

John M. Cox, *Circles of Resistance: Jewish, Leftist, and Youth Dissidence in Nazi Germany*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2009, 200 p.

J.R. Blackstone
Clare College, University of Cambridge

On 18 May 1942, a group of leftist dissidents stormed the *Sowjetparadies* exhibit in Berlin's *Lustgarten* square, in a daring attack on one of Goebbels' major propaganda pieces of the period. Some forty activists were subsequently arrested, interrogated and executed for the action alongside a 'communal' punishment of two waves of two hundred and fifty Jewish civilians each. This event itself is relatively well known to historians of the Third Reich and socialist studies. However, it is the background to this act of resistance and the people who perpetrated it that primarily concern John M. Cox's monograph *Circles of Resistance: Jewish, Leftist, and Youth Dissidence in Nazi Germany*.

Cox sets out to deal with an impressive array of questions and issues in his work, but it may reasonably be said that the groups led by Herbert Baum in the 1930s and 1940s form the central theme of *Circles of Resistance*. Of its eight chapters, three deal directly with the development of the 'Baum Groups,' their operations during the earlier days of the Reich, and finally the spectacular fall of the groups in 1942. The preceding chapters serve three functions: first, to provide the reader with an overview of the German-Jewish experience up to the 1920s and the growth of Jewish youth groups; second, to establish the notion of a 'third way' on the left, examining Jewish youths who neither adhered strictly to the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands – German Communist Party) nor the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – German Social Democrat Party); and thirdly, to analyse and assess the activities of the KPD underground in the post-1933 years. The remaining two chapters address the fraught issue of memorialisation of the Baum Groups, in both popular and national memory, and also within the historiography.

In expounding upon often limited existing material – particularly in English-language texts – Cox's narrative and analysis take the reader on an elucidating and sometimes wrenching journey through the hearts and minds of people who, as Cox notes, likely 'had little future...a fact they were painfully aware of' (p. 137). However, this work is not simply conventional historical narrative. From the outset Cox is actively working within, and against, a specific historiographical context: he notes 'This book challenges prevailing research, which has examined such groups [as Jewish youth groups, leftists, and so forth] separately, if at all; illuminates in a new way the collective experience of thousands of young Jews by exploring the intersections of these dissident circles; [and] analyses why the story of the Jewish left-wing resistance does not fit neatly into any of the various national and political

narratives that were constructed after the war.’ (p. 4) It would seem fair to judge the work against these criteria therefore.

In the first regard, *Circles of Resistance* must be deemed a success as a constant theme within the text is the notion of multiple adherences or influences. One could, and quite probably increasingly did in this period, conceive of themselves in some way as being Jewish while actively participating in Stalinist or anti-Stalinist leftist groups. Cox convincingly promotes the idea of broad heterogeneity within group thought, from the KPD, through to the *Org* and *LO*, and the Baum Groups (p. 63-64 for example). Indeed as Cox comes to discuss the fascinating case of sometimes group member Charlotte Paech (she was tried and convicted of treason, sentenced to death, but ultimately survived the war), her religious and political convictions during the era of the Third Reich appear at times wholly indistinct from one another when discussed with journalists decades after the war’s end (p. 158-159).

Establishing the success of the second criterion Cox sets himself is more problematic, and is perhaps the crux of the whole work: does the evidence as presented make the case that Jewish members of these left-wing youth groups (primarily the Baum Groups in this case, and indeed many of their members were Jewish) share a collective experience in which religion (or at least its cultural elements) had a high saliency? To be clear, the answer is not an unequivocal no, but equally one has to stretch to answer wholly in the affirmative.

On the one hand, the evidence from earlier in many of the main protagonists’ lives suggests that participation in KPD youth groups (KJVD: Kommunistische Jugendverband für Deutschland – Communist Youth Group for Germany) or the Zionist *Blau-Weiß* was a significant enabling factor that helped them move toward groups such as Baum’s or even the *Schwarze Haufen* (an anarchist group) in later life. The argument is also persuasively made that the decision to attack the *Sowjetparadies* was driven by a response to antisemitic elements within the exhibit (p. 126).

While on the other, Cox’s own evidence shows that religion, religious values or religiosity did not necessarily play a predominant role in the decisions of the Baum Groups. In May 1942, for example, shortly before commencing the daring raid on *Lustgarten* square, Herbert Baum and group associates Heinz Birnbaum and Werner Steinbrinck robbed an elderly but wealthy Jewish family, ‘raising approximately 1,500 Reichsmarks. ... It seems that the action was motivated in part by class resentment’ (p. 114). And on the question of policy-making, while ‘Baum’s network was less constrained by Communist policy than other domestic KPD-led groups,’ after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, “the active struggle of the group stagnated,” as did “the resistance struggle generally,” only to become “intensified” again after the June 1941 invasion of the USSR’ (p. 107-108). One cannot help but think from these statements that the nature of the Reich’s relationship to the Soviet Union was the primary factor in motivating the groups.

