

Martyna Grądzka-Rejak  
Institute of National Remembrance  
ORCID 0000-0001-8805-0616

A SPATIAL TURN IN HOLOCAUST STUDIES. ANJA NOWAK,  
*VIOLENT SPACE. THE JEWISH GHETTO IN WARSAW*,  
BLOOMINGTON: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2023, 329 PP.

As the largest ghetto created by the Germans in occupied Poland, the Warsaw Ghetto is supported by the richest and most diverse array of sources, which has given rise to an extensive and multifaceted body of scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> Despite

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<sup>1</sup> See among others *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vols. 6–36, Warsaw, 2012–2023; E. Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny światowej. Pisma z bunkra*, ed. and introd. T. Epsztein, Warsaw, 2020; J. Stroop, *Żydowska dzielnica mieszkaniowa w Warszawie już nie istnieje!*, ed. A. Żbikowski, Warsaw, 2009; B. Engelking and J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście*, Warsaw, 2013; B. Engelking and D. Libionka, *Żydzi w powstańczej Warszawie*, Warsaw, 2009; M. Ferenc, „Każdy pyta, co z nami będzie”. *Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie*, Warsaw, 2021; A. Grupińska, *Po kole. Rozmowy z żydowskimi żołnierzami*, Warsaw, 1991; A. Grupińska, *Ciągle po kole: rozmowy z żołnierzami Getta Warszawskiego*, Warsaw, 2013; A. Grupińska, *Odczytanie listy: opowieści o powstańcach żydowskich*, Cracow, 2003; I. Gutman, *Walka bez cienia nadziei. Powstanie w getcie warszawskim*, Warsaw, 1998; I. Gutman, *Żydzi warszawscy 1939–1943*, Warsaw, 1993; S.D. Kassow, *Kto napisze naszą historię? Ukryte Archiwum Emanuela Ringelbluma*, Warsaw, 2017; J. Leociak, *Spojrzenia na warszawskie getto. Stawki*, Warsaw, 2011; K. Person, *Policjanci. Wizerunek Żydowskiej Służby Porządkowej w getcie warszawskim*, Warsaw, 2018; R. Sakowska, *Dwa etapy. Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydów w oczach ofiar. Szkic historyczny i dokumenty*,

this, every year new works are published in which authors analyse selected aspects of the functioning of this ghetto and the people confined within it. What is more, it can be observed that these publications do not essentially duplicate content (or do so only to a limited extent), and each contributes something new or modifies previous findings. Anja Nowak's 2023 book is another important publication on the Warsaw Ghetto. The uniqueness of this work lies in the topic chosen by the researcher. She analyses the space of the ghetto as a form and source of violence against the people imprisoned there. This time, the history of the Warsaw Ghetto is discussed from the perspective of space (public and private), the landscape of violence, and the experiences of individuals and social groups in the space of violence, which is, to some extent, a *novum* in the historiography of ghettos in occupied Polish territories to date.

Anja Nowak holds a doctorate from the University of British Columbia. She is an educator and author of the book *Elemente einer Ästhetik des Theatralen in Adornos Ästhetischer Theorie*, as well as an editor of the work *The More I Know, The Less I Understand: Young Researchers' Essays on Witnessing Auschwitz*; she has also published numerous articles, including articles devoted to the category of space in Holocaust studies. In the reviewed volume, she engages with the insights and contributions of scholars featured in the relevant literature, notably key figures of the spatial turn such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> They recognised space as a socially constructed phenomenon – both a mirror of prevailing social relations and an active agent in shaping them. As such, space functions as a dynamic social factor, underpinning historical transformations and differing across societies. Lefebvre's proposition that each society generates its own distinctive spatial form proves especially compelling within the framework of Holocaust studies, a perspective the author integrates into the reviewed work. Nowak also draws on the scholarship of Tim Cole, whose work encompasses social and environmental history, historical geography, and digital humanities. Cole's research centres on Holocaust landscapes – both historical and memory

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Wrocław, 1986; R. Sakowska, *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej. Z dziejów Żydów w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej. Październik 1939 – marzec 1943*, Warsaw, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Hoboken, 1991; M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, 1988; M. Foucault, "Space, Power and Knowledge," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During, New York, 1993, pp. 134–141; M. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 1 (16) (1986), pp. 22–27.

landscapes – as well as the Holocaust representation, the spatiality of ghettoisation in Budapest during the Holocaust, and the spaces of survival.<sup>3</sup>

