




FORUM

Neighbors, the Jedwabne Massacre of Jews and the Controversy that Changed Poland

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The Jedwabne Mass Murder Uncovered

There are not many other cases when one single book about history, written by an academic, not only provoked a massive and stormy nationwide debate involving mass media, political leaders and bishops, but also unleashed processes that strongly influenced the self-perceptions of a nation, opening the way for ground-breaking new historical research and, at the same time, for political responses which had a tangible impact on the direction in which the whole country moved. It was all achieved by a not very long historical essay (around 100 pages in Polish, 170 pages in the subsequent English-language edition, excluding photographs, maps, indexes) by Jan Tomasz Gross.¹ Its subject was the massacre of almost all Jews (the number is still debatable: between several hundred to 1,600 – the latter number claimed by Gross) living in the small town of Jedwabne in German-occupied Poland, committed by their Polish neighbours in July 1941. After its Polish debut, the book was translated into thirteen languages.

Gross, a sociologist and historian born in Warsaw, pursued his whole academic career at American universities. As a student of Warsaw University, he had been involved in a democratic movement brutally crushed by the communist authorities in 1968. After having spent several months in prison, he left Poland, as did almost 13,000 other Polish citizens of Jewish descent, propelled by the anti-Semitic campaign and witch-hunting carried out by the Polish United Workers Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*).² In the United States Gross published two important and solidly researched books regarding the Second World War, one about Polish society under the German occupation, another about the Sovietisation of Eastern Poland in 1939–41.³ They were hardly known beyond academic circles, which is a fate of almost all scholarly publications. It was, however, no wonder that Gross's book on the Jedwabne pogrom, written with an ardent polemic fervour, had a completely different reception. Not only did it tackle an extremely drastic and completely unknown historical event, but it also challenged the most important self-perceptions of the great majority of Poles regarding their past and identity.

The new American edition of *Neighbors* gives us an opportunity to revisit the controversies it brought and their long-term consequences, which one may now grasp more clearly after over two decades.⁴ This is virtually the same book as the first English language edition from 2001, since Gross did not change anything in its text, adding only a new preface. On the one hand it could be misleading to

¹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2000); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

² See an autobiographical book: Jan Tomasz Gross w rozmowie z Aleksandrą Pawlicką, ...*Bardzo dawno temu, mniej więcej w zeszły piątek* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB, 2018).

³ Jan T. Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement 1939–1944* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴ Jan T. Gross, with a new preface by the author, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

the reader as the book still has some factual errors and omissions pointed out by reviewers. On the other hand, it confirms its status as a historical document, a *lieu de mémoire* (using the term coined by Pierre Nora), the significance of which goes beyond continuing historical research.⁵

What made *Neighbors* so powerful was its shocking novelty and audacity in writing about Poles murdering Jews. Such facts were briefly present on the margins of the public debate in Poland, especially in some literary works revisiting the time of the German occupation, but only in the first post-war years and during the short period of political liberalisation which started with the post-Stalinist thaw in 1956. Since the mid-1960s the communist authorities, increasingly seeking nationalist legitimisation, consequently silenced this topic and imposed an image of Polish-Jewish relations focusing on an allegedly massive aid of Poles to persecuted Jews.⁶ This was supposed to have been the prevalent attitude in Polish society during the Holocaust. Such a narrative was accepted by a great majority of public opinion and the first cracks started to appear only in the second half of the 1980s.⁷ The documentary film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann included many comments hostile to Jews by Polish witnesses to their tragedy. It caused in Poland overwhelmingly critical reactions and accusations that the French director distorted historical facts, with an official position by the communist authorities calling the film a slander to the Polish nation. In 1987 an essay by a renowned Polish intellectual, Jan Błoński, about the indifference of too many Poles vis-a-vis persecuted and dying Jews brought about a vivid and sometimes emotional discussion in various periodicals. Nevertheless, in both debates Poles were by no means presented as murderers of Jews.⁸ The prevalent perceptions of the attitudes of Poles towards Jews during the war did not change in the first decade after the demise of communism in Poland in 1989. When the journalist Michał Cichy wrote in 1994 about isolated cases of killing Jews by some soldiers of the Polish resistance during the anti-German Warsaw uprising in 1944, his article was broadly criticised as focusing on the criminal acts of a few outcasts who can be found in any army and in any society.⁹

Polish public opinion, including historians, was certainly not prepared for revelations brought by the publication of *Neighbors* in May 2000. Paradoxically, at first even the author himself was not ready. When Gross came across a key testimony of a Jewish survivor from Jedwabne, his first reaction was incredulity. He later admitted:

