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Sloin studies anti-Semitism in relation to global history

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I think what got me into history was the realization that history was the most political and dangerous subject one could study.” That’s the way Dr. Andrew Sloin explains how he became a historian.

Sloin was born in New Haven, Connecticut. He received his bachelor’s degree in history and political science from Sarah Lawrence College in New York and his masters in social sciences, and his doctorate in history and Jewish studies from the University of Chicago. Today he is an assistant professor in the History Department of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

One wonders how there can be thousands of history books about the same subject, such as the life of Abraham Lincoln, when the facts about him or any other major historical subject are well known, and Sloin has a very good explanation. “People with different perspectives—using the same facts and sources—can come up with radically different conclusions. That becomes a question of interpretation, and the essence of history is to dig into the interpretation.”

Sloin has looked at anti-Semitism and seen that, in the case of Russia, it has a long history predating even the Soviet Union. “In the former Russian Empire, most Jews were confined legally as to where they could reside. After the Soviet revolution, Jews became a very prominent political factor in both Soviet and Bolshevik party life. Belorussia became one of the few places on Earth to recognize Yiddish as a national language, as one of four national languages.”

In fact, Sloin says that the Czarist regime was very anti-Semitic. “The Czarist regime codified anti-Semitism. It restricted Jewish occupational rights. No one had the right to vote, so Jews didn’t have the right to vote, but Jews were also restricted in terms of property, profession, universities—many different restrictions.” And it’s ironic if this sounds like Nazi Germany, because the Nazis believed that communism was a Jewish conspiracy.

“The myth of anti-Semitism is that the Soviet Revolution is caused by the Jews. What I would



Dr. Sloin at his office.

argue is that the Revolution radicalizes the Jewish population in the way that it radicalizes many populations. Actually, Jews are quite ambivalent about the Bolshevik Party when the Revolution takes place in October of 1917.

“But over the course of the 1920s, particularly after the civil war, when there’s massive anti-Semitism and pogroms are perpetrated against Jews by the White army, the Red army seems like a pretty good option in that moment. So, Jews are entering into the state, and I try to write about that moment in a non-mythologizing way, in some sense a fair way. I don’t like the term ‘objective,’ because of course we’ve superseded objectivity.”

There are also a lot of myths about anti-Semitism and the Middle East. “There’s a reason why Jews went to the Ottoman Empire for a long time. They found refuge in the Ottoman Empire and lived in

Arab countries all over,” Sloin explains. “Jews lived there a long time and then many of them got driven out. There’s a long history of Sephardic Jewry that I think is frequently overlooked.”

Some think that modern anti-Semitism is a reaction to Zionism, but Sloin does not think so. “I think that it’s very easy to attribute the re-emergence of what some would call the new anti-Semitism to a sort of backlash against Zionism. Obviously, that plays a role to a degree, but I think we once again have to ask what’s happening socially in places where anti-Semitism is re-emerging as an ideology. And that doesn’t just go for the Middle East. If you look around the United States today, one might argue that it is really a kind of global leader in the production of anti-Semitic narratives, which is something I never expected I would experience as a younger person. We also have to ask: Is that something that’s imported or

is that emerging from a certain historical conjuncture that we’ve been living through for the past decade or so?”

For Sloin, there is a clear connection between anti-Semitism and racism. “You can go back to the Obama inauguration, where you had protesters carrying signs saying that the Rothschilds were Obama’s bankers, that Obama was beholden to Jewish capital.”

Some of Sloin’s research focus on the fact that these ideas are no longer held only in the margins of society but have grown in appeal. “These ideas are no longer fringe movements. There’s something about the social moment that has mobilized them, and I would say that I’m a believer in the idea that when we think about the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, it’s fundamentally tied to crises of modern capitalism dating back to the nineteenth century.”

And he introduces that idea to his students. “In my introductory class, where I have 115 students, we examine the question: What is the relationship between capitalism, race and violence in the modern era? We spend weeks just trying to get a sense of all of these things that have happened in the past several hundred years as the tip of the iceberg. When we get into the horrors of the twentieth century, it all sort of comes together. In that moment, they realize that there’s this massive sea of history that they’ve been completely oblivious to.”

Sloin is now working on a book that’s basically about the writing of history in the trans-national Yiddish press from 1871 to 1948 and particularly the radical Yiddish press. “I’m interested in the way that Jews who were writing in all different locations all over the globe in this particular language are writing about both the Jewish past and the general past, about issues of violence and revolution and about the history of capitalism and the future of socialism in that context.”

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