

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Jan T. Gross: Neighbors

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2001, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

I NTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century Europe has been shaped decisively by the actions of two men. It is to Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin that we owe totalitarianism—if not its invention, then certainly its most determined implementation. The loss of life for which they are jointly responsible is truly staggering. Yet it is not what happened but what has been prevented from ever taking place that gives a truer measure of totalitarianism’s destructiveness: “the sum of unwritten books,” as one author put it. In fact, the sum of thoughts unthought, of unfeelt feelings, of works never accomplished, of lives un-lived to their natural end.¹

Not only the goals but also the methods of totalitarian politics crippled societies where they were deployed, and among the most gripping was the institutionalization of resentment. People subject to Stalin's or Hitler's rule were repeatedly set against each other and encouraged to act on the basest instincts of mutual dislike. Every conceivable cleavage in society was eventually exploited, every antagonism exacerbated. At one time or another city was set against the countryside, workers against peasants, middle peasants against poor peasants, children against their parents, young against old, and ethnic groups against each other. Secret police encouraged, and thrived on, denunciations: *divide et impera* writ large. In addition, as social mobilization and mass participation in state-sponsored institutions and rituals were required, people became, to varying degrees, complicitous in their own subjugation.

Totalitarian rulers also imposed a novel pattern of occupation in the territories they conquered. As a result, wrote Hannah Arendt, "they who were the Nazis' first accomplices and their best aides truly did not know what they were doing nor with whom they were

dealing.”² It turned out that there was no adequate word in European languages to define this relationship. The term “collaboration”—in its specific connotation of a morally objectionable association with an enemy—came into usage only in the context of the Second World War.³ Given that armed conflicts, conquests, wars, occupations, subjugations, territorial expansions, and their accompanying circumstances are as old as recorded human history, one wonders what novelty in the phenomenon of German occupation during the Second World War stimulated the emergence of a fresh concept.⁴ A comprehensive answer to this question would have to be sought in multiple studies of German regimes of occupation.

After the fact, public opinion all over Europe recoiled in disgust at virtually any form of engagement with the Nazis (in an arguably somewhat self-serving and not always sincere reaction). “It is nearly impossible to calculate the total number of persons targeted by post-war retribution, but, even by the most conservative estimates, they numbered several million, that is 2 or 3 percent of the population formerly under German occupation,” writes

Istvan Deák in a recent study. “Punishments of the guilty ranged from lynchings during the last months of the war to postwar death sentencing, imprisonment, or hard labor. Added to those harsh punishments were condemnation to national dishonor, the loss of civic rights, and/or monetary fines as well as such administrative measures as expulsions, police supervision, loss of the right to travel or to live in certain desirable places, dismissal, and the loss of pension rights.”⁵ “This was a war,” to quote Heda Kovaly’s poignant memoir from Prague, “that no one had quite survived.”⁶

While the experience of the Second World War has to a large extent shaped the political makeup and destinies of all European societies in the second half of the twentieth century, Poland has been singularly affected. It was over the territory of the pre-1939 Polish state that Hitler and Stalin first joined in a common effort (their pact of nonaggression signed in August 1939 included a secret clause dividing the country in half) and then fought a bitter war until one of them was eventually destroyed. As a result Poland suffered a demographic catastrophe without precedent; close to 20 percent of its population died of war-

related causes. It lost its minorities—Jews in the Holocaust, and Ukrainians and Germans following border shifts and population movements after the war. Poland's elites in all walks of life were decimated. Over a third of its urban residents were missing at the conclusion of the war. Fifty-five percent of the country's lawyers were no more, along with 40 percent of its medical doctors and one-third of its university professors and Roman Catholic clergy.⁷ Poland was dubbed "God's playground" by a sympathetic British historian,⁸ but during that time it must have felt more like a stomping ground of the devil.

The centerpiece of the story I am about to present in this little volume falls, to my mind, utterly out of scale: one day, in July 1941, half of the population of a small East European town murdered the other half—some 1,600 men, women, and children. Consequently, in what follows, I will discuss the Jedwabne murders in the context of numerous themes invoked by the phrase "Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War."⁹

First and foremost I consider this volume a challenge to standard historiography of the

Second World War, which posits that there are two separate wartime histories—one pertaining to the Jews and the other to all the other citizens of a given European country subjected to Nazi rule. This is a particularly untenable position with respect to Poland's history of those years, given the size of, and social space occupied by, Polish Jewry. On the eve of the war, Poland's was the second largest agglomeration of Jews in the world, after the American Jewry. About 10 percent of prewar Polish citizens identified themselves—either by Mosaic faith or by declaring Yiddish to be their mother tongue—as Jews. Nearly one-third of the Polish urban population was Jewish. And yet the Holocaust of Polish Jews has been bracketed by historians as a distinct, separate subject that only tangentially affects the rest of Polish society. Conventional wisdom maintains that only “socially marginal” individuals in Polish society—the so-called *szmalcownicy*,¹⁰ or “scum,” who blackmailed Jews, and the heroes who lent them a helping hand—were involved with the Jews.

