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ROUNDTABLE

When History Matters Too Much: Historians and the Politics of History in Poland

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Academic historians often complain that their work is not appreciated by the public and that the impact of their books is limited to a few other scholars. There are, however, situations where historians face the opposite challenge, namely a great deal of interest from both the public and from politicians who want to exploit or interfere with their work to further their political agendas. This arises most often in countries that are undergoing deep political and social changes. At these times, the legacies of the past that emerge after a fundamental regime transformation, like the collapse of dictatorship, have a profound impact on historical research and discourse.

Reckoning with the Communist Past and the Second World War in Poland

In Poland after the demise of communism in 1989, history became a pivotal part of public discussions that shaped new civic identities. Regime change opened the way to confronting historical issues that had been marginalised or banned under the communist dictatorship. Historians tackled formerly taboo subjects, such as the Stalin-Hitler Pact, the Soviet agression of 17 September 1939, and the Katyń massacre. Scholars got access to documents of the Polish United Workers Party, which enabled new research on the communist system and the democratic opposition to it.

At the time, these subjects did not provoke much controversy or mass public interest. Necessary and obvious changes were introduced in the public sphere: new school textbooks were published; patrons of streets and squares were changed; some monuments were removed and others were erected. Most people in Poland shared a broadly critical assessment of the communist regime, which was widely condemned as undemocratic, repressive, economically inefficient and dependent on the Soviet Union. But few people were preoccupied with the past. Instead, they were concerned with the challenges of adapting to the market economy, which was often painful, with mass unemployment and a new, more competitve labour market. Historians, who also shared these burdens, were largely free to focus on their research without external interference.

The increase of public interest in the past came after a decade of democratic and economic transformation. It was sparked by a polemic over the identity of former agents of the communist security apparatus and the problem of what to do with files left by the secret police. At the moment of democratic transition, there were surprisingly few calls for a settling of accounts in Poland. The dominant trend was to co-opt former communist functionaries and use them to build a new democratic order. This was the consequence of the peaceful dismantling of the communist regime, which had been agreed in the so-called Round Table talks in 1989.[1] There were practically no demands to give citizens access to the communist security archives. This differed from (East) Germany, where it became a major issue and where a special institution was created to deal with it: the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the National Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic.

[1] On the Round Table and the Polish transition to democracy see Jan Skórzyński, *Okrągły stół. Wynegocjowany koniec PRL* (Kraków: Znak, 2019).

But this relative calm began to change over the course of the 1990s as the documents of the communist security police were exploited for political reasons, mostly in order to compromise people who were accused of having been secret collaborators. Documents and accusations were leaked to journalists and there were no mechanisms in place to verify the veracity of allegations. To tackle these problems, a new institution was created in Poland in 2000 along the lines of its German counterpart. This Institute of National Remembrance took over the files of the communist security apparatus and opened them to historians and journalists. It was a turning point for historical debates, which became much more intense. The communist past abruptly came to occupy the very centre of public discourse and even political life. By accident or by design, historians became key experts commenting on security police files and took on a major public role.[2] They were often forced by the media to declare in public whether individual people, whose past activities were under scrutiny, deserved to be called 'agents' or exculpated.

Over time, the subject of former agents began to be exploited by those groups who suggested that Poland after 1989 was still dominated by former communists and people from the ranks of the former democratic opposition who cooperated with them or stayed under their control. The shining example of this was Lech Wałęsa. Already in the early 1990s, there had been public allegations that, as a young worker in the Gdańsk shipyard, he was forced to cooperate with the secret police. This was confirmed after the opening of the archives. Wałęsa was recruited in 1970 after he had participated in workers' strikes which had been crushed with extreme brutality. He met with secret police officers and delivered information about the situation in the Gdańsk shipyard. After a few years, Wałęsa broke this cooperation and joined the ranks of the opposition. In 1980, he became a leader of strikes at the Gdańsk shipyard. Shortly afterwards, he became the chairman of the newly born Solidarity trade union and later the head of the opposition at the Round Table talks. In 1990, he was elected the first president of democratic Poland. It was therefore in the interest of his political opponents to accuse him of collaboration with the secret police, not just in the early 1970s but also in the following decades.

