

Senkewicz, Robert N., S. J. *Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985. Pp. xvi, 272. Map, illustrations. \$24.95

Paul Skenazy

Volume 15, Number 1, June 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018922ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018922ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Skenazy, P. (1986). Review of [Senkewicz, Robert N., S. J. *Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985. Pp. xvi, 272. Map, illustrations. \$24.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15(1), 120–120. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018922ar>

Senkewicz, Robert N., S. J. *Vigilantes in Gold Rush San Francisco*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985. Pp. xvi, 272. Map, illustrations. \$24.95.

Beginning with a brief narrative recapitulation of four moments of vigilantism in 1850s San Francisco, Robert Senkewicz provides a balanced and wide-ranging discussion of the development of the Gold Rush city and the outbreaks of vigilance committee action in 1851 and 1856. Comparing these two years of vigilante activity, Senkewicz shows how a number of economic, political and religious factors encouraged the growth of the movement until, by 1856, the San Francisco Vigilance Committee could claim more than 6,000 members, was responsible for four deaths and numerous deportations, and was able to take control of most city offices.

Like other commentators before him, Senkewicz argues that the vigilance committees were what one contemporary newspaper called a "mercantile junta," a response to both economic and political frustration on the part of a group of businessmen. His two chapters on the actions of the vigilance committee frame a full and careful exposition of the economic and social forces that were dominant in 1850s San Francisco: the ups and downs of trade that made the merchants imagine conspiratorial forces working against their interests, the Australian and Irish immigrants who became the focus for discontent, the election campaigns with their claims of fraud and corruption, the religious controversies between Catholics and Protestants that erupted over school funding and curriculum. He sees San Francisco's history as more representative, and less unique, than many historians, and argues persuasively that the city developed along lines similar to other urban and western environments in the United States at that time; thus he undermines many of the traditional interpretations of San Francisco as peculiarly wild, corrupt, or violent. He neither condemns nor praises the vigilante actions. By tracing the Committees back to their economic and religious-political roots, and detailing their consequences through a vivid series of brief biographical sketches of the careers of the city's civic leaders, Senkewicz provides a clear, even-handed assessment of the movement's history.

Vigilantes breaks little new ground. In a useful historiographic essay at the end of his study, Senkewicz reviews previous interpretations of vigilantism and claims his own middle position between what he calls the "imitative" and "analytic" approaches to the problem and Gold Rush era: more sympathetic than many present historians to language and arguments presented at the time, yet still helpfully skeptical of such rationales. His analysis is almost entirely public. He relies heavily on contemporary newspaper accounts of events and stresses economic and civic history. (The biographies of the vigilante leaders, for example, enumerate their offices and define success in terms of their finances). Senkewicz downplays the importance of nonwhite influences on the events, and says little of domestic arrange-

ments (or lack of them) and their possible effects. His emphasis on continuities and gradual development and his efforts to revise earlier versions of San Francisco's unsteady character blind him at times to his own evidence of sudden alterations of a person's fortune; an unknown figure who becomes a journalistic powerhouse within six months of initial publication, for example.

Each chapter begins with contemporary commentaries and epigrams from the Bible and de Tocqueville, providing an effective if revealing framework for Senkewicz' assumptions as an historian. He takes a traditional approach to ideas of national character and the pattern of cultural life: in oft-repeated allusions to the American Adam, for example. But his study provides a fine overall synthesis of the factors involved in 1850s San Francisco civic life. One appreciates especially his emphases on exaggeration (in expectations of rapid wealth, in later charges of crime and corruption), and on the religious and economic aspects of the vigilante movement, in his reading of this troubling phenomenon.

Paul Skenazy
American Studies
University of California, Santa Cruz

Gutman, Yisrael. *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943*. Ina Friedman, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Pp. xviii, 487. Black and white plates. \$24.95 (U.S.).

In August, 1939, the number of Jews in Warsaw was about equal to the combined populations of Ottawa and Winnipeg; and almost one of every three Varsovians was a Jew. After New York, Warsaw was the largest Jewish metropolis in the world; and its Jewish community had a history stretching back more than half a millennium. Less than four years later, Warsaw was *judenrein*. Its Jewish community, which had been the religious and cultural centre of Yiddish-speaking Jewry the world over, was destroyed. Almost all of her Jews had been murdered; the handful of survivors had become hunted fugitives holed up in underground bunkers or in the apartments of gentile friends or hired protectors, who risked their own safety by sheltering Jews and sometimes betrayed them. In *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943* Yisrael Gutman, a historian at the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, chronicles the overnight transformation of the once vibrant community in which he grew up into a terrorized and traumatized agglomeration of people marked for death. He does so dispassionately, without reference to personal experiences.

The events detailed will be familiar in their broad outline to many readers. "Genocide" and "Holocaust" are by now household terms; novelists and playwrights, historians and