

Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland
by Michael Meng.
Harvard University Press 2011.

The genocidal campaign waged against the Jews by the Nazis is replete with images that haunt the mind, not least of the arrival of hapless Jews at selection points in the death camps and the sights that greeted the Allied soldiers who liberated those camps when the war was won. But among the most iconic and prophetic images are those of the synagogues set alight in the nationwide pogrom of November 1938, beautiful buildings, architectural treasures, pillaged and burned by mindless barbarians.

In Shattered Spaces, the history professor Michael Meng sets out to explore what happened to the synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish sites after the war was over. It is an exercise that takes him through Germany and Poland, and the facts that he uncovers are always interesting, and occasionally deeply distressing.

Meng demonstrates that after the war the German and Polish people were left with ruins that reminded them of what they had done to the Jews, or what had been done to them by the Germans; in addition with Germany split, and Poland and East Germany in the grip of Communism, the responses to the reminders of the war's destructiveness were vastly different.

Meng divides his book into five chapters, sandwiched between an Introduction and Conclusion: Confronting the Spoils of Genocide; Clearing Jewish Rubble; Erasing the Jewish Past; Restoring Jewish Ruins; Reconstructing the Jewish Past.

The whole question of reparations to the shattered, surviving Jewish populations of Germany and Poland is much more complicated than may be realised. The level of destruction in Poland, quintessentially in Warsaw whose Muranow district, where the Ghetto had been sited, was razed to the ground, the issue of restoring what had been lost was drowned by traditional, visceral Polish anti-semitism combined with a carefully constructed national narrative of victimhood. This left little room for accommodating the section of the Polish population that had suffered, and lost, the most.

In West Germany, reparation was driven largely by the occupying Allies rather than the Germans themselves, and residual anti-Semitism coupled with a sense of guilt about that to which they had acquiesced, and linked to legalities concerning ownership of specific sites, made the country slow to respond to demands for restoration. In East Germany the narrative was one of Communism against Fascism, and acknowledging that the Germans of the East had perpetrated atrocities against the Jews of the East was unwelcome.

Meng focuses on some specific buildings and their fate, and by means of this vehicle describes what has been done in the decades since the war to restore, rebuild and memorialise. Shattered Spaces is illustrated throughout by some stunning archival images and Meng's conclusions, particularly about the ways in which sections of the German population now laud Jews as citizens and their contribution to German society, but in specific contradiction to that of German Muslims, gives powerful pause for thought.

Shattered Spaces is a fine work, well written, meticulously researched and copiously annotated, and shines a light on an aspect of the Nazi war against the Jews that has had nothing like the coverage it deserved.