



Theodore R. Weeks. *From Assimilation to Antisemitism: The "Jewish Question" in Poland, 1850-1914*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. x + 242 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-352-4.



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## “Why Herschel Hershenberg Wasn’t a Pole”

In 1907 my maternal grandfather left his shtetl near Lodz for Chicago; three years later my grandmother and two aunts followed. My grandparents usually spoke Yiddish in their West Side neighborhood, but their first alternative was Polish. In the early 1930s whenever public school teachers asked my mother to identify her family’s “nationality,” my mother always replied “Polish.” Polish Catholic children in the neighborhood (and subsequent Polish-American friends), though, told her that she was a Jew, not Polish. She has always been confused and a bit offended by this attitude; after all, her parents were born in Poland, too ... In December 2006 I mentioned to my mother that I was reviewing a book on Polish-Jewish relations that had a section on a pogrom in Lodz when her parents were children. My mother, again, asked why “Poles” didn’t consider her family Polish. That question is at the heart of Theodor R. Weeks’ *From Assimilation to Antisemitism*.

Answering that question drags the historian into a historiographic and political minefield, but Weeks crosses this ground gracefully.[1] He avoids general “theories” of antisemitism as well as essentialist arguments about the “inherently antisemitic” nature of Polish culture. Instead, he focuses on public discourses about

Polish-Jewish relations in the context of the complex intersections of Polish, Jewish, and Russian politics.

According to Weeks, in the early nineteenth century Jews and gentiles in Russian-held Poland lived in separate worlds that seldom intersected. Few Polish intellectuals focused attention on relations between Jews and gentiles, and Polish society (“middle class” Poles) generally assumed that Jews should transform themselves so as to assimilate into the “superior” Polish culture. The death of Tsar Nicholas I and reforms initiated under Alexander II then pushed the question of Jewish assimilation toward to the center of Polish political discourse. In the wake of the failed 1863 Polish insurrection, Poles’ reactions to the imperial state’s Russification policies shaped discussions regarding assimilation. Polish journalists, political activists, and cultural figures perceived these policies as a direct threat to Polish cultural survival. As a result, modern Polish national politics, the birth of which coincided with the pan-European rise of political and racial antisemitism, took on a decidedly defensive tone. Given their homeland’s status as a subject of the Russian empire and its relative economic underdevelopment, the question of whether its Jews would accept Polish cultural hegemony assumed exceptional importance. Polish society and Jew-

ish progressives agreed that Jews could and should assimilate. This consensus eroded, however, in the two decades after the pogroms that followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. As young Jews joined the ranks of the socialists and Zionists, Polish society began to doubt the utility as well as the possibility of assimilation. By the turn of the century, Polish nationalists had seized upon antisemitism as a tool for political mobilization. Still, Polish society rejected the premises of radical antisemitism until the period of renewed repression that followed the 1905 Revolution. At that point, Poles across the political spectrum identified Jews as agents of Russification, enemies of Polish culture, and a threat to Polish national survival. Polish radical antisemitism, then, grew out of a politics of cultural and insecurity in which Jews became a surrogate enemy that could be blamed for the pain and humiliation imposed by Russia.

Weeks develops this argument in eight chronologically ordered chapters. Along the way he provides solid discussions of changes in Jewish social and economic life; incidents of anti-Jewish violence; arguments among Jewish traditionalists, socialists, and Zionists; and major turns in Russian state policy regarding Jews. But the book is not about Jews. It is about changes in the ways that Polish educated society (and in particular, the adherents of Polish liberal positivism and conservative nationalism) understood the “Jewish Question.” In each chapter, Weeks traces discussions among Polish (and, to a lesser extent, Jewish) writers regarding the possibility (or impossibility) of assimilation. He does so with remarkable erudition, on the basis of sources in Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. These include some very interesting materials from Lithuanian, Polish, and particularly Russian state archives. The core of Weeks’ research, though, is his close reading of dozens of Polish newspapers and periodicals, which he exploits beautifully.

By dissecting public discourse, Weeks shows that educated Poles and Jewish progressives considered Jewish assimilation into Polish society an obvious and attainable goal during the 1860s and the 1870s. He then uses journalists’ and publicists’ responses to the traumatic events of 1881-1882 (including the Christmas 1881 pogrom in Warsaw) to demonstrate their growing doubts about assimilation. He tracks the changing attitudes of many educated Poles in the disturbing political and social environment of the 1880s-1890s. Not only Tsarist repression and the growth of Zionist and socialist political movements, but also rapid social change and increased economic competition between Jews and Gen-