When I first read Szmul Wasersztajn's testimony, it seemed to me so shocking that it stayed with me for a long time as a tale of a man who experienced something horrible and, to put it mildly, got mad. As a reader I was aware that the author of the testimony went through something horrific, but not exactly through what he describes. For a few years I was convinced that Wasersztajn must have mistaken something.¹⁰

He was not alone in his scepticism. Testimonies of survivors describing the participation of Poles in anti-Jewish violence in summer 1941 in localities other than Jedwabne were earlier read by historians, but they also did not believe in their veracity and accuracy, treating their content as exaggerated.¹¹

⁵ Cf Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–92).

⁶ About how this narrative was shaped in the 1960s see: Paweł Machcewicz, 'Na straży wizerunku narodu. Cenzura w latach sześćdziesiątych wobec stosunków polsko-żydowskich w czasie II wojny światowej', *Przegląd Historyczny*, CXII, 3 (2021), 735–50.

⁷ Cf Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁸ For the Polish reactions to Lanzmann's film and to the essay by Błoński ('Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 Jan. 1987) see: Piotr Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu. Spory o przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010), 132–65.

⁹ Michał Cichy, 'Polacy-Żydzi: czarne karty Powstania Warszawskiego', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 29–30 Jan. 1994. For the reactions to this article see: Steinlauf, *Bondage*, 133–5.

¹⁰ Jan Tomasz Gross w rozmowie z Aleksandrą Pawlicką, ...*Bardzo dawno temu*, 137–8.

¹¹ Andrzej Żbikowski in the early 1990s published an article in a scientific journal about the anti-Jewish pogroms after the outbreak of the Nazi-Soviet war in 1941, but it did not evoke any interest among the broader public or even professional

However, Gross managed to find additional sources which were never used before (mostly records of postwar trials of perpetrators). They confirmed Wasersztajn's testimony and helped put various pieces together.

The events reconstructed in *Neighbors* were indeed deeply shocking. In the situation of the utter chaos after the outbreak of the Nazi-Soviet war and the hasty withdrawal of the Soviet forces, almost all but a handful of Jews living in Jedwabne were in just one day killed with utmost cruelty by Poles living in the same town, the majority of the former, including women and children, burned alive in a barn. Using another survivor's testimony, Gross described also a mass murder of Jews in Radziłów, another small town in the vicinity in Jedwabne, which happened three days earlier according to a very similar pattern, with almost all the local Jewish population burned alive in a barn.

The crucial issue was the role of Germans in these events. Gross wrote that a small detachment of gendarmes had been stationed in Jedwabne and that on the day of the pogrom also several Gestapo functionaries had arrived. He claimed, however, that their role had been passive and could be understood as only giving consent to kill Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne within a certain amount of time, after which violence should stop. The Nazis even wanted, according to Wasersztajn's testimony, to spare some Jewish craftsmen who could be useful to them, but it was rejected by the Poles. The crime was devised and organised by Polish 'municipal authorities' who only 'consulted with the Germans and eventually carried out the mass murder of Jedwabne Jews'.¹² 'As to the Germans' direct participation in the mass murder of Jews in Jedwabne on 10 July 1941, however, one must admit that it was limited, pretty much, to their taking pictures' – stated the author of *Neighbors*.¹³

Gross not only described facts that were, to put it mildly, utterly disturbing to the Polish audience, but often used a style which by many was regarded as very harsh or even provocative, presumably used deliberately to shake the conscience of readers. In the last sentence of his book he declared that Jews in Jedwabne had been killed neither by any external forces nor by a bunch of outcasts or criminals which can be found in any community, but by average Poles, 'the society' (*społeczeństwo*).¹⁴ In the American version, it was somewhat alleviated: 'the society' was replaced by 'neighbors', which did not directly suggest the collective responsibility of the Polish nation.¹⁵

