

Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–48

Data opublikowania: 01.08.2016

Zrecenzował(a) mgr Tomasz Frydel Redakcja naukowa

This review was first published as: Tomasz Frydel. Review of Cichopek-Gajraj, Anna, Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944-48. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. June, 2016.

The Return of Comparative History: Anti-Jewish Violence in Postwar Eastern Europe

The decade following the publication of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* (2001) witnessed a renaissance of work that dealt with the thorny and dormant issues surrounding Polish-Jewish relations during World War II. The momentum was sustained by Gross's *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (2006), which aimed at a new interpretation of violence toward Jews in the immediate postwar period, focusing on the Kielce pogrom of July 4, 1946. The subsequent five years gave rise to a series of remarkable studies that sought in their own way to situate the Holocaust and its aftermath within the history of East Central Europe and to integrate it within broader historiographical trends. Saul Friedländer called for an "integrated history" of the destruction of European Jewry, but it was perhaps Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010) that propelled a more contextualizing energy in the case of Eastern Europe. The field has itself generally shied away from a comparative context, as evidenced by the debate surrounding Donald Bloxham's *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (2009).[1] Still, innovative studies that embrace a comparative framework have been on the rise.[2] The most ambitious treatment that takes a broader approach to postwar violence is undoubtedly Polish historian Marcin Zaremba's *Wielka Trwoga: Polska 1944-1947: Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (The great fear: Poland 1944-1947: A popular reaction to crisis) (2012), which is likely to leave a mark on the field for years to come. Among the book's many achievements is its use of a sociologically informed umbrella concept of the "great fear" that situates postwar pogroms alongside violence toward other ethnic groups—such as Germans, Ukrainians, and Belarussians—all within the social anxieties circulating in this dramatic period. Another important contribution can be found in *Prześlona rewolucja: Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* (An imagined revolution: An exercise in historical logic) (2013) by Andrzej Leder, a Polish philosopher of culture. The book frames the period from 1939 to 1956 as a socioeconomic revolution in Poland, featuring a chapter that views the Holocaust—though carried out by Nazi Germany on Polish soil—as a key component of this hitherto unacknowledged "bourgeois" revolution.

Anna Cichopek-Gajraj's recent book is thus a fitting contribution to this budding approach. The book stands in a class of its own, however, by virtue of a methodology that combines an *Alltagsgeschichte* with a sustained comparative framework of Poland and Slovakia—two countries that responded in fundamentally different ways to Nazi Germany but that experienced comparable levels of anti-Jewish violence from 1945 to 1948. The author's introduction argues for the analytical benefits to be reaped from a comparative perspective, a tradition of historical writing that has admittedly waned in recent years. The case she makes is a convincing one, especially for a historiography that—even in its most self-critical expressions—has nevertheless been trapped in national frameworks and narratives. One of the fundamental challenges for the historian of East Central Europe is avoiding such pitfalls, and the author's approach may serve as an instructive antidote for future research. More universally, she argues that a comparative methodology has greater potential for separating crucial causes from incidental factors, as well as for "unsettling of the perceived naturalness" of historical events (p. 2). A related goal of the book is to go against the grain of a dominant trend in a historiography that she believes gives undue focus to violence and emigration, accompanied by a monocausality of postwar antisemitism and a homogenization of Jewish experience. The author's stated goal is thus to go "beyond violence" by unearthing the story of how surviving Jews sought to rebuild their lives in postwar Slovakia and Poland and, by doing so, to restore the historical contingency of the moment by showing that emigration was not inevitable. And there is a big story to be told here—after the Kielce pogrom, 120,000 Jews had left Poland, but another 100,000 had stayed behind, 50,000 of whom settled in Lower Silesia. She is aided in this second goal by employing a history of the everyday that captures interethnic encounters "on the street" (p. 8). The source base is wide ranging, but she draws primarily on reports found in the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT) and documents produced by the Central Committee of Polish Jews (CKŻP) and archived at the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) in Warsaw, as well as the archives of the YIVO Institute in New York City and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC. It is surprising here that she does not utilize the postwar investigation and trial records of cases based on the August Decree of 1944 (so-called *sierpniówki*), most of which have been moved to the regional branches of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and the National Archives of Krakow (ANK). It is true that the majority of these cases deal with the occupation period, but many capture the social dynamics of the postwar period under examination.

