

**Alina Molisak, Przemysław Czapliński (red.),
Tożsamość po pogromie. Świadectwa i interpretacje Marca '68,
Instytut Badań Literackich, Warszawa 2019, pp. 346.**

It is an uncanny feeling: reading a book about your past experience that answers your present questions. Questions not only present but urgent. I am writing here about a collection of texts on the events of 1968 in Poland. An unusual volume that shows us the past events without freezing them in a rigid frame and brings forth their consequences. It also ponders how its participants, by later grappling with these events, create their literary and artistic legacy. The volume offers partial views and a kind of synthesis. Quite an achievement.

The first part of the volume is in fact an effort at providing a synthesis. It contains two essays diagnosing the nature of the 1968 events and one looking at the evolution of the literary works reflecting on them. Instead of the usual detailing of intra-party skirmishes, the scholars approach the 1968 events through their momentous result: the expulsion of the remnants of the great Jewish diaspora of Poland. It is this perspective that allows the authors to address a topic that is difficult to discuss: antisemitism. Essential as it is to our understanding of that moment in Polish history, antisemitism is one of these words that is not pronounced in (Polish) polite society. There is a barrier to its use. That difficulty pertains to the whole semantic field to which antisemitism belongs. One of these words is "pogrom," and Piotr Forecki opens the volume with his inquiry as to the adequacy of this term to the atmosphere and consequences of 1968 events. He analyzes the avoidance of that term in Polish contemporary writings about, for example, the Kielce pogrom: it becomes almost impossible to apply it to even the most explicit anti-Jewish violence. The euphemizing, softening of the description of anti-Jewish events produces a non-violent version of Polish attitudes towards the Jewish minority. The often-used lens in Polish historiography is to describe anti-Jewish acts or declarations as part of Polish-Jewish relations, in that way turning the minority into an equal partner and changing the narrative from persecution to retribution. This practice causes a peculiar intellectual void: to use the formula of Alina Cała, we have in Poland antisemitism without Jews and without anti-Semites.

Forecki's chapter does show that the term "pogrom" adequately describes the events; other authors in the volume also apply this word to March '68. The very title of the volume – *Identity after a pogrom* – also indicates the agreement of its editors as to the usefulness of such a definition in this case. Though we associate "pogrom" with physical violence that in 1968 was not present, all other

characteristics of a pogrom were in place: a singling out and labeling of people, group and family responsibility, expulsions from work and schools, a menacing atmosphere, a push to abandon home and country. The Jewish minority in 1960s was very tiny and not visible enough to offer a target for violent mob activity. But tell it to all those individuals who were publicly excoriated for "Zionism," demoted in the army, prevented from teaching students, from working in their profession. To all those who remembered the Holocaust which happened not even a quarter of century before. To all of those who were born in the shadow of it. For them it was perfectly logical to fear a pogrom or even extinction.

Two other analyzes contained in the first part of the volume refer to this definition. With his usual erudition and talent for synthesis, Przemysław Czapliński proposes an overview of the literature treating the 1968 expulsion of Jews. After discussing several works and authors, he proposes two opposite models of thinking about the expulsions – a tragic one, which is concentrated around the Holocaust, i.e., those who are dead, and a melodramatic one, i.e., the works that deal with the post-1968 ways of negotiating life. He shows a definite progression from the first to the second, due perhaps to the generational change among the authors, many of them exiled and therefore forced to manage flexible identities. The third essay of the first part of the book, by Sławomir Buryła, reviews ten controversial issues in the interpretation of the events of 1968 – we are still grappling with what really happened. He debates the applicability (according to him only metaphorical) of the term "pogrom" to the events. He asks if the events were provoked on purpose by a fraction of the communist apparatus, what was the role of intellectuals in them, what was the attitude of the society towards the expulsion of Jews, how to assess the emigration of the communists or ex-communists, etc. He is very thorough in the review of various opinions about each of the points. Yet, the essay is inconclusive, attesting to the unstable interpretation of historical events. The debate continues.

As one of the participants who thinks and writes about the 1968 events, I have a strong opinion or two about each of these points. But my opinions also keep evolving. It is as if history itself were fluid, reformatted by new conditions. The earliest diagnosis by Zygmunt Bauman of the nature of these events (published in December of 1968 in "Kultura"), was that of an internal crisis of the governing party countered by rebellious youth. Even the 40th anniversary of events held in Warsaw in 2008 focused on internal Polish (and international-generational) aspects. But the 50th anniversary in 2018 was, so to say, Jewish. The placement of the expulsion at the center of the events led to looking at the *longue durée* of Polish antisemitism. The book under review is one of the proofs of that development.

Many essays in the book reach out to literature that wrestles with the issue of identity. And identity is in the title of the book, as I already mentioned. But what question stands behind this term, what kind of identity is being probed? The title of the second part of the book gives an answer: *Tożsamość jako przemoc (Identity as Violence)*. All essays in this part, all essays in the entire book deal with various forms of symbolic violence and reactions to them. The chapter by Andrzej Zieniewicz *Marzec '68 jako wydarzenie graniczne (March '68 as Limit Experience)* sees the works of Anna Frajlich and Michał Moszkowicz as

the means of (or description of) the recovery of a distant, buried horrible past that seemed to end with the Second World War, yet finds its continuity in March events. Hanna Gosk titled her chapter *Brzydkie słowo na "a"* (A Bad A-word). She talks there about a perverse form of forcing those who wanted to emigrate to abjectly ask the government for permission to do so because they were Jewish. Laura Quercioli Mincer looks at a 2018 exhibit about March events as an effort to integrate this experience into the visual vocabulary. The writings of Józef Hen, Andrzej Szczypiorski and several younger writers are addressed in other chapters. Alina Molisak's essay deals with the autobiographical words of the émigrés themselves. All of the authors address the pressures that shape or disfigure the identities of those who were touched by the poisoned wand of 1968.

The various chapters of this rich and in places riveting book indirectly ask a question: was it an accident that made the few remaining Jews victims of persecution, or was it the logical end to a long-lasting process in which the ever-stronger Polish nation expelled all of its minorities to be, finally, by itself and for itself. Perhaps this stark either/or is too extreme of a conclusion. But today's language of public life – by the government and its various agendas – makes one wonder. Even if pushed abroad, Jews remain a problem. As the editors of the volume say, March '68 is not over. Not only because people still feel its consequences, but also because the 1968 patterns of authorities' behavior are with us again. March '68 had a long prehistory. Hopefully it does not have a future.

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