Poland’s war with Jan Tomasz Gross

David Liebers

Polish President Andrzej Duda has demanded a review of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland bestowed on historian Jan Tomasz Gross two decades ago. This move towards stripping the decoration from a leading scholar of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War has drawn criticism from virtually every scholar of Eastern European history writing in English. Yale historian Timothy Snyder tweeted: ‘If they take away Gross’s award, they can have mine back, too.’

Gross’s contested historical writing is set against the backdrop of Poland’s painful and complex wartime past. Five years of alternating German and Soviet occupations resulted in the annihilation of Poland’s nearly thousand-year-old Jewish community and the death of millions of Poles. The Soviet re-occupation resulted in the expulsion of Poland’s German and Ukrainian minorities birthing a homogeneous communist state that fostered a Polish ethno-national understanding of the past which supplanted the messier interethnic negotiations of interwar Poland.

As a consequence, during Poland’s four decades of communism Jews did not figure in historical narratives of the nation’s suffering during the Second World War. The state memorial at Auschwitz, for example, documented victims of the infamous camp only by nationality, with no mention of the Jews who made up the majority of the dead. They were subsumed within Polish victimhood.

But the end of communism in 1989 brought new narratives. For the first time the Polish public encountered the ambivalent—if not hostile—memory of wartime Poles held by American and Israeli Jews: the almost complete abandonment of Polish Jews by their gentile neighbors. This clash of competing views coincided with a broader rediscovery in Poland of national Jewish history and individual Jewish roots at the same time as American Jews began tentatively to explore a renewed interest in Poland.

That is why Gross’s scholarship, which probes the complexities of the wartime relationship between gentile and Jewish Poles, is both so important and so fundamentally controversial. After being granted Poland’s honor for expatriate Poles and foreigners in 1996, Gross produced a triad of books—Neighbors in 2001, Fear in 2006, and Golden Harvest in 2012—that laid out the very real anti-Semitism that existed alongside Polish nationalism during and after the war. Gross has held up a mirror to Polish society and challenged it to reconsider its national mythology of unalloyed martyrdom during the Second World War.

Gross’s early academic success was informed by his family’s difficulties under Nazi rule and Soviet-controlled communism. His mother hid—and therefore saved—his Jewish father during the German occupation. She was unable to save her first husband (also Jewish) who was killed after being denounced to the Germans. Later, Gross’s involvement in student protests at university led to the family’s departure from Poland during communist leader Władysław Gomułka’s anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. The question of how societies accommodate, collaborate and resist in the face of totalitarianism was central to his doctoral work at Yale and to his subsequent writing. Gross wrote both the first English-language book on the consolidation of Soviet control in eastern Poland and the most thorough study of the German ‘Generalgouvernement’ in
wartime central Poland. It is for the contribution that these books made to the understanding of Poland’s difficult modern past that Gross was inducted into the Order of Merit.

Soon after, Gross turned to a question that had long weighed on him: Polish-Jewish relations during and after the Second World War. Despite the autobiographical urgency of this inquiry, it did not come easily. When he first encountered documentary evidence of the now infamous Jedwabne pogrom of 1941, he was incredulous, and so were other scholars of the Holocaust. ‘Impossible,’ they thought, ‘that a group of Poles killed hundreds of Jews in a small town in Poland’s Podlasie region, long before the large-scale exterminations at Treblinka, Auschwitz, Bełżec and Sobibór.’ Given the strength of Poles’ identification with the narrative of the crucifixion of Poland at the hands of the Nazis, Gross’s conclusion that a group of rural Poles had shoved their Jewish neighbors into a barn and burnt them alive came as a visceral shock.

Yet the testimony was plain, as were the stories he later uncovered of the violence, pogroms and intimidation faced by Jews who survived and returned to their homes all over Poland after the war. Clear too was the mounting evidence that Poles had looted mass graves at the sites of death camps in the years just after the war. Upon its Polish-language publication in 2000, Gross’s study on Jedwabne, Neighbors: the destruction of the Jewish community of Jedwabne, Poland, prompted a national conversation on a scale that has no true parallel in the United States. An investigation into Gross’s claims conducted by Poland’s government-sponsored Institute of National Remembrance largely confirmed his narrative that a group of Polish men brutally murdered several hundred Jewish men, women and children (although it suggested greater German involvement and reduced the number of the dead from 1600 to the low hundreds). The Jedwabne massacre continues to reverberate in Polish public discourse; it was even cited in last year’s presidential debates.

