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## What is the State of Polish Historiography Today?\*

**Abstract:** This article describes the evolution of Polish historiography since 1989. Among the subjects which have particularly attracted the attention of historians in these years are how communist power was established, how far the People's Republic of Poland was a sovereign state, whether its political system can accurately be described as 'totalitarian', to what extent the claims of its rulers to have achieved a significant economic and social transformation of Poland are justified and their relations with the Catholic Church. Other topics investigated include the long-term effects of serfdom, the attempts to engage in armed resistance to the regime established in July 1944, and the nature of the agreements that led to the end of communism in 1989. There have also been attempts to explore the controversial issues of Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Jewish relations, above all during the Second World War. Despite the bitterness these controversies have aroused, real progress has been made in our understanding of them, and it is hoped that this will continue.

**Zarys treści:** Artykuł opisuje ewolucję polskiej historiografii od 1989 r. Wśród tematów, które w ostatnich latach szczególnie przyciągały uwagę historyków, znalazły się: sposób ustanowienia władzy komunistycznej, stopień suwerenności Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej, możliwość trafnego opisanie jej systemu politycznego jako „totalitarnego”, zasadność twierdzeń jej władców o dokonaniu znaczącej transformacji gospodarczej i społecznej Polski oraz ich relacje z Kościołem katolickim. Inne badane tematy obejmują długoterminowe skutki pańszczyzny, próby zbrojnego oporu wobec reżimu ustanowionego w lipcu 1944 r. oraz charakter porozumień, które doprowadziły do upadku komunizmu w 1989 r. Podjęta została również próba zbadania kontrowersyjnych kwestii stosunków polsko-ukraińskich i polsko-żydowskich, przede wszystkim w okresie II wojny światowej. Pomimo goryczy, jaką wywołują te kontrowersje, poczyniono rzeczywisty postęp w ich zrozumieniu i należy mieć nadzieję, że zrozumienie to będzie wciąż rosło.

\* In writing this article, I have made extensive use of my own works, most notably 'Toward a Usable Past in Poland', *Polish Review*, 66, no. 4 (2021), 69–77; "The Conquest of History?" Toward a Usable Past in Poland', Lecture 1: An Assessment of the History of Poland since 1939, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 27, no. 1/4 (2004), 217–250; "The Conquest of History?" Toward a Usable Past in Poland', Lecture 2: The Problem of the Dark Past, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 27, no. 1/4 (2004), 251–270; and "The Conquest of History?" Toward a Usable Past in Poland', Lecture 3: Polish-German and Polish-Ukrainian Historical Controversies, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 27, no. 1/4 (2004), 271–313.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** historiografia polska, PRL, podziemie podziemie polityczne i zbrojne (1944–1956), stosunki polsko-żydowskie, stosunki polsko-ukraińskie

Memory is blind to all but the group it binds – which is to assert, as Maurice Halbwachs has argued, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History, on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority.

Pierre Nora<sup>1</sup>

### Polish Historiography until 1989

As is the case with other nations that have been compelled to struggle to regain their lost independence, the Poles have been preoccupied with history and have sought to draw lessons from the past to provide support for their struggles in the present. The first major historical school in the country, which developed in Galicia under the leadership of Fr. Walerian Kalinka, Józef Szujski, and Michał Bobrzyński, was linked with the pro-Habsburg conservatives who had gained control of the province in the 1870s. By attempting to prove that the partitions of Poland had been caused by the weaknesses of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the failings of the Poles themselves, rather than by the machinations of the partitioning powers, they sought to provide the intellectual underpinning for the conservatives' view that the Poles should work within the status quo established by the partitions of the country rather than seek to re-establish the Polish state by armed insurrection, which in their view had proved disastrous. The revival of nationalism in the 1890s and the rejection of tri-loyalism, as the acceptance of partition was categorized, went along with a revision of this view of the Polish past, a revision which is associated with historians such as Władysław Smoleński, Tadeusz Korzoń and Szymon Askenazy who attempted to rehabilitate the efforts of the Poles to modernize their institutions in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, stressing the responsibility of Prussia, Austria and the Tsarist monarchy for the partitions.

In the interwar period, the conflict between Roman Dmowski, who before the First World War had favored a pro-Russian orientation and Józef Piłsudski, who had attempted in the late nineteenth century to revive the anti-Russian insurrectionary tradition was marked by continual reference to the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26, Special Issue: *Memory and Counter Memory* (1990), 7–24 (at p. 9).

previous fifty years in order to justify not only the behavior of leading figures in the past but also to support the present position of the political groupings linked with these two men. As Dmowski himself observed in 1932:

One of the striking splits in our society is the fact that the history of what has taken place in the last few decades, the history of our regaining our independence, and of the political activity which preceded it, is presented in two different, mutually exclusive ways. What one side regards as a ludicrous detail, of no importance or consequence, the other sees as an epic deed of great historical significance; what one side sees as the true precursor of independence, the other sees as a frivolous adventure which did not have disastrous consequences for Poland only because it did not succeed.<sup>2</sup>

During the Stalinist period, after the purge of Gomułka and his associates in November 1949, nationalism came to be seen as one of the main obstacles to the “building of socialism” in Poland, an attitude which was embodied in the historical writing of the time. It was then, as Marian Drozdowski wrote in *Przegląd Kulturalny* in October 1957, that “the whole concept of the left [*lewica społeczna*] in the inter-war period was narrowed so as to include only the communist movement and its ramifications”.<sup>3</sup> Very little actual research was done on the years between 1918 and 1939, a period referred to as “bourgeois-landowner Poland”, and much of the material published consisted of collections of documents, many of them falsified, which were intended to show that the pre-war Communist Party of Poland (KPP) was the only progressive force in the country and that those who had been in positions of power before 1939 had continuously and consciously betrayed Polish national interests.

This state of affairs came to an end with the events of October 1956, which brought Gomułka back to power. Crude Stalinist oversimplifications ceased in historical writing, and censorship was somewhat relaxed, so that the politics of the interwar period could be more dispassionately examined and a more sympathetic analysis of the parties of the non-communist center and left could be undertaken. However, the study of foreign policy and, in particular, of Polish-Soviet relations was still tightly controlled. So too was the history of Poland during the Second World War.

Historians certainly played a large role in undermining the legitimacy of the Polish People's Republic. From the late 1970s, attempts were made to fill in the “blank spots” in the official account of the recent past – the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact, the Katyn Massacre, the nature of the regime established in Poland in July 1944, electoral falsification, legal abuses, and judicial murders in the PRL, and the development of opposition to the regime. At the same time, there appeared

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<sup>2</sup> Roman Dmowski, *Od Obozu Wielkiej Polski do Stronnictwa Narodowego* (Częstochowa, 1932), 157.

<sup>3</sup> Marian M. Drozdowski, ‘O polskiej lewicy społecznej w przededniu II wojny światowej’, *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 47 (1957).

in the underground press discussions of sensitive aspects of the country's history in relation to its national minorities, such as the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 and Operation "Wisła" in which nearly 150,000 Ukrainians were "resettled" after the war from south-eastern Poland in the territories newly acquired from Germany.

