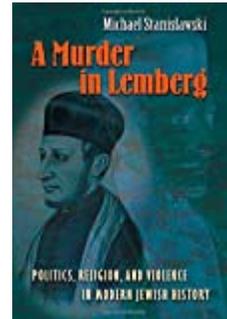




Michael Stanislawski. *A Murder in Lemberg: Politics, Religion, and Violence in Modern Jewish History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 152 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12843-6.



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A Murder in Lemberg: A Micro-Study or an Historical Essay?

Hatred, violence, and crime are usually unavoidable elements of social life. Sometimes, they better reflect relations between people than political or cultural divisions. This thesis can be illustrated by the book under review. Its author, Michael Stanislawski, a Professor of Jewish History at Columbia University and an expert on Russian Jews, Zionism, and Jewish Enlightenment, has published several important books, including the classic *Tsar Nicholas and the Jews* (1983). Shocked by the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin in 1995, Stanislawski decided to research a historical event that had intrigued him for years: the murder of Reform Rabbi Abraham Kohn in 1848 in Lemberg, then the capital of Austrian-controlled Galicia, now L'viv in Western Ukraine. Through his old friends in the United States and Ukraine, Stanislawski received, almost miraculously, a copy of the entire police and court records regarding Kohn's assassination that were preserved in the Central State Historical Archive in L'viv. After meticulous analysis of the records and other sources, Stanislawski presented the outcome of his research in the reviewed book. It describes how an Orthodox Jew, Abraham Ber Pilpel, entered Kohn's kitchen and poured arsenic into the soup

that was later served to the rabbi's family. The book also reconstructs events preceding the murder: political conflicts within the Lemberg Jewish community and a clash between its Orthodox majority and a small but influential group of progressive Jews, who, in the revolutionary era of the Springtime of Nations, dominated the community council and arranged the appointment of Kohn as the city District Rabbi. Finally, *A Murder in Lemberg* depicts the trials that followed the murder, their political and religious fallout, and the political victory of Kohn's Orthodox enemies in the Lemberg community.

The two parts of the book ("The Murder and Its Background" and "The Investigation, Sentence, and Appeal") are divided into eight chapters. The first two chapters, "Galicia and Its Jews, 1772-1848" and "Lemberg and Its Jews, 1772-1848," depict the scene and the socio-historical context of the crime. Chapter 3, "A Reform Rabbi in Eastern Europe," offers a short history of Reform Judaism and explains how a poor Jew from Bohemia became a brilliant rabbi and a supporter of the Jewish religious Reform Movement in Tyrol. Chapter 4, "Rabbi Abraham Kohn in Lemberg, 1843-1848," shows a cultural clash be-

tween an energetic Westernized, German-speaking spiritual leader and an ultra-Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking majority of an East European community. The clash led to the poisoning of the rabbi during the violent events of the Springtime of Nations (chapter 5, "Revolution and Murder"). The first two chapters of the second part of the book are titled "Abraham Ber Pilpel, Murderer?," and "The Indicted Co-Conspirators." The third chapter centers on the rabbi's wife, who tried to reverse the verdicts of the Criminal Court of Lemberg and the Galician Appellate Court, which set free the murderer and the Orthodox activists, who had created a murderous atmosphere ("Magdalena Kohn v. the Austrian Empire"). The book closes with a short conclusion, an afterword devoted to the author's rather sad recent visit to L'viv, acknowledgments, endnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

Stanislawski's main conclusion is that Kohn's "assassination represents a radical new departure in Jewish history" (p. 114). Leaving aside murders of "informers"—Jews who denounced their local communal and rabbinical leadership to the government" (p. 114), Stanislawski claims that there was no single assassination, triggered by political or religious motives, among the Jews since antiquity. The Lemberg case became a prelude to a new phenomenon—assassinations of Jews by Jews for political and religious reasons. The author shows that the religious motives of Kohn's enemies—opposition to the Reform Movement and liberalization—were paralleled by political factors: Kohn was against certain community taxes and in this way threatened the financial domination of the *kahal* by a group of rich tax collectors. Stanislawski shows how the conflicts within the Lemberg community were linked to Galician and all-Austrian political events. "Indeed, far more broadly," writes the author, "the Kohn assassination reveals a fundamental aspect of modern Jewish history that has heretofore remained all but unstudied: the alliance in many times and places between Orthodox (and other forms of traditionalist Jewry) and conservative and even reactionary forces and states" (p. 119). Finally, Stanislawski argues, the analysis of the

Lemberg events demonstrates that East European Jewish communities of the early nineteenth century were far more diverse in terms of various religious and political formations than we usually believe.

A Murder in Lemberg is a very well-written, original, and interesting book. The author's general historical remarks, concerning the Jewish Enlightenment, Orthodoxy, and the Reform Movement, are especially attractive and stimulating. Yet, problems arise when Stanislawski writes about the Jewish and non-Jewish realities of Lemberg and Galicia. True, most factual errors are not crucial from the point of view of the main narrative, but they are particularly numerous in the first two chapters. Readers familiar with a history of Poland may be discouraged after they discover that the first two sentences of the first chapter (after the motto) are untrue and that every page, within those two first chapters, contains at least one mistake. The book is based on solid archival documents from L'viv and Jerusalem and has a scholarly apparatus that shows Stanislawski's primary and secondary sources. Surprisingly, the endnotes of the first chapter ("Galicia and Its Jews, 1772-1848") include only two works: Norman Davies's *God's Play Ground: A History of Poland* (1982) and William O. McCagg's *A History of Habsburg Jews, 1670-1918* (1987). Historical background is very important and it could be reconstructed much better if the author used other, more recent books on the Habsburg Jews. Jewish Galicia and Jewish Lemberg (or Lwów) have a large Polish historical bibliography. Leaving aside one book by Majer Balaban (published in 1937) and one contemporary article, Stanislawski ignores the contribution of the Polish historiography. The same applies to Ukrainian works.

A Murder in Lemberg, an engaging and original work, is a recommendable reading for everybody interested in Polish and East European Jewish history. Yet, a question remains: is this a meticulous micro-study, as the painstaking analysis of the court and police documents suggests, or is it a light historical essay, as the Galician historical part indicates?

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