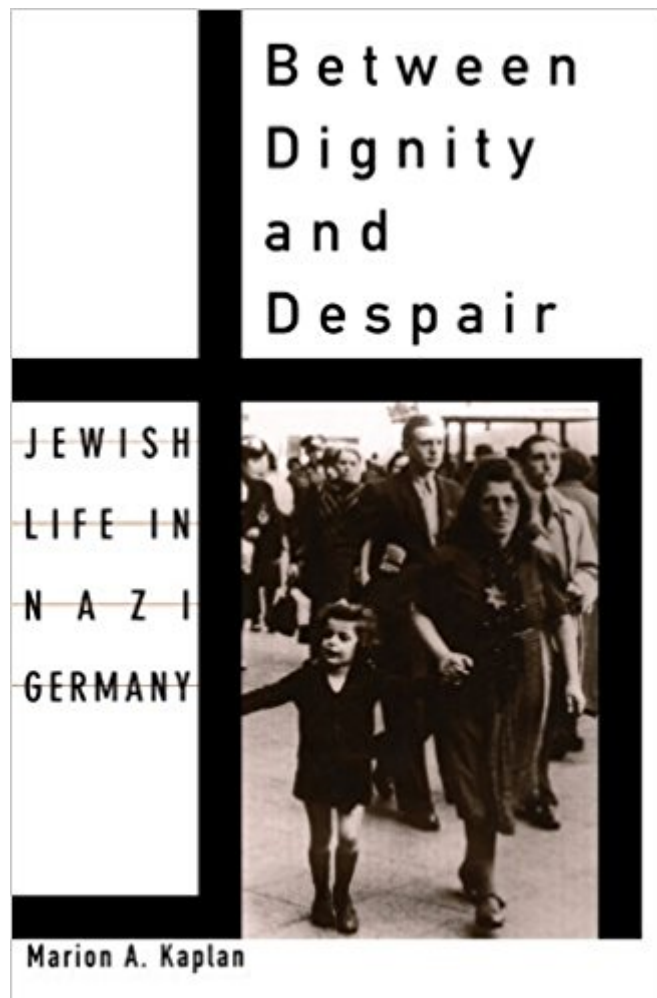




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# Between Dignity And Despair: Jewish Life In Nazi Germany (Studies In Jewish History)



## Synopsis

*Between Dignity and Despair* draws on the extraordinary memoirs, diaries, interviews, and letters of Jewish women and men to give us the first intimate portrait of Jewish life in Nazi Germany. Kaplan tells the story of Jews in Germany not from the hindsight of the Holocaust, nor by focusing on the persecutors, but from the bewildered and ambiguous perspective of Jews trying to navigate their daily lives in a world that was becoming more and more insane. Answering the charge that Jews should have left earlier, Kaplan shows that far from seeming inevitable, the Holocaust was impossible to foresee precisely because Nazi repression occurred in irregular and unpredictable steps until the massive violence of November 1938. Then the flow of emigration turned into a torrent, only to be stopped by the war. By that time Jews had been evicted from their homes, robbed of their possessions and their livelihoods, shunned by their former friends, persecuted by their neighbors, and driven into forced labor. For those trapped in Germany, mere survival became a nightmare of increasingly desperate options. Many took their own lives to retain at least some dignity in death; others went underground and endured the fears of nightly bombings and the even greater terror of being discovered by the Nazis. Most were murdered. All were pressed to the limit of human endurance and human loneliness. Focusing on the fate of families and particularly women's experience, *Between Dignity and Despair* takes us into the neighborhoods, into the kitchens, shops, and schools, to give us the shape and texture, the very feel of what it was like to be a Jew in Nazi Germany.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As the old saying goes, hindsight is always 20-20; people looking back on the Holocaust and the events leading up to it often wonder why the Jews didn't flee Nazi Germany or why they put up with the prejudice and degradation inflicted upon them by the Nazis. From our perspective, 50 years later, it seems almost incredible that the victims of genocide didn't see it coming and made little effort to escape. But as Marion Kaplan makes clear in her powerful book, *Between Dignity and Despair*, the choices were much murkier at the time. The Jews didn't leave because Germany was their home and had been for centuries; like everyone else, they had responsibilities and commitments to family, jobs and communities that kept them there. Nor, in the early days of Hitler's regime, could the Jews of Nazi Germany have foreseen the terrible humiliations they would suffer or imagined the horror of the Final Solution. Kaplan's sensitive narrative, supported by a host of letters, memoirs, and interviews, aims to give a balanced account of German Jewry under the Nazi regime. She convincingly shows how it was German society (indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda) that dealt the first crippling moral blow to the Jewish psyche, before any laws dictated their actions. The Jews succumbed to daily humiliations, ranging from little boys being maliciously teased for being circumcised to older Jews being treated like social pariahs by one-time friends who fell easily into the mindset of racial enmity. Hatred breeds hatred; slowly the German populace strangled the pride of the Jews, creating resentment, distrust and disharmony. Kaplan conveys a poignant, yet subtle message: the fundamental de-facto abandonment of decency and moral civility by the gentile Germans was the catalyst which allowed Nazi leadership to proceed with more aggressive policies that ultimately led to the Holocaust. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

