

No Title Possible

by [Samuel Hux](#) (October 2022)



The Soldier (Der Soldat), Christian Rohlfs, 1914

God help me if I should ever agree with Adolf Hitler. I mean it now since it is no longer an "if." God help me. When Adolf Hitler justified his foreign policies by insisting that Germans needed more space to expand—the famous policy of *Lebensraum* (Living Room)—he never looked west toward France and the low-countries like Belgium and The Netherlands, nor north to Scandinavia, nor south to Italy, Spain, or even the Balkans ... but specifically to the east. But not even all the east. Czechoslovakia's Bohemian and Moravian lands already had a considerable German minority population, especially in the mostly German population in the Czech Sudetenland, and cities like Prague already had a rather Teutonic or rather semi-Teutonic culture: think of artists like the Jew (how ironic) Franz Kafka or recall that Sigmund Freud grew up "Germanic" in Moravia. No. Hitler looked specifically to Poland and The Soviet Union. Why? Not only because there was a plenitude of *Raum there*—but because these purest of the eastern Slavs were—he was sure—most suitable to serve as slaves. And as offensive as it is to say so, Hitler was if not exactly right not precisely wrong either.

Might as well admit to myself an irony which would have pleased Hitler, although he was not responsible for it; only History was. The most civilized areas of the Slavic world were those with the strongest German cultural influence: those which had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire like Bohemia and Moravia; while the southern Slav Serbs and Croats seemed eager to kill one another, Slovenia could thank God for its being proximate to Austria: although German is little spoken there now, the cultural influence remains. Since *Deutschland* became the Third Reich it has become hard to appreciate what a cultural blessing greater *Germania* was for so long.

I have been reading two books both of which alternately depress me and elevate my spirits—the depression more

persistent however than the elevation. Jane Rogoyska's *Surviving Katyn* and Jan Gross's *Neighbors*.

Nothing is comparable with the Nazi Holocaust, but if there was a second worst World War II crime, it has to be the murder of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war in the Katyn Forest in Russia the summer of 1940 during the dual invasion of Poland by Germany and The Soviet Union. The USSR insisted the Poles were killed by German captors and the Americans and British pragmatically bought that story, although the timeline made it impossible since the Katyn was controlled by the Russians and the Germans got that far into the USSR only after Hitler later betrayed his pal Stalin. Now there is no doubt that "Katyn" was a Soviet crime ordered by Josef Stalin and orchestrated by Lavrenty Beria's NKVD—and Rogoyska tells and analyzes the story from beginning to end most admirably and in excruciating detail. The only elevation of spirit the reader can experience is when he or she is moved to tragic admiration of the victims painfully occasioned by the reader's contempt for the bestiality of the Russian murderers. Think of 22,000 soldiers and officers, with that officer corps including career professionals and, as well, reservists representing lawyers, artists, intellectuals, the cream of Polish society ... chosen by Stalin to suffer thus *because they were the cream!* I confess I cannot help but associate the officers with the fictional protagonist of Alan Furst's novel *The Polish Officer* for his nobility, as well as the soldier and diplomat Jan Karski, who brought details of the events in occupied Poland to the West. I want to emphasize early the existence of a real "cream of Polish society."

Consider what might seem a digression: During World War II there were roughly 425,000 German POWs incarcerated in the United States in 700 POW camps. A late friend of mine named Sam Hinkle, who bred race horses in Kentucky, served in the army as a guard in a camp in Louisiana (I recall it was), and I remember an afternoon when he entertained a young me with

his recollections. If you do the mathematics, such a POW camp might hold 607 Wehrmacht veterans. I proposed to him that afternoon—remembering my bloodthirsty feeling toward the Krauts when a kid during the war—“Sam, did you ever wish to shoot the bastards?” (Allow me quotation marks for a reconstructed conversation). “Not at all. I felt sorry for them, so far from home. And in fact, they seemed happy to be prisoners and out of the war.” The devil in me spoke, long before I had even heard of Katyn: “You were in the army, Sam; suppose the order had come down from on high: ‘Shoot them all!’” Sam laughed and said, “Never! We would not have obeyed such an order.” Precisely. Impossible to imagine. There was, I know, an event during the Battle of the Bulge when U.S. soldiers, still burned by the heat of battle, gunned down 80 captured German soldiers. But 607 POWs in a camp? Never. Question: are we better than the Russians? Answer: yes.

