TOWARDS A NEW KIND OF LEGITIMACY? JAN GROSS'S *NEIGHBORS* AND POLAND'S RECKONING WITH THE PAST

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Abstract

This article discusses the controversy surrounding Jan Gross' book *Neighbors – The Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jedwabne, Poland.* Rather than review arguments and protagonists of the debate in Poland, I concentrate here on its meaning as a source of state legitimacy. I argue that the Jedwabne issue has been employed by 'Westernizing' Polish elites to bolster Poland's credentials as a modern democratic state and that it is an important part of a new kind of mnemonic legitimacy. While I contend that this discussion has overall had the positive effect of diversifying many Poles' attitudes towards their history and enabling a more nuanced confrontation with the past, I also acknowledge that the instrumentalization of memory can lead to a serious backlash.

1. For Eastern Europeans the past is not just another country but a positive archipelago of vulnerable historical territories.[1]

Discourses about the meaning of the past have multiple layers wherever they take place. However, in East-Central Europe (ECE), where the experience of communist rule is still fresh, these memories take on a particularly tangled form. Who may claim the mantle of victimhood or innocence is far from clear-cut, as mnemonic remainders of the period of German occupation and the Holocaust are both redefined and supplemented by the legacy of the communist regimes.

Thus, the debate over the correct interpretation and usability of the past, by now familiar to all European societies, has taken on a unique character in ECE. Here, this debate reflects a 'duality of confronting the past:' in contrast to most Western European states directly after the Second World War, ECE is not dealing with one temporally limited period of trauma which must continuously be renegotiated, but rather with this episode as seen through the prism of over forty years of communist rule. The citizens of these countries must not only come to terms with omissions and crimes committed by their compatriots which are now coming to light, but must re-evaluate how they have been thinking about these experiences for the last six decades. In particular, they must grapple with inevitable comparisons of

[1] Tony Judt, "The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe," in *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe - Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 172.

public behavior under fascist and communist totalitarianisms, and the unfavorable analogies which might be drawn between them.

This article's topic is the ongoing discussion about the past in Poland and, more specifically, Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors – The Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jedwabne, Poland.* The debate about this book usefully encapsulates a range of important issues which, though in some ways uniquely Polish, nevertheless are relevant to a host of European societies. Rather than launch into a lengthy review of arguments and different protagonists of the discourse in Poland,[2] I want to concentrate here on its meaning as a source of state legitimacy. It is the contention of this article that 'Westernizing' Polish elites[3] skillfully used the debate surrounding *Neighbors* to bolster their image of a modern democratic society worthy of joining international institutions. Poland is therefore a good illustration of the increasing importance of memory as a component of state legitimacy (and thus sovereignty) in the international arena, especially in the European Union (EU). The reprimanding and shunning of Austria after the right-wing Freedom Party under Jörg Haider joined the government, as well as pressure on Turkey to acknowledge the Armenian genocide as part of the accession process to the EU, are further examples. Thus, the local negotiation over memory in Poland should be regarded as both spurred by, and influencing, international relations.

I argue, then, that the debate over *Neighbors* has been employed by liberal Polish elites to enhance Poland's credentials as a modern democratic state and is an important part of a new kind of mnemonic legitimacy. This legitimacy is based on projecting a particular image to an *external* audience. It contrasts with the type of mnemonic legitimacy that was fostered under the communist regime which harnessed a heroic past of resistance and innocence to enhance *internal* legitimacy and augment support from the Polish population. I contend that the use of Holocaust memory for external legitimation has had a positive effect in that it produced a more nuanced understanding of history in Polish society. The Jedwabne debate challenged the prevailing one-sided self-image of Poles as exclusively innocent victims. A gradual realization that Poles too have a complex past in which overwhelming suffering occurred *simultaneously* with the perpetration of

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[2] See Antony Polonsky and Joanna B Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond - the Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). And [http://pogranicze.sejny.pl/jedwabne] for many important contributions.

[3] By 'Westernizing elites', I mean those political and social elites who strive to orient Poland towards European and other Western institutions and who are commonly to be located in the left or center of the political spectrum. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this distinction.

shocking crimes is taking shape. I argue that this realization entails the potential for a very positive reflection on the need to honestly debate the past and to take responsibility: Poles, Jews, Germans, and Communists must no longer be relegated to one-dimensional historical categories but rather rethought in a non-relativizing dialogue. However, I also note that there are potentially negative consequences of this instrumentalization of memory by elites. Some scholars have argued that the Jedwabne issue has impeded a genuine reckoning with the past in local communities and has enabled populist forces to revitalize nationalist rhetoric for political mobilization.

The two-sided consequences of the Jedwabne debate speak to the dynamic between the individual memories and historical attitudes of Poles on the one hand, and official memory on the other. While state-driven memory discourse can transform the public's interpretation of the past in a positive manner, it can also exist in contradiction to popular beliefs or even cause resentment. Before I discuss the use of the past under communism and post-communism in Poland, a brief explanation of individual and collective memory is in order.

