

however, was followed by recovery and development that was stopped again by the 2008–9 economic crisis.

The often-catastrophic economic trend described in the book was accompanied by a tragic demographic crisis. This region experienced the worst population decline in peacetime: it lost about 18 million people, or about 6 percent of its population since 1990. This was caused by mass out-migration, sharp decline of fertility, and dramatic increase of mortality. In the worst affected countries such as Russia, mortality increased by more than 53 percent. Some countries, such as Bulgaria, lost one-fifth of its population. Life expectancy, however, during state-socialism spectacularly increased to 68 years in Russia, 71–72 in Bulgaria and Albania and the Višegrad countries neared the western level. The bumpy road of transformation damaged societies as well. Changing values and norms and extreme corruption shocked society. Social cohesion was undermined. Lost security generated nostalgia for state-socialism. On the other hand, it created the social base for right-wing populist autocratic regimes in Russia and other countries of the region.

After these impressive and excellent analyses, the authors blame the mistaken shock therapy for the unnecessary economic and social pains and dangerous political consequences of transformation. This political conclusion of the analysis is questionable. They often return to the comparison with the rather different Chinese transformation, where reform of communism happened without decline and social suffering, and hundreds of thousands of people were elevated from poverty.

Although one may praise the complexity of the book, the basic shortcoming is still a missing factor of analysis: history. This huge post-communist area exhibits major differences in the historical background of its sub-regions: the Balkans were under Ottoman suppression for more than four hundred years; central Europe belonged to the modernizing Habsburg empire for four hundred years; Russia and most of the other parts of the later Soviet empire were under Mongol occupation for centuries and then under an Asian type of tsarist dictatorship. The Baltic countries, though part of the Soviet Union before independence, were during their long history connected to the German Hansa cities and, for centuries, to Scandinavian countries. Several of the countries of the region never experienced anything other than dictatorial regimes. History matters.

Russia, Serbia, and even Hungary were unable to “return” to democracy because it never existed there. And that makes the Chinese comparison also problematic. Despite avoiding shock therapy, transitional decline, and suffering, the political outcome of transformation in China was rather like the one in Russia: a harsh dictatorial system. The explanation of political developments based only on the mistakes and difficulties of the transformation after 1989 in central and eastern Europe is wrong. Estonia, a former Soviet republic, exhibited one of the most successful transformations. Nowadays it is getting integrated into the Nordic countries and becoming more Scandinavian than east European. Lacking a historical approach, the authors missed an important explanatory factor of post-communist political development of the region.

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The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland. By Andrew Kornbluth. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021. ix, 332 pp. Notes. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$45.00, hard bound.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2022.251

Andrew Kornbluth's *The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland* is a major contribution to the history of postwar war crimes trials and the politics

of memory. It is a powerful account of postwar justice—and injustice—in Soviet-occupied Poland (and the Polish People's Republic), which tells an important story about the manipulation of history to serve a Polish nationalist agenda.

From 1944 to 1956, Poland tried more than 32,000 individuals for war crimes in keeping with the August Decree of 1944 (“On the Punishment of Fascist-Hitlerite Criminals. . . as well as of Traitors to the Polish Nation”). The book examines the mechanics of these trials (carried out initially by Special Courts convened expressly for this purpose), the details of the case records, and how the active participation of Poles in the murder of Jews was ultimately covered up.

Kornbluth reminds us that Polish nationalism and antisemitism went hand in hand in pre-war Poland, with the Polish government speaking of a “Jewish problem” that could only be “solved” with “the voluntary emigration of all Jews” (13). Then came the war, with the invasion, occupation, and partition of Poland. The Nazis confined Poland's Jews to ghettos before deporting them to death camps. The majority of Jews who remained (some 160,000–250,000 people) escaped to the countryside, where they found themselves at the mercy of the Polish peasantry. What ensued was the often-enthusiastic participation of the Polish population in what Kornbluth calls “the remaining workaday business of genocide” (47).

Kornbluth also reminds us that the actions of Poles toward their Jewish neighbors during and after World War II has been a subject of contention in Poland since the 2000 publication of Jan Gross's *Neighbors*, which documented the massacre of Jews by Poles in the town of Jedwabne. More recently, Poland's Institute of National Remembrance has actively worked to suppress any information that challenges the heroic narrative of Polish resistance to Nazism. In 2018, the Polish government made it a crime to attribute “to the Polish Nation or Polish state. . . co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich” (1).

