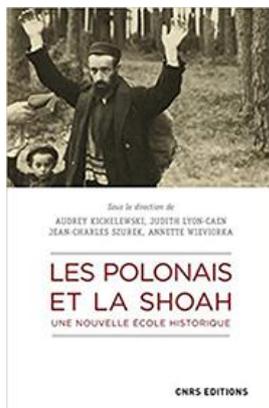


Audrey Kichelewski, Judith Lyon-Caen, Jean-Charles Szurek, Annette Wiewiorka (dir.), *Les Polonais et la Shoah. Une nouvelle école historique*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2019, 320 p.

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In February 2019, the EHESS hosted a Polish-French symposium on The New Polish School of Holocaust History.¹ Unexpectedly, this scholarly conference gained extensive public attention across the globe, and led to an unpleasant diplomatic exchange between Paris and Warsaw. The reason for this turmoil was the attempt made by groups of Polish nationalists to disrupt the event. Organised by a priest from the Polish Catholic Mission in Paris and supported by state-controlled media at home, the self-proclaimed defenders of Poland's good name bullied and blamed the participants of the conference for undermining Poland's image abroad. This incident is not only part of the ongoing Polish struggle about interpretations of the Holocaust. Indeed, it also reveals much about the decline in academic freedom that can be observed in Poland over the last few years. The volume *Les Polonais et la Shoah. Une nouvelle école historique* edited by Audrey Kichelewski, Judith Lyon-Caen, Jean-Charles Szurek and Annette Wiewiorka in late 2019, documents both the Paris conference and the Polish context in which the New School has emerged.

For around 20 years, the New Polish School of Holocaust History has been unsettling traditional assumptions structuring Poland's academic and popular thinking about Polish-Jewish relations. According to one of them, Poles helped Jews on a mass scale; according to another, there was a parallel between Polish and Jewish suffering under Nazi occupation. Although the first attempts to challenge these distorted views were undertaken during the 1980s by left-wing activists and Catholic intellectuals, the real breakthrough occurred only in 2000, when the Polish-American historian Jan T. Gross published an essay titled *Neighbours*.² This tantalising book explores the history of several hundred Jews who were burned alive by their Polish neighbours in the village of Jedwabne in July 1941. The debate that exploded around *Neighbours*

¹ The conferences was organised by the EHESS, la Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, le Collège de France, the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, the Paris branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Strasbourg University, and the journal *L'Histoire*: <https://www.fondationshoah.org/recherche/la-nouvelle-ecole-polonaise-dhistoire-de-la-shoah>. The only part of the conference that is accessible online is the lecture given by Jan T. Gross at the Collège de France: <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/conferences-cdf/Jan-Tomasz-Gross.htm> (accessed 20/11/2020).

² The French translation was published two years after the Polish and American original: Jan T. Gross, *Les Voisins: 10 juillet 1941, un massacre de juifs en Pologne* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

lasted for several months and is rightly considered the most important public struggle regarding Poland's contemporary history.³ More importantly, the debate on what happened in Jedwabne has inspired a great deal of new research documenting the various ways in which Poles were involved in the extermination of Jews.

A considerable part of this revisionist work has been carried out at the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, established in 2003 at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and representing the core of the New School. The very notion of a New Polish School of Holocaust History was first used by one of the leading Polish intellectuals Adam Michnik. Despite his Jewish origins, Michnik is by no means an unconditional supporter of the shock therapy imposed by Gross and his fellow colleagues.⁴ When using the term New School, Michnik possibly related it to the critical impetus of the new generation of Polish Holocaust scholars, which reminded him of the merciless approach to Poland's past that had been advanced in the 19th century by historians from the then famous Krakow School. In the last few years, Michnik's notion has gained currency both in Poland and abroad. It is used to describe a group of up to thirty researchers, mostly historians, but also anthropologists, psychologists, literary scholars and sociologists, who keep telling uncomfortable truths about Polish-Jewish relations.

