

Historical Memory and the Rise of Anti-Democratic Populism in Poland in the 21st Century

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In Poland over the past thirty years, the process of historical reckoning has been marked by controversy and recriminations not only about the Communist period but also about the years that preceded it. Emotional and often politically-charged debates have arisen about both periods, albeit along different tracks with little or no connection between the two. Although I will focus here mainly on the Communist period, recent debates in Poland about Poles' behavior toward Jews during and immediately after World War II have been so wrenching and have played such a crucial role in political battles over historical memory that some discussion of them is warranted here.

The main impetus for reassessments of Poles' complicity in the annihilation of Polish Jews has come from the work of Jan Gross, an eminent Polish-born historian who has lived in the United States since 1969 but who still spends a good deal of time in Poland. In three hard-hitting, well-documented books published over a span of eleven years, beginning with *Sąsiedzi* (Neighbors) in 2000, Gross systematically punctured long-held myths about the treatment of Polish Jews by their fellow Poles during and immediately after World War II.¹ In *Sąsiedzi* he recounted how in the eastern Polish town of Jedwabne in July 1941, the local Polish residents turned *en masse* against their Jewish neighbors and brutally killed hundreds of them. The book

¹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, Fundacja Pogranicze, 2000), published in English in 2001 by Princeton University Press as *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*; Jan Tomasz Gross, *Wokół Sąsiadów: Polemiki i wyjaśnienia* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2003), which contains his responses to the furor about *Neighbors*; Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2006), published in Polish in 2008 by Znak as *Strach: Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści*; Jan Tomasz Gross, *Złote żniwa: Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów* (Kraków: Znak, 2011), published in English as Jan Tomasz Gross with Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)..

made clear that although an influx of Wehrmacht troops into the area two weeks earlier as part of Operation Barbarossa provided an important context for the massacre of Jews, the killing itself was perpetrated by local Poles, often with gratuitous cruelty. This instance of mass violence, Gross argued, was one of numerous pogroms carried out by Poles against Jews in the summer of 1941.

Gross's book struck a raw nerve in Poland and generated more than two years of fierce debate and recriminations.² Some Poles who had not even read *Sąsiedzi* were quick to condemn it, whereas others who did read the book took issue with Gross's account of the massacre or with his interpretations of why it happened.³ Still others defended Gross, arguing that *Sąsiedzi* was a book that "had to be written and was absolutely necessary" to force Poles to "face up to the painful truth of Jedwabne."⁴ Many of the leading experts in Poland on the history of Polish Jewry, such as Dariusz Stola, welcomed the ongoing debate and maintained that much greater research should be undertaken to explore the topic more deeply and verify Gross's findings. Some of the discussion in Poland at times took on ugly nationalist and anti-Semitic overtones, and several political commentators, especially those affiliated with the extreme-right Radio Maryja, invoked

² For an excellent review of the debate, see Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). See also Andrzej Paczkowski, "Debata wokół 'Sąsiadów: Próba wstępnej typologii,'" *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 24 March 2001, p. A6.

³ Natalia Aleksion, "Polish Historians Respond to Jedwabne," in Robert Cherry and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, eds., *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 164-188.

⁴ Krystyna Skarżyńska "Zbiorowa wyobraźnia, zbiorowa wina," *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 24 November 2000, p. 19; Dawid Warszawski, "Odpowiedzialność i jej brak," *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 9-10 December 2000, pp. 20-21; Jacek Korczewski, "Mord rytualny," *Wprost* (Poznań), 10 December 2000, pp. 36-37; Dariusz Czaja, "To nie 'oni,' niestety," *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 16-17 December 2000, pp. 20-21; Andrzej Żbikowski, "Nie było rozkazu," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 4 January 2001, pp. A6-A7; Dawid Warszawski, "'Mowa pokutna: Bez także,'" *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Warsaw), 9 March 2001, p. 18; and Dawid Warszawski, "'Dwie Polski w Jedwabnem,'" *Wprost* (Poznań), 21 July 2002, pp. 24-26.

hoary notions of Judeo-Communism (*Żydokomuna*) and sought to exculpate the attackers.⁵

