



JEDWABNE POGROM MEMORIAL

Jedwabne, Poland

53.28528, 22.299933



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Executive Summary

The Jedwabne pogrom memorial was renewed in 2001, following controversies surrounding who the perpetrators of the massacre were. This case study explores moral questions over the commemoration and memory of perpetrators, Poland's responsibility for the slaughter, and how tragic events such as historical pogroms should be commemorated in the contemporary era. To this day, the Jedwabne Memorial and its vital role in uncovering Poland's tabooed past created a new precedent in the Polish public sphere and remains a site of contested memory that persists to this day.

Introduction

The town of Jedwabne is located in North-eastern Poland, in Podlaskie Voivodeship. Before the Second World War, its population numbered between 2,720 and 2,800, of which sixty per cent were Catholic and forty per cent Jewish.¹ As part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Jedwabne had fallen under Soviet occupation following the joint invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939. On June 22nd, 1941, however, after Operation Barbarossa, the town came under Nazi occupation. On July 10th 1941, perhaps the most infamous and controversial pogrom in Polish history occurred in the then-German-occupied Jedwabne. Debates continue regarding Polish involvement in the massacre – while it appears undeniable that Polish men were involved in rounding up and murdering Jews from the town, the question of whether they acted of their own accord or under orders from the occupying German police remains.

Moral questions of how one must remember the perpetrators, Poland's responsibility for the slaughter, and how we must commemorate the pogrom are essential elements of this case. The memorial, set up in 2001, replaces an older one erected in 1963, which exclusively blamed the German occupying forces. This new memorial, which does not explicitly specify who the perpetrators were, has repeatedly been a victim of vandalism – particularly in 2011 – and remains a site of contested collective memory among both the local and national community.² Despite this, the majority of contemporary historians, Polish and international alike, agree that Poles bear at least some level of responsibility for this crime, with Judeo-Bolshevism as well as other forms of rampant antisemitism being commonplace at the time.

Background

Jews had been settling in Jedwabne from as early as 1664, according to some accounts,³ and by the 1930s, the Jewish community would have comprised over a thousand members of a total population of almost three thousand. In the days before the massacre, however, the town's Jewish population increased by at least 200 as refugees fled from neighbouring towns Radziłów and Wizna, where the town's head had ordered the Jewish community's expulsion.⁴

On July 10th 1941, between 40 and 90 Polish men attacked the Jewish people of Jedwabne with German Gestapo police looking on. Many Jews were clubbed and stabbed to death in their homes and on the streets during the pogrom, and hundreds of women and children were gathered into a barn that was locked and set on fire. 18-year-old Szmul Wasersztejn, a Jewish resident, deposited a statement in Yiddish in April 1945 with the Central Jewish Historical Commission in Białystok,⁵

¹ Anna Cienciala, "The Jedwabne Massacre: Update and Review," *Polish Review* 48, no. 1 (2003): 52.

² Jacek Przybylski, "ABW szuka wandali, którzy zniszczyli pomnik w Jedwabnem," *Rzeczpospolita*, September 1, 2011.

³ Julius Baker and Moshe Tzinovitz, "My Hometown Yedwabne, Province of Lomza, Poland," In *Yedwabne Yizkor Book*, edited by Julius Baker et al (Jerusalem: Yiddish Book Center, 1980), 5.

⁴ Laura Crago, "Jedwabne," In *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, edited by Geoffrey Megargee and Martin Dean (Bloomington and Indianapolis: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012), 899–90.

⁵ Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, "Deposition of Witness Szmul Wasersztejn", Written down by E. Szejman; chairman of the Voivodeship Jewish Historical Commission, M. Turek; freely translated from the Yiddish language by M. Kwater." Collection no. 301 ("Individual Depositions"), document no. 152 (301/152).

where he detailed that the beards of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers' breasts, people were beaten and forced to sing and dance as their neighbours and friends were killed.

