

A Reconfigured Terrain

JOHN-PAUL HIMKA

THIS BOOK OPENS with an analysis by Marci Shore—nuanced, poking at every tender spot—of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors* and the debates it unleashed.¹ This is precisely where we need to begin, since it was this “one small book,” as Vladimir Solonari calls it later in the volume, that announced the arrival of a new historiographical moment, of which the essays collected here are among the outstanding representatives. Several things have been happening in the new historiography. One of the most striking is that Holocaust studies and East European studies have finally met intellectually. For too long, the annihilation of the Jews of Eastern Europe had been relatively neglected in scholarship or else treated by Holocaust specialists lacking a deep immersion in the local languages, cultural traditions, and historical contexts of the region. Raul Hilberg’s magisterial, indispensable, pathbreaking *Destruction of the European Jews* made no use of sources or scholarly literature in East European languages and exhibited a superficial acquaintance with East European history, even though, as Timothy Snyder has reminded us, over 4,000,000 of the about 5,400,000 murdered Jews were natives of a restricted area of Eastern Europe that he has dubbed “the bloodlands.”² Another major milestone in Holocaust historiography, Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*, followed the destructive work of one German reserve police battalion as it shot and rounded up for the death camps tens of thousands of Jewish people.³ All the actions described in Browning’s book took place in Poland, but *Ordinary Men* made no use of Polish-language sources or literature and never looked at events from an inside-Poland perspective. By no means do

I point this out to criticize these authors' formidable achievements, only to clarify the historiographical context in which Gross's *Neighbors* appeared.

Here was a book written by someone whose previous work had concerned the twentieth-century history of Poland but not the Holocaust. Gross was, like all the authors in the present book, an East Europeanist. He knew the languages, the history, the sociological context, and the politics. He came to the Holocaust *from* East European studies, not to Eastern Europe from Holocaust studies. *Neighbors* was a breakthrough, almost a paradigm shift. Shore's contribution here illuminates and contextualizes Gross's personal evolution to the Holocaust. It is important to recognize that a similar evolution, partially fueled by Gross's work itself and partially responding to the same impulses as he, affected an entire field—rather two fields, East European studies and Holocaust studies. Neither is the same anymore.

The other thing that *Neighbors* did (and we can see this particularly in Solonari's chapter) was that it turned attention to local participation in anti-Jewish violence. *Ordinary Men* had opened up, as no previous work had, the world of the routine perpetrator: not the Adolf Eichmanns or Franz Stangls, but the undistinguished policemen who executed people and delivered them to execution simply because it was their job to do so. Gross lifted another veil from the Holocaust when he called attention to East Europeans engaging in mass murder and robbery in the summer of 1941, in the immediate aftermath of the German invasion of the USSR. Such incidents had already been known for decades from Jewish survivors' testimonies and memoirs, but they had not been the object of concentrated scholarly research. Since the publication of *Neighbors* in 2001, however, many studies on this violence have appeared, taking as a point of departure the events in Jedwabne that Gross had described in his deceptively small book.⁴ That many questions remain to be answered about this violence is evident from the disagreement one can find even here between Solonari and Diana Dumitru about what kinds of people perpetrated the massacres in the summer of 1941. Both agree, however, that the attacks on Jews in Bessarabia that summer did not arise because of their participation in the Soviet administration. (See also Shore's discussion of this "anguished motif.")

Another trend set by *Neighbors* was greater use and appreciation of survivors' testimony for exploring the history of the Shoah. As Shore demonstrates, Gross (even before his turn to the Holocaust) always had been interested in a "highly personalized source base" and the "experience of ordinary people." The most important source for *Neighbors* was the testimony of a single Jewish survivor who left a written description of the murders in Jedwabne. That testimony was one of thousands collected in the immediate aftermath of the

war by the Central Jewish Historical Commission and now housed in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.⁵ These sources, and others like them, had been available all along, although they were woefully underused by Holocaust scholars. Gross brought them to prominence, and now they inform much of the historiography on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe.⁶ *Neighbors* also made use of sensitive investigative and trial records that would not have been available to researchers prior to 1989, but this newly accessible archival base did not play the same role in Gross's work as it began to play in the new East European Holocaust historiography as a whole.

The importance and difficulty of working with the sources that became available after the fall of communism emerge clearly from the essays in this volume. Shore already hits on a crucial issue with regard to Gross's use of transcripts of security-police interrogations. How much credence can be put into coerced testimony? To find out about the anti-Jewish violence in Bessarabia in the summer of 1941, Solonari makes use of Soviet war crimes trials as well as the documentation produced by the Extraordinary State Commission for the Establishment and Investigation of the Crimes of the Fascist German Invaders and Their Accomplices. He also explains at the beginning of his chapter the particular difficulties that they pose as sources and how from his experience he evaluates them. Included also in this volume are two important source studies: Dumitru's triangulation of the war crimes trials with other sources, which vindicates their significance for investigating the Holocaust at the local level, and Marina Sorokina's study of the origins of and politics behind the Extraordinary State Commission.

Sorokina's piece is perhaps less of a source study than a study of the Soviet response to invasion and the Holocaust; Dumitru's piece also documents aspects of the Soviet response to the murder of the Jewish population. This response forms a major theme of the present book. Harvey Asher proceeds from Stalin's lack of interest in rescuing the unfortunates in Auschwitz to tease out the reasons behind the Soviets' seemingly tepid interest in the fate of the Jews in 1939–45. Although he argues that "visceral antisemitism" played a role, he insists that other factors were also at work. Karel Berkhoff carefully surveys how the Holocaust was covered in the Soviet media and arrives less at a conclusion than at a set of complexities that have to be taken into account.⁷ Most disturbing is Tarik Cyril Amar's contribution to this problem. Examining the discourse on the Holocaust in western Ukraine (Lviv) under Soviet rule, he discovers an "imperfect silence," one that acknowledged that the Holocaust happened but not that it had any outstanding importance: the mass extermination of the Jews was self-evident— common knowledge but marginal.

From Amar's insight we can understand the fierce resistance that Gross's work and other studies of local perpetration have encountered in postcommunist Europe. The inhabitants of Jedwabne did not need Gross's book to find out about the savage events of late June 1941. They knew, but the events had not loomed large in their consciousness, and aside from a desultory trial after the war, no one had raised a stink about them. In the territories acquired by the Soviets in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, older people had witnessed the Holocaust with their own eyes and saw—some even participated in—the anti-Jewish violence of the summer of 1941. But the imperfect silence in Soviet and Polish communist discourse comforted them that although these things had happened, they were not very meaningful and required no reckoning. The view that it was only the “German fascist invaders” who killed not so much Jews as “peaceful Soviet citizens” was a convenience for both the regime and the population. The new historiography, which brings a dark past to light, has painfully challenged this indifference, and a new chapter of working through the Holocaust has opened. The essays collected here have played their part in revising perspectives.