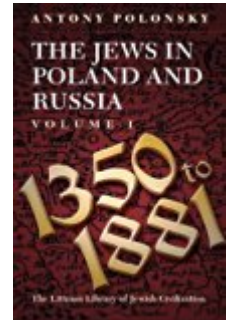
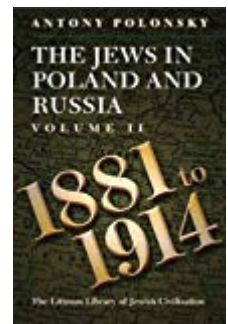


Antony Polonsky. *The Jews in Poland and Russia, vol. 1, 1350 to 1881.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. xiv + 534 pp. \$59.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-874774-64-8.



Antony Polonsky. *The Jews in Poland and Russia, vol. 2, 1881 to 1914.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. 492 pp. \$59.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-904113-83-6.



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The first two volumes of Antony Polonsky's magisterial *The Jews in Poland and Russia* trilogy provide a much-needed addition to the landscape of Jewish historical studies. For generations, the Eastern European Jewish experience has been overshadowed in historical scholarship by the experience of Jews living in German lands. Cold War politics was certainly a contributing factor: Western ideological investments made serious scholarship of the Eastern European Jewish experience uncomfortable at times, and those who persisted were thwarted by limited access to documents. In the last two decades or so, however, scholars of the Jewish historical experience have focused

their attention on those parts of the world from which most American Jewry originates. The study of the Eastern European Jewish heritage is rapidly becoming one of the most exciting fields in Jewish studies. An outpouring of groundbreaking specialized studies of specific aspects of the Eastern European Jewish experience has transformed the way that historians understand that civilization. In the last few years, there have been a few attempts to synthesize this scholarship and to present it to nonspecialists in an effort to publicize these findings to broader readerships. The *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2008), for instance, produced an essential refer-

ence work that drew on much of this scholarship. Polonsky has now completed an equally significant achievement in presenting the most modern findings in a clear, readable, comprehensive survey of the Jews in Poland and Russia.

It is fitting that Polonsky dedicates the volume to Shimon Dubnov and Majer Balaban, the last two historians to have approached this type of comprehensive scholarship with any success. Although Dubnov and Balaban shared the goal of strengthening Jewish identity by bringing the history of their people to light, in many ways they adopted opposite approaches. On the one hand, Dubnov, who was predominantly an autodidact, preferred monumental sweeping narratives. His ten-volume *Weltgeschichte des Jüdischen volkes* (World History of the Jewish People, 1925-29) and his three-volume *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (1916-20) epitomize this approach; they embody the grand narrative tradition in history that fueled national sentiment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Balaban's strength, on the other hand, was his meticulous eye for detail and professional historical training. His greatest contributions were small-scale studies of particular communities, studies that today could even be called microhistories. Polonsky combines the best of both approaches: his narrative is grand and his analysis is tight.

One of Polonsky's major strengths is his ability to contextualize the story he tells within the broader history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the first volume, and the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires in the second volume. In this sense, Polonsky builds on recent studies conducted by Moshe Rosman, Gershon Hundert, Adam Teller, ChaeRan Freeze, and others who have mined Russian and Polish archival sources as well as Jewish narratives. These scholars have shown that in contrast to Dubnov's perceptions, Jews were relatively secure in their daily lives. In the first chapter of the first volume, "Jews and Christians," Polonsky details

this tenuous relationship, showing how the disdain that often existed between the two communities--and not just by Christians directed against Jews, but the other way around as well--was balanced with economic security.

In the second chapter, "Jewish Autonomous Institutions," Polonsky looks at the local *kehillot* (communities) and the larger Jewish Council of Four Lands. While modern antisemites often accused these communal organizations of functioning as "a state within a state," Dubnov and others have celebrated them as expressions of Jewish national autonomy. Polonsky shows how the councils interacted with Christian authorities, at times reinforcing restrictions on Jewish activity imposed by the Sejm, including the issuing of edicts forbidding Jewish settlement in specific areas. Polonsky ascribes some importance to the Council of Four Lands and the Council of Lithuania but maintains that the "core of the system of Jewish self-government lay in the local *kehillot*." He sees communal self-government as "one important element in the democratic tradition of the State of Israel" and "one of the most fundamental legacies of the Jewish experience in Poland-Lithuania" (vol. 1, p. 67). Communal self-government was clearly an important legacy in the State of Israel, but the Polish Zionists who formulated that legacy were probably more likely to look for precedents of self-government in medieval Spain and Babylon than in their own lands.

