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Book Review: *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric and the Traditions of Hatred*

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Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric and the Traditions of Hatred

Beth A. Griech-Polelle

New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017

296 Pages; Price: \$26.95 Paperback

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Although scholars began to publish significant works in the 1960s regarding the Holocaust, Holocaust studies in the classroom for pupils and students did not begin until the 1980s. In the decades that followed, high school teachers looked for source material often in the form of broadsheets and sample images. Professors utilized edited books to offer their students an overview of the Holocaust. Beginning in 2015, Bloomsbury published the first in a series of books “designed to help students further their understanding of key topics within the field of Holocaust studies.” *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric and the Traditions of Hatred* is the second book in this continuing series, offering an excellent introduction on this topic for college and university students. In this volume, Griech-Polelle does not attempt to replace classic books on the topic of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, such as Jacob Katz’s *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933*.¹ She focuses on the “power of language,” how it influences common people to perpetrate violence. Following the Holocaust and other genocides, scholars have asked how is it that ordinary people that have never killed before can pick up weapons and torture, kill, and mutilate others. Griech-Polelle argues that the “threatening” image of the Jew built up over centuries along with destructive myths and stereotypes. Already built into the European culture, Hitler and the Nazis merely had to draw on people’s perceptions, fears, and resentment of the Jews to obtain support for murderous actions.

Griech-Polelle organizes the book in a thematic and chronological fashion. Employing (French political scientist) Jacques’s Sémelin’s *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*,² she introduces three themes from his work—identity, purity, and security—to set up her arguments. From the fourth century forward, “Europe” began to Christianize with the expansion of the Romans. As time passed, Christian Europe identified the Jew as the “other,” an enemy that could destroy the fabric of society. It became “us versus them.” To secure a pure German identity, the Jews had to die.

In Chapter 2, Griech-Polelle explains the developing myths regarding the Jews—from the ancient period through the modern era. Prior to the emergence of Christianity, some polytheistic cultures viewed the Hebrews as “other” because of their monotheism. In the pagan environment of the Roman Empire, persecution of Jews “revolved around political problems.” With the advent of Christianity and Christian written works, one can see how language began to divide Jews and Christians (seen by the Romans as simply a sect of Judaism). Griech-Polelle discusses the early church fathers and notes that written works portrayed Christians as the “New Israel,” part of the supersession myth. She points out that not all agreed on what to do with the Jews. Should we or should we not try to convert them to Christianity? What is God’s plan for them? Naturally, the harshest claim and taunt at the time was “Christ-killer.” The Jews were beginning a long journey of living as “scapegoats.” Through the Crusades, the Black Death, and Jewish expulsion from Western Europe, Jewish hatred continued. The images never left the minds of the Christians—Jewish

¹ Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

² Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

poisoners and defilers, wearing special badges and depicted as pigs (Judensau). Significantly, since most writers do not explain Martin Luther's 1523 work, "That Jesus Christ was born a Jew," Griech-Polelle explains that early on Luther had tried to convert the Jews and it was only later, in 1543, that Luther wrote "Concerning the Jews and their Lies." The French Revolution, with its ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, offered some Jews new opportunities. In Germany, however, many viewed these concepts as "unGerman."

The origins of the term "anti-Semitism" opens Chapter 3. Through wars, the German states unified giving way to "Germany" in 1871. Within a few years, German citizens were experiencing economic struggles and looking to blame someone. Many pointed to the political left and for them, this included Jews. Identifying Germans as enlightened thinkers, a German publicist, Wilhelm Marr, decided that Germans needed a "respectable" word for those who articulated their hatred for the Jews. He began to use "anti-Semitism." One sees in the nineteenth century that Jewish hatred begins to move from a political hatred to a racial hatred. Many now would not accept concerted Jews. When the time comes, Hitler has his anti-Jewish platform already built for him. The chapter continues through the fin-de-siècle and the Great War. Well known for his statement, "The Jews are our misfortune," Griech-Polelle concludes this chapter with an excerpt from the nineteenth-century German historian, Heinrich von Treitschke.

In chapter 4, Griech-Polelle takes the reader through the development of the Nazi party into Hitler's early leadership of Germany. She asserts that the weakness of the Weimar Republic led by moderates helped to offer fertile soil in which the Nazi party developed. Griech-Polelle continues the story in Chapter 5 noting that Jewish life in Germany was deteriorating year by year in Nazi Germany, but that turning points came for German Jews with forced expulsion, Kristallnacht, and war. Throughout the narrative, she includes personal stories of those living and suffering at the time.

Once the war begins in 1939, the Nazis move systematically toward the final solution. They had already disenfranchised and dehumanized the German Jews; they had expropriated the businesses and practices of German and Austrian Jews; in 1939, it was time to begin to concentrate them into camps and ghettos. In chapters, 6 and 7, Griech-Polelle shows how the war acted as cover for the crimes of the Nazis as they set out to exterminate the Jews. She points out that the Nazis used the language developed over the centuries now to portray the Jews as a "true" danger and to justify their brutal actions.

In her final content chapter, Griech-Polelle shows the culmination of centuries of hate-filled language and images by taking the reader to the "Final Solution" of the "Jewish Problem." She writes about the various death camps, through the horrific work of the Sonderkommando and finally the death marches as the war nears and ends. She concludes, "Hitler capitalized on preexisting stereotypes, myths, and legends about the Jews in order to isolate and then persecute, and ultimately murder them."

As part of a series of books regarding Holocaust Studies, this book offers college and university students, as well as any serious student of the Holocaust, a narrative of the Jews in the modern age as "others" while maintaining the thread of anti-Semitism formed by centuries of hateful language and images. At the end of each chapter, Griech-Polelle offers "For your Consideration," a primary document, which supports the content of the chapter. In addition, she presents a well-developed list for further reading, a great help for students working on research or historiography. The book is a readable size for students with focused chapters, which a professor could use individually for the distinct topics. Although the book does offer images, some are not large enough or clear enough for students to analyze. Nevertheless, one can find images on the internet to support the text of the book. An excellent glossary of terms that also includes names and events will also be of great help to students as they read. Beth Griech-Polelle's *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric and the Traditions of Hatred* is a perfect addition to the "Perspectives on the Holocaust" series of books.