Nevertheless, despite the viciousness of some of the commentaries, the debate overall had a cathartic effect in Polish society, especially after the Polish parliament officially authorized the recently established Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, or IPN) to produce a comprehensive study of the Jedwabne pogrom and the circumstances surrounding it. Two well-respected IPN scholars, Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, jointly coordinated the institute's work on the matter, and in 2002 they published two massive volumes — the first a compendium of authoritative essays by leading experts and the other a collection of annotated documents from various Polish archives — that confirmed Gross's basic findings but considerably reduced the total number of deaths and added a wealth of detail.⁶ (Later research by the IPN and other scholars resulted in somewhat higher estimates of the numbers of victims and perpetrators, bringing the tallies a bit closer to those originally cited by Gross.) The two volumes are indispensable for anyone studying the Jedwabne massacre. The IPN's successful performance in this high-profile case helped to cement its reputation early on as a nonpartisan, professional body that could facilitate historical reckoning in Poland even on the most sensitive topics.

Gross's next two books, *Strach* (Fear) and *Złote żniwa* (Golden Harvest), extended his reassessments of the history of Polish Jews to the late wartime years and early postwar period. In *Strach*, he discussed how Poles seized the property of local Jews who had been deported to Nazi

⁵ Jerzy Robert Nowak, *100 kłamstw J. T. Grossa o żydowskich sąsiadach w Jedwabnem* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo von Borowiecki, 2001); Henryk Pajak, *Jedwabne geszeft* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Retro, 2001); Lech Z. Niekrasz, *Operacja Jedwabne—mity i fakty* (Wrocław: Nortom, 2001). Antoni Macierewicz, "Rewolucja nihilizmu," *Głos — Tygodnik katolicko-narodowy* (Warsaw), 3 February 2001, p. 2; Tomasz Strzembosz, "Przemilczana kolaboracja," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 27-28 January 2001, pp. A6-A7; Tomasz Strzembosz, "Inny obraz sąsiadów," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 31 March–1 April 2001, pp. A6-A7; Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, "Kłopoty z kuracją szokową," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 5 January 2001, p. A6; and Piotr Gontarczyk, "Gross kontra fakty," *Życie* (Warsaw), 31 January 2001, p. 4.

⁶ Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *Wokół Jedwabnego*, Vol. I: *Studia*, and Vol. II: *Dokumenty* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 2002).

death camps or shot by Nazi police battalions. The book then focused in depth on the early postwar period, showing that even after more than 90 percent of Polish Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust, many Polish Christians reacted with hostility when surviving Jews returned home. Some of the Poles had seized Jewish property and housing and were worried that their claims would be challenged, whereas others simply regretted seeing Jews back in their midst. The hostility at times gave rise to gruesome anti-Semitic outbursts, including a pogrom in Kielce in July 1946 that left 42 Jews dead.⁷ Significant as the Kielce massacre was in the scale of its bloodshed and ferocity of its violence, the cumulative death toll of other attacks against Jews in postwar Poland, including atrocities perpetrated by armed nationalist guerrillas, was many times higher. Gross estimated that up to 1,500 Polish Jews were killed by their fellow Poles after the war.

The reaction in Poland to *Strach* among professional historians (including some prominent Jews) as well as the wider public was often uneasy. Although most scholars accepted the basic facts in Gross's narrative, many contested his interpretations. Some argued that he had been too sweeping in his characterizations of Polish society and had attributed anti-Semitic motives to people whose actions in some cases might have stemmed mainly from greed or criminality coarsened by the war.⁸ A senior figure in the Polish Catholic church went so far as to accuse

⁷ For relevant archival documents and analyses, see the two large volumes put out by the IPN: Łukasz Kamiński and Jan Żaryn, eds., *Wokół pogromu kieleckiego* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006); and Leszek Bukowski, Andrzej Jankowski, and Jan Żaryn, eds., *Wokół pogromu kieleckiego* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008). See also Stanisław Meducki and Zenon Wrona, eds., *Antyżydowskie wydarzenia kieleckie 4 lipca 1946 roku*, 2 vols. (Kielce: Kieleckie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 1992).