This is not the place to argue in detail why such views are untenable. Perhaps it is

not even necessary to dwell at length on this matter. After all, *how can the wiping out of one-third of its urban population be anything other than a central issue of Poland's modern history?* In any case, one certainly needs no great methodological sophistication to grasp instantly that when the Polish half of a town's population murders its Jewish half, we have on our hands an event patently invalidating the view that these two ethnic groups' histories are disengaged.

The second point that readers of this volume must keep in mind is that Polish-Jewish relations during the war are conceived in a standard analysis as mediated by outside forces—the Nazis and the Soviets. This, of course, is correct as far as it goes. The Nazis and the Soviets were indeed calling the shots in the Polish territories they occupied during the war. But one should not deny the reality of autonomous dynamics in the relationships between Poles and Jews within the constraints imposed by the occupiers. There were things people could have done at the time and refrained from doing; and there were things they did not have to do but nevertheless did. Ac-

cordingly, I will be particularly careful to identify who did what in the town of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941, and at whose behest.

In August 1939, as is well known, Hitler and Stalin concluded a pact of nonaggression. Its secret clauses demarcated the boundaries of influence spheres between the two dictators in Central Europe. One month later the territory of Poland was carved out between the Third Reich and the USSR. The town of Jedwabne first found itself in the Soviet zone of occupation and later, after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, was taken over by the Nazis. An important issue I thus felt compelled to address concerns the standard historiographical perspective on Soviet-Jewish relations during the twenty-month-long Soviet rule over the half of Poland the Red Army occupied starting in September 1939. Again this is not the place to put the matter to rest.¹¹ We will simply have to remember that according to the current stereotype Jews enjoyed a privileged relationship with the Soviet occupiers. Allegedly the Jews collaborated with the Soviets at the expense of the Poles, and therefore an outburst of brutal Polish antisemitism, at the time the Nazis invaded the USSR, may have come in the terri-

tories liberated from under Bolshevik rule in 1941 as a response to this experience. I therefore explore whether there were any linkages between what happened in Jedwabne under the Soviet occupation (September 1939–June 1941) and immediately thereafter.

The Jedwabne massacre touches upon yet another historiographical topos concerning this epoch—one maintaining that Jews and communism were bound by a mutually beneficial relationship. Hence, allegedly, the presence of antisemitism among broad strata of Polish society (or any other East European society, for that matter) after the war, and the special role Jews played in establishing and consolidating Stalinism in Eastern Europe. I will address this issue briefly in the discussion of my study's sources and will return to these and related matters in the concluding chapters.

As to the broader context of Holocaust studies, this book cannot be easily located on the functionalist–intentionalist spectrum. It stands askew of this distinction, already blurred in recent Holocaust historiography, and belongs instead to a genre—“only now beginning to receive appropriate scholarly atten-

tion”—that belabors the “pepetrators-victims-bystanders” axis.¹² But it shows that these terms are also fuzzy and can be read as a reminder that each episode of mass killing had its own situational dynamics. This is not a trivial point, for it means—and further studies will, I think, demonstrate that Jedwabne was not unique in this respect—that in each episode many specific individual decisions were made by different actors present on the scene, who decisively influenced outcomes. And, thus, it is at least conceivable that a number of those actors could have made different choices, with the result that many more European Jews could have survived the war.

In an important respect, however, this is a rather typical book about the Holocaust. For, as is not true of historical studies we write about other topics, I do not see the possibility of attaining closure here. In other words, the reader will not emerge with a sense of satisfied yearning for knowledge at the conclusion of reading; I certainly did not do so at the conclusion of writing. I could not say to myself when I got to the last page, “Well, I understand now,” and I doubt that my readers will be able to either.

Of course one must proceed with the exposition and analysis *as if* it were possible to understand, and address prevailing interpretive historiographical strands. But I think it is in the nature of the subject matter that we will have to pose queries at the end of the story—and how about this? and how about that? And this is just as well, since perhaps the only relief we may hope to find when confronted with the Holocaust is in the process of asking such endless follow-up questions, to which we will continue to look for answers. The Holocaust thus stands at a point of departure rather than a point of arrival in humankind's ceaseless efforts to draw lessons from its own experience. And while we will never “understand” why it happened, we must clearly understand the implications of its having taken place. In this sense it becomes a foundational event of modern sensibility, forever afterward to be an essential consideration in reflections about the human condition.