Most of the studies published by the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research have been highly appreciated by the international academic community and yet largely ignored by the Polish readership. Public awareness of the research output produced at the Centre increased significantly in early 2018, when the results of the collaborative book *Night without an End* were presented.⁵ In a number of micro-historical studies based on a wide range of sources scattered across several countries, the Warsaw scholars around Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski systematically explored what happened during the so-called third phase of the Holocaust (1942–1945) in Poland. Their analysis revealed that at least 60 % of the Jews who had managed to survive the deadliest phase of the Holocaust were denounced or killed by their Christian neighbours.⁶ Extrapolated to the entire country, these findings from nine Polish districts would mean that Poles were responsible for the death of approximately 200,000 Jews. In other words, as Jan T. Gross provocatively stated, during the Second World War Poles killed more Jews than they killed Germans.⁷ Was it a

³ For the documentation of the debate: Ruth Henning (ed.), *Die "Jedwabne-Debatte" in polnischen Zeitungen und Zeitschriften* (Potsdam: Deutsch-Polnische Gesellschaft Brandenburg, 2001); *Jedwabne. Spór historyków wokół książki Jana T. Grossa "Śsiedzi"* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Frondy, 2002); Antony Polonsky and Joanna Beata Michlic (eds.), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); for its analysis: Laurence Weinbaum, *The Struggle for Memory in Poland: Auschwitz, Jedwabne and Beyond* (Jerusalem: Institute of the World Jewish Congress, 2001); Piotr Forecki, *Spór o Jedwabne: analiza debaty publicznej* (Poznań: UAM, 2008); Jean-Yves Potel, *La fin de l'innocence. La Pologne face à son passé juif* (Paris: Autrement, 2009); Joanna Beata Michlic, "At the Crossroads: Jedwabne and Polish Historiography of the Holocaust", *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 31, 3 (2017), p. 296–306.

⁴ Jan T. Gross, *...bardzo dawno temu, mniej więcej w zeszły piątek... Rozmowa z Aleksandrą Pawlicką* (Warsaw: WAB, 2018), p. 223–229.

⁵ Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (eds.), *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, 2 vol. (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018).

⁶ Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, "Wstęp". In: Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (eds.), *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vol. 1. (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, p. 1–43; 21–22, 29–37).

⁷ Jan T. Gross, *...bardzo dawno temu, mniej więcej w zeszły piątek... Rozmowa z Aleksandrą Pawlicką*

coincidence that the infamous Polish Holocaust Law was passed a couple of weeks before the public release of *Night without an End*?

In any case, the leaders and supporters of the ruling Law and Justice party launched a campaign denouncing the scholars from the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research before their book was even published, and accompanied the debate about it with a combination of discursive and disciplining practices. For instance, the Prime Minister did not prolong Engelking's tenure as chairwoman of the International Council of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the Minister of Culture cut funding for the Centre's journal, and the Polish Anti-Defamation League has intensified its attacks against Grabowski.⁸ Historians and journalists supporting the government publicly libelled *Night without an End* as 'scientific humbug' (*naukowa mistyfikacja*) accusing its authors of what they call a 'racism of sources' (*rasizm źródłowy*), i.e. the privileging of Jewish over Polish testimonies.⁹ The Institute of National Remembrance, meanwhile transformed into an agency implementing the state-sponsored politics of memory, commissioned a number of extended critical 'reviews' of *Night without an End* in Polish and other languages.¹⁰ Although it is difficult to say whether these and other counter-measures were part of a coordinated plan or an accidental accumulation of spontaneous activities, taken together, they show how ruthless the defenders of Poland's innocence can be.

Even more alarming than these developments, however, is the gradual establishment of a parallel scientific community. Since the publication of *Neighbours* in 2000, this and every other book by Gross has been followed by a counter-book written or published by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz – a Polish-American historian who has often been confronted with the charge of antisemitism.¹¹ Furthermore, the growing interest of Polish scholars in the various ways in which Poles were involved in the Holocaust has been accompanied by an increasing number of publications dealing with the Polish Righteous among Nations.¹² For the last few years, however, the relationship between (scholarly) arguments and (partisan) counter-arguments has been undergoing a process of institutionalisation. Opened in 2016, the Chapel of Memory of Rescuers (popularly called 'Polish Yad Vashem') in Toruń, and the Ulma-Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews in the Second World War in the village of

(Warsaw: WAB, 2018), p. 194–196.

⁸ No measures 2018. Available at <https://www.germandeathcampsnotpolish.com> (accessed 17 September 2020); Witold Mrozek, "Minister Gliński nie dał dotacji rocznikowi 'Zagłady Żydów'", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 June, 2018; Adam Leszczyński, "Prof. J. Grabowski, badacz Zagłady: Pozywam Redutę Dobrego Imienia. Nie wolno ciskać w ludzi błotem", 29 November, 2018. Available at <https://oko.press/prof-jan-grabowski-pozywam-redute-dobrego-imienia-nie-wolno-ciskac-w-ludzi-blotem/> (accessed 17 September, 2020).

