

Polish Collaboration and Contemporary Memory Polemics: Addressing the “Polocaust” Myth

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Abstract

In 2018, the term “Polocaust” was used by the Polish PR advisor to describe Polish suffering experienced during the Second World War. To this day, the Holocaust remains a controversial historical topic and traumatic national memory in Poland. The ruling Law and Justice Party continues to polarize Polish-Jewish relations, particularly with the January 2018 law which rebukes anyone who alleges that the Polish state or nation collaborated on any level with the Nazi occupiers of the 1930s and 1940s. This paper analyzes the modern national memory polemics of the Polish state and Holocaust memory transmission today, specifically examining the “Holocaust law”, the narratives surrounding the Jedwabne (1941) and Kielce (1946) pogroms, and provides a reflection on the type of relationship Poland could consider developing with its national memory moving forward.

Keywords: *Holocaust, memory studies, Jewish studies, Poland, Jedwabne, Kielce, politics, memory trauma, memory polemics, “Holocaust law.”*

“It is the social group that constructs the narratives of victims and perpetrators, not the individuals themselves, as to ‘transform individual suffering into collective trauma is cultural work.’” – Šárka Kadlecová¹

Introduction

On 27 January 1945 the Red Army liberated the infamous Nazi death camp, located just outside of the Polish town of Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau. Since then, this day has become recognized by the United Nations and various countries across the world as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is on this day, 73 years after the liberation of the death camp, that Poland’s ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) decided to symbolically pass a law making any “allegations that the Polish state or the Polish nation were responsible or co-responsible for the Nazi crimes of the German Third Reich” punishable by up to three

¹ Šárka Kadlecová, “Relating to the Distant Past: Routes of Memory of Women Concentration-Camp Survivors,” *Česky lid* 104 (2017), 481.

years in jail (Gebert). Three months later, in April 2018, the Polish PR advisor Marek Kochan coined the term “Polocaust” to describe Polish suffering experienced during the Second World War and the Holocaust. This came in reaction to what Kochan and leader of the PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, referred to as a “deficit of knowledge about World War II.”² But who was it that the Polish politicians wanted to educate and what version of history did they prefer?

John T. Pawlikowski writes that to this day, “the Holocaust remains the greatest source of continuing controversy within the contemporary Polish-Jewish relationship” (Pawlikowski, 208). Undoubtedly, Poland faced a violent, hostile, and brutal occupation by the Nazis between 1939-1945. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reports that 1.5 million Poles were deported as forced labourers, and another 2.5 million (non-Jewish) Polish civilians and soldiers lost their lives throughout the course of the occupation (Collaboration and Complicity, USHMM). Prior to the Nazi occupation of Poland, the country was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe, with three million Jews known to have lived within Polish borders – ten percent of whom survived the war (Kapralski, 170; Pawlikowski, 207). In recent historiography of the Holocaust, researchers move past the “intentionalist” versus “functionalist” debate and instead ask questions such as: “How were the Nazi goals actually achieved so successfully?” (Michman, 394). As Dan Michman affirms, the Holocaust, though German-initiated, “was in fact a Europe-wide project and has to be researched as such, and not just as a German one” (395). To achieve such a high Jewish death rate suggests that local collaboration took place – a phenomenon which is not unique to Poland, but still strongly exemplified there.

This paper analyzes the modern national memory politics of the Polish state surrounding the Holocaust today, particularly addressing the concept of “Polocaust” and the implications of the Polish law passed in January of 2018. The creation of the term suggests an ongoing struggle to make amends with a complicated and traumatic past in Poland. Rather than addressing the layered implications of the Nazi

² Kaczyński is the current leader of the Polish Law and Justice Party (Gebert).

