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The memory of World War II in Poland

Polish memory of World War II has returned with force. German–Polish relations are overshadowed by the perception of Germany's contrition — or lack thereof — for wartime damages, with Polish commentators warning that a process of reinterpretation of wartime memory is underway in Germany. Anti–Russian feelings are also widespread and strengthened through Russia's refusal to make even a symbolic gesture of wartime reparation. Polish–Ukrainian antipathy over the Volhynia massacres is still alive though in decline thanks to efforts of politicians and academics. But the biggest problem in the Polish concept of history is Poles' wartime relationship to Jews, namely the suffering inflicted upon Jews by Poles themselves. It's time to wake up to the notion that suffering experienced does not negate suffering inflicted, writes Krzysztof Ruchniewicz.

A nation's perception of its own history affects relationships not only within its boundaries, but also those with other peoples. Memory of World War II is of particular importance in this sense. Memories of this period remain vivid for the more than 20 per cent of Poles who experienced it personally, as well as for all the others who learned about it through the accounts of family members. "The ever palpable results of World War II have led us inexorably to thinking and speaking about it for all the years since," wrote World War II historian Tomasz Szarota in 1996.

To forget this period is to hinder the process of socialization of which not only schools, but also families, various organizations, and even the army are a part. Educational and training programmes place a special emphasis on the World War II period and on the occupation. Events and individuals connected to the war are ubiquitous, whether on TV, on the radio, or in printed media. The theme remains an important element in literature and science, in film, theatre, and fine arts. Not to mention the fact that political elements constantly instrumentalize it. Probably no other country marks anniversaries related to the events of World War II so often and so ceremoniously.¹

Szarota stresses the importance of public commemoration of the wartime struggle and suffering: memorial events held on the streets, in churches, and cemeteries.

On these anniversaries, such sites of national commemorations are *infused with life*: they are turned back into an element of *living* history. Flowers, burning candles, white and red flags — they turn our thoughts to the past. Anyone who was not at Warsaw's Powazki Military Cemetery on All Saints' Day,² is

not in a position to understand what it means to live for history.³

In 1965, 1977 and 1988, college graduates were asked what events in Poland's thousand-year history they considered most praiseworthy. Poland's struggles during World War II always topped the list. And it would be no different today. As a poll has shown, most Poles still have a very emotional connection to those events. It is important to note that there is no difference between the generations in this respect. Younger and older Poles take a similar stance: 73 per cent declare that memory of World War II is alive and that it should be remembered.⁴ That the percentage is so high is due in part to the special meaning the war holds for Poles. In general, Poles emphasize the fact that Poland was the first country to stand up to Hitler; that Poland did not produce any "quislings"; that their country developed both a powerful resistance movement and a full underground government; and that Poles bore the greatest loss of life, per capita. According to a survey from 1994, when asked to name the most important events of World War II, Poles placed the defence of Warsaw in 1939 and the battle of Monte Cassino in 1944 (in which Polish divisions participated) above the battle of Stalingrad and the landing of the Allies in Normandy. In his evaluation, T. Szarota confirms that this does not demonstrate the importance of the war experience for today's Poles, but rather their delusions of grandeur and their search for relief from the complexes that they have developed as a result of these events. "The immensity of one's own suffering blocks out the suffering of other peoples," writes Szarota.

This emphasis on their own martyrdom grew in intensity after 1989, when people began to speak openly about the Soviet repressions in eastern Poland following the invasion of the Soviet Union on 17 September 1939. In the popular estimation, the suffering of the Polish people caused by the war became even greater: more names of martyrs and execution sites were added. But wartime pride was mixed with bitterness about the senselessness of the sacrifice, the dimensions and political impact of which were revealed in their entirety only after the war. This, on the other hand, fits perfectly with the cult of defeat and the pride in moral victory, where there is no victory in the military or political sense. It seems that ceremonies marking the sixtieth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising in 2004 flow into the same stream. Poles observe with some satisfaction how both representatives of Germany and the former anti-Hitler coalition now pay homage to either their former enemies or to allies that were left in the lurch. All that is lacking is the presence of the Russian president or his special emissary.

