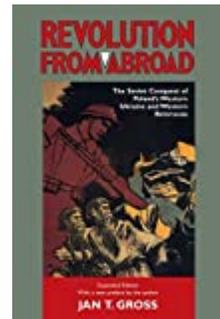




Jan T. Gross. *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. xxiv + 396 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-09603-2.



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Occupation by a Spoiler State: The Soviet Takeover of Eastern Poland (1939-1941)

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According to the Polish national anthem, “Poland is not dead whilst we live. What others took by force, with the sword will be taken back” (“Jeszcze Polska nie zginiała poki my żyjemy, co nam obca przemoc wzięła, szabla odbierzemy”). Both Nazi and Soviet occupiers must have taken these words to heart as they set out thoroughly to crush the Polish population between September 1939 and June 1941. In *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (expanded edition), Jan T. Gross draws on documents from Polish, German, Israeli, and U.S. archives to show with camera-like precision how Polish citizens at the grassroots level experienced the Soviet occupation of Poland and the mechanisms Soviet authorities used to induce their participation. A professor of politics and European studies at New York University, Gross has written several books, most recently *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001). U.S. citizens who have never known the horrors of foreign occupation will find *Revolution from Abroad* especially

sobering. Originally published in 1988, its conclusions are sound and—with the exception, perhaps, of numbers of deportees—not starkly contradicted by documents discovered in archives after the book's publication.

Revolution from Abroad consists of 274 pages of actual text, plus endnotes, extensive bibliography, list of abbreviations, separate name and subject indices, and twelve illustrations (war-time posters unearthed in the archives). Divided temporally into two key parts (“seizure” and “confinements”), the book's six chapters address distinct thematic aspects of the Soviet occupation experience. Chapter 1 (“Conquest”) discusses such topics as the Polish frontier defense corps' reaction to the Soviet campaign against Poland in September 1939, the initial hostilities, the formation of the Citizens' Guard, the ragtag mien of the Red Army soldiers, the violence perpetrated by Ukrainians and Belorussians against Poles in the eastern territories before the actual Red Army occupation, and Soviet propaganda campaigns before September 1939 (resulting in a sometimes friendly reception at first among the population). Since the Polish armed forces had been stationed on the western front by mid-

September, the Soviet invasion took them completely by surprise. They could not organize any resistance. Indeed the Polish supreme commander actually issued orders not to fight the Red Army (p. 17). The Soviet takeover was thus relatively simple. For a cost of fewer than 3,000 casualties (737 deaths), the Russians acquired in a mere two-week period 200,000 square kilometers, 13.5 million new citizens, and 250,000 prisoners of war (p. 17).

Chapter 2 (“Elections”) deals with the elections carried out in the eastern territories in the first six months of occupation (in October 1939 and March 1940). Since the clandestine 1939 Soviet-German treaties make it clear that full incorporation of the Soviets’ partition of Poland was decided well in advance, one wonders why elections were even necessary. Gross explains that Soviet leaders worried that Hitler might arrange yet another Pax Germanica, so they felt the need to “legitimize” their hold over the territory through bogus elections.

Chapters 3 (“The Paradigm of Social Control”) and 4 (“Socialization”) move beyond the period immediately following the Soviet invasion to concentrate on the various mechanisms by which the Soviets imposed a specifically Soviet international order. Chapter 4 explores the socialization of the youth, since—as Gross explains—a special place was given to the youth in the blueprint of communist revolution (p. xxiii). He intended this chapter to serve as a “steppingstone in the analysis from the process of subjugation to that of social control” (p. xxiii).

Chapter 5 (“Prisons”) is an especially painful chapter to read, detailing as it does the massive arrests, overcrowding of prisons, conditions of detention, interrogations in the middle of the night, use of torture, deaths (either from torture or suicide) and escapes into insanity while in prison, evacuations, and executions.

Chapter 6 (“Deportations”) is a useful analysis of deportations and resettlements—an often neglected topic, compared to the more conspicuous forms of persecution enumerated above. Gross provides estimates of the numbers of deportees and outlines the varieties of resettlement, registration of refugees, and house searches.

