

Cordelia Hess, *The Absent Jews: Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*, (New York, Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 323.

by Ingo Haar

In *The Absent Jews*, Cordelia Hess tackles a key topic in German history and writes about the connection between science and political power under National Socialism. For two decades now, research has been being conducted on the part that German historians played in the genocide of the European Jews and Slavic people in Eastern Europe, but here Hess focuses on the role played by archivists. As Raphael Lemkin, the father of the Genocide Convention, pointed out, the physical destruction of a nation or ethnic group is preceded by the removal of their cultural heritage. This finding is still unproven in Germany except for individual research on the looting of archives by Wolfgang Freund, Esther Abel and Anja Heuss and the genealogical research that Jürgen Schlumbohm works on.

The key focus of this book by Cordelia Hess, medieval historian and chair of Nordic History at the University of Greifswald, is the Königsberg archivist and medievalist Kurt Forstreuter (1897–1979). As there is hardly any evidence for the presence of Jews in the area around the eastern Baltic in the Middle Ages, especially in the State of the Teutonic Order (*Deutscher Orden*), the region has long been considered as being without Jews. In her study, Cordelia Hess questions this thesis of the absence of Jews and investigates whether this is not rather the result of the destruction of Jewish sources during the Holocaust, an activity closely related to Forstreuter. He belonged to the German nationalist avant-garde of the German *Ostforschung*, albeit as a historian of minor importance. This group of right-wing pioneers with their ideas of ethnic cleansing and ethno-nationalist policies about demography gained a foothold as “servants of the state” in universities and archives from Berlin to Danzig and Königsberg and in the Historical Commissions of the Federal Republic of Germany well into the 1960s. Forstreuter is a good example of how former members of the Nazi bureaucracy became deeply involved in the history of the new Federal Republic of Germany. Like other nationalist scholars, Forstreuter used a paradigm in his academic thesis which Hess calls the “bulwark discourse.”

Forstreuter is interesting, because not only did he professionally interpret documents, he also managed them as an archivist. He was not just anyone. Not only did he manage the file collection of medieval and modern Prussia in the Königsberg National Archives that was important for Jewish history, but he also

conducted his own research on them. Prussia appeared to him as a bulwark of the Germans – and of their ethnic as well as national order – against the Slavic East, which always appeared, like the Jews, as a Polish, Russian or Lithuanian threat to German national identity and national borders.

Like Theodor Schieder and Werner Conze, who both became leading figures in West German historiography and presidents of the Association of German Historians, Forstreuter joined the Nazi regime as a scholarship holder in the publication office Berlin-Dahlem. However, unlike Schieder and Conze, he never became a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party. Nonetheless, Forstreuter both benefited from and participated in the Nazi regime. He was responsible for 70 per cent of trips made by all archivists to occupied Poland and Lithuania from 1939 onwards. He had to identify, sift through, record and transport the contents of occupied or abandoned archives. As Hess shows in Chapters 1 and 2, this included the disappearing of entire archive components that were thus lost forever to Polish posterity and survivors of the Holocaust.

Hess stresses that there was no master plan to systematically locate the archives and steal them from their owners. Nevertheless, Forstreuter cooperated very closely with the SS and other Nazi offices involved in the elimination of the Jews. The agreement of the archivists of the Prussian Archive Administration and the Nazi Party authorities was based on the goal of abandoning the Treaty of Versailles in favour of German hegemony in the East, and of strictly separating the ethnic and national groups in order to strengthen the group of Germans in this area.

One of Hess's contributions in Chapter 3 is that she sees Forstreuter's work in the Nazi resettlement and extermination policies as closely linked to his scholarly writings on "German order" in the Middle Ages. Similarly, the National Socialists also used this semantic figure of the East, that for a long time had been civilized by the Germans, in order to derive power and claim persecution. In this, not only Jewish Eastern Europe, but also Poland as a historical subject was to be made to disappear from the map.

The lasting value of Hess's work lies in the fact that she is the first scholar to systematically work on the problem of archive theft as defined in the United Nations Genocide Convention. She provides, from the German side, the first and long-overdue proof of Raphael Lemkin's hypothesis that genocide not only pursues the goal of physically killing a group, but also of making their culture

invisible. If Hess's findings are accepted, they will result in consequences for the present day.

