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**Poland**

# **Jedwabne is everywhere**

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**Neighbors', a book by Jan T Gross, has been the subject of intense debate in the media and on the street in Poland; [1] a debate which has revealed the depth of anti-Semitism in a country where Jews have been a tiny minority of the population since the Second World War, [2] not just because of the Nazi genocide but also as a consequence of anti-Semitic campaigns which led many of the survivors to emigrate, in 1945-1948, 1956-1957 and 1968.**

*JT Gross is a historian who emigrated in 1968 as a student oppositionist and only came back to Poland after 1989. In his book he describes the pogrom that took place on July 10, 1941 in a village in eastern Poland, Jedwabne, a little after the occupation of the region by the Nazi army (Jedwabne ended up on the Soviet side of the dividing line in Poland after the Hitler-Stalin pact up until June 22, 1941, when the Nazis attacked the USSR).*

*This pogrom, which led to the death of 1,600 Jews, was presented in Poland after the Second World War as the deed of the Nazis and some Polish back-up troops, of which several had been punished. A monument to the memory of the victims even says that it was a Hitlerian crime, making no mention of the responsibilities of the local Polish population. What Gross reveals is the absence of Nazi forces in the village on that day (whereas they had taken part in a hunt for Jews in another nearby village some days before, leading to the flight of the Jewish population precisely to Jedwabne) and he describes in a detailed fashion the bestiality of the crime - Jews of all ages who survived the first roundup were assembled in a barn and burnt alive "and the spontaneous participation of the local Polish population in the genocide. We publish here an article by a Polish radical left activist on the debate aroused by the Gross book.*

The Jedwabne affair obliges Poles to make a sorrowful search of their consciences. I hope that it will not lead to a strengthening of anti-Semitic sentiments in our country' - said Aleksander Kwasniewski [3] some months ago when interviewed by the Israeli daily newspaper Yediot Aharanot. Surprising words, for Jews or those who do not live in Poland and do not read the Polish press. Because it was not Jews who killed Poles in Jedwabne, but the other way round. I do not believe the readers of Yediot Aharanot would have been able to understand Kwasniewski. And if they did understand it, so much the worse for us Poles.

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On July 10 (2001) I was buying some cherries from the market near my home. An afternoon in the capital. In Jedwabne the ceremonies for the sixtieth anniversary of the pogrom had ended. Among the buyers and sellers, only one theme of conversation.

"I see the Yids are having their celebration," says a middle aged man in front of me buying potatoes.

"Yeah, yeah", says the woman who helps the trader to wrap the vegetables.

"Don't be a Jew! Add some weight", another man says to the trader, who is weighing the tomatoes on the scales.

The trader becomes irate, spits between his teeth, 'the Jew is scum!' and without saying any more serves the vegetables.

"Yeah, yeah", repeats the woman.

The men nod their heads.

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I did not invent this story. Each of us has witnessed similar things many times. Not before the war, when our country was home to three million Polish citizens of Jewish nationality. Now. In the country where the greatest crime of modern Europe, the Holocaust, took place. In the country where to be Jewish during the war meant death, whereas after the war it still meant trouble and repression.

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Nobody can tell me that Poland is not an anti-Semitic country; such assurances sound false, even in the mouths of those who saved Jews during the war. Given the never-ending desecration of Jewish cemeteries and the attacks against synagogues, the offices of Jewish associations and newspapers, people who dare to go on the streets wearing a skullcap. Given the stars of David on gallows scrawled on walls so frequently. Given the innumerable publications whose character can only be compared to the Hitlerian rags. Given the racist language of anti-Semitic insults and insinuations that one can hear on the radio and television, in the pulpits and parliamentary galleries. Given the racist and anti-Semitic murders.

I consider that anti-Semitism is the greatest shame of the Third Republic. A shame that will be washed away by neither the excuses of the president, nor the equivocations of the bishops. A shame that has become our stigma and sign de recognition, our heritage and - virtually - the definer of our identity. For, at the end of the day, what can Poles most surely find agreement on, whether around a vodka in Zabrze, at a party at an aunt's in Krakow, or at congresses from Polonia to Valparaiso? Moreover, what else excites in us the most sacred rage, if not the accusation of anti-Semitism?