⁹ Piotr Gontarczyk, "Zakłamana, zmanipulowana praca Engelking i Grabowskiego o zagładzie Żydów to masowa mistyfikacja", 20 February, 2019. Available at <http://www.radiownet.pl> (accessed 17 September, 2020); Piotr Gontarczyk, "Naukowa mistyfikacja," *Sieci* 10 (2019), p. 22–23.

¹⁰ Judith Lyon-Caen, "Les historiens face au révisionnisme polonais", 5 April, 2019. Available at <https://lavedesidees.fr/Les-historiens-face-au-revisionnisme-polonais.html> (accessed 17 September, 2020); Tomasz Domański, *Korekta obrazu? Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki 'Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski, t. 1-2'* (Warsaw: IPN, 2019).

¹¹ Joanna Beata Michlic and Małgorzata Melchior, "The memory of the Holocaust in post-1989 Poland: Renewal – its accomplishments and its powerlessness". In Joanna Beata Michlic and John-Paul Himka (eds.), *Bringing the Dark Past to the Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), p. 403–450: 433.

¹² Piotr Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem. Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej* (Warsaw: IBL, 2018), p. 255–360.

Markowa, place Poland, a country which already had three such museums, as the world leader in museums devoted to the Righteous.¹³ In addition, the Minister of Culture has just founded the Warsaw Ghetto Museum – a decision that many observers consider to be an attempt to take control of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The Institute of National Remembrance is about to publish the first issue of the journal *Polish-Jewish Studies*, on whose editorial board the absence of scholars from the Polish Center for Holocaust Research and the main centres for Jewish studies affiliated with Polish universities is striking. To judge by what has already been said, written and done, there is little doubt that the overall message promoted by these newly established institutions will solidify the narrative of Polish innocence and self-sacrifice in helping Jews during the war.

The nationalist attacks on the Polish-French symposium in Paris were part of this broader picture. Yet, instead of protecting the good name of Poland, the right-wing activists actually brought more international attention for and solidarity with the scholars who were the object of their aggression.¹⁴

Before the long awaited translation of *Night without an End* appears in English, the volume *Les Polonais et la Shoah* gives a useful overview over this ground-breaking publication in French. It contains several micro-historical studies dealing with the individual districts analysed in this project, a synoptic article by Jan Grabowski summarising its main findings, and articles by five scholars perceived as or perceiving themselves as members of the New School. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir shares her thick description of the Kielce pogrom (1946). Anna Bikont reconstructs the biography of Irena Sendler (1910-2008) – one of the most popular and controversial Polish Righteous among the Nations. Andrzej Leder uncovers the various consequences of the Shoah for Poland's conscious and unconscious mind. Jacek Leociak makes an attempt to capture the research identity of the New School. By probing the limits of Raul Hilberg's categories of perpetrators, victims and bystanders that has been organising the Holocaust studies across the globe for almost three decades,¹⁵ Elżbieta Janicka compellingly argues for a consideration of the notion of participant observer as being more appropriate to understand the Polish experience. Taken together, these chapters of *Les Polonais et la Shoah* show how much has happened in the Polish Holocaust studies in recent years.

However, the book includes even more than its title suggests. Whereas articles by Valentin Behr, Tal Bruttman, Audrey Kichelewski, Fleur Kuhn-Kennedy, Barbara Lambauer, Sidi N'Diaye, Jean-Yves Potel and Ewa Tartakowsky provide interesting insights into the vast area of studies on Polish, Jewish and Polish-Jewish history carried out by French authors, the autobiographical essay by Jan T. Gross that opens the book is a must-read for everyone interested in Poland's struggle over

¹³ Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, "Distorting and rewriting the history of the Holocaust in Poland: the case of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II in Markowa", *Yad Yashem Studies*, 45(1) (2017), p 29–60; Zofia Wóycicka, "Global patterns, local interpretations: new Polish museums dedicated to the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust", *Holocaust Studies*, 25(3) (2019), p. 248–272.

¹⁴ The political and public effects of the Paris incident have been well documented on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Polish_School_of_Holocaust_Scholarship_\(conference\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Polish_School_of_Holocaust_Scholarship_(conference)) (accessed 20/11/2020).

¹⁵ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).



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understanding, interpreting and remembering the Holocaust. The only missing link is a chapter bringing the two worlds –i.e. that of the French and that of the Polish Holocaust studies– together by explaining the genealogy of the remarkably intense dialogue and close cooperation between them.