Thus it is not surprising that as the Stalinist system was being consolidated, the eminent historian Władysław Konopczyński could have asserted, in a dissident voice, that history is the "mainstay of [our] national existence",<sup>4</sup> a view which was repeated after the negotiated end of communism in 1989 by Andrzej Paczkowski, who claimed in 2004 that "[t]here is a universal conviction that Poles have a special attachment to the past – something which marks them out – and that nowhere do 'coffins rule' more than in Poland".<sup>5</sup>

### **Historiography since the End of Communism: General Problems**

This belief in the importance of studying the national past has not gone unchallenged, and fears have been expressed that since 1989, its centrality in Polish self-understanding has diminished. Thus, Andrzej Wajda, whose films certainly challenged the myths which the Polish People's Republic (PRL) used to bolster its legitimacy, asked plaintively in *Polityka* on 5 June 2004:

[W]hy, after many years when we had so much to say to ourselves and to people outside Poland, at a time when it was so difficult to say anything, have we lost ourselves in conditions of freedom? ...Once our God was History...She formed us, we were molded by our great past, which gave us the right to demand a future better than that offered by People's Poland.

These fears seem somewhat overplayed. Since 1989, research has continued in areas previously subject to strong censorship and control, stimulated by the new freedom and the opening of the archives. In addition, both the daily and weekly press have published large amounts of material on Polish and general history. Academic research on the history of the period between 1944 and 1989 has centered on several topics – how communist power was established, how far was the People's Republic of Poland a sovereign state, can its political system accurately be described as "totalitarian" and how far are the claims of the communist rulers to have achieved a major economic and social transformation of Poland justified? Linked to all these questions is the issue of periodization – can the history of the

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<sup>4</sup> Władysław Konopczyński, 'Dzieje nauki historycznej w Polsce', *Przegląd Powszechny*, 66, no. 228 (1949), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, 'Czerwone i czarne: czy Polska jest przywiązana do narodowej historii', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 14 March 2004, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/czerwone-i-czarne-125630> (accessed 13 Nov. 2025).

PRL be treated as a single entity, or did the political changes of 1956 result in a qualitative change in the political system? A great deal has also been written on different aspects of the Church's experience under the Communists. In addition, there has been an argument over the agreements which led to the negotiated end of the communist system in 1989 – how far should these be seen as a necessary and legitimate compromise, and how far were they the result of the willingness of the more liberal wing of the Polish opposition to make unnecessary concessions to the communists. Attempts have also been made to rehabilitate those who continued to engage in armed resistance to the regime established in July 1944, the “cursed soldiers” (*żołnierze wyklęci*), which have also led to strong criticism of their actions.<sup>6</sup>

Another issue which has aroused considerable attention is the long-term effect of serfdom and the deep division that this created between the nobility and the unfree serfs who constituted the majority of the population. Linked with this is the question of how unfree cultivation was abolished on the Polish lands and how the economic, social and political hegemony of the *szlachta* was undermined and replaced in the nineteenth century by the emergence of competing modern Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and, more slowly, Belarusian nations, a process which also saw the increasing importance within the Jewish community of an ethnic concept of Jewish identity. The extension of the idea of Polishness to wider sections of the population is discussed at length by Patrice Dąbrowski in an article with the title, ‘On Forgetting, Displacement, and Historical Error in Polish History’. In her words: “Until the late eighteenth century, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the country were not considered Poles. This does not mean only that they were of different ethnic or religious groups (and some were). Rather, being a Pole meant being a noble”.

This led to the division of Polish society into what she describes as “Sarmatians... after the myth of common origin that served as the glue to hold together a nobility of different backgrounds and religions in the Commonwealth” whom she claims made up some seven to ten percent of the population “with the rest of the population divided into further estates (townspeople/burghers and peasants)”. Most of the latter group she describes as “Roman Catholic Slavophones” or simply “peasants”. Her article analyzes how these groups came to see themselves as Poles (and indeed Ukrainians or Lithuanians).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On this, see also the lecture of Andrzej Paczkowski delivered at the XX General Conference of Historians in Lublin in 2019, ‘Druga wojna o przeszłość. Rola historii w polityce okresu transformacji’, in Mariusz Mazur and Jan Pomorski (eds), *Wielka zmiana. Historia wobec wyzwań... Pamiętnik XX Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich w Lublinie, 18–20 września 2019 roku*, vol. 3: *Wiek XX i XXI* (Warszawa–Lublin, 2021), 173–21; and Robert Traba, *Historia (nie) na sprzedaż* (Warszawa–Kraków–Budapest–Syracuse, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Patrice Dąbrowski, ‘On Forgetting, Displacement, and Historical Error in Polish History’, in John Bukowczyk and Halina Filipowicz (eds), *Pole/Jew History, Literature, Identity, Future* (Athens, OH, 2025).

Disputes over how this process should be understood have led to bitter arguments, sometimes articulated in the press. Thus, inspired by the concept of “white privilege” as formulated by the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the United States, in an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 28 February 2021, the Polish-Silesian novelist Szczepan Twardoch claimed “I am the descendant of slaves” and attacked the privileged position which those of noble descent and of the intelligentsia derived from it still enjoy in Poland. This led Maciej Radziwiłł (*nomen omen*) to respond on 9 March that “to identify the descendants of oppressors as an oppressive class is genetic Marxism”. Discussing the peasant uprising in Galicia of February and March 1846, in which around 1,200 nobles were murdered, Andrzej Nowak in *Gość.pl* on 1 April 2021 attacked those who identified Polishness (*polskość*) with slavery (*niewolnictwo*) and who argued that emancipation (*emancypacja*) required one to renounce this identity (*zabicie w sobie polskości*). In his view, Polishness should not be identified with serfdom, but is rather to be understood as “progress, emancipation in the direction of the finest model of freedom”.

While a great deal of research had been done on these topics, the period from 1890 to 1939 seems to have attracted much less attention. The archives for this period were accessible during the Polish People’s Republic, and the level of censorship was much lower than that for works on the Second World War and the post-war period. As a consequence, a great deal was then written on this period, although its quality is uneven. This seems to have discouraged new research. Thus, although there has been a certain amount of investigation of Polish foreign policy in the interwar years, this is a subject that would repay more research. What has been written on this topic is often highly politicized. There is also still much to be written on the emergence in the 1890s of the political groupings which dominated Polish political life until 1945, on the way the “Polish Question” developed during the First World War, on the reasons for the breakdown of democratic rule in the 1920s, and on the character of the Piłsudski regime and of its successors after 1935.

