

Introduction

The Competition of Evil

Why write a biography of a man who was ordinary in so many ways, including the amount of evil he was responsible for during National Socialism? In a period in which we know a lot about inconceivable crimes and are used to accepting their inconceivability, it might seem pointless to describe a lesser degree of evil. This study deals with the work and legacy of a historian and archivist who was not among the most famous and important representatives of his field, was not a particularly active National Socialist and was not even a party member. His deeds were so banal that not even the famous ‘banality of evil’ dictum applies to him.

It is difficult to escape the competition of evil, which in an unfortunate way seems to be linked to the competition of scholarly impact. Kurt Forstreuter was a thorough, slightly boring historian of medieval Prussia and the Teutonic Order, a topic burdened with the devastating results of Germany’s *Drang nach Osten* (strive eastwards), but today rarely any longer giving rise to heated academic debates. Forstreuter took pride in the idea that he wrote about politically heated topics *sine ira et studio*,¹ without anger or zeal. The utterly zealous political and historical environment this work was conducted in and contributed to often compensated for a lack of anger or passion in his writing. *Sine ira et studio* has also been used to denote a historian’s role as a neutral bystander and chronicler.² Forstreuter was neither neutral nor a bystander.

The study of the history of Prussia in the Late Middle Ages and of the Teutonic Order has in the past reached heights far above its current status. In the context of the struggle between Germany and Poland since World War I, it became overloaded with territorial claims, racist and nationalist constructs and legitimizing narratives. The recognition of the Oder-Neiße border in 1970 constituted a preliminary step towards a denouement, one that was completed by the German reunification, and this change of political context made the history of the Crusaders and

their eastward push a marginal discipline in both German and Polish universities, compared to the significance it had been assigned during most of the twentieth century. Once the topic of heated debates, as well as the source of early initiatives for reconciliation and accommodation, Prussian regional history now lives on listlessly, rarely troubled by the source editions produced from the holdings of the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA).

This archive, which, among other things, warehouses the holdings of the former Staatsarchiv Königsberg (Königsberg State Archive), is in possession of most of the remaining material from the Teutonic Order's Prussian administration, and therefore of a significant part of the history of German colonialism in the East. A closer look makes it clear that this archive is the site not only of the preservation of historical sources but also of their far-reaching and systematic destruction. Both aspects are intertwined in the history of Jewish communities in East Prussia. With a few exceptions, nothing has been written about this aspect of medieval history – a complete absence of Jews, which cannot be explained solely by their absence from the medieval sources. The sole researcher to systematically examine this issue is very closely connected to both the preservation and the destruction of sources and, as such, with the way the history is remembered. Kurt Forstreuter, a state archivist in Königsberg until 1945 and thereafter director of the exiled archive in Goslar and Göttingen, compiled two versions of the Teutonic Order's sources about Jews within its Prussian state and its administrative territory, the first in 1937 and the second in 1981. Forstreuter also played a key role in the destruction of Jewish community archives in the region, making him a witness to the destruction of the actual communities themselves.

The archivists from Königsberg and, more generally, from the Prussian archival administration were responsible for the comprehensive looting and 'restructuring' of archives in the occupied territories. Besides this, they also played a prominent role in the vein of historical research known as *Ostforschung*, a politically motivated approach to the history of East Central Europe that arose in response to German territorial losses in the Treaty of Versailles.³ The sources held in the German and Polish archives in Königsberg/Kaliningrad, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Poznań and elsewhere played a crucial role in issues surrounding the German, Polish and Lithuanian borders. As a result of both their administrative functions and their research tasks, they played a crucial part in the institutionalization of *Ostforschung* – probably one that was more important than even that of the universities and their staff, which have been the subject of a good deal more historical scholarship.⁴ After

1939, Germany took practical measures to revise its eastern border; it occupied Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic countries and parts of Russia, and that also set in motion an unlimited desire for complete control of the archives in these regions. For the Prussian archivists, this meant both practical and scholarly revisionism.