occupation and collaboration in Poland, the contemporary national memoryscape³ attempts to negate the vehement antisemitism in Poland which pre and postdates the Holocaust, presenting the country solely as a victim of Nazi crime. Is it possible that Poland was a victim as well as an agent of Nazi-led atrocity? Despite the Polish narrative arguing Polish innocence during the war, there is evidence to suggest an air of complicity as well. To support my position, this paper will examine the “Holocaust law”, as well as the narratives surrounding the Jedwabne (1941) and Kielce (1946) pogroms, in order to demonstrate that Polish collaboration was not only plausible but did in fact take place during the Second World War. To finish, I will reflect on the type of relationship the Polish state should consider developing with its national memory of the past.⁴

1. Contemporary Politics of Memory in Poland

As communism began to fall in Eastern Europe, a new, oftentimes extreme sense of nationalism saw a surge in many of the newly liberated states. According to historian Dan Michman, in many cases, these sentiments sought to “hail interwar and wartime nationalist leaders and movements that were antisemitic and participated in the persecution and murder of Jews,” and consequently led to a de-emphasis on the “enormity of the Holocaust and the role of the local population” in the annihilation of the European Jewry (399). Since the collapse of communism, the generally accepted national collective memory in Poland began to be challenged, especially in the early twenty-first century.⁵ While the post-communist official memory did not differ much from the original outline under communism, it emphasized different heroes. In post-war Poland, the narrative of the heroic Pole came to rise, as the national memory centralized its focus on the glories and bravery of the Polish resistance and nation. Omitted from the emerging (and

³ I employ the term “memoryscape” throughout the paper – as used by Slawomir Kapralski, who uses it in order to demonstrate the complex nature of social memory. Memoryscape “refers to a material and symbolic space, in which social memory is expressed” (Kapralski, 171).

⁴ I would like to acknowledge that the approach to this paper comes from a non-Polish speaking academic, whose entire education has been in Western institutions, thus is significantly more familiar with Western approaches to memory politics surrounding the Holocaust.

⁵ Note: collective memory is theory popularized by the study of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the mid 20th Century, which has been important in general historical research in the post-Holocaust era. Collective Memory refers to the shared memories, knowledge, or information of social groups – which can be constructed and shared on large or small scales, including national scales.

pre-1989) stories were Polish collaborators and war criminals, as the blame for the atrocity was placed on the nation's occupiers: the Nazis and the Soviets (Naimark, 477).⁶ However, since the turn of the century, the publications of books such as *Fear* and *Neighbors* by Polish-American historian Jan T. Gross directly challenged the long-accepted politics of memory in the Polish nation. Politics of memory are often used by social or political groups to establish or modify the collective memory of a community, and usually include the ideological politicization of history (Törnquist-Plewa, 135) – which can be recognized in modern Polish politics.

Gross's *Neighbors* (2000) triggered a debate in Poland, as it presented a counter-memory to all of the accepted, outdated, and biased hegemonic political memories of Polish society and Polish-Jewish relations during World War II (Michlic, 296). In poignant contrast to the accepted historical narrative of the Polish past, *Neighbors* tells the history of the Jedwabne massacre and the key role that local Poles played in the slaughter of Jews in July 1941. Similarly, in *Fear* (2007) Gross fills his book with “arresting, appalling images” of the ugliest side of humanity manifesting itself through vehement, violent antisemitism on behalf of the Poles after the end of the Second World War (Margolick). Barbara Törnquist-Plewa refers to Gross as a “memory carrier”, who is actively encouraging a shift in the memory of Polish “wrong-doings” against the Jews in the Holocaust era. By employing emotional, forceful, and deliberate language in his story-telling of the past, Gross hopes to shock the nation into challenging the traditional narrative of Poland as a nation of heroes and victims, acknowledging and accepting the cultural trauma of their ties to perpetrator history as well (Törnquist-Plewa, 127).