### Polish-Ukrainian Historical Disputes

The investigation of the Polish-Ukrainian past has also made progress, but this has been limited by the strength of national resentments on both sides of the San River and by the use of legislation in Ukraine to protect the reputation of the Ukrainian Partisan Army (UPA), which provoked a Polish counterpart somewhat later. New research has concentrated on the origin, duration, and number of casualties of the murderous anti-Polish campaign initiated by the OUN (Orhanizatsiia ukrainskykh natsionalistiv – Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA (Ukrainska Povstanska Armiiia – Ukrainian Insurgent Army) in Volynia in 1943. Polish historians have attempted to provide both long- and short-term explanations for these events. Among the more remote causes, they stress the overpopulation

and backwardness of the territories disputed by Poles and Ukrainians, and the long duration of the conflict. They emphasize such events as the Polish-Ukrainian War over East Galicia in 1918–1919 and the fact that a significant part of Ukrainian society saw Polish rule in the interwar period as a foreign occupation. They also examine the negative consequences of Polish rule, including the liquidation of the bilingual school system in former East Galicia, the “pacification” of 1930, and the destruction of Orthodox Churches in the late 1930s.

The struggle against the local Polish administration led to a radicalization of a section of the Ukrainian political elite and its acceptance of terrorism as a legitimate means in political struggle. This led to an outbreak of brutal inter-ethnic violence during the Second World War. The immediate context of the massacres to which this gave rise was the Soviet and Nazi occupation of these areas after the defeat of Poland in 1939. Soviet deportations in 1940 and 1941 demonstrated that it was possible to “solve” problems by simply removing entire social groups. At the time, the Polish and Ukrainian elites were decimated, and younger and more radical elements came to the fore. The massacres, which began in March and April 1943, have been seen as part of a strategy initiated by the more radical wing of the OUN, the OUN-B, which established the UPA as a partisan formation in April 1943, but different views have been expressed as to the factors which led to its adoption. Some stress the context of the weakening of Nazi control and the fear of the return of the Soviets as a pretext for “cleansing” the area of non-Ukrainian elements, which had been OUN-B policy since May 1941. Others have argued that the key factor was the defection of large numbers to the UPA of Ukrainians from the German-controlled police force, many of whom had already participated in the murder of Jews, which meant that there were now many people able to use arms in the underground, which probably numbered nearly twenty thousand. They were too weak to challenge the Germans, and the local Poles thus became an easy target. In all, perhaps 50,000 Poles perished in Volynia and another 20,000 in East Galicia. Over 10,000 Ukrainians lost their lives in Polish self-defense and reprisal actions, some of the most brutal conducted by Poles in the German-organized police. These issues have been bitterly disputed in Poland and have led to polemics with Ukrainian historians. There have also been debates on Polish-German, Polish-Lithuanian, and even Polish-Russian relations, but these have all been less far-reaching.

### **Disputes over the Polish-Jewish Past**

There has also been increased interest in the Polish-Jewish past. Since 1989, a great deal of valuable research has been done on different aspects of the history of the Jews in the Polish lands. Among the topics which have been addressed are the successes and failures of Jewish integration, the history of Jewish women, Yiddish literature in Poland, the contribution of people of Jewish origin to Polish

literature, Jews in Polish theatre, cabaret and musical life, Judaism both in its Orthodox and progressive forms, the origins and character of antisemitism in the Polish lands and the history of Zionism and of Jewish socialism. This research has greatly contributed to our understanding of the history of the Jews in the Polish lands and has led to a degree of consensus on the main issues it raises.

The history of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War and of the attitude of Polish society to the mass murder of Polish Jews initiated and carried out by the Germans on Polish soil remains one of the most central and also one of the most disputed topics in Polish historiography. John Bukowczyk, one of the editors of the collection of essays, *Pole/Jew History, Literature, Identity, Future*, explained in his introduction why one section of this volume bears the provocative title 'Is There a History of Poland Beyond the Holocaust?' This question was posed because:

it acknowledges, by implication, that the Holocaust is a singular and unique historical event and, accepting the Holocaust as a metonym for Polish-Jewish relations, asserts that Polish-Jewish relations are the central problem in Polish history for our present times.<sup>8</sup>

Historical controversies of this sort have often tended to become extremely acrimonious, as in the polemic caused in the 1960s by the publication of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1961), which argued that Germany bore the major responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War, in the disputes that have arisen in the United States over how the role of slavery is to be evaluated in American history up to the present and over the conflicts as to how to assess Britain's imperial past which is discussed in Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London, 2021).

Clearly, the achievement of a degree of consensus is much more difficult when issues relating to the national identity and its image are involved, as in these cases and as in the case of the fate of the Jews in Poland during the Holocaust. The discussion of such disputed aspects of the national past has been most successful in those countries where civic culture has been most highly developed and where the tradition of debate resting on the acceptance of the good faith of those with whom one disagrees is well established. These principles have come under attack in recent years, not least in Poland, with the rise of populism and the undermining of democratic values, which has several roots. This is partly a reaction against the Reagan- and Thatcher-era marketization and globalization from the 1970s. In East Central Europe, it is fueled by a distaste for those who have profited from the introduction of market reforms after the collapse of communism in the area. It is also linked with politics, which stresses the importance of national identity. Everywhere, it is a reaction against so-called "liberal elites" that are perceived by their opponents

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1.



as lacking in patriotism. It also derives some of its support from the panic fear of immigration and its associated xenophobia. In addition, the new legitimacy that authoritarian regimes enjoy – from Putin’s Russia to Xi’s China – has undermined the attractiveness of the liberal democratic model in much of the developing world. It is not yet clear how far this will be affected by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In this situation, it is not surprising that the debate about the reaction of Polish society to the mass murder of the Jews should have proved so controversial and that, unlike the other issues I have mentioned, little progress has been made in achieving consensus. The arguments about how Poles reacted to the persecution of the Jews go back to the Nazi occupation itself. Emanuel Ringelblum, in his *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War*, written in hiding in a bunker in Warsaw in 1943, posed the following question:

Last summer when the carts packed with Jewish men, women and children moved through the streets of the capital, did there really need to be laughter from the wild mobs resounding from the other side of the ghetto walls, did there really need to prevail such blank indifference in the face of the greatest tragedy of all time?<sup>9</sup>

The way the debate in Poland has developed since the late 1980s is well known, and it is not necessary for me to describe it in detail. This issue was always a matter of public discussion, but the publication of Jan Błoński’s article ‘Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto’ (The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto) in the liberal Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* on 11 January 1987 constituted a major turning point. In it, Błoński called on the Poles to accept some degree of responsibility for the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens under Nazi occupation. This guilt did not consist, in his view, of involvement in the mass murder of the Jews, in which he claimed the Poles did not participate significantly. It had rather two aspects. First, there was the Poles’ “insufficient effort to resist”, their “holding back” from offering help to the Jews. This was the consequence of the second aspect that the Poles had not in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created conditions in which the Jews could be integrated into the Polish national community. He concluded, using very strong language:

If only we had behaved more humanely in the past, had been wiser, more generous, then genocide would perhaps have been “less imaginable”, would probably have been considerably more difficult to carry out, and almost certainly would have met with much greater resistance than it did. To put it differently, it would not have met with the indifference and moral turpitude of the society in whose full view it took place.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Evanston, 1992), 7–8.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Błoński, ‘Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 Jan. 1987. For an English translation, see Antony Polonsky (ed.), *My Brother’s Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London, 1990), 34–52.