Of course not all Russians were NKVD, as not all Russians now are KGB (successor to NKVD). But how was the NKVD possible? Was it possible because this is possible?: There may be a so-far ineradicable cruelty in the heart of the Russian soul, coming from I know not where. My ambiguity about the source should not encourage a counter-argument. I can't explain the humor in the heart of the Irish soul, but there it is. I realize of course how offensive to some the notion of national character is, potentially suggestive of a semi-racism so to speak. But I have spent considerable time in England, Spain, France, and Germany, and I do not need a map to remember where I am—and I am not sure it would make much difference if I were deaf.

But suppose this speculation is nonsense, although I do not think it is. The cruelty of Russian soldiers in Ukraine is stunning ... even though it is not unexpected that common soldiers—keep images for instance from Bucha in mind—should behave as if they were NKVD agents from 80-odd years ago. But a better guess is that what is buried in the Russian soul is a

certain slavishness. I avoid playing games with the incidental similarity of *slave* and *Slav* in English and *Sklave* and *Slawe* in German ... and even *esclavo* and *eslavo* in Spanish, (I know no Russian but I know there is no similarity.)

Considering the broad sweep of European history from the time that freedom was an actualizable concept and not just a utopian dream, there has been no *important* (!) western nation that has not had “three minutes” of real and experience-able *liberté* except Russia. Great Britain, the Scandinavian nations, the Low Countries, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Austria-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Germany—excuse me if your place of origin has been slighted. Russia? Maybe “two minutes.” The Czars followed by Lenin, Stalin, and then the various Stalinoids. The Gorbachev-Yeltsin promise lasted about 120 seconds before the succession of Putin the KGB professional. The question is not have the Russians ever had a real and functioning Liberty. The question is: have they ever seriously wanted it? Mikhail Gorbachev does not strike me as your typical Russian, no more than Prince Peter Kropotkin back in Lenin’s day. If you have no inbred desire for freedom you might as well be called a slave by nature.

Before turning the page, one more outrageous suggestion: Given the not atypical Russian behavior in the Katyn Forest, if the Germans had not committed The Holocaust, if they had behaved in all other military respects as they did, History would tell us, setting aside the Asian and Pacific war, that our ally the Soviets were equally as vicious as the Germans in the European war, and perhaps just a bit more. But set aside the Russians for a while. Before he could reach the Soviet Union for *Lebensraum* Hitler would have to conquer *die Sklaven* in Poland.

Jan Gross must be the most unpopular historian in Poland over the last 20 years since he first published *Neighbors*, now reissued in the 2022 edition by Princeton University Press. Actually Gross has not lived “in Poland” for many years. A native Pole he is now Professor of History Emeritus at

Princeton as well as Norman B. Tomlinson '16 and '48 Professor Emeritus of War and Society: a most distinguished scholar. The subtitle of his most famous book is *The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. While the book depresses, it also—as promised—elevates the spirit. Here's the elevation.

Karolcia Sapetowa was the Christian maid to a Jewish family in the village of Wadowice near the town of Jedwabne, "our family" she calls it in a deposition now on record in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. After the family was forced to a ghetto, Karolcia kept in touch as best she could. And by an accident (or the grace of God?), she had two of her very young Jewish charges in her care when the mother and a slightly older boy were unexpectedly rounded up never to be seen again. Karolcia protected the two, boy and girl, at the expense of danger to herself quite simply because she loved them as she long had. She secreted them in her modest home, fearful that the Germans would find them. But her neighbors were the greater danger: they feared that the children put *them* in danger. Probably too late to turn them in, thus confessing the hiding of Jews, the neighbors were willing to kill them if Karolcia was not. Although young the children were wise enough to know the score: "*Karolciu, don't kill us yet today. Not yet today.*" I'll let Karolcia Sapetowa tell the rest of the story. "*I felt that I was getting numb, and I decided that I would not give up the children at any price. I got a brilliant idea. I put the children on a cart, and I told everybody that I was taking them out to drown them. I rode around the entire village, and everybody saw me and they believed, and when night came I returned with the children ...*" The children survived. Jan Gross adds: "And we are left with a frightening realization that the population of a little village near Cracow sighed with relief only after the inhabitants were persuaded that one of their neighbors had murdered two small Jewish children."

A single brutal and cowardly Polish village? Of course not. The subject town of Jedwabne approached 3,000 citizens Gentile and Jewish. With SS approval, but without SS insistence or support, on July 10, 1941, the mayor and his city council led a pogrom in which 1600 Jews, male, female, and children, were murdered in every way imaginable, including decapitation. Those escaping a "personal" (so to speak!) killing were herded into a barn which was then set afire. Seven Jews survived the pogrom to bear witness. The decapitation, by the way, was the fate of a local beauty named Gitele Nadolny, her head kicked around like a football.