2. Mémoire and souvenir – conflicting memories?

Processes of identity formation are inseparable from the individual and collective memories which are cultivated in a society. Jan-Werner Müller conceptualizes the interaction between identity and memory: "Identity – understood as a relational concept and as sameness over time – is established by what is remembered, and itself then leads in turn to certain pasts being remembered and others being forgotten: in this sense, and as Renan first pointed out, remembrance and forgetting depend on each other."[4] Forgetting, or the privileging of certain memories over others, takes place at individual as well as collective levels. In the context of modern Poland, the formation of individual and collective memories and their impact on collective identity is important because it allows us to more fully understand a potentially new source of state legitimacy.

Müller makes a distinction between collective and individual memory. 'Mass individual memory' or *souvenir* denotes the recollection of events which people actually lived through.[5] To this one can add the remembrances which are passed on through the generations, mainly in families. Collective memory or *mémoire* on the other hand, serves as the social framework through which individuals can organize their history.[6] This framework can be actively

[4] Jan-Werner Müller, "Introduction: The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory," in *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe - Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)., 21.
[5] Ibid., 3.
[6] Ibid., 3.

constructed by actors within the state and other elites.

Certain individual memories can be decisive in the formation of individual identity – this depends on many factors, most notably at which stage in life an experience takes place. More crucial here, however, is that collective memory and collective identity are mutually constitutive and that collective memory can conflict with mass individual memories.[7] This is because collective memory often does not neatly correspond to or incorporate all individual remembrances. Rather, "collective memory is always the outcome of a series of ongoing intellectual and political negotiations; it is never a unitary collective mental act."[8] Thus, political and social actors serve as 'carriers' of collective memory.[9] If the carriers are powerful or have good communicative resources, the particular interpretation of memory is more likely to become dominant. In the case of communist societies, as discussed below, collective memory is the result not so much of *negotiation* but of *control* and *manipulation* by state elites. They are by no means neutral, but instead consciously and unconsciously shape memories, often to advance their special interests or views of history.

As Torsten Koch and Sabine Moller have demonstrated with respect to German expellees, individual remembrance is passed on mainly in the family, through the telling and re-telling of events of personal importance. These are called "acts of intergenerational negotiation" in which the past is constructed jointly.[10] Those who had the experiences pass on their recollections to younger generations who rework them in the process. Thus, while individual and collective memories are certainly highly interactive, individual memories also have an independent dynamic which makes it possible for them to develop in ways that are at odds with the dominant collective memory at any given time. This might be called a "bifurcation of memory."[11] It is also important to note that individual memories are not static – their meaning can and does change in reaction to mainstream and official narratives or events that may trigger new interpretations. As Margit Reiter has shown in the Austrian context, memories and attitudes within families are more likely to persist unchanged if the state and other 'outside' actors do not launch challenges.[12] Thus, if private

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] Ibid., 21.

[9] Siobhan Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory - the Nazi Past and German National Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2001)., 3.

[10] Torsten Koch and Sabine Moller, "Flucht Und Vertreibung Im Familiengedächtnis," in *Zwischen Heimat Und Zuhause - Deutsche Flüchtlinge Und Vertriebene in (West-)Deutschland 1945-2000*, ed. Rainer Schulze (Osnabrück: secolo Verlag, 2001)., 216.

[11] Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory - the Nazi Past and German National Identity*., 4.

[12] Margit Reiter, *Die Generation Danach: Der Nationalsozialismus Im*

and public narratives are consistent with and reinforce each other (as was mostly the case in post-war Austria and communist Poland), a change in attitudes towards the past is probably difficult to achieve.

However, mass individual memory is not unified but rather varied and conflicting. "Split into victim, perpetrator and bystander perspectives, such group accounts are replete with contradictory recollections, creating layers of often incompatible remembrances which highlight different lessons that refuse to produce a coherent sense of the past."[13] Polish memory under communism generally has had at least the appearance of being more unified than under post-communism. I argue that this was so partly because different individual remembrances were mostly excluded from public discourses, but also because the idea of Polish victimhood and collective innocence was present in both individual and official narratives – they mutually reinforced one another. Individual memories of Jewish suffering and Polish collaboration existed of course, but they were marginalized in both private and official arenas. During the late communist and then post-communist periods, these marginal memories emerged gradually and helped to transform official memory. Narratives of collective memory changed as some post-communist elites recognized the utility of establishing a different memory discourse to support external legitimacy. This new official collective memory, in turn, does not correspond to many Poles' views of the past as essentially tragic, innocent, and heroic. It thus entails the potential for disjuncture or even friction between mass individual and state-supported collective memory.

3. Memory and legitimation under communism

Poland's collective memory has long been characterized by the exclusion of individual memories (of Jewish victims and Polish witnesses and perpetrators) which could have challenged the 'monolithic' collective memory of innocence. Polish poets and intellectuals have long fostered the myth of a people who were not only free of sinful historical episodes, but had suffered continuously while Europe's Great Powers pursued objectives at its expense. Bound up in this myth is an image of Poland before its partition in the late 18th century as a model of multiculturalism and tolerance – an image that seems to have persisted despite the events of the interwar and war periods.[14] Ilya Prizel lists the main

Familiengedächtnis (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2006).

[13] Konrad H Jarausch, "Living with Broken Memories: Some Narratological Comments," in *The Divided Past - Rewriting Post-War German History*, ed. Christoph Klessmann (Oxford: Berg Press, 2001)., 184.

