

BOOK REVIEW

A Book Review

Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath

Edited by Joshua D. Zimmerman, New Brunswick, New Jersey

Rutgers University Press, 2003, Hard Cover, 324 pages

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Reviewed by

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As I read Joshua Zimmerman's collection of essays, *Contested Memories*, I began to understand the dynamic complexity of the Holocaust. It is no simple matter. The context of Poland is essential as is the relationship that Jews and Poles have shared over their long history, which at times has been strained and embittered. The events of the Holocaust – the Nazi Final Solution only worked to exacerbate the difficulty in their relations even further. *Contested Memories* examines these issues and consequently, is scholarly treatment, considered by many to be a “standard work” on the Holocaust. Three generations of Polish and Jewish researchers wrote a series of essays on topics concerning Polish-Jewish relations before, during and after World War Two. The articles in the book cover the prewar years, the breakdown of Polish and Jewish relations in the early days of the war, Poland's institutional responses to the Holocaust, the Jewish perspective on Poles and the Polish nation, European Jews and their destruction and popular Polish opinions, and the relationship between Poles and Jews following 1945.

The primary drawback of the book is that it is not strictly addressing history but is an analysis of history or what is termed historiography, which is “the narrative presentation of history based on a critical examination, evaluation, and selection of material from primary and secondary sources and subject to scholarly criteria” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Reading the book may require of the reader an academic interest and some familiarity with the history of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Polish-Jewish history. The essays are well written and interspersed with comments from some of the most noted Polish and Jewish voices on the issues, addressing “commonly held views on both sides of the debates” regarding Polish and Jewish responses to the Nazi occupation of Poland. The purpose of the authors is to analyze “issues fairly” and to reach “mutual understanding” as Poles and Jews address the aftermath of the Holocaust collectively (p. xi).

The tone of the book is serious and details developments in the Polish and Jewish conflict, even dealing with the painful question of Polish anti-Semitism. The common belief is that the Nazi regime chose Poland for the setting of the Final Solution because of Polish anti-Semitism; however, this is not the case. The Nazis chose Poland strategically “as their gigantic laboratory for mass murder” solely for the reason that Poland was the home to the largest Jewish population in Europe (p. 3). Although Poles did not conceive the Holocaust, it “had tainted Polish soil forever” (p. 6). Dealing with the aftermath of such a tragic event would require cleansing Poland and its people from this “terrible burden of history” by allowing the Polish people to see themselves and their country “in the light of truth” (p. 6).

The Holocaust as such “is the tragedy of the Poles” because, during dark days of the Nazi extermination of the Jews, Poles “were exposed to an unprecedented moral trial” through which it would be difficult to say if anyone else “would have come through it better” (p. 7). Moreover, Poles were eyewitnesses and saw firsthand the events of the Holocaust and the plight of their Jewish neighbors. At times Poles were noble and assisted their neighbors under the threat of execution and on other occasions, they were slightly more than bystanders doing little or nothing to protect their Jewish neighbors from the Nazi brutality. Nonetheless, on at least one occasion, Poles became participants of barbarism, rounding up and brutally murdering their Jewish neighbors in a pogrom – an organized massacre of particularly Jews (Meriam-Webster, 2012). Jewish perception of the role of Poles in the Holocaust often conflicts with the historical record. The essays demonstrate clearly that both Poles and Jews suffered, albeit disproportionately, at the hands of their Nazi oppressors.

With the permission of Nazi officials, Polish residents of Jedwabne, Poland brutally murdered 1,600 of their Jewish neighbors on a hot summer’s day in July 1941. Jews were

rounded up and humiliated, then were beaten, clubbed or hacked to death; however, most of those who died were eventually herded into a barn and burned alive. This occurrence was extreme and not the norm; however, it occurred, and Poles took part in the murder of Jews. Nevertheless, this event has not been examined historically due to the fact that many historians discounted the grim eyewitness testimony of the Jewish survivors of the event as being too incredible to be true. In his essay on the circumstances of Jedwabne, Jan Gross points clearly to the fact that it appears that journalists and historians have taken “sedatives” and did not address the “mass murder of Jedwabne Jews” for decades believing that the Germans were the only ones who murdered Jews in Poland (p. 77). Furthermore, Gross challenges the status quo of historians of this period and urges them to revise “the approach to sources . . .” arguing that “we must take literally all fragments of information at our disposal” and realize that what the Jewish community truly experienced during the Holocaust “can only be more tragic than the existing representation of events based on surviving evidence” (pp. 78-79).

The essay on the Polish government and its attitudes toward Polish Jews prior to and during the Second World War does an excellent job of categorizing and explaining the political landscape Poland giving insight and understanding of the broad spectrum of political views concerning the question of Jews in Poland. Hitler’s campaign to destroy Polish Jews “radically transformed the prewar Jewish question” making “old positions of Polish parties largely irrelevant;” nevertheless, these prewar positions were influential among the exiled leadership of Poland, which essentially solidified the exiled government making it “unprepared to face the Holocaust” (p. 93). The Polish government-in-exile effectively stirred world opinion about the plight of its Jewish population; however, it was powerless to change anything in occupied Poland. This understanding is reflected in a statement made by Shmuel Zygielbojm prior to his

suicide in May 1943, when he wrote that Poland had not “risen to anything extraordinary to match the extent of the drama taking place in occupied Poland” (p. 94).

In the latter portion of the book, Zimmerman offers a series of essays dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust cataloging topics such as pogroms, the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish attitudes, and the Jewish response to anti-Semitism in Poland. As in the rest of the book, these essays are critical examinations of the issues, some of which are highly technical and meant for researchers in the discipline. Generally speaking, this book is not for the casual reader and at times the book is brutally graphic and difficult to read, as in the case of the verbatim eyewitness accounts of the Jedwabne pogrom. Nevertheless, the book is an invaluable resource classifying and examining research concerning the Holocaust oftentimes challenging and re-examining issues long left dormant. *Contested Memories* contains a wealth of historical information and is a body of bibliographical resources, which makes this book essential for anyone doing research on the Holocaust. Lastly, the essays in *Contested Memories* assist readers, such as me, to have a better understanding and appreciation of the tragic events of the Holocaust and how they have impacted both Jew and Gentile.

In conclusion, Auschwitz is a museum today, visited by millions of people annually; however, the event it represents – the Holocaust, still cries out, demanding justice for innocent victims murdered in its gas chambers. Auschwitz was one of the six Nazi death camps built and operated in Poland to annihilate the Jews of Europe. An article that I read in *The Guardian* captures the enduring legacy of hatred and the impact the Holocaust has on us today stating, “As at Auschwitz, the gates of hell are built and torn down by human hearts, a wrenching debate about anti-Semitism in Poland's past leads us, in the end, to ask questions about ourselves” (Ash, 2009). I have visited Auschwitz on numerous occasions. Every time I visit, I go to the gas

chambers and crematoriums. I stand in silence, surveying what remains, and ask myself, “Why?” I do not have an answer to the evil that occurred during the Holocaust in Poland, nor do I have a reason for the destruction of the Jewish heritage and culture of Poland. All I know is that I am compelled to speak to the injustice of the Holocaust and be a voice for those who no longer have a voice today.

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