On the basis of the existent sources and research, the present study will show that Jews were a relatively minor issue in the Teutonic Order's Prussia, both in positive and in negative terms; it will also explore how the control of memory and its destruction or conscious political framing came to shape an entire research tradition around this minor issue, as well as others of greater significance. Most of the Jewish community archives in the area were destroyed along with the people. As far as written sources go, what is available for the entire area of East and West Prussia comes from Polish and German Christian writers, because either the Jews themselves did not produce sources before the Early Modern period or possibly any existent documents were destroyed before or during National Socialism. According to the accepted wisdom, there were no stable Jewish communities until the seventeenth century, making it unlikely that modern synagogue archives would include lost evidence of such communities. However, these communities had maintained the memory of their ancient roots; in 1900, the rabbi Isaac Rülff of Memel/Klaipėda wrote the history of his community, presenting evidence of a 1567 expulsion order as the first written reference to it – no trace of this document remains today.⁵

How could one write *sine ira et studio* about Jews in 1937? How could one update this research some forty years later and not mention the numerous Jewish communities and their archives that had been destroyed in the meantime? Were it not for Forstreuter's personal involvement in this destruction, this attempt would seem rather naïve. However, considering his role during the war, it just seems cynical. His article about the Jews in medieval Prussia, although one of his shortest, is significant because it formulates a kind of common-sense opinion that has influenced German, Polish and other scholars until the present: the truism that there was no Jewish life in medieval Prussia due to an active Teutonic Order anti-Jewish policy. Forstreuter's line of argument is not particularly consistent or skilled, but, obviously, the not-very-skilled work of not-very-important scholars can, nonetheless, have a deep impact on our common knowledge of the past. Forstreuter's scholarly and professional acumen is located at the juncture of so many still-unresolved aspects of German-Jewish history that he is an excellent example of an ordinary man in the service of National Socialism, one whose work had a considerable impact on our present-day knowledge

about historical realities. The allure of his argument and the results he presents lie in the fact that they create and replicate a research paradigm that is still in use; the Teutonic Order, as a Christian Crusading institution, aimed to create a purely Christian state in the Baltic and, thus, served as a bulwark against Slavic and Jewish immigration while dealing with an already multiethnic population in Prussia.

From a medievalist's point of view, I have several objections to this paradigm, which ignores a number of source genres, misjudges the importance of the Teutonic Order in the Prussian heartlands and misconceives the relationship between anti-Jewish regulations and those directed against all foreigners – for example, the trading regulations of the towns. These will be presented in detail in the second part of this book. However, my first objection is that a study about Jewish life conducted by a man who cooperated closely in the extinction of that life during the Shoah, and especially in the extinction of the memory of the Jewish communities, can only be biased. It is a common misconception that there were certain studies undertaken during National Socialism that were entirely politically contaminated, while others, which only used a couple of problematic terms, represented otherwise serious scientific groundwork, and that there were yet others that, even today, seem unproblematic. The latter are those that involve basic work on the sources, source editions and lists of discoveries related to a certain topic. The Forstreuter articles about Jews seem to belong to the latter category – an impression which will be repudiated in the present study. Instead of identifying single politically contaminated terms, this study aims at an analysis of the entire semantics of ethnically informed hostility which shaped the Ostforscher's ideological and scholarly framework. Within this framework, Forstreuter's article about medieval Jews receives a different significance.

Finally, I wish to object to the double competition of evilness and scientific impact which determines whose deeds we investigate and whose achievements we question. National Socialism produced the most monstrous crimes we know of, but also a lot of lesser evils. And it is not only the most prestigious of thinkers who influence our collective memory. From a methodological point of view, it is both justified and necessary to investigate one of the lesser evils, especially since Forstreuter's legacy, in large part, consists of source editions that we still use and which have shaped the current research paradigms.