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I know something about it. Because, as the author of some reports on the Polish far right which have been published in the West by organizations involved in the analysis of racism and anti-Semitism here, I have been attacked as a 'traitor' and 'sellout'. And what is most interesting, not only by the scribblers of the far right press but also by deputies - representatives of Poland in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

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Incredulity, anger, hysteria: one can summarize thus the reaction of the Polish media to Jan T. Gross's book 'Neighbors' [\[4\]](#) which describes in detailed fashion how on July 10, 1941 1,600 Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne were burnt alive by their Polish neighbours. These reactions confirm the sad truth that the cases of killings of Jews by Poles during the last war and just after its end remain a taboo subject in Poland. The false image of Poland as a

country 'without butchers' and 'without Quislings', which has always been the victim of conspiracies, treason and aggression from the neighbouring countries and foreign minorities, in a word the Messianic vision of Poland suffering for the sins of the world, cultivated by the rightwing press and the supposedly 'national' newspapers, has broadly infected the milieus which up until now had resisted this schema.

Certainly, the least surprising commentaries were those in the rightwing and 'national' press, and the most surprising the article published by Trybuna. [5] But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

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For Leszek Bubel, who edits high circulation publications which are anti-Semitic in the extreme, like the bimonthly *Tylko Polska* ('Only Poland') and *Kwartalnik Narodowy* ('National Quarterly'), the Jedwabne affair is from beginning to end no more than a Jewish provocation having as its goal to definitively dishonour Poland in the eyes of the world, as a country of anti-Semites and eaters of Jews. "On numerous occasions," writes Bubel, "in the course of these recent years the representatives of the highest bodies of the state have presented apologies for crimes, persecutions and pogroms that Poles never committed". [6]

One of these authors qualifies the information concerning the crime at Jedwabne as "material full of lies and deformations" which "in a surprising manner are in synch with the new Jewish claims concerning the recuperation of so-called goods and of compensation(!) for mythical Polish 'crimes'. [7]" For Bubel and his authors this is all another Jewish anti-Polish provocation, for the Poles took no part in the massacre of 60 years ago. [8]

*Mysl Polska* ('Polish Thought') and *Nasza Polska* ('Our Poland') employ a similar style to describe Jedwabne. The editorial board of the latter, in their 'open letter to Leon Kieres - president of the Institute of National Memory' (called here the 'Institute of National Forgetting') - reports that 'the inhabitants of Jedwabne, who remember the period of Soviet and German occupation in their town, have unanimously affirmed that the murder of the Jewish population was the deed of the Germans, and this board demanded that the Institute clarifies instead "the pogrom of the Polish population of the village of Koniuchy in 1944" [carried out by 'Jewish communist partisans'] and "the aspect of Jewish collaboration with the Soviet occupier". [9]

The editors protest firmly against the apologies made to the Jews for the crime of Jedwabne in the name of the Poles by president Kwasniewski, saying that it is rather Jews who should apologize to Poles for the crimes of Communism for which they supposedly bear responsibility. [10]

The Catholic weekly *Niedziela* ('Sunday'), edited by the metropolitan Curia of Czestochowa, published a piece by Jerzy Robert Nowak, entitled '100 lies of JT Gross'. while in the same newspaper the defence of the good name of the inhabitants of Jedwabne was also undertaken by the collaborator of 'Radio Maryja' [11] and president of the Commission of Culture of the Senate, senator Krystyna Czuba. [12]

In *Glos*, [13] edited by Antoni Macierewicz, a lecturer at the Catholic University of Lublin, Ryszard Bender, qualified Gross's theses as 'phantasmagoria' and 'lies'. The newspaper develops a vision of a Judeo-Communist conspiracy which, under the pretext of the 'Jedwabne affair', has as its goal to compromise Poland and the Polish in the eyes of the world and whose essence is 'the systematic aspiration to a durable submission and exploitation of Poland'. [14]