In the epilogue (“The Spoiler State”), Gross attempts to highlight his findings regarding the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia by “putting it in the context of the Nazi occupation of Poland.” Which regime—Soviet or Nazi—inflicted more suffering on the populations? Both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had divided Poland into nearly equal halves, and comparisons of the two oppressive regimes must have figured

prominently in the minds of citizens who were debating whether to flee, across the river Bug and San? Realizing that this is an ambitious exercise, Gross offers several caveats. He does not intend to present a “full-fledged comparative analysis” in this book, and he limits the comparison to the period before the Holocaust. He concludes that the Soviet Union inflicted more suffering for reasons explained below.

The final section of *Revolution from Abroad*, which distinguishes this expanded edition from the original edition published in 1988, is entitled “Historiographical Supplement: A Tangled Web.” Here Gross raises a serious, but long neglected, topic: Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.

Gross piques the reader’s interest, particularly in the first chapter, by stating that the Soviet occupiers seemed less “oppressive” to the Polish and Jewish citizens at first. The Russians lacked the Nazis’ “discriminatory contempt” and “Uebermensch airs” (p. 230). The author explains that perhaps one reason why the Soviet army seemed less oppressive at first is that it claimed to “liberate” Poland. Generally, the population was confused about Soviet intentions, and indeed, “nobody had warned the local community and the authorities that a Bolshevik invasion was possible and what to do in case it occurred” (p. 22). The deceptive slogans of national liberation soothed millions of wishful-thinking Polish citizens—Jews, Ukrainians, Belorussians—who “could meet fellow ethnics” in the Red Army or the Soviet administration (p. 230). Moreover, a quasi civil war broke out: ethnic Ukrainians and Belorussians versus Poles. The Red Army had cleverly proliferated leaflets beforehand, urging the former ethnic groups in eastern Poland to “rectify the wrongs they had suffered during twenty years of Polish rule” (p. 35). One popular slogan was “Poliakam, panam, sobakam—sobachaia smert’!” (To Poles, landowners, and dogs—a dog’s death!).

The stark contrast between soldiers in the Wehrmacht and those in the Red Army—the latter in coats of assorted lengths, with rags wrapped around their shoeless feet—also made the Soviet occupiers seem less intimidating, Gross explains. One reason for the Red Army’s cloddish image is the febrile rapaciousness with which the soldiers bought and consumed Polish goods. Expecting to hear discussions of lofty communist ideals, Poles instead saw “in the marketplace how these Soviet people ate eggs, shell and all, horseradish, beets, and other produce. Country women rolled with laughter” (p. 46). In a restaurant “a Red Army soldier might order several

courses or a dozen pastries and eat them all on the spot” (p. 46).

This massive buying spree was itself a public relations campaign. According to one source, Red Army soldiers received as much as three months’ salary in advance with instructions to bestow it generously among the Polish villagers (pp. 28-9). In this way Poles would see that life is good in Russia. Soldiers mouthed the platitude *u nas vsyo est* (“We have everything”) to nonplussed villagers watching them devour common foodstuffs. In comparison to Nazi Germany, then, the Soviet Union struck the Poles at first as a petty and materialistic “spoiler state.”

But not for long. The Soviet occupiers proved themselves masters in psychological manipulation. As they established control, they proudly bruted about the aphorism, “There are three categories of people in the Soviet Union: those who have been in jail, those who are in jail, and those who will be in jail” (p. 230). So gripped by fear were the inhabitants that some even begged to be arrested, just to end the prolonged suspense. Many reported feeling relieved when they were finally arrested “as if the threat, being realized, was removed” (p. 144). The NKVD could track individuals with radar-like accuracy. Gross recounts stories of men who, when forewarned that they might be arrested, fled to far-away towns for months. When they returned to their homes just for one night to collect their belongings and bid farewell to their families before crossing the border, the NKVD arrested them on the spot (p. 148). Poles dubbed the dreaded NKVD “Nie wiadomo Kiedy Wroce do Domu” (“impossible to tell when I will return home”).

NKVD officials were also adept at exploiting the evil in human nature. As one interviewee wrote, “Whoever had a grudge against someone else, an old feud, who had a grain of salt in his eye—he had a stage to show his skills, there was a cocked ear, willing to listen. Posters encouraged people to bring denunciations” (p. 120).