History never offers the perfect laboratory conditions, but Cichopek-Gajraj is able to bring the two countries into a controlled comparative framework that foregrounds the crucial factors at play. What were some of these parameters? Antisemitism was a significant political force prior to the war in both countries and was on the rise prior to the outbreak of war. The prewar Jewish population of Poland was approximately 3,000,000 or 10 percent of the total population, while the number of Jews, mostly religious minded, who found themselves in the First Slovak Republic (1939-45), fluctuated between 89,000 and 91,000, a much smaller percentage. During the war, it was the relationship with the Third Reich that set the course of the respective Jewish populations and conditioned Jewish and non-Jewish relations. In September 1939, Slovakia had allied with Nazi Germany in attacking Poland. Slovakia deported 57,000 of its Jews to Auschwitz by October 1942. As a consequence of the alliance, ethnic Slovaks were in a privileged position—even above ethnic Germans—and the threat of physical destruction never loomed over the average non-Jewish citizen, at least not until the Slovak National Uprising of August 1944. In occupied Poland, on the other hand, the Nazis had absolute control over the lives of the

population. Here, ethnic Germans represented the privileged class, while legal protection was lifted from the ethnic Polish population; Jews would eventually be slated for total destruction; and Polish territory would become a central site of genocide. After the war, it was the relationship with the Soviet Union that differentiated the two states. The postwar Third Czechoslovak Republic, feeling betrayed by the West after the appeasement of Munich, leaned more toward the Soviet Union. Poland, a historic impediment to Russian ambitions in the West, faced civil war conditions that resulted from the Soviet takeover, as members of the Home Army were immediately arrested and guerilla fighting continued into 1948.

Comparative juxtapositions of these factors in each chapter function like a turn of a kaleidoscope and the resulting synthesis dazzles with explanatory potential. The text is also woven through with a theoretical thread that engages with the core arguments made by Gross in *Fear*, agreeing in places, at other times challenging certain claims. The first chapter deals with the experience of Jewish return to "no home." The question that greeted many survivors "Are you still alive?" was common in both Poland and Slovakia. Cichopek-Gajraj finds that contrary to conventional claims, the wartime past was not a taboo subject in the private realm and there was much talk about who did what during the war. All returnees shared a demographic of a "déclassé community" that resulted from the destruction of the nuclear family and consisted mostly of young men, who were more assimilated or secular than religious. What differentiated Poland was that returning home meant facing a new civil war, where the idea that Communism was largely a Jewish phenomenon (*Żydokomuna*) was on the rise and played into the conflict between Poles and Jews. Yet, as the author reminds us, for better or for worse, the surviving Jews could do little more than rely on the state as protector in a hostile environment—a practice rooted in a long Jewish tradition of survival (*dina de malchuta dina*—the law of the land is the law) (p. 235). It is therefore not surprising that the stereotype was shared by some Jews themselves. Cichopek-Gajraj finds a report by the American Jewish Committee in which the author complains that "the number of Jewish officials is entirely out of proportion with the size of the Jewish population" (p. 49).