Neighbors focused on the crime committed in one town but discussed as well anti-Jewish pogroms in other localities in the same region and widespread hostility of Poles towards Jews resulting in anti-Jewish violence in other parts of occupied Poland and a mass-scale phenomenon of denouncing Jews in hiding to Germans, which also meant their certain death. For Gross such attitudes were prevalent or even typical and the whole national mythology constructed around Poles saving Jews should be rejected as it pertained only to a marginal minority who acted against the overwhelming majority of the nation. 'It seems to me that antisemitism polluted whole patches of twentieth century Polish history and turned them into forbidden subjects, calling forth stylized interpretations whose role was to cover, like a fig leaf, what had really happened', he wrote in the conclusion of his book.¹⁶ Gross claimed that the history of Poland should be rewritten: 'in order to reclaim its own past, Poland will have to tell its past to itself anew'.¹⁷

historians (see 'Lokalne pogromy Żydów w czerwcu i lipcu 1941 roku na wschodnich rubieżach II Rzeczypospolitej', *Biuletyn ŻIH*, 162/163 (1992), 3–18). The author later said that he had not fully used the information from the survivors' testimonies about the role played by Poles in anti-Jewish violence: 'to be honest, I did not really believe that such things could have happened on such a scale. I was completely unprepared for it' (see 'Jedwabne-Crime and Memory', in Jacek Borkowicz and Zbigniew Nosowski, eds., *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne* (Warszawa: Więź, 2001), 269.

¹² Gross, *Neighbors* (2022), 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ Gross, *Sąsiedzi*, 115.

¹⁵ Gross, *Neighbors* (2022), 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

Heroes and Victims: The End of the Narrative?

Neighbors sparked off a very stormy and heated debate that for many months dominated mass media and involved politicians and other figures of public and moral authority. In terms of its public resonance it had two peak moments. One was the holy mass of repentance held in May 2001 by Catholic bishops who asked for God's forgiveness for crimes committed upon Jews by people of the Christian religion and Polish nationality.¹⁸ The other one was the ceremony of unveiling the monument to murdered Jews of Jedwabne in July 2001 when the president of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, apologised 'in the name of those Poles whose conscience is moved by that crime. In the name of those who believe that we cannot be proud of the magnificence of Polish history without at the same time feeling pain and shame for the wrongs that Poles have done to others'.¹⁹

As Joanna B. Michlic and Antony Polonsky rightly put it:

The debate about Jedwabne is probably the most profound on any historical issue in Poland since 1989. . . . To borrow a term from the French historian Pierre Nora, the arguments set out in *Neighbors* represent a clear 'counter-memory' to the canonical Polish memory of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations, the most articulate expression of the 'self-critical' view of the Polish past.²⁰

One may agree with Gross, who called it 'the most complex confrontation with collective memory, and the need to revise it, that the Poles had ever faced'.²¹ The comparisons were made to important historical debates in other countries, like the *Historikerstreit* in West Germany in the 1990s, the discussion after the publication of *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* by Daniel Goldhagen, or even those public controversies that went far beyond history, like the Dreyfus affair, which tore apart France at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century.²²

The debate had various layers – moral, political, historical – which cannot be all presented here with the same thoroughness. One of them, which deserves our attention, is reactions by professional historians who analysed *Neighbors* on the grounds of its methodology and accuracy, discussed the author's use of historical sources, the conclusions he reached, and tried to answer questions, continually raised in public, if Gross's reconstruction of the events in Jedwabne may be treated as fully reliable or any alternative versions are also legitimate. It was not only an academic discussion, since historians' interventions, at least those voiced in Poland, were divulged in the mass circulation media, including television programs.

Many scholars expressed their criticism regarding various parts of Gross's arguments and also the way in which he presented them, but in most cases it did not mean the rejection of the most fundamental fact that the Jews of Jedwabne were killed by Poles. 'And yet I believe that had Gross been a little less rigid in some of his generalizations, his argument would have been even more persuasive', wrote István Deák.²³

What provoked lots of polemics was Gross's call for a 'new approach to sources' – a claim that testimonies of Jewish survivors should be treated a priori as trustworthy, exempted from the standard criteria of cross-examination which are applied to all other types of sources. 'When considering survivors' testimonies', Gross argued, 'we would be well advised to change the starting premise in appraisal of their evidentiary contribution from a priori critical to in principle

¹⁸ Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu*, s. 371–2. This book offers the most detailed analysis of the debate.

¹⁹ Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 132. The book contains the most thorough presentation and analysis of the debate available in English.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ Gross, *Neighbors* (2022), XIX–XX.

²² Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu*, 294, 300.