Direct challenges such as Gross' led to the PiS putting politics of memory directly on their platform in their 2004 political programme – declaring that Poland needed “modern politics of memory for cultivating and spreading Polish historical and cultural values” (135). In 2005, the PiS won the national elections and launched the “Fourth Republic” as a means to rectify the nation's identity and cohesion –

⁶ Naimark explains, “the crimes of the Soviet occupation, both during the period 1939-41 and after 1944, were equally condemned, though usually in private and among friends or in emigration” (477).

which, according to them, had been weakened by the Third Republic and its European-inspired “culture of regret” approach to history. The PiS believes that the position was taken by members of the Third Republic, as well as historians like Gross, intensified a Polish inferiority complex; inspiring their goal to promote national confidence in response (136). Gross in particular has been portrayed by the right-wing as an alleged instrument to force Poland to pay reparations to Jews, as well as Germans, for land lost during the war. In addition, he is also held to be responsible for a damaging attack on Poland, reinforcing the Western stereotype of eternal Polish antisemitism (141-2).

1.1 The PiS “Holocaust Law”

As the PiS won both the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015, a new era of opposition to critical history-writing about Poland during the Holocaust was launched. For example, the PiS responded to the re-telling of the Jedwabne massacre by calling the shift in historiography a sign of “all the lies voiced against the Polish nation,” as well as an attack on Polish values and identity (Michlic, 299). The PiS’ approach to history identifies two narratives as true and patriotic: the heroic history of Polish anti-Communist military units that was suppressed between 1945 and 1963; and the history of the Poles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. It is under this leadership that the Ministry of Justice would introduce a governmental bill in August 2016, aiming to make it a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or up to three years in prison, for anyone to “implicate Poland, or the Polish people, in the crimes of the German Third Reich” (305). The law on the “Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation”, otherwise known as the “Holocaust Law”, was officially passed in Poland on 27 January 2018, launching what Joanna Michlic refers to as a “total war” against a critical approach to Poland’s Holocaust history. It effectively employs a national memory amnesia which excludes and minimalizes “narratives concerning uncomfortable historical truths about greed, racial and ethnic prejudice, betrayal, murder, and denunciations of Jewish fugitives and their dedicated Polish rescuers by their neighbours and acquaintances” (305). The PiS and their supporters appear more interested in maintaining a national identity that portrays the Poles as heroes or martyrs, rather than acknowledging that antisemitism existed in Poland and Poles were complicit in the Holocaust. To the PiS, the law is necessary for defending the good name of Poles, as it wants to

ensure, for example, that people do not speak of “Polish death camps,” when of course the death camps were established by the Nazis on occupied Polish soil. The modern Polish state has sought out to make certain the suffering of the Poles in what they dub the “Polocaust” does not go unseen or forgotten in the collective memory of the Holocaust. According to the deputy president of Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance, Mateusz Szpytma, the history of the Second World War in the West concentrates on [Jewish suffering in] the Holocaust, forgetting the other victims of the genocide. He claims that as a nation, the Poles are the victims of the Second World War.⁷ His statement exemplifies the fixation of contemporary Poland on their identity of collective suffering and martyrdom.⁸

The reality of the ‘Holocaust law’, however, is more far-reaching than simply a desire to correct what relatively few people have misspoken (“Polish” death camps versus Nazi death camps). Historian James McAuley notes the subtle dangers of the law, which falsely equates Polish and Jewish sufferings during the Holocaust (McAuley). In addition to this, it should be noted that the law is restricting the right to think freely and critically of the nation’s past by censoring and punishing free expression. In 2015, Gross boldly stated in an article that the Poles killed fewer Germans than Jews during the Second World War. Despite the fact that the publication of this article pre-dates the “Holocaust law”, Gross was summoned by the Polish public prosecutor to provide proof to support his argument in 2016 – which the Polish-right denounced as an attempt to distort Polish history (Aderet). Following a five-hour-long interrogation, the Polish prosecution dropped the case on 26 November 2019, asserting that “there is no unequivocal or persuasive data about the number of Germans or Jews who died as a result of Polish actions during World War II” (Aderet). Dr. Piotr Gontarczyk, a researcher for the Polish Institute of National Remembrance – which investigates crimes against Poles – concluded that “there is no reliable academic study” that can

⁷ “Currently, the history of World War II in the West concentrates on the Holocaust. But other aspects — other victims — are forgotten [...]. As a nation, we as Poles — we are the victims of the Second World War, but if you emphasize only our negative relations with the Jews, and in such articles where the only word used is ‘Nazi’ and not ‘German,’ what you’re seeing now [with the ‘Holocaust law’] is essentially a self-defence mechanism,” said Szpytma (McAuley).