The case files for the August Trials, available since the early 2000s and a key focus of Kornbluth's book, paint a brutal picture of co-responsibility between German occupiers and Polish communities for the murder of Jews. They show that Polish crimes against Jews were “German-inspired” but “locally directed” (18). Entire communities took a coordinated part in the detention, transport, and murder of Jews, motivated by “a mixture of racial hatred and greed” (77). The Blue Police (the Polish police in German-occupied Poland) executed Jews with “little oversight or instructions from the Germans” (66). The Polish Underground, known for its heroic acts of anti-German resistance, “also killed Jews, massacring them in groups or picking them off individually” (77). The Catholic Church remained silent, acquiescing in these crimes.

Given the mass of evidence in the case files, why were so many Poles given light sentences for their crimes against Jews—or let off the hook entirely? This is a primary question Kornbluth asks in his study. He looks to the judges and the witnesses, and their motivations, for answers. The professional judges in the August cases, many of whom had been part of Poland's prewar judiciary, viewed the mandatory death sentences for murder, capture, and blackmail as an attack on their independence and pushed back. The lay judges (there were two assigned with one professional judge to every case) and the Polish witnesses frequently viewed even the most horrible crimes against the Jews “through the prism of the perpetrator” (118). Witnesses blamed Jewish victims “for carelessness or passivity” (140). Polish defendants were said to have acted “under duress, performing the bare minimum required of them by the occupier” (140).

Everyone, Kornbluth argues, wanted to deflect attention away from Polish involvement in the ethnic cleansing of Jews. Everyone except the Jews, of course. And there were too few of them left in Poland after the war to make a difference.

The role of the Soviet-influenced Polish government in all this is one of the most interesting parts of the story. Kornbluth argues that the Polish government was dissatisfied with the leniency of the verdicts in these cases, but that its response was shaped by its goal of maintaining power. The new state's "weakness, lack of popularity, and dependence on prewar technocrats" (104) greatly limited its room to act. Rather than risk further alienating the ethnically Polish population (the overwhelming majority), it conspired in the cover-up of Polish responsibility for the murder of Jews. The heroic narrative about Polish resistance during World War II became a part "of the compact between the communist state and citizens" (227). Poles could be martyrs and heroes, but not perpetrators of genocide.

Kornbluth's book deserves a wide readership. Its information and insights about the Holocaust in Poland will be of interest to historians, students, and general readers. Its details about the August Trials and the Polish judiciary make it an invaluable resource for scholars of European and international law. Its discussion of memory laws and the politics of history could not be more timely—and gives us much to think about in the current political environment.

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Reassessing Communism: Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland, 1944–1989.

Ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mrozik, and Grzegorz Wołowiec. Central European University Press: Budapest, 2021. vii, 418 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$105.00, hard bound.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2022.252

This book stems from a seven-year project at the Centre for Cultural and Literary Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences on "Communism—History of the Concept in Poland in the Years 1944–1989." Thirteen participants, a majority of them women, challenge the post-communist political claim that everything in the previous period was evil. They seek a perspective for communist studies of central and eastern Europe wider than the "neoliberal" consensus—particularly prominent in Poland—that the whole project was doomed to fail. Instead, they reconstruct and critically dissect the period through cultural studies, discourse analysis, and memory studies. Political power is analyzed from a "Foucauldian approach" according to which inherited tradition is "gradually transformed under the influence of new currents or sentiments" (7).

Though lasting less than two generations, Polish "communism"—a word not used by the political authorities—had dramatically different stages. The editor Katarzyna Chmielewska focusses on the Stalinist years. Though often equated simply with totalitarian violence, as an era of terror, lawlessness, and repression, or more recently as a transgression of the official national-Catholic paradigm, Stalinism is shown to have varied functions. Beyond the defeat of fascism and recovery of western territories, post-war communism was presented as the heir to European humanism and culture and dressed in the patriotic language of liberation and national independence. The author emphasizes progressive (or "disruptive") policies in which traditional "high-low" and "rural-urban" hierarchies were replaced by a new official consensus, based on reconciliation, community, and "equalization" of status.

A key element of the "proletarian turn" from late 1948 was women's liberation. As Agnieszka Mrozik shows, this involved the professional training of women and their promotion into professional positions. It also gave women a greater place in public