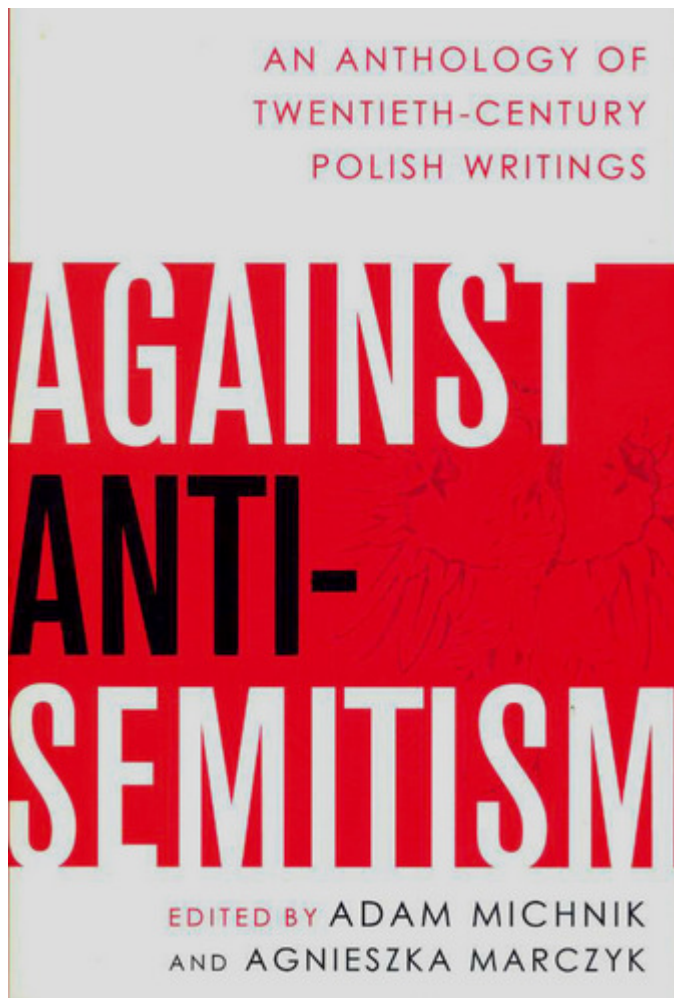


POWERFUL VOICES

Discrimination can evolve if left unchecked

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“Against Anti-Semitism: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings” edited by Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 424 pages, \$34.95 (hardcover).



“In the 1930s, in the wake of the Great Depression, anti-Jewish violence, boycotts and discrimination became a powerful force in Polish public life,” Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk explain in the introduction to “Against Anti-Semitism: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings,” their remarkable new collection of essays that should be required reading in every high school across America.

“The year 1934 proved to be an important turning point,” the co-editors continue. “During the year, the Polish Parliament worked on a new constitution, which was finally adopted in April 1935, shortly before (Polish leader Jozef) Pilsudski’s death; it increased presidential powers and renounced some of the protections granted to Jews and other minorities back in 1921. Also in 1934, the Polish government signed a non-aggression declaration with Nazi Germany, and the ultranationalist National Radical Camp (ONR) activists, who were especially active on university campuses, started advocating the principle of ‘*numerus clausus*.’ At first, they demanded all universities reduce the number of Jewish students to 8 percent; by 1937, however, they wanted a complete ban on

admitting Jewish students to postsecondary educational institutions.”

Before reading this exceptional volume that provides key insights into how discrimination can evolve if left unchecked, much of what I knew about the persecution of Jews came from the history classes I took throughout my academic career as well as from watching the numerous documentaries that have been made on the subject over the last few decades. “Against Anti-Semitism” was a real eye-opener for me. It features first-hand accounts of many Polish intellectuals who lived through some of the darkest chapters in the ever-unfolding story of our collective experience as human beings. It also serves as a cautionary tale at a time when the evil forces described so eloquently by these courageous authors seem to be making a comeback all across the globe.

“Against Anti-Semitism” consists of 22 chapters arranged in chronological order and covering the entire 20th century. The essays are organized into nine major sections: Prologue (the 1920s), The Mustard Gas of Racism (1936-1939), On Both Sides of the Wall (1939-1945), The Power of Ignorance (1945-1947), The Anti-Semitism of Kind and Gentle People (1956-1957), Expulsion from Poland (1967-1969), The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto (1970-1989), Toward Description and Diagnosis (1989-2000), and After 2000: Against the Conformity of Silence.

Michnik is a historian and editor-in-chief of “Gazeta Wyborcza,” Poland’s largest daily newspaper. He was a leader of the student anti-government protests in 1968, a Solidarity activist in the 1980s and a negotiator at the Round Table Talks in 1989. His previous books include “Letter from Prison” and “In Search of Lost Meaning: The New Eastern Europe.” Marczyk is the co-editor of “Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support” as well as a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, where her work focuses on democratic citizenship and historical analysis.

Although it is challenging to pick a favorite essay, a leading candidate is “The Anti-Semitism of Kind and Gentle People” by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Poland’s first prime minister after the fall of communism in 1989. As is the case with many of the writers showcased in this anthology, Mazowiecki did not just write about making a difference, he lived out that philosophy on a daily basis. He joined the anti-communist democratic opposition movement in 1968. And, although he passed away in 2013, his words still ring as true today as they did in 1960 when he argued that Polish Catholics had a responsibility to confront anti-Semitism that was growing within their ranks.

“Anti-Semitism has always served to cover up real social conflicts,” Mazowiecki explained. “Anti-Semitism is as convenient for turning attention away from real sources of difficulties and social conflicts as it is for directing society’s dissatisfaction toward a universal symbol of evil. The fact that anti-Semitism can be used to deceive society and turn its attention away from actual problems and social conflicts is rather obvious. The causes that make this possible seem less obvious. But anti-Semitism is an irrational attitude. It speaks to the imagination with primitive but suggestive arguments. And by appearing over a long period of time in various circumstances it created susceptibility to the kind of arguments it uses. Running from explaining problems that must be posed in a touchy way does not serve the cause of solving them, but rather preserves hidden traumas and misunderstandings.”

Perhaps Jan Grabowski, a professor of history at the University of Ottawa, says it best: “ ‘Against Anti-Semitism’ offers powerful testimony to the courage of those Polish writers and intellectuals who over the decades have dared to confront one of the most pernicious ideologies of our time, while also providing evidence of its endurance from one generation to the next. Given the recent rise of radical nationalism in Poland (and elsewhere in the world), this book will be a beacon for those who see the threat and want to confront it.”

The powerful voices Michnik and Marczyk have assembled for this exquisite primer movingly articulate what happens when fear and blame replace empathy and understanding as the cultural lens used to make sense of the world. Again, this one needs to be added to the curriculum of every high school throughout the United States.

I strongly recommend “Against Anti-Semitism” as an antidote to anyone whose solution to the myriad problems we are facing involves pointing to those other than themselves as the genesis of the societal challenges that have been with us since the beginning.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.