⁸ For an overview, see Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 'Coming to Terms with Anti-Semitism: Jan T. Gross's Writings and the Construction of Cultural Trauma in Post-Communist Poland,' *European Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (May 2013), pp. 125-150. See also the interview with Gross in Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska, "Antysemityzm straszny jak Stalin," *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Warsaw), 24 January 2008, p. 22.

Gross of stoking anti-Semitism by “unfairly maligning the entire Polish nation.”⁹ Both Gross and his Polish publisher, the academic press Znak, rejected most of the criticism and stressed the need for Poles collectively to come to terms with “the most vexing issues in [Polish] history.”

The furor surrounding *Strach* gained even greater intensity with Gross’s third book, *Złote żniwa*, which underscored the callousness and antipathy of many Poles toward Jews during the war even as the Holocaust was taking its grisly toll. Gross cataloged instances in which Poles living near Treblinka, Chelmno, and other extermination camps stripped the clothes off Jewish corpses and stole gold fillings from their teeth. He described how Poles waited for their Jewish neighbors to be shot or deported to the gas chambers and then laid claim to their homes and possessions. The small percentage of Poles who had tried to save Jews from Nazi death squads were ostracized and even physically attacked and forced into exile by their fellow Poles after the war.

The response to *Złote żniwa* in Poland was swift in coming. Once again, many Poles alleged that Gross had dwelt too much on pathologies that were outgrowths of a rampantly destructive war and had therefore “drawn unfair generalizations.” Much of the debate about the book was substantive (if often emotional), but some commentators engaged in ad hominem attacks against Gross, often with anti-Semitic overtones.¹⁰ Gross and Znak responded that the criticisms missed the whole point of the book, which was never intended to focus mainly on the actions of Poles who helped to save Jews (some 6,200 honored by Yad Vashem). The aim, instead, was to show that many Poles behaved with unspeakable cruelty both during and after the war.

⁹ Małgorzata I. Niemczyńska, “Żydzi nas atakują! Trzeba się bronić,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Warsaw), 11 February 2008, p. 7.

¹⁰ “Internauci chcą zablokować publikację książki Grossa: Grożą bojkotem wydawnictwa,” *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 10 January 2011, p. 4.

Even as Gross's books touched off recriminations and disputes, they stirred greater public curiosity about the history of Polish Jews and spurred many Poles to seek to learn more about the topic. One of the byproducts was the opening in Warsaw in October 2014 of a state-of-the-art Museum of the History of Polish Jews (*Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich*), which presents not only a thorough overview of the destruction of Polish Jewry in the Holocaust but also a comprehensive history of Jewish life in Poland from medieval times on.¹¹ The construction and initial operating costs (320 million złotych) were funded by two government bodies (Poland's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the municipal government of Warsaw) and by the Jewish Historical Institute (a non-governmental organization), but the museum operates autonomously under the supervision of highly respected academic experts, with Dariusz Stola as its founding director.¹² Many groups of Polish schoolchildren have visited the museum and seen its multi-media exhibits, and it has also now become a popular destination for Polish and foreign tourists.

Despite greater public interest in the history of Polish-Jewish relations, the issue has remained politically sensitive in Poland. In an article published in September 2015 in the German newspaper *Die Welt*, Gross maintained that Poles had killed more Jews during World War II than they had killed Germans.¹³ He contended that Poles had killed roughly 17,000 Germans during the initial warfare against the Wehrmacht in September 1939, 5,000 more over the next four years, and another 5,000 during the August 1944 Warsaw uprising. Gross said the total number of Jews

¹¹ Joanna Podgórska, "Muzeum życia: O tym, jak powstawało Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, jak zostało zorganizowane i jakie niesie przesłanie, opowiada Marian Turski," *Polityka* (Warsaw), No. 43 (22-28 October 2014), pp. 108-109; and the guidebook *1000 lat historii Żydów polskich. Miniprzewodnik po ekspozycji* (Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN, 2014).

¹² Kancelaria Sejmu, Biuro Komisji Sejmowych, *Pełny zapis przebiegu posiedzenia Komisji Kultury i Środków Przekazu (nr 96) z dnia 25 września 2013* (Warsaw: Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polski, September 2013).

¹³ "Die Osteuropäer haben kein Schamgefühl," *Die Welt* (Berlin), 14 September 2015, p. 4.

killed by Poles — by ordinary citizens as well as police, paramilitary units, army soldiers, and nationalist guerrillas — was several times higher than the number of Germans killed.