²³ István Deák, 'Heroes and Victims', in Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 428.

affirmative'.²⁴ The main reason for this was that all available testimonies are 'stories with a happy ending', since the people who told them survived, contrary to the overwhelming majority of Jews who were murdered and whose voices will never be heard.²⁵ This approach was met with scepticism by many scholars who were reluctant to treat survivors' testimonies according to different standards than other sources. It was pointed out that Jewish survivors had sometimes differed in describing the same events and this pertained even to two versions of Wasersztajn's testimony about the Jedwabne massacre. There happened to be also misinformation in survivors' testimonies, like a story that a Jewish delegation from Jedwabne delivered valuable gifts to the Catholic bishop in nearby Łomża, asking him, in vain, to prevent a coming pogrom. As a matter of fact, the bishop had been in hiding since the beginning of the Soviet occupation and could not be reached in his palace during the days preceding the pogrom.²⁶ The story remained, without any comment by the author, in the subsequent editions of *Neighbors*.

Many critics argued that Gross in his description of the Jedwabne mass murder had not devoted enough attention to a historical context that could explain why anti-Jewish violence took place in this very area and exactly at that time, and why it turned out to be so genocidal. The fundamental fact was that all the pogroms in 1941 happened in the area that since September 1939 had been under the Soviet occupation, which deeply affected life of all the inhabitants and also relations between various ethnic groups. Poles as the ruling group were the prime target of the Soviet terror and often accused Jews of welcoming the Red Army and of collaboration with the NKVD and newly established Soviet authorities. It also explains why the Polish population greeted Germans as liberators in summer 1941 and might be prone to their incitement. Historians argued that Gross had downplayed the factor of the Soviet occupation and ignored Polish testimonies from Jedwabne about alleged collaboration of Jewish inhabitants with the new communist authorities.²⁷

Dariusz Stola, whose reviews of *Neighbors* may be regarded as the most thoughtful of all that was written about this book, compared mass murders of Jews in Jedwabne and Radziłów with other pogroms that had taken place earlier in Eastern Europe. All of them brought the death of only a fraction of the affected communities. Even the worst of them, which took place in Ukraine in 1918–19, spared 80 per cent of Jewish families in localities where they happened. The events in Jedwabne and Radziłów were exceptional as they resulted in the almost total annihilation of Jewish communities. They were systematic and organised, carried out according to a certain scheme (herding the Jews to a main square, labelling them as supporters of the Soviets, burning them alive in barns) and cannot be called, as Gross does, just the 'cacophony of violence'. According to Stola, 'the plan to murder *all* the Jews was not conceived locally, but imported'.²⁸

The answers to many questions, and especially the broader context missing in *Neighbors*, were provided by a publication by the newly created Institute of National Remembrance. The latter carried out both historical research and a prosecutorial investigation regarding the events in Jedwabne. The two-volume book contained essays by historians and all available documents pertaining to the wave of pogroms on the occupied Polish territories in 1941.²⁹ On the one hand, it largely broadened the

²⁴ Gross, *Neighbors* (2022), 139.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁶ See Bogdan Musiał, 'The Pogrom in Jedwabne: Critical Remarks about Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*', in Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 318–22.

²⁷ See for instance a critique by Tomasz Strzembosz: 'Covered-up Collaboration', in Jacek Borkowicz and Zbigniew Nosowski, eds., *Thou Shalt Not Kill: Poles on Jedwabne* (Warszawa: Więź, 2001), 163–81. For an examination of the complex issue of the attitudes of Jews towards the Soviet occupiers see: Ben-Cion Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews Under Soviet Rule: Eastern Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939–1941* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995).

²⁸ Dariusz Stola, 'A Monument of Words', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 30 (2002), 35. See also: Dariusz Stola, 'Jedwabne: Revisiting the Evidence and Nature of the Crime', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17, 1 (2003), 139–52.

²⁹ Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, *Wokół Jedwabnego* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2002). Gross called it 'an invaluable – more than 1,500 pages – compilation of archival sources . . . and scholarly essays . . . on issues related to

territorial scope of anti-Jewish violence described by Gross, identifying more than twenty localities in the same region where Poles killed Jews in the first weeks after the outbreak of the Nazi-Soviet war in 1941. On the other, it expanded the knowledge about the role played by the Germans, reconstructing the way in which they instigated pogroms, including Jedwabne and Radziłów. According to documents found in German archives, in the 1960s prosecutors from Ludwigsburg established that a small Gestapo detachment had operated in the area and its commander was recognised by Jewish witnesses as an officer organising the pogrom in Radziłów. Most likely, the same Gestapo unit came to nearby Jedwabne three days later, which would explain the identical *modus operandi* in murdering Jews. It should be seen as a part of the then Nazi policy, formulated by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), the aim of which in summer 1941 was to push local populations previously under the Soviet occupation to ‘self-cleansing actions’, i.e. killing Jews.³⁰

