

Tatjana Lichtenstein

The Limits of Soft Power

Review of Tomáš Jiránek, Zbyněk Vydra, and Blanka Zubáková, *Židovský bojkot nacistického Německa, 1933–1941* (Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2020)

Boycotts remain an important way for ordinary people to express their opposition to the decisions and policies of businesses and governments. It allows individuals as economic agents, most significantly as consumers, to assert soft power. While the impact of a boycott movement or action might vary, it is a tool within reach of most people. In *Židovský bojkot nacistického Německa, 1933–1941* (The Jewish Boycott of Nazi Germany, 1933–1941), the outcome of a multi-year grant-funded project at the University of Pardubice, authors Tomáš Jiránek, Zbyněk Vydra, and Blanka Zubáková explore the global Jewish boycott movement against Germany as a response to Nazi antisemitism between 1933 to 1941. The project sets out to examine the movement's goals and chances for success (page 9) and takes an innovative comparative, global perspective covering Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Among the questions the authors seek to explore are the impact that the boycott campaigns had on Germany's economy and on public opinion, and they also map the obstacles faced by the activists. Ultimately, the authors conclude that while boycott efforts emerged spontaneously, reflecting the outrage of people to Nazi Germany's early antisemitic policies, the campaigns were, for a variety of reasons, difficult to sustain. Indeed, it is unclear whether the boycott had a measurable impact on the German economy (page 414). In fact, the failure of the boycotts to have a significant economic effect reflected how little the Nazi image of the economic and political power of world Jewry had to do with the reality of the 1930s (page 414).

The book has twelve chapters and is divided into different themes. One theme pertains to the interwar German economy, attitudes towards the boycott, and "anti-boycott" measures in the foreign service. A second theme focusses on the history and character of economic boycotts as well as other forms of boycotts of Nazi Germany. Finally, the most important chapters deal with the theme of Jews' efforts to organise anti-German boycotts in their respective countries. The authors investigate these themes through a combination of archival materials, from at least five different countries, and existing secondary literature. While some chapters read as "background" (such as the chapter on boycotts historically or Germany's economy), others engage in a detailed examination of the response of Jews globally to Nazi Germany in 1933. In my assessment, the book's core contribution is the authors' mapping of the emergence of the boycott movement, the actors involved and their strategies, and the challenges they faced in organising an effective response to Nazi persecution.

The book's most substantial and voluminous chapter pertains to the boycott movement in the United States. The authors show that boycott efforts originated across the political and class spectrum of the country's large Jewish communities, mobilised men as well as women in grassroots political activism, and served – although to a lesser extent – as an arena for Jewish and non-Jewish shared action. While new organisations sprung up that focussed on the boycott alone, more established American-Jewish organisations and leadership networks also debated how to

respond to the assault on Germany's Jews. At first the most significant obstacles included a concern that an international response might worsen the situation for Germany's Jews and that by organising, Jews were drawing attention to their difference from other Americans. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles and the influence of dysfunctional leaders (page 101), the boycott of German goods, including a call for American merchants and consumers to take a stand, came under way in the spring and summer of 1933. Some of the most interesting aspects of the authors' research (pages 106–117) are the sections that document the activists' tactics. Young people and women fanned out across stores: they documented who sold German goods, encouraged consumers to choose other ones, started letter campaigns to put pressure on large and small merchants to stop selling German goods, and reported back to "headquarters" on their findings. This was a true grassroots effort. The outrage and emotion that fuelled the initial boycott meetings and actions, on the one hand, show the power of collective action in drawing attention to an issue. On the other, the time, commitment, and resources required to keep the boycott going, without any tangible change in the Nazi regime's treatment of Jews, made the effort difficult to sustain (pages 127–131). This only fuelled a further lack of consensus among Jewish leaders as to the right response to Nazi antisemitism.

The discussion of each country – ranging from countries in eastern and western Europe, in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, as well as two stand-alone chapters on the United Kingdom and Czechoslovakia – is quite varied in depth and quality. The authors show that while the boycott movement had initial momentum, it petered out as visible collective action within a year or two, with occasional "flare ups" such as around the boycott discussion ahead of the 1936 Olympics. Interestingly, the sort of spontaneous, sustained, everyday action that the initiators were hoping for was perhaps most successful in Poland (pages 181–195). Here, despite the massive socio-economic and cultural differences among the country's Jewish societies, a broad range of Jewish merchants and consumers participated in avoiding German wares and replacing their stock with other products, often from Czechoslovakia and other countries that saw the boycott of German goods as an economic opportunity. In these chapters, it would have been interesting to learn more about how ordinary people might have exercised power and continued to act on the boycott call even though the top-level leaderships failed to agree on a way forward. A more in-depth social analysis where the sources allow (including the "silent boycott") would have been a welcome alternative discussion to the detailed investigations of the elite discussion and intrigue.

The book brings together a truly wide-ranging array of primary and secondary sources. The authors document that the boycott movement emerged across Jewish societies on multiple continents. It also draws attention to the way in which the political and philanthropic mobilisation among Jews during and after World War I laid the groundwork for the emergence of an audible, visible, and global boycott movement in 1933. Yet, effecting any measurable change in Nazi Germany's policies towards its Jewish minority proved difficult. Instead, activists and institutions turned their attention to assisting German Jews in fleeing their country: a humanitarian effort that mirrored the mobilisation on behalf of Jewish war refugees (page 156) during and after World War I.

The very broad and interesting scope of the book, as laid out in a series of questions in the introduction (pages 11–12), is also one of its weaknesses. Some sections read as simple summaries of small clusters of evidence, for example, the chapter titled "The German View of the Boycott" (pages 291–295), while other, expansive

ones delve into so much detail that the reader loses track of the analytical point being pursued. This is particularly the case for the 107-page-long chapter on the American boycott movement (which makes up 25 per cent of the book). As it became clear to the authors that their approach and the available sources could not, as they state repeatedly, answer the questions they had initially asked, the book would have benefited from an adjustment in focus. Having said that, the broad mobilisation, the grass roots initiatives and day-to-day actions that Jews and their allies engaged in that the authors of *Židovský bojkot* uncover, reflect that there is a lot more to learn about ordinary people's response to Nazism.

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