Translated excerpts of Gross’s article quickly gained wide circulation in Poland and in some cases were deliberately distorted by far-right nationalist commentators to suggest that in Gross’s view the Germans had killed fewer Jews than the Poles had.¹⁴ But even if no distortions had taken place, Gross’s claims were bound to be controversial in a country like Poland that had long prided itself on having fought against Germany throughout the war. So vehement was the public reaction that Poland’s chief state prosecutor launched a criminal investigation in mid-October 2015 to see whether libel charges should be brought against Gross for having “publicly insulted the Polish nation” — charges that, if upheld, could potentially lead to a three-year prison sentence.¹⁵

The criticism of Gross escalated after the rightwing populist Law and Justice (*Prawo i sprawiedliwość*, or PiS) Party of Jarosław Kaczyński won a decisive victory in Poland’s parliamentary elections in October 2015, allowing it to form a government on its own. Kaczyński had headed a coalition government from 2005 to 2007 but had then been in the political wilderness for nearly a decade. In May 2015, Andrzej Duda, a protégé of Kaczyński in PiS, won the Polish presidential election, and then six months later PiS’s overwhelming victory in the parliamentary elections solidified its control over Poland’s political system. Both Duda (who took office in August 2015) and the new PiS government endorsed the investigation of Gross.

Subsequently, in January 2016, Duda called for the revocation of the Knight’s Cross of the

¹⁴ See, for example, Jerzy Robert Nowak, “Jak prowokator J.T. Gross odsłonił się do końca,” Serwis Informacyjny BIBUŁY, 3 October 2015.

¹⁵ “Jest śledztwo w sprawie słów Jana T. Grossa — Zarzut: znieważenie narodu polskiego,” *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 15 October 2015, p. 6.

Order of Merit that had been awarded to Gross by the Polish government in 1996.¹⁶ That proposal immediately triggered a backlash in Poland among scholars and political commentators, who decried PiS's "stupid and harmful" efforts to use history as a "political weapon." Two open letters to Duda and the government, signed by distinguished Polish historians, warned that such a move would "tarnish Poland's image in the world" and be a "national embarrassment."¹⁷ They condemned the president's "worrisome and heavy-handed" insistence on a "uniform historical perspective." Duda himself had claimed that his move against Gross was part of a wider "offensive" he would be spearheading to burnish Poland's image in the face of "malevolent" attempts to "cast aspersions" on Poland's historical record and its current global standing. "Historical politics," he asserted in early 2016, "should be conducted by the Polish state as an element of the construction of our international position."¹⁸ Yet by trying to expunge all the unpleasant aspects of Poland's treatment of Jews from public memory, Duda undermined what he was trying to achieve and gave the impression that his goal was to sanitize history, not clarify it.

Political agendas have also been a salient factor in retrospective debates about Poland's Communist past. In Poland, unlike in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the end of Communism came relatively gradually. The Round Table talks from February to April 1989, which led to the partly free parliamentary elections of June 1989 that enabled Solidarity to form a non-Communist government under Tadeusz Mazowiecki two months later, were held at a time when Communism

¹⁶ Adam Leszczyński, "PiS kole order prof. Jana Tomasza Grossa: I chcą mu odebrać Krzyż Kawalerski," *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 9 February 2016, p. 3; and Paweł Wroński, "Zabrać "zdrajcy" order?" *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 11 February 2016, p. 7.

¹⁷ "Apel do prezydenta przeciw postępowaniu ws. odebrania orderu Grossowi," Polish Press Agency, 12 February 2016; and "Prof. Gross zasłużył na ten order: Kancelaria Prezydenta chce reglamentować wolność słowa?" *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 11 February 2016.

¹⁸ "Prezydent: Państwo polskie powinno realizować 'ofensywną' politykę historyczną," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 16 February 2016, p. 4.

still existed in Eastern Europe, the Warsaw Pact was still functioning, and considerable uncertainty still existed both in Poland and elsewhere in the bloc about the bounds of Soviet tolerance.¹⁹ These circumstances induced Solidarity to agree to certain important compromises in exchange for the formation of Mazowiecki's government in August 1989, notably to allow General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the country's long-time political and military ruler who had introduced martial law in Poland in December 1981, to remain as president, and General Czesław Kiszczak, the long-time minister of internal affairs, to remain in charge of that ministry.

