

**Gabriel N. Finder, Alexander V. Prusin**

***Justice behind the Iron Curtain:  
Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland***

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407 pp.

When I was studying for my doctoral dissertation about the war crimes trials in Romania, I came across the name of Alexander Victor Prusin. The conclusions he reaches, when analysing the trials that took place in the Soviet Union, helped me understand the similarities with the trials that took place in Romania, in 1945-1946. There are many common elements between the courts of the former communist states, a detail that I underlined many years ago, but it was Prusin's systematic work in this direction, also proved in this present study, which changed the tone of my comparison. As the authors warn us from the beginning, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain* examines "Poland's role in prosecuting Nazi German criminals during the first decade and a half of the post-war era".

For the first time, two scholars approach in a book, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, the judicial post-war confrontation from communist Poland with the legacy of the Nazi occupation, succeeding to offer a valuable contribution to the scholarship on the history of war crimes prosecution.

The authors put together their knowledge of history and law to seek answers to questions about the post-war trials in Poland. Alexander V. Prusin was a professor of history at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, where he taught for seventeen years, while Gabriel N. Finder is associate professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures and Director of Jewish Studies at the University of Virginia, but he also practiced law in the past, before embarking on an academic career. As I mentioned previously, Prusin had revealing contributions on the subject of prosecuting Nazi crimes in the Soviet Union and Poland, and his experience (partially shared with Finder in the past) in various archives (those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Institute of National Remembrance in Poland – but, in fact, many others, given that the two archives are collectors of sources from various archival funds of many countries) shaped the answers to the question whether the justice practised in Poland in the first decade and a half after the Second World War, regarding war criminals, met the

expectations of an equitable act of justice.<sup>1</sup> Prusin died in 2018, just when this book was going to press, so, due to these tragic circumstances, the book is also a tribute to Prusin's memory.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to add here that both authors are the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and victims.

No other European country was hit by war as Poland was. Between 1939 and 1945, 17 percent (six million) of its pre-war population perished, of whom the Germans liquidated approximately 5.5 million Polish citizens, including 3 million Jews. But the retributive justice was also appropriate: "Poland was more persistent than any of the other Soviet satellites in pursuing Nazi criminals and investigating Nazi crimes" (*Introduction*). For such enormous national tragedies as the massive killing of Polish civilians, the liquidation of Polish POWs, the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia, the Warsaw uprising, the suppression of Polish Jewish communities, etc., the Polish courts convicted about 17,000 individuals for war crimes between 1944 and 1956 (one-third of those people, some 5,500 – were German or Austrian nationals or German ethnics). As Poland was occupied by the Red Army, which rejected the Polish government in exile and imposed its favorable government, the trials against war criminals were conducted simultaneously with political trials of opponents of the communist power. One of the most important conclusions of the book shows the way in which the trials against war criminals were organised, in contrast with the Stalinist trials: they were led by professional magistrates and lawyers who followed the "conventional legal and moral standards comparable to those found in contemporary trials of Nazis in the West, including the Nuremberg trials" (*Introduction*). However, the number of those convicted of war crimes was significantly lower than the number of those convicted of political crimes and imprisoned after 1944 (statistics from the Lublin region, from 1944-1954, show that the ratio was about 100 to 1).

Divided into six chapters (plus an introduction and an epilogue), the book covers the period 1944-1959 as follows: *chapter one* discusses the initiatives of Polish leaders, during the Second World War, to pursue Nazi criminals and the first trials set up between 1944 and 1947; *chapter two* explains the role of the Polish delegation to the Nuremberg trials; *chapter three* investigates the establishment and activity of Poland's Supreme National Tribunal, the instance especially designed to prosecute major Nazi criminals and collaborators in 1946-1948; *chapter four* follows

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Victor Prusin, "Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!" The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945 – February 1946', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 17, 1 (2003): 1-30; also: 'Poland's Nuremberg: The Seven Court Cases of the Supreme National Tribunal, 1946-1948', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2010): 1-25. The authors wrote together 'Jewish Collaborators on Trial in Poland, 1944-1956', in *Making Holocaust Memory* (Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, vol. 20), eds. Gabriel N. Finder, Natalia Aleksun, Antony Polonsky, and Jan Schwarz (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 123-48.

<sup>2</sup> Beilinson, Orel, 'Alexander Prusin (1955-2018)', *Slavic Review*, 77(3) / 2018: 870-1.