Memory of the war also has a decisive influence on relationships with other national groups. In the People's Republic of Poland, the starting point for discussion of such questions was inauspicious. There was a compulsory, official point of view of German-Polish and Polish-Soviet relations. Both relations were loaded with taboos. In the attitude of Poles to Germans, the emphasis was on the enmity of the western neighbour, an enmity confirmed by the overall experience of war. One could even venture to suggest that Poles had no need to undertake a re-evaluation of this stance, that they did not see the purpose of such a transformation.

Today, there is the oft-cited, famous 1965 letter from Polish bishops to their German counterparts; in it, one finds the line: "We forgive and ask for forgiveness." But this line went way beyond the mood and convictions of Polish society at the time. At any rate, such a discussion could only unfold in conditions of full freedom of expression; in other words, only after the political

change in 1989 was historical research able to proceed unimpeded. In the process, any considerations of the occupation of Polish territory by Hitler Germany were practically swept aside. It seemed as if the subject had worn out its welcome. Whereas in the 1990s, the problem of the postwar expulsion of the German population and their treatment at the hands of the victors was dealt with at great length, as was the relationship of Poles to the German cultural legacy in the former German regions attached to Poland in 1949. One must note that many Polish historians bravely took up this issue. The result of their work already encompasses a large number of articles and monographs. The Polish press, too, was very interested in the problem, which led to further broadening of academic knowledge and also offered ordinary citizens the opportunity to go on the record. At the same time, Poles living in the former German areas developed a strong interest in the history leading up to 1945. Here, too, there is an extensive list of scholarly and popular publications, of local initiatives focusing on "German history". One may well say that there has been a transformation and enrichment of the historical picture and that it has become an important element of a developing local identity of residents of western and northern Poland.

Still, memory of the war against Germany has returned with force in recent years, in reaction to the activities of certain organizations that draw Germans who left Poland. The Poles — recognizing that the expulsion of ethnic Germans after the war was an injustice perpetrated against these people — demand that these events be placed in the historical context of the epoch. And part of that context is the genocide committed by the Germans, the deportation of Poles and Jews, and the economic exploitation of the occupied regions. For many Poles it seemed obvious that some Germans wanted to settle accounts from a war that Poles had neither initiated nor desired. Some political commentators and pundits in Poland have raised the alarm that a dangerous process of reinterpretation of memory is underway in Germany and that the Polish view of the war, especially when it comes to Polish victims and losses, no longer exists in the minds of Germans. For some time now, commemoration of Polish victims of the tragedy has been eclipsed by the tragedy of the Holocaust, and in recent years, also by commemoration of the German victims of the war, who have been clamouring for public attention: victims of the Allied bombardments and those who fled or were driven out of the liberated eastern countries. There were loud complaints that the Polish side had failed to use the 1990s to show the Germans and European society in general — not merely the politicians visiting Warsaw — just how much Poland lost as a result of Nazi policy.

The tendency of Germans to confuse the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 with the major, bloody and destructive battles that broke out a year later in the entire city was fundamentally demeaning to Poles. For Poles, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is the central point on the map of their collective conscience. That memory rode out the negative communist propaganda during the period of the People's Republic of Poland and survived the course of time. This position was significantly strengthened in 2004, during ceremonies marking the sixtieth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. With great satisfaction, Poland went all out in its efforts to awaken interest in the history of the uprising in other countries as well. They paid careful attention to speeches by foreign politicians, particularly the words of then-Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schröder. British historian Norman Davies earned points with Poles, because he wrote a book about the uprising that was translated into many languages, including German.⁵ The Warsaw Uprising represents an important element in their self-perception as victims — victims not only of the