Ensnared in those posts over the next several months, Jaruzelski and Kiszczak secretly allowed the removal and destruction of some of the Communist-era files, including state security records that were overseen by Kiszczak's ministry. By mid-1990, after both Kiszczak and Jaruzelski had been ousted for good from any governmental positions, rumors were circulating in Poland that the most incriminating materials had been weeded out and destroyed and that counterfeit documents had been planted.²⁰ Although some of these allegations were exaggerated or false, there is no question that some destruction of secret police records and other sensitive documents occurred. Moreover, conclusive evidence surfaced in February 2016 that when Kiszczak left office in 1990 he took with him a large quantity of highly classified documents and stored them at his home illegally until his death at age 90 in November 2015.²¹ It is unclear what, if anything, he did with the documents during the 25 years they were in his possession, but he

¹⁹ The literature on the negotiated end of Communism in Poland is immense. See, for example, Witold Szalmonowicz, ed., *Porozumienia Okrągłego Stołu: Warszawa 6 lutego—5 kwietnia 1989 r.* (Olsztyn: NSZZ "Solidarność," 1989); Andrzej Garlicki, *Ryccerze Okrągłego Stołu* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2004); and Jan Skórzynski, *Uгода i rewolucja: Władza i opozycja, 1985-1989* (Warsaw: Presspublica, 1995), pp.182-254.

²⁰ Bartłomiej Kaminski, *The Collapse of State Socialism: The Case of Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Claudia Kundigraber, *Polens Weg in die Demokratie: der Runde Tisch und der unerwartete Machtwechsel* (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1997); and Marjorie Castle, *Triggering Communism's Collapse: Perceptions and Power in Poland's Transition* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

²¹ "List Czesława Kiszczaka: Dokumenty publikować po śmierci Lecha Wałęsy," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 22 February 2016, p. 1.

presumably planned to exploit them for blackmail purposes if necessary. Regardless of the motivation, the disclosure that he took these extremely sensitive materials is yet another factor that has trammled even the sincerest of efforts in Poland to come to terms with the Communist past.

Moreover, even though Poland's transition to a market economy was far swifter and more successful than in most former Communist countries, dislocation during the transition fueled a perception that the Round Table had been merely a conspiracy among elites to maintain an inequitable power structure in Poland. Many Poles felt that Communist elites had used their positions of influence to acquire economic assets that enabled them to live in luxury and to remain dominant in society during the post-Communist era.²² Many of these perceptions were hyperbolic, but the notion that key elites did what they could to remain influential after Communism is both true and unsurprising. Unfortunately, historical memory in Poland about the Round Table has often been skewed for political reasons, generating acrimonious debate that sheds little light on the events themselves and that gets bogged down in conspiracy theories of various sorts, including about the April 2010 airplane crash. Generational change has not helped matters, in part because of the polarization of political life in Poland, which has tended to convert debates about historical matters into thinly-veiled political battles, especially when PiS has been in power.

Beyond the question of how Communism ended in Poland and the implications for power structures in Poland today, debates about historical memory of Polish Communism have focused on the role of two important individuals who were on opposite sides in 1980-1981: General Jaruzelski and Lech Wałęsa. To simplify slightly, the debate concerning Jaruzelski (who died in 2015) has boiled down to the question of whether he should be perceived as a hero or a traitor.

²² Andrzej Stankiewicz, "Nie wierzyli w wybory, większość dziś zmieniła zdanie," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 4 June 2014, p. 13.

Some views are more nuanced than that, but they tend to get submerged in the miasma of accusations and recriminations in what is often a politicized debate. Legal proceedings were under way against Jaruzelski from the early 1990s on for his role in two events — the shootings of workers on Poland’s Baltic coast in December 1970 and the imposition of martial law in late 1981. Although the latter charges against him were put on hold in 1996 by a leftwing parliament for nearly a decade, they were reinstated in 2005 and remained in place until his death a decade later.