The contentious question here is whether the Polish Catholics of Jedwabne initiated the pogrom themselves or were following orders from the Nazis. Between 1949 and 1950, twenty-two Polish defendants implicated in the crime were put on trial, accused of collaborating with Germans during the pogrom. Twelve of these men were convicted of treason against Poland, and one was sentenced to death.⁶ It was later proven, however, that torture was used by the Security Office (UB) to extract confessions for these men, and so the accused were released.⁷

In 1963, a monument to the victims of the pogrom was created by the Polish Communist state's Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy. The inscription on the plaque read as follows: 'The site of the murder of the Jewish population. On July 10th 1941, the Gestapo and German military police burned 1,600 people alive.'⁸ This plaque has, in the ensuing decades, been branded as misleading not only for placing the blame solely on the Nazi perpetrators but also for overestimating the victim count (the number of victims of the pogrom is still disputed since numbers of refugees fleeing from other Soviet- and Nazi-occupied areas had not been properly documented. A later exhumation in 2002 recovered the remains of 300-400 victims, but it could not be completed out of respect for Jewish religious law).⁹

The publication of texts such as Jan Tomasz Gross' 2000 *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* claimed that the pogrom had been a Polish-initiated massacre, with Polish neighbours carrying out attacks on their fellow Jewish neighbours.¹⁰ Krzysztof Persak documents that the antisemitic stereotype of Judeo-Bolshevism (which had been used by the National Party, *Stronnictwo Narodowe*, before the war) conditioned the view of Jews as Soviet collaborators - with the departure of the Soviets, Poles sought revenge.¹¹ One elderly man departing a Jedwabne Church was quoted by *The New York Times* in 2003 as saying, 'The Jews were cooperating with the Russians. You can ask what the Jews did to the Poles, but no one asks that.'¹² This viewpoint is shared to this day by a lot of Poles, many of whom are hugely influential political figures. Gross' book proved, as a consequence, to be highly controversial, and the Polish parliament ordered a new investigation to be conducted into the massacre by the Polish Institute for National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN). IPN itself is a government-run commission launched in 1998 to document crimes committed against Poles during the periods of Nazi occupation and Soviet domination. In the words of its current director, Jarosław Szarek, its aims include 'showing the historical heritage that our predecessors have created, showing it in a modern form, transmitting

⁶ Tomasz Strzembosz, "Inny obraz sąsiadów," *Rzeczpospolita*, March 31, 2001.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Polin: Museum of the History of Jewish Pole, "Jedwabne: timeline of remembrance," *Polin: Museum of the History of Jewish Poles*, July 10, 2016.

⁹ Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, "Komunikat dot. postanowienia o umorzeniu śledztwa w sprawie zabójstwa obywateli polskich narodowości żydowskiej w Jedwabnem w dniu 10 lipca 1941 r," *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, June 20, 2013.

¹⁰ Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

¹¹ Krzysztof Persak, "Jedwabne before the Court: Poland's Justice and the Jedwabne Massacre—Investigations and Court Proceedings, 1947–1974," *East European Politics and Societies*, 25 no. 3 (2011): 410–432.

¹² Peter Green, "Polish Town Still Tries to Forget its Dark Past," *New York Times*, February 8, 2003.

it to the young generation, shaping views on history.¹³



Figure 1: "The memorial of the pogrom of Jedwabne on the former site of the barn where the Jews were burnt" Image by Jacques Lahitte CC BY-SA 3.0

In March 2001, before the conclusion of IPN's investigation had been reached, Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek pre-emptively described the participation of Poles in the Jedwabne crime as 'indisputable', and the 1963 monument was removed shortly thereafter to make room for a new and improved version. The report later found that the Poles were indeed culpable in the crime.

The polarisation caused by this entire spectacle led some to believe that the President used the event to curry favour with liberals.¹⁴ The tensions and political polarisation prevented a cohesive apology, and almost all the 2,000 residents of Jedwabne, along with representatives of the Catholic Church and members of the Jewish communities, refused to attend the ceremony after it was announced that the inscription on the new memorial would read, 'In memory of Jews from Jedwabne and its surroundings, men, women, and children, co-owners of this land, murdered, buried alive on this site on 10 July 1941. Jedwabne 10 July 2001.'¹⁵ The new six-foot-tall stone memorial, which has writings in Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish, was inaugurated on the pogrom's sixtieth anniversary. It symbolically displays the wooden doors of a barn and is surrounded by stone blocks marking the site of the barn.