The controversy over Błoński's article revealed that the desire to come to terms with the more problematic aspects of the Polish-Jewish past was still to be found only within a minority of the Polish intelligentsia and was certainly not shared by society as a whole. Błoński's position was rejected by most of the two hundred individuals who participated in the debate in *Tygodnik Powszechny*.

The parameters of the debate in Poland in the 1990s seemed to have been set by Błoński and his critics. However, two new developments stimulated a more fundamental rethinking of attitudes toward Jews and the "Jewish question". The first was the large mass of new historical material produced in the years since 1989. This provided a much fuller picture of Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century, showing clearly how desperate the situation of the Jews had become by 1939, with the majority in Polish society and in Polish political parties now adopting the position that the "solution" of the "Jewish problem" was the voluntary or compulsory removal of most Jews from Poland.

The second important development was the emergence of some new Polish-Jewish writers and the more widespread distribution in Poland of the works of already established Polish-Jewish authors. The 1990s were marked by an outburst of creativity by Hanna Krall and Henryk Grynberg, and by the publication of important new writers like Wilhelm Dichter, as well as fictional and autobiographical works by Michał Głowiński, who had previously limited himself to criticism. All dealt extensively with their previously concealed Jewish backgrounds, which had in common their experience in the war as children hidden on the Aryan side and their maturing into adults in the complex post-war years. Their work gave a graphic and largely negative picture of what it was like to be a Jew in a hostile environment both during the war and under communism.

### **The Impact of *Neighbors***

This was the context for the debate provoked by the publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbors* (Princeton University Press, 2001), first published as *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Neighbors, The History of the Destruction of a Jewish Shtetl, Sejny, 2000). Based on the memoirs of Szmul Wasersztajn who survived the massacre and of the evidence produced for the trials in 1949 and 1953 of those accused of participating in it, the book describes in detail an incident in 1941 in the town of Jedwabne in the northeast of today's Poland in which, with some German incitement but little actual assistance, the local population brutally murdered the overwhelming majority of its Jewish neighbours.

The debate on Jedwabne was the most serious, protracted, and profound on the issue of Polish-Jewish relations since the end of the war, and it has not been

concluded.<sup>11</sup> It confirmed the existence of two basic positions among historians in Poland, a self-critical one willing to accept Gross's basic conclusions, even if with modifications, and a more apologetic one, seeking instead to explain and excuse Polish behavior. This same division was evident in response to Gross's two subsequent books, *Fear*, first published in English in June 2006, and in January 2008, in a slightly different version in Polish, as *Strach*, which describes the anti-Jewish violence in Poland after the Second World War focusing on the Kielce pogrom of July 1946, and (with Irena Grudzińska-Gross) *Złote Żniwo: rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów* (Kraków, 2011), translated into English as *Golden Harvest: events at the periphery of the Holocaust* (New York, 2012), which describes how looters attempted to find Jewish valuables on the terrain of the former death camps.

Gross's work has stimulated a new school of Holocaust historians in Poland at the *Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów* (Center for Studies of the Jewish Holocaust) in Warsaw, who have concentrated on the final stage of the Holocaust in Poland, which took place after the initial killings carried out by the *Einsatzgruppe* and the liquidation of the ghettos in the large towns. In the smaller towns of Poland, the ghettos were more porous, and many Jews were able to escape them – one of these historians, Andrzej Żbikowski, estimates over 300,000 did so. Others have given much lower estimates – that of Grzegorz Berendt is around 50,000. Polish-Jewish relations in these towns had been more distant before the war. The Jews who sought shelter among the local population often did not find it, and less than 50,000, according to Żbikowski's estimate, survived to the end of the war, hunted down by the German occupying authorities and often betrayed by the local population, and also, in some well-documented cases, murdered by Home Army units.<sup>12</sup> Such was the fate of the Trinczer family in Gniewczyna in southeastern Poland, described in the Catholic monthly *Znak* in 2008 in articles by Dariusz Libionka and Tadeusz Markiel, an eyewitness. It has now been the subject of a book-length study by Alina Skibińska and Tadeusz Markiel.<sup>13</sup> Two leading members of the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, assembled a team to examine how the policy of mass

<sup>11</sup> The debate about Jedwabne has given rise to an enormous literature, which has been the subject of several serious analytical works including Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, 2004) and Piotr Forecki, *Spór o Jedwabne. Analiza debaty publicznej* (Poznań, 2008). For the report produced by the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, see Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1–2 (Warsaw, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, "'Night Guard': Holocaust Mechanisms in the Polish Rural Areas, 1942–1945", *East European Politics and Societies*, 25, no. 3 (2011), 512–529.

<sup>13</sup> Alina Skibińska and Tadeusz Markiel, *Jakie to ma znaczenie, czy zrobili to z chciwości? Zagłada domu Trynczerów* (Warszawa, 2011).

murder was implemented in a selected number of districts in Nazi-occupied Poland, which was published in a major two-volume, 1,700-page study, *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Night Without an End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland, 2 vols, Warsaw, 2018). This is the subject of ongoing controversy.

There has also been considerable debate between the more apologetic and more self-critical historians in Poland on the evaluation of the number and motivation of those Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews.<sup>14</sup> Although some valuable work had been done on this problem before 1989, most notably by Teresa Prekerowa, the official line, particularly during and after 1968, stressed the high number of rescuers, downplayed the fact that their actions were often disapproved of by society, and failed to differentiate the different categories of rescuers, protectors, and helpers, or examine their motivation.

In the debate over Gross's book, his critics frequently alluded to the over 6,300 Christian Polish rescuers of Jews who have so far been honored by Yad Vashem Memorial Institute in Jerusalem. They claimed that this figure was only a fraction of the total number. Thus, Marcin Urynowicz, basing himself on the numerical estimates made by Gunnar Paulsson of Jews who survived in war-time Warsaw, which many scholars have argued are exaggerated, asserted that there were four hundred thousand Christian Polish rescuers of Jews.<sup>15</sup> These historians also frequently alluded to the heroic actions of people like Irena Sendler, whose organization saved perhaps 2,000 Jews in Warsaw, and the Ulma family in Markowa in the Rzeszów district of Poland, who were murdered by the Germans along with the Jews they were sheltering and who were beatified in September 2023.

The apologetic character of much of this research led to attempts to place the situation of the rescuers in a broader larger historical context, stressing how they were frequently regarded with hostility by the surrounding population and pointing out the often-complex character of their motivation in providing assistance. The figures given by Urynowicz were subjected to a severe critique by Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka,<sup>16</sup> while research has also elucidated the

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<sup>14</sup> This issue is discussed in a nuanced and balanced manner by Joanna Michlic in her article, "'The Many Faces of Memories.'" How do Jews and the Holocaust Matter in Postcommunist Poland', in Theodore Zev Weiss, Hilary Earl, and Karl A. Schleunes, *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, 1st edn (Evanston, IL, 2014), 156–162, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/34574>.