Until 1991, Jaruzelski always denied that the Soviet Union had intended to invade Poland in 1981, but as soon as the USSR ceased to exist, he reversed himself. From the early 1990s on, he repeatedly insisted that he had had no choice in December 1981 but to impose martial law as the “lesser of two evils,” that is, as an alternative to a Soviet invasion and military occupation of Poland. Jaruzelski acquired some prominent defenders from the ranks of those he once strenuously opposed, notably Adam Michnik, the former dissident intellectual and now long-time editor of *Gazeta wyborcza*. Michnik has staunchly supported Jaruzelski, often to the consternation of some of Michnik’s former associates. Jaruzelski, however, also has had plenty of detractors in Poland, some of whom have claimed that Soviet troops would not have dared to invade Poland in 1981 and that Jaruzelski imposed martial law simply to establish a militarized form of Communist rule and resist any genuine compromise with Solidarity and the Catholic Church.

This debate has been unsatisfactory, in part because proponents of both of the extreme positions (Jaruzelski and Michnik on the one hand and Jaruzelski’s bitterest opponents on the other) have been unconvincing.²³ To be sure, Jaruzelski’s claims that he acted under enormous Soviet pressure are certainly true. The Soviet Politburo and Soviet High Command were exerting

²³ This paragraph and the next four paragraphs are based on Mark Kramer, “The Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and the Polish Crisis of 1980-1981,” in Lee Trepanier, Spasimir Domaradzki, and Jaelyn Stanke, eds., *The Solidarity Movement and Perspectives on the Last Decade of the Cold War* (Kraków: Krakowskie Towarzystwo Eduk, 2010), pp. 27-67.

relentless pressure on Polish leaders. The Soviet Union deployed many divisions of combat-ready troops around Poland's borders and in the western USSR, conducted a long series of conspicuous Warsaw Pact and bilateral military exercises, informed Polish officials that elaborate plans had been drawn up for a Soviet-led invasion, undertook reconnaissance and other preparations to carry out those plans, and made repeated, vehement exhortations through bilateral and multilateral channels. These various actions, in combination, might well have caused Jaruzelski to fear that Soviet troops would invade Poland unless he imposed martial law. Whether Soviet leaders actually *intended* to invade is a very different matter. But regardless of what Soviet intentions truly were, the key point to bear in mind is that Jaruzelski and other senior Polish officials in 1980 and 1981 were not privy to the internal deliberations of the Soviet Politburo and could never be fully certain about Soviet intentions. Hence, Jaruzelski might have genuinely believed that an invasion would take place if a solution "from within" Poland did not materialize.

Nonetheless, even though Jaruzelski's memoirs accurately depict the excruciating pressure he was facing from the Soviet Union, his account of the crisis omits a crucial matter — namely, that as the decisive moment for the imposition of martial law approached in December 1981 he urged Moscow to send Soviet troops into Poland to bail him out. The reason that Jaruzelski was appointed head of the Polish United Workers' Party (the Communist party) in mid-October 1981 is that Soviet leaders believed he would be willing to comply with their demands for a crackdown. Jaruzelski did promptly move ahead with the final preparations for the "lesser of two evils"— that is, martial law — but he also began considering the possibility of relying on the "greater of two evils," Soviet military intervention. His overtures about this option evidently began in late October 1981 and continued, with ever greater urgency, until the day martial law was introduced. Apparently, Jaruzelski by late 1981 had come to believe that the martial law operation

would be unsuccessful unless it went hand-in-hand with external military intervention.

But if Jaruzelski's version of events is problematic, the notion that the Soviet Union was willing to let Poland go its own way is even more dubious. This argument flies in the face of a vast amount of evidence. The first step the Soviet Politburo took in August 1980, after forming a special commission to deal with the Polish crisis, was to authorize the mobilization of a sizable number of Soviet tank and mechanized infantry divisions "in case military assistance is provided to Poland." From August 1980 until the fall of 1981, Soviet leaders were fully prepared to send these divisions into Poland to help the Polish Communist regime introduce martial law. The only reason the Soviet (and Czechoslovak and East German) divisions did not move into Poland is that whenever the Soviet Politburo stepped up its pressure and proposed the deployment of Soviet ground troops to facilitate a vigorous crackdown on the Polish opposition, Polish leaders warned that it would be better if Polish forces imposed martial law on their own. If the Poles had instead been willing to receive external military support during this period, Soviet Army units would have entered Poland to aid them in crushing Solidarity and restoring orthodox Communist rule.