Germans, but also of the Russians, whom they charged with passively standing by as their city fell. To this day, the uprising also represents the apathy of the western powers, their readiness to sacrifice weaker allies on the altar of good relations with the USSR. Many Poles see the final phase of the war as reflecting its previous history and first phase, which they consider to be the result of a collaboration of two enemies — the Third Reich and the USSR — on one hand, and the passivity of Poland's western allies on the other. But in general, Poles do not believe that most Germans wish to avoid responsibility for World War II. The Polish majority considers rapprochement and reconciliation with Germans to be both possible and necessary if Poland wants to function within a united Europe. But Poland's interest in German responses to the proposals of the Association of Expellees, or Germany's reactions to the ceremonies marking the Warsaw Uprising, show Poles' desire for true empathy from its neighbours and for education about the Polish historical experience. Especially because their neighbours — above all the former expellees — want the same empathy for themselves.

In the case of Polish–Soviet relations, during the period of the People's Republic of Poland there was a clear difference between the official historical record on one hand, and personal experience as well as collective memory on the other. Although Polish political powers and the average citizen agreed on some points when it came to their anti–German orientation, the conflict between the official and private approach continues unchanged. The propaganda of the "Polish–Soviet friendship" as an explanation for the relationship between the two countries from 1944 was seen as lies. The Soviet continuation of tsarist Russian policy toward Poland was clearly anchored in the Polish consciousness. Poles did not accept the thesis promulgated in communist schoolbooks that their country owed its independence to the October Revolution and that they had picked up the Bolshevik idea of the people's revolution. Poles could cite many instances in Polish–Soviet relations where the Kremlin took a hostile view of the Polish yearning for independence. This relates not only to events during World War II, but also to the Polish–Russian war of 1920. Commemoration of this period picked up steam after the fall of communism. The anniversary of the Battle of Warsaw in 1920, during which the Tukhachevski Offensive was put down, is an official holiday for the Polish military and falls on a day of great significance for Catholics — Assumption Day — which gives it an additional sacred meaning.

Undoubtedly, anti–Russian feelings and fears are not rare in Poland. And they are strengthened through Russia's refusal to make even a symbolic gesture of reparation for the suffering of Poles during the Stalinist period. Fears of Russian "imperialism" are a living part of the Polish approach to its powerful neighbour; here, one still senses the influence of the period of the division of Poland. As far as the Polish public was concerned, Moscow did not adequately condemn the mass murders in Katyn — the killing of Polish prisoners of war in 1940. The contributions of presidents Gorbachev and Yeltsin in this matter were greatly appreciated, but Russia's last word on this is incomprehensible to Poles. The unfortunate official statement by the Russian Foreign Minister regarding the results of the Yalta conference, which supposedly put Poland in a position to build an independent state, was discussed at length and with great agitation. It is hard to imagine that, regarding the painful events of shared history, President Putin could express himself as former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder did. In no way do discussions on this theme in Poland arise from a need to question the achievements of Soviet soldiers in liberating Poland from German occupation — except in extreme cases. Despite fears openly expressed in the 1990s in Russia, there was never any neglect or even

desecration of Soviet war graves in Poland. But Poles today want Russian recognition of the fact that the courage of Soviet soldiers and the political goals of Stalin are two different matters.

Additionally, it must be stressed that Polish losses on the Eastern Front — both human and territorial losses — are a closed chapter for the Poles, despite the pain they cause to Polish society. To some extent the communists themselves contributed to this, by suppressing memory of the lost territories over several decades. Even during the period of deep political-economic crisis in 1956, the security apparatus of the State made a statement that amounted to suggesting that the Polish eastern border must be revised. Such statements did not recur. Poland's new borders, and its national homogeneity, were quickly accepted by most of society. During the communist period, an idealized memory of the Polish eastern territories — in which the economic backwardness and the conflict between Poles and national minorities were completely obscured — was cultivated only within the family circles of people who had come from those eastern regions, as a kind of private tradition. In the first year after lifting of censorship, one could observe a great popular interest in this problem. By now, however, interest has shrunk again to the circles of veterans' organizations and of those who came from those regions. Only very controversial events, such as the reconstruction of the Polish soldiers' cemetery in Lviv, managed to draw the attention of a larger segment of society to this problem. Some Polish opinion polls contend that Poland's new westward orientation — to some extent a direct result of communist and post-war Polish geo-politics, and currently even stronger due to Poland's entrance into the EU — could more quickly obliterate awareness of the earlier history of the eastern regions among many Poles. This would be paradoxical; and a very swift departure from the centuries-old connections that Poland had with these regions.