Hess states in Chapters 4 and 5 that Forstreuter not only made entire archives disappear, but with his own particular history of the East and further publications in the new Federal Republic of Germany he also made sure that Jews and Jewish communities no longer emerged as a historical subject in the history of Old Prussia. If that is true, all follow-up projects that go back to Forstreuter or to the Historical Commission for East and West Prussian Research have a responsibility to explain this "absence" of Jews in Prussian history which Hess asserts in Chapters 6 and 7. But so far nothing has happened to change this. Only American and Polish scholars discuss this question.

A doubtlessly painful but, nonetheless, inevitable revision of their editions and representations, which are obviously under suspicion of manipulation, will be necessary if Hess's claims are correct. Yet Arno Mentzel-Reuters, a former member of the Historical Commission for East and West Prussian History, attacked Hess sharply in *Francia*, a well-known German journal. Hess in turn replied to his criticisms in the same issue in a detailed commentary.¹ In his review, Mentzel-Reuters refers to a small preliminary study by Hess that appeared in *Yad Vashem Studies* in 2014.² He is himself active in the Commission and was the president from 2010 to 2019. Incidentally, Forstreuter led this Commission under Hitler in the 1930s and 1940s and later worked for it again when it was re-established in the Federal Republic under Adenauer with federal funds as an institution for displaced persons (*Vertriebene*). Mentzel-Reuters accuses Hess of pursuing a hate campaign against Forstreuter. He assumes that she wants Forstreuter personally "discredited." But how serious are these ideas?

Well, Cordelia Hess's interpretation may not appeal to every historian. Criticism is certainly a good way to discover the truth, and it may also help to counter the misinterpretation of sources or exaggerated value judgments. Over the years,

¹ Arno Mentzel-Reuters, "Review of Cordelia Hess, *The Absent Jews. Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*, New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017," *Francia-Recensio*, 2 (2018): <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/frrec/article/view/48312/42068>. Cordelia Hess's reply, at <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/frrec/article/view/51887/45842>. Accessed September 19, 2020.

² Cordelia Hess, "Some short business trips. Kurt Forstreuter and the Looting of Archives in Poland and Lithuania, 1939–1942," *Yad Vashem Studies* 42/2 (2014): 91–122.

however, a style of confrontation has developed that treats all historians who ask critical questions unfairly. They are seen as traitors. There is a desire to shoot the messenger if the bearer is bringing bad news.³ In his review, rather than focusing on the uncomfortable truth, Mentzel-Reuters is punishing Cordelia Hess as an author. He accuses her of manipulating sources and artificially inflating Forstreuter's responsibility for archival theft. Finally, Mentzel-Reuters interprets a letter written by Forstreuter about being ill as an attempt by Forstreuter to resist following his boss's terrible orders. At the end of the war, he was transferred to the Defence Forces as a radio operator and Mentzel-Reuters believes that Forstreuter no longer acted in the spirit of the National Socialist genocidal policy and he distanced himself from it internally. He claims that Forstreuter was only acting on orders and was nothing more than a bureaucrat.⁴ However, he offers no evidence or sources to support this claim. Nor does he recognize that the elimination of cultural heritage is the bloodless first step to killing a nation or an ethnic group. It is, in fact, a step on the road to genocide.

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How to quote this article:

Ingo Haar, Review of *The Absent Jews: Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*, by Cordelia Hess, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, n.17, September 2020

DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/8667

³ There is another case here. See Esther Abel, "Aktenraub und Völkische Wissenschaft. Die Aktivitäten des Osteuropahistorikers Peter Scheibert im Sonderkommando Künsberg, seine Entschuldungsstrategie und die seiner 'Schüler,'" in *Völkische Wissenschaften. Ursprünge, Ideologien und Nachwirkungen*, eds. Michael Fahlbusch and Ingo Haar, (Munich: De Gruyter, 2020), 208–241.

⁴ Arno Mentzel-Reuters, "NS- 'Archivschutz' in Zichenau," *Preussenland* 6 (2015): 100–115; 105ff.