

In this book, I hope to show that the ghetto remains a useful concept—provided we recall its rich historical background and stop divorcing it from its past. The word derives from the name of a Venetian island that once housed a copper foundry, or *geto*.⁴ Five hundred years ago, in 1516, the Venetian authorities required the city's Jews to live on that island, in an area enclosed by walls. Venice was thus the first place to have a ghetto with today's connotation of restriction in space. In 1555, Pope Paul IV forced Rome's Jews into a similarly enclosed quarter, which, a few years later, came to be called by the Venetian name "ghetto." The term then gradually spread to other European cities where Jews were similarly segregated from the larger population. In all these places, they simultaneously suffered and flourished.

Although the ghettos were demolished in the nineteenth century, in tandem with a gradually swelling wave of Jewish emancipation, the term "ghetto" was increasingly used from the late nineteenth century on, first to refer to dense Jewish quarters in Europe and America and then occasionally in reference to black urban neighborhoods. The word was given even greater prominence when it was reappropriated by the Nazis as they confined the Jews of Eastern Europe behind barbed wire in the late 1930s. A few years later, the idea of the ghetto took on new significance in the United States. During World War II, as black Americans served in the military (usually in arduous roles of logistical support) and witnessed the liberation of the Jews, blacks at home saw parallels between the ghettos established by the Nazis and their own segregated neighborhoods, between the Caucasian purity that whites were seeking to preserve in the United States and the Aryan purity that Hitler was trying to impose on Europe. As they had during World War I, they found themselves asking, in effect, "Have we been fighting once again for everybody else's freedom except our own?"⁵

For many of the undergraduate students who take my seminar on the idea of the ghetto, it comes as news that Jews, not blacks, were the original ghettoized people.