

Book Review

Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga. Polska 1944-1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, [The Great Fear. A Popular Reaction to Crisis], 700 pages, Warsaw: Znak 2012.

Wielka trwoga [The Great Fear], published in 2012 by Znak, an eminent Polish scholarly publishing house, forms an important contribution to the still growing field of the history of emotions from which Polish historiography has thus far been almost absent. Since 2008, this gap has been gradually filled by the work of Professor Marcin Zaremba, sociologist and historian from the school of Marcin Kula, leading Polish expert of modern history. Zaremba's articles on the emotional aftermaths of the Second World War in Communist Poland, published in prominent local historical journals, focused mostly on various aspects of fear. The scholar's further thorough investigation of this intriguing social phenomenon lead to the elucidating work which is the subject of this review.

Wielka trwoga is, to some extent, an answer to the much debated scholarly oeuvre of Jan T. Gross. This sociologist has described the treatment of the Polish-Jewish community by its non-Jewish Polish neighbours, the memory of which was 'frozen' during the Communist period. Gross claims that anti-Jewish persecutions which occurred in a mixed Polish-Jewish society during and after the Second World War resulted from a deeply ingrained anti-Semitism prevalent in Catholic-Polish society. Zaremba, on the other hand, revises this thesis by pointing at elements that lie beyond the xenophobic background of pogroms and the robbery of the Jewish community. Apart from anti-Semitic sentiment, which indeed played a role, the criminal behavior of the inhabitants of Polish cities and the countryside was a consequence of living under constant threat during the German, and later Soviet, dominations, which brought about the loosening of moral norms and an increased focus on sheer survival.

According to Zaremba, the consequences of war were utter psychological exhaustion and civilizational regression caused by the dreadful and dehumanizing years of living in the "bloodlands" (a term introduced into modern historical discourse by Timothy Snyder). Using a sociological and psychological methodology, Zaremba shows a spectacular and depressing panorama of anxieties and threats that overwhelmed the post-war society. In my view, it seems

that where Gross may be too one-dimensional in his analysis, Zaremba might subscribe to a mildly teleological post-Communist Polish scholarly tradition of seeing WWII as the great breaking point in Polish-Jewish relations, whereas reality was more complicated.

With his book, the author reveals the commonness and acuteness of the fear the Poles felt of the Red Army (responsible for mass rapes and requisitions of all valuable goods), of demoralized war veterans and deserters, and of the plague of plundering and banditry. He also proves how deeply the fear of hunger and concerns resulting from the new socio-political order and collectivization were ingrained in postwar Polish society. Additionally, in his study Zaremba presents the way fear was augmented and reinforced by the propaganda, which played into the postwar phobias regarding hunger, poverty, looting, as well as the ones regarding the Germans, Ukrainians and Jews. Although Zaremba's book is focused on peoples' reactions to this wide panorama of fears, the author pays relatively little attention to the ways in which fear was transmitted. With this, he leaves room for further research into "agents of fear" (who were interested in extending, developing and manipulating this emotion), as well as into propaganda means and techniques that enabled their manipulations.

However pessimistic this picture of the emotional condition of the Poles after the war, as presented by Zaremba, his study awards too little space to the also existing feeling of enthusiasm and joy following the conclusion of the war. In my view, one of the few flaws in Zaremba's study is the author's overly pessimistic vision of post-war Poland, which should be balanced out by the more optimistic observations of the same period made, for instance, by Jerzy Jedlicki¹ and Hanna Świda-Zięba². Whereas Jedlicki, one of the most prominent Polish researchers dealing with the history of ideas, postulates a general analytical tactic of including both positive and negative factors constituting the emotional shape of a society, the sociologist Świda-Zięba states in her study on Polish youth during first postwar years that the strategy of the Communist government was aimed at involving all Poles in the process of enthusiastic reconstruction of the destroyed society. In contrast to the work of these two scholars, Zaremba, while being focused on various shades of fear, seems to marginalize the vital fact that significant parts of Polish post-war society, despite their disappointment, fear and bitterness, felt deep relief following the end of the war and wanted desperately to believe in class equality and the accompanying rebuilding of society. This general optimism, as well as their use of tactics of fear, allowed the Communists to rule.

¹ J. Jedlicki, *Powojenne lęki Polaków i Żydów. Strachy polskie* [Post-war Anxieties of Poles and Jews. Polish Fears], "Polityka", 08.09.2012.

² H. Świda-Zięba, *Urwany lot. Pokolenie młodzieży powojennej w świetle listów i pamiętników z lat 1945-48* [An Aborted Flight. The Generation of Post-War Youth in the Light of Letters and Memoirs 1945-1948], Kraków 2003.

Marcin Zaremba edited an excellent study on fear in postwar Poland. It offers a vital and innovative insight into the emotional background of historical events during a period when a new social and political European order was being shaped. To a large extent, this book corresponds with Keith Lowe's *Savage Continent*³, an impressive essay analyzing the phenomenon investigated by Zaremba on a more pan-European level. Both authors show that the need for survival under the pressure of an everyday fear of losing one's life during and after the Second World War deprived people of their dignity and redefined their moral code. Important as these studies might be, however, when analysing them one should definitely bear in mind the conclusions offered by other scholars such as Jedlicki and Świda-Zięba.

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³ K. Lowe, *Savage Continent. Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, New York, 2012.