Introductory overviews are a thankless genre. Undoubtedly necessary but bound to please nobody entirely, open to criticism from specialists and generalists alike, they require an enormous amount of synthesis without allowing the author to showcase much of their own research. The problem is compounded with a topic as complex and controversial as antisemitism. Linda Maizels takes an admirably inclusive and even-handed approach to the task in her new book, which succeeds in several significant ways and falls short in others. As the latest installment in a familiar lineage, *What is Antisemitism?* can serve as a test case for an important but elusive question: How effectively has the elaborate scholarship on antisemitism been able to translate itself into concise findings accessible to a broader readership?

Maizels begins with a thoughtful discussion of the 2018 Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, considered the deadliest antisemitic attack in US history, as an illustration of the complicated entwine-ment of different modes of animosity against Jews. Though the attack took place in a synagogue, the perpetrator was motivated by a mix of racial and conspiracist ideologies about Jews rather than traditional religious prejudices. Maizels also notes the practical aspect of targeting Jews at places of worship: for white supremacists who consider Jews racially alien, it can be hard to identify Jews in public. Others, in contrast, view Jews as quintessentially white (while ignoring Jews of color). This nuanced sense of the various ways in which antisemitism can manifest itself sets the tone for the book as a whole.

The first chapter, “The Difficulty of Definitions,” addresses the challenging question of how to define “antisemitism,” a topic that continues to divide scholars across a range of disciplines. Reflecting current debates, much of Maizels’s discussion centers on disagreements about Israel and Palestine. There is valuable material here, and a principled presentation of alternative frameworks, which is a noteworthy achievement in light of the heated disputes surrounding such issues. From a historical point of view, however, the focus on contemporary concerns seems questionable.
Most of the book covers events that predate the founding of the state of Israel, sometimes by centuries.

This is one of the book's chief strengths: despite the narrowness of the definitional segment, Maizels devotes extended attention to a broad survey of antisemitic beliefs and actions as they developed in ancient, medieval, and modern contexts in European and Middle Eastern societies, all the while resisting simplistic explanations and teleological assumptions. Her approach to Christian and Islamic settings is judicious, offering useful historical background and detailed case studies. She is particularly perceptive on the dilemmas of modernity:

**“The many layers of anti-Jewish animosity built up over centuries meant that Jewishness was automatically understood as negative, even in those lands that were becoming more culturally and politically progressive. Therefore, the only way to extend the rights and benefits of citizenship to individual Jews was to insist that Jews in general change themselves and become less Jewish. However, ... even when the majority of Jews complied with this demand, their sacrifice was deemed insufficient because the taint of their Jewish identity was seen as something inherent that could not be eradicated.” (p. 137)**

From her discussion of Enlightenment intellectuals (pp. 102-107) to her rebuttal of the myth of Jews as drivers of the transatlantic slave trade (pp. 242-244), Maizels provides a substantive opportunity to engage with the complexities of antisemitism as a dynamic historical phenomenon under shifting social conditions. Yet the historical sections of the book also reveal its weaknesses. Part of the problem has to do with Maizels's choice of sources. She frequently relies on collections from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as general works from the 1990s. Scholarship from the past two decades is often absent. This has significant consequences for some of the book's prominent themes. Her discussion of the blood libel, for example, does not mention the studies by Hannah Johnson or Magda Teter.[1] In several notable cases, neglect of the current state of research leads Maizels to repeat dubious and discredited claims. Two instances stand out: Her treatment of usury, and her assessment of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Throughout the book Maizels refers as historical fact, not as a persistent distorted image, to “Jewish involvement in professions connected to money, such as usury” (p. 98). This claim comes up repeatedly, in different geographic and chronological contexts, but is most pronounced in her chapters on medieval Europe. There she asserts “Jewish prominence in the profession of usury in the Middle Ages” (p. 70). Such contentions are a common feature of both antisemitic worldviews and of critiques of antisemitism, and reflect longstanding and widely held assumptions about Jews and money. But they have been systematically dismantled by a new generation of historians, whose research has fundamentally challenged previous views of usury and cast critical doubt on “the myth of the medieval Jewish moneylender.”[2] Untouched by this scholarship, Maizels’s book perpetuates an antiquated legend rather than airing a crucial historical debate.

Her section on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an infamous antisemitic forgery, follows a similar pattern (pp. 150-154). Drawing on Norman Cohn’s classic 1967 work *Warrant for Genocide*, Maizels says the *Protocols* were fabricated in the 1890s, “probably by a member of the Russian secret police,” and that the text “spread quickly across national borders” after its initial publication in Russia in 1903 (p. 151). These claims are inaccurate, and they detract from better understanding of the origins and impact of the *Protocols*. Scholars have known for many years that Cohn’s book incorporated several wholly unreliable sources, and key elements of his account have long since been disproven. As far as can be reconstructed on the basis of available textual and
historical evidence, the Protocols were compiled between 1902 and 1903, not in the 1890s, by anti-Semitic agitators and publicists; the Russian secret police were not involved. The text remained marginal for a decade and a half after it first appeared and only came to international attention after the dispersal of the Russian Far Right in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Scholars have examined these questions in painstaking detail, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, but their research finds no mention in Maizels’s book.[3]

This is not so much an individual failing on the part of Maizels but reflects a broader problem within the contemporary field of public education on antisemitism. Regarding usury as well as the Protocols, her claims conform to a well-worn set of beliefs. In both instances, multiple scholars from a wide range of backgrounds have subjected these beliefs to critical scrutiny—even as other scholars continue to promote them. Standard responses to antisemitism have adopted a series of unexamined narratives over the years and neglected to consider their historical veracity.

Tempting as the thought may be, these are by no means merely academic quarrels. The beliefs in question replicate an array of unfortunate clichés that hinder public comprehension of antisemitism. It matters whether we cast medieval Jews in a leading role as usurers. It matters whether we get basic information right in debunking a hoary conspiracist myth about the Elders of Zion. Falsehoods about supposed Jewish participation in financial affairs have fed antisemitic resentments on the left and the right for generations; their mirror image in philosemitic form echoes the same underlying historical distortions. Similarly, attempts to counter popular conspiracy tales can unwittingly mimic the object of critique by offering an alternative version of events equally unmoored from historical reality. But perhaps some of the responsibility lies with scholars who work on these topics and have so far failed to convey their research to audiences beyond the academic realm, indeed beyond the limited confines of specialization, despite their best efforts. Improved cooperation between different parts of this fragmented field could help change the situation.

That is too much to ask from one book, and the shortcomings noted here should not obscure the achievements of this work. Maizels has compelling insights to share with anybody looking for orientation on the unsettling subject of antisemitism today. Flaws are to be expected in an introductory text, and in this case they can contribute to an overdue conversation among the disparate constituencies committed to understanding and confronting antisemitism.

Notes


[3]. See Charles Ruud and Sergei Stepanov, Fontanka 16: The Tsars’ Secret Police (Montreal:

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-antisemitism


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58847

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.