History of the Contestation

The reason this monument has been so controversial pertains primarily to whom it blames. To place sole responsibility on the Poles would be to challenge an ingrained national narrative of victimhood, reinforced by the current Polish government – but to place responsibility solely on the Nazis would not only have transnational ramifications, particularly with regard to Israel but would also lead to a miscarriage of justice and a misremembering of the hundreds of massacred victims.

Challenging a National Narrative of Victimhood

¹³ Matthew Luxmoore, "Poles apart: the bitter conflict over a nation's communist history," *Guardian*, July 13, 2018.

¹⁴ Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, "Collective Remembrance in Jedwabne: Unsettled Memory of World War II in Post-communist Poland," *History and Memory*, 18, no. 1 (2006): 170.

¹⁵ Polin: Museum of the History of Jewish Pole, "Jedwabne: timeline of remembrance," *Polin: Museum of the History of Jewish Poles*, July 10, 2016.

The contestation started well before the new memorial was set up in 2001, with Gross' book, in particular, creating profound divisions across Poland, shattering a national narrative that revolved around a double victimhood at the hands of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and a wider martyrology ingrained in the history of Poland since its 18th-century partitions. The book created urgency among Poland's political and cultural elites to come to terms with its revelations, and, before the installation of the new monument in July 2001, Polish President Aleksandr Kwaśniewski apologised for the involvement of Polish people in the Jedwabne Pogrom:

We can have no doubt that here in Jedwabne, Polish citizens were killed at the hands of fellow citizens ... For this crime, we should beg for forgiveness from the souls of the dead and their families. This is why today, as both a citizen and president of the republic of Poland, I apologise I apologise in my own name, and in the name of those Poles whose conscience is shattered by that crime.¹⁶

His questioning of Poland's enduring self-representation as a victim of totalitarianism – both Soviet and Nazi – gave rise to the accusation of 'stoning the Polish nation.'¹⁷ Politicians from the right and centre-right refused to come to the commemoration ceremony in Jedwabne, and a separate ceremony took place in Warsaw, sponsored by the Prime Minister.¹⁸ Former Polish President Lech Walesa, who had been a leading figure of the trade union *Solidarność* in the 1980s, declared on the radio in the aftermath of the apology:

The Jedwabne crime was a revenge for the cooperation of the Jewish community with the Soviet occupant. The Poles have already apologised many times to the Jews; we are waiting for the apology from the other side because many Jews were scoundrels.¹⁹

On July 9th, 2002, one year after the new memorial was inaugurated, IPN released the findings of its investigation, confirming that at least 340 Jews had been killed in the 1941 pogrom.²⁰ The authors of it assessed Soviet SKVD documents, the accounts of Polish witnesses deported to the USSR, Jewish survivor accounts as well as police investigations and trial records.²¹ Responsibility for the crime was established at two levels: *sensu stricto*, the perpetrators were forty Polish male inhabitants of Jedwabne; *sensu largo*, the crime had been facilitated because of the German presence and passiveness on that day. The chief prosecutor, Radosław J. Ignatiew, was blamed by the League of



Figure 2: "View of the Memorial" Image by Fczarnowski CC BY-SA 3.0

¹⁶ Kate Connolly, "Poland says sorry for slaughter of Jews," *Guardian*, July 11, 2001.

¹⁷ Ewa Ochman, *Post-communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Alvin Rosenfeld, "Facing Jedwabne," *American Jewish Committee*, May 24, 2012.

²⁰ Radosław Ignatiew, "Postanowienie," *Institute of National Remembrance*, June 30, 2003.

²¹ Anna Cienciala, "The Jedwabne Massacre: Update and Review," *Polish Review* 48, no. 1 (2003): 52-63.

Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*, a Polish conservative party) for being a 'servant of the Jews.'²² In an opinion poll taken after the conclusion of the IPN investigation and following the president's apology, half of all respondents were unable to say who they thought had committed the massacre.²³

Collective Remembrance and Unsettled Memory

In subsequent years, the divisions in the public sphere were reflected by divisions within the historical profession. In 2004, journalist Anna Bikont published *My z Jedwabnego* (The Crime and the Silence), explored the role of collective memory and continuous silence in wiping out the massacre. In 2005, however, Polish historian Marek Chodakiewicz published a response to Jan Gross' *Neighbours* titled *The Massacre of Jedwabne*, which was accused of upholding 'a view of the Polish past which seeks to return to an untenable vision of modern Poland as solely victim and hero.'²⁴ In particular, he insisted that the 'few willing Polish collaborators included *Volksdeutsche* (Polish citizens of German origin) and petty criminals.'²⁵ According to historian Johanna B. Michlic, *Jedwabne* encapsulates the tension between a critical and a defensive approach to Polish history, namely that: 'the national debate about Neighbors and the *Jedwabne* massacre can be seen as a reflection of the process of democratisation of Poland's political and social life after 1989.'²⁶

Jedwabne also acted as a catalyst in challenging national historical narratives as the IPN investigation uncovered further pogroms in the Białystok region, widening the scale of Poles' involvement in Jewish deaths – before, during, and even after the German occupation. The *Jedwabne* controversy was seen as a huge shift in Poland's historical consciousness, with the idea of the war generation being just victims but also bystanders and even perpetrators.²⁷ But when in 2011, ten years after the initial apology, the new Polish President Bronisław Komorowski apologised again on behalf of Poland, vocal anti-Semitic sentiments were triggered once more among a still-divided public. In August 2011, the memorial site was vandalised with swastikas and the words 'I'm not sorry for *Jedwabne*' and 'they were flammable.'²⁸ As time passed, local remembrance and reconciliation initiatives were undermined by state-sanctioned commemorations: '[The] interference from the "outside"—in this case by groups holding political power, the media and intellectual elites—is detrimental to local remembering.'²⁹

Present-day inhabitants of *Jedwabne* and its surroundings still struggle to comprehend the conflicting voices surrounding their shared history and feel that contemporary acts of remembering need to be rethought in order to be relevant to all past and present inhabitants of the town, including the descendants and relatives of the victims of the pogrom.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Joanna Michlic, "Letter to the Editor," *History* 93, no. 309 (2008): 154–158.

²⁵ Peter Stachura, "Review: The Massacre in *Jedwabne*, 10 July 1941: Before, During, and After," *History*, 92 no. 306 (2007): 276–277.

²⁶ Joanna Michlic, *Coming to Terms with the 'Dark Past': The Polish Debate about the *Jedwabne* Massacre* (Jerusalem: Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, 2002)

²⁷ Ewa Ochman, *Post-communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 88.

²⁸ Steven Hendrix, "Poland wants to outlaw blaming Poles for Nazi atrocities. But what about the *Jedwabne* massacre?" *Washington Post*, February 6, 2018.

²⁹ Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, "Collective Remembrance in *Jedwabne*: Unsettled Memory of World War II in Post-communist Poland," *History and Memory*, 18, no. 1 (2006): 152–178.

And despite the initial steps taken by the previous Polish government, recent political shifts following the rise of the ruling 'Law and Justice' party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS*) have shifted the historical narrative governing Polish involvement in the Holocaust. One of the nationalist-conservative government's most famous catchphrases was 'Down with the pedagogy of shame,' and subsequently, prosecutors launched a libel inquiry against Jan Gross in October 2015 (eventually dropped in 2019).³⁰ Education Minister Anna Zalewska, speaking in 2016, around the anniversary of killings, dismissed the idea of Poles burning Jews in a barn as a 'matter of opinion.'³¹ In February 2018, Polish lawmakers passed legislation that curbed certain speech that implicated Poles in the Holocaust, citing the need to 'protect Poland's and the Polish people's good name.'³² Backlash from Israel, the United States, and the European Union, however, forced the government to backtrack by removing potential prison sentences as a form of punishment and turning it from a criminal into a civil offence. Despite the watering down of the law, however, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki believes 'those who say that Poland may be responsible for the crimes of World War II deserve jail terms. But we operate in an international context, and we take that into account.'³³ The Centre for Research on Prejudice at Warsaw University found that the overall levels of anti-Semitic sentiment have not increased in Poland over recent years, but that these sentiments have become much more public, especially in online forums.³⁴

Decision-Making Processes

Different stakeholders have been involved in the decision-making process surrounding the Jedwabne memorial:

- The Polish Government under the leadership of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1995-2005) and Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek.
- The Polish Institute for National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), lead by chief prosecutor, Radosław J. Ignatiew.
- Jedwabne mayor Krzysztof Godlewski, who supported the investigation and commemoration of the massacre – and resigned in August 2001 in protest at the local council's refusal to found a new road to the site.

