

Blobaum, Robert (Hrsg.): *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2005. ISBN: 0-8014-8969-5; 348 S.

Rezensioniert von: Michael Meng, Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

There are probably few other academic issues in twentieth-century Central European history that provoke such emotional and polarizing views than antisemitism in Poland. The topic is often a minefield of competing emotions, memories, and stereotypes, as became particularly clear in the recent debate about Jedwabne. With a few exceptions now and then, the issue typically triggers critical, defensive, and accusatory responses that precludes rather than advances a deeper understanding of anti-Jewish hatred in Poland. It is thus particularly refreshing that Robert Blobaum has edited this balanced and nuanced volume on antisemitism in Poland (despite „opponents“ in the title, the book focuses largely on proponents of anti-Jewish hatred; only one of fifteen essays directly deals with opposition to antisemitism, although most contributions make some general reference to it). Bringing together leading scholars from the United States and Poland, Blobaum has produced an indispensable account that analyzes antisemitism in all its various political, cultural, religious, and economic forms from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The volume moves chronologically beginning with an overview provided by Theodore R. Weeks on the rise of antisemitism in Poland with the collapse of assimilation. Weeks argues that assimilation failed once ethnic Poles started to see Jews as an „existential threat“ to their national development. With their national aspirations already precluded by the partitioning powers, Poles were particularly sensitive to the persistence of Jewish cultural and religious traditions. They interpreted them largely as a sign that Jews were unwilling to help in the fight to preserve the Polish nation. By the 1880s, many Poles had thus abandoned the hope that Jews would integrate into Polish society.

Essays by Keely Stauter-Halsted, Robert Blobaum, and William Hagen show how this growing divide between Jews and Poles exploded into outright hatred and even violence. Using a wealth of primary sources, Blobaum examines the stereotype of the „criminal Jew“ propagated by the anti-Semitic press of the radical right in Poland's industrializing cities. Stauter-Halsted, following the methodological approach of her important book on Polish peasant nationalism, analyzes the roots of the Galician pogroms of 1898 in the Polish countryside.¹ In an era of nascent capitalism, Polish peasants connected Jews with the ills of economic modernization, targeting Jewish property such as taverns, distilleries, and manorial offices. Turning to physical violence against Jews, Hagen examines the Lwów pogrom of 1918 that ended with some 150 Jews dead and over 500 Jewish shops destroyed (material losses totaled some 20 million contemporary US dollars). He is interested in the „moral economy“ of the perpetrators' actions: how they understood, saw, and justified their actions. The perpetrators above all saw their actions as righteous, believing that „the Jews owed them the goods (and even lives) of which, by moral right, Christian violence was dispossessing them“ (p. 136).

Three essays by Brian Porter, Konrad Sadkowski, and Dariusz Libionka explore the role of the Church in harboring, supporting, and propagating anti-Jewish beliefs. Although the Church certainly did not sanction violence against Jews, it did help to create a socio-cultural framework in which such actions could be conceived, enacted, and justified. Indeed, Porter argues that the Church, in its attempt to engage „modernity“ rather than simply oppose it, embarked on a battle that pitted Poles against Jews. By the 1920s, the Church had increasingly adopted the ideological language and concepts of racial antisemitism, developing a „modern militant model of Catholicism“ that saw Jews as one of its (and Poland's) central enemies.

Sadkowski adds an important institutional perspective to Porter's ideological argument, claiming that priests during the interwar

¹ Stauter-Halsted, Keely, *The Nation in the Village. The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914*, Ithaca 2005.

years had occupational reasons for opposing Jews. The emergence of a civic and pluralistic Polish state based on equal rights (though limited in practice, as Szymon Rudnicki shows in an essay on antisemitic legislation in the interwar period) threatened the position and prestige of Catholic priests who attempted to „Catholicize Poland.“ Yet their vision of a Catholic Poland left room for only a small number of converted Jews. Libionka analyzes the role of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust, concluding that it, for the most part, remained indifferent to the mass murder of Polish Jews. He attributes this largely to the presence of antisemitism within the Church just before and during the war. One of the pieces of evidence he marshals to support this claim is stunning in its racial logic: „No person of another race undergoing baptism, for example, a Negro, will be considered a member of the white race simply because a priest belonging to the white race baptized him. The Jew is no exception here. The more so since he falls under the ‘rule’ that because he was a Jew racially and ethnically before undergoing baptism, so racially and ethnically he remains a Jew even after undergoing baptism“ (p. 240).

