

Krzysztof Bielawski, *The Destruction of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland*, translated by Richard Bialy, Boston, 2024, Academic Studies Press, 9 + 248 pp.; series Polish Studies

Krzysztof Bielawski traces the history of the human-made destruction of Jewish cemeteries in Poland from the period of Nazi occupation through to the twenty-first century. He investigates the fate of those sites in both large cities and small towns and villages, meticulously identifying state, institutional, and private actors involved in the process, as well as the wide range of forms that

this destruction has taken. This volume is the English translation of a Polish book first published in 2020.¹

Reviewers² of the Polish edition have praised the richness and diversity of the sources the author drew on. Bielawski uses not only materials from central and local archives concerning the fate of Jewish cemeteries across present-day Poland, but also the Archive of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw – the longest-functioning Jewish scholarly institution in the country. He further draws on doctoral and master’s theses on the subject. In addition, he incorporates materials gathered through his own fieldwork, including interviews, testimonies, correspondence, and photographs. Reviewers have also singled out for special recognition his detailed discussion of the legal provisions governing Jewish cemeteries throughout the period under review. Furthermore, the author brings together information on the subject, dispersed across the existing literature concerning studies on cemeteries, the national and local histories of the Shoah, and Jewish heritage in Poland, drawing on works from various periods. As a result, Bielawski’s book constitutes the first comprehensive monograph explicitly devoted to the destruction of Jewish cemeteries located in Poland.

The book consists of eight chapters, a conclusion, and an index of places and names. The opening chapters of the book address the nuanced definitions of Jewish cemeteries, their constituent elements, and the religious laws governing them across various Jewish traditions. They also provide a brief history of Jewish cemeteries and the relevant state legislation before 1939, beginning with the eighteenth century. The following chapter examines the fate and administration of Jewish cemeteries during the period 1933–45. Here, the chronological frame of the Second World War is extended back to Hitler’s rise to power in order to include cemeteries that, after the war, were located within the borders of Poland but had previously belonged to the territories of the Third Reich. The author emphasises that many Jewish cemeteries survived the pre-war antisemitic actions of the Nazis, since burial sites were less frequently targeted than synagogues or Jewish communities themselves. The destruction of Jewish cemeteries was particularly severe in occupied Poland. It entailed deliberate humiliation and physical violence, including the use of Jewish forced labour by the German occupiers. Cemeteries became sites of both individual and mass murder of Jews, as well as of grave desecration, the destruction and looting of tombstones – frequently repurposed for road construction and other building works – together with levelling and

¹ Krzysztof Bielawski, *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich* (Warszawa, 2020).

² Tadeusz Zieliński, ‘Krzysztof Bielawski, *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich...*, Biblioteka „Więzi” tom 359, Warszawa 2020, ss. 276’, *Przegląd Prawa Wyznaniowego*, xiii (2020), 399–402; Anna M. Rosner, ‘Recenzje’, *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 1 (2021), 301–28.

agricultural use. At the same time, the destruction of Jewish cemeteries also resulted from the actions of the local population. As the author notes, “[s]ome residents of various nationalities, including Poles and Germans” (p. 62), looted cemetery elements and repurposed them as building materials (stone, wood, metal), while others plundered graves and desecrated human remains in search of valuables.

The next chapter examines the post-war history of Jewish cemeteries, first in the Polish People’s Republic under communist rule, and later in democratic Poland after 1989. It clearly demonstrates that attributing the destruction of Jewish cemeteries solely to the Nazis during the war – a view still widespread in contemporary Poland – is a misconception. The book meticulously shows that neither the destruction imposed by the state’s actions and laws, nor that carried out by the local population, ceased after 1945. Legislation regulating cemeteries of all denominations, together with laws concerning property rights imposed by the communist authorities, resulted in neglect, closure, or reappropriation of Jewish cemeteries and their elements (as well as sites of executions and mass graves of Shoah victims) for practical purposes. These actions were frequently undertaken regardless of Jewish religious law and, in many cases, with no respect for human remains. Jewish cemeteries and their elements continued to be used as sources of building materials (including soil mixed with human remains), as construction sites for public-use facilities, or as crop fields. The state simultaneously restricted the legal status and capacity of Jewish organisations to undertake genuine protective measures. At the same time, in the post-war social consciousness of the Polish population, Jewish cemeteries were frequently regarded as “no man’s land” or foreign spaces. This perception encouraged individuals to engage in similar practices, such as the arbitrary adaptation of cemetery sites as grazing land. Although motivated by different reasons, such actions nonetheless mirrored those of the state and displayed the same disregard for traditions and for the dignity of the deceased.