This erroneous narrative of long-term collaboration was promoted by right-wing groups and especially by the populist Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*; PiS). They sought to exploit the allegations against Wałęsa to delegitimise the democratic order created in Poland after 1989. The party and its leaders were supported by historians who shared the same ideological orientation. In 2008 two historians from the Institute of National Remembrance published a major book that led to the Wałęsa controversy becoming a major subject of public interest.[3] *SB a Lech Wałęsa* [*The Security Service and Lech Wałęsa*] was based on extensive archival research and included many original documents. It described in detail Wałęsa's brief period of cooperation with the secret police, but also suggested – by the language it used and hints it provided – that communists had exerted undue influence upon the leader of Solidarity at all subsequent stages of his public career. The book was criticised by many academic scholars as an alarming example of how politically motivated interpretations can distort a complicated and often ambiguous historical reality.[4]

Apart from the legacy of the communist regime, the most sensitive historical debate has been Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War. Interest in this subject mushroomed after the discovery of a mass murder of Jews in the small town of Jedwabne in north-eastern Poland in July 1941. The site was revealed for the first time in 2000 in a book by Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish sociologist working in the United States. He described how Poles had killed 1600 Jews, burning

[2] On the Institute of National Remebmrance see Georges Mink, 'Is There a New Institutional Response to the Crimes of Communism? National Memory Agencies in Post-Communist Countries: The Polish Case (1998–2014), with References to East Germany', *Nationalities Papers*, 45, 6 (2017), 1013–27.

[3] Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, *SB a Lech Wałęsa. Przyczynek do biografii* (Gdańsk-Warszawa-Kraków: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008).

[4] See for instance Andrzej Friszke, 'Zniszczyć Wałęsę', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 21 June 2008; Paweł Machcewicz, 'Wałęsa w krzywym zwierciadle', *Rzeczpospolita*, 30 June 2008.

most of them alive in a barn.[5] It is worth saying that a more detailed analysis of historical sources and an exhumation of the mass grave lowered this number to around 500 and also proved the German inspiration behind the crime. The Jedwabne mass murder was one of the pogroms instigated by the German security forces after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war on the territories formerly occupied by the Soviets. Subsequent research has revealed that there were many other localities in the same region where Poles murdered Jews in 1941.[6]

The discovery of the Jedwabne pogrom was a great shock for public opinion and provoked an emotional debate. On the one hand, there were many reactions of denial. On the other, the controversy brought about a lot of soul searching regarding the 'dark' sides of Poland's past, including such topics as the expulsion of Germans from Poland after the war and the ethnic-cleansing of Ukrainians in the so-called Vistula Operation in 1947, when 140,000 Ukrainians were deported from their homes in south-eastern Poland and dispersed in the north and in the west, mostly on territories which Poland had taken over from Germany in 1945. Even if these events had already been researched by Polish historians in the 1990s, their rise to prominence was unsettling. For more traditionally oriented Poles, the emergence of such topics jeopardised their historical self-image as heroes or victims.[7]

Historians and Populists

It did not take long for a backlash to develop against this new, more critical approach to Poland's past. This was first formulated by conservative intellectuals (some of them historians) and then embraced by the ruling Law and Justice party in 2005–7 and again after its electoral victories in 2015 and 2019. This right-wing 'politics of history' was based on the assumption that the Polish elites were obsessed with the 'history of shame'. Professional historians and the mass media were blamed for allegedly concentrating on the wrongdoings committed by Poles. In response, conservative intellectuals and the ideologues of the Law and Justice party argued that national cohesion needed to be strengthened by emphasising the 'glorious' parts of Polish history, especially Poland's heroism and suffering during the Second World War.

One of the most remarkable consequences of this is that the Law and Justice party has devoted more attention to history and historians than any other government in democratic Poland (and, possibly, anywhere else in the European Union). This resonated with the expectations of a large part of their more traditionally oriented constituency. The identity of this group was based on a form of patriotism and Catholicism that led to an intense hostility towards rapid social and cultural changes resulting from Poland's accession to the European Union. The latter became associated with Western consumerism and more secular styles of life. History was seen as a bulwark against these external influences that posed a threat to the existence of the Polish nation. Such fears were reinforced by the memories of the traumatic past with the absence of an independent state throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, brutal German and Soviet occupations during the Second World War, and the postwar communist dictatorship imposed from abroad. For these reasons, history mattered – and still matters – more in twenty-first century Poland than in many other European countries, including other former Eastern Bloc states.[8]

[5] Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2000); the American edition: Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[6] See Paweł Machcewicz, Edmund Dmitrów and Tomasz Szarota, *Der Beginn der Vernichtung. Zum Mord an den Juden in Jedwabne und Umgebung in Sommer 1941. Neue Forschungsergebnisse polnischer Historiker* (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2004).