The discussion triggered by *Neighbors* focused not only on killing Jews by Poles and even other examples of Polish anti-Semitism throughout history. It also brought a public soul-searching exploring other ‘dark’ sides of Poland’s past, like, for instance, forced deportations of Germans and Ukrainians after the end of the Second World War. The fundamental paradigm of the nation’s historical self-perceptions, presenting Poles as heroes and victims, started to be questioned. After the discovery of the Jedwabne massacre, it was argued, Poles should be seen also as perpetrators, those who inflicted harm on other nations, and all of Polish history should be thought through anew, which was the crucial claim by Gross. ‘Whatever community could therefore be given the designation “Polish” or “fatherland”’, declared one of the most renowned Polish intellectuals, Marcin Król, ‘it will have to be built almost from scratch. Rebuilt on the rubble. And in this rebuilding, there will be no help from those components of the collective memory and imagination which have so far functioned so well.’³¹

Turning the Clock Back and New Holocaust Research

Uncovering the Jedwabne mass murder and the subsequent discussion brought about a backlash reflecting feelings and often fears of more traditionally oriented segments of Polish society, aiming at the defence of existing pillars of national pride, now in jeopardy and possibly crumbling. In the most radical form it meant a complete denial of the involvement of Poles in killing Jews in Jedwabne and elsewhere, reiterating the presumption of the sole German responsibility. The publication of *Neighbors* and the whole debate it caused were presented as a Jewish plot to compromise the Polish nation and, more specifically, enforce the restitution of the property owned by Jews before the war.³²

In a more profound way the conservative response consisted in arguments that the identity of a nation could be maintained only on the basis of the memory of its heroism and victimhood, and not by confronting ‘dark’ episodes of its past. ‘It is the clash of the history of national glory with the history of national shame, or rather the aggressive assault of the latter on the former’, wrote a prominent right-wing historian, Andrzej Nowak, pointing at the harmfulness of national ‘self-flagellation’.³³

In the longer term the reaction to the Jedwabne debate was a concept of the so-called ‘politics of history’, created by conservative intellectuals and implemented by the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party, first in power in 2005–7 and then, for a much longer time, after 2015. Its core was

the Jedwabne mass murder and other similar episodes in the surrounding territory of the Białystok voivodship’ (Gross, *Neighbors*, 2022, XXXII).

³⁰ See Peter Klein, ed., *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1997), 318–28.

³¹ ‘Akt skruczy i co dalej?’, *Res Publica Nowa*, 2001, 7, 50–1.

³² See Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu*, 334–55.

³³ Andrzej Nowak, ‘Westerplatte czy Jedwabne’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 Aug. 2001.

the accusation of the majority of Polish political and intellectual elites, including historians, of focusing on a 'history of shame'. The remedy to it should be, it was argued by the Law and Justice Party, an active involvement of the state in promoting approaches emphasising Polish heroism and sufferings inflicted on Poles by other nations. 'Defending' Poland's history and pride became one of the key elements of the Law and Justice's programs and politics, which helped mobilise its supporters and win subsequent elections.³⁴

In the right-wing narratives *Neighbors* was presented as the emblematic example of a 'history of shame' and Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War were treated as the key field to be 'reconquered' by the 'politics of history'. Massive government funds were allocated to public initiatives (museums, mass media, commemorative events) and to historical research conducted by quasi-academic institutions controlled by the Law and Justice Party in order to promote the theme of Poles saving Jews during the war. It was presented as a prevalent attitude of the great majority of Polish society, and those who killed or denounced Jews were labelled as criminal 'outcasts', exactly as in the narratives from the era preceding the publication of *Neighbors*.³⁵

It was, however, not possible to block the impulse this book gave to completely new research on the Holocaust in occupied Poland, and especially on the involvement of many Poles in this crime. The pivotal role was played by an interdisciplinary group of scholars who created the Centre for Holocaust Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Over the years, they published a series of ground-breaking, meticulously researched studies, which reconstructed the fate of Jews on the local level, especially in the countryside and in small towns.³⁶ They used sources which so far had been overlooked or not sufficiently explored: documents created by the German occupation administration, testimonies of Jewish survivors, records of numerous postwar trials of Polish perpetrators (mostly from the first decade after 1945). The very existence of the latter was largely unknown to the public and even to scholars. Unlike *Neighbors*, most of these books avoid hasty generalisations or accusatory language – their argumentation is very factual and precise, based on a broad empirical basis. Altogether, they have documented a massive participation of Poles in persecution of Jews, mostly by denouncing and killing those in hiding, usually in order to take over their property, but often also out of hatred. The exact number of victims will never be known, but it may be reasonably estimated as dozens of thousands. It all happened not in just one region of Poland previously under the Soviet occupation, like pogroms described by Gross, but in almost all parts of the General Government created by the Germans in 1939, which encompassed most of the Polish territories under the Nazi occupation.