⁸ The Institute of National Remembrance is a government-funded organization dedicated to researching crimes that were committed on Polish soil between 1939-1989 (McAuley).

verify or dispute Gross' assertions, therefore "academia should discuss the matter" (Aderet). Dr. Gontarczyk is correct to say that academics should discuss the matter – however, his final statement is contradictory to the parameters in which academics such as Gross are able to work within due to Poland's 'Holocaust law'. If the nation is so confident in their innocence during the war, why censor and prosecute those who challenge the national narrative as it stands today?

1.2 Pis "New History"

What the PiS is calling for is a "new history of Jedwabne" (Michlic, 180). Radicals of the PiS actively advocate for the erasure of the field of critical history regarding the Holocaust in Poland, most notably in the case of Jedwabne. Such repression is recognized as a necessary policy to serve the Polish nation. The PiS is confident that Poles were not involved in the Jedwabne massacre, and perhaps a strong reason for their belief in this is linked to the ongoing conviction that Poland was but a victim of Nazi crime – which includes anti-Slavism and antisemitism. Therefore, as a victim, Poland could not have been guilty of antisemitic acts. However, it should be noted that prior to World War II, antisemitism in Poland had been growing in light of a new surge of Polish nationalism following the First World War. Polish authorities had taken various measures to exclude Jews from key sectors of society, and some Polish politicians encouraged the mass emigration of Poland's Jews (Collaboration and Complicity, USHMM). Even with immense Polish suffering under the Nazi occupation, examples of antisemitic collaboration in the 1940s can be found, despite what the PiS suggests.

2. Polish Antisemitism and Collaboration (Jedwabne)

For many, the non-Jewish Polish community was quite removed from the Jewish-Polish community in the mid-twentieth century, and there existed a divisive "us" versus "them" dichotomy. As Gross writes: "some Poles regretted more, some less, the elimination of the Jews from Polish territory [during the Holocaust], but this was, in any case, the work of the Nazis and had nothing to do with the national martyrdom of the Poles" (Naimark, 477). Pogroms and extreme antisemitism were not exclusively the work of the Nazis. For example, pogroms were recorded against the Jewish community in Grodno in

1935, 1937, and September 1939 – prior to the advent of war.⁹ In his article “Testigos o Encubridores?,” Xosé Núñez Seixas notes that the Spanish Blue Division, a volunteer unit deployed to follow the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front (1941-1943), struggled to grapple with extreme antisemitic measures employed by the Nazis and supported by the intense anti-Jewish sentiment of the local Poles. One Spanish soldier recorded his observations of the Poles in Grodno’s strong hatred towards their Jewish neighbours – a hatred which he observes in future testimonies is spun to come across as an implicitly German phenomenon.¹⁰ In *Neighbors*, Jan Gross provides a serious, well-evidenced, re-evaluation of Polish historiography and the role of Poland as a potential collaborator against the Jews during the Holocaust. He concluded that Poles had not only stood aside indifferently or served as informants to the Gestapo or SS; but they had also actively participated in genocide – separately from Kapos in camps or salaried policemen of the Nazi Generalgouvernement (Naimark, 478).¹¹ Perhaps the most large-scale example of Polish anti-Jewish crimes during the Holocaust is manifested in the shameful massacre of approximately 1600 Jews in the Polish village of Jedwabne in 1941, where the majority of people were murdered by being herded into a barn, which was then set ablaze. However, in regards to Jedwabne specifically, historians are divided on who is responsible. In particular, they debate to what extent the Nazis manipulated the local population into participating in these anti-Jewish crimes.