The 1990s brought, on the one hand, legislation aimed at restoring communal rights in post-communist Poland (1997), together with a growing recognition of the value of Jewish heritage and the establishment of both domestic and international institutions dedicated to its protection and restoration. On the other hand, Jewish cemeteries often became the subject of conflicts of interest in the context of public and private investment within a capitalist economy. These challenges were exacerbated by persistent social perceptions of Jewish cemeteries as abandoned spaces suitable for secular use. During the 1990s, further issues arose from the reluctance or lack of resources to recover desecrated elements, such as tombstones (*matzevot*) repurposed as building materials. Finally, the sheer scale of the destruction and appropriation of Jewish cemeteries over time posed a serious difficulty in itself.

The three concluding chapters focus on Polish and Jewish perceptions, attitudes, and initiatives in relation to the long history of the destruction of Jewish cemeteries in Poland. One chapter explores Polish responses to this destruction during the period under study. It describes attempts by individuals to prevent the damage or reclaim these sites, often undertaken in hostile political and social circumstances, as well as artistic and cultural initiatives to honour Jewish heritage in Poland. At the same time, the author highlights the persistence of indifference – stemming from the conviction that Jewish cemeteries did not hold the same rights or status as other burial places – alongside the presence of antisemitic resentment in post-war Poland. The remaining two chapters address the Jewish perspective. They examine Jewish reactions to the destruction of cemeteries during and after the war, emphasising its profound traumatic impact on Polish Jews. They also discuss Jewish initiatives to protect and reclaim cemeteries, detailing a wide range of both private and institutional efforts in this regard.

The richness of the author's source base and his ambition to explore the subject in depth are clearly evident in the book's structure. Each chapter begins with an account of the historical background and the legislation in force at the time that influenced Jewish cemeteries. This introduction is followed by detailed descriptions of various forms of destruction of specific Jewish cemeteries, enriched with photographs and personal testimonies. Each case study includes a list of places where analogous actions took place, among them: Warszawa, Łódź, Kraków, Białystok, Sochaczew, Międzyrzec Podlaski, Sieniawa, Ułanów, Żyrardów, Supraśl, Przeworsk, Kunowice, Kleczew, and Gąbin. The study presents 470 localities altogether. Additionally, each specific example is accompanied by identification – in most cases by name – of individual and institutional actors involved: perpetrators, victims, and witnesses alike.

It is also worth noting that this monograph covers the fate of Jewish cemeteries within the territory of present-day Poland. The chapters, arranged in chronological order, provide an overview of their history while also addressing cemeteries which, although now situated within Poland's contemporary borders, were historically located in the territories of other states. In this way, the book offers readers unfamiliar with Polish history a clearer understanding of the subject in its historical context.

Another striking feature of the book is the author's nuanced understanding of what should be regarded as the destruction of Jewish cemeteries, both in material terms and in relation to Jewish religious tradition. Throughout the book, Bielawski examines a wide array of such instances, including – but not limited to – destruction resulting from military operations, legal and practical actions of the state, archaeological interventions, and the participation of the local non-Jewish population. He also considers less obvious causes, such as the actions undertaken by Jews themselves in their attempts to survive the Holocaust during the Second World War. The breadth and depth of Bielawski's

work become further evident in his recognition of destruction not only as a material phenomenon but also as a symbolic one, especially in the eyes of Jews confronted with instances of destruction and desecration of cemeteries across Poland at various points in the history he covers.

Bielawski provides a measured and balanced account of the phenomenon, combining meticulous illustrations of the many aspects of the destruction of Jewish cemeteries with meta-analysis of the socio-political circumstances and possible motivations behind it. At the same time, he conveys the daunting persistence and scale of the destruction throughout the period under review, while also acknowledging changes over time and the varying degrees of success in attempts to counter these actions. Additionally, the author conscientiously highlights the cultural context surrounding the destruction of Jewish cemeteries in the Polish milieu, presents both Polish and Jewish perspectives on the subject, and debunks myths surrounding this phenomenon in Polish collective memory. For this reason, an English translation of Bielawski's comprehensive and multifaceted historical monograph is particularly valuable for readers outside the Polish cultural context.

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