The Law and Justice Party launched 'a "total war" against critical history-writing', as Joanna B. Michlic rightly called it,³⁷ and its aim was to intimidate those who publish findings not conforming to the official line about Polish-Jewish relations during the war, and possibly deter other historians who would like to follow that route. The first attempt took place in 2006 when a new paragraph

³⁴ About uses of history by the right wing in Poland see: Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski, 'Memory Games and Populism in Postcommunist Poland', in Chiara De Cesari and Ayhan Kaya, eds., *European Memory in Populism* (London: Routledge 2020), 239–57; Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, 'Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland', *East European Politics and Societies*, 33, 2 (2019), 435–71.

³⁵ About this political instrumentalisation of Poles saving Jews see: Joanna B. Michlic, "'At the Crossroads": Jedwabne and the Polish Historiography of the Holocaust', *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 31, 3 (2017), 296–306.

³⁶ Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2011); Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka, eds., *Prowincja noc: życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim* (Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2007); Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Zarys krajobrazu: wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2011); Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd: polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945: studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2011) [the American edition: *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)]; Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2018) [the American edition: *Night without End: the Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022)].

³⁷ Michlic, "'At the Crossroads'", 299.

(its critics called it ironically ‘lex Gross’) was added to the penal code that foresaw three-year imprisonment for ‘those who publicly accuse the Polish nation of participation, organization or responsibility for the Communist or Nazi Crimes’. The amendment was nullified by the Constitutional Tribunal, but this move clearly demonstrated that the right wing would use administrative and legal means to curtail unwelcome research.³⁸

In 2018 the parliament controlled by the Law and Justice Party passed the so-called Holocaust Law (precisely speaking: an amendment to the law on the Institute of National Remembrance). It again threatened with a three-year imprisonment those who publicly suggest that ‘the Polish nation’ took part in Nazi crimes and who ‘diminish responsibility of real perpetrators’.³⁹ A huge international uproar made the Polish government somewhat mitigate the legislation by reducing possible consequences only to financial fines. It did not stop, however, the ruling party from harassing scholars. Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, the editors and co-authors of the most important publications of the Centre for Holocaust Research, were sued for an alleged libel by an individual whose relative was mentioned in their most recent book as someone co-responsible for crimes against Jews. The legal suit was supported and financed by an organisation which obtains government funds.⁴⁰ The mass media close to the Law and Justice Party, including public television, continued condemning scholars from the Centre for Holocaust Research as those who tarnish the reputation of the nation, and such accusations were publicly voiced also by high-level government officials.⁴¹

It all goes back to the publication of *Neighbors* in 2000. This is a rather unique case of a book which, far from being methodologically flawless, gave an impetus to new, ground-breaking research on the Holocaust that changed the prevalent, deeply rooted opinions about attitudes of Poles towards persecuted Jews. It also set in motion massive counter-measures of those who wanted to defend the image of Polish history based exclusively on heroism and victimhood. Extensive resources of the state were employed to achieve this goal, but it seems unlikely that the clock could be turned back to the *status quo ante*, before the Jedwabne mass murder was uncovered. Poland is not the same country anymore.

³⁸ Lech Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci. Esej socjologiczny* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2008), 221.

³⁹ Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Warszawa, dnia 14 lutego 2018 r. Poz. 369, Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary (<http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20180000369>).

⁴⁰ See Jonathan Freedland, ‘Fears Rise that Polish Libel Trial Could Threaten Future Holocaust Research’, *The Guardian*, 3 Feb. 2021.

⁴¹ The deputy minister of research and education declared in Dec. 2022 that measures should be taken to prevent activities which ‘undermine the good name of the Polish state and nation’, pointing at the Centre for Holocaust Research. See ‘Rozmowa z prof. Włodzimierzem Bernackim, sekretarzem stanu w Ministerstwie Edukacji i Nauki, pełnomocnikiem rządu ds. reformy szkolnictwa wyższego’, *Forum Akademickie*, 2022, 12 (<https://miesiecznik.forumakademickie.pl/czasopisma/fa-12-2022/sloty-prowadza-do-usrednienia-wynikow%e2%80%a9/>).