In short, the historical evidence reveals a nuanced picture — a picture in which Jaruzelski certainly was not a hero but was not altogether a villain, either. The basic problem is that he was operating in a context in which heroes would not have lasted long. Some of the hardline political and military alternatives to Jaruzelski, such as Tadeusz Grabski, Stefan Olszowski, and General Eugeniusz Molczyk, one or more of whom would have been brought in by the Soviet Union to replace Jaruzelski if he had failed to heed Soviet wishes, undoubtedly would have implemented a much harsher crackdown, killing larger numbers of people. Many Polish scholars are well aware of the nuances and have published excellent analyses of the topic. But public debates in Poland about the history of that period have far too often become relentlessly politicized, omitting all the

nuance.

Much the same is true about recent debates concerning the role of Lech Wałęsa in Polish history. Wałęsa has long been known as the founding leader of the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) trade union whose image scaling the shipyard fence in Gdańsk in August 1980 is still one of the best-known symbols of the Solidarity era both in Poland and abroad. But Wałęsa's term as president in post-Communist Poland, from December 1990 to December 1995, was marred by controversy and political infighting.²⁴ As early as 1992, rumors began to surface that Wałęsa had been an informant for Poland's Communist-era Security Service (SB). But because those allegations initially came from Antoni Macierewicz, a senior official who had been engaged in an acrimonious feud with Wałęsa, most Poles tended to discount them. The accusations tarnished Wałęsa's legacy somewhat, but his image was still decidedly positive both in Poland and abroad. However, in the late 1990s, journalists and researchers in Poland claimed to have found further evidence that Wałęsa was an informant for the SB in the 1970s under the codename "Bolek" — charges endorsed by some of his former aides who had split with him in the 1990s. Although a Polish lustration court ruled in 2000 that Wałęsa had been falsely accused,²⁵ damaging rumors persisted.

The debate about Wałęsa took on a more politically charged tone after Lech Kaczyński was elected Polish president in 2005 and his twin brother, Jarosław, became prime minister in a PiS-headed coalition government. Lech Kaczyński had been a close aide of Wałęsa in the late

²⁴ Raymond Taras, *Consolidating Democracy in Poland* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); and Hubert Tworzecki, *Parties and Politics in Post-1989 Poland* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

²⁵ "Orzeczenie sędziów Sądu Apelacyjnego w Warszawie wraz z uzasadnieniem wyroku w sprawie lustracyjnej Lecha Wałęsy," Sygn. akt V AL. 26100, 11 August 2000, Warsaw.

1980s and early 1990s, but the two men eventually had a bitter falling out.²⁶ As president, Kaczyński lent weight to the rumors about Wałęsa as “Bolek” and encouraged investigations of the matter by journalists and researchers, especially those associated with Poland’s prestigious IPN, which until the Kaczyńskis came to power had been perceived as a strictly nonpartisan organization with a laudable record of confronting sensitive issues in Poland’s past, such as the Jedwabne massacre. In 2008, two researchers at the IPN, Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, published a 750-page book presenting evidence from the former SB archives which they claimed showed that Wałęsa had been the SB informant “Bolek” from 1970 to 1976 and that later, as president, he had sought to cover up his earlier misdeeds.²⁷ The evidence of Wałęsa’s work as “Bolek” was largely persuasive, though the evidence also suggested that most of the information he provided to the SB was relatively innocuous (apart from a few cases when it may have been considerably more damaging). More troubling was the evidence that Wałęsa as president had relied on his intelligence chief to tamper with the files, an action that was clearly illegal.

The problem with the Cenckiewicz-Gontarczyk book was not the evidence it amassed but that it made no effort to present a balanced assessment of Wałęsa. It offered no coverage of his invaluable contribution during the 1980-1981 crisis and his courageous defiance of the SB when officials from the agency vigorously pressured Wałęsa in 1982 to turn against Solidarity. Nor did Cenckiewicz and Gontarczyk acknowledge Wałęsa’s crucial role in the start and conduct of the Round Table talks or his equally crucial role in forcing Jaruzelski to back down and accept a

²⁶ Monika Nalepa, *Skeletons in the Closet: Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 17-19.