<sup>15</sup> M. Urynowicz, 'Liczenie z pamięci', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 30 Oct. 2007, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/liczenie-z-pamieci-138491> (accessed 13 Nov. 2025). Paulsson's estimate is to be found in *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940–1945* (New Haven, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka, 'Żonglerka liczbami', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 27 Nov. 2007.

complex situation in the Rzeszów district, where, after the murder of the Ulma family, a large number of families who were hiding Jews handed them over to the Nazis or the Polish police, or, in some cases, murdered them.<sup>17</sup> A whole issue of the yearbook *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*, published by the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, was devoted to this subject. It included several articles examining paid rescuers; some of whom later denounced those they rescued or murdered their Jewish charges. There have also been other significant works on this topic.<sup>18</sup> The last word has clearly not been said on this important matter, and the need for what Joanna Michlic characterizes as a “complex and nuanced history of rescue that challenges the old, false schemas of historical thinking about rescuers” is one of the tasks still awaiting the investigation of the Holocaust in Poland.<sup>19</sup>

What has become clear in these debates is that the adoption, planning, and implementation of a policy of the mass murder of the Jews here was the work of the Nazi leadership and the German people, who, for the most part, willingly or unwillingly followed their lead. At the same time, the Nazis gave considerable incentives, both political and material, to those who participated in this genocide and brutally punished, sometimes by death, those who attempted to assist their Jewish neighbors. The debate in Poland would be less envenomed if Polish reactions were compared to the responses to the anti-Jewish genocide of the other national groups in north-eastern Europe – Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Like the Poles, these groups, for the most part, saw themselves as fighting two occupying forces during the Second World War, the Nazis and the Soviets. However, the degree to which they were willing to collaborate with the Nazi occupiers differed significantly. For the Jews, despite the reservations of many Jews at Soviet policy, the Soviets provided an opportunity to survive, and they therefore had no choice but to support them. This inevitably further increased the gulf between the Jews and their neighbors.

<sup>17</sup> Elżbieta Rączy, *Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na Rzeszowszczyźnie, 1939–1945* (Rzeszów, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Among them one could mention Jan Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945*, Search and Research: Lectures and Papers 13 (Jerusalem, 2008); Witold Mędykowski, ‘Sprawiedliwi, niesprawiedliwi? O złożoności stosunków pomiędzy ratującymi a ocalonymi w okresie Zagłady’, in Edyta Czop and Elżbieta Rączy (eds), *Z dziejów polsko-żydowskich w XX wieku*, (Rzeszów, 2009), 27–37; Andrzej Żbikowski (ed.), *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945: Studia i materiały* (Warszawa, 2006), chapters 9 and 10, by Elżbieta Rączy and Anna Pyżewska, respectively; Jacek Leociak, *Ratowanie: Opowieści Polaków i Żydów* (Kraków, 2010); and Małgorzata Melchior, *Zagłada i tożsamość: Polscy Żydzi ocaleni ‘na aryjskich papierach’* (Warszawa, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Joanna B. Michlic, ‘The politics of the memorialization of the Holocaust in Poland: Reflections on the current misuses of the history of rescue’, *Jewish Historical Studies*, 53, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.011>.

## Government Involvement in the Controversy

Clearly, our goal should be to investigate these difficult topics, making use of careful and detailed research based on archives and reliable first-hand testimony. Unfortunately, this approach to history has been challenged recently in Poland on political grounds, claiming that it unjustifiably blackens the reputation of the country. It has also been complicated by the attempt to use the law to resolve these issues, as in the legislation passed by the Polish parliament in late January 2018, amending the law on the prosecution of crimes against the Polish Nation. The most controversial of these amendments held that:

1. Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich, as specified in Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal enclosed to the International agreement for the prosecution and punishment of the major war criminals of the European Axis, signed in London on 8 August 1945 (Polish Journal of Laws of 1947, item 367), or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or whoever otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the true perpetrators of said crimes – shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years. The sentence shall be made public...
2. If the act specified in clause 1 is committed unintentionally, the perpetrator shall be liable to a fine or a restriction of liberty.
3. No offense is committed if the criminal act specified in clauses 1 and 2 is committed in the course of one's artistic or academic activity.<sup>20</sup>

The legislation evoked strong opposition, and, in a surprise move at the end of June 2018, the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, introduced legislation in the Polish parliament that significantly modified the amendments to the law. The clauses I quoted have now been removed from the legislation. The following clause was, however, retained:

Protecting the reputation of the Republic of Poland and the Polish Nation shall be governed by the provisions of the Civil Code Act of 23 April 1964 (Polish Journal of Laws of 2016, items 380, 585, and 1579) on the protection of personal rights. A court action aimed at protecting the Republic of Poland's or the Polish Nation's reputation may be brought by a non-governmental organization within the remit of its statutory activities. Any resulting compensation or damages shall be awarded to the State Treasury...

Article 53p. A court action aimed at protecting the Republic of Poland's or the Polish Nation's reputation may also be brought by the Institute of National Remembrance. In such cases, the Institute of National Remembrance shall have the capacity to be a party to court proceedings.

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<sup>20</sup> Text of the Holocaust-related legislation adopted by both houses of the Polish Parliament, as provided in Polish by the Polish government to Israel's Foreign Ministry, and translated by the ministry, 31 Jan. 2018, cited in *Times of Israel*, 1 Feb. 2018.

In addition, clauses relating to penalization for the denial of crimes “committed by Ukrainian nationalists and members of Ukrainian units collaborating with the Third Reich” remained in the legislation, echoing similar legislation in Ukraine.

The amendment of the legislation was accompanied by a joint statement by the Prime Ministers of Poland and Israel. In it, they condemned “every single case of cruelty against Jews perpetrated by Poles during... World War II” but also noted “heroic acts of numerous Poles, especially the Righteous Among the Nations, who risked their lives to save Jewish people”. The declaration condemned anti-Semitism and anti-Polonism and affirmed that “[w]e believe that there is a common responsibility to conduct free research, to promote understanding and to preserve the memory of the history of the Holocaust”.<sup>21</sup>

This, however, did not resolve the dispute, and the divisions it had created returned when a libel action was brought in February 2021 in the Warsaw District Court by 79-year-old Filomena Leszczyńska, supported by a right-wing foundation, *Reduta Dobrego Imienia* (Redoubt of the Good Name of Poland). It was alleged that in the book *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, which I have mentioned above, Barbara Engelking, author of one of its sections, and its co-editor Jan Grabowski had libeled her uncle, the late Edward Malinowski, mayor (*sołtys*) of the village of Malinowo, located in the district of Bielsk Podlaski, near Białystok, in present-day eastern Poland, by claiming that he had been implicated in the roundup of Jewish citizens of his district.

