



**Elżbieta Janicka, Tomasz Żukowski.** *Philo-Semitic Violence: Poland's Jewish Past in New Polish Narratives*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. ix + 270 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-79363-669-0.

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In *Philo-Semitic Violence: Poland's Jewish Past in New Polish Narratives*, two literary scholars and cultural critics, Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, probe selected texts, films, art installations, and commemorative initiatives in Poland related to Jewish and Holocaust history. The authors discuss Polish collective narrations about the Jewish past and about Polish collective imagination and identity. The main focus of the book is on the years 2007-12, following a wave of public debates about Polish-Jewish relations and the history and memory of the Holocaust in Poland that took place with the publication of Jan T. Gross's book, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* in 2000.

Janicka and Żukowski define "philo-Semitism" as "impetuously positive feelings of the majority toward a collective imagined object identified as 'the Jews.' In this sense, philo-Semitism, although utilizing the opposite emotional vector, is structurally similar to anti-Semitism" (pp. 3-4). The authors introduce the notion of "philo-Semitic violence" which, in short, means patterns of exclusion, subjugation, and control based on the expectations assigned to an imaginary "Jew." The phantasm of "the Jew," the authors claim, is subjected to pressures that transform the subject into an ob-

ject. Its role is to remove difficult questions about the Polish-Jewish past and the Polish people's responsibility for the complicity in the Holocaust. This is a bold argument that reassesses the meaning of philo-Semitism, efforts to address the memory of the Holocaust and Jewish life in Poland, and projects that have come to represent Polish-Jewish rapprochement. At its core, *Philo-Semitic Violence* is a book about the conditions that regulate the channeling of difficult history and memory in public consciousness. Quite interestingly, contemporary Jewish presence in Poland is excised from the book. It understandably focuses on "the Jews" as an imagined object. And yet, the statement that the Holocaust and the expulsion of Jews by the Polish Communist government in 1968 put an end to Jewish presence in Poland does not hold true.

The book is composed of an introduction and five essays. Each focuses on a different form of communicating the Jewish past in Poland. In the first chapter, the authors analyze the film *Po-lin* (2008). Here, interwar amateur home movies of, by, and for Jews are used to further the Polish narrative about Polish-Jewish coexistence. In this way, the film becomes devoid of complicated topics of antisemitism and violence against Jews in the

Second Polish Republic that underpin the attitudes and behavior toward Jews during the Holocaust. Chapter 2 explores the reenactment of the liquidation of the Będzin ghetto (2010). In this performance, Jews and Germans are at the center of the action while Poles are separated from the scene and cast as spectators, thereby reinforcing the collective memory of the Polish people's role during the Holocaust. Chapter 3 loops back to the first to examine another form of nostalgia through performative events. In "I Miss You, Jew," Poles declared their longing for an undefined collective, and in the staging of the "The Burning Barn" they were supposed to commemorate the Jedwabne massacre (2010). Both initiatives, the author claim, gloss over the "disappearance" of Jews from the Polish landscape. Chapter 4 centers on the commemoration in the public space of the Warsaw Ghetto Bridge (1996, 2007-11). Here, the figure of the Pole as a witness is emphasized, and not that of a blackmailer that posed a danger to Jews who sought to slip out of the ghetto. Chapter 5 dissects the emergence, form, and meaning of the Keret House (2012) in Warsaw, dubbed the narrowest house in the world. The symbolic gifting of the house to the Israeli writer Etgar Keret entailed an arrangement of naming the house after the writer in exchange for his promoting of it. This, in turn, raises questions about the role that Jews are expected to play in Polish collective consciousness.

*Philo-Semitic Violence* weaves in threads that help to explain one perspective about examples of major efforts in Poland billed as commemorative practices of the Holocaust and Jewish past. Janicka and Żukowski take a critical approach to show how and why Jews are instrumentalized to fit a collective Polish narrative that favors an ethnoreligious identity. Therefore, this book has much to say about how the Polish people strive to see themselves. The figure of "the Jew," infused with meaning to suit the majority culture's imagination about itself, becomes acceptable in discussions and representations of Jewish history in Poland as long as it does not challenge the dominant narrat-

ive. That is how the titular "philo-Semitic violence" manifests itself.

The authors pose larger questions about the ethics of memory practices and about the politics of history. The book becomes an important commentary, too, on the reasons, modes, and consequences of exclusion of groups and histories. Emotions play a role in processing, conveying, exhibiting, and experiencing information about traumatic historical events, such as the Holocaust and the loss of Poland's Jewish population during and after World War II. As Janicka and Żukowski show, the various public endeavors that use the image of "the Jew" are aimed to release emotions. However, they do not necessarily invite difficult questions about the past and the present. They instead repeat clichés and emphasize the Polish self-image of heroism and victimhood. The authors reveal that a deeper examination of the various projects illustrates that scholarship did not generate the anticipated social-cultural changes in social awareness about the Jewish past and the Poles' role in it. This finding seems to say more about the creators than the consumers of the various media discussed in the book. The popularity of and broad participation in the projects may reflect an interest in the available memory practices. Thus, a question emerges about the role, responsibility, and agenda of the artist. In fact, *Philo-Semitic Violence* demonstrates the urgency of ongoing scholarship and education on the Holocaust and Jewish history in Poland.

The strength and importance of *Philo-Semitic Violence* lie in its thought-provoking criticism and piercing analysis of educational and commemorative initiatives related to the Jewish past in Poland. This is a strictly academic text, grounded in literary studies terminology and addressed primarily to scholars. For those focused on East Central Europe, Poland, the Holocaust, Polish Jewish history, antisemitism, and memory studies, this book illuminates the continued refusal of a group (here, the Polish people) to engage with its

history and role in the Holocaust beyond the superficial modes that are aimed to reinforce the dominant group's narration. For this reason, too, this book will be of interest to practitioners, activists, educators, and artists to recognize the mech-

anisms that lead to and uphold the distortion of historical facts and the consequences of promoting master narratives that abuse the notion of the imagined "Jew."

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