Polish memory of the east is also marked by a feeling among many Poles of superiority over Russians and other eastern Slavic peoples. The stereotype held by those same people of the so-called "Polish nobleman" may upset Poles, but somehow it also tickles their vanity and their sense of being somewhat superior. This also influences the relationship of many Poles to Ukrainians. The negative image of Ukrainians is partially determined through tragic historical experiences: a barbarous, mutinous character, an outlaw with a knife between his teeth, a murderer from the Ukrainian liberation army of the last war. One can see just how strong such stereotypes were and are, through the local conflicts that broke out in the 1990s in southeast Poland, revolving not only around historical but also current issues — such as religion, as in the dispute about the Dome church in Przemysl. The commemorations in 2003 marking the sixtieth anniversary of the mass murder of Poles in the Volhynia region (Ukraine)⁶ made it clear — despite the efforts of politicians and historians on both sides — that memory of these events still divides the two peoples painfully.

A further problematic issue turns out to be the question of the renovation of the Polish soldiers' cemetery in Lviv, the final resting place for those who had fought for the Polish nation, which included that region. Here, it is the Poles who do not recognize Ukrainian sensitivities. (How would the Poles feel if Germans prepared or erected a memorial in their country for those who fell in the 1921 battle for "German Silesia", the battle of St. Annaberg?) On the other hand, it is hard for Poles to comprehend that — at least to some degree — public opinion in Ukraine plays down the presence of Polish culture and its civilizing role in the regions that today constitute western Ukraine. Those

Poles who have recognized the importance of remembering German cultural heritage in part of their territory expect the same reasonable attitude of Ukrainians as regards the Polish heritage. And because they don't find this attitude, they are irritated and explain it by falling back on the stereotypical image of the crude Ukrainian national character. They are unaware of the effect that the USSR's oppression of Ukraine had on their eastern neighbour's national identity and concept of history. But slowly, something is beginning to change in their mutual perceptions of the other. Academic dialogue among historians is moving ahead, even if it is not as lively and direct as in the case of Polish–German contacts. Polish–Ukrainian scholarly history seminars, which have taken place for years, are an outstanding example.⁷ Knowledge about the causes and course of the so-called "Operation Vistula" of 1947 — that is, the resettlement of the Ukrainian population from southeastern Poland into southern East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia — is slowly spreading in Polish society.

An important factor could prove to be the support expressed throughout Poland for the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in November/December 2004. The degree of support expressed through demonstrations, appeals, and trips to Ukraine in solidarity with the supporters of Viktor Yushchenko led some pundits to assert that Polish–Ukrainian reconciliation could be taking place right before our very eyes, ending the period of enmity that had been heightened briefly by memory of events during and after the war. But it remains to be seen whether this improvement of the image of Ukrainians in Poland and of Poles in Ukraine is only temporary. The proof will be in how both sides deal with clearing up controversial questions that remain in the realm of history. The fact is that the generation of witnesses and participants in the tragedy of Volhynia is leaving the scene. Memory of the horrors remains in Poland, but the degree of negative feelings toward Ukrainians will surely decline. Perhaps such attitudes as those expressed in the following statement by a student at Warsaw University will become the norm of his generation; it includes criticism of his own people:

I am amazed at the ease with which one justifies the [Polish] revenge. I would prefer it if my generation would stop trying to differentiate between more or less justified crimes against the civilian population. [...] Numbers are important for historians, but what does it mean to us, whether one thousand or fifty thousand Polish or Ukrainian civilians died? [...] The murder of innocent people, brutal resettlements — this is an offence that cannot be justified. In this sense, both sides should ask each other for forgiveness, and both sides should do this in full sovereignty, without any pressure, depending on how they reach recognition of mutual responsibility.⁸