Referring to one paragraph written by Barbara Engelking, Leszczyńska claimed that it was not true that her uncle had defrauded a fugitive Jewish woman, Estera Drogicka (née Siematycka), or that he had assisted in the rounding up and murder by the German occupiers of a group of over twenty Jews hiding in a nearby forest. (At his trial in August 1949 for collaboration under the law of August 1945, in which he was acquitted, Malinowski had admitted to participating in the roundup but denied involvement in the murder of any Jews). Drogicka had spoken in Malinowski’s defense at this trial (perhaps under coercion) but had accused him of these actions in her hours-long testimony to the Shoah Foundation given much later in 1996. Explaining this discrepancy, Drogicka, who had subsequently remarried and was now known as Maria Wiltgren, explicated, “When the war ended, he would have been sentenced to death... I saved him even though he did me much harm”. It seems that she felt some gratitude to Malinowski, who, by helping her pass as a non-Jew and by sending her to Germany as a forced laborer, had saved her life.

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<sup>21</sup> The joint statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, available on line at <https://www.ijl.org/joint-statement-of-israel-and-poland/> (accessed 13 Nov. 2025).

The lawsuit was clearly intended to discredit the major 1700-page-long two-volume study edited by Grabowski and Engelking, and the plaintiff won her action in the lower court. This decision was overturned in August 2021 in the appeals court, where Judge Joanna Wiśniewska-Sadowska held that:

[i]nterference in scholarly research is not the responsibility of the courts...In this situation, the opinion of the appeals court, to evaluate or reject the scholarship involved, as is demanded, would constitute an unacceptable interference in the freedom of scholarly research and speech. It cannot be ruled out that the results of this research are not free from mistakes of fact or interpretation. However, these cannot be the basis for a decision in this matter. A courtroom is not the appropriate place for conducting a historical debate.<sup>22</sup>

The *Reduta Dobrego Imienia* appealed the case to the Supreme Court, and it was only the death of Filomena Leszczyńska in October 2021 that caused the appeal to lapse

Certainly, we can anticipate more libel actions of this type. While individuals are entitled to protect their reputations, such actions seem to be a blunt instrument. How to interpret documents dealing with such complex topics is very difficult. Essentially, the issue is one of intellectual honesty and good faith and clearly there are many people who are, above all, concerned to advance an agenda to which they are deeply committed. There is also the question of whether you can libel the dead. Who speaks on their behalf?

In this situation, there is a need to find common ground between two incompatible and conflicting views of the Polish past, which affect not only the discussion of Jewish issues but the study of Polish history more generally. What is at issue here is not primarily a conflict about facts but a more deep-rooted divide which reflects a clash between two views of society. Those who favor a more self-critical approach see society as made up of different and often competing groups in which understandings of the past may differ and in which a reckoning with the negative aspects of the national history is necessary for building a pluralistic, outward-looking, and tolerant polity. Its adherents see the nation as something that emerged in particular circumstances and whose identity can change over time.

The other view is centered on the nation and the community of which it is composed, which is seen as primordial and transcending the transient individuals of which it is comprised. This is why, as Brian Porter-Szűcs has argued, history is vitally important for the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party (PiS – Law and Justice) which ruled Poland from 2015 to 2023 and which may soon return to power, for which it is “the biography of the national community and the source of the traditions and

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<sup>22</sup> Judgement on behalf of the Republic of Poland, 16 Aug. 2012, available at: [https://www.ijl.org/grabowski\\_engelking-full/](https://www.ijl.org/grabowski_engelking-full/) (accessed 13 Nov. 2025).



values that hold everything together”.<sup>23</sup> The Institute for National Memory, when it came under PiS control in 2016 and was used aggressively to promote and an apologetic view of the Polish past, defined the goal of historical study in 2016 as follows:

Historical policy refers to the interpretation of facts, lives, and events and is assessed according to the interests of the society and the nation, as an element that has a long-range character and constitutes the foundation of state policies. Historical policy is a type of history that serves to shape the historical consciousness of society, including economic and territorial consciousness, as well as to strengthen public discourse about the past in the direction of nurturing national bonds, regardless of the momentary policies of the state.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the issue is not historical truth as such; instead, history is important because it is the “constitutes the foundation of state policies”. It is those stories that a community tells and retells in order to establish a bond between generations and to teach young people what “we” believe – one of those factors that must never be contested or debated. To quote Porter-Szűcs again:

The supporters of PiS complain about historical accounts that refuse to clearly identify who is a hero and who a villain, who a victim and who a perpetrator, who a martyr and who an oppressor. When historians say (as we are inclined to do) that our scholarship should reveal the complexities, nuances, and multiple perspectives of the past, we are directly repudiating the role that PiS believes we should play... What was lacking [in the scholarly historiography] was a clear, unambiguous account that was sanctified by public commemorations, evoked in lofty speeches, immortalized in inspiring films and novels, and above all taught to everyone in school. PiS wants to establish a canon of stories that everyone knows, that everyone evokes to identify the good guys and the bad guys, that everyone treats with solemnity and reverence as the unquestioned and unchanging core of their shared identity.<sup>25</sup>

This dispute is of long-standing. As early as 2004, Andrzej Paczkowski correctly observed that one of “the most significant phenomena of the last fifteen years has been the emergence, concretization (also in political life) of competing positions in the sphere of memory and in relation to the national past”.<sup>26</sup> This process has gone much further in recent years. It is not impossible for this gap to be diminished, since there is considerable common ground between these two understandings of how history should be written. It is important not to demonize the historians of whom one disapproves; there is a role both for a patriotic history which celebrates the achievements of the nation and for one which also points out the mistakes and wrongdoings committed in the past.

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<sup>23</sup> Brian Porter-Szűcs, ‘Meritocracy and Community in Twenty-First-Century Poland’, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37, no. 1 (2019), 87.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

One hopeful sign seemed to be the very positive reaction of Polish society to the problem of the absorption of Ukrainian refugees and the awareness of all in Poland of what is at stake in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, more recently a sense of fatigue has developed and there is growing resentment at the presence in the country of around one million Ukrainian refugees. In addition, President Karol Nawrocki appears to be taking a harder line on Ukraine, calling for “the search for and exhumation of the victims of the genocide in Volynia”.<sup>27</sup>

Another reason for optimism was the coming to power in Poland following the elections of October 2023 of a new coalition government in Poland, which seems to be committed to the maintenance of academic freedom and to limiting the direct involvement of the government in historical study and discussion. This government appointed new directors to the Jewish Historical Institute, the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and, more controversially, the Museum of Polish History and took some limited steps to curb the excesses of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej. However, more recently, with the election of Karol Nawrocki as President of Poland, its position has become significantly weaker and its hold of power may be coming to end.