For instance, Norman Naimark raises an interesting point in his paper “The Nazis and the East,” which is that it is important to remember that the “Germans created the situation in eastern Europe in which the Jews were slaughtered and peoples were set against one another” (479). I do agree that it is unlikely a Holocaust would have taken place without the Nazi war;¹² however, I also believe Naimark should be wary of blaming the Nazis for pitting people and communities against one another entirely. Of course, there is

⁹ Grodno belonged to Poland at the time (Núñez Seixas).

¹⁰ Quoted from Núñez Seixas’ article, this is an excerpt from one Ridruejo’s diary entry, reading: “esto se convirtió en los testimonios posteriores en un paliativo implícito de la culpabilidad germana” (Seixas, 271).

¹¹ Note: this is not to say that Poles did not equally suffer during the Second World War and the Holocaust.

¹² As I use the term “Holocaust” I refer specifically to the historically known Nazi genocide and murder of Jews, as well as Sinti and Roma, persons with disabilities, homosexuals, “asocials”, political dissidents and opponents, Jehovah’s Witnesses, persons of colour, Slavs, Prisoners of War, and other victims of Nazi racial/ideological murder.

no reason to believe that the Poles on their own would have organized a large-scale genocide of the Jews, and it is equally inaccurate to blame the Poles for the existence of extermination camps. Naimark notes that it was the Germans first and foremost who reconstructed social norms in Eastern Europe according to their racial ideology, and it was the fierceness of their antisemitism which encouraged traditional antisemites in the regions they occupied. While he is not entirely incorrect, it is nonetheless essential to be mindful of where blame is placed for which crimes. If the Nazis “encouraged traditional antisemites,” it means that antisemites were there to begin with. It has already been demonstrated that an atmosphere of antisemitism uncontestedly predates the arrival of the Germans, as anti-Jewish pogroms were taking place prior to 1939. The Nazis laid the tracks to Auschwitz and engineered the foundation for the Holocaust, but Auschwitz’ bunkers could not have been filled beyond capacity without local collaboration – not just in Poland but across Nazi-occupied Europe.¹³ Victims can simultaneously function as collaborators when they work willingly against the same “enemy” as their occupiers. In fact, on the eve of the launch of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, Reinhard Heydrich developed a plan for the “self-cleansing” actions (*Selbstreinigungaktionen*) against Jews by the local populations in the East. Heydrich was against the initial detention and elimination of Poles in eastern Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus, because he knew they would be helpful in initiating pogroms and discovering “Jewish Bolsheviks” (Naimark, 480-1).¹⁴

The Nazis were aware the Poles would have been willing collaborators against the Jews; antisemitism was a Europe-wide phenomenon, and locals had already been used by the Nazis as a tool to round up the Jews in ghettos, to guard them, to discover them. However, there also remained no shortage of volunteers, in Poland as in other occupied states (481-2). It is for this reason that historians continue to

¹³ As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) states: “As the war proceeded and Germany occupied or allied with almost every European state, it depended on other governments at the national level as well as organizations and individuals at the local level to help carry out what it called “The Final Solution of the Jewish Question”” (Collaboration and Complicity during the Holocaust, USHMM).

¹⁴ The USHMM writes: “[a]s German forces implemented the killing, they drew upon some Polish agencies, such as Polish police forces and railroad personnel, in the guarding of ghettos and the deportation of Jews to the killing centers. Individual Poles often helped in the identification, denunciation, and hunting down of Jews in hiding, often profiting from the associated blackmail, and actively participated in the plunder of Jewish property.” (Collaboration and Complicity during the Holocaust).

question who is ultimately responsible for the massacre at Jedwabne, and perhaps it is this grey zone that the Polish-right latches on to in attempts to disprove Polish-initiated antisemitism during the war. The Germans occupied the area of Jedwabne, but documentary and testimony evidence prove that it was not the Nazis who tortured the Jews of Jedwabne, herded them into a barn, doused it in gasoline, and lit the flame; it was villagers turning against their neighbours (McAuley). Yes, the Poles were victims of Nazi atrocity: the Polish nation was occupied and ravaged, and Poles were regarded as racially inferior to the “Aryan” race idealized by the Nazis – thus subject to Nazi atrocities, losing some ten percent of its prewar population. However, as Gross reminds us, in some respects many Poles supported Hitler. Despite being themselves an “other” to the Nazis, arguably the one unifying factor some Poles and the Nazis had was antisemitism; a Jewish “othering”. By offering a ‘final solution’ to Germany’s “Jewish problem” Hitler and the Nazis were offering one to Poland’s as well (Margolick).

2.1 Kielce: A Polish Post-War Pogrom

If anti-Jewish violence in Poland during the Holocaust is too blurred by Nazi occupation to imply Polish complicity, how can post-war pogroms be explained without drawing a direct connection to Polish antisemitism? Kielce, like Jedwabne, is one of the most famous examples of Polish aggression towards the Jewish community in modern history. One year after the end of the war, on 4 July 1946, between 60 and 70 Jews were murdered; another 100 injured.¹⁵ According to historians, security forces stormed a known Jewish apartment building and neighbourhood after a young Catholic boy went missing. Initially, 22 were shot dead in the morning, but as a crowd gathered to observe the events unfolding, a mob began attacking more Jews as the police looked on (Safdie). Additionally, it is said the few pistols the Jews had among them were confiscated by police the day before the pogrom, which, if accurate, suggests the pogrom was premeditated (Glicksman and Krakowski). This pogrom was the largest attack on the Jews since the war’s end, with children and pregnant women among the murdered and injured, and the result was the mass exodus of Jews – many of whom were Holocaust survivors – from Poland to the West. The Polish right-

¹⁵ I have seen different statistics for the number of individuals killed during the Kielce pogrom. This figure was taken from William Glicksman and Stefan Krakowski, “Kielce,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12, no. 2 (2017).

wing may wish to manipulate the historiography of Poland's antisemitic past, reacting to necessary critical analyses with denial, defensiveness, and rationalization; but the fact remains that it is near-impossible to deny the existence of antisemitism in Poland. They may seek to continue propagating an image of Poland as a martyr and a heroic victim, but they still must come to terms with the role some Poles played in the loss of innocent lives. It has proven difficult to disseminate historical accounts of an uncomfortable and traumatic aspect of the Holocaust in Poland – but the self-critical assessment of the Polish national past, as noted by Joanna Michlic, is necessary as a form of addressing cultural trauma and achieving cultural renewal in Poland. So how could Poland begin to approach this process?

3. The Construction of the Holocaust in the Contemporary Polish Memoryscape

Historians today have noted that although no nation would come close to the Jewish community in underscoring Holocaust memory, Holocaust memory simply does not play the same role in contemporary Polish identity that it does among the collective memory and identity of Jews. Some Polish writers draw attention to the problematic nature of this divide, as there is too little space in the Polish memory dedicated to the loss of millions of Polish Jews, who had been present and influential in shaping Polish culture and identity for centuries (Pawlikowski, 213). What was left of Jewish memory after the Holocaust in Poland became controlled by two hegemonic bodies: the “nationalist” and the “communist” (Kapralski, 170). For the nationalists, whose ideal memory was an overlap of political and cultural boundaries, the Jewish presence in Poland's memory “subverted their national project”, and they blamed the Jews for welcoming the Soviets and helping institute communist rule (171). On the other hand, the communists felt that ethnic or religious identities in memory subverted their vision of history and chose instead to highlight the dominant position of the working class or Polish partisans. What united these two frames was the act of symbolic antisemitism: the erasure, or structured amnesia, of Jewish memory from the overall collective memory of the state. Divisive dichotomies are still deliberately employed as a tool in contemporary Polish critiques of those who challenge the historical narrative of the Holocaust in Poland. For example, conservatives and the extreme-right implied that the media who showed support for Jan Gross was “Polish-

language media” and not “genuinely Polish”. This type of rhetoric intensifies the opposition between “us” and “them” – ie., “genuine Poles” and their enemies: Jews, Germans, and the “ingenuine Poles” who criticize the foundations of Polish identity (Törnquist-Plewa, 140). Reactions to Gross’ poignant history-writing were to continue denying antisemitism among Poles, instead of arguing that the Poles saved Jews *en masse*, who in return did not show any gratitude to those who risked their lives to save them and rather cooperated with Poland’s enemies (140). This rebuttal can best be described as “scapegoating”, or a coping strategy in dealing with trauma: a reaction of blaming the other, often the victim, instead of fronting one’s own responsibility.¹⁶