[7] About the Jedwabne debate see Joanna B. Michlic and Antony Polonsky, *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[8] On the exploitation of history and other symbolic issues by the Law and Justice party see Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski, 'Memory Games and Populism in Postcommunist Poland', in Chiara de Cesari and Ayhan Kaya, eds., *European Memory in Populism* (London: Routledge, 2020), 239–57; Seongcheol Kim, ' . . . Because the Homeland Cannot Be in Opposition: Analysing the Discourses of Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) from Opposition to Power', *East European*

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As we have seen, the most important challenges to the heroic narrative of the Polish nation came from the new research on the Holocaust and, above all, from the attitudes of Poles towards Jews. The Jedwabne controversy began a new trend in Polish historiography, which has led to a number of well-documented publications exploring historical sources that had been overlooked by scholars. They uncovered facts that contradicted the widely accepted narrative of Polish assistance to persecuted Jews, and they documented mass-scale denunciations and violence by Poles, which exposed thousands of them as perpetrators.[9]

This new research was seen to threaten the very pillars of the 'history of pride' preached by the Law and Justice party and its intellectual allies. In 2018, the Polish parliament passed the so-called 'Holocaust law' (to be precise, an amendment to the law on the Institute of National Remembrance). It instituted penalties of up to 3 years in prison for anyone suggesting that 'the Polish nation' took part in Nazi crimes or in other war crimes, crimes against humanity or crimes against peace. It also targeted any statements that 'diminish the responsibility of real perpetrators'.[10] The legislation provoked international uproar.[11] Under pressure from the United States and Israeli governments, some of the penalties were softened. Criminal responsibility was removed from the law, but those who tarnish the 'reputation of the Polish state or the Polish nation' could still be sued and held financially responsible under civil law. Two of the most eminent Polish Holocaust scholars, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, the editors and co-authors of many ground-breaking publications, were sued for an alleged libel by an individual whose relative was mentioned as a perpetrator in their book documenting the course of the Holocaust in Poland on a local level. The case, which was enthusiastically hailed by the pro-government media, was supported and financed by an organisation associated with the Law and Justice party.[12]

In addition, critical research on the Polish involvement in the Holocaust has been undermined by an enthusiastic renewal of the narrative of Polish assistance to Jews during the Second World War. Two of the largest non-academic institutions dealing with history, the Institute of National Remembrance and the newly created Pilecki Institute, the task of which is mostly to promote Polish history abroad, have publicised this topic through numerous publications, educational projects and exhibitions in Poland and abroad. Needless to say, both institutions are controlled by the Law and Justice Party. Since they can offer better salaries and research funds than universities and the Polish Academy of Sciences, they can tempt professional historians into their ranks. This has been partly successful, especially in the case of younger researchers who do not have academic affiliations. Combined with repressive measures aimed at scholars who question the official line, the governing party has created a strong institutional and ideological deterrent to independent research.

This climate of intimidation affects not only research on the Holocaust. The most vehement smear campaign of recent years was conducted against historians who created the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. This institution, founded in 2008 by the Civic Platform government of Donald Tusk, was opened to the public in 2017. Its aim was to represent an overall image of the

Politics, 37, 2 (2020), 332–51; Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, 'Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland', *East European Politics and Societies*, 33, 2 (2019), 435–71.

[9] See Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Zarys krajobrazu: wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2011); Engelking and Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą, 2018).

[10] Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Warszawa, dnia 14 lutego 2018 r. Poz. 369, Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary. See: http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20180000369 (last visited 25 Aug. 2022).

[11] About the international impact of the law see Marci Shore, 'Poland Digs Itself a Memory Hole', *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 2018; Bartosz Wieliński, 'Duda miał zakaz wstępu do Białego Domu. Przez podpis pod ustawą o IPN', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 July 2020.

[12] About the legal harassment of historians dealing with the Polish participation in the Holocaust see Jonathan Freedland, 'Fears Rise that Polish Libel Trial Could Threaten Future Holocaust Research', *The Guardian*, 3 Feb. 2021.

