

**Klaus Kempter, *Joseph Wulf. Ein Historikerschicksal in Deutschland*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 422.**

by *Ulrich Wyrwa*

For quite some time the narrative has been repeated that in the 1950s and 1960s very few Germans were willing to face up to the Nazi past and deal with the murdered Jews of Europe. Only during the 1970s, after the change of government and the protest movement of the younger generation, so the narrative goes, did segments of the German population begin to come to terms with the Nazi past. The biography of the Jewish historian Joseph Wulf by Klaus Kempter demonstrates just how little this picture is true.

Wulf was born in 1912 as the son of a successful Polish-Jewish businessman. He grew up in Cracow, and immediately after the German occupation of Poland, he joined the Jewish resistance movement there, along with his wife Jenta. After his arrest he was sent to Auschwitz as slave labour for the IG Farben company. He survived because he successfully fled during the death marches. His wife, however, was hidden in a sinkhole together with their six-year old son David thanks to the help of a Polish peasant.

After the liberation, Joseph Wulf began to collect documents regarding the persecution and murder of the Jews of Europe for the Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, which he had co-founded. Furthermore he took a stand for a European network of Jewish historians and he worked to establish documentation centres in various countries. After the pogroms of 1945/46, Wulf left Poland in 1947. He first went to Sweden and then to France. There he constantly worked for the Association of the Polish Jews, and together with a Polish-Jewish colleague living in France he established a Historical Commission.

After political disagreements with his colleague, Wulf and his wife moved to Berlin. Here he continued working for the documentation of the German politics of persecution and murder of the Jews, and he started a remarkably successful job as an early historian of the “Churban” (the term for the Holocaust or the Shoah at that time). In close cooperation with Leon Poliakov, with whom he had already worked together in France, Wulf published in rapid succession three copious volumes of documents regarding the history of the persecution and murder of the Jews in NS Germany: first the huge volume “The Third Reich and the Jews,” published in 1955, followed the next year by the second the volume “The Third Reich and its Servants,” and in 1959 they presented the third volume “The Third Reich and its Thinkers.” All three received remarkably positive reviews in German newspapers and they all achieved an unexpectedly high circulation.

Furthermore Wulf wrote a series of biographies of individual perpetrators, published a large number of articles on the Holocaust, including, for example, in a high-circulation journal published by “The Federal Agency for Civic Education” (a West German government institution), as well as for the magazine “Der Spiegel” and the weekly “Die Zeit.” He also published monographic studies to remember the erased culture and way of life of East-European Jewry. In addition to his printed papers, he wrote a vast number of manuscripts for radio broadcasts regarding the Nazi period, and as soon as television began to make its appearance, he also delivered scripts for films on the Third Reich for this new mass medium. On top of these efforts to enlighten German public opinion, Wulf was engaged in judicial investigations and criminal proceedings against Nazi perpetrators.

Whereas Wulf’s commitment to come to terms with the German past had had a remarkable impact on the German public sphere, the established historical scholarship in Germany ignored his historical-scientific and historical-didactic efforts ignominiously. The Munich Institute of Contemporary History (Institut für Zeitgeschichte), established in 1949 for the scholarly research of the Nazi regime, refused Wulf’s approach of collecting the sources to document the Nazi crimes in their entirety. They alleged that he was unable to analyse the NS period soberly because he was a victim, adding that he was not educated as a professional historian. This notorious incapacity and this serious failure of the German historiography has just been studied and documented precisely by Nicolas Berg in his detailed monograph.<sup>1</sup>

Among Wulf’s comprehensive projects regarding the elucidation of the German past was his idea to establish in Berlin a centre for documentation and historical research on the Nazi reign of terror. As a seat of this centre he proposed the mansion of the Wannsee Conference. To create this institute Wulf succeeded in founding an international society for its promotion, and even the government of Berlin had indicated its approval. Nevertheless, soon after, the project failed.

With great disappointment Wulf noticed further that at the beginning of the 1970s, public interest in his publications decreased – an experience which marked a sharp contrast to the narrative mentioned above, that German society only began to come to terms with the Nazi past after the political change and cultural movement of that decade. Instead of dealing with the persecution of the Jews and with antisemitism, Wulf saw that the new historical and public interest was in generalising theories of fascism.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung*, (Göttingen: Wallstein 2003).

Furthermore Wulf noticed with alarm that in the context of the Near East conflict new antisemitic/anti-zionist positions were spreading in Germany.

Wulf's suicide in October 1974 has been interpreted in previous biographical essays as an act of desperation, as a reaction to his unavailing efforts to account for the German past and because of his disappointment about the failure of his project for the centre for research and documentation.

As Kempter demonstrates clearly, all these experiences could not have shaken the conviction of the engaged scholar Wulf. Instead they would have provoked him toward an even stronger public engagement. What Wulf was really not able to get over was the death of his wife Jenta in August 1973. Wulf lived in Berlin, as Kempter points out aptly as a "skeptischer Solitär" a "sceptic solitary" or "recluse" regarding his Berlin surroundings. He did not want to have personal relationships neither with Gentile German intellectuals nor with German Jews. The death of his wife therefore had struck him so deeply, that he took his own life the following year.

Kempter has published an outstanding biography of the exceptional life of Joseph Wulf. He gives a new picture of Wulf's historical scientific efforts and his public engagement.

Only two minor remarks might be added. Kempter has given a short presentation of the volume "The Third Reich and its Servants", in which Wulf and Poliakov had given some brief remarks on the persecution of the Jews in fascist Italy. The wording of Wulf however is much more appropriate than the paraphrase of Kempter. Whereas Kempter wrote erroneously and repeating old legends that Mussolini had issued the racial laws only because of the pressure of his German allies, Wulf and Poliakov in their writings of 1956 wrote precisely that Mussolini had decided in 1938 of his own accord to issue the anti-Jewish laws.

The second annotation is related to Wulf's project of the centre for documentation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Kempter remarks that many years later, in 1992, a memorial centre had been founded in the Wannsee Villa for the documentation of the Nazi terror against the Jews. Kempter ignores however, that only four years after Wulf's death the Mayor of Berlin announced in his memorial speech for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9 November 1938, that a centre for research on antisemitism would be founded at the Technical University of Berlin, and the profile of this institution has incorporated explicitly central ideas from Wulf's original conception.

Despite these brief remarks, Kempter has written an impressive and remarkable biography of Joseph Wulf, and the benefit of this volume must be seen primarily in the evidence presented that Wulf was by no means a disregarded, sidelined, or ignored individual. He may have had moments of exasperation and despair, but as Kempter has demonstrated clearly, Wulf had

such broad public success with his huge oeuvre, that one must picture Wulf for certain periods “rather as a happy person.”

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