There was a lack of consultation of the local community, both in terms of the residents of Jedwabne and of the descendants and relatives of the victims. The subsequent tensions surrounding the memorial, such as the absence of most of the town's residents at the 2001 unveiling, indicates a lack of focus on the ongoing impact of both the massacre and the shift in collective memory at a local level. Jedwabne has become a precedent across Poland in the adoption of a critical approach to a

³⁰ Steven Hendrix, "Poland wants to outlaw blaming Poles for Nazi atrocities. But what about the Jedwabne massacre?" *Washington Post*, February 6, 2018.

³¹ United States Holocaust Museum, "Museum Concerned Over Polish Education Minister's Remarks on Jedwabne Pogrom," *Press Release*, July 20, 2016.

³² Madeline Roache and Olivia Waxman, "World War II in Europe Ended 75 Years Ago—But the World Is Still Fighting Over Who Gets to Say What Happened," *Time*, May 8, 2020.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman, "Collective Remembrance in Jedwabne: Unsettled Memory of World War II in Post-communist Poland," *History and Memory*, 18, no. 1 (2006): 152-178.

shared historical narrative, and the construction of the memorial was based on extensive historical research by academics and institutions. However, the absence of a collaborative approach suggests that the history of the massacre, and the lived memory of it, are symptomatic of a wider process across Polish society.

The new government has reduced the amount of time devoted to the teaching of the Holocaust in the history curriculum. It also insists that museums such as the Jewish History Museum (POLIN) in Warsaw and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, famous for offering no single and simplified historical narratives, place a focus instead on the positive role played by Catholic Poles. In Jedwabne itself, Anna Bikont found that Gross' book *Neighbors*, as well as her own book (*The Crime and the Silence*), were absent in the high school's library. She speaks of how difficult the monument itself is to find, being on the edge of the town, at the end of a dirt track. The plaque of honour was removed from near the monument after the resignation of the mayor Krzysztof Godlewski – while in the central square of Jedwabne, where in July 1941 Jewish inhabitants were lined up and beaten, there is now a monument which commemorates Poles deported to Siberia during the war. It seems therefore clear that Jedwabne is an undeniable case of an unsuccessful memory project, highlighting the need for a 'more diverse approach to inquiry into local communities' work of remembrance.³⁵

Finally, as previously stated, a 2018 Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance criminalised false public statements that ascribe to the Polish nation collective responsibility in Holocaust-related crimes, crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, or war crimes. The legislation was controversial and was rewritten jointly by Poland and Israel a few months later, but it could durably undermine further initiatives of collective remembrance surrounding Jedwabne.

Summary and Conclusions

The case of the Jedwabne memorial and the uncovering of Poland's tabooed past created a precedent in the Polish public sphere and remains a site of contested memory. As more sites of pogroms and massacres have been uncovered, as well as the evidence that Poles, as well as Germans (and other groups), were responsible for the death of Jewish people, the subsequent sense of guilt has taken two directions. Initially, and primarily among the intellectual classes, it led to a renewed appreciation of the Jewish past within Poland's history and a heightened interest in Jewish culture and heritage. The creation of new museums and curatorial decisions have also helped imbricate Jewish presence within a Polish national identity. However, on a local scale, little progress has been made, and only very few accept Polish involvement. Furthermore, developments since 2015 have led to a reframing of the historical narrative around a postwar mono-ethnic and mono-religious nation, and a government-led 'competitive victimisation' with Polish Jews is, unfortunately, being carried out.

Research contributed by Olivia Durand

³⁵ Ibid.

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In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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