

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation

Review Number:

627

Publish date:

Friday, 31 August, 2007

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ISBN:

9780691128788

Date of Publication:

2006

Pages:

261pp.

Publisher:

Princeton University Press

Publisher url:

<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8347.html>

Place of Publication:

Princeton and Oxford

Reviewer:

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The fate of Jews in post-war Europe is a subject which has been neglected by historians both in the West and in areas previously under Soviet control. Clearly this is not a subject which has neutral connotations, raising questions about the way pre-war political elites subscribed to the belief that the fate of Jews was not an important element in the history of a given nation/state, the degree of complicity between the occupation administration and the local community, and, finally, how post-war reconciliation seemingly made it necessary to avoid the debate of the Jewish war-time tragedies. Poland is not unique in the way that the subject has been avoided. France, Italy, Holland, Denmark and Switzerland have only belatedly faced the uncomfortable truths relating to governments' and individuals' actions during the Nazi period. There is presently a willingness to admit that local co-operation and complicity in the Nazis' extermination policies were factors of considerable importance in the history of the Holocaust.

Since the establishment of independent Poland, successive governments have had to face the strength of nationalism, which ultimately challenged the right of Jews to define themselves either as Polish nationals or as rightful citizens of the independent Polish state. The Communist government of the post-war period was not unique in having to debate the fact that support for Jews would reduce the government's popular appeal, slender as it always was. What distinguished Poland from other West-European states was the fact that a

government based on a universalist creed of equality could and did appropriate nationalist symbols and prejudices to boost its image. The result was that far from attacking the nationalist and clericalist ideas which dominated the political discourse of the inter-war period, the Communist government only too willingly blocked calls for an open debate of the more painful episodes in Poland's recent history. Of those, the fate of Jews during the period immediately after the liberation of Polish territories is the most controversial.

The impact of this policy of the Communist regime, embracing the concept of Polish nationalism on the Jewish community in Poland and, by implication, the study of the fate of the Polish community, has been immense. Within the academic community the subject could not be addressed openly. Nor was this a subject debated within the West-European academic world. Michal Checiński's *Poland, Communism, Nationalism, Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1982) was unusual in that respect. This was a stinging condemnation of the Communist regime for its mistreatment of Jews. The author accused the Communists of fomenting anti-Semitic incidents, most notably the Kielce pogrom in 1946. In 1992, Krystyna Kersten in her *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939-6* (Warsaw, 1992) did not merely write about the history of the Polish Jewish community in Communist Poland but, more importantly, boldly challenged the popular perception that Jews were in some way closely linked to the establishment of that regime. Since then the study of Jewish history has progressed, but the nationalist agenda in which Jews are portrayed as antagonistic to the existence and interests of the Polish nation continues to cloud the historic assessment of events of the post-war period.

In 2001 Gross published a book, which changed the nature of the debate. *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ, 2001) had an impact well beyond academic circles. For the first time a clear statement was made that Poles, who until then had been portrayed as undisputed victims of Nazi race policies, had been willing perpetrators of genocide against the Jews. Through the study of a small town in Eastern Poland Gross showed how, if the opportunity arose, Christian neighbours became murderers. He further suggested that the post-war Communist government was reluctant to prosecute the perpetrators of the crimes committed against Jews. The revelations, and the interpretation of the historic events it describes, led the Polish government and the President to authorize a full investigation. An official apology was offered for what had happened. The Catholic Church was at the same time forced to consider its own spiritual cowardice during that period and subsequently. The Polish episcopate expressed regret for what had happened in 1941. The reaction of the Polish community, including those who deem themselves to be the intellectuals, has been diverse and only too frequently angry. Popular responses amounted to an unwillingness to accept that any crime had been committed in Jedwabne. More surprisingly, a number of Polish academics returned to the popular perception that Jews had only themselves to blame for Polish hostility during and after the war. Of those who maintained that Gross had either misused historic evidence or failed to draw correct conclusions, Tomasz Strzembosz, Leszek Żebrowski, Piotr Gontarczyk and Marek Chodakiewicz were most prominent. The common theme of their attack on Gross has been the suggestion that Jews had in disproportionate numbers supported Communism. With reference to the Jedwabne tragedy, figures have been mustered to suggest that Jews, unlike Christians, were willing to co-operate with the Soviet authorities when Poland's eastern areas were incorporated in the Soviet Union as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement. This, according to Gross's detractors, accounted for the Polish community's hatred of Jews. The equation drawn between Jews and Communism continues to be invoked and is consistently maintained by historians addressing both the wartime and the post-war period.

Gross's recent book should on no account be seen as the first English language publication in which an attempt is made to move on the debate on the supposed Jewish contribution to the Soviet plans for Poland to include the period between the end of the war and the final establishment of the Communist government in 1947. In 2003, East European Monographs published *After the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Conflicts in the Wake of the World War II* by Chodakiewicz. The author presented a clear debate on what he perceived to be distortions in the recent understanding of the relationship between the actions of Christians and Jews in Polish territories during the post-war period. While his desire to introduce a nuanced understanding of the way both communities responded to occupation and liberation is commendable, the book is marred by a

general desire to implicate Jews in the coming to power of a Soviet-sponsored government.