### **The Impact of the Gaza Crisis on Polish Discussions of Antisemitism and the Holocaust**

The violent conflict initiated by Hamas’s incursion into Israel on 7 October 2023 has inevitably affected discussions of antisemitism and Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. The argument that we now live in a very different world was brutally put by the Indian novelist and essayist Pankaj Mishra in the V.S. Naipaul Memorial Lecture, ‘The Shoah after Gaza’ delivered on 12 March 2024 and published a week later in the *London Review of Books*. Describing those who criticize Israel’s actions in Gaza, he observed:

Whether or not they know about the Shoah, they reject the crude social-Darwinist lesson Israel draws from it – the survival of one group of people at the expense of another. They are motivated by the simple wish to uphold the ideals that seemed so universally desirable after 1945: respect for freedom, tolerance for the otherness of beliefs and ways of life; solidarity with human suffering; and a sense of moral responsibility for the weak and persecuted. These men and women know that if there is any bumper sticker lesson to be drawn from the Shoah, it is “Never Again for Anyone”: the slogan of the brave young activists of Jewish Voice for Peace.

This led James McAuley, to respond in a letter on 4 April 2024 to the *London Review of Books*:

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<sup>27</sup> *Rzeczpospolita*, 12 July 2025.

Pankaj Mishra seems to suggest that it is unreasonable for Jews to see the Shoah as a Jewish tragedy that could reasonably change the way they think about communal solidarity, national sovereignty or Zionism. There is a certain arrogance in requiring Jews – or any other group of history’s victims, for that matter – to feel a certain way about their communal past, to shed any sense of particularity, and to become universalized representatives for any number of enlightened abstractions, somehow always chosen by other people. The appropriate lessons of the Shoah, Mishra writes, are “respect for freedom, tolerance for the otherness of beliefs and ways of life; solidarity with human suffering; and a sense of moral responsibility for the weak and persecuted”. Those are fine lessons to which any group should aspire, but Jews are also real people with real fears, real concerns and real experiences. They are not avatars, and they are not metaphors in someone else’s morality play.

The impact of the war in Gaza has also been directly felt in Poland. Among the seven aid workers tragically killed by the Israel Defence Force on 1 April 2024 was a thirty-five-year-old Pole, Damian Soból. The initial reaction of Yacov Livne, Israel’s ambassador to Poland, was maladroit, criticizing on social media what he described as the attempts of the “extreme right and left in Poland” to accuse Israel of “intentional murder in the attack”. His comments were described by President Andrzej Duda on as “outrageous”. Duda observed that the authorities in Israel had spoken about the tragedy “in a very subdued way”, but added, “[u]nfortunately, their ambassador to Poland is not able to maintain such delicacy and sensitivity, which is unacceptable”. Similar views were expressed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who said that the comments of the ambassador had offended Poles, and he should apologize. Poland’s Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski, likewise called on him to show more “humility”. Ambassador Livni was summoned to the Polish Foreign Ministry on 5 April 2024. He now adopted a much more conciliatory position, expressing his “personal deep sorrow and sincere apologies” for the death of Soból and the other aid workers and asking to be put in contact with his family possibly to offer compensation. “We share in the grief of the families from the bottom of our hearts. I assured the deputy minister that Israel is fully committed to a transparent and thorough investigation of this grave tragedy.”<sup>28</sup>

It did not take long for Mishra’s lecture to evoke responses in Poland. The first of these was voiced by Professor Monika Bobako of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in *Krytyka Polityczna* on 2 August 2024. A scholar of the issues of race and racism, including Islamophobia and antisemitism, she is the author of *Demokracja wobec różnicy. Multikulturalizm i feminizm w perspektywie polityki*

<sup>28</sup> For these statements, see OKO press, 5 Apr. 2024, <https://oko.press/na-zywo/na-zywo-wybory-samorzadowe/ambasador-izraela-przeprosil-za-zabicie-polskiego-wolontariusza>; Vanessa Gera, ‘Diplomatic crisis erupts between Poland and Israel following killing of Polish aid worker in Gaza’, *Associated Press*, 5 Apr. 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/poland-israel-tensions-aid-worker-death-5d7cb5548f9d1a8d469aa158dde8148>; *The Times of Israel*, 11 Apr. 2024.

uznania (Poznań, 2010) and *Islamofobia jako technologia władzy. Studium z antropologii politycznej* (Kraków, 2017). She was sharply critical of the way Israel has conducted the war in Gaza, following *The Lancet* in giving a very high number of the estimated casualties it is likely to cause (186,000). In her view, “[w]ithout confronting the fact that a certain type of conceptualization of antisemitism leads to the dehumanization and disempowerment of Palestinians, it is impossible to maintain the cognitive, ethical and political coherence of research on antisemitism and programmes to combat it”. She gave a highly critical account of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians since the establishment of the state and argued that the Holocaust “has become a common ploy used by those seeking to justify the legitimacy of the operation [in Gaza]”.

Critical research on the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations, in her view, had sought to achieve a number of goals. These included the pursuit of historical truth and the reduction of Polish ignorance about their own past, especially its less glorious chapters Secondly, in the political dimension, this research helps to counter the xenophobic traditions of Polish nationalism and the historical myths they produce and finally, in the ethical dimension, this research should “be understood as an endeavor to establish what in the humanities in recent years has been called epistemic justice”, the right of individuals and communities to have their knowledge and understanding of the world recognized, valued, and respected.

For this research to have a major impact, it needs to “meet the highest standards of cognitive honesty and moral perspicacity”. This leads her to pose the question: “how does Polish research and discussion on the Holocaust and antisemitism protect itself from being included in the machinery of the instrumentalization we have described and how does it safeguard its authority from unwanted use in a bad cause?” Her conclusion was drastic: “Without honestly confronting the ‘Palestinian question’ and opening our eyes to the drama of the Palestinians, including its current phase, the normative legacy inherent in research into the Holocaust and antisemitism will be difficult to preserve”.

Professor Jacek Leociak, a leading scholar of the Holocaust and one of the founders of the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, expressed himself more moderately. In an interview with the writer Hanna Grupańska in the online *Oko press* on 22 December 2024, while recognizing the tragic nature of the conflict and the appalling human suffering it involved, he argued that it was important to distinguish between antisemitism and anti-Zionism and that it was possible to criticize Israel’s actions without being antisemitic. He argued that while we have a duty to commemorate the Holocaust, we should avoid ritualization, “the creation of a public spectacle out of it”. At the same time, he warned against the instrumentalization of the Israeli national trauma of 7 October, “of weaving despair and pain into a narrative that legitimizes violence, fueling a hunger for revenge and hatred”.

Ewa Górka of the University of Wrocław in the online journal *Dwutygodnik* no. 406, February 2025, took a more extreme position. She was not concerned with the study of antisemitism or Polish Jewish relations, but, above all, argued that “[t]he freedom of the Palestinians is our common cause, and is part of the global quest for equality, human rights and the protection of nature”. In her view: “[M]odern Palestinian history reveals the mechanisms of settler colonialism, which seeks to replace the indigenous population with new settlers through the systematic eradication of Palestinian identity and the violent appropriation of space”.

