

INTRODUCTION

The following essays were presented at “Revival of Jewish Studies in Eastern Europe,” a symposium held at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Arizona, on November 8–9, 2012. The symposium was born of a new collaboration between the Center for Jewish Studies at ASU and the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The Institute’s reputation as one of the fastest growing academic centers of Jewish studies in Eastern Europe led all involved to believe that a debate on contemporary Jewish studies in Europe would be the most appropriate manner to launch this collaboration.

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Stephen Batalden, and I organized the symposium with financial support from the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, the Melikian Center of Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies, and the Center for Jewish Studies at ASU. The symposium featured prominent scholars of East European Jewish Studies in American academia (Brian Horowitz, Natalia Aleksiu, and Natan Meir) as well as distinguished guests from the Jagiellonian University (Edward Dąbrowa and Edyta Gawron). We were also fortunate to have our ASU colleagues present their own findings (Andrew Reed) and comments (Stephen Batalden, Volker Benkert, Eugene Clay, Mark von Hagen, and Anna Holian).

The opening presentations by Brian Horowitz and Natalia Aleksiu sketched the historical background for our discussion. Horowitz analyzed the approach of renowned Jewish historian Simon Dubnow toward Jewish nationalism before the war while Aleksiu focused on the flourishing Jewish historical scholarship in interwar Poland. Their excellent essays led us to a lively discussion about contemporary Jewish studies in Eastern Europe. Natan Meir and Andrew Reed presented first-rate accounts of Jewish studies in contemporary Ukraine and Russia while Edyta Gawron and Edward Dąbrowa focused on the revival of Jewish studies in Poland, in general, and Kraków, in particular. Comments and discussion followed each essay.

The themes that arose during the symposium ranged from the role of individual activists to the changing political, economic, and cultural environments in each country. Other topics included ethnic identities of scholars pursuing Jewish studies and questions about antisemitism and relations between local Jewish communities and non-Jewish majorities in contemporary Eastern Europe. The impact of the Second World War and the Holocaust was also on the agenda. The panelists concluded that historical, social, and political variations across Eastern Europe make it difficult to discern one pattern in the development of Jewish studies. The institutions fostering Jewish studies face a variety of difficulties (a lack of funds and adverse political pressure) as well as opportunities depending on specific local conditions. Thus cautious optimism is in order: although academic interest in Jewish studies is on the rise in all the countries discussed, the 2010s are still times of transition with outcomes hard to predict.

The following is a selection of the essays with the responses presented at the symposium. Comments by Stephen Batalden follow Brian Horowitz’s paper on Dubnow.

Eugene Clay's commentary complements Andrew Reed's paper on St. Petersburg and Russia, while Edyta Gawron's essay on Poland is followed by Anna Holian's response. Volker Benkert's article on Jewish studies in contemporary Germany offers a closing comparative angle to our East European story.

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