

The Trouble with History

Morality, Revolution, and Counterrevolution

By Adam Michnik. Edited by Irena Grudzińska Gross. New Haven: Yale University Press (yalebooks.com), 2014. 194 pages. Bibliography. ISBN 978-0-300-18597-3. Hardbound.

John M. Grondelski

It has been generally accepted that the nineteenth-century German philosophy of history was greatly influenced by Hegel's dialectics and Fichte's triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. A historical trend (thesis) is reversed or countermanded (antithesis), and then a new direction emerges incorporating the antithetical element (synthesis) and guided by *Geist* (Spirit).

Adam Michnik tries to square this dialectical triad. In his interpretation of history, a trend is first reversed by revolution (antithesis) and then challenged by counterrevolution seeking to restore the *ancien régime*. For Michnik, historical events are always challenged by revolutionary destruction and then followed by destructive counterrevolutionary efforts to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. One always faces Jacobins and Ultras, polar radicals each convinced of their "purity" and intent on discarding the half loaf of political compromise that each opposes. Michnik divides his book into two parts. The second applies his philosophy of history to the French Revolution. The first, further divided into two chapters, ponders the role of morality in politics. One chapter treats Willy Brandt and Poland, the other contemporary Polish politics.

Concerning the French Revolution, Michnik sees Louis XVI as having come to an accommodation, both moral and pragmatic, with reality: he has accepted progress from an absolute monarchy toward a constitutional one. That political half loaf generated two counterreactions: the Jacobin, intent on washing away every last vestige of what it deemed a corrupt past, including monarchy itself, regardless of how much blood it took; and the Ultra, intent in the post-Napoleonic era on

turning the clock back before July 14, 1789, in order to restore the wonderful world of the past.

Michnik's ruminations on Willy Brandt focus on two moments: 1970 and 1981 (and onward). He applauds the 1970 Brandt, joining morality to politics by pursuing *Ostpolitik* while kneeling in the Warsaw Ghetto. He criticizes the 1981 Brandt who, as a leader of the free Western European Left, seemed incapable of speaking out for human rights in martial-law Poland, presumably for fear of destabilizing the situation there although showing no such reticence in other corners of the world.

Chapter 2 appears to be the center of the book and it proffers Michnik's unshakeable beliefs. For Michnik, Poland's communist regime is the Jacobins intent on effacing the old Poland, regardless of the amount of blood it would take. Those who question the order brokered by the 1989 Roundtable are the Ultras, purveyors of "nationalist-conservative rhetoric" (46) that treats history as a "baseball bat used to whack those who think differently" (49) and selectively read the past to shed a partial and therefore false light on it.

Michnik seems to suggest that Poland's golden Solidarity heritage is threatened by those who question what he deems the moral, pragmatic, and realistic compromise reached in 1989. However, another interpretation of those events, applying Ockham's razor (i.e., the simplest explanation) rather than a rejiggered nineteenth century German idealism, is that back in 1989 one part of the Left made a deal with another. It is therefore possible to contend that deal was self-serving, and that the subsequent reckoning with the past (e.g., through open access to the available records, including those of the secret police) has been partial, limited, and thus inimical to the open and robust transparency prerequisite to democratic participation. In other words, Michnik may be doing that of which he accuses his opponents. After all, what *ancien régime* are the critics of the outcomes of the 1989 Roundtable order supposedly seeking to restore?

Summing up, Michnik offers an interpretation, but readers should be aware of an alternate—and less dialectical—reading of the events.