

The Jews in Poland and Russia: a Short History by Antony Polonsky.  
Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2013.

Antony Polonsky is a historian, arguably as great a historian in his time as Salo Wittmayer Baron was in his. A prodigious and prolific writer and editor, Polonsky will probably be remembered best for the Polin series, the twenty seventh volume of which is about to be published and which he has edited since its beginnings. Polonsky is the Albert Abramson Professor of Holocaust Studies at Brandeis, and his intellectual and literary legacy will lie in his singular attempt to retrieve as much as is humanly possible about the history of Jews in Poland, a community more than decimated by the Nazis during the Second World War.

The current volume, a 'short' history of some 648 closely printed pages, is a revised version of a three volume work published in 2010 and 2012 after twenty five years of study and research: Polonsky recognised that the three volume work was probably too inaccessible to regular non-academic readers and sets out in the one volume edition to produce a text that will engage general readers and inspire them to further study in the field.

Between an Introduction and Conclusion there are eleven chapters telling the extraordinary history of the Jews of Poland and Russia between the Middle Ages and the twenty first century. The detail is fascinating, the writing immensely engaging, and the maps that cover from the Partitions of Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the Eastern Europe of 2000 a source of much information and interest in their own right.

In an age of TV historians who communicate huge events in sound bites, and whose selectivity is at times astonishing, Antony Polonsky stands out as a true historical scholar, as well as a man who has dedicated his life to keeping the details of the past firmly anchored to the present.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh