Special Polish Issue

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Book Reviews

Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz by Jan Tomasz Gross
(Random House, 2006)
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Professor Gross begins his argument with the following declaration concerning his methodology: "The nature of prejudice is to make unwarranted totalizing claims, whereas understanding advances through elucidation of careful distinctions. These are directly opposed mental exercises. And if one tries to argue prejudice away by the usual procedure of testing hypotheses (that is, by pointing to alternative explanations, or false deductions, or limitations in the empirical evidence) one enters a kind of discourse where the prejudice's basic premise is already accepted." While the first sentence begins with a platitude, the subsequent ones remove us from the universally accepted scholarly method of testing hypotheses by means known since the emergence of Aristotelian logic. What is wrong, one might ask, with testing the null hypothesis that there is a great deal of anti-Semitism in Poland? Historians and lawyers have traditionally been comfortable with bringing forward facts to confirm or deny such a hypothesis. In contrast, Gross declares that the above hypothesis is unacceptably formulated, and then accepts no argument that it could be false. This "in your face" method of imposing one's foregone conclusions on the reader leaves no way of rebutting false assumptions by ushering evidence to the contrary. The use of this method in historical research allows one to reshape history by stating preposterous things later published by presses with the correct zip codes, to congeal into the acceptable version of history.

Gross's way of arguing is quintessentially postmodern, i.e., not based on consideration of evidence. Nor does it draw conclusions by means of a ladder of syllogisms. He calls it "analytical history": "What I offer here, therefore, is not diachronic but analytical history. I go back and forth in time over different aspects of events bearing on understanding the phenomenon of postwar anti-Semitism in Poland." From this point on, page xiii of the Introduction, there is no question that Gross will reach his conclusion. He does not conceal his willingness to treat as true the testimony of Communist officials, unnamed persons quoted from "documentaries" filmed during the fifty year Soviet occupation,

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Warsaw, Poland.

sidewalk statements, just anything that agrees with his foregone conclusion. In contrast, evidence that might shatter these selected statements is simply not ushered in. As is the case with some other rewritings of history, the author's foregone conclusion is fuzzy. It rambles over the entire book. But one comes close to a summary of his conclusion on page 164: "The conceptual and emotional fog veiling this story lifts somewhat only after we recognize that Jewish survivors were an unbearable sore spot because they had been victimized by their Polish neighbors—for centuries, but especially during the Nazi occupation. . . . Episodes of collective violence that from a distance appear random and elemental are on close scrutiny semantically rich. Virtually every moment is endowed with significance, as people continuously communicate and comment about what they are doing."

To paraphrase Gross's argument, it is that Catholic Poland is a continuing reservoir of ecclesiastically supported anti-Semitism. After World War II, this reservoir was a combustible mixture, which could be lit by anything. Once started, it could spread throughout the community with lethal results. By design or accident, Professor Gross's book has been timed to correspond to a political agenda. Here is up-to-date (as of February 2007) political background to Gross's story: Although Poland did not produce a Quisling and all expropriations were done by the German and Soviet occupiers, nevertheless, given the fact that the Poles did not save their Jews from the Germans and did not protect their property, the sins of the grandfathers require that the current impoverished Polish state pay massive reparations to Jewish individuals and organisations representing the interests of Holocaust survivors. The demands by these organisations are huge, well beyond the ability of Poland to pay. Twenty representatives of these organisations arrived in Warsaw on February 27, 2007, to press the Polish government for tens of billions of dollars of restitution. The Jewish organisations are not unaware of the fact that the European Union will be paying to the Poles, over the next several years, tens of billions of dollars for the improvement of Poland's long neglected infrastructure. These organisations have in mind a better use for those monies.

To support his conclusions, Gross focuses on three pogroms that occurred in Soviet-occupied Poland in 1945. One in Rzeszow (June 12, 1945), another in Krakow (August 11, 1945), and a third in Kielce (July 4, 1946). The number of Jews (Gross's figures) killed in the three *pogroms* were zero, one to five, and forty-two, respectively. Gross gives as his estimates for the total number of Jews killed in anti-Semitic events in Poland during the postwar period as being between 500 and 1500, (*Fear*, p. 258). When one thinks of pogroms historically, these figures hardly rise to the level of ethnic cleansing. In 1648, the Cossack leader Bogdan