²⁷ Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, *SB a Lech Wałęsa: Przyczynek do Biografii* (Gdańsk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej—Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2008).

Solidarity-led government in the summer of 1989. The one-sided nature of the Cenckiewicz-Gontarczyk book gave the impression that it was intended more as a political indictment than a solid work of scholarship. That said, the controversy clearly tarnished Wałęsa, who continued to deny even the most persuasive evidence against him rather than trying to respond to it as fully as possible.

By the time the IPN unexpectedly announced in February 2016 that Kiszczak had illegally kept a large quantity of classified files at his home, Wałęsa had won another court ruling against his accusers. Nonetheless, doubts about his integrity had steadily mounted in the wake of the Cenckiewicz-Gontarczyk book. Thus, the IPN's disclosure of more than 350 pages of formerly secret documents confirming that Wałęsa was a paid SB informant in the 1970s under the cover name Bolek caused less of a shock than it might have in earlier years, at least in Poland (the shock perhaps was greater abroad, where few people had followed the earlier discussions).²⁸ Full scanned images of the documents in Wałęsa's personnel and working SB files were made publicly available soon after the IPN obtained them. The disclosures were seized on by rival political factions in Poland, who used Wałęsa as a kind of symbol in their battles. Jarosław Kaczyński and other PiS officials amplified their earlier allegations that Wałęsa and Kiszczak colluded in 1989 in fashioning a post-Communist political order that worked to the benefit of senior Communists.²⁹

By contrast, Donald Tusk, a critic of PiS who served as Polish prime minister from 2007 to 2014

²⁸ See the IPN's periodic updates on the materials: "Informacja dotycząca udostępniania dokumentów z pakietu trzeciego i czwartego z materiałów zabezpieczonych w domu wdowy po Czesławie Kiszczaku," 7 March 2016; Agnieszka Sopińska-Jaremczak, Rzecznik prasowy IPN, "Komunikat o przekazaniu przez prokuratora IPN dokumentów pochodzących z trzeciego i czwartego pakietu materiałów zabezpieczonych w domu wdowy po Czesławie Kiszczaku," 3 March 2016; and Agnieszka Sopińska-Jaremczak, Rzecznik prasowy IPN, "Komunikat w sprawie ekspertyz dokumentów dotyczących tajnego współpracownika pseudonim 'Bolek,'" 25 February 2016.

²⁹ "Macierewicz o archiwum Kiszczaka: To koniec legendy Lecha Wałęsy," *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 22 February 2016, p. 7; "Antoni Macierewicz: Lech Wałęsa? Bez wątpliwości 'Bolek,'" *Rzeczpospolita* (Warsaw), 18 February 2016, p. 13; and Paweł Bravo, "'Bolek': Wygodne półprawdy," *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Kraków), No. 8 (18 February 2016), p. 17.

after co-founding the centrist Civic Platform Party, dismissed the newly discovered documents as “just a rehash” of old allegations that “added nothing new.”³⁰ Cenckiewicz, for his part, not only denounced Wałęsa but also accused the IPN of mishandling the Kiszczak documents — an accusation that seemed to be motivated more by politics than by evidence.

Had the debate not been so politicized both before and after the disclosure of the Kiszczak files, Wałęsa perhaps might have done a better job of responding and explaining his side of the story, but one of the hazards of the politicization of historical memory is that it induces participants on all sides to take extreme positions and shifts the discussion away from its proper focus.

If Wałęsa had long ago acknowledged a link with the SB in the early 1970s and had explained that he was under great pressure at the time and did his best to keep his cooperation to a minimum, the controversy undoubtedly would have subsided relatively quickly and would have caused no significant damage to his reputation. But by denying all the evidence against him, he inadvertently fueled the impression that he was covering up something far worse. His failure to come to terms with his own past laid the groundwork for the partisan attacks against him.

³⁰ “Tusk o teczkach z szafy Kiszczaka: Odgrzewana sprawa, przykra dla wizerunku,” *Gazeta wyborcza* (Warsaw), 18 February 2016, p. 3.