The book *Violent Space* consists of four parts, preceded by a preface, acknowledgements, and a glossary of terms, and culminating in appendices such as maps, a discussion of the photographs included in the publication, biographical notes, and a bibliography of the literature and sources used. Its layout is therefore typical for publications on historical topics. Already in the first sentence of the preface, the author underlines that the book is partly about the history of the Warsaw ghetto in general and partly about the experiences of individuals forced to live within it. On subsequent pages, she “traces out the trauma that the space of the ghetto brought on Jewish people, the way it alienated, disoriented, hurt, and harmed them. [...] *Violent Space* is about these Jews and about the ghetto as a space that shaped Jewish experience of the first phase of the Holocaust.”<sup>4</sup> Anja Nowak bases her considerations on historical and sociological research, primarily on the analysis of diaries and memoirs of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto, and combines the results of this research – mainly from personal sources – with an interdisciplinary study of the links between space and violence. This gives the reader the opportunity to learn about the most important moments from the period of the ghetto’s existence, while focusing on socio-spatial aspects. The author refers in particular to two types of space: private (apartments) and public (streets).

On 16 November 1940, the Germans sealed the Warsaw ghetto, enforcing a decree issued on 2 October and publicly announced on Yom Kippur (12 October) by Ludwig Fischer, the head of the Warsaw District. The decree ordered the establishment of a segregated “Jewish district.” A part of the city was, in a sense, removed from its previously compact structure, separated by a 16-kilometre wall and thus cut off from the view of outsiders. In his analysis of public responses to crisis, Marcin Zaremba pointed out that “the relocation of Jews to ghettos symbolically signified their objectification and exclusion from the human community. This shift diminished interpersonal interactions with Poles and, when coupled with

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<sup>3</sup> See selected references: T. Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, New York, 2003; T. Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes*, London, 2016; T. Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust. Journeying In and Out of the Ghettos*, London, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> A. Nowak, *Violent Space. The Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw*, Indiana University Press 2023, p. vii

the earlier noted tendency to retreat into one's own social group, contributed to a decline in empathy toward Jews and even fostered hostility.<sup>5</sup> The more hermetic the ghetto became, the more difficult it was to see the hell in which its inhabitants lived and the violence they suffered every day. Yet, beyond serving as a site of confinement, isolation, and the indirect annihilation of the Jewish population, the ghetto remained a space for functioning, living in various social dimensions, trade, and smuggling. In its border zones, connections were established with the so-called Aryan side, linking the ghetto to the outside world.

Around 140,000 Jews and 113,000 Poles were forcibly relocated. For the Germans, the establishment of the so-called Jewish quarter served to deepen the exclusion of Jews from broader society and to intensify their isolation. For the Jewish population, however, the ghetto became a space of everyday existence – a setting where personal tragedies unfolded. Shortly after its gates were sealed, the Warsaw ghetto confined nearly 400,000 people, including both long-time Warsaw residents and those displaced from nearby towns and territories annexed by the Third Reich. Overcrowding emerged as one of the most severe hardships of daily life. Private space – the homes within the ghetto – was compressed to the extreme, with multiple families often packed into cramped quarters. This overcrowding severely impacted quality of life, eroded privacy, strained access to food and healthcare, and frequently led to conflict. Public space – the densely populated, congested streets – offered no relief. The ghetto was almost entirely devoid of green areas or parks, leaving residents with no refuge from the harshness of their surroundings, not even momentarily. From the very beginning, the Jews imprisoned there – unable to leave the district and overwhelmed by the prevailing conditions – felt lonely, abandoned, and cut off from the world. Their existence was restricted in every possible way and in every aspect. Analysing these events through the lens of spatial dynamics and the resulting violence against ghetto inhabitants – across social, private, public, and professional spheres – offers a valuable contribution to research on the fate of Jews during World War II.

The author defined the purpose of the research as follows: “My book addresses two main questions: First, how was the particular space of the ghetto created and organized – that is, which policies, regulations, decisions, practices, and actors (in-

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<sup>5</sup> M. Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Cracow, 2012, p. 134.

dividual or collective) were involved in its creation and defined its inner workings? And second, how did the people who were forced to inhabit this space experience it, and what did it do to them? While the first question involved the study of the ghetto's history, of its planning and implementation, the second inquiry focuses on the 'lived' space of the ghetto, on the way it affected people, the way it was perceived, navigated, and appropriated."<sup>6</sup> The reviewed book approaches the ghetto not only as a historical space, but also stands out for its sociological perspective on the subject. Anja Nowak underscores and expands upon existing research showing that violence played a central role in the creation of ghettos and camps. Yet its impact extended further – violence profoundly influenced the conditions and operational rules of these sites, permeating every facet of social life. The ghettos constituted a form of violence in themselves. Their spatial configurations and related practices exposed, marginalised, and inflicted harm on those confined within them. Nowak undertakes a detailed analysis of both public and private aspects of daily life in the ghetto, illustrating how constrained space and pervasive violence shaped these experiences and ultimately influenced individual destinies.