Polonsky's study of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth period includes chapters on Jewish settlement patterns, differentiating between the growing number of Jews living in private towns under the protection of the Polish nobility and those living in royal towns. In the second volume, he also devotes a chapter to "Jewish Spaces," demonstrating the variations in Jewish demographic, social, and cultural life across the vast geographic space of Poland and Russia. Since comparatively few recent studies have focused on the economic and demographic history of the Jews of

the region, these chapters are perhaps the most familiar. The chapter on “Religious and Spiritual Life” shows the importance of the institution of the rabbinate as well as the limitations of that position and the changing role of the cantor. Following the 1648 Khmelnytsky rebellion, esoteric and mystical thought flourished, culminating in the excitement that surrounded Shabbatai Zevi and later Jacob Frank. Polonsky draws on the work of Ada Rapoport-Albert and Michael Silber to show that Hasidism was not a direct outgrowth of Sabbatianism, though. Like Rosman and most other scholars of Hasidism, Polonsky links the origins of the movement to the spread of mystical preachers and kabbalists, who formed new power centers within the *kloyzn* (prayer rooms) that competed with the established synagogue for attention. The chapter on “Jewish Religious Life” in the second volume provides in-depth discussion of the nineteenth-century spread of Hasidism, particularly into Polish lands, a period often overlooked by those who focus primarily on the origins of the movement in Ukrainian lands.

Following his discussion of the period of the Polish partitions, Polonsky appropriately divides the remainder of the first volume and first third of the second volume along geographic lines. His study of the struggle for legal equality among the Jews of Galicia is based overwhelmingly on the excellent scholarship that Artur Eisenbach and Balaban had conducted on this subject. The sections on the Kingdom of Poland focus on the less successful struggle for legal emancipation waged by the Jews there. Polonsky is eager to correct the common misconception that equates the fate of the Jews of the Kingdom of Poland with those of the Pale of Settlement. The opportunities for integration with Polish society in the Kingdom of Poland were clearly better than the opportunities for integration into Russian society in the Pale, but the Polish integrationists had a much more difficult path after the 1863 uprising and subsequent Russification. Polonsky sees the failure of integration in the kingdom as “a story of lost op-

portunities for which subsequent generations were to pay a high price” (vol. 1, p. 321).

In the final 120 pages of the first volume as well as the bulk of the second volume, Polonsky focuses on Jews in the tsarist empire. Here as well, most of Polonsky’s concerns are with the state’s attitudes toward its Jewish population and on the variety of Jewish political responses. Following Michael Stanislawski, John Klier, and other recent scholars, he sees Catherine and Nicholas I’s interference in Jewish life as being motivated predominantly by integrationist ideology and state modernization rather than Judeophobia. He agrees, as well, that state policies increased social stratification and failed to modernize a large body of the Jewish population. The reforms also contributed to the impoverishment of much of the Jewish population. Only the reforms of Alexander II, which reversed some of the most onerous restrictions imposed by Nicholas I, led to some circles of integrationists based primarily in Odessa and St. Petersburg. Polonsky concludes with questioning the role of 1881 as a watershed moment, noting that already in the 1860s and 1870s many integrationists were becoming disillusioned. Nevertheless, 1881 remains the point of division between the first and second volumes.

In the first half of the second volume, Polonsky documents the tsarist government’s retreat from integrationist policies and its embrace of outright discrimination and oppression in the period 1881-1914. These policies led in part to the increased poverty that plagued the Jewish masses, although poverty remained endemic in the Galician territories that were incorporated into the more benevolent Austro-Hungarian Empire. The second half of the second volume looks in detail at the tremendous growth of creative activity and religious transformation that occurred during this period of repression. Polonsky’s original voice and passion are reflected best in his chapters on women, Jewish religious life, mass culture, and, in particular, modern Jewish literature. His analyses

of Jewish cultural expressions in multiple languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and German) complement recent studies that have sought to highlight the multilingual nature of Jewish cultural life in Eastern Europe.

The Jews in Poland and Russia is an excellent synthesis of this community's history, incorporating much of the groundbreaking scholarship that has been conducted on the topic over the last few decades. Repeatedly, the volumes remind us of the many lost opportunities for real reform in the region. They help correct the nostalgic and romanticized portraits of what is sometimes considered a lost civilization, while simultaneously demonstrating the vibrancy and diversity of Jewish life in the region. The volume is essential reading for those seeking a thorough and balanced understanding of Jewish life in pre-twentieth-century Eastern Europe.

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