[14] Ilya Prizel, "Jedwabne: Will the Right Question Be Raised? - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish

elements of this persistent historiographical narrative: Poland was the first country to resist both Hitler and Stalin; it was without a collaborationist regime; the Holocaust was mainly a Polish tragedy and perpetrated exclusively by Germans; and Poles helped Jews where they could.[15] "Thus, the Second World War affirmed within Polish historiography Poland's self-image of victimhood, martyrdom, and righteousness, supporting Adam Mickewicz's view of Poland as 'an apostle among adulterers'",[16] Further, as Adam Michnik has written, "there is no Polish family that was not wounded by the war […] – that is a simple Polish fact."[17] Of course, this narrative is closely aligned with the truth and for this reason was singularly effective and enduring. Challenging the myth of Polish innocence meant calling into question Polish suffering. The inseparability of these dual elements of the myth has persisted until recently.

Successive communist regimes employed the myth of Polish innocence and martyrdom for legitimation purposes. In fact, as Jan Gross argues in his most recent book, anti-Semitism and Polish nationalism were used in the immediate post-war period to gain acceptance from the Polish population for the new communist order. To this end, the authorities stood idly by when Holocaust survivors and their Polish saviors were persecuted and pogroms committed.[18] Later, during the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign, three-fourths of the remaining Jews were compelled to leave Poland.[19] Michael Steinlauf has examined in-depth the dynamics under which both oppositional forces and the government used anti-Semitism to revitalize nationalism for legitimation as communist ideology declined in effectiveness. The role of the Catholic Church as the only institutional counter-weight to the regime has been regarded as pivotal in reproducing the myth.[20] Partly as a direct consequence of the replacement of Jewish scholars in government institutes, a narrative was constructed according to which Polish and Jewish suffering were not

Community in Jedwabne, Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 1 (2002)., 279.

[15] Ibid., 279.

[16] Ibid., 279.

[17] Adam Michnik and Leon Wieseltier, "Adam Michnik and Leon Wieseltier: An Exchange," *The New Republic* 2001., 22.

[18] Jan T Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

[19] Joshua D Zimmerman, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War," in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D Zimmerman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003)., 10.

[20] Michael C Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead - Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997)., Michael C Steinlauf, "Teaching About the Holocaust in Poland," in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D Zimmerman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

distinguished. In history textbooks, the fate of the Jews was often not even mentioned, or Jews were described as passive in contrast to Polish active resisters.[21] As William Miles outlines, this official narrative also entailed the sidelining of Jewish victimhood in national commemoration. Auschwitz-Birkenau was made into a national memorial for the martyrdom of Poles and other 'brotherly nations', in keeping with the communist internationalist line.[22]

The instrumentalization of history and memory was a staple in the communist toolbox of rule. The past was evaluated in its usefulness to the present legitimation of the regime. Instances of airbrushed photographs, of formerly prominent revolutionaries suddenly disappearing from the annals of history after becoming inconvenient to communist regimes, are by now well-known. Further, as Rubie Watson argues in her introduction to a volume on memory and opposition in state-socialism, Marxist-Leninist theory necessitated a deterministic understanding of history which left little room for honest confrontations with the traumatic recent past.[23] The role of Polish historians then, was to represent the Peoples' Republic "as the logical and crowning conclusion of a thousand years of history."[24]

In this context, it was impossible to represent the Holocaust as a complex event in which communists and non-communists, Germans, Poles, and Soviets alike had committed atrocities. Instead, the Holocaust was constructed as a lesson about the dire consequences of monopoly capitalism.[25] The Polish nation was depicted as one-sidedly righteous and pure, in an attempt to harness the overwhelming feeling of sacrifice and Polish nationalism for purposes of state socialist legitimation. This narrative was aimed primarily at the Polish population. As Michael Steinlauf argues, the memory of the Holocaust was driven underground to fester:[26] Jewish experiences of suffering were almost entirely marginalized, but the witnessing and perpetration of crimes against humanity by Poles was also deleted from the public sphere. Private memories must have existed,

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[21] Steinlauf, "Teaching About the Holocaust in Poland.", 265-266, see also William F S Miles, "Post-Communist Holocaust Commemoration in Poland and Germany," *The Journal of Holocaust Education* 9, no. 1 (2000)., 45.

[22] Miles, "Post-Communist Holocaust Commemoration in Poland and Germany."

[23] Rubie S Watson, "Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism - an Introduction," in *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism*, ed. Rubie S Watson (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1994). 1.

[24] Susanne Marten-Finnis, "Collective Memory and National Identities - German and Polish Memory Cultures: The Forms of Collective Memory," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 28, no. 2 (1995)., 257-258.

[25] Steinlauf, "Teaching About the Holocaust in Poland.", 264.

[26] Ibid., 264.

but they were not allowed to emerge, let alone pressured to.