Khmelnitsky set off the killing of over 100,000 Ukrainian Jews. The Nazi regime killed six million Jews from all over Europe during the period 1939–1945. The period immediately after World War II was one of utter devastation in Poland. In one NKVD action in Suwalki (July 12–25, 1945), 600–800 Polish Catholics were killed (Rzeczpospolita, 9 July 2005). The rate of 500 killed for 250,000 Jews living in Poland during the interval 1945–1948 (Gross's figure, p. 258) does not seem far out of line for a similar ratio regarding the Catholic population. In a country which in 1945 still fought against enslavement by communism, it would not be out of line if one person in five hundred died a violent death. Gross concentrates on the Kielce (July 4, 1946) *pogrom*. This produced forty-two deaths. Early on, there were two basic interpretations of what had gone on. There was the position of the government and that of the Catholic bishops. The Communist government of Bierut and Berman claimed that this was the result of an attack by the AK and NSZ (forces loyal to the pre-war government exiled in London). Much effort was spent by the Communists and hundreds of people were tortured to produce evidence to support this view. Yet nobody today takes the Bierut position seriously.

The position of the Catholic episcopacy was that the Kielce pogrom was a bungled provocation, planned long in advance by the Communists. On June 30 there had been the rigged election (the Three Times "Yes" meant to legitimize the government of Soviet-occupied Poland). The Communists wished to have a manufactured incident on the American Fourth of July in order to deflect attention from the fact that democracy in Poland had formally and ceremonially ceased to exist. The killing of the Jews on 7 Planty Street involved a number of deaths by gunshot. Yet, the only persons, outside the military and organs of state security, who were allowed to carry arms were, in fact, such organisations as the Jewish group hunkered down on Planty Street. (Any Polish Catholic found with a firearm was summarily executed.) Gross ignores this inconvenient fact. Five Polish priests tried to get to the area where the shooting was taking place and were turned back by a cordon of police that had instantly appeared around the area where the pogrom was taking place (Kielce July 4, 1946: Background, Context and Events, Toronto: Polish Educational Foundation, 1996). Of course, the entire civil administration was under the control of the Communist government whose leadership in Warsaw appeared to be well in touch with the events taking place in Kielce. There was throughout the feeling of a badly choreographed and poorly timed play. A Russian NKVD unit arrived under apparently prearranged orders prepared to annihilate a crowd of bloodthirsty Poles. But there was no crowd when the NKVD units arrived.

There is much *cui bono* evidence to support the position of the Catholic bishops. Gross is incensed that the

bishops did not follow the directive of the Communist government to denounce the killings. But they did denounce those killings. What they did not do was to support the charges of the Communist government that the killings were the result of actions planned by the anti-Communist forces. The presenter of the bishops' report, Bishop Czeslaw Kaczmarek, paid dearly for his intransigence. He was tortured for months and sentenced (without his teeth, which the security police had removed from his jaws) to a lengthy sentence by a Communist court of spying for the Americans. This fact is not mentioned by Gross. Gross treats the Kielce UB (secret police) as though they were led by Inspector Jane Tennyson of New Scotland Yard rather than as ruthless, highly disciplined aparachniks.He talks grandly about this or that key person being on summer holidays as though in July of 1946 people were off taking the waters at a spa or hunting grouse on the moors. Yet Kielce in 1946 was incomparably worse off than London after the Blitz. This was a city under occupation since September of 1939. It was under complete control of the Russian-run administration and spontaneous civil demonstrations were unthinkable.

One thing in common to the position of the government and that of the bishops is that both views assumed that the murders at Planty 7 were planned and directed by leaders and not spontaneous acts of individual mob members. This confirms the so-called Pareto Principle which notes that catastrophic failures in systems are due to one or a few assignable causes rather than a general malaise across the system. Throughout the ghastly Holocaust of Jews, Poles, Gypsies, etc., the Nazi killings were planned and organized. From the lootings of Kristallnacht to the gassings at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the killing and violence were planned and directed. Gross denounces the view of the bishops and does not exactly support the government's view either. Rather, he advances a position revisionist to that of the government (*Fear*, p. 163):

I find the terms "*pogrom*" and *prowokacja* misleading in denoting episodes of collective behavior such as took place in Kielce. They relegate the phenomenon to the repertoire of "mob behavior," attributing it implicitly to socially marginal malcontents presumably acting out their frustrations and quite frequently manipulated to do so by unscrupulous agents of the ruling strata, who thus deflect the resolution of mounting social conflicts. But on July 4, 1946, in Kielce, we did not see an unexpected blowup by the lumpenproletariat. Instead, it was Mr. (and Mrs.) *Tout-le-Monde*, the Mom-and-Pop crowd deliberate and very much at ease with what they were doing. In Gross's view, the killings at Kielce were due to a general spirit of anti-Semitism which spontaneously led to the actions of a mass of individuals. In other words, Gross stands the Pareto Principle on its head and claims that Kielce was due to a general malaise

across the Polish Catholic society. In Gross's view, this is a continuing problem fueled by Polish Catholicism.