3.1 Addressing a Traumatic Past: Fusing Contradictory Contexts to Build a National Memory

Another phenomenon that can be applied to the Polish right’s reaction to the reassessment of the current historical narrative is what Jürgen Habermas refers to as “cognitive dissonances”; which, when applied to national memory and identity, can be explained as the discomfort of individuals or a nation which holds two (or more) contradictory beliefs or values. When Habermas explored these theories in “Concerning the Public Use of History” in 1988, his reflections were in reaction to the historians’ dispute (*Historikerstreit*) in Germany: the debate between conservative and left-leaning academics about how to incorporate Nazi Germany and the Holocaust into German historiography and the contemporary German national identity. When he reflected on cognitive dissonances, he concluded that it came down to a struggle between the desire to preserve a positive image of one’s nation and identity, and, on the other hand, the contradictory abstract reports about [negative, even traumatic] contexts which directly challenge the good image one wishes to project. In Poland’s case, Gross challenges the Holocaust memory in which Poles are the main victims. He is in turn accused of weakening the Polish national identity by critiquing the traditional historiographical approach to the Holocaust era in Poland. Habermas suggests that it becomes less difficult to address the Nazi period if the state, rather than resorting to hostile defensiveness, instead calmly considers

¹⁶ Social psychologist Neal J. Smelser relates the Polish right’s reaction to works and ideas such as Gross’s to scapegoating/coping strategies (Törnquist-Plewa, 140).

this era as a filter through which to look back on Germany, or in this case, Poland.¹⁷ Gross builds a strong case by asserting that “considerable damage [has] been done to Polish society by not dealing with the heritage of antisemitism and the question of guilt in relation to those Polish Jews who were its victims” (Törnquist-Plewa, 129). When Gross asks why antisemitism could continue to be present in Poland even after the Holocaust, he concludes that, ultimately, fear is preventing the acknowledgement of Polish collaboration in the past. Aside from the fear of losing economic advantages gained from the persecution of the Jews during the Nazi occupation, there is an overbearing moral fear of having to answer for the participation of any kind in the Holocaust. This includes fear of the Poles themselves: “of the dark, frightening side which people and society demonstrated when they were put to the test during the Holocaust” (129). Due to the traumatic nature of having to address such a fear, which requires a deep self-critique and challenges the morals of a victim nation, coping strategies developed. For instance, stressing the “Polocaust” and the heroic deeds of those who were brave enough to risk death in order to save lives. Holocaust memory needs to be recognized in Poland as the result of layered, multidirectional experiences. The Polish collective memoryscape should be reformatted to make space for all of the existing narratives – which includes the memory of Poles as victims *and* collaborators, and Jews as more than “just” Jewish victims of genocide, but also as Polish victims. History has become what Michlic calls “a battlefield over national identity”, where collective memory is discussed, but it must be done without repressive erasure or prescriptive forgetting of the past in its entirety.¹⁸

Conclusion

¹⁷ The reference I make here to Habermas is from an essay he wrote specifically about Germany. The original quote is as follows: “the Nazi period will be much less of an obstacle to us, the more calmly we are able to consider it as the filter through which the substance of our culture must be passed, insofar as this substance is adopted voluntarily and consciously” (Habermas, 43).

¹⁸ Michlic refers to Paul Connerton’s seven types of forgetting, which include ‘repressive erasure’ and ‘prescriptive forgetting’ as tools used by the Polish right, including the PiS through law, to limit and regulate research on Poland’s dark past (Michlic, 305).

