"Before Gross" and "After Gross": The Polish Holocaust and Historical Debate at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

In 2000, Jan Tomasz Gross, then a professor of political science and European studies at New York University, published Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka. A year later, it appeared as Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland. This little book, which fit into one issue of The New Yorker (March 4, 2001), started the most significant historical public debate in Poland since the fall of Communism in 1989. It described how, on July 10, 1941, three weeks after the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the conquest of the Polish territories previously occupied by the Soviets, Polish Christian citizens of the little town of Jedwabne murdered their Polish Jewish neighbors. The book reached far beyond the description of this individual crime. It questioned the traditional lacrimatory, heroic interpretation of Polish history and showed that, during the Second World War, Poles were not only victims but, not infrequently, also perpetrators. Many Poles considered the book a threat to their identity and national honor. The publication triggered an angry debate, which lasted—in its most acute form—over a year; generated hundreds of articles, books, TV and radio programs; deeply divided Polish public opinion; and changed the way many Polish historians wrote about mid-twentieth-century history. The consequences of the publishing of Neighbors resemble the repercussions of Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil issued by Hannah Arendt in 1963.

In 2006, Gross published Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz, An Essay in Historical Interpretation, which appeared two years later as Strach: Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie, Historia moralnej zapaści. This time, Gross examined Polish anti-Semitism after the war. He concentrated on the Kielce pogrom of July 4, 1946, but also wrote about “the unwelcoming of Jewish survivors” (the title of one of the chapters) and about the żydokomuna (Judeo-Communism)—an anti-
Semitic stereotype popular in Poland for most of the twentieth century. This time, the public debate was less intense and shorter than after the publication of *Neighbors*, but it also contributed to changes in the Polish perception of history and provoked angry attacks on Gross. The debate was revived again in 2011, when Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, both professors at Princeton University, published *Złote żniwa: Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów*, which was issued the following year as *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*. This book, a collection of essays, was inspired by a picture, reprinted on its cover, presented initially in a 2008 article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* under the title “Gold Rush in Treblinka.” The image shows a group of peasants who looked as if they had just completed a day of harvest. However, there are human bones and skulls in front of them, and soldiers flank them. It is widely believed that the photo was taken on the fields that belonged to the Treblinka death camp and the peasants, as in other similar places, dug up the remains of Jews, looking for valuables, especially gold and silver.

The Gross trilogy and his other articles and public statements about Polish-Jewish relations shook Poland and divided Poles into two “tribes” fighting over the past. This fight has been described and analyzed in many publications, but three of them, the books under review, deserve special attention. They examine the debate particularly thoroughly and from different angles. Two of these books appeared almost simultaneously in 2017.

Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology at Łódź University, is interested in changes in public memory as a process of modernization, elite transformation, and the struggle for power. She uses the Gross debate as a case study. Her book, originally a doctoral thesis opens with an extended methodological part (one-third of the text), which could form a separate volume. The author rejects the outdated approach of Maurice Halbwachs and his concept of collective memory. Instead, she builds her methodological framework on a careful examination of the analytical tools and terms offered by modern scholars, notably by Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Armed with such notions as Foucault’s dispositif analysis and Said’s concept of an intellectual as a stranger, she examines the Gross debate with chirurgical precision.

Nowicka-Franczak opens the empirical part of her book by analyzing the depictions of and the debates on Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War “before Gross.” She starts with 1945 and writes about such authors as Józef Mackiewicz, Zofia Nałkowska, Władysław Bartoszewski, Kazimierz Iranek-Osmecki, Jan Józef Lipski, Czesław Milosz, and Jan Błonski. Then Nowicka-Franczak examines about two hundred articles, internet publications, and TV and radio programs devoted to the Gross debate. She divides the debate into several phases, groups its participants, and characterizes them. She even tests voice tones and body language used during interviews and recorded programs. She quotes extensively and tries to explain opinions of all the participants of the debate, including the hateful comments coming from some Catholic-nationalist circles and accusing Gross of being a Jew hostile to Poland and a paid agent of international Jewish anti-Polish conspiracy. Here Jerzy Robert Nowak, Marek J. Chodakiewicz, Piotr Gontarczyk, Bogdan Musiał, and Jan Żaryn figure prominently in the text. Nowicka-Franczak also writes about historians, writers, artists, and journalists who defended Gross, albeit without much success. Statistical results of several polls suggest that, in general, the Gross debate did not educate Polish society but strengthened its traditional nationalistic attitude, and even the liberal-left and liberal-centric media adopted elements of the national-conservative discrediting of Gross. “The struggle over the books of Gross, which to a large degree proved to be a conflict over Gross himself,” Nowicka-Franczak concludes, “also showed the inefficiency of the shock
Pawel Dobrosielski, an assistant professor at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, agrees with Nowicka-Franczak but approaches the Gross debate from a different angle. Dobrosielski compares this debate to the Dreyfus affair in late nineteenth-century France and the Historikerstreit, the historians’ quarrel in Germany in the 1980s. Golden Harvest was published in Poland in fifty thousand copies, an absolute record for a scholarly book, which also attests to the caliber of the debate. Dobrosielski analyzes numerous sources generated by the Polish intelligentsia and elites and also uses a sophisticated methodology, including the concept of “multidirectional memory.” Introduced by Michael Rothberg, an American Holocaust historian and memory studies scholar, it talks about “competing memories,” remembering “against” something, and a process of permanent negotiations between different memories (p. 28).