Two Books in One

The two parts of this study, the scholarly biography of Kurt Forstreuter and the reconstruction of the legal framework of potential Jewish life in medieval Prussia, are intimately connected by the common research tradition regarding the Teutonic Order in Prussia and the absence of Jews from its documentation, as well as by an insight into the way archives are constructed. Forstreuter's life is not the only reason his work needs to be questioned. However, it is a good starting point, and combining Forstreuter's biography with a reassessment of his work on the Prussian Jews will contribute to a shared understanding among scholars of medieval and modern history about the impact of their work.

The present study has two objectives: first, to show that Kurt Forstreuter's scholarly biography and his research into medieval Prussia, and particularly its Jewry, were intimately connected to his professional biography, which included participating in the looting of archives and cultural goods; the administration of occupied territories; close cooperation with the Gestapo, SS and SD; and ultimately the administration of files and archival holdings used for cataloguing and creating lists of Jews during the Holocaust. It also included a broader ideological preparation for German expansion within the institutional and scholarly framework of *Ostforschung*. This part of the study will focus on Forstreuter's professional career before 1945 and will place the research he carried out during those years in its chronological, geographical and ideological context. Antisemitism is one rather minor aspect of this; more significant is both the assumption of the superiority of Germany and the view of the border regions of East Prussia as a field for the struggle over *Volkstümer* and *Volksboden*,⁶ which, in turn, also affects how he addressed the Jewish question.

Kurt Forstreuter is an example of a qualified civil servant who was loyal to the German state before, during and after National Socialism. He had no say in major decisions, but he nonetheless faithfully and fastidiously fulfilled his professional duties, adjusting to the shifts that occurred as a result of changes in the political framework. His professional attitudes and his understanding of scholarly research, in contrast to ideologically infected propaganda, are paralleled in the biographies of many of the more prominent historians of his generation, such as Theodor Schieder, Hans Rothfels or Peter-Heinz Seraphim, whose work have become the topic of biographic approaches to *Ostforschung*. In addition to this, Forstreuter's biography seems to be typical for the

group of archivists and other civil servants trained in the period following World War I and already active by 1933, and who later had little problem being re-employed in West Germany. Forstreuter's central position at the Königsberg state archive, and later at the Archivlager in Göttingen, as well as the extensive responsibility he had for the cultural tradition of an entire region, bear witness to the oft-neglected political role of archives. The elitist and proud (or arrogant) identity and self-image of the Königsberg archivists as a 'specific kind of historian', as their leader Ernst Zipfel put it, had its roots in the immense importance of history and historicism in German nationalist movements since the 1870s.

The study's second objective is to disprove Forstreuter's conclusions regarding the Teutonic Order's relationship with Jews. In the case of Prussia, this does not mean the sudden detection of previously unknown large and stable Jewish communities. It does, however, mean thoroughly questioning the assumption of an anti-Jewish policy imposed by the Order, something that will also shed new light on the process of state formation in Prussia in general, as well as on the existing traces of Jewish life in the region. Because Forstreuter left out a number of sources and fields relevant to the question of Jews in Prussia and to the Teutonic Order's relationship with them, it is necessary to extend the study far beyond Forstreuter's chosen sample of sources. The Order's historiographic tradition needs to be investigated to determine if there was a connection between Crusading ideology and anti-Judaism in the Baltic, and the handful of legends and host desecration stories included in the material need to be placed in the context of local and European tradition. Furthermore, the Teutonic Order's text production needs to be investigated with a particular eye to potential anti-Jewish regulations, and the same is true for other urban sources. In all of these areas, the absence of Jews is more striking than their presence, at least prior to the mid-fifteenth century. This absence does not, however, prove an absence of actual Jews; it could also indicate an absence of conflicts and, thus, an absence of source material addressing blood libels, pogroms and anti-Jewish regulations – this interpretation was tentatively advanced by some of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (a nineteenth-century scholarly movement for the investigation of Jewish and rabbinic sources) scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was not taken up in later research.