The last group of essays analyzes anti-Jewish attitudes in the postwar period. Bożena Szaynok gives a broad overview of antisemitism during the immediate postwar years, paying particular attention to the Kielce pogrom that erupted in July 1946 and sparked an exodus of Jews from Poland. Dariusz Stola examines the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968 (coded as „anti-Zionist“ by the communist regime) drawing from his book on the subject published in 2000.² He analyzes the stereotypical images of Jews as depicted in the thousands of antisemitic articles, pamphlets, television reports, radio announcements, speeches, and demonstrations that showered Poland in the spring of 1968. In the volume’s last chapter, Janine P. Holc provides a brief overview of Jewish and Polish memories of Auschwitz, analyzing the public discussion that erupted in 1998 about placing crosses on the camp’s grounds.

By selecting and bringing together these essays (and also translating most of those originally written in Polish), Blobaum has pub-

lished a useful book that will doubtlessly advance research on antisemitism in modern Poland. So in the spirit of continuing the discussion that this book has begun, I would like to offer some brief, concluding observations about topics not discussed above. My intention is not to criticize what has not been accomplished here, but merely to point out some possible avenues of future research that came to mind while reading this stimulating volume.

The Holocaust stands as perhaps one of the most striking areas that receives little attention in this book. In both the preface and introduction, Blobaum suggests that the Holocaust is „an episode, however important and tragic, in a much longer history of social and cultural attitudes that have shaped and reshaped Polish-Jewish relations“ (p. X). After so much ink has been spilled over Jedwabne, I can understand Blobaum’s reluctance to re-enter the trap of conflicting views - Poles as victims/Poles as perpetrators. But the challenge is to jump over the trap itself, and transcend the analytical categories of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. As one scholar has perceptively observed in the context of occupied Ukraine, „most people, when finding themselves in an extreme situation, try first of all to survive, rather than to die as heroes or martyrs.“³ It would be useful to apply a similar sensitivity to the Polish case in order to overcome the simplistic dichotomy of collaboration/rescue. Research still needs to be done on how ethnic Poles perceived, understood, and responded to the genocide of Jews that carefully takes into consideration the „extreme situation“ of brutal war and deadly occupation.

In addition, this volume follows the vast majority of the secondary literature by analyzing antisemitism among Poles. But before 1945 Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Lithuanians, and Germans also lived in Poland. The history of antisemitism in Poland (and in Eastern Europe for that matter) might benefit from being placed within a wider web of interethnic relations. The results could be illuminating.

² Stola, Dariusz, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967-1968*, Warschau 2000.

³ Berkhoff, Karel C., *Harvest of Despair. Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, Cambridge 2004, p. 5.

As Hagen shows in his article on the Lwów pogrom, the violence against Jews erupted as part of a broader conflict between Poles and Ukrainians.

Finally, Blobaum emphasizes in his introduction that there is nothing peculiarly „Polish“ about antisemitism; one can speak of antisemitism in Poland, but not of Polish antisemitism. The essays that follow confirm this conclusion: many of the stereotypes, perceptions, and images of Jews present in Poland can easily be found elsewhere on the map of Europe, although one could say that by the 1930s antisemitism had become particularly potent in the continent’s center and east.⁴ And yet the volume analyzes antisemitism from the perspective of one single nation, implying in the end, even if it clearly states otherwise, that there is some kind of „Polish antisemitism.“ In my view, the only way out of this conceptual dilemma is to break down the nationally-centered approach that has long dominated the study of antisemitism. Adopting a transnational and comparative perspective would overcome the tendency to situate and reify Jewish hatred within a given nation-state.

HistLit 2006-2-201 / Michael Meng über Blobaum, Robert (Hrsg.): *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*. Ithaca 2005, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.06.2006.

⁴Hagen, William W., Before the ‘Final Solution’. Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland, in: *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), pp. 351-381.