An exceptional Holocaust study from the vantage point of German Jewish women. German Jews in general have been accused of loving Germany too much and of suffering less than their Eastern European counterparts. Kaplan (History/Queens Coll., CUNY), the award-winning author of *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class* (not reviewed), doesn't dampen the first charge, but has lots of personal and poignant responses--and statistics--to eradicate the latter. German Jews, she writes, "expected the worst--they did not expect the unthinkable." As far as what German Jews suffered, we see from Kaplan's research that "women reveal crucial private thoughts and emotions." Drawing on their "stories, memoirs, interviews, letters and diaries," and aided by her own eye for the intimate detail, she lets us re-experience how "Nazi Germany succeeded in enforcing social death on its Jews" by slowly banning them from all public places. And German Jewish women were a public force; they had smaller families and more education than the average woman, and in the League of Jewish Women Voters they numbered 50,000 for Germany's bourgeois feminist

movement. When conditions worsened, ``most [women] adjusted to daily deprivation'' and insult, courageously carrying on family life and tasks with a semblance of normalcy. And women, faced with carrying on in such circumstances, were often less naive than their husbands, who didn't want to risk their livelihoods. The author cites one woman who smuggled the family's valuables in a secret compartment of her desk and only told her husband the night before they arrived in Cuba. Taboos about mistreating women gradually fell, and the Nazis--for whom ``racism and sexism were intertwined''--murdered a disproportionate number of elderly women. Only 1,400 German Jews survived by being hidden by their countrymen, less than one percent of the original population in 1933. This is a major addition to Holocaust studies, as so few works have concentrated on women.

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This is an enlightening portrayal of the day-to-day, slow, then rapid, terrible and terrorizing changes inflicted on Jews in Germany before the killing of them. As a Jew always troubled by the fact that my People didn't just up-and-leave Germany as soon as Hitler came to power, if not before, I now Get It. Ms. Kaplan details the pernicious, mercurial changes Jews endured at the hands of the Reich that deliberately kept them unsteady on their feet, and about whom the Jews would never have attributed such pending evil. Jewish disbelief in the possibility was so entrenched that by the time The Pogrom ("Kristallnacht") came down and the lens cleared, escape routes had been shut and locked. Ms. Kaplan's attention to the lives of women is one that has needed explication; my one comment would be that the examples used throughout the book were most often those of the same women. They are articulate and their moving experiences varied - nevertheless a good cross-section of examples is wanting because of the few voices. I would have given

Between Dignity and Despair ♂ five stars, but for the paucity of mention of the Orthodox religious community in Germany and its women. If there was no such community I feel that fact should have been brought directly upfront. As it is, I want to know much more of how those who lived unflinchingly by Torah dealt with this new Germany - the struggles and fears of those women and children, as well as their men. Dignity and Despair ♂ contains myriad material on secular Jewish life, mixed marriages, the children of those marriages, Jews who converted, Zionist Jews, cells of young Jewish communists fighting Nazism - all absolutely valuable - but what of those whose Judaism was their life? A whole slice of the picture is therefore neglected, I'm sorry to say. I live near a community of very religious Jews including children of survivors, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of survivors, and a

number of survivors themselves. These Jews regularly turn out en masse to hear stories of victims still living, to watch filmed interviews with victims who have since died, and to hear the stories of murdered victims and witnesses – regardless of their places on the spectrum of Jewish observancy. The religious community who lost so many and who honor their dead also deserves to be heard. Thus the lack thereof in *Between Dignity and Despair* makes the book even more painful a read. My hope is that later editions of this detailed glimpse into Jews living in Germany before and during WWII will include as well the stories of Torah-observant women, children, and men.