In his introduction to a volume on the nexus between memory and power, Jan-Werner Müller points out that in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, all European societies constructed "foundational myths" about the war experience which necessarily entailed much forgetting and simplification. In essence, in both east and west, a dominant discourse was created in the name of social cohesion, reconstruction, and legitimacy.[27] Thus, the Poles were not alone in 'officially forgetting' their difficult past.[28]

However, the dynamics of this suppression of memory were decidedly different in the Soviet bloc than in democratic states. The state had an absolute monopoly on the public sphere so that marginalized memories could not even enter into a dialogue on the sidelines as was the case in the West. Further, in contrast to Western polities, the state encroached on the private realm through the regulation of social life and the always present fear of informers. Thus, an official culture of commemoration and history-writing was fostered and became instrumental in maintaining the regime. Dissenting memories could not find open expression. As Watson indicates, it is unclear how effective these "technologies of amnesia" were and how precisely they operated. However, it is likely that unofficial pasts were never entirely eradicated and that unsanctioned remembrances kept alternative memories and histories alive.[29] In any event, it seems that memories of Polish complicity in the Holocaust were prominent neither in official nor in underground remembrances. "Emphasising the Jewish origins of (some of) the millions killed in the war was anathema to trans-communist ideology"[30] as well as to the myth of Polish national innocence. This began to change with more general political liberalization.

> Poles never freely examined the repercussions of their nation's historical experience with

[27] Müller, "Introduction: The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory.", see also Judt, "The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-War Europe.", and Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik - Die Anfänge Der Bundesrepublik Und Die Ns-Vergangenheit* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1997). On Germany.

[28] As Timothy Garton Ash points out, forgetting is often important for establishing democracy and stability. Timothy Garton Ash, "Trials, Purges and History Lessons: Treating a Difficult Past in Post-Communist Europe," in *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe - Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Garton Ash, "Trials, Purges and History Lessons: Treating a Difficult Past in Post-Communist Europe."

[29] Watson, "Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism - an Introduction." 19.

[30] Miles, "Post-Communist Holocaust Commemoration in Poland and Germany." 35.

> antisemitism, much less acknowledged any measure of responsibility for the ensuing genocide committed on their territory. By the 1980s, they were, however, willing to deviate from the communist orthodoxy that obscured the specifically Jewish dimension to Nazi extermination policies.[31]

This development may have been encouraged by the fact that Jewish-Polish relations became an issue of intellectual debate among dissidents. Jack Kugelmass argues that Jewish memory became more significant precisely because of official suppression of it: "particularly so because – in the minds of many in the opposition – government maligning was almost a certificate of merit."[32] Thus, the first steps towards a more honest confrontation with the past, taken still during the communist period, included the recognition of Jewish suffering, the rethinking of official Holocaust memorials, and the granting of rights to Jewish organizations. Nevertheless, genuine 'memory space' was only made available with the end of the communist regime in Poland.

4.Memory in early post-communist Poland

The period immediately following the fall of the Iron Curtain saw an upsurge of anti-Semitism – Jewish institutions and cemeteries were vandalized and anti-Semitic publications were openly promoted.[33] However, while virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism were certainly not absent from politics (for example, Lech Walesa used anti-Semitism in the 1995 election campaign),[34] initial fears were not confirmed. Most prominent politicians condemned racist slurs and ultra-right-wing parties were not successful. There was a gradual shift in public treatment of the Holocaust. Taboo subjects, such as pre-war anti-Semitism, post-war pogroms, and contemporary anti-Semitism, began to be aired, and the study of Polish-Jewish history became more common.[35] There was also a

[31] Ibid., 35-36.

[32] Jack Kugelmass, "Bloody Memories: Encountering the Past in Contemporary Poland," *Cultural Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (1995)., 280

[33] For a more in-depth discussion of anti-Semitism and Holocaust commemoration in Poland after 1989 see, Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead - Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*. Chapter 7.

[34] Ibid., 132.

[35] See for example, Ibid., Natalia Aleksiun, "Jewish Responses to Antisemitism in Poland, 1944-1947," in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D Zimmerman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003)., Abraham Brumberg, "Poles and Jews," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 5 (2002)., Israel Gutman, "Some Issues in Jewish-Polish Relations During the Second World War," in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D Zimmerman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003)., and Szewach Weiss, "No Right to Silence - Interview with Israeli Ambassador to Poland

blossoming of Jewish culture and the open declaration of Jewish identity, mostly by younger Poles. These were generally the children and grandchildren of so-called 'hidden Jews.'[36] The series of 50th anniversaries during the 1990s (of the Warsaw uprising and the liberation of Auschwitz) offered politicians opportunities to publicize their new 'progressive' stance by way of highly ritualized ceremonies with international attendance. They seemed to have an effect: in polls after the Auschwitz ceremony those respondents associating Auschwitz exclusively with Polish suffering had dropped from 47% to 32%.[37] This speaks to the effectiveness and importance of official symbolic politics in changing popular attitudes.

Despite all these positive moves, the most persistent myth of Polish society – that of the one-sided Polish identity of victim and resister – was not challenged. It was not truly questioned until Jan Gross' book. One reason for this delay may be the mechanism by which the communist regime was dismantled in Poland. Since the Polish state was the first in the region to topple, the pathway to democracy was as yet uncertain. Therefore, the opposition opted for a Roundtable strategy or a "pacted transition" in which the old regime was involved in the transformation.[38] The break with the past was thus not as radical as in other new democracies in ECE. As Leszek Koczanowicz has commented, members of the former opposition in Poland faced some embarrassment about inadvertently legitimizing the communist regime by briefly sharing power with it.[39] Poland did thus not see an immediate confrontation with the communist past (or 'lustration') as was the case in Czechoslovakia and Germany. It is possible that the lack of such a precedent of reckoning with the 'truth' impacted the way in which memory is approached more generally in post-communist Polish political culture. In other words, the early post-communist period did not establish a societal consensus that the past must be dealt with honestly and thus delayed the confrontation with Holocaust, as well as other, memories. To some extent, this omission came back to haunt Polish society in late 2006 and early 2007, when new laws on secret police files

Szewach Weiss," *Dialogue & Universalism* 11, no. 5/6 (2001)..

