

Antysemityzm. Niezamknięta historia

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"Bożena Keff's essay is not a historical work, but reflection on culture" we can read on the cover of "Antysemityzm". It is a very good summary of the book which offers a nice summary of the history of anti-Semitism in Europe and Poland. Aiming at a wide audience including "college students, university students, teachers and lecturers", the book may serve as an introduction to the topic for those who have never had a chance to read more comprehensive studies discussing the same problem.[1]

Because of her attempts to reach a potentially wide audience, Keff wrote a book that presents a mixture of history of the world, history of Jews and history of anti-Semitism. The way in which she presents events of Antiquity and Middle Ages is rather interesting (though not without some flaws), offering a brief outline of the history of Jews and Judaism in the context of contemporary political and religious changes, with particular attention paid to the rise of Christianity and the ways in which the new religion treated Judaism. Keff presents all major prejudices against the Jews that existed in ancient and medieval Europe and the ways in which various myths about Jews came into being, creating roots for early modern anti-Semitism.

The following chapters discuss the fate of Jews in medieval and early modern Poland, but they feel even briefer than the previous ones. On less than thirty pages the author deals with four centuries of Polish history, Polish-Jewish relations, Polish anti-Semitism and Jewish responses to it, rushing through the Chmielnicki rising and the Swedish Deluge of the mid-seventeenth century and, recently popularised, the messianic movements of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank. There is no attempt to put the experiences of Polish Jews into a wider European context and, in consequence, that part of the book appears highly underdeveloped, a type of necessary but unwanted interlude between the more interesting (and better researched) parts discussing antiquity and European medieval period on the one hand and nineteenth and twentieth century developments of anti-Semitism on the other.

It is clear that the main focus of the book is on the history of modern anti-Semitism, with four major chapters (discussing the history of Jews in Europe from the eighteenth to the twenty first century) constituting more than half of the whole publication. Keff raises several interesting points about Jewish elements in Polish literary thought (with particular attention paid to Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki), but, at the same time, she fails

to acknowledge other, more critical expressions of Polish-Jewish relations such as the highly anti-Semitic "Nieboska komedia" by Zygmunt Krasiński. On the good side, however, the fate of Jews in Poland throughout the long nineteenth century is compared with their life in other European countries, including France and Germany, leading the author to the conclusion that neither full assimilation promoted in the West, nor unavoidable separation of the Jews from gentiles in Poland and Russia, were, from today's point of view, satisfactory choices for the Jewish minority (p. 106). It was in the nineteenth century when anti-Semitism gained its racial and political angles that were to dominate the way in which it developed in the first half of the twentieth century.

In discussing interwar realities, the book seems to concentrate almost entirely on the history of Jews and anti-Semitism in Poland. Successful identification of main trends and policies of the Polish Government (that included *numerus clausus* and separate benches for Jewish students at the universities) is not, however, put in a wider European context (similarly to the early modern events). Even Polish anti-Semitic cartoons and caricatures (presented as a valuable appendix to the book) do not receive proper attention. The German policy towards Jews and the development of Nazism were discussed on only five pages as a type of necessary introduction to the chapter discussing the problem of the Holocaust.

It feels that both pre-Holocaust events in Poland, as well as the subject of the Shoah itself (discussed very briefly and dominated by the author's attempt to answer the question 'how could it happen?'), serve only as a preparation for the last chapter of the book. On these final thirty pages Keff tries to deal with much more problematic issues of Polish (and, this time, only Polish) anti-Semitism during and after the Second World War. The argument presented in that last part of the book is the most relevant to the subtitle of the book suggesting that the tragedy of the Holocaust did not put an end to the history of anti-Semitism.

As it was suggested above, the book suffers from a number of errors, unexplained decisions and a rather poor construction. Most problematic is the fact that the author clearly could not decide whether she would like to write a book about anti-Semitism in general or only about anti-Semitism in Poland. In consequence, while there are parts where she successfully presents both the Polish and European context, there are also chapters that concentrate only on the Polish side of the events. Moreover, if the book's main aim was to raise the reader's awareness of the unfinished history of anti-Semitism, then the last chapter (being the only one that directly discusses this problem) is certainly not enough to convincingly support that thesis.

We can, however, analyse the book from a didactic point of view and consider it as a type of short introduction to the subject of anti-Semitism to those, who do not want to start from any other scholarly work Keff lists in her bibliography. This vantage point may explain the way in which the author decided to structure her work, her occasional omissions and oversimplifications. For a non-specialist reader, the picture painted by Keff may seem rather grim and, indeed, as the title and the content of the book clearly indicate, "Antysemityzm" was written as a warning that the history of anti-Semitism has not yet come to an end. In many ways Keff's approach to the problem resembles Dubnov's "lachrymose" history of Jews, this time, however, written from a gentile vantage point.

Although I can understand the fact that the book is not a historical monograph, it is absolutely no excuse for numerous factual errors. According to Keff ancient Judea was one of the colonies (rather than provinces) of the

Roman Empire (p. 15), the July Revolution in France took place in 1835 (p. 100) rather than in 1830, and the Bolsheviks took over the power in Russia in 1918 (p. 141), even though the October Revolution took place in late 1917 and the power of the Bolsheviks was not firmly established until the end of the Russian Civil War in the early 1920s.

The very title of Keff's book presents a clear interpretation of Jewish history, one that does not necessarily present the most comprehensive, nuanced and up-to-date approach to the question. Various factual errors and a number of oversimplifications weaken the historical part of the study, while the brevity of the part discussing contemporary issues related to anti-Semitism poses a serious question about the main point of the whole work. However, 'Antysemityzm. Niezamknięta historia' can be considered as a valuable introduction to the subject, one that may lead the readers to more detailed studies of Polish and European anti-Semitism.

[1] See for example a three-volume study by Leon Poliakov or classic, lachrymose history of Jews by Dubnov. Poliakov, Leon, 'Historia antysemityzmu', 3 vols. (Kraków, Universitas, 2008, 2010). Dubnov, Simon, 'History of Jews in Russia and Poland, 3 vols. (Skokie Illinois, Varda Books, 2001). One may wonder why in her history of Jews and anti-Semitism Keff did not refer to the most recent comprehensive study by Antony Polonsky. See Polonsky, Antony, 'The Jews In Poland and Russia', 3 vols. (Oxford, Littman, 2010).



Zitierweise:

Dr. Milosz K. Cybowski: Rezension zu: Bożena Keff: Antysemityzm. Niezamknięta historia, 2013, in:
<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1942#r5169>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1942?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=5169>