access to monuments and documents, but besides stating this fact she presents neither the causes for nor the results of this rivalry.

What is particularly odd is linking Forstreuter’s visit in Vilnius on 25 July 1941, with the Ponary massacre in July of the same year (p. 120). Mass executions started as early as 2 July, and not 23 July as Heß suggests. No Lithuanian Waffen-SS division participated in them, as the author writes, but a paramilitary formation composed of former riflemen units, so-called *šauliai*, performing police functions.⁶ In addition, the author does not mention the non-Jewish victims of the Ponary executions, namely, Russians, Poles, and Romani people who constituted almost half of the over 100,000 victims.

In the part devoted to World War II, the researcher shows a certain ignorance of terminology. Heß wrongly states that Suwałki was located beyond the prov-

⁶ Karen Sutton, *The Massacre of the Jews of Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Gefen Books, 2008), 169–170.

ince of East Prussia (p. 121). This is not the only time the author is wrong when it comes to the description of the administrative units in the Third Reich. She does not note the difference between the lands incorporated into the Third Reich and the General Government area. Moreover, she does not note the difference between the lands constituting the German Empire before World War I and the territories annexed in 1939 which never belonged to the German Reich. As a result, Heß confuses (p. 109) the terms “Reichsdeutsche” (German people coming from the territories of the Reich in the years 1871–1918) and “Volksdeutsche,” which leads to further mistakes. The territories of the Zichenau region, even though incorporated into East Prussia in 1939, had not belonged to the German Empire previously; thus, one cannot speak of “Reichsdeutschen” living there. The author either incorrectly juxtaposes the two terms or wrongly claims that “Reichsdeutsche” were the people living in the annexed territories.

The author misinterprets the assumptions connected with the German “völkisch” movement whose influence on the ideology of the NSDAP was crucial. The main assumption of the “völkisch” movement was not the idea that the land was shaped by the peoples inhabiting it (p. 112), but the other way around, that the features of nature shaped the character or soul of the “Volk.” The theory with which the author confuses the “völkisch” beliefs is cultural diffusionism theory (a movement created by F. Ratzl in Germany). This movement rejected classical evolutionary thinking that lower cultures could transform into higher ones; instead, its assumptions were that there existed main centres (creators of culture) which emitted culture to its recipients (recipients of culture). Contrary to what the author writes, assumptions of this type were not a form of megalomania among “Ostforschung” researchers (pp. 38, 86–88), but one of the fields of anthropology which was also popular in the United States or Great Britain.⁷

Cordelia Heß set herself the objective to revise the current views concerning the absence of Jews in the territories of medieval Prussia. For this reason it is difficult to regard the work as successful. At the same time, she made several mistakes which have resulted in faulty conclusions.

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⁷ Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy, *A History of Anthropological Theory* (North York–Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 70–73.

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