

Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß, eds., *Antisemitism in the North: History and State of Research* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 302.

by *Håkon Harket*

### **From Anti-Semitism without Jews to Anti-Semitism without Anti-Semites**

The book-cover of *Antisemitism in the North* harbors a story. It shows the photo of a sprinter in a Makkabi jersey crossing the finish line first at the Helsinki Olympic Stadium on June 21, 1938. Abraham Tokazier is ahead of the rest, but the Jewish athlete is ranked fourth and deprived of any medal. Complaints from the Makkabi sports Club and the publication next day in *Helsingin Sanomat* of the photo-finish do nothing to correct the falsification of the result, and for years to come this case remained both a scandal and an exception in the public eye: not only the most famous, but also the sole publicly known example of anti-Semitism in Finland—a country that due to unfortunate circumstances was forced to navigate between Schylla and Charybdis, and spent the years 1941-1944 as comrades-in-arms with Nazi-Germany, before the legendary Commander in chief and Head of State Carl Gustav Mannerheim reached an agreement with the Soviets and turned against Germany in the endgame of the war.

The history of Finland during the war differs dramatically from that of the other Nordic countries: Sweden stayed neutral, Denmark accepted a so-called peaceful occupation, the Norwegian king famously turned down any offer of submission. There was however no correspondence between the will to resist the occupation and the protection offered to the Jewish population. The cold facts suggest the opposite: The prime victims of the Nazi aggression were better served by the compliant protection offered by the pragmatic Danes than the heroic resistance of the principled Norwegians, an outcome maybe necessitated by the coup d'état by Quisling in April 1940. To put it simply: Many Norwegian Jews were deported in November 1942, most Danish Jews were saved in October 1943. Again, Finland is a different story: Despite the brotherhood in arms, or perhaps because of it, none

of the Jewish citizens of Finland were handed over to Germany as requested by Himmler.

On the other hand, the protection of the Jews of Finland did not extend to a group of Austrian refugees and Soviet prisoners of war, and Sweden, the haven for Jewish refugees from Norway, Denmark and Finland, recently had to reconcile with its profitable dealings with Nazi-Germany. Likewise, Danish fishermen, hailed for their heroic rescue of the Jewish population, profited nicely from the shipping of countrymen across the Sound, and in Norway it is now hotly disputed whether anti-Jewish sentiments among the leaders of the Resistance movement can help explain why such a large proportion of the Jewish population were abandoned to be arrested, deported and murdered.

It has then become increasingly complicated to stick to the established national narratives regarding the Jews of the North. The reasons are highlighted in this fine compendium of texts presenting the state of research in the whole Nordic region, including Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

*Antisemitism in the North: History and state of research* is the first volume in a series on religious minorities in the North, published by De Gruyter, edited by Jonathan Adams (Gothenburg) and Cordelia Heß (Greifswald) and funded by the Archives of Antisemitism at the University of Gothenburg and the University of Greifswald. This volume has also benefited from editorial contributions by Christhard Hoffmann (Bergen). It is structured in an introduction and three parts: “Nordic Otherness,” “Antisemitism without Jews,” “The State of Research on Antisemitism” and “Perceptions, Encounters and the Presence of Antisemitism.” It is based on a three-day workshop at the University of Greifswald in February 2018, but several of the contributions have been commissioned specially for the volume. They are all worth reading, but apart from the central part on the state of research, all very solid presentations, it is a rather incoherent collection of texts, some brilliant scholarly exposés, some more impressionistic, but nevertheless valuable explorations into unmapped territories. It serves to underscore the motivation behind the project: to communicate loud and clear that research into anti-Semitism in the North—from an “Antisemitism without Jews”

(apart from the hermeneutical ones) to the present situation with an “Antisemitism without Antisemites”—is a work in progress.

Holocaust remembrance didn’t disappear with the last survivor, as was feared by many; in the twenty-first century it has become the main narrative of the Second World War. Even the social democratic nations of the North with small Jewish populations have had to adapt and confront their past, not as “willing executioners” but as complicit bystanders or facilitators. Nation by nation, this has mostly been handled as a question of managing embarrassment. Book by book, accusation by accusation, the past keeps coming back. But so does anti-Semitism.

All reflections on this subject unfold in the shadow of a looming word. No one can deny the importance of distinguishing between discrimination and destruction; no one can deny the necessity of investigating the connection. One of the commendable aspirations of Antisemitism in the North is the attempt by co-editor Cordelia Heß to deal with this head-on in the introduction. Her point is the need to educate our understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon, both conceptually and historically, when we seek to identify contemporary expressions of the malaise.

A concept from the 1870s has become the common denominator for this age-old bug, but not even in Nazi-Germany in the years of the Holocaust is it possible to draw a razor-sharp line between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern shape and form of justification. The Semites stayed Jews. The esoteric racial rhetoric has long been out of fashion, Jew-hatred is not. That’s why we need to study the language and its many manifestations. We need to engage in a long and deep conversation with our history beyond the Hitler era. As we are reminded these days by the pandemic: it is not enough to deal with the original virus, we must be able to protect ourselves against new mutations.

The main aim of this book has been to gather information on the state of research in the Nordic Countries. It demonstrates clearly the late arrival of a systematic approach in all the countries of the North. It also demonstrates that the Nordic

perspective is new to the field. Not much comparative research has been going on. A look further back into the past is also called for. The Century of Emancipation is yet to be researched. A history of anti-Semitism without a firm understanding of what shaped the anti-Jewish sentiments of the nineteenth century is futile. So is any attempt to analyze the contemporary outbursts of anti-Semitism without tools to identify what is new and what is not.

It is well known that the University of Greifswald was named after Ernst Moritz Arndt from 1933 until 2018. It may be less well known that it was also the alma mater of Christian Friedrich Rühs. In 1808 he was appointed to the chair of History and in 1810 he was offered a position at the new University in Berlin. He spoke Swedish, and until 1815 the city of Greifswald belonged to Sweden, so the point is not that he was German, but that an investigation into the exchange of ideas in the Nordic region must involve a thorough rereading of a writer like Rühs, who helped shape the habitat of Scandinavian studies in Napoleonic times.

He was the author of a *History of Sweden*, a book on Finland and its Residents, a thesis on the culture and constitution of the old Scandinavian societies as well as a controversial translation of the Edda with a book-long introduction. He was in many aspects an admirable and modern historian infatuated with the past of the peoples in the North, including the Sámi. He was also the author of two infamous anti-Jewish pamphlets in 1816. It is possible to argue that they belong to a corpus of texts on the Jewish question that made a lasting impact, not only in the German lands, but also in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Today the chair of Nordic history at Greifswald is held by Cordelia Heß.

In 2013 Abraham Tokazier was posthumously declared the winner of the 100 meter sprint in Helsinki, thanks to the publication of the novel *Mirage 38* by Kjell Westö. Perhaps a minor injustice, knowing what was to come, perhaps a canary in the coal mine. It is all about setting the record straight in an effort to protect the future. So is this highly recommendable book.

*Håkon Harket, Norwegian Academy of Language and Literature*

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