The next two chapters are concerned with the question of property restitution in Poland and Slovakia respectively. Similar to Leder mentioned at the outset, the author describes the change of property as "one of the largest social revolutions of the Second World War," which was greater in Poland than in Slovakia (p. 64). In the case of Poland, the "aryanization of property" was strictly presided over by a Trusteeship Agency (*Treuhändstelle*) in its takeover by Germans, Volksdeutsche, and Ukrainians. At other times, Poles were encouraged to participate in so-called property transfer, a form of "outright robbery" in line with a Nazi policy of *divide et impera* (p. 66). The level of chaos and frequent lawlessness of the postwar takeovers, in which a JOINT memorandum even pointed to a "racket" of Jews who made false claims of ownership of "formerly Jewish" (*pożydowskie*) property, suggests that perhaps a stronger institution, similar to the German one, might have been necessary to roll back the "aryanization" process and to help resolve ethnic tensions by presiding over restitution, instead of leaving the matter to district courts. In Jozef Tiso's Slovakia, the majority of Jewish enterprises were liquidated rather than "aryanized," as the attempt at the latter led to an open Slovak-German conflict of interest. Here, after the war, Jews faced a particular difficulty vis-à-vis former partisans, who felt a sense of entitlement to property on account of their sacrifices.

The fourth chapter, "Violence," focuses on the dynamics around pogroms. In Poland, between 650 to 1,200 Jews were killed between 1944 and 1946. In Slovakia, at least 36 people were killed and at least 100 were injured between 1945 and 1948. The most severe pogroms in Poland were in Krakow and Kielce, and in Slovakia in Topol'cany and Bratislava. Yet violence aimed at Jews persisted longer in Slovakia than in Poland. In Poland, the Kielce pogrom of 1946, the "watershed moment," marked the peak and end of anti-Jewish violence (p. 116), while Slovak Jews experienced violence as late as August 1948. In Poland, anti-Jewish violence occurred in waves that coincided with the political upheaval surrounding the civil war—a dynamic markedly missing from its southern neighbor. In Slovakia, the trial and execution of Tiso cast a shadow over the violence of 1947, as women coming back from morning mass for Tiso shouted anti-Czech, pro-Tiso, and anti-Jewish slogans. Rumors of the blood libel—most prominent in Rzeszów, Krakow, and Kielce—were also spread among crowds in Topol'cany. The chapter also includes a comparative microstudy of Krakow and Topol'cany, which makes it evident that fears of nationalization were closely linked with the demand for Jewish restitution

The remaining three chapters deal with notions of citizenship and attempts to return to "normality" in both countries. The author notes that notions around the "nation-state and national homogeneity" informed a process in which "citizenship" was to "overlap with ethnicity" (p. 146). In Slovakia, Magyar-speaking Jews found themselves in the middle of an anti-Magyar conflict, which then fed into antisemitism. A very small pocket of German Jews in the newly acquired territories in western Poland were caught in a similar anti-German bind. Polish Communists hoped that by recognizing the particularity of Jewish victimhood, they would encourage the assimilation of Jews to Polish culture. Yet as Jews were the only national minority to enjoy national and cultural recognition in Poland, as the author claims, their status might have contributed to the perception that Jews were favored over Poles. In the last two chapters, Cichopek-Gajraj shows that Jews who sought a return to "normality" were shaped by different state responses to the idea of Jewish revival. Readers might be particularly struck by the relative "success story" of postwar Jewish life in Lower Silesia, which was dominated by a "settler" spirit shared by new arrivals of all ethnic groups (here on "formerly German" property) and visions of a "New Jew" radically transformed by the forces of "productivization." In contrast, Slovakia saw nothing comparable, as no government support was given for a national revival, although it gave rise to a Jewish community of a predominantly religious orientation.

The author's goal of moving away from a focus on violence is undermined by the fact that some of the most thought-provoking insights found in the book pertain to this aspect. The postwar pogroms continue to pose a sociological and historical mystery, and it is here that Cichopek-Gajraj's comparative model exhibits its greatest strength. First, the author's findings lead her to question the thesis initially put forward by the literary critic Kazimierz Wyka and later maintained by Gross, which makes the argument that it was the absence of a Quisling-like collaborationist government in Poland that allowed for antisemitism to thrive by never compromising it "as an attribute of servile collaborationism with the Nazis" (pp. 142-143). Yet, as the author shows, the Tiso regime collaborated with the Nazis and antisemitism continued to manifest itself in postwar pogroms. Here, Cichopek-Gajraj points to the level of wartime "demoralization" as the crucial factor. Paradoxically, and contrary to Wyka and Gross, it was collaboration that allowed the Slovak government to protect the "material well-being of ordinary non-Jewish Slovaks for most of the war ... and thus, possibly, blunted their wartime demoralization" (p. 142). Polish society, on the other hand, was stripped of all statehood and was exposed to one of the most