Thus, despite the Red Army’s unkempt appearance, the Soviet occupiers proved to be—according to Gross—greater victimizers than the Nazis. He argues that, in sheer numbers, more human beings (regardless of ethnic background—Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, etc.) suffered under Soviet occupation between September 1939 and June 1941 (i.e., before the Holocaust began) than under German occupation. By suffering, Gross refers to loss of life, deportation, forced resettlement, and material losses through confiscation and fiscal measures (p. 226). Whereas the Germans killed approximately 120,000 Poles and Jews combined (100,000 Jews

and 20,889 Poles) in the first two years of occupation, the Soviet security police (NKVD) nearly “matched that figure in just two episodes of mass execution” (viz., the mass murder of Polish prisoners of war in the spring of 1940, and the evacuation of prisons in the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia during June and July 1941) (p. 228). Gross does not compare the total numbers of Poles and Jews killed in Poland during the entire six-year period, 1939-1945. The final historiographical essay (“A Tangled Web”) was no doubt inspired by Gross’s research for *Neighbors*, an absorbing book published a year before *Revolution from Abroad* about the entire destruction (save seven people) of the Jewish population in the small Polish town Jedwabne. The historiographical essay deals with Polish-Jewish relations during and after World War II (all the way up to 1947). Unfortunately, while intriguing, it muddies this otherwise excellent book about the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941. Here Gross addresses the problem of anti-Semitism that prevailed in Poland during the war and even after O=wi=cim (Auschwitz) was revealed in all its horror (p. 248). He also raises the thorny question, Why didn’t more Polish citizens try to help the Polish Jews? To be sure, one faced severe penalties—torture and execution, often in front of one’s own family members. However, ignorance persists among Poles today about the ultimate fate of Polish Jews, he points out. Gross cites an opinion poll in which Poles were asked who suffered and died more, the Poles or Jews, during World War II? About 30 percent thought it was roughly equal. “Over half of the Polish society does not know that Polish Jews were wiped out during the Holocaust,” he writes (p. 242).

Apart from the fact that this subject is wholly irrelevant in this book, Gross also does not acknowledge other points of view. In an earlier published book not listed in his bibliography, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation, 1939-1944*, Richard C. Lukas claims that “anti-semitism was less a factor in Polish-Jewish wartime relations than the reality of the Nazi terror, which was so overwhelming that the opportunities to assist the Jews were more limited in Poland than anywhere else in occupied Europe” (p. 121). Lukas also believes that the three million Jews were “unassimilated,” exacerbating the task of saving them. Moreover, Lukas writes that Poland lost 22 percent of its total population during the six years of war, or 6,028,000 people, and that “about 50 percent of these victims were Polish Christians and 50 percent were Polish Jews” (p. 39).

Gross himself observes that “the destruction of European Jewry is forever linked to any mention of Nazi

behavior during World War II” (p. 226). He ignores his own word of caution by tacking on this historiographical essay about Poles and Jews, since he risks confusing the reader about the argument he makes earlier in the epilogue. There he states that, in the 1939-1941 period alone, Soviet-inflicted suffering on all citizens in Poland exceeded that of Nazi-inflicted suffering on all citizens. That discussion had nothing to do with Poles versus Jews. In any case, genocide is genocide; it seems rather pointless to debate whose genocide was worse in a purely numerical sense. To his credit, the debate is in no way central to the book.

Gross has taken advantage of valuable collections housed at the Hoover Institution of individuals’ handwritten accounts of their experiences living under Soviet occupation in Poland. In the original preface of the book, he explains that he let the availability of documents shape his study, sometimes at the risk of analytical unity. He excluded some topics that should have been covered—the experiences of citizens of other nationalities, for example—because of scanty data (p. xxiv). Appropriately entitled *Revolution from Abroad*, the book can more accurately be described as an account of the imposition of the Soviet regime, rather than a complete history of the period.

This book, in short, makes an important contribution to a growing body of archive-based literature about Soviet interventions, occupations of countries once in the Warsaw Pact, and the ignorance of the populations in these countries of their countries’ Nazi pasts. The Soviet-imposed myth about “communist heroes of resistance” enabled them for decades to avoid the painful questions faced long ago by other Western countries, West Germany in particular. For a recent comparison of East and West Germans on this issue, see Feivel Kupferberg’s *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2002). While there are several books in Polish about the Soviet occupation (1939-1941), few exist in English. Books about the Polish and Jewish experience under German occupation, or the exclusively Jewish experience under Soviet occupation, appear to be more common. See Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles under German Occupation, 1939-1944* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986) and Dov Levin’s *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939-1941* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995). For the effects of the occupation on children, see Irena Grudzenska-Gross and Jan T. Gross, *War through Children’s Eyes: The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939-1941* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1985).

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