Dobrosielski analyzes the four crucial (in his opinion) aspects of the Gross debate: disagreements over numbers, categories, methods, and attitudes of the debate’s participants. He shows that manipulating with statistics one can defuse a debate, push it in a sterile direction, and question the most fundamental facts and interpretations. How many Jews are buried under the burned stable of Jedwabne: approximately 300 or 1,600? We don’t know because the exhumation had been stopped, claim the critics of Gross. So what can we say about the event? How many Poles were necessary to save one Jew under the German occupation? How many Poles altogether were involved in saving Jewish lives and how many of them were punished by the Germans with death? These and other legitimate questions can be used to dilute any debate.

Also, the disagreements over categories and terms were used in various ways to undermine Gross’s main points. Is the classification of Raul Hilberg into perpetrators, victims, and bystanders still a valid and helpful analytical tool? Should the category of bystanders be included into the perpetrators’ category? When and how should we use such terms as Germans, Nazis, peasants, bandits, collaboration, resistance, and society? Some debate participants applied terms dehumanizing historical actors or tendentiously putting them on the margin. Only “mob,” “underclass people,” “bandits,” “passive crowd,” and “strangers” murdered the Jews during and after the war, insist Gross’s opponents. They tried to show him as a hostile Jew, an enemy of peasants, and a product of “Judeo-Communism,” but they also questioned his scholarly methods and competences, arguing that they were incompatible with “the basic requirements of the historical profession” (p. 141). Finally, and this is the fourth aspect of Dobrosielski’s analysis, Gross’s opponents insinuated that he had partisan, dishonest intentions, participating in a conspiracy against morality, the “Truth,” Polish identity, and the perception of Poland abroad. Dobrosielski’s conclusions are discouraging: “the debates about the books of Jan Tomasz Gross also brought the questioning of both the objectivity of history and the position of historians,” and “the sociological research of the last 25 years suggests a significant but limited and temporary influence of the debates on common memory on the level of anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Polish society” (pp. 270, 309).

Most arguments used by Nowicka-Franczak and Dobrosielski are also presented by Piotr Forecki, even though he introduces a new and original approach. In his analysis of the Gross debate, Forecki, an outstanding scholar from the Political Science and Journalism Department at the University of Poznañ, uses the theory of backlash. Backlash is “a sudden backward movement or reaction” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), but the term is also used in political, academic, and feminist discourse. “A backlash against a tendency or recent development in society or politics is a sudden, strong reaction against it” (Collins English Dictionary-
The publication of Gross's books started a backlash in Polish historiography and public debate. Many people and institutions used a multitude of arguments to sideline Gross, to compromise him, and to prove that he is not entirely right or not right at all. The backlash forces, both the “architects” and the “middlemen” (to use Forecki’s terms), have been doing their best to return to the pre-Gross narrative that showed Poles as a brave nation, fighting against the Germans and protecting the Jews during the Second World War.

The anti-Gross backlash developed a rich dictionary of terms and slogans, many instruments, and supporting institutions. “The countryside was like Jedwabne, the cities—like Žegota [Council for Aid to Jews],” says one of the backlash slogans, meaning that the upper classes of Polish society helped or sympathized with the Jews while the lower classes and mainly the peasants were the perpetrators (p. 20). Gross’s opponents claim that he and his acolytes use a “pedagogy of shame” to reform Poles from a “community of pride” into a “community of shame” (p. 67). Fighting against this intellectual and moral breach is, allegedly, not only fighting for the “Truth” but also defending the good name of Poland and its raison d’état. The opponents support “affirmative patriotism” and resist “critical patriotism” (pp. 51-55, 311). To balance Gross’s arguments, his opponents promote new historical topics, such as the cult of “accursed soldiers” and the crimes of “Judeo-Communism” against the Polish nation (pp. 89-92, 312). They also support “their” historians, such as Andrzej Nowak, Ewa Kurek, Bogdan Musiał, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Jerzy Robert Nowak, Jarosław Szarek, Mateusz Szpytma, and Jan Żaryn, continues Forecki. Among the institutions of backlash, he names the Catholic Church, the government of Poland controlled by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and its new historical policy, the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), and the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. Forecki believes that the historical backlash has strongly affected Poland’s political life and election results.

Forecki claims (and supports this argument) that among the backlash middlemen we can find such outstanding intellectuals as Jan Kieniewicz, Piotr Wandycz, Władysław Bartoszewski, and Andrzej Paczkowski; and that even several historians with positive attitudes toward Gross, such as Marcin Zaremba, Paweł Machcewicz, or Bożena Szajnok, have helped the backlash. The same applies, according to the reviewed books, to some film and theater directors, such as Ryszard Bugajski and Tadeusz Słobodzianek, and a group of “alibi Jews,” such as Norman Finkelstein and Szewach Weiss. Forecki’s conclusions are dispiriting: “Contrary to expectations, since the Jedwabne debate, not only the ignorance of historical facts but also the propensity to reject them or to radically twist their meaning is growing” (p. 230). Forecki quotes a prominent sociologist, Antoni Sułek, whose research indicates that the facts presented by Gross “strengthened or triggered dislike or even hostility toward the Jews” (p. 232).

All three books under review offer interesting and penetrating examinations of the Gross debate. They portray most of its participants and catalogue the crucial issues discussed during this debate. However, they are also disheartening and provoke heavy questions related to the Gross debate in a broader way. How to write history today? How to answer nationalist and conservative visions of history? Are the academic historians, with their heavily footnoted and nuanced texts, able to answer the sledgehammer arguments of populist politicians, sensation-hungry journalists, religious fundamentalists, and intellectual opportunists, looking for popularity?
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