But the biggest problem within the Polish concept of history is probably the relationship to the Jews. Historically speaking, contact between these peoples extends back to the Middle Ages, when many Jews fled persecution in other European countries and settled in Poland. But the behaviour of representatives of both peoples to one another today is primarily influenced by their experiences of the twentieth century. Individuals with anti-Semitic attitudes are quick to seize upon the slogan, "Jewish communism", which they use to characterize Poland's postwar government. The reasons for this may well lie in the presence of many individuals of Jewish background in communist party and security apparatus during the first decade after the war. Jews, on the other hand, see Poland as the country where the Holocaust was carried out. Lack of

recognition for the assistance that Poles gave to Jews during the war elicits anger among Poles. The Poland-centric view of the war also results in the fact that Poles actually do not know much about the extermination of the Jews. Many still think Auschwitz was a concentration camp set up primarily for Poles (thus the years-long dispute over the setting up of crosses on the site of concentration camps, rejected by Jewish associations around the world). The average Pole knows that five to six million Polish citizens died during the war. But this does not mean that most know that at least half of those were Jews.

For some years now, Polish schools have been teaching more about the Holocaust. The first new lessons and schoolbooks have been published. The heated debate lasting from 2000 to 2002 about the murder of the Jews by their Polish neighbours in the town of Jedwabne in July 1941 is a particularly vivid example of how complicated and difficult Polish-Jewish relations have been. The debate was set in motion through the book *Sasiedzi* (The neighbours) by Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish historian who had worked for a long time in the West. The discussion went beyond everything that had taken place until then in historical debates in Poland. There were serious confrontations between historians, pundits, and the general population. It is no exaggeration to suggest that at some point the name Jedwabne had been mentioned, at the very least, in every Polish household. This stemmed from the fact that the pogrom of 60 years earlier (and revelation of other events of the same period) shattered the self-image of Poland and of Poles as victims of the history and victims of their neighbouring country.

True, Poles already had to answer the question about the post-war expulsion of the Ukrainian and German population, but they could always explain that the suffering they had experienced at the hands of the others was overall greater. So it was easy — at least for some Poles — to grant generous pardon and ask for the same. But when it came to the defenceless Jews threatened with extinction by the Germans, there was no such "mitigating" circumstance, though some historians and some in the public eagerly seek it. The debate about Jedwabne caused great difficulties and much pain to many Poles. They simply could not believe that their fellow Poles had contributed directly to this tragedy. The discussions about Gross's thesis were published in all important newspapers and many magazines of various types and political orientation. A variety of Internet sites with material about the events in Jedwabne were set up where material for discussion was assembled. As Tomasz Szarota said in May 2001, this is not a Polish "historians' dispute",⁹ nor is it "merely" a public debate, but rather a discussion that awoke the passion of all Poles. Unusually important in terms of the societal reaction — and more significant than the opinions of professional historians — was the frequent occurrence of moral considerations in this debate.

A certain model for society is without doubt presented by the approach of the government and the Catholic Church leadership. The President of the Republic of Poland at the time, Aleksander Kwasniewski, expressed his profound dismay during the ceremonies on the anniversary of the pogrom and begged forgiveness. For this, he received severe criticism from the Right. Still, this was apparently not the reason why Polish society rejected him. Kwasniewski's loss of popularity was rather due to the revelation of various illicit affairs involving leftwing politicians, as well as the collapse of the governing coalition. Kwasniewski's gesture was also important to the reception of these processes in the international arena. The Primate of Poland could not bring himself to deliver a similar gesture, even if the church expressed its regret over the crime. This was surely due to divided opinion within the Church hierarchy.

From the outset, the Archbishop of Lublin, Joseph Zycinski, well known as an intellectual, underscored the importance of dealing with the moral aspects of this crime. His counterpart, the Archbishop of Lomza, who held jurisdiction in the parish of Jedwabne, rather reflected the voices from his own diocese, which bitterly protested the "defamation of Poland". The priest of Jedwabne himself did not take part in the ceremonies on the anniversary, nor did the great majority of his parishioners. It was more than they could handle, because they would have been condemning their own ancestors and parents, people who may not themselves have committed murder but who may have watched the atrocities with indifference or even with approval — and possibly even stolen the property of the victims.