The Sonderweg theory (special path) attempts to explain how Germany progressed toward democracy on a unique path. Jurgen Kocka contests that “for the peculiarities of German history summarized under the label *Sonderweg* contribute much more to explaining the weakness and the early collapse of the first German republic than to explaining National Socialism. The Sonderweg thesis may help to explain why there were so few barriers against the fascists or totalitarian challenge in Germany. But the Sonderweg thesis is much weaker in explaining fascism as such and what happened after 1933.” (Kocka, 13) Interestingly, Kocka also states that each country has its own Sonderweg, which seems eludes his support to this idea. *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, Marion A. Kaplan discusses the Jewish communities within Nazi Germany, rather than focusing upon the Nazis themselves. In an attempt to fill a void in Holocaust historiography, Kaplan focuses upon the daily lives of German Jews prior to the implementation of the Final Solution. While she does touch upon forced labor and deportation toward the end of the book, the majority of the work is focused on the ramifications of the political atmosphere and policies of the 1930s. The daily lives of German Jews were disrupted almost immediately when the Nazi Party gained control in 1933. Through propaganda and state policy, Jews were slowly sentenced to a “social death. The closing or acquiring of Jewish business, excluding Jews from marketplaces, and other state implemented policies were designed to separate the Jewish population. In German, unlike Poland where the Jewish population stayed generally separate, the Jewish population had assimilated into the larger German society. German Jews viewed themselves as Germans who were also Jewish. This strong nationalist identity made the events of the 1930s that much harder to understand. Kaplan addresses a frequently asked question; why did the Jews not flee Germany? This is an understandable question, but one that is not as simple as it seems. Kaplan explains that the government/people sent the Jewish population

mixed signals through recognition or military service or by some small gesture from a neighbor that provided them with hope that it would all blow over. Many German Jewish males had fought in the First World War and were decorated for their service, which made them very patriotic and unwilling to abandon their country. They believed if they kept pushing through they would reach the light at the end of the tunnel and everything would work itself out. The November Pogrom of 1938, or Kristallnacht, brought about an "escalation of persecution by both the government and German society" which "left German Jews scrambling to flee." (Kaplan, 6) Even with the escalation of persecution and the mass desire to flee, Kaplan argues that this did not mean that genocide would follow. Kaplan states that while historians looking back on the Pogrom are able to link the genocide and the events of 1938, it did not provide clear evidence of what was to follow. Kaplan focuses on Jewish women and their experiences throughout the Nazi era. Kaplan argues that gender difference do matter when studying the Holocaust because males and females had different reactions to various events. Males were more likely to stay in Germany, while females were more likely to advocate fleeing. She attributes this to male participation in the First World War and a sense of patriotism. Males were also more likely to be subjected to physical violence and imprisonment. As the men lost their jobs or were removed from the household, women had to assume the role of provider. This was increasingly difficult when Jews were barred from entering grocery stores. Kaplan argues that the gender roles for Jewish families were reversed during this period. The complicity of "ordinary" Germans is of particular interests. This is something that is difficult for people to understand when they are first experiencing Holocaust studies. It is true that not every German actively participated in the anti-Semitic policies, and eventually the Final Solution, most did nothing to stop them. Kaplan discusses the role of the "onlookers" and those who watched as their neighbors were persecuted. Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men* is an excellent examination of Kaplan's "ordinary" Germans who participated in Jewish persecution. Kaplan has done an excellent job filling a gap in Holocaust historiography by focusing on the Jewish population prior to the Final Solution. This is a group that is generally studied in passing or as part of the large context of the period, but never fully engaged. She addresses numerous important questions and answers them with specific evidence that supports her claims. *Between Dignity and Despair* is a tremendous work that examines Nazi Germany and its Jewish population.

Bought this via professor recommendation, due to my being unable to take a course on the Holocaust. This book offers distinct insight into Jewish life in Nazi Germany. Sections on Private life as well as Children are included. The book is a must have for anyone studying the Holocaust.

A difficult read but a must-read. Written from the perspective of the role played by Jewish women in Germany during the 1930s through the war's end, this book also examines what the average German citizen knew about war-time atrocities and whether they ignored, denied, or were complicit in these actions. Makes our perceived problems of today seem so insignificant; also gives one pause to think about the current state of world affairs. This book gives a detailed glimpse into the daily struggles of basic survival during this time in history. I had no understanding of the Jews' persecution beginning in the early 1930s; as an American, December 1941 is when the WWII clock started, hence this book gave tremendous insight into a world otherwise unknown to me. The stories of bravery and mental strength were inspiring. Other stories with a not-so-happy ending leave you feeling rather hollow, but that is precisely why I read these books, lest this chapter of history be forgotten or ignored. My only criticism is the font size is rather small (perhaps 8 point). I do recommend this book highly.

Great book.

The book gives a very comprehensive account of life in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. It offers personal illustrations of lived experiences and accounts left behind by those who perished. It was emotional without being sentimental.

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