tiles, undermined their faith that Jews could or would merge into Polish society. Even the writer Aleksander Swi?tochowski, who rejected the basic premises of antisemitism, shared this disillusionment. Polish commentators interpreted the attraction of young Jews to the banners of socialism or Zionism as a rejection and repudiation of Polish culture (which, absent sovereignty, stood at the center of Polish national identity). The initial skirmishes of 1905 Revolution briefly restored a cooperative spirit among Jews and Poles (an echo of 1863), but that moment passed quickly. The revolution’s collapse fed a politics of blame based upon perceived conflicts between Jewish and Polish interests. It was in this context that Polish nationalist politicians effectively mobilized around the idea that Jews had allied with the Russian oppressors. Liberals and socialists adopted similar, if less virulent, positions. “Increasingly,” Weeks argues, “Poles did not view their Jewish neighbors as actual or potential allies or brothers, but as national enemies, agents of Russification, and disruptive elements” (p. 150). In the 1912 State Duma electoral campaign, for example, all Polish political factions (left, center, and right) assumed that Jews would vote for other Jews and not for the Polish parties because Jews’ interests, solidarities, and culture set them apart from “real” Poles. In late 1912 Polish nationalists launched a boycott of Jewish businesses that “crystallized the rhetoric of antisemitism in Polish society, emphasized the stark and unbridgeable differences between ‘Poles’ and ‘Jews,’ and made it possible for broad sections of Polish society to advocate radical measures such as expulsion and economic coercion” (p. 166).

Weeks is at his best guiding readers through the complex, shifting positions of the journalists and publicists whom he places at the center of this story. He details the changing arguments of key exemplars of Polish liberal positivism, Jewish moderate assimilationists at the Polish-language weekly *Izraelita*, major Polish and Jewish socialist and Zionist writers, and leading figures among the antisemitic National Democrats (Endeks). Two authors in particular dominate the narrative: Jan Jele?ski, whose journey from judeophobe to hysterical antisemite Weeks chronicles; and liberal intellectual Aleksander Swi?tochowski, founder of the Progressive-Democratic Union. Swi?tochowski, for whom Weeks clearly has considerable respect, “mercilessly mocked and reviled antisemites as hacks, careerists, and benighted fools” (p. 175), yet also dismissed the possibility of assimilation as an illusion.

In his concluding chapter, Weeks briefly places his findings into the context of European political anti-

semitism as elucidated by two recent studies, William Brustein's *Roots of Hate* (2003) and Albert Lindemann's *Esau's Tears* (1997). He quite correctly points out that "the Poles certainly held no monopoly on antisemitism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 176) and outlines differences between political antisemitisms in Poland, France, and Germany. He also warns us against positing a straight line from political antisemites like Jele?ski to exterminationist racial antisemites like Hitler. Although he clearly has read and mulled over a vast number of studies on the topic, Weeks unfortunately does not use the conclusion to explicitly compare his findings to other major works on Polish antisemitism, nor does he engage with comparative literature beyond Brustein and Lindemann.[2] These are minor criticisms, however, of a very impressive book.

#### Notes

[1]. This is evident in some of Weeks' terminological choices. For example, he uses the word "antisemitism" (rather than "anti-Semitism"), which in itself carries interpretive, ideological, and emotional significance. Several authors have argued that the hyphenated term suggests that there is in fact a "Semitic" race. Similarly, the choice between the terms antisemitism and Judeophobia can carry significant weight: while some authors use the two interchangeably, others distinguish between Judeophobia as the hatred of Jews and antisemitism as a modern racist ideology. Weeks does not reflect on his choice of the unhyphenated "antisemitism," nor does he draw attention to the distinctions implied in the text by

the use of Judeophobia and antisemitism. Weeks is more explicit about another terminological choice, the use of the term "assimilation" as opposed to "acculturation." Weeks defines acculturation as "the adoption of cultural markers ... while retaining a degree of Jewish identity," as opposed to assimilation, which understood as a deliberate effort to "efface all differences" between Jews and gentiles or, more generally, as the process through which a separate Jewish identity is erased. He emphasizes, however, that contemporary Poles made no such distinctions and used the term assimilation (*asymilacja*) "for both meanings" (pp. 179-180).

[2]. For instance, Weeks might have used the conclusion to clarify the relationship between his arguments and those laid out recently by Brian Porter, Robert Blobaum, Jerzy Jedlicki, Stephen Corrsin, and Tadeuz Stegner. See, for instance, Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Stephen Corrsin, *Warsaw Before the First World War: Poles and Jews in the Third City of the Russian Empire, 1880-1914* (Boulder: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Robert Blobaum, "The Politics of Antisemitism in Fin de Siècle Warsaw," *Journal of Modern History* 73, 2 (June 2001): 275-306; and essays by Brian Porter, Jerzy Jedlicki, and Robert Blobaum in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005) (a volume to which Weeks also contributed).

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