brutal occupations in Europe for a period of five years, with death camps and killing fields a part of everyday reality. Jan Grabowski's path-breaking work, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (2013), has only scratched the surface in revealing how segments of the Polish population were co-opted into anti-Jewish policies on the grassroots level. In the case of Slovakia, an anecdote culled from the sources by the author draws attention to the connection between wartime and postwar attitudes. In August 1948, a fight had erupted in the farmer's market of Bratislava between Emilia Prášilová and Alica Frankova, the latter of whom was allegedly being privileged as a Jew by a seller. Franková "called Prášilová a 'fascist, an SS-woman' who forgot that it was no longer 1942, 'These times are gone when one could handle Jews in *this* way!'" (p. 120). Thus, a core element of why Poland witnessed postwar violence on a much higher scale may be found in the damage perpetrated on Polish society "as a community of citizens" by undermining the notion of "morality in everyday life" (p. 142).

Second, the author's framing may help put to rest claims that the series of pogroms were a "provocation" initiated by the Communist authorities or the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD)—the Soviet secret police—aimed at placing the blame on the anti-Communist underground, now cast as the "Polish fascists," and thus legitimating the use of state power to quell these "reactionary" elements. It is more likely that the authorities were quick to bank on the political opportunity created by the outbreaks. She points out that the explanations offered by both the Communist authorities and the political underground were a "mirror image" of each other. The official press cast the outbursts of violence as an "operation," a "provocation" carried out by "paid confidants of the London reactionaries" and the like (pp. 131-132). Ironically, segments of the resistance believed that the pogroms were staged by the new authorities to depict Poland internationally as a reactionary and antisemitic country in need of Communist control (although the word "pogrom" was rarely used by both sides). This was the way part of the anti-Communist resistance interpreted the Kielce pogrom, which occurred days after the referendum of June 30, 1946, and similar events in other cities—a narrative that has made its own inroads in Polish scholarship.[3] The Slovak press also saw the Topol'cany pogrom as an organized crime perpetrated by the "fascists." Cichopek-Gajraj states that the Communists stripped anti-Jewish violence of its ethnic dimensions by seeing it solely through the prism of a political struggle. The underground resistance likely exhibited a similar failure of sociological imagination, though it often clothed events in the garments of Judeo-Communism. Thus, when the postwar harvest of pogroms erupted on the scene and baffled most observers, both sides of the political struggle failed to see postwar violence for what it was—not a political provocation but a pattern of anti-Jewish attitudes and behaviors set in motion by the specific conditions of the occupation.

Beyond Violence is a pioneering work brimming with insight. Cichopek-Gajraj's methodology delivers, giving renewed strength to the discipline of comparative history that deals with East Central Europe and the Second World War. She covers a notoriously polarizing subject matter without ever assuming a moral high ground. In seeking to understand postwar violence aimed at Jews in East Central Europe, the book persuasively views state power during and after the war, and the varying degrees of "demoralization" born of the war, as the key independent variables. It is worth pointing out that the destruction of a state by armed force likely gave rise to its own dynamic of resentment. Here, whatever scholars of the Holocaust think of Snyder's recent *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015), it might be worth placing Cichopek-Gajraj's insights against the sections of Snyder's work that deal with the wartime dialectic of "sovereignty and survival." [4] Readers might

also wish to consult *Klucze i kasa: O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939-1950* (Keys and cash: Jewish property in Poland under German occupation and in the immediate postwar years of 1939-1950) (2014), the first academic work of its kind to take on the question of Jewish restitution in Poland, published by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in the same year as *Beyond Violence*.