Polish reactions to Neighbors were complicated by other aspects of the relationships between Poles and Jews during and after the war. In some areas left-wing Jews had welcomed the advent of Soviet Communism in 1939, while others were understandably relieved to have been spared occupation by the Nazis; these reactions, and the presence of numbers of educated Jewish professionals and administrators in the first Communist government of Poland after 1946 led some Poles to stereotype Communism as Jewish Communism (‘Zydokomuna’) and all Jews as Communists. Thus some Poles explained the Jedwabne massacre as a murder not of Jews but of the Communists who had betrayed the Polish people by welcoming Soviet occupiers. This argument was a particularly attractive one in a Poland which was struggling to explain the complex and often morally ambiguous ways in which many had acquiesced in and benefitted in tacit or explicit ways from the years of Communist rule.

Some Poles have felt that Neighbors stigmatizes Poland as a ‘perpetrator’ rather than a blameless ‘victim’ of the historical trauma of the Second World War.

This reading of Gross impoverishes his nuanced account of Polish society under Nazi occupation. Timothy Snyder, who accepts most of Gross’s findings, explains that misguided interpretations of local responsibility for the Jedwabne pogrom seek to portray it as a ‘historically predictable outburst of the barbarity of east Europeans’, a conveniently apolitical explanation of the Holocaust that neatly mirrors the essentialist rhetoric of Nazi racism and colonialism. Snyder persuasively shows in his recent book
Black earth: the Holocaust as history and warning that Germans were in fact unable to unleash the wave of spontaneous local mass pogroms they had hoped to incite, and that the presence and encouragement of German units was key to sparking violence.

Crucially, political forces help explain patterns of collaboration. The best predictor of cooperation with German-initiated pogroms in occupied eastern Poland (much of which lies within modern Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) and the Baltic states was the extent to which local gentiles had collaborated during the period of Soviet occupation of lands east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line in September 1939. Many of the most enthusiastic Polish partners in Nazi crimes likely hoped to prove their value to the new regime before their Soviet ties became known. The result of Gross’s work is not to shift moral culpability for the Holocaust from Germany to Poland, as his critics feared: instead, his work throws into sharp relief the moral and political complexities inherent in living under and subsequently remembering the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the country.

The study of Jewish-Polish relations and the Holocaust in Poland has flourished thanks in part to Gross’s courage to face unpleasant facts and throw light into forgotten corners of Polish history. Historians Jan Grabowski, Dariusz Libionka and Barbara Engelking have produced influential studies of Polish-Jewish relations during the war which highlight both the courage of those Poles who protected Jews and the widespread culture of denunciation during the occupation. Anna Bikont’s The Crime and the silence elaborates on Neighbors and reveals local efforts to cover up the crime after the war. Joshua Zimmerman’s The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939-1945 explores the controversial relationship between the Polish ‘Home Army’ resistance and Polish Jews.

The wider mood of self-searching prompted by this turn in historical writing culminated in Paweł Pawlikowski’s film Ida, the story of a convent novice in immediate post-war Poland who discovers that she was left with the nuns after her Jewish parents were killed by local Poles fearful of hiding them from the Germans. The film brings into focus the difficult choices facing Poles who sheltered Jews and features a haunting scene of Polish anti-Semitic violence. Gross carved out the space that allowed these issues to enter a wider public and artistic consciousness.

To its discredit, the conservative Polish government has hushed this conversation, and Gross has not been its only target. The recent Polish premiere of Ida on state-controlled public television was prefaced by a panel discussion which asked viewers to consider ‘who the film really serves’ and highlighted its ‘Jewish point of view.’ This bizarre spectacle prompted 44 leading Polish directors including Andrzej Wajda (Katyn) and Agnieszka Holland (Europa, Europa) to draft an open letter to the broadcaster’s leadership raising alarms over these first steps down ‘the road to censorship.’

The signal is quite clear: Polish state institutions now only value scholarship and artwork that aligns with a comfortable, state-sanctioned view of Polish history. Given new media laws that give full control of state-broadcasting to the government and a recent call by Culture Minister Piotr Gliński for more ‘patriotic’ movies to be made about Poland, it is worth asking what else the government hopes to exclude from public debate?

By suggesting that Jan Tomasz Gross is not fit to remain an officer of the Order of Merit, the Polish government has in effect accused him of national defamation for his writing since 2001. To take back a decoration which recognizes his contribution to Polish public understanding of the country’s history under Soviet and Nazi totalitarianism would
deny the validity of a crucial debate about the nature of Polish society and collective memory. That would defame democratic Poland more grievously than any of the questions Gross’s books raise about the country’s morally complex past.