Given the lack of other studies on the topic and the obvious flaws in Forstreuter's interpretation of the sources, a reassessment seems more than justified. Some tentative conclusions can be drawn based on the structure and content of the extant sources about Jews from the

neighbouring areas in Poland and Lithuania, where large and stable Jewish communities were found. It is essential to keep in mind the fact that even these communities often produced no written documentation before the sixteenth century, and even what we have from Christian sources is very poor. The absence of documentation requires not only reflection on the absence of actual Jews but on the structure of the documentation itself – long before the Königsberg archivists helped to destroy the communities' own written memory.

While none of this provides sudden insights, it all contributes to my major point; the Teutonic Order did not have an anti-Jewish policy and the Prussian lands were relatively free of conflicts between Christian and Jewish inhabitants and between inhabitants and foreign guests until the Reformation. Additionally, the results raise questions about the definitions of 'Jewish life' at the margins of Ashkenaz: Do we only count stable communities, based on and at least the size of a *minyán* (ten male adults), and those with a certain amount of Jewish infrastructure, such as a slaughterhouse, a *mikveh* and a synagogue? Certainly we have enough evidence of Jews travelling, selling and buying, being robbed and lending money to wonder how they expressed their Jewish faith and identity in surroundings that lacked stable community structures.

This study stops abruptly in the sixteenth century, when the last high master of the Teutonic Order converted to Protestantism, and the Order, as a landlord, disappeared. The first secular ruler of Prussia, Albrecht von Brandenburg, immediately developed a more active and more contradictory policy towards Jews in Prussia than had ever previously been the case. Albrecht's policies provide additional evidence that there were small Jewish communities in Prussia before the Reformation. It is only when Albrecht addresses them as a problem in the second half of the sixteenth century that the Jews of medieval Prussia become visible.

Some areas are consciously left out of this study; for example, the entire field of place names seemed alternately too specific or too uncertain to be useful for generalizing. Most often, investigations of the urban tradition have focussed on legislation and jurisdiction, and this has rendered close to no results regarding Jewish life. While there might be more evidence of actual Jewish inhabitants or even citizens in the smaller towns, the perusal of the archival documentation in these towns would require a different approach with a far greater focus on uncovering evidence of Jewish life in the area. An investigation of that sort would also need to include the results of archaeological studies and eventually a fresh assessment of those results, as well as a new look at appraisals of material culture, particularly of art history.⁷ In this context, the Jewish sources from the surrounding area might also need

to be re-examined for references to travellers or for possible *responsa* addressing halachic questions at the peripheries of the Baltic coast.⁸ The emergence of Jewish academic life in the Early Modern period might also prove relevant here – in 1635, two scholars at the University of Königsberg defended their theses about questions of Hebrew linguistics in Rabbinic Hebrew. Where did they come from, and how did the topic gain institutional attention in Prussia? But these and other questions will be left to future research and researchers.

The common assumption underlying both parts of this study is that historiographic writing and research are never free of ideology. The fact that research into the Teutonic Order is basically free of Jews – as it is of women, by the way – does not mean that the source material is free of Jews; it simply means that we have become used to a certain reading and approach. My point is that this approach is heavily burdened with the deeds of the perpetrators of the Shoah. To claim that their work was performed *sine ira et studio* is to ignore the underlying ideological framework and to assume the possibility of unsullied work on the sources – for which Forstreuter, the archivist, is a good counterexample.

Some Notes on Spelling, Place Names and Translations

Non-English terms, titles and expressions will generally be translated at first use, as well as quotations. However, quotations are not translated verbatim in footnotes when the main text contains a close paraphrase. In Medieval German languages, nouns are most often not capitalized and will be given in the form they appear in the sources (*willkor, friheit*). Terms that already are a result of linguistic normalization from medieval to modern German (*Landordnung, Judeneid*) will be capitalized.