[36] Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead - Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*., 127.

[37] Ibid., 142.

[38] On pacted transitions, see Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule - Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). and Juan J Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation - Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[39] Leszek Koczanowicz, "Memory of Politics and Politics of Memory. Reflections on the Construction of the Past in Post-Totalitarian Poland," *Studies in East European Thought* 49 (1997).

were passed and led to a high profile scandal involving the newly appointed archbishop of Warsaw, Stanislaw Wielgus.

The myth of the one-sided victim position of the Polish people, then, lives on in many arenas and wide-spread anti-Semitism is still to be bemoaned. However, during the late 1990s, the victimhood idea began to be challenged, and *Neighbors* has been instrumental in this context. Dialogue between Jewish and Polish scholars is on the increase and there seems to be a realization on both sides that a move beyond the rigid duality of victim and perpetrator can bring fruitful understanding about the experience of the Holocaust. As Janine Holc argues,

> The construction of two separate 'victimhood' experiences situated as competitive and mutually exclusive has obscured the aspects of the occupations that resulted in a shared or common vulnerability to violence. It has also created a set of scripted categories that contribute to a sense of mutual exclusion: 'pro-Polish or pro-Jewish argument,' 'collaborator or resister,' and, more recently, 'accept collective responsibility or contribute to anti-Semitism.[40]

With this recognition, there have been attempts to transcend the Polish myth and thus accept responsibility while continuing to honor the sacrifice made by Poles. The result seems to be a less monolithic memory discourse. Despite continuing efforts to utilize the myth of innocence in its well-worn function of political legitimation, the Jedwabne debate signaled significant strides to dismantle it.

5. Debating the Jedwabne events

Jan Gross's book was published in Poland in May 2000, and has subsequently appeared in many languages, including English, German, and Hebrew. In Poland it had the effect of catapulting a discussion which had previously been confined to historiography into a broader public. As Gross points out in the afterword to the English Penguin Edition: "The story reached every nook and cranny of the Polish society – 92 percent of respondents in a nationwide survey could identify the name 'Jedwabne' by August 2001".[41]

Neighbors is the story of one day in 1941, just after the occupation by the Germans, when the majority of Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne either actively participated in or stood by and watched the brutal murder of 1600 Jewish town residents, without help or order from Germans. Gross meticulously establishes the context of this mass murder: he outlines the pre-war life in Jedwabne, discusses the alleged (but

[40] Janine P Holc, "Working through Jan Gross's Neighbors," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002). 457.

[41] Jan T Gross, *Neighbors - the Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jewabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).117.

mostly untrue) implication of the town's Jews with the Soviets, and describes the fate of the community and some individuals in the event's aftermath. He re-creates for the reader the brutal and desperate situation in which the Jedwabne Jews found themselves. It is truly a harrowing account, intensified by the irony of the title. As George Will writes, "a murderer in uniform can resemble a cog in a machine, but the last faces seen by Jedwabne's Jews were the familiar faces of neighbors. It was, Gross says, 'mass murder in a double sense – on account of both the number of victims and the number of perpetrators.'"[42]

Neighbors evokes questions about the extent of Polish participation in the Holocaust elsewhere. And more importantly, despite its specificity, or maybe because of it, the story of Jedwabne is an intensely personal and damning indictment of a Polish society in which these acts were not only possible, but silenced for over four decades.

The public reaction to the book covered the whole spectrum. Some outright denied any Polish involvement in the massacre, sticking to the familiar version of exclusively German guilt. They claimed Gross harbored "an 'anti-Polish' (i.e., pro-Jewish) bias, and probably communist sympathies to boot."[43] Despite an official Catholic Church apology, many anti-Semitic verbal slurs emanated from church members and institutions such as the nationalist radio station "Radio Maryja" run by Catholic priest Tadeusz Rydzyk.[44] Observers point out that the official rejection of anti-Semitism does not go very deep.[45] It seems however, that most interlocutors did not question the basic accuracy of the events.[46] While there were instances of protest, for example by Jedwabne residents during the 2001 memorial service there, and some anti-Semitic pamphlets, Andrzej Tymowski argues that these activities were notable for their rarity and did not develop into organized movements.[47]

In academic circles, the discussion revolved mainly around historiographical methods employed by

[42] George F Will, "July 10, 1941, in Jedwabne," *Newsweek* 2001.
[43] Brumberg, "Poles and Jews.", 180.