The first part of the book is titled "Localization." It consists of an introduction and four chapters. In this part, the author outlines the theoretical and methodological framework on which she based her research and the book's narrative. First, she introduces the concept of spatial violence and outlines the terminology she will use throughout the publication. She analyses the most important findings of other researchers in this field. She also compares the spatial changes that the ghetto underwent. Additionally, she highlights issues related to mapping the ghetto space. Based on the analysed publications, archival sources, accounts, and memoirs, she identifies locations in the ghetto that interest her. Thanks to this, street names and individual places "come to life," gaining a more complete description, something more than just a name. An important issue raised in this part of the book is the network, showing the connections between individual spaces in the ghetto. This is an important area of social research. In the subsequent pages, the author presents the sources she used. The first and foremost source is the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, commonly referred to as the Ringelblum Archive. Particu-

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<sup>6</sup> A. Nowak, *Violent Space*, p. 3.

larly significant are the descriptions of the ghetto's spatial layout, contributed by Perec Opoczyński, Stanisław Różycki, and others. In the final chapter of this part, titled "Streets and Buildings," she identifies the public and private spaces central to her analysis. She examines the "images" of the ghetto's streets, focusing on the intimate events that occurred there in plain view. The streets served as channels of communication and gathering places – where people talked and exchanged information. Constantly crowded, day and night, they echoed with the footsteps of tens of thousands and the multilingual voices of their residents. They were also spaces of theft, prostitution, violence, crime, and death. Life in the ghetto unfolded in the streets, where it often came to a tragic end.

Regarding buildings, Anja Nowak analyses the opportunities, risks, and advantages they offered to tenants. She investigates their architecture, location, technical condition, apartment layout, and all aspects that may have mattered to residents in their daily lives. She also addresses details such as the height of the storey where the flat was situated. According to the author, many of these elements played a crucial role during critical momenta, such as deportations. In one of the subchapters, she points out the significance of buildings as social spaces.

The second part of the book is entitled "The Making of a Violent Space." The title refers to Tim Cole's work on the Budapest ghetto, and the author also identifies the earlier findings she will draw on in this section. Nowak discusses the fate of the Jewish population in pre-war Warsaw, tracing it back to the late Middle Ages. She examines the possibilities of settlement, the privileges granted by rulers that prohibited permanent residence, and the turning point that came in the 19th century. This serves as an introduction to the main topic. In the following chapter, she analyses the situation after the outbreak of war and the measures taken to establish a ghetto in occupied Warsaw. It outlines the individual decisions and actions that led to its creation. It also includes data on the changes to the ghetto's boundaries until its gates were sealed on 16 November 1940. Although this material is familiar to historians, the author places it within the framework of spatial research and points out the changes in the organisation of urban life. The final two chapters of this part focus on the functioning and destruction of the ghetto.

The most comprehensive and, at the same time, the most crucial part of Anja Nowak's publication is the third part entitled "Experiences of a violent space."

It consists of an introduction and fifteen short chapters. The author emphasises that one of the characteristics of a violent space is that it does not affect victims in the same way as direct means of violence, such as weapons. Whether it is an incidental or a more permanent situation, space forces people to relate to it and interact with it. As previously underlined in the existing literature, throughout its two and a half years of existence, the Warsaw Ghetto functioned as a violent space where the Germans aimed to restrict the lives of those imprisoned within. This compelled them to make deep adjustments to their behaviour and survival strategies in the harsh conditions imposed by the occupiers. Jews were continually forced to devise new methods of organising and reshaping a space that challenged their very existence. Therefore, this part describes and analyses the practices and forms of spatial violence experienced by the inhabitants of the ghetto. The author demonstrates how the ghetto as a space influenced the lives of its residents in various aspects of their daily functioning and how they attempted to endure and survive in this highly adverse environment. Anja Nowak guides the reader from the beginning of the German occupation, starting with the marking of Jews and their businesses in the public spaces of the city. She then demonstrates the escalation of these measures, including the planning of designated areas for the Jewish population in different parts of Warsaw, the construction of initial walls separating their homes, the establishment of the ghetto, the disintegration of this part of the city, and the forced relocations from areas outside of Warsaw or into the so-called Jewish quarter. She examines the development of Warsaw, refers to its spatial layout, and identifies possible places of refuge.