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war with a special focus on Polish and Eastern European experiences that are often marginalised in dominant global narratives of the war. One of the ways it did this was by placing at its centre the sufferings of civilians.[13]

Predictably, this project was accused by the Law and Justice party (in opposition at the time) of jeopardising a narrative of Polish heroism and martyrdom by integrating these into a general, transnational narrative of the war. Right-wing politicians compared the new museum to the House of European History in Brussels and to German-French and Polish-German textbooks, all of which were seen to be part of a plan by cosmopolitan European elites to suppress national identities and replace them with an artificial, supranational European identity. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice party, in a speech in parliament in November 2008 went so far as to argue that the hidden goal of the liberal government of the Civic Platform was to use the Museum of the Second World War as a tool to destroy Polish national identity.[14]

When the Law and Justice party returned to power in 2015, the museum continued to be a symbolic enemy. It was constantly attacked in the government-controlled media and the parliament. In a debate about the Museum of the Second World War, Law and Justice politicians accused its exhibitions (even before they were opened to the public) of 'a cosmopolitan vision of history . . . detached from the needs of Poles'. They claimed that 'this view of the Second World War as a martyrdom of civilians is very convenient and very close to the German concept of politics of history'.[15] The ruling party attempted to formally liquidate the Museum of the Second World War, which at that moment was in its final stage of construction, through a merger with another newly created museum. However, this was blocked by the administrative courts, which allowed the Gdańsk museum to be opened to the public.

Soon after its opening, the museum was finally brought to heel by the Law and Justice party. The historians who created the museum were fired or quit, and its founding director was accused of financial irregularities and corruption.[16] The museum's main exhibitions soon started to be changed according to the wishes expressed openly by Jarosław Kaczyński and other Law and Justice politicians.[17] It was a compelling example of how right-wing politicians understand the function of history and what can happen to historians who do not conform to this vision.

While history in Poland is now visible and of wide public interest, it is not at all clear that this is a desirable or positive environment in which to pursue fundamental research. History itself has become a source of serious tensions and is exploited to strengthen a political agenda. This situation has created unprecedented challenges for historians who have found themselves at the epicentre of these ideological battles. Not only have they been forced to defend their autonomy and integrity, but they

[13] On the exhibitions of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk see Stephan Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020); Monika Heinemann, *Krieg und Kriegserinnerung im Museum. Der Zweite Weltkrieg in polnischen historischen Ausstellungen seit den 1980er Jahren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017); Joachim von Puttkamer, 'Europäisch und polnisch zugleich. Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Danzig', *Osteuropa*, 67, 1–2 (2017), 3–12.

[14] About the controversy over the Museum of the Second World War see David Clarke and Paweł Duber, 'Polish Cultural Diplomacy and Historical Memory: The Case of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 33 (2018), 49–66; Daniel Logemann and Juliane Tomann, 'Gerichte Statt Geschichte? Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Gdańsk', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 16 (2019), 106–17; Marco Siddi and Barbara Gaweda, 'The National Agents of Transnational Memory and Their Limits: The Case of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 27, 2 (2019), 1–14.

[15] Quotations from the debate in the Polish parliament (Sejm) on 8 June 2016. See: Kancelaria Sejmu. Biuro Komisji Sejmowych. Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Pełny zapis przebiegu posiedzenia Komisji Kultury i Środków Przekazu (24). See: http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/biuletyn.xsp?skrnr=KSP-24 (last visited 25 Aug. 2022).

[16] Stephan Stach, 'Gefeuert heißt noch nicht besiegt. Keine Angst vorm Antikorruptionsbüro: Der frühere Direktor des Danziger Weltkriegsmuseums wehrt sich', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 Dec. 2017.

[17] Ljiljana Radonić, '"Our" vs. "Inherited" Museums: PiS and Fidesz as Mnemonic Warriors', *Südosteuropa*, 68, 1 (2020), 44–78.

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have also had to choose their research topics carefully. In some cases, this has meant not dealing with the most sensitive subjects; in other cases, it has led historians to contribute actively to political movements keen on mobilising history for their own ends. For those of us who began our career as historians at a time when autonomy of research and stability of democratic institutions were taken for granted, this is a depressing and troubling outcome.

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