Gross's *Fear* has to be seen in the context of the debate, which is being driven by historians with a nationalist agenda that they have pursued since the end of Communism. To them, Communism is an alien creed, incompatible with, and antagonistic to, the interests of the Polish nation. The fate of Jews in post-war Poland is conveniently placed in the centre of this debate, thus at one stroke negating Jewish claims to a Polish identity and at the same time explaining the existence of Communism as wholly foreign to, and the result of outside interference in, Polish history.

Gross's approach is to encourage the reader to view the period through the eyes of the Jews who were in Poland when the first post-war administration was established. His reliance on first-hand accounts, on reports submitted by Jewish organizations, and on accounts written by foreign diplomats and journalists is aimed at reconstructing the mood of the time. Fear dominated every aspect of the lives of those who were defined by the community as Jewish. This was not an anxiety about housing, food or even the fate of family members and friends. Gross differentiates between hardships which Jews would have suffered in common with the Polish community—a general sense of insecurity which dominated daily life in war-torn Polish territories—and those that were experienced by Jews alone; he paints a picture of an all-pervading anxiety that once someone was identified as a Jew the community would turn on that hapless person. Several instances of the community turning into a pogrom mob determined to eradicate every Jewish person found are discussed in greater detail. The Kraków and Kielce pogroms are analysed, as are other instances of the Christian community mobilizing to murder Jews in its midst.

Chapter 1 is an outline of the political background to the establishment of a Communist-dominated government in post-war Poland. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the general attitude towards Jews and on analysing the two best-known pogroms. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the way in which the government, but most importantly the Polska Partia Robotnicza (PPR), the post-war Communist party, dealt with the situation. Gross is able to explain the apparent contradictions between the actions of a left-wing radical party which nevertheless defined itself and its political role as the defence of Polish national interests. The logical conclusion of this was that Communists were unwilling to be seen supporting the right of Jews to remain in Poland. An interesting example offered by the author is of the two Berman brothers, one of who became the chief ideologue of the Stalinist period and the other a committed Zionist and thus advocate of Jews leaving Poland.

In his attempt to explain the limits of the government's responses to tragedies, the author leaves no stone unturned. He notes that the intellectuals condemned the pogroms and mistreatment of the Jews, but that the Catholic Church at best condoned these events through its failure to denounce them. Some parish priests still viewed Jews as deserving divine retribution for their role in the crucifixion of Jesus. The belief that Jews needed the blood of Christian innocents was widespread in Poland and parish priests did nothing to dispel it. The Church's reactions to the Kielce pogrom is shown through its official pronouncements which displayed moral cowardice and spiritual poverty, thus accounting for a general perception that the Catholic Church would offer absolution to the participants of pogroms, were they moved to seek it.

Chapter 6 is in effect a polemic against those who have suggested that the Jews were the architects of their own fate, because of their eagerness to welcome Communists and the fact that they showed little, if any, commitment to Polish independence. Gross rejects both as unfounded and, critically, places the blame for the general belief that killing Jews could not be equated with the killing of human beings on Nazi atrocities. He has thus refused to draw a line between the anti-Semitic policies of the pre-war government and the pogrom of the post-war period by stating that Nazi policies of extermination created opportunities for Poles to improve their material lot and, consequently, an anxiety that this would be destroyed if Jews returned to reclaim their properties. Gross clearly struggles to understand and to explain the apparent communal insensitivity to the fate of the Jewish survivors. Chapter 7 is an attempt to outline some reasons for this phenomenon, which was unique to Poland. To his credit, Gross finds it difficult, if not impossible, either to comprehend or to account fully for this situation.

A book which addresses this much neglected chapter in the history of Poland, only recently a victim of brutal and arbitrary persecution, fills in a major gap. That is not to suggest that it does not have its limitations. Gross is particularly good in reconstructing the mood prevailing in the community, the moral void in which the killing of a randomly-identified Jew is met with popular approval. Where Gross fails to deliver is in explaining the political situation. The role of the anti-Communist underground, both the Armia Krajowa (AK) and the nationalist Narodowe Sily Zbrojne (NSZ), in stoking-up communal hatred and encouraging the perception that Soviet domination was tantamount to rule by Jews, should have been discussed. The obvious weakness of the security services, for which the Communists remained responsible throughout this period, is an aspect of the story which has also received little attention. The low calibre of the people on whom the government had to depend to discharge administrative functions in the areas outside Warsaw is striking and reveals a lot about the government's limits of authority. A publication which addresses the issue from the victims' perspective, which is the strong point of this book, needs to link up with other similar studies. Pogroms and fratricidal conflicts are usually signs of social disequilibria caused by political, economic or military trauma. Gross's focus on the Polish experience will make an invaluable contribution to these studies, though he himself has done little to acknowledge these historic phenomena.

Gross clearly intends his publication to generate a further debate. It is therefore puzzling that nowhere in the book's footnotes, endnotes, bibliography or index has he acknowledged any of the historians who have attacked him in the past and with whom he is clearly conducting a polemic throughout the pages of this book. One cannot help wondering whether he made a decision not to grace them with his attention. If this is the case, it might have been unwise. The structure of his debate leaves the reader in no doubt as to their arguments, which he intends to refute through his excellent scholarship. An open acknowledgement of the other, however unworthy, schools of debate would have been appropriate.

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