The “Polonization” of the Holocaust has long been Poland’s priority in its approach to its national Holocaust memory; meaning the emphasis has been placed on Poland’s own suffering, avoiding the daunting question of Polish antisemitism during and even after the Holocaust. Such rhetoric, undermining or ignoring Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, is not only inherently antisemitic in itself, but it also produces a divisive, damaging, and counterproductive hierarchy of suffering among victim groups. Many historians and left-leaning intellectuals have regarded Gross’s writings, particularly *Neighbors* and *Fear*, as an opportunity for Poland to come clean about its heritage of antisemitism – referring to him as a catalyst of collective remembrance (Törnquist-Plewa, 132). However, Polish right-wing circles have dubbed Gross’s works as detrimental to the Polish national identity. How can an identity be properly formed when entire historical narratives are being omitted from the memoryscape of the nation? Proper advancement as a society and repair of historical-cultural traumas cannot take place through censorship of the past. Habermas writes that “the less communality such a collective life-context allowed internally and the more it maintained itself by usurping and destroying the lives of others, the greater, then, is the burden of reconciliation, asking or mourning, and the self-critical scrutiny of subsequent generations” (Habermas, 47).

This is not to say that Poland is responsible for the Holocaust, nor is it meant to detract from the suffering of non-Jewish Poles during the Holocaust. The purpose of this paper is not to attack the Polish state, but rather to present a challenge to the PiS’ advocacy for the national amnesia and prescriptive erasure of Jedwabne and other dark aspects of Polish-Jewish relations before, during, and after the Holocaust. Many courageous Poles risked the death penalty in order to protect Jewish-Poles – as evidenced through the fact that Poland has undisputedly received the highest number of Righteous Among the Nations awards from Israel. However, there is also abundant evidence that there were resisters to the Nazis who were at the same time antisemites, and there were Poles who denounced other Poles for protecting their Jewish neighbours. The story of the Ulma family is an example of the latter. Today, they serve as a symbol of sacrifice and martyrdom of Poles under Nazi occupation, as they provided shelter to eight Jews (the Szall family, Golda Grünfeld, and Layka Didner and her daughter), risking not only their lives but the lives of their own children

as well (The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation). On 24 March 1944, the Nazis shot all the hidden Jews, as well as the entire Ulma family, after they had been denounced to the Gestapo by a member of the *granatowa policja* (the Polish Blue Police).¹⁹ The official Polish government website for the Institute of National Remembrance, as well as right-wing historians when re-telling the story of the Ulma family, avoid addressing that the Ulma family was betrayed by their fellow Poles.²⁰ This is why the ‘Holocaust law’ is dangerous, intensifying Polish memory polemics around the Holocaust today. It denies the heritage of antisemitism in Poland, which in turn allows antisemitism to continue to grow in the darkness like a fungus: whispers of collaboration denial released into the wind, resonating deep in the corners of the Polish memoryscape, spreading so wide that it becomes increasingly harder with passing time to remove and make room for the other side of the narrative. This suggests that the issue of antisemitism is still deeply ingrained in the politics of memory in Poland. Indifference and control of information dissemination or freedom of thought today, just as in the past, suggests complicity. Evidence shows that it is indeed possible to have a history of both a victim and an agent of Holocaust crime in Poland. Work done by scholars such as Jan Gross provides milestones in Poland’s politics of memory, and also a painful but necessary counter-history to the shocking dichotomy which is ongoing in Poland – and should, ultimately, be welcomed into the difficult conversation that needs to be restructured in Poland moving forward.

¹⁹ This is the most commonly reported explanation of how the Ulma family was denounced (Poland Daily; The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation; Yad Vashem, for example). Various sources identify Włodzimierz Leś, a policeman from Łańcut, Poland, as the denouncer. The Szall family reportedly left their belongings with Leś, who then turned them in in order to take over their property (Yad Vashem).

²⁰ The Institute of National Remembrance website writes that a “[p]unitive expedition of the German police appeared in Markowa [where the Ulma family lived] on 24 March 1944. All household members, including the hidden Jews were shot” (Institute of National Remembrance). But, how did the German police know to go to the Ulm house? How were they and the two Jewish families discovered?

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