[44] Ibid., 182, see also Antony Polonsky, ed., *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry - Focusing on the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, vol. 13 (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000). for discussions of contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland.
[45] Stanislaw Krajewski, "The Jedwabne Service: A Grand Gesture with No Immediately Perceptible Consequences?," *Dialogue & Universalism* 11, no. 5/6 (2001).
[46] Zimmerman, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations. During the Second World War.", 11.
[47] Andrzej W Tymowski, "Apologies for Jedwabne and Modernity - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 1 (2002). 292.

Gross, the details of the massacres (how many perpetrators and victims), the level of involvement of Germans, the significance of alleged Jewish collaboration with Soviet forces,[48] and the socio-psychological context within which the killings took place. Rather than call into doubt Polish complicity then, discussants voiced disagreement over whether the context could explain (and some argue excuse) Jedwabne.[49] In short, the debate revolved around questions that other European societies also faced: were these perpetrators 'ordinary' Poles and, if so, how much responsibility falls on Polish society, and what should its response be today? As Joshua Zimmerman has argued, the Jedwabne debate ended the "myth of Polish innocence"[50] by stirring up issues in Polish history which had long remained undisturbed.

The knowledge of Polish crimes in the Holocaust and calls for confrontation with their legacy were not entirely new. Publications such as Emanuel Ringelblum's eyewitness study of 1943 and the wartime diary of physician Zygmunt Klukowski vividly describe Polish crimes against Jews.[51] In the late communist period, Jan Blonski's 1987 article "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" radically called for admittance of guilt. However, as Jerzy Jedlicki demonstrates in a review of pre-*Neighbors* discussions of similar topics during post-communism, these received only limited attention.[52]

Despite the preparatory discussions among intellectuals, the effect of *Neighbors* was to bring these concerns into the wider public domain and was as

[48] Brumberg, "Poles and Jews.", 180.

[49] Ilya Prizel argues, not altogether convincingly, that the murderers of Jedwabne were not representative of Polish society, but rather of European peasantry at large, displaying the backwardness of this pan-European rural underclass. Prizel, "Jedwabne: Will the Right Question Be Raised? - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland.", 283. See also Holc, "Working through Jan Gross's Neighbors.", Wojciech Roszkowski, "After Neighbors: Seeking Universal Standards," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002)., William W Hagen, "A 'Potent, Devilish Mixture' of Motives: Explanatory Strategy and Assignment of Meaning in Jan Gross's Neighbors," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002)., Norman M Naimark, "The Nazis and 'the East': Jedwabne's Circle of Hell," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002)., and Jan T Gross, "A Response," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002). in the special edition of *Slavic Review (2002)* on *Neighbors.*

[50] Zimmerman, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations. During the Second World War.", 11.

[51] Hagen, "A 'Potent, Devilish Mixture' of Motives: Explanatory Strategy and Assignment of Meaning in Jan Gross's Neighbors.", Mieczyslaw F Rakowski, "Five Zlotys of a Jew," *Dialogue & Universalism* 11, no. 5/6 (2001).

[52] Jerzy Jedlicki, "How to Deal with This," in *Thou Shalt Not Kill - Poles on Jedwabne*, ed. William Brand (Warsaw: Towarzystwo "Wiez", 2001).

such quite revolutionary.[53] It received much support and acclaim for its impact on the public. One of the leaders of the Polish Jewish community, Stanislaw Krajewski said, "For the first time it doesn't avoid anything, and it is public. It is tremendously positive."[54] Jan Gross' work was hailed as a "shock to Polish public opinion like no other book in the last half-century."[55]

Part of the reason for this profound effect was the resonance of the book beyond public discourse: it provoked action by Poland's political and religious establishment. On 27 May 2001, Polish bishops offered an official apology to Jedwabne's and Poland's Jews for any harm done to them by Poles and Catholics. A highly symbolic service was held in a church adjacent to the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. On 10 July 2001, the sixtieth anniversary of the massacre, President Kwasniewski led a government delegation to Jedwabne to inaugurate a memorial which states explicitly that Poles were the culprits. Significantly, according to surveys, half of the Polish population supported the President's apology in their name.[56] Further, some victims' bodies were exhumed (though Gross and others have criticized a lack of professionalism in this undertaking and much controversy surrounded the exhumation)[57] and in 2002, the Institute of National Memory (IPN), a government body, published a report which confirmed most of Gross' findings and specifically asserted that no Germans were involved directly in the massacre.[58] Overall then, the acknowledgement of crimes of Polish citizens and the realization that the myth of Polish innocence must be questioned has moved from the intellectual realm into the public, and from there to the highest levels of official state representation.

According to his introduction to *Neighbors*, this is precisely what Jan Gross intended to achieve with his work. He aimed to problematize what he called the "perpetrators-victims-bystanders axis", demonstrate that these terms can be fuzzy, and show that a people (or even an individual) can suffer and inflict suffering at the same time.[59] Or as Dan Stone puts it,

[53] The books public exposure was aided by a critically acclaimed documentary about the same topic. For a useful review of the debate in the Polish press, see Agnieszka Klim, "Reaction of the Polish Press to the Book of Jan T. Gross, Neighbors" (Honors Thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 2002)..

[54] Economist, "It Wasn't Just Germans," *The Economist* 2001.

[55] Zimmerman, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War.", 11, quoting Father Stanislaw Musial

[56] Tymowski, "Apologies for Jedwabne and Modernity - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland.", 301.

