

Polonsky, Antony. *The Jews in Poland and Russia. Volume 1: 1350–1881*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford and Portland, OR, 2010. xxxi + 534 pp. Maps. Tables. Notes. Appendices. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. £39.50: \$59.50.

ANTONY POLONSKY'S *The Jews in Poland and Russia. Volume I: 1350–1881* is the first of three instalments of a magisterial, comprehensive treatment of East European Jewish history. It deals largely with shifting power relations between the rulers of Poland (and later, the Russian Empire) and its Jewish minority, and interrelations within the domains of Polish (and Russo-Polish) Jewry. In addition to the copious archival work of Polonsky himself, carried out over decades while he pioneered the modern study of Polish-Jewish history, this volume also draws on vast secondary literature including numerous pieces that appeared under Polonsky's editorship of the journal *Polin*. This book, on its own, constitutes a highly original and distinctive contribution to the fields of East European as well as Jewish history. Along with the recent *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New York, 2008), the current volume and the remaining two in the series can serve as an authoritative reference for research and teaching on innumerable aspects of East European history. Those who read the text carefully and completely, moreover, will be amply rewarded by an eloquent and refreshing narrative and compelling analysis. 'The Jewish past in these lands is well established in the Jewish collective memory,' Polonsky writes. 'But with the opening of the archives in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe and the vast amount of research which has taken place in the last two decades in Israel, North America, and Europe, there is a need to produce a new synthetic account which will correct the overly sentimental and also the exclusively negative view of the past, both of which are prevalent. It is my hope that this will enable us better to appreciate from where the Jews have come and how much has been achieved by them on the path to the modern world' (p. 3).

Scholars of Jewish history may be perplexed by the title, as the date 1350 does not correspond to a watershed. At a recent conference (Berkeley, CA, November 2010), the author revealed that the publisher insisted on the mid-fourteenth century — as opposed to 1286, identified with the Charter of Boleslaw of Kalisz (the Pious), which set the legal foundation for Jewish settlement in Poland. Nevertheless, Polonsky expertly examines the origins and initial birth pangs of Jewish communal life in Poland, culminating with the fact that '[b]y the middle of the eighteenth century the Jewish community of Poland-Lithuania had become the largest Jewish community in the world and a centre of intellectual and religious life' (p. 7).

Although there are a number of harrowing episodes recounted, including the Khmelnytsky Uprising of the seventeenth century in which some 13,000 Jews were killed (p. 14), this volume is much more than a compendium of crises or a prelude to the tragedy of the Holocaust. By no means does Polonsky seek to minimize the significance of anti-Jewish animus in Poland. He does, however, through a painstaking and lucid reconstruction of ideas, policies and events, show how Jews had more of a hand in determining their fate (up to 1881, that is) than is often imagined. In his retelling, there is far

greater agency held and exercised by Jews than is typically recalled. But the larger problem is that Poland itself, in much of this period, was, or felt itself to be, severely under stress — and therefore was unlikely to grant Jews the kind of freedoms they sought.

One of the several merits of this book is that it complicates the simple dichotomy between Jews, on the one side, and the forces of anti-Jewish repression, on the other. There exists a myth, sometimes articulated but otherwise simply assumed, that Jews were roughly on the side of ‘reason’, while their antisemitic opponents represented the forces of unreason and fanaticism. Polonsky argues, in numerous discrete segments, that Jews often fell victim to pressures in their own community in the direction of conservatism, and even fanaticism. Hence in some instances where there may have been openings for greater Jewish integration into Polish society, the factors blocking or limiting Jewish inclusion did not always reside on the non-Jewish, Polish side. Without succumbing to a romanticized notion of tolerance in the Kingdom of Poland, Polonsky asserts that those

who favoured Jewish integration had both a strong sense of the inferiority of Jewish to Polish society and unrealistic expectations of how rapidly the Jews could be transformed. They also greatly overestimated the ability of the Jewish elite to carry through such a transformation. Nevertheless, the assumption that Jewish integration could not have succeeded in the Kingdom of Poland and that its supporters were hopelessly naïve should be rejected. It is another of the implicit assumptions of the now discredited nationalist grand narrative of Jewish history and an example of what E. P. Thompson has described as the ‘boundless contempt’ exhibited in the present for those whose aspirations in the past were not fulfilled. The history of the Jews in the Kingdom of Poland is a story of lost opportunities for which subsequent generations were to pay a high price. (p. 321)

Polonsky shows that even greater cynicism and entrenched stereotypes influenced the course of Jewish history after the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795, which resulted in the bulk of Jewry being subsumed by the tsarist empire.

My main quibble with this splendid book concerns its organization. At the end of Part One (of Two) is an ‘Appendix’ on ‘The Polish Lithuanian Background’ (pp. 160–79). Many of the points raised in this section might have been more effectively deployed in the context of the arguments developed in the preceding five chapters. Ironically, one of the outstanding attributes of the book, in total, is precisely the skill of the author at interweaving greater cultural currents, as well as national and local pressures that impinged on the Jews. This single point, however, need not detract from the overwhelming keen judgment, deep knowledge of Poland and its Jews, and remarkable critical insights that are manifest in this extraordinary book.