Having made his argument for systemic anti-Semitism in Poland, Gross then spends some chapters to establish his other major conclusion: Polish anti-Semitism has nothing to do with any imagined collaboration between Polish Jews and the Soviets. Although Professor Gross will brook no testing of null hypotheses, the reader might be interested in the statement by Professor Andrzej Paczkowski, former head of the respected Institute of National Memory, to the effect that the proportion of Jews on the central decision-making level in the Soviet-controlled security apparatus in Poland was about thirty-percent, (Paczkowski, "Zydzi w UB—*proba weryfikacji stereotypu*," in *Komunizm: ideologia, system, ludzie*, edited by Tomasz Szarota. Warsaw: Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2001, p. 197). There were approximately twenty-five million Polish Catholics in Poland in 1945. There were approximately 250,000 Jews in Poland in 1945. After a little arithmetic we find that the proportion of Jews who opted to join the UB was forty-two times that of Catholics. Gross does not dispute the fact that the proportion of Jews willing to work for the secret police was higher than that of the Catholics. But he gives an intriguing explanation for why this was so (*Fear*, p. 227): "But the MBP did not look specifically for Jews to fill the available positions. There was an overall shortage of qualified personnel; people were being pulled every which way to take jobs all over the new administration, and what one ended up doing was very often a matter of pure coincidence."

In other words, the reason for the alarmingly higher proportion of Jews than that of Catholics in the UB was the relatively greater competence of the Jews. And that competitive advantage must have been substantial as the ratio of forty-two would indicate. In Gross's analysis there is no attention given to the fact a Polish Catholic who joined the UB would be regarded as a traitor to his nation and would be an excommunicate from his Church. By Gross's calculus, Polish Catholics were "underrepresented" in the UB because they were less competent. The invasion of Poland by Germany and Russia in September of 1939 was an unprovoked partition of the country. It is understood that the Poles were not pleased by the Russian occupation, but it may be thought that the Russian occupation was a minor annoyance compared to the occupation by the Germans. In an earlier book *Revolution from Abroad* written in his pre-postmodern days, when Gross was an associate professor at Emory, Gross carefully and with excellent documentation shows how wrong this notion was. He wrote (*Revolution from Abroad*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1st ed., p. 229): "These very conservative estimates show that the Soviets killed or drove to their deaths three or four times as many people as the Nazis from a population

half the size of that under German jurisdiction. This comparison holds for the first two years of the Second World War, the period before the Nazis began systematic mass annihilation of the Jewish population."

Gross shows that, for Polish Catholics, the Soviets were even worse, indeed much worse than the brutal Nazis. Essentially all the Polish professional and semi-professional classes (doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, managers, foremen, farmers with holding beyond a few acres, etc.) were rounded up by the Soviets and then either killed immediately or retained in prisons for shipments to slave labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia. Prison conditions were hellish, worse than those in the Nazi concentration camps. Gross writes (*Revolution from Abroad*, p. 161): "In Lwów, twenty-eight people living in a 11.5 sq. m cell relied on the geometrical skills of a gifted high school student who fitted them most ingeniously by size into an intricate pattern." Sanitary conditions were appalling, with inmates frequently forced to urinate and defecate on the floors of the cells. What was the situation with the Jews in the lands occupied by the Soviets and what was their attitude to the occupiers? Gross writes (*Revolution from Abroad*, p. 32): "What Poles and Ukrainians report, often with biting irony, the Jews do not deny: "Jews greeted the Soviet army with joy. The youth was spending days and evenings with the soldiers . . . Jews received incoming Russians enthusiastically, they [the Russians] also trusted them [the Jews]."

Again, Gross writes (Revolution from Abroad, p. 34, quoting Celina Koninska]: "It is hard to find words to describe the feeling—this waiting and this happiness. We wondered how to express ourselves—to throw flowers? To sing? To organize a demonstration? How to show our great joy? I think the Jews awaiting the Messiah will feel, when he finally comes, the way we felt." These warm receptions by Jews for the Soviets in eastern Poland were in September of 1939, when there were no Germans in sight. The Jews were rejoicing over the occupation of eastern Poland by the Russians. To Polish Catholics, this was simply treason, analogous to the occasional warm receptions in western Poland of the Germans by some Volksdeutsche. Now, it is undeniable that in the German-occupied portion of Poland where the situation of the Jews was worse than that of the Catholics, many Polish families hid Jews from the Nazi occupiers. It is a matter of record that Poles are listed at *Yad Vashem* numerically first amongst the righteous Gentiles for risking their lives and those of their families for sheltering Jews from the Nazis. So, it is fair to ask the question, "When did Jews use their favored position in Soviet occupied eastern Poland to shelter Polish Catholics from the NKVD?" This reviewer regrets to say that he cannot find any instances of such assistance.

