

Antisemitism: A History

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum

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Albert S. Lindemann and Richard S. Levy, eds.. *Antisemitism: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) pp. 288.

Some books are good and some are useful; this is both.

In fifteen well written, concise chapters, this work covers the entire history of antisemitism from the pre-Christian era to contemporary times. Though written by different authors, there is a rare uniformity of quality that is difficult to obtain from a multi-authored collection; more rare still, each author has stuck to their assignment, writing an essay that is deep enough to be of interest to scholars, broad enough to serve as a general introduction, clear enough to serve as a classroom textbook both for an overview course and for a more specialized one. The editors provide the bookends with Lindemann's important essay on the Jewish Question and the persistence, duration and intensity of antisemitism and a conclusion that is both a wrap up overview but also indicates what remains to be understood.

Almost two decades ago in what seems as a distant memory, after the Oslo Accords, it seemed as if antisemitism would be a minor phenomenon, confined to the fringes of society. Americans of my post-war generation know no barriers to advancement because we are Jews, none in higher education, none in the professions or in industry. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism, a major pillar of worldwide antisemitism fell. When some Arab countries sought normalization with Israel, a muting of antisemitic rhetoric, if not of antisemitic feeling, was required; it seemed as if more might follow. In Eastern Europe, the Jewish communities were small and in some places there were advantages in being Jewish. Roman Catholicism and some significant segment of Protestant Christianity were changing their views on the Jews and knocking down another pillar of antisemitism. One could be optimistic that a generation after the Holocaust, antisemitism was quarantined.

The last decade has not shattered those hopes. While one can argue how severe a problem antisemitism is in the second decade of the twenty first century, no one can dispute that there has been a resurgence in Europe, both on the left and the right and within the immigrant populations of major European countries, and most particularly in the Muslim world where major themes of antisemitism that were endemic to Christianity, such as the blood libel, and to

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Europe, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion have reemerged with great ferocity. Holocaust denial, which should be a European phenomena, after all Germany and its allies killed the Jews, has migrated to the Arab world where Jewish blood, excepting Iraq, had not been shed, but in some sort of distorted logic, Holocaust denial is used as a means of eliminating Israel. Deniers reason that if Israel is an outgrowth of the Holocaust, then if there was no Holocaust, Israel will cease to exist.

So at many universities, professors who never imagined that they would teach a course on antisemitism have begun to teach it and have returned to its study. And scholars must confront the question why does antisemitism persist, what are its origins, its historical and present manifestations and what is its future if the past can teach us of that future.

The first seven essays are chronological moving from Philip A. Cunningham's essay on Jews and Christians from the first through the fourth century, Alex Noutikoff's treatment of antisemitism in the Middle Ages, Ralph Korn's study of the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Period, Jonathan Karp's treatment of the role of the Jew both in actuality and in the imagination during the age of Mercantilism and Adam Sutcliff's understanding of the Enlightenment and of the age of Napoleon. The book then switches to a country by country, region by region treatment of antisemitism, France, Germany and Austria merit their own treatment. Islam is considered pre-1948, where the clash was primarily religious, separately than the post 1948 politicalization of the clash between Jews and Muslims. Heinz-Dietrich Lowe treats antisemitism in Russia from tsarist times through the Soviet era to our own time. His overview allows us to see what is unique about each era and what they share in common despite the different political configurations, ideologies and economics of the greatly varying regimes. István Deák fills in on the rest of Eastern Europe excluding Russia and the Russian empire and finally the issue of contemporary Israel and the lingering and seemingly intensifying measures of antisemitism in our time. There could be a greater consideration of antisemitism in the Muslim world, most especially in those countries that are party of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but the condition is so fluid that seemingly much that would be written today might prove stale by the time of its publication.

The decision to combine as one antisemitism in the English speaking world is perhaps the only structural misstep in the volume as the United States and English, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand raise too many different issues to be considered as one. William Rubinstein's essay is too hurried to consider British antisemitism in other than a cursory form or the United States pre- and post-World War II history in the detail it richly deserves. He also did not consider the gap between Jewish perceptions of increased antisemitism and the empirical reality of its decline.

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Still the volume as a whole is deeply satisfying. I know of no single book that is both comprehensive and brief, diligently researched by scholars in the top of their field, skillfully introduced, free from polemics, meticulously fair. Other critics might feel that it is not hard hitting enough, but the refusal to engage in polemics or hysteria only adds weight to the importance of this volume.

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