A key element of this section is the chapter focused on the loss of former homes and, as a result, the loss of numerous belongings, family keepsakes, and familiar personal space. The order to relocate to the ghetto marked a major shift in the daily lives of Jewish families. Family life is inseparably tied to the home – being in a space that is not only a material family hearth, but also one of moral and religious significance, and physically understood as a place of refuge. The command to abandon one's residence, often bound with an entire lifetime and more than one generation, was undoubtedly difficult to carry out. In the ghetto, the concept of home lost its traditional role as a refuge. The flats were sparsely furnished, missing everyday objects like books, appliances, and much of the furniture – reduced

to only the most essential items. They ceased to embody comfort or tranquillity. Overcrowding intensified the sense of insecurity. Exhausted from work and burdened by the monotony of daily life, residents spent their limited free time confined within four walls. The limited space and the accumulation of people – even if they were family members – made individuals feel overwhelmed and cornered by their presence in the ghetto. This also led to conflicts and disputes. The situation regarding accommodation in the ghetto was not stable but depended on changes to its boundaries as a result of deportations. In addition to the overcrowding in the ghetto, the sealing of its gates and its isolation from the rest of the city, the inhabitants suffered from a lack of space to spend the few free moments they had.

In the following chapters of the third part, Anja Nowak describes the ghetto as a place of both life and death, where children were born, but many more people died due to starvation, illness, exhaustion, and a lack of hope for change. She presents the ghetto as a city within a city, where natural processes occurred. People moved around, communicated, shared information, and spread rumours. They lived alongside one another, and spatial expressions such as “not far,” “far,” “near,” “next door,” or specific street names gained new meanings. The chapter focusing on the voices of the ghetto stands out. During the day, the streets echoed with the persistent cries of street vendors, the orders of Jewish policemen maintaining order, the voices of crying children, parents searching for their missing children, the multilingual conversations of passers-by, and the constant lament and melancholic songs of beggars.

The phenomenon of a sealed, demarcated ghetto attracted curious onlookers, including German soldiers, who came as if going on an excursion to “another world.” The author also examines the spatial dynamics of the ghetto during the deportations to the Treblinka extermination camp, showing how specific elements – such as streets and apartments – created both opportunities and dangers. Her observations on spaces of resistance are compelling, though this area clearly warrants deeper exploration. One could easily envision a dedicated part focusing on civil resistance, armed resistance, or the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising itself. A spatial study of the network of bunkers, shelters, and hideouts would offer significant scholarly value.

The book ends with Part IV, titled “Conclusion,” in which the author presents her key findings regarding the ghetto as a space marked by violence. Notably, the work

draws the attention of readers interested in the history of the Warsaw Ghetto and Holocaust scholars to the concept of space as a critical category of analysis, including within the realm of social inquiry. At the same time, the author acknowledges that the Warsaw Ghetto occupies a unique position and is not representative of the majority of ghettos established by the Germans in occupied Polish territories. As such, while the book offers valuable analytical directions, it also opens up further avenues for exploration by Holocaust researchers – particularly in relation to the many open ghettos or sites designated as concentration spots before deportation.

*Violent Space. The Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw* is a significant contribution to Holocaust historiography, despite certain limitations and aspects that could benefit from further elaboration or clarification (such as the concept of resistance space). A more extensive engagement with archival materials and a focused examination of particular demographic groups – by age, gender, or socioeconomic status – would enhance the work. Still, while many of the book's themes, insights, and data on spatiality and violence are also found in other studies on the Warsaw Ghetto, its strength lies in their thematic organisation and consolidation within this several-hundred-page volume. Drawing on a rich blend of personal and bibliographic sources and shaped by the author's eloquent prose, this book emerges as a layered and thought-provoking work. Its accessible narrative invites both experts and general readers into a nuanced exploration of space and violence as key dimensions in understanding the daily lives of Jews under German occupation. Each chapter not only deepens this insight but also sparks new questions and opens up unexplored avenues of inquiry – encouraging historians and scholars alike to investigate further and expand the field.