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/29trot.jpg>]

Anti-Bolshevik and anti-semitic poster of Trotsky used by the White Russian army in 1919 *Nasz Dziennik* ('Our Daily')

on March 3-4, 2000 published over three and a half columns an interview with Marek Jan Chodakiewicz ('Jedwabne is only a beginning') who laments the fact that Poland's past is written "by the same team who wrote under the leadership of Moscow and which is ready today to write under the diktat of Brussels or anyone who will find them a foreign account". What Chodakiewicz, author of the book *The Jews and the Poles 1918-1955*.

Coexistence-Extermination-Communism, did not say is completed by Malgorzata Rutkowska, who conducts the interview. Here we find the "completely unfounded accusations of the Warsaw insurgents killing Jews in the famous article by Michal Cichy published some years ago by *Gazeta Wyborcza*", here we find the affirmation that "Cichy and Gross use the same excessively dishonest methodology; manipulation of sources, half-truths and lies", and that "what is at stake is not so much the truth as 'the revalorization' of History so as to render the Poles responsible for the Holocaust."

Finally Rutkowska accuses Gross "of having isolated the events of Jedwabne from the historic context", that is "of the involvement of Jews inside the security apparatus and regime 'from the first soviets' in Jedwabne" and says, in the name of all Poles obviously, that so far as Jedwabne is concerned "we have no intention of beating our breasts over crimes that were not ours".

An article by Bogumil Lozinski and Alina Petrowa-Wasilewicz. "Nobody asked the neighbours", which appeared in *Zycie* ('Life') of March 3-4, 2001, makes the same points. The authors claim that the crime at Jedwabne was carried out by the Germans with the help of local 'hooligans and bandits' who had been 'compelled' to participate. "If it could happen that a Pole could set upon a Jew", says RP Kemblinski "it is above all because they considered the Jews as Soviet collaborators, some revenging themselves for the suffering of those close to them". However, "according to the Jedwabnians these were isolated cases", conclude these authors.

The views of Professor RP Waldemar Chrostowski, former co-president of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews (he resigned in February 1998 to protest against "the escalation of Jewish demands"), presented in the interview 'What prevents dialogue?' carried out by Pawel Paliwoda, [15] are of the same hue. The professor begins with a total critique of Gross's book, which is compared to the "product of a sick imagination", the book *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinski (interestingly the journalist from *Trybuna*, Jakub Kopec, makes the same comparison, as we will see). [16] "This book begins with wild anti-Polish and anti-Catholic ravings." He continues in a familiar anti-Semitic style, attempting to 'understand' the anti-Jewish sentiments among some Poles (that is the killers): Jewish collaboration with the NKVD, [17] the silence of rich American Jews during the Holocaust and so on. It is then natural that he considers the idea of apologising to the Jews for Jedwabne as 'unhealthy' and 'humiliating' for the Poles. The main problem in Polish-Jewish relations resides, in his view, in the fact that Jews, unlike Poles, "do not wish to take account of a period of their recent history".

The alleged collaboration of Jews with the Soviet repressive apparatus directed against the members of the Polish resistance, which should - according to the authors of the newspapers cited - explain 'and some' the anti-Jewish behaviour of the Poles in the course of the Holocaust, is taken up and developed by Tomasz Strzembosz. Both in the interview given to *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, [18] and the copious article entitled 'The collaboration passed over in silence' published by *Rzeczpospolita*, [19] Strzembosz not only rejects Gross's thesis, according to which the perpetrators of the massacre in Jedwabne were Poles, but argues that Polish enmity towards the Jews in eastern Poland was comprehensible and had a patriotic basis; the Jews 'had betrayed' by collaborating, 'weapons in hand' with the occupier, in this case the USSR.

