Against Anti-Semitism. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings

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In this extremely timely publication, Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk present twenty-two essays on antisemitism and Polish-Jewish relations written by Polish intellectuals from the interwar period until the present. Originally an immense three-volume work published in Polish, Against Anti-Semitism: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings is a highly curated one volume selection of the "greatest hits" in English translation. [1] With the exception of four essays, which were previously available in English, the essays appear in English for the first time, having been expertly translated by Marczyk. Read together as a corpus of literature confronting historic antisemitism in Poland, the essays critically examine the causes and consequences of Europe's oldest and most pernicious form of hatred in Polish society.

The editors open the volume with an informative historical introduction, which situates the discussion of Polish-Jewish relations within a historical continuum from the 19th century onwards. By doing so, Michnik and Marczyk enable general readers unfamiliar with Poland and its shifting sociopolitical and cultural contexts—the partitioning of Poland by the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian empires in the late 18th century, the reconstitution of independent Poland following World War I, German occupation during World War II, and the fall of Communism in 1989—to comprehend the peculiarities of the Polish case. Thus, Against Anti-Semitism "is an experiment in cultural transposition—an attempt to bring a long-standing internal Polish debate to audiences beyond Poland" (p. xiv). In this regard, the editors also provide useful introductions to every essay, with accompanying endnotes explaining culturally specific or obscure terminology.

Parts one and two of the anthology tackle the interwar period and feature essays by Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz ("Jews—the 1920s," pp. 3-32), novelist and playwright Maria Dąbrowska ("Annual Shame," pp. 45-51), among others. As astute contemporaneous observers, these authors assess the greatest challenges facing Jews during the interwar period, including pervasive antisemitism in the university and within nationalist politics. Part three concerns the period of Nazi occupation and its aftermath. It includes, among other selections, the self-critical reflections of literary scholar Kazimierz Wyka ("Jews and Polish Commerce," pp. 55-60) who exclaimed that the "Germans get the blame for the crime; we get the keys to the cash box" (p. 57)—an indictment of Polish society's benefiting from the dispossession of Jewish property and businesses after the Holocaust. In particularly
poignant language, Wyka observed that "a golden tooth pulled from a corpse will always bleed even if everyone forgets whose mouth it came from" (p. 57). Of course, the post-Holocaust phenomenon of expropriation of Jewish property and social advancement of local non-Jewish populations is not unique to Poland. It is a pan-European phenomenon, as contemporary historian Constantin Goschler has elsewhere made evident. [2] Nevertheless, in Poland, Wyka's analysis was almost entirely neglected during his life and only now is receiving attention. [3]

The heart of the volume and perhaps its most significant scholarly contributions are contained in parts four through seven, which concern the postwar and Communist period through 1989. These sections include representative essays addressing the key turning points of the period. Novelist and screenwriter Jerzy Andrzejewski ("The Problem of Polish Anti-Semitism," pp. 93-112), sociologist Stanisław Ossowski ("With Kielce in the Background," pp. 113-126), and historian Witold Kula ("Our Part," 127-138) deal in real-time with postwar violence, including the infamous Kielce program, where at least 42 Jews—mostly destitute Holocaust survivors—were murdered by their Polish-Catholic neighbors in response to a ritual murder accusation in July 1946. Catholic intellectual and Poland's first prime minister after the fall of Communism, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, criticizes his fellow Catholics in a stirring 1960 talk to the Club of Catholic Intellectuals for not confronting antisemitism in its ranks ("The Anti-Semitism of Kind and Gentle People," pp. 170-187). Historian Krystyna Kersten ("March 1968 and the So-Called Jewish Question in Poland after the Second World War," pp. 191-225) comprehensively analyzes the antisemitic campaign of 1968 and the subsequent forced migration of Poland's remaining Jews. And, Catholic theologian Jan Błoński's famous essay "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto" ("The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," pp. 271-285)—published in the January 1987 issue of Tygodnik Powszechny and inspired by Miłosz's rousing 1943 poem "Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto" ("A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto")—produced the most significant debate during the Communist period regarding "Polish moral responsibility during the Holocaust" (p. 271). These, along with other selections, provide insightful real-time accounts and later moral reflections on antisemitism and opposition to antisemitism in postwar and Communist Poland.

While critical reflections on the murder of Polish Jewry were largely silenced by the Communist state by 1948-49 [4], Michnik's and Marczyk's selections of essays written during the Communist period demonstrate that Polish intellectuals continued to grapple—if only in small literary and academic circles—with the consequences of antisemitism in Poland. These responses were often articulated in defiance of the Communist censor, and in some cases the authors were subject to ridicule by the Communist authorities, expelled from the Party, banned from teaching at their universities, and exiled from the country.

The final two sections of the book—parts eight and nine—concern the post-1989 era. Contributions include, for example, sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemba ("The Disgrace of Indifference," pp. 313-26) and historian Jerzy Jedlicki ("Helplessness," pp. 347-356). Oddly absent is journalist Michał Cichy, whose 1994 article "Polacy i Żydzi: Czarne karty powstania Warszawskiego" ("Poles and Jews: Black Cards of the Warsaw Uprising") ignited arguably the most significant public debate on Polish-Jewish relations, antisemitism, and the memory of the Holocaust in Poland during the 1990s. [5] Similarly, an excerpt from Jan Gross's Neighbors should also have been included in Against Anti-Semitism
Michnik and Marczyk justify their decision for excluding Gross from the volume because he is "already well known to international audiences" (p. xl). Despite this, the editors aptly utilize the year 2000 and the subsequent Jedwabne debate initiated by Gross's publication as the final turning point in the periodization of the anthology, including a stirring commentary on Gross's revelations (Waldemar Kuczyński, "The Burning Barn and I," pp. 343-46). Lastly, it is also surprising that the editors did not include more recent literature produced by scholars at the Center for Holocaust Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in this section.

The extent to which the exemplary intellectuals featured in Against Anti-Semitism are actually representative of general Polish society is an open question, despite the editors' assertion that "resisting anti-Semitism is as deeply rooted in Polish culture as antisemitism itself" (p. xiii). At minimum, however, Michnik and Marczyk demonstrate a sociologically significant current within Polish intellectual life, which has consistently and courageously fought against antisemitism. Against Anti-Semitism is thus undoubtedly an important contribution to the wide-ranging fields of Polish and Jewish studies, antisemitism studies, European history, and many others.


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