Up to the day (June 22, 1941) when Hitler broke his deal with Stalin and invaded Soviet-occupied Poland, Gross (Revolution from Abroad p. 194) estimates that 1.25 million people were transported into the Soviet Union from eastern Poland. The ghastly NKVD prisons in Poland were generally used as holding cells for Poles awaiting execution or prison train space for transportation to the gulags. When the Germans attacked the Soviets on June 22, 1941, the NKVD killed or moved to the east 150,000 prisoners from these holding cells. In the Brygidki prison in Lwów, on June 22, 1941, the NKVD killed almost all of the thirteen-thousand inmates. (*Revolution from Abroad*, p. 179). This was recorded by Gross as a "massacre" rather than a pogrom.

After the Nazis occupied western Poland in 1939, they encouraged anti-Semitic acts by the Poles, including pogroms. The Germans had only the most minimal success. Polish Catholics were not inclined to participate in Nazi murders. Moreover, the Polish underground punished betrayal of Jews to the Nazis by death. After the Russians rapidly retreated following the German attack of June 22, 1941, in the brief time interval before the Germans could take over, there was a number of killings of collaborators, including many Jews, by the Polish underground. One example of such took place in Szczuczyn, where there were four NKVD prisons. Gross gives such killings as evidence of Polish anti-Semitism. But we still must wonder why the Polish Catholics in German occupied western Poland, where *pogroming* was a state subsidized activity, had not engaged in such activities.

As stated early on in this review, Professor Gross disdains to use empirical timeline data and Aristotelian logic to prove his point. To those of us who believe in logical conclusions based on facts, his thesis does not hold water. Worse, it is beyond mean-spirited to treat Catholic Poland, victimized by half a century of brutal and systematic rape as though it were itself a rapist. And to offer up Catholicism, the Faith that has sustained the Polish nation in its fifty-year long ordeal, as an underlying cause of Poland's alleged anti-Semitism is not acceptable. There is no question that there is a very large choir with whom Gross's voice resonates. The Jews lost property during the Second World War in Poland and the Poles must pay for it. If the cupboard is bare, if there is massive deprivation, even starvation in Poland, it makes no difference.

This raises another question. According to Teresa Bochwic (*Rzeczpospolita*, August 3, 2002), two out of three of the current residents of Poland have either suffered the loss of their homes as a result of World War II and the events following, or are descendants of those who have. The organs of state security, led by such

persons as Jakub Berman, and the Soviet NKVD were directly responsible for the deaths of over one million Polish Catholics. Where should the Catholic victims go for redress of grievances? Poles ask simply to be left alone, to be freed from quasi-legal attacks by those who would keep them oppressed forever. Poland had the highest proportion of deaths during Word War II (seventeen-percent of the population). Next to the USSR, the USA, and Great Britain, Poland contributed the greatest number of troops in the war against Hitler. The Polish underground produced the highest number of attacks against the Nazis of any occupied country and suffered the greatest retaliations. There was no Quisling or Petainist government in Poland. Collaboration with the Nazis was rare and punished by the underground by death. Poland has the largest number of "righteous Gentiles" recorded at *Yad Vashem.* It should take more than postmodern sermonizing to justify the further victimization of this long-suffering nation.

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Dreams and Tears: Chronicle of a Life by Erwin K. Koranyi (Renfrew, Ontario: General Store Publishing House, 2006) ISBN 978 1897113479

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade

Theodore Roethke

Dr. Erwin Koranyi has published respected medical articles on Holocaust survivors. He himself was one of those survivors who fled Europe to Israel just after World War II. In the years following he also knew many as part of his life and practice in Montreal and Ottawa, Canada. But it is only now, in *Dreams and Tears*, that he bears witness to his own experience as a young Hungarian Jew during Hitler's Nazi regime. At the Israeli ambassador's book reception for him in December in Ottawa, former Justice Minister Irwin Cotler observed that, in these days of occasional but serious anti-Semitism, it is important that those who experienced the Holocaust, now a dwindling number, should bear witness. Such a memoir of Koranyi's does just this. But the book does more: it shows the best as well as worst in human nature. For example, it tells how Swedish diplomat Raul Wallenberg risked his life for Koranyi and thousands of others by signing special visas for them that saved them from the death that awaited 600,000 Hungarian Jews in the camps. The book also shows how the many who did survive, through courage, will, intelligence, and substantial luck went on to contribute richly to their new countries. Yet the archives of *Yad Vashem*, in Jerusalem, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., the Shoah in Los Angeles, and many other centers, are sadly full of Holocaust stories in letters, books, videotape, and microfilm. You might therefore ask, what makes Erwin