[57] Gross, *Neighbors - the Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jewabne, Poland*.

[58] Brumberg, "Poles and Jews."

[59] Gross, *Neighbors - the Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jewabne, Poland*., xxi, 96.

> Gross has asked some uncomfortable questions that not only change the way in which we view the Holocaust (not simple 'German' and 'Jews') but, more importantly, explode the Polish mythical memory of pristine victimhood. It does not deny that Poles were victims, but forces us to encounter the psychologically and socially far more realistic scenario that people are never just this or just that, but take on many roles and identities.[60]

6. Memory and post-communist state legitimacy

I believe that a new trend in Polish politics and public discourse was kick-started by *Neighbors* which offers a potentially different means of legitimation. In the wake of the publication of the book, the Western-oriented Polish cultural and political elite were using 'honest confrontation with the past' as a way of establishing legitimacy. My contention here is that a memory discourse, even if it is a response to a 'pure' urge to confront the painful truth, does not become powerful unless relevant societal carriers push it onto the political agenda. Assuming that most powerful political actors do not promote a particular interpretation of history for its own sake, one must ask which interests were served by the memory agenda encapsulated by *Neighbors*.

Timothy Snyder argues that after the end of the Cold War, many politicians in the newly independent states began to recognize the utility of treating memory as a political problem (rather than a moral imperative) which should be addressed with current national interests in mind. They sought to gain "sovereignty over memory" by establishing "European standards" for discussing history, thus enabling them to instrumentalize memory for the purpose of fostering amicable international relations. "Although the Polish eastern program of sovereignty over memory had originally been articulated as a means of securing Polish independence by eliminating grounds for Polish-Russian discord, it was attractive in 1989 as a method of showing west Europeans that Poland was a mature state ready for integration in Western institutions."[61] Thus, liberal Polish elites proceeded to foster a more differentiated view of Polish history – in which the Polish role in the Holocaust was the most important component. As former dissident Adam Michnik remarked: "I believe […] that the ability to confront the dark episodes of one's own heritage is for each nation a test of its democratic maturity. I

[60] Dan Stone, "Review of Jan T. Gross Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland," *The Journal of Holocaust Education* (2001)., 116.

[61] Timothy Snyder, "Memory of Sovereignty and Sovereignty over Memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939-1999," in *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe. Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)., 56-57

affirm that Poles have matured to democracy, which means they have the right to the full truth about their own past".[62] Thus, these Polish elites actively sought to promote the idea that Poland had complex history which was subject to debate.[63] It is in this context that the *Neighbors* debate must be examined.

The most important example of the official effort to gain 'sovereignty over memory' was President Kwasniewski's apology in Jedwabne.[64] Similarly, in a speech at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. in 2001, the then-Polish foreign minister Bartoszewski effectively used the Jedwabne debate as proof of the vibrancy of Poland's democracy.[65] The liberal Polish establishment overall has made pains to reconstruct the memory of the war and the Holocaust in a less binary way. Andrzej Tymowski argues that Kwasniewski acted out of desire to make Poland fully modern: "his decision was a political one, made against the background of similar decisions in other countries".[66] In essence, being seen to be critical towards the old myth, admitting Polish crimes, and making conciliatory gestures towards the Jewish community set Poland's memory-work on one level with many Western European countries and received acclaim from that direction. This version of a nuanced 'usable' past presents a new way of employing memory for legitimation, albeit not in a one-sided discourse, but rather in an ongoing debate which allows many voices. Legitimacy in this sense is important for Poland's international recognition and for EU participation. The centrality of legitimate memory politics for Poland compares to Germany's need to prove itself to be mature and unthreatening after unification.

The intellectual debate over Jedwabne and official reactions to it has also had a significant impact on mnemonic attitudes in Polish society at large. First, the fact that Polish leaders have latched onto the debate over the past in a differentiated way means that a potentially 'democratized collective

[62] Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead - Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*., 133. Originally published in Gazeta Wyborcza.

[63] Tomasz Szarota, "The National Debate on Jedwabne - Reflections of a Historian and Specialist on National Stereotypes," in *Thou Shalt Not Kill - Poles on Jedwabne*, ed. William Brand (Warsaw: Towarzystwo "Wiez", 2001)., 288, see also Pawel Machcewicz, "A Round-Table Discussion: Jedwabne - Crime and Memory," in *Thou Shalt Not Kill - Poles on Jedwabne*, ed. William Brand (Warsaw: Towarzystwo "Wiez", 2001)..

[64] His address is reprinted in Polonsky and Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond - the Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*., 130-132.

[65] Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, "Opening Wounds for the Sake of National Health," *Dialogue & Universalism* 11, no. 5/6 (2001).