How does one explain such savagery? The problem is that explanation involves giving reasons why—and *reason* cannot easily be disassociated from *rationality*. There have been attempts—analyzed and dismissed by Gross—to "explain" that Jedwabne had been occupied by Russia in 1939 before the Germans arrived in 1941 and Jews had been welcoming of the Russians given the possibility of German occupation, but there does not seem in Gross's judgment to be very much to it. Even had there been, how could that be a reasonable explanation for the pogrom without seeming and being a crass justification? One's final judgment has to be that the Jedwabne pogrom was a horror beyond any normal definition of *horror*! And Jedwabne was not the only scene, just that with the most victims. Recall the Karolcia Sapetowa story and others in Gross's book. Before Gross's *Neighbors* there was much more known about a pogrom on July 4, 1946, when a Polish mob welcomed Jews back from The Holocaust by murdering 42 Jews in the town of Kielce. 1946!

The German of Goethe and Schiller is a beautiful language although Hitler tried to reduce it to "*Juden heraus!*" (Jews out of here!). True, it can look sometimes ridiculous when a word is a lengthy compound. But some compounds sound like music to my ear. Such as *Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung*: "coming to terms with the past." The Germans have not gotten full

credit for their brave attempt to do just that. I don't know how to say it in Polish, and I would not be surprised if it cannot be said in Polish. But in spite of the efforts of Poles like Jan Gross (half Gentile, half Jewish, by the way), *coming to terms with the past* has not been broadly a Polish habit, not with respect to antisemitism at any rate.

Next step. The cream of a society do not necessarily set the tone for the rest of a society. Close to home: if I try to imagine a collective figure compounded of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary, the unfortunately-late Saul Bellow and John McCain, Merrill Streep, Chief Justice John Roberts, and my spouse—to keep it imaginable—they or it would not represent the character of the United States of America. And so the cream of Polish society did not and does or do not represent the character of Poland past or present. The Jedwabne pogrom—much like the Kielce version, I would imagine—was the work of peasants and—Gross uses the term more than once—*lumpenproletariat*, their work not encouraged by but also not interfered with by parish priests. Here is an inescapable conclusion, no way around it:

Poland, in so far as the nation was not controlled by its betters but by its dregs, was an antisemitic place *before* the war, violently so *during* the war, and as Kielce more than “suggests” still so *after* the war. And in so far as Jan Gross's book is still an unaccepted embarrassment, especially when the national government is under the leadership of nationalist parties, Polish has no easy translation of *Vorgangheitsbewaeltigung*.

Before Hitler could have reached Russia for *Lebensraum*, he'd have had to conquer the Polish *Sklaven*. If a nation is not characterized by an inbred love of freedom, you might as well call that nation slaves merely lucky when history provides it otherwise. But here is a great irony, which not everyone perhaps will accept:

There are more than a single kind of slavery. There is (1) enforced slavery, as in chattel slavery or the result of conquest by an overpowering and demanding enemy. There is (2) embraced slavery, a choice. The latter involves a lack of guts, a cowardice not recognized as such. *Antisemites are cowards, who, however, do not reveal themselves by physically or obviously cowering. But they are afraid to the extreme.*

The antisemite who thinks Jews are all about money and are good at it is afraid of "the Jew" not because he thinks Jews have money that should belong to him but because he fears that the Jew's ability to make it means that he has no ability and is thereby a lesser being. The antisemite who thinks Jews are so smart or too smart fears that "Jewish superiority" means "Gentile inferiority" and is enraged that "Jews are thereby putting him down." To add to these processes ... given the observable fact that both Russian Orthodoxy and Polish Roman Catholicism have, or at least had, a long history of anti-Judaism with the popular and endorsed tradition at least among the local clergy (the Poles not Italians while the Russian Orthodox as bad as the Greek) of the Jew as Christ-Killer, then you have not a polite antisemitism but a lethal variety.

I find it surprising that as the 20th century began Jews were safer and more welcome in the Ottoman Empire than elsewhere. But perhaps Muslims, or Muslim leaders at least, were *civilized in those days*, a far cry from now.

The great irony that I mentioned three paragraphs back is that the *Sklavenmoral* (slave morality) that Hitler thought the possession of the eastern Slavs that made Poland and the Soviet Union the proper region for German *Lebensraum* was embodied in the violent antisemitism of which Nazism was a secular version. God is an ironist.

Should I title these reflections? "How Hitler's Choice of Poland and the Soviet Union as Prospective Living Space for German Expansion Made Some Sense While Being at The Same Time

Unbearably Ironic." I prefer my title-less title.

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