Of course, 'smoking gun' evidence in these matters is often elusive in the extreme, but nonetheless the onus is with the historian to prove their argument and one cannot help but feel further evidence would have been helpful in this regard.

The third criterion — understanding the Baum Groups as 'history' and their (lack of a) place within national and political narratives — is where Cox excels and if anything a greater number of chapters might profitably have been devoted to its discussion.

Addressing the Groups within the GDR's (German Deutsche Demokratische Republik – East Germany) 'official' narrative — that of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland – Socialist Unity Party of Germany / Communist Party), successor to the KPD — Cox picks delicately through the complex position they occupied after the war. Whereas Communists were considered to have bravely opposed fascism, Jews to some extent were not (p. 147). Associations (VVN boards) were even formed to decide which victims were 'fighters' and which were supposedly passive; the former receiving a special stamp on their identity card (p. 150). The Baum Groups were whitewashed as 'heroic Communists,' receiving a monument on a corner of *Lustgarten* square that read 'The courageous deeds and the steadfastness of the anti-fascist resistance group led by the young Communist Herbert Baum will never be forgotten,' with the reverse reading 'Forever allied in friendship with the Soviet Union' (p. 153). This was a pattern much repeated within the GDR narrative: an emphasis on loyal Soviet adherence while downplaying or completely removing the Jewish character of the Baum Groups. Cox, quite reasonably, would rather the historiography reflect that fact the Baum Groups 'accommodated a variety of leftist perspectives, including some that were critical of the Soviet and KPD version of Marxism,' and assuming one is on board with earlier arguments over religious influence, that 'particularly in the last two years of their existence ... the character and activities of Baum's groups ... were shaped heavily by the evolving Jewish consciousness of many of the members' (p. 164).

Unfortunately for the memory of the Baum Groups, West-Germany also had a standard narrative of resistance against the NSDAP that did not include those 'of a system that was as "inhuman" as Hitler's.' The 20th July conspirators against Hitler were, Cox argues, perceived by West German governments as the standard-bearers of the 'true' liberal and democratic Germany in the early decades after the war, whereas the 'Communitic' Baum was perceived by some as 'an "unknown, alleged" resistance fighter' (p. 165).

Cox also briefly discusses political difficulties in the post-war period for fully understanding and honouring the Baum Groups in countries such as the United States, the Soviet Union and Israel, although on this international element particularly it would have been useful to have seen more detail on debates over memorialising the resistance fighters.

A couple of other difficulties are worthy of mention: first it is occasionally unclear precisely whom was responsible for a given action or activity. To choose an example, Cox notes that 'For the first time in years, toward the end of 1941 the Baum groups began producing or distributing newspapers and leaflets. The first of these, a

newspaper called *Der Weg zum Sieg* and subtitled “Information Service of the KPD,” was written by KPD members unaffiliated with Baum and signed “Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany” (p. 111). If *Der Weg* was truly ‘unaffiliated’ with Baum’s groups, why discuss it as the first example of how Baum’s groups stepped up their leafleting campaign?

Second, whilst the thorny question of ‘what constitutes resistance?’ is addressed in the text, there is a stark contrast between activities such as the *Sowjetparadies* attack or leafleting, and what seemed to be the primary function of the groups in the earlier years – to engage in *Heimabende* (social evenings) events. Cox makes the valid argument that ‘Seemingly humble and non-threatening actions – cultural activities and self-education, for example – thwarted the Nazi ambition to dehumanize and crush its victims. ... Perhaps most importantly, these acts of resistance and refusal have a lasting, residual effect. If the history of world civilization is replete with war and tyranny, it also shows that decent, honourable impulses and the instinct for human solidarity can never be fully suppressed’ (p. 184). However, comparable works on resistance (for example the burgeoning literature in the last decade on slave resistance in the United States) tend to address their definitions more philosophically and in greater detail, thereby often girding their arguments for the occasions when the evidence isn’t necessarily as iron-clad as one would ideally want.

The publisher’s note on the rear of the book suggests ‘Circles of Resistance will be useful for undergraduate as well as graduate courses on Jewish history, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust, as well as courses devoted to the history of European socialism.’ One would certainly wish to add that this work, despite the occasional misgivings in this review, should be considered essential for all institutional research libraries. Perhaps it would be more useful for graduate rather than undergraduate courses, but could additionally be instructive and incisive to students studying historiography as a topic in its own right.

The monograph contains endnotes for the chapters, which are extensive in places, and a ten-page bibliography detailing archival and secondary sources.