Nonspecialists and the historiography more broadly might also benefit from a clearer answer to the question of the type of violence examined here: should it be regarded as a form of "ethnic cleansing," as some historians maintain,[5] or is it better understood as a hybrid form of violence? Further, the author uses Zaremba's *Wielka Trwoga* to help reconstruct the history of the everyday in this period, but one wishes she had also employed her sharp eye in examining the more substantial claims made by Zaremba, such as the argument that the pogroms were the result of a "provocation," though not a political one, but one that emerged around a "business-looting" (*biznesowo-łupieżczy*) nexus, rooted in the desire for theft and economic competition.[6] Zaremba also draws attention to the discourse around protecting "our children" that arose in these events, and one sociological attempt has been made to link this discourse with the dynamic around surviving Jews returning to reclaim their children from Christian rescuers.[7] It might also be worth dwelling on the fact that in all of the cases examined, none of the violence appears to have been sexualized, though in the case of Rzeszów, the body of the "kidnapped" nine-year-old Bronisława Mendoń showed signs of rape (not to mention potential cannibalism).[8] In other words, there remain numerous other potential axes of analysis open to historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Yet the potential loss on the microhistorical scale is more than compensated for by the critical insights gleaned in this illuminating study that should serve as a model for others in the future.

Notes

[1]. Jürgen Matthäus, Martin Shaw, Omer Bartov, Doris Bergen, and Donald Bloxham, review forum of *The Final Solution: A Genocide*, by Donald Bloxham, *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 1-2 (June 2011): 107-152.

[2]. For a comparative European framework of the wartime period, see Waldemar Grabowski, ed., *Okupowana Europa: Podobieństwa i różnice* [Occupied Europe: Similarities and differences] (Warsaw: IPN, 2014).

[3]. For example, the Polish historian, Krzysztof Kaczmarski, argues that the "unfinished" pogrom in Rzeszów was a failed attempt at a provocation carried out by the Communist Security Apparatus. See Krzysztof Kaczmarski, *Pogrom, którego nie było: Rzeszów, 11-12 czerwca 1945 r.: Fakty, hipotezy, dokumenty* [The pogrom that never happened: Rzeszów, June 11-12, 1945: Facts, hypotheses, documents] (Rzeszów: IPN, 2008), chap. "Nieudana próba prowokacji aparatu bezpieczeństwa i władz komunistycznych" [A failed attempt at provocation by the security apparatus and the Communist authorities], 52-57.

[4]. Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), chaps. "The State Destroyers," 77-116, and "Sovereignty and Survival," 226-249.

[5]. Andrzej Żbikowski, "That Was a Case of Ethnic Cleansing," in *Difficult Postwar Years: Polish Voices in Debate over Jan T. Gross's Book Fear*, ed. Magdalena Klimowicz (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs,

2006), 15-18.

[6]. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944-1947: Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012), 626.

[7]. Łukasz Krzyżanowski and Marcin Zaremba, "'Prosił by mnie oddać Żydom': Strach o dzieci i przemoc wobec Żydów w Polsce (1945-1946)" ["He asked me to be handed over to the Jews': Fear for children and anti-Jewish violence in Poland (1945-1946)] (paper presented at the conference Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku [Pogroms against Jews on Polish lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries], Historical Institute, University of Warsaw, June 10-12, 2015). The proceedings from this conference will be published in connection with a research grant led by Artur Markowski, titled "Pogromy: Przemoc kolektywna wobec Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX-XX wieku i jej wpływ na relacje polsko-żydowskie: Historia, pamięć, tożsamość" [Pogroms: Collective violence against Jews on Polish lands in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries and its influence on Polish-Jewish relations: History, memory, identity].

[8]. Kaczmarek, *Pogrom, którego nie było*, 71.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



<https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/847?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=4757>