In another article, [20] Strzembosz deals with the film by Agnieszka Arnold *Neighbours*, in which the witnesses reveal revolting details on the murder 60 years ago. Strzembosz assures us with authority; it is "an obvious manipulation".

An article by Jakub Kopec 'Holocaust in Jedwabne' subtitled: 'Jan Tomasz Gross's book deceives effectively', published on February 23, 2001 by *Trybuna*, demands a 'scientific' analysis of Gross's book. [21] To reject entirely

Gross's thesis on the 1,600 Jews burned in a barn it is enough, says Kopec, simply to "read a text on the construction of barns in Jedwabne and its environs. Taking account of the marshy character of the lands situated between the Biebrza and Narew rivers... the barns should not be big." And further: "A scientist from Opole [Dariusz Ratajczak, collaborator of Bubel, who in a book which he has edited himself questioned the existence of the gas chambers at Auschwitz - SZ], who has challenged the Holocaust in general, has calculated, that at most 100 were burnt in the barn. And although the number of victims is of little importance for the moral judgment of the crime, we - enlightened men and struck by the ignominy of the collective murder at Jedwabne - we would make the hypothesis that in the barn five times more victims would have been burnt alive. There are still 1,000 missing".

Gazeta Wyborcza, [22] which has devoted proportionally the most space to the discussion on Gross's book, would seem purely academic if not incomprehensibly subtle for the readers and editors of the above mentioned titles. The authors of Gazeta Wyborcza - with the exception of the surprising statement by Ryszard Bugaj [23] as if drawn into the open by the bulletins of Bubel, claim that "supporters of the thesis of an anti-Semitic Poland serves also to justify material demands on Poland" and do not ask "if this really happened?" or "how did this happen?" I cannot understand how eminent intellectuals like Adam Michnik or Jacek Zakowski, [24] can feel 'harassed' by the crime of Jedwabne and 'sick' at the appearance of Gross's book or fall back on an anti-Semitic argument: "several witnesses concerning Jedwabne indicate that an Aryan shop could not maintain itself there before the war because retail trade was entirely in the hands of Jewish traders. The economic struggle, including between artisans, could bring forth strong emotions. Thus in the reality and the criminal folly of the period such sentiments could find their place"; "Soviet totalitarianism had contributed to the creation of a new list of offences" and the anti-Semitic accusations of the Jews of Jedwabne "were founded on personal experiences". [25] Zakowski himself begrudges the Jews for their passivity before death, because they went tranquilly "like sheep" to the abattoir.

Such formulations are not astonishing in the right wing press, which in its great majority has anti-Semitism as its basis; nor, to a still greater extent in some Catholic far right press, where it is the rule. But in Gazeta Wyborcza, a daily reputed for its courage to treat of the so-called difficult themes, which de-idealise the history of Poland and the Poles? In a newspaper which more than any other is sensitive to intolerance, racism and xenophobia?

This stems in my opinion from the attempt to rationalize something, which cannot be rationalized, to explain the inexplicable and understand what cannot be understood. Should we try? Take care. We still have some other undiscovered skeletons in the cupboard of our recent history. Allow me to mention only the case of the liquidation of detachments of Jewish and Soviet partisans by the NSZ and AK formations, [26] the deportations and massacres of the German and Ukrainian populations after the war, the camp for Germans at Lambinowice, the 'Vistula' action. [27] I imagine that the discussion around one of these themes (and I am sure that sooner or later it will take place) will resemble that on Jedwabne. And what I fear is that again people will try to explain the crime or refuse to admit it. Indifferent, like those who pass every day in the streets of our towns without looking at the gallows bearing stars of David scrawled on the walls.

This article appeared in number 13 of the review of the radical left, [Lewa Noga](#) ('With the left foot'), October 2001.

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[1] One of the witnesses in the film 'Neighbors', which told how Poles killed the Jews at Jedwabne, has been harassed by their neighbours as a 'lackey of the Jews' after the broadcast and forced to leave the town with their family.