[66] Tymowski, "Apologies for Jedwabne and Modernity - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland.", 304.

memory' (one that includes many diverse voices) was being buttressed by powerful forces in Polish society. Its legitimating function only serves to strengthen the debate's impact. The public discussion has already produced an effect – in a 2001 survey, 68% of young Poles said 'yes' to the question of whether or not it is necessary to expose the facts regarding the participation of Poles in the destruction of Jews.[67]

Second, the very possibility of the debate over Gross's book itself is an indication of how times have changed. As Gross himself wrote, "we have reached a threshold at which the new generation, raised in Poland with freedom of speech and political liberties, is ready to confront the unvarnished history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war."[68] Further, "*Neighbors* benefited from a free press, a democratic political system, the reality of frequent travel and the cultural/information exchange through readily available media – all these made it possible, technically, as it were, to investigate and to discuss the implications of moments in history such as Jedwabne that had been overlooked […]"[69] Thus, *Neighbors* was *a product* of democratic change in Poland as much as it was *a catalyst.* On a related point, Adam Krzeminski argues that the debate and questioning of Polish-Jewish relations which was triggered by Jedwabne was possible because with the transformation of 1989 came a change in political culture. No longer oppressed but rather sovereign, Poles began a process of 'self-Europeanization' and which made them less reliant on old national myths (although losers of modernization continue to be comforted by them).[70]

Third, the separation of innocence from suffering, the dismantling of the divide between victimhood and guilt can itself be a positive force for democracy because it delegitimizes one-sided narratives which are traditionally used by populist and undemocratic forces. While the 'democratization of memory' and the opening of the arena to many different life experiences is viewed here as a positive development however, collective memory is never *inherently* progressive. Taboos or 'forgetting' may sometimes function to protect democracy. Further, though the Jedwabne debate did much to transform Polish attitudes towards the past, such mnemonic change is by no means unequivocally positive or irreversible.

[67] Zimmerman, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions in the Historiography of Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War.", 12.

[68] Gross, *Neighbors - the Destruction of the Jewish Community of Jewabne, Poland.*, 116.

[69] Tymowski, "Apologies for Jedwabne and Modernity - Jan Gross. Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland.", 306.

[70] Adam Krzeminski, "Polen," in *Verbrechen Erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung Mit Holocaust Und Völkermord*, ed. Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005).

Several scholars have argued that – far from being a positive force for change – the debate over Gross' book prevented genuine 'memory-work' from taking place and even encouraged a backlash against westernizing reforms. Wlodzimierz Borodziej argues that through discussions about German-Polish, Ukrainian-Polish, and Jewish-Polish relations which had taken place since 1989, the myth of innocent Polish victimhood was already virtually dismantled by 2000, and that *Neighbors* interrupted this healing process by instrumentalizing a particular interpretation of history.[71] Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, in her study about the local responses of Jedwabne residents to the public debate, discusses the impact of state-sponsored memory politics and media treatment on local reconciliation. She argues that because liberal elites attempted to impose 'acceptable' memory from above, the debate did not have constructive effect on the formation of a new Polish national identity. Instead, locals reacted defensively and refused to participate in official commemorations.[72] Similarly, Annamaria Orla-Bukowska believes that unfair pressure was exerted on Poles by elites and international actors to confront the complex legacies of history, just when Poles were beginning to heal the wounds created by Soviet domination.[73]

Some have claimed that through the sidelining of local processes and paces of coming to terms with the past, national identity has again become a focus of social mobilization which can potentially be exploited by populist political forces. Janine Holc contends that rising anti-Semitism and the pronounced activism surrounding the use of Christian symbols at Auschwitz in 1998/1999 came in response to the growing influence of Western political institutions and culture in the context of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and EU entry talks.[74] Antony Polonsky has connected the nationalist backlash against the official apologies in Jedwabne to populist politicians' rejection of Europeanization and Tomasz Szarota has gone so far as to claim that the Jedwabne debate was

[71] Wlodzimierz Borodziej, "Abschied Von Der Martyrologie in Polen?," in *Zeitgeschichte Als Streitgeschichte - Grosse Kontroversen Seit 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow, Ralph Jessen, and Klaus Große Kracht (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2003).

[72] Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, "Collective Remembrance in Jedwabne - Unsettled Memory of World War II in Postcommunist Poland," *History & Memory* 18, no. 1 (2006).

[73] Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, "New Threads on an Old Loom: National Memory and Social Identity in Postwar and Post-Communist Poland," in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[74] Janine P Holc, "Memory Contested - Jewish and Catholic Views of Auschwitz in Present-Day Poland," in *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*, ed. Robert Blobaum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

responsible for the recent electoral successes of populist parties.[75] The effect of *Neighbors* is therefore still being debated and it may just be too early to tell what its ultimate impact will be.

7. Conclusion

The official acknowledgement of the crimes committed in Jedwabne in 1944 and the confrontation with uncomfortable pasts has helped to create a new type of state legitimacy, which can potentially facilitate Poland's dialogue with its neighbors and within the European community. The fact that this diversified memory discourse is supported by 'hard' state and elite interests for external recognition means it is a potentially powerful transformative catalyst for Polish attitudes toward history and historical responsibility. The promotion of nuance or even contradiction in collective memory as a source of legitimacy contrasts starkly with the legitimating narratives of national unity and innocence under communism. This article has argued that *Neighbors'* most important effect in post-communist Poland has been to push the challenge to the Polish myth of innocence into the public domain. However, such a democratic memory discourse cannot be sustained merely through the pronouncements of some elites or prevent a backlash from anti-democratic or nationalist forces. A more permanent change in public attitudes to history must be supported by a strong foundation in civil society which is not easily swayed by the political currents of the day.

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[75] Polonsky and Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond - the Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*.

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