The history of Jedwabne (and other cases of persecution or poor treatment of Jews by Poles) still represents an open wound in the Polish consciousness. Its location within that collective conscience has not yet been decided. But this case will surely not be relegated to the sphere of the forgotten. Pundits and sociologists are not of one mind. The initiator of the debate, Jan T. Gross, even proposes that Poland's history may soon have to be rewritten. Journalist Jacek Zakowski already determined in 2000 that Jedwabne had shaken the Polish conscience and that this history must become a permanent part of the collective consciousness. Some scholars even speculate that far from purifying Polish memory, Jedwabne will simply fuel the ongoing crisis of national identity. Surely they were thinking here about public opinion polls that for years have revealed a gradual reduction in the number of Poles who are proud of their people. Historian Tomasz Szarota and others consider this rapid overthrow of further Polish myths about their self-image to be harmful: "The debate about Jedwabne confirmed a feeling that the Poles had for a long time: that of shame," he said in April 2002. "This national tradition must report its own sins and mistakes — that is clear. But mistakes must not negate achievements. One must not see Poles only from the standpoint of Kielce and Jedwabne." Still, it seems that this is a somewhat overly dramatic appraisal. Szarota himself, a few months before, had ascertained that the debate shows that Poles are finally becoming a "normal people" that wants to know the "whole truth" about its history.

Polish commemoration of World War II has gone through major changes in the last 15 years. The simplified, official image of the Polish–German struggle, justified by the "eternal" enmity between the two peoples, was overturned. The public perception now includes elements of memory of the war that were pushed aside during the communist period and could only be nurtured within the family or in certain small circles. Part of this memory relates to the fact that Poland was occupied by two powers in 1939. By now, it is fully accepted that the war's end did not in any way mean the re-establishment of independence — an assertion impossible to make during the period of the occupation. The fall of Poland in 1939, the dissolution of the 20-year-old State, was a shock to the people. To this day, Poles carry the fear within them that the international agreement can be broken. And beyond that, they also sense that neither their struggle, nor those of their underground army, the Polish fighting forces in the west and the Polish units that formed in the USSR, are given due appreciation. A large segment of the public feels that it is insulting to the people who fought so hard from 1939 to 1945 that there is no Polish soldier in the planned Russian memorial to the victory over National Socialism.

The difficult historical debates about Polish–German, Polish–Ukrainian, or Polish–Jewish relations make it impossible for Poles to encapsulate themselves in a ceaseless exaltation of their own suffering and bloody sacrifice inflicted

upon them by the German or Soviet side. Rather, these debates force recognition of the fact that one's own suffering cannot serve to justify suffering imposed on others, not even when those others are the enemy. This growing understanding will serve a therapeutic function for the Polish concept of history in the years to come.

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- ¹ T. Szarota, "Wojna na pocieszenie" [War as solace], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 6.9.1996.
- ² Where, among others, members of the Warsaw Uprising resistance of 1944 are buried — K.R.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Report from Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, "Opinie o stosunkach polsko–niemieckich i reparacjach wojennych" [Opinions on German–Polish relations and war reparations]; the results of the survey were published in October 2004.
- ⁵ Norman Davies, *Rising '44. The Battle for Warsaw*, 2004.
- ⁶ In 1943–44, during Nazi occupation, up to 80 000 Poles were massacred by the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Polish reprisals counted up to 20 000 victims — ed.
- ⁷ Documented in the multi–volumed series, *Polska–Ukraina. Trudne pytania* [Poland–Ukraine. Difficult questions].
- ⁸ Sławomir Sierakowski, "Chcemy innej historii" (We want a different history), in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10.6.2003.
- ⁹ Referring to the West German *Historikerstreit* in the late 1980s over the interpretation of the Holocaust — ed.

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