[2] Just after the official commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the crime at Jedwabne, the mayor of the town and the president of the municipal and cantonal councils resigned. They had lost the confidence of the inhabitants, who boycotted the ceremony.

[3] Aleksander Kwasniewski, a social democrat, is currently president of the Republic.

[4] Jan T Gross, *Neighbors*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

[5] Trybuna ('Tribune') - which succeeded Trybuna Ludu ('Tribune of the People'), organ of the Polish United Workers' Party (in power from 1944 to 1989) is the daily of the Polish left, close to social democracy.

[6] Tylko Polska, February 28 - March 13, 2001.

[7] *Roch Narodowiec*, article entitled 'Anti-Polish offensive', *Kwartalnik Narodowy*, March-May 2001.

[8] 'Without participation of Poles. The new facts in the Jedwabne affair disprove the lies of Gross', *Tylko Polska*, April 11-24, 2001; 'We unmask the lie. The Germans at Jedwabne', *Kwartalnik Narodowy*, July-September, 2001.

[9] *Nasza Polska*, February 27, 2001.

[10] 'Obligatory reading. Why should Kwasniewski apologize?', *Nasza Polska*, July 3, 2001; 'Apology is a crime', *Nasza Polska*, July 10, 2001.

[11] *Radio Maryja* ('Radio Mary') is a private radio, ultra-Catholic and reactionary, given to a chauvinistic and anti-Semitic discourse, with several million regular listeners.

[12] 'Jedwabne: to the glory of the heroes of the struggles for Poland', *Niedziela*, May 25, 2001.

[13] *Glos*, ('The Voice') of November 25, 2000. This newspaper first appeared in the late 1970s, clandestinely. Antoni Macierewicz was a founder of the 'Committee for the Defense of Workers' (KOR) in 1976, where he led a radical anti-Stalinist current.

[14] Jan Kowalski, 'Behind the provocation. The Jewish lobby and the Communists attack Poland', *Glos*, June 16, 2001.

[15] *Zycie*, April 15, 2001.

[16] In his novel *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski, a Polish Jew who emigrated to the USA, tells how a Jewish boy was the victim of Polish peasants during the last world war. Although the novel does not claim to be historic truth, it describes a completely plausible social climate.

[17] An acronym of the Stalinist political police in the USSR.

[18] January 17, 2001. This is the weekly of the *Solidarnosc* trade union.

[19] January 27-28, 2001. *Rzeczpospolita* ('The Republic') was the official government daily. Privatised, it is still considered an official newspaper.

[20] 'The witnesses', *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, number 15, 2001.

[21] Eastern region of Poland from 1918-1939, integrated into Belarus in 1939.

[22] Main liberal Polish daily, edited by Adam Michnik, a historic oppositionist, former member of KOR and founder of the 'Club of Researchers of Contradictions' at the University of Warsaw in 1966.

[23] 'Historic truth and material interest', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 6-7, 2001. Ryszard Bugaj, economist and former *Solidarnosc* expert, helped found a small social democratic organization originating from part of the clandestine union *Labour Solidarnosc*.

[24] Jacek Zakowski, 'Each neighbour has a first name', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 18-19, 2000.

[25] Prof. Tomasz Szarota interviewed by Jacek Zakowski in 'The diabolical details', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 18-19, 2000.

[26] NSZ, National Armed Forces, a right and far right organization of the Polish resistance during the Second World War, autonomous in relation to the main formation of the resistance, the Interior Army (AK), non-Communist. The AK led in particular the Warsaw insurrection (August-September 1944). The NSZ had contacts with the Nazis, in particular at the time when the latter's occupation was crumbling, in the name of the 'struggle on two fronts' against the Nazis and the Soviets.

[27] In the mountainous region of Bieszczady, in the southeast of modern Poland, where the Ukrainian national resistance had not laid down its arms and enjoyed popular support, the whole population was deported to the west and north. This 'pacification' was especially brutal. Bieszczady was declared a forbidden zone and reverted to a wilderness. Only the higher bureaucracy could go there for hunting.