

## Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

---

### Article:

#### The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: sources, memory, politics.

Michael Fleming<sup>1,\*</sup>, François Guesnet and Christine Schmidt

**How to cite:** Fleming, M., Guesnet, F. and Schmidt, C. 'The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: sources, memory, politics.' *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 53(1), pp. 112-114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.008>.

Published: 14 March 2022

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

### Copyright:

© 2021, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.008>

### Open Access:

*Jewish Historical Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

\*Correspondence: [Fleming\\_m11@hotmail.com](mailto:Fleming_m11@hotmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Polish University Abroad, UK

## A view from London: selected papers from the symposium in honour of Professor Antony Polonsky

### The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: sources, memory, politics<sup>\*</sup>

---

MICHAEL FLEMING, FRANÇOIS GUESNET,  
CHRISTINE SCHMIDT

On 16 March 2021, the Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies, the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London (UCL), and The Wiener Holocaust Library convened an online symposium in honour of Professor Antony Polonsky on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. Entitled “The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: Sources, Memory, Politics”, the symposium brought together established and junior scholars researching the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and provided a timely overview of the state of knowledge. The presentations from the symposium can now be viewed online at The Wiener Holocaust Library’s YouTube channel at this link: <http://bit.ly/Polonsky21>.

The symposium was divided into three sessions with each focusing on a particular theme and opened with a tribute to Professor Antony Polonsky by Connie Webber, the Managing Editor of the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. Webber outlined Professor Polonsky’s immense contribution to the broad field and his critical role in constituting the field of Polish–Jewish Studies. She pointed to Professor Polonsky’s decades of work on *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, his collegiality, generosity, and wisdom, and cited the views of leading scholars. Indicatively, Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the chief curator of the permanent exhibition at the Polin Museum in Warsaw, noted that “Antony Polonsky is unparalleled among historians today as someone who has tackled the long and complex history of Jews in Poland and Russia.”

\* A version of the report on the symposium first appeared in *Gazeta: A Quarterly Publication of the American Association for Polish-Jewish Studies and Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture* 28, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2021).

In the first session, “Sources”, Katarzyna Person (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw) provided a detailed and nuanced discussion of micronarratives of everyday life revealed through an analysis of the Ringelblum Archive. This was followed by Hannah Wilson’s (Nottingham Trent University) discussion of the work of archaeologists at the Sobibór death camp. In her paper, Wilson highlighted that the discovery of particular artefacts has helped identify individual victims, but has also raised questions about how such artefacts should be classified and about their future use, for example, in museums. She also contrasted the divergent interests of archaeological exploration and commemorative practices. Agnieszka Wierzcholska (German Historical Institute, Paris) discussed everyday life in Tarnów during the German occupation and the Holocaust. Using untapped source material such as court cases brought against Poles by Jews who faced increasing levels of persecution and lawlessness, before the final deportations of the summer of 1942, the speaker offered penetrating insights into social interactions between neighbours living under such extreme circumstances.

The second session, “Memory”, opened with Lukasz Krzyzanowski (Warsaw University). Building on his recent important book, *Ghost Citizens* (Harvard University Press, 2020), the speaker elaborated on how survivors of the Holocaust in Radom commemorated those who had perished, and through their memory practices marked their presence in the post-Holocaust city. Piotr Forecki (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) analysed Holocaust revisionism in contemporary Poland. Drawing on the statements of politicians, officials, articles in the press, and the publications of various historians, the speaker convincingly argued that Holocaust distortion is widespread. The developments of recent years suggest that the willingness to confront a difficult past, as demonstrated in the Jedwabne debates of the early 2000s, has declined significantly, to be replaced by a reassertion of national mythologies and heroic narratives. The session closed with Mary Fulbrook’s (UCL) discussion of conflicting accounts of guilt and complicity and the difficulties historians face in relating personal experiences and atmosphere in their work. Fulbrook called for a contrasting comparison between the different trajectories of antisemitism in Western and Central Europe on the one hand, and Eastern Central and Eastern Europe on the other. In her timely intervention, Fulbrook highlighted that it is crucial for “historians [to] develop conceptual and empirical work that will allow ideologically charged national narratives to be challenged and critically evaluated –

and that citizens ensure that the conditions for freedom of speech and of academic research are sustained.”

The final session explored the contemporary political implications of the Holocaust and its repercussions. Joanna Michlic (UCL) discussed the early postwar testimonies of child survivors and showed how these testimonies undercut the skewed narratives of the Holocaust promoted by the current Polish government’s historical policy. Dariusz Stola (Polish Academy of Sciences) considered how, following the fall of communism, Poland became a leader among post-communist states in confronting its difficult past. In public debates, scholars not only provided empirical material, but helped shape the constructive form of those debates. The erosion of respect for scholarly expertise and the jettisoning of conciliatory memory policies have undermined both scholars and the tenor of debates on the past. Antony Polonsky provided expansive expert commentary on the papers and joined other participants of the symposium in a rigorous discussion of the issues raised.

The symposium showcased some of the ways in which scholars are making use of new or hitherto under-researched sources and highlighted some of the challenges of researching and writing about the Holocaust in the context of an assertive and well-funded state-backed historical policy in Poland, as well as in the more general context of debates over memory. In the light of the importance of the issues discussed at the symposium, presenters were invited to submit their revised papers for inclusion in this volume of *Jewish Historical Studies*. Several of the presenters – Connie Webber, Mary Fulbrook, Dariusz Stola, and Joanna Michlic – were able to take up this invitation and their important contributions to the scholarly debate are published for the first time here.