Preußen is the contemporary correct spelling for the area under investigation; however, many older publications use also *Preussen* and *preussisch*. As I follow the spelling from the sources, this will result in a certain inconsistency between the two versions.

Most of the places mentioned in this study have historically had both Polish and German names, and there has been quite a lot of argument on which names to use in contemporary historiography – one more minor topic in Prussian history which has been burdened with ideological issues. The German names are used in German-speaking scholarship, based on the argument that these were the historical names. Polish-speaking scholarship generally uses the Polish names. English has not developed specific preferences for most of the towns and villages in Prussia, Silesia and Lithuania. When they exist, I use the common

English forms (e.g., Warsaw, Pomerania and Culm). Otherwise, I generally use the contemporary names (e.g., Wrocław, Elbląg and Toruń), to avoid alternating place names when discussing the fifteenth century, a period when the Prussian towns were sometimes under Polish rule and at others under the Teutonic Order's rule. The exceptions are the towns and districts that were renamed during National Socialism; the German names, such as Warthegau and Zichenau, are essential in that particular historical phase. Yet another exception is Königsberg, whose contemporary name was never used during the period addressed by this study. When I refer to the town after 1946, I use Kaliningrad.

Throughout this volume, I use the spelling 'antisemitism' instead of 'anti-Semitism', because the hyphen may suggest that the Semites in anti-Semitism are an actually existing ethnic group – parallel to the Slavs in anti-Slavism, for example. While Semites as an ethnic group do exist, they are far from identical to the group constructed as the object of antisemitism.⁹

Notes

1. K. Forstreuter, 'Vom Blickpunkt eines Archivars: Zu viele Memoiren?', in K. Forstreuter (ed.), *Wirkungen des Preußenlandes: Vierzig Beiträge* (Köln: Grote, 1981), 406.
2. The notion of neutrality was proven wrong by the first historian to use the phrase: Tacitus. Selma Stern also uses the phrase in her monograph on Court Jews during Absolutism, denoting the historian's duty to be neutral. S. Stern, *Der Hofjude im Zeitalter des Absolutismus: Ein Beitrag zur europäischen Geschichte im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 32.
3. *Ostforschung* is an unprecise term, as many scholars have noted, but it nevertheless serves to denote a particular revisionist form of historical scholarship, in contrast to the purely geographically determined *Ostmitteleuropaforschung*.
4. Evidence of this can be found in the biographies of a number of archivists in M. Szukała, *Pruskie archiwa państwowe a niemieckie badania wschodnie (deutsche Ostforschung) w okresie międzywojennym XX wieku (1918–1939): Między nauką a politycznym zaangażowaniem* (Warszawa: Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych, 2011).
5. The medieval town archive of Memel has been lost. The GStA holds files from the commander of the castle but not those of the town administration. The 1567 expulsion is mentioned in I. Rülff, 'Zur Geschichte der Juden in Memel', in E. Carlebach (ed.), *Erster Bericht der Israelitischen Religionschule zu Memel* (Memel: Siebert, 1900), 3–26.
6. *Volkstum* is a politically charged term for the ethnic and cultural identity of peoples. *Volksboden* describes the territory that this kind of homogenous population inhabits. Both terms have been used in *völkisch* discourse. *Völkisch*, a term frequently used in this volume, denotes a German political

movement since the late nineteenth century, defined by its racist, ethnocentric, nationalist and populist ideology.

7. For later periods, see P. Fijałkowski, 'Kultura i sztuka religijna Żydów na Mazowszu w XVI–XVIII wieku', *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2007), 142–63.
8. Michael Toch claims a total absence of Jewish sources from the East for the Early and High Middle Ages. M. Toch, *The Economic History of European Jews: Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 154.
9. See also S. Almog, 'What's in a Hyphen?' *SICSA Report: Newsletter of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism* (Summer 1989).