Responding to her in *Dwutygodnik*, no. 410, April 2025, Kamil Kijek of the University of Wrocław argued that what was needed was to recognize that:

[a] different understanding of history is possible. One that does not conform to one of the two extremely polarized and discourses conducted in the media on the Middle East conflict today. It is worth talking about the history of this part of the world without blind one-sidedness and without false symmetry, trying really to understand what happened.

His goal, he claimed, was “to challenge the simplistic account of Palestinian-Israeli history and Arab-Jewish relations, based on a simple few-sentence definition of ‘settler colonialism’, which has generated an interpretation of history affecting many millions of people”. He gave an account of the emergence of the Zionist movement, which in his view, was by no means created single-handedly by Theodor Herzl or solely in response to the European antisemitic discourse of the time, but was also a genuine national revival. Jewish settlement in Palestine did not always involve conflict with the local Arab population, and there were times when the coexistence of Jews and Arabs in Palestine certainly seemed possible. When the Hamas incursion took place, there were 7.2 to 7.3 million Jews living in Israel.

Kijek concluded:

Making this multi-million-strong group and its complex history an uncritical symbol has yet another effect – that of a dangerous political utopia. Its indiscriminately anti-Israeli point of view pits the indigenous Palestinian people, who are held to have an absolute right to the entire land from ‘the river to sea’, against the Jews, the colonizers, who are only accidentally present here.

In his view, the negative consequences of this are obvious. This simple-minded position

reinforces the symbiosis of Israel’s ruling coalition of Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir with Hamas that is driving today’s tragedy. For it has been clear, at least for the last twenty-five years, that each side reinforces the other with its radicalism, mutually sustaining each other in power; The total delegitimization of Israel’s right to exist strengthens Jewish radicals and weakens Jewish critics of today’s Israeli government, giving them no alternative. An uncritical view of the Palestinian cause strengthens fundamentalist radicals whose values are far from the emancipatory and egalitarian ideals espoused by Ewa Górka.

The crisis has also created problems for the major Jewish institutions in Poland, among them the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland). When the Polin Museum was accused of supporting Hamas in the months after 7 October 2023, Zygmunt Stępiński, its Director, and Piotr Wiślicki, President of the Board of the Stowarzyszenie, issued a public letter:

In light of unfounded allegations in the media by a single individual who claims that POLIN Museum cooperates with organizations that support Hamas and finance terrorism, we wish to defend the POLIN Museum against such defamatory accusations.

Responding to the brutal massacre of innocent Israelis by Hamas on October 7, POLIN Museum has stood in solidarity with Israel and with efforts to free the hostages. The Museum has requested the Polish President's support in securing the release of hostages, in particular Alex Dancyg, a dear friend of the POLIN Museum. The Museum has issued multiple statements condemning the attack and publicly called for the immediate release of hostages taken by Hamas...

We wish to underscore our steadfast commitment to Israel. While we are always open to criticism and dialogue, we will never tolerate such unfounded and defamatory allegations.

Subsequently, Director Stępiński issued a second statement on 11 August 2025:

I always try to call evil evil.

The bloody attack by Hamas was undoubtedly evil. On 7 October 2023, terrorists committed an unprecedented crime. Their treacherous attack on Israel, planned and carried out with unprecedented brutality from Gaza, did not serve a military purpose: it was about murdering and kidnapping as many innocent Israeli civilians as possible. One of the victims of this crime is Alex Dancyg, a historian, a collaborator of our museum, a man whose life mission was reconciliation – seeking what unites us – despite differences and past grievances.

The death and suffering of Palestinians as a result of Israeli intervention in the Gaza Strip – from bombs, bullets, hunger, and disease – is also evil. These people are dying without any possibility of influencing their fate: they cannot escape, receive medical help, or even surrender...

I want to address you directly – our audience, who demand that the museum take a stand on the war in Gaza...

I agree with the opinion of numerous Israeli intellectuals (as well as those representing the diaspora around the world) that the key to peace is not the trigger of a rifle. Even if it seems unrealistic or even inappropriate today, returning to the path of dialogue is the only option. The passage of time can only increase the blood that will have to be shed to reach this conclusion.

For me, as someone who has experienced living under totalitarianism and actively fought against it, democracy means more than just a method of selecting governments, a set of rules, and written laws. Democracy – mature, strong, lasting, and just – is also empathy. Empathy is not a sign of weakness. It is a strength that allows us to survive.

## Conclusion

As the case of Gaza demonstrates, historians, however much they would like to, cannot but be affected by contemporary developments. Different interpretations of complex historical phenomena are inevitable, and historians should clearly be

aware of this and be willing to accept that no one has a monopoly on the truth. One would like to believe, as Cicero wrote in *De oratore*, that *historia vitae magistra est*, that “history is the teacher of life” and that it can provide valuable lessons for the present and future. However, we have to recognize the deep divisions in Polish society, which have given rise to the often mutually incompatible explanations of the past I have described. There are many scholars of the Polish past in Poland and elsewhere who have attempted to provide nuanced, archival-based, and dispassionate accounts of the difficult problems of the past. We need to continue pursuing this approach, and to do so in a transnational manner. In my view, this will show how similar situations gave rise to similar reactions and that the issue is not one of a unique “national guilt”.

In addition, as scholars like Dan Michman and Saul Friedländer have pointed out, one of the major dilemmas faced by historians of the Holocaust is the issue of defining and conceptualizing this event. As Michman has written, “Explanation is only the last stage in the historian’s process of ‘understanding’ and ‘comprehending’ the nature of the process”.<sup>29</sup> Saul Friedländer’s *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (New York, 2007) goes still further. An attempt to write a transnational account of the “Final Solution”, this book succeeds in integrating the way Nazi policies towards the Jews developed with the issue of collaboration and indifference in the areas which came under Nazi rule, and also incorporates the perspective of the victims, as reflected in diaries and memoirs. Friedländer makes it clear that while the main decisions which led to the anti-Jewish genocide were taken by the Nazi leadership in Berlin, the anti-Jewish obsession of the Nazis as well as the willing collaboration and widespread indifference of so many people across Europe has to be seen as the consequence of pervasive nature of various forms of anti-Jewish hatred, ranging from Hitler’s racist, redemptive antisemitism to more conventional forms of Christian anti-Jewish prejudice. The relevance of the insights of these scholars for our understanding of the Polish situation is clear.

We need, in addition, to answer more moderate critics of what one can describe as “critical” history who have claimed it devotes excessive attention to the ‘dark past’ and, in particular, to the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews. This, they claim, undermines the national community. This view has been articulated by the historian Andrzej Nowak. In his view, what is involved in this dispute, “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”; the result was a dangerous exercise in national “self-flagellation”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues* (London–Portland, OR, 2003), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Andrzej Nowak, ‘Westerplatte czy Jedwabne’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 Aug. 2001.

Yet, in spite of the bitterness of the controversies I have described in this article, real progress has been made in our understanding of the Polish past. In addition, for all its faults, the democratic and pluralist political system does seem to have consolidated itself in Poland. As historians, let us hope we can contribute to further strengthening this process and to the better understanding of the past that it will promote.

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