

Two Enlightenments: Poles, Jews, and Their Roads to Modernity

Abstract for the general public

The "age of reason" followed by the "age of iron and steam" – with all their rapid social, political and cultural transformations – exposed the Polish and Jewish communities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century to the most dramatic challenges of the modernization process. For the first time, these communities found themselves in the word in which religious, professional and ethnic groups of former estate society have not been separated any more. Old traditional social groups have been faced with new challenges, new influences, and new opportunities.

The fact of interaction of Christian and Jewish versions of national Enlightenments and the impact of the former on the latter is relatively well known. Still, despite considerably well-developed research the topics lack a certain balance. While we know relatively much about the influence of the Central and West European Enlightenments on the Jewish version of Enlightenment (the Haskalah), remarkably little research is to be found on the parallel phenomenon in Eastern Europe. There is indeed much to be researched and there is certainly a need to emphasize more strongly the Jewish and East European Enlightenments on the map of European history.

The main question for this project is to investigate interactions between the Polish and Jewish Enlightenments and to evaluate what this meant for both sides and how the two interacted on their road to modernity. I intend to see how they interacted, what were their similarities, influences, and mutual attitudes. I will ask about the possible impact of the Polish context on the shape of the Haskalah in Poland and of the unique features it adopted. Similarly, I will ask about the role of the Haskalah in the formation of the essential ideas and reform plans of the Polish Enlightenment.

The central category for the Polish attitudes toward the Jewish Enlightenment has been the "Jewish Question." In the nineteenth century, this was the code word for the issue of the place and status of Jews in the countries and societies of modern Europe. This issue was widely regarded as one of the most important social issues in almost all of European countries, though not because of the care for the Jewish community, but rather because it was considered one of the fundamental issues for modernizing the state and the entire Christian society. Countless voices of debates and projects of social reform of Jews provide a unique testimony of the era, as they help us understand how the countries and societies of nineteenth-century Europe imagined the Jewish community. What is important, however, the "Jewish question" not only shaped the ideas, but also to a considerable extent the policy of European countries towards Jews and, consequently, the living conditions of that community. In order to understand this influence of the Enlightened debates on the Jewish life, I shall investigate the development of central categories of the debate on the "Jewish Question and its influence on the Jewish community.

However, what is most important here, instead of portraying the Jews as passive recipients of the historical actions undertaken by the Polish actors, this project will place emphasis on understanding the Jewish agency and their role as historical actors, even if in a situation of underprivileged minority subject to violence from the side of the dominant Polish ideologues and politicians.

Ultimately, the project will ask the fundamental question of the historiography of Enlightenment, namely it will attempt to trace the possible role and impact of the ideology and social practice of Enlightenment on the form and direction of modernization processes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, and of Polish and Jewish modernity in particular. How far are we children of the Enlightenment?

The outcome of the project might prove relevant beyond the academy, as it touches on some concepts and practices central to the contemporary Polish and Jewish national identities. The project will allow not just for "demythologization" of some well-known figures, such as Stanisław Staszic and Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, but also, more importantly, for understanding these figures and their actions in far greater complexity, thus in the richness of the historical past.