

# From A to Z

## Important concepts in the study of antisemitism

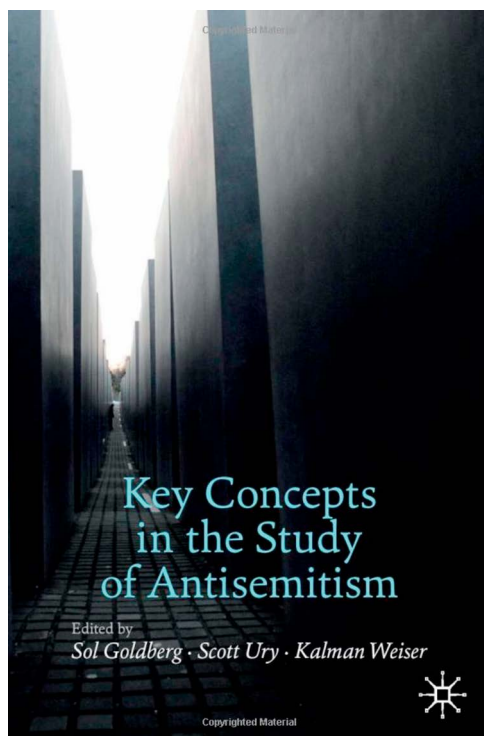
### BOOK REVIEW

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**Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism**, eds. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury and Kalman Weiser, Palgrave Critical Studies of Antisemitism and Racism (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), xviii + 336 pages, doi: <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51658-1>>.

Edited by the scholar of religion Sol Goldberg, the historian Scott Ury, and the historian Kalman Weiser, *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* is an alphabetically ordered overview of twenty-one key concepts in the broad topic of antisemitism. The point of the anthology is not to give exhaustive studies of every term but to introduce readers and present comprehensive explanations. In this regard, the volume achieves its goal in a fruitful and interesting way.

What can be somewhat confusing is the lack of coherence in the application and definition of the term the whole anthology is built around: antisemitism. Even the spelling (anti-Semitism or antisemitism) is not coherent. However, in the introduction, Weiser states that this is for a reason: the editors want to show the versatile and multifaceted research and the difficulty in defining a concept such as antisemitism and not try to show a form of uniformity that does not exist within the study of antisemitism (pp. 9–11). Furthermore, Weiser explains how this volume came to be: a ‘common frustration’



stemming from the lack of an overview of key concepts. The anthology sets out to correct this – an endeavour which is successful in many ways.

The volume features chapters by many different scholars, and there is a wide array of concepts explored: the historian Jonathan Elukin discusses ‘anti-Judaism’ (pp. 13–24); the historian Jonathan Judaken contributes with a historiographic account of the study of ‘anti-Semitism (historiography)’ (pp. 25–38),

which is very helpful, especially for students, since it explores different definitions of anti-semitism and how the concept and phenomenon has been explained; the historian James Loeffler explains 'anti-Zionism' (pp. 39–52); the historian Hillel J. Kieval delves into the myth of 'Blood Libel' – accusations of Jewish ritual murder (pp. 53–64); the historian Magda Teter takes on the subject of 'the Catholic Church' (pp. 65–78); the social scientist Jovan Byford explains 'conspiracy theories' (pp. 79–92), which is the shape many forms of contemporary antisemitism takes; the philosopher Frederick Beiser elaborates on the concept of 'emancipation' (pp. 93–104); the literary scholar Sara R. Horowitz contributes an exposé on 'gender' (pp. 105–20); the historian Daniel B. Schwartz explains the concept of 'ghetto' (pp. 121–32); the historian Richard S. Levy contributes an essay on 'the Holocaust' (pp. 133–46) to explain how the understanding of antisemitism was impacted and altered; Sol Goldberg takes on 'Jewish self-hatred' (pp. 147–60); the historian Brian Porter-Szücs elaborates on 'nationalism' (pp. 161–72); the historian Doris L. Bergen contributes a run-down on 'Nazism' (pp. 173–86); the anthropologist Ivan Kalmar takes on the subject of 'Orientalism' (pp. 187–200); the scholar of French literature and culture Maurice Samuels explains 'philosemitism' (pp. 201–14); the political scientist Jeffrey S. Kopstein contributes a text on 'pogroms' (pp. 215–28); the literary scholar Bryan Cheyette elaborates on 'postcolonialism' (pp. 229–44); the philosopher Robert Bernasconi takes on the contested link between antisemitism and 'racism' (pp. 245–56); the scholar of law and history Lena Salaymeh and the scholar of law Shai Levi contribute a co-authored chapter on 'secularism' (pp. 257–72); the biblical scholar Martin Lockshin explains '*Sinat Yisrael* (hatred of Jews)' (pp. 273–85); and, in the final chapter of the anthology, Scott

Ury elaborates on 'Zionism' (pp. 287–99). Since there is such a rich plethora of brilliant exposés on many interesting concepts – with each chapter being very engaging in itself – I have chosen to further discuss only five: emancipation, gender, ghetto, pogroms and one concept that I argue could have been included: allo-Semitism. Of course, there are several other concepts that could have been included in an overview of this kind, but the lines have to be drawn somewhere and the twenty-one concepts related to antisemitism that are discussed are all very relevant and well thought out.

Horowitz, in her chapter on gender, reminds us that antisemitism is often linked to gendered ideas. Discourses on Jews and women often represent ideas on citizenship, privileges and power. The 'Jew' has often been described as feminine, and as such, contrasted with the white, masculine, Christian citizen. Sexual deviance and blame of 'patriarchal' Judaism for the persistence of sexism are tropes explored in this chapter, which gives a thorough overhaul of the role of gender in antisemitism from the French Revolution of 1789 to the present day.

As Beiser states in his chapter on emancipation, the so-called Jewish question was born out of the discussions about Jewish rights; thus, antisemitism and emancipation are deeply linked. The strive for emancipation rested upon the French declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Beiser reminds us not to be judgmental in our study of the opponents of emancipation. In our time, civic and political rights are self-evident. For many in the nineteenth century, to oppose Jewish emancipation was self-evident owing to a conceptualisation of society that differs from most modern ideas about citizenship and society at large. This is an important reminder: one must, as a scholar (be it of the past or the present), be

rigorous in contextualising the ideas and concepts used in the material. This is especially important in the study of history, where lack of contextualisation can often lead to misinformed results based on misunderstandings of source material.

Schwartz makes use of contextualisation in his explanation of the concept of ghetto, comparing different phenomena that have been given the same name. He explains how the negative image of ghettos was born in the era of emancipation (approximately from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries, depending on how one defines the time period) and was used as a contrast to the liberal promise of equal rights. The first ghetto, depending on one's definition, was founded in Breslau in 1267, and the last, the one in Rome, was abolished in 1870. Schwartz is critical of the historian Salo W. Baron's linkage between voluntary Jewish quarters and forced ghettos (Baron claimed that the former is the ancestor of the latter). One interesting example is Schwartz's comparison of the Nazi ghettos to the ghettos of the early modern period. He concludes that there are only 'superficial similarities' between them: 'The sharp contrast ... raises the question of whether they are truly variations on an idea or are similar only in name' (p. 130). This is a good example of how important contextualisation really is and how this volume can challenge pre-conceived notions of historical phenomena.

At first glance, Kopstein's essay on pogroms can be perceived as somewhat provocative as he argues that antisemitism is not the root cause of pogroms. As Kopstein states, antisemitism as the sole explanation of pogroms leads to a circle argument: pogroms are used as proof of antisemitism and antisemitism is used to explain pogroms. Kopstein tries to show the 'rationality' behind irrational violence (pp. 217–19). His argumentation is well thought out and the logic

of the main argument – antisemitism is not the root cause of pogroms – is valid because, as Kopstein states, if antisemitism had been the only factor, we would have seen far more pogroms throughout history than we do (p. 226). The comparison of three, very separate cases – Alexandria 38 CE, Valencia 1391 and Lviv 1941 – is maybe not the best for arguing that politics are the main cause. A term such as 'political' is not the same over the course of two millennia – as Kopstein seems to be aware. On the one hand, the conclusion, that the main reasons behind pogroms seem to be conflicts over shared spaces and goals, is presented in a convincing manner. On the other, it could be argued that the statement that pogroms occur when a non-Jewish majority perceives that their dominant position is threatened (p. 226) is in itself a sign of existing antisemitism amongst the same 'threatened' majority. However, I agree with Kopstein's statement that we should be careful not to see antisemitism as the only factor behind pogroms (p. 226).

Allosemitism, although mentioned in Samuels's chapter on philosemitism (p. 205), is overall something that the anthology is lacking. Furthermore, Samuels – who makes an intriguing review of the historiography and potential of philosemitism along with suggestions for further research – is critical to the concept and its use:

The problem with such an approach [that is, the use of the concept of allosemitism], in my view, is that it fails to explain the very real differences between positive and negative discourses on Jews. It does not allow us to account for the specific reasons that philosemitism develops – often quite different from those that lead to antisemitism – or to comprehend the vastly different effects that philosemitism and antisemitism generate. (p. 205)

Even though I acknowledge the important and valid criticism presented by Samuels, I would argue that the concept of allosemitism has much potential to explain the othering of the 'conceptual Jew'. Allosemitism helps us understand that the designation of the Jew as different – as *the* other – is more or less inherent to many worldviews, such as Christianity and modernity, and grants us a fruitful concept for exploring this othering. While philosemitism and antisemitism are positively and negatively charged, respectively, allosemitism is more neutral in its approach to the othering of the 'Jew' – herein lies some of the concept's potential (but also, as Samuels argues, some of its downfall). To designate something as either philosemitic or antisemitic can, in some cases, forego the analysis of the sources. However, this does not hinder us from using allosemitism as an umbrella for both antisemitism and philosemitism – breaking down the ideas put forth in the sources through the analysis, rather than before.

The main focus of the anthology is the modern period, with a handful of excerpts which draw longer lines, such as Kieval's chapter on Blood Libel and Lockshin's chapter on *Sinat Yisrael*. This makes the volume most appealing to scholars focusing on the last couple of centuries – including the present. On the other hand, these explorations and explanations of concepts could be used as points of departure for studies of antisemitisms in other time periods as well.

The volume is not a work solely addressed to historians, but is directed towards scholars of all disciplines studying antisemitism. This is a strength that makes the anthology an important contribution which promotes cross-disciplinary scholarship. For scholars of both the past and of the present, this work presents insightful historical overviews as well as well-grounded explanations of

concepts that yield a solid foundation for further research.

It is not easy to do justice to such an ambitious and engaging anthology in a short review, but the overall picture is that *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* offers in-depth and innovative reviews of important concepts, without becoming too focused on the details. In my opinion, this anthology is a welcome addition to works such as *Antisemitismus. Vorurteile und Mythen* (München: Piper, 1995), edited by Julius H. Schoeps and Joachim Schlör. Certainly, *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* will be used by researchers and students alike to orientate the many concepts that circulate in the study of antisemitism(s). ■

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