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Polish-Russian Conflicts and Efforts Aimed at Reconciliation

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Polish-Russian Conflicts and Efforts Aimed at Reconciliation

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Polish-Russian relations boast a centuries-old history, older than the modern Russian or Polish statehood. However, it seems fair to start this tale in the 18th century, that is, the era of partitions, which will also mark here the beginning of modern conflicts. Quite recent if approached from the perspective of history, yet simultaneously quite distant, when a contemporary human ponders upon them – those conflicts have been arousing emotions not only in experts. For 123 years, since 1795 till the end of World War I in 1918, Poles were deprived of their independent country. The agony was initiated with the First Partition in 1772 – that was the time when, as it seems, neither was there turning back, nor hope for securing the territory. However, it must be noted that the Republic had been ailing throughout the 18th century and the infirmities, in many cases, were induced by the patient herself. Therefore, the final fall of the country that coincided with the Third Partition should be understood in symbolic terms.

The Tsardom of Russia turned out to be the largest and most cruel partitioner. Not only was the country vast and military strong, but also the Tsar yielded the power which was much more authoritarian than, for instance, that of the ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Southern Europe.

The centuries of shared background and those over two hundred years, since the partitions, of common history cannot be interpreted only in terms of enslavement. A clear division of roles between the victim and the perpetrator is not only too simplistic, but also does not enable us to understand the past, which is never linear or uniform. What is more, an approach as such would just be false. Over that long period of time, there took place three risings: the first one, that is, the Kościuszko Uprising, directly led to the Third Partition, yet also sparked hopes with Napoleon's advance to Moscow and the establishment of the ephemeral Duchy of Warsaw, which could not have been possible without the support of the French dictator. Then came the 1830 November Uprising, which lasted almost a year and ended in defeat, although it did have the making of a success: before 1830, Poland enjoyed some limited rights and benefits, for instance, military units were commanded by the Polish officers, Polish was the official language at the universities, and there existed a semblance of judicial system. All of those were suspended in retaliation for the rising. Finally, the January Uprising broke out in 1863, yet turned out to be a sad and senseless suicide from the political and military point of view.

It was in the 19th century when the defeats during the time of Partitions gave birth to the icon of Siberia – a huge and cruel prison or labor-camp for thousands of Poles, which spread over the whole Northern Asia. That iconic image was accompanied by the mythical one, according to which Siberia assumed the role of the literary or even romantic myth. A case in point here might be, for instance, *Dziady* by Adam Mickiewicz, the background of which is constituted by the tsarist political repressions towards the Polish, or, if one moves in time to the end of the 19th century, *Lalka* by Bolesław Prus. Finally, Siberia and the Polish deportees, those Polish noblemen, are also present in the works by Fyodor Dostoyevsky who, to be honest, was not fond of them at all.

The Polish-Russian relations cannot be limited to Siberia, that vast and merciless place of confinement. They seem to resemble a true cultural melting pot. Many Polish artists and writers were inspired by the Russian culture in a similar way as many Russians looked longingly towards Poland as if it were a window to the West. Appositely, a significant number of Polish scientists co-created Russian science at Russian universities. Such figures as Jan Nieciśław Ignacy Baudouin de

Courtenay or Thaddeus Bulgarin¹ are quite well-known, yet the picture would not be complete without adding few emblematic names:

- Stanisław Kierbedź – an engineer and a graduate from the Imperial University of Vilnius. He continued his academic career in St. Petersburg and became a lecturer at the local Main School of Engineering. Kierbedź was the guiding spirit of building an iron bridge over the Neva in St. Petersburg (later referred to as Nikolaevsky Bridge) as well as an iron bridge over the Vistula in Warsaw. Promoted by the Tsar to the rank of Major General, he was also admitted to the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences as a corresponding member. Having retired in 1891 after a wonderful official, academic and financial career, Kierbedź moved to Warsaw where he died in 1899.²
- Wacław Sieroszewski – a famous traveller and ethnographer, one of the founding fathers of the modern Russian ethnography. A son of the January Uprising insurrectionist, he was relegated from the gymnasium for conspiracy and imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel. Sieroszewski was subsequently exiled to Yakutia and Irkutsk, which he left for St. Petersburg. In 1914, Sieroszewski joined the Polish Legions and later, in the 1930s, he became a senator. Sieroszewski died in Warsaw in 1945, just after WWII which he spent in the Polish capital. As a deportee to Russia for 13 years, Sieroszewski was simultaneously an author of fundamental works on anthropology, for instance, *Twelve Years in the Yakut Country* [Dwanaście lat w kraju Jakutów] of his was awarded the Golden Medal by the Imperial Geographical Society. What is more, he also wrote a scholarly work *Korea, the Key of the Far East* [Korea. Klucz Dalekiego Wschodu], thus becoming one of the forerunners of modern ethnographical and anthropological research.³
- Michał Jankowski – as a young boy, he was exiled to Russia for taking part in the January Uprising. Having served his sentence, Jankowski decided to stay in Russia where, as a free person,

1 Piotr Gluszkowski, *Barwy polskości czyli życie burzliwe Tadeusza Bułharyna*, Kraków: Universitas, 2018.

2 Lech T. Jabłoński, *Dzieje rodziny Kierbedziów*, Warszawa: BP m. st. Warszawy, 2003.

3 A. Lam, *Wacław Kajetan Sieroszewski*, [in:] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. XXXVII/3, no. 154.

he became a director of a gold mine located on Askold Island near Vladivostok. Jankowski used the money he earned there for starting the breeding of the sika deer, which later became the biggest in the region. He made a fortune on trading in deer skin with the Chinese. In 1889, Jankowski established and funded an ethnographical museum in Vladivostok, where he has been hailed the founding father thanks to his engagement in building the first brick edifices. To commemorate Jankowski's services, one of the peninsulas in the Sea of Japan was named after him. Although being a Polish insurrectionary deportee, that outstanding naturalist and breeder turned out to be one of the first and most significant researchers of Far Eastern fauna and flora.⁴

How should one judge or interpret those three sketched biographies the space of the present article does not allow me to elaborate on? Each and every one of them could serve as a key to presenting the Polish fate and common Polish-Russian history in that century. Who were Jankowski, Kierbedź and Sieroszewski: the deportees, victims of the tsarist regime, political exiles, or maybe the people who did achieve financial and academic success in Russia, and made a lasting mark on Russian science and culture? Or maybe they were both! Those three life stories show that clear-cut divisions into the oppressors and the oppressed in the context of describing mutual relations are not always possible. Sharp bends of history being softened with the passage of time, we are now able to talk about the 19th century in a calmer manner. Hence, it seems feasible to state that the 19th century is the period of 'cool' history – after all, now one would quarrel about the details of the 1831 Battle of Ostrołęka, and if so, that would take place at the university or during an academic conference. One might even assume that nowadays it would not cause a diplomatic or political crisis.

The closer it gets to the present day, the stronger the emotions become – in the 20th century, that 'cool' approach to history seems to be replaced by the 'heated' one. Our attitude to the recent shared history

4 Eugeniusz Nowak, 'Trzy pokolenia Jankowskich – badaczy przyrody Azji', *Wszechświat*, 1988, vol. 89, no. 10.

does exert an influence on the current political relations and history, this is almost tangible.

Let us now enumerate those most important and symbolically 'heated' events that have always been problematic (or even explosive) in our mutual relations; let us start with the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920 and the fate of the Soviet prisoners after the Battle of Warsaw lost by the Bolsheviks. It has been estimated that the number of Soviet prisoners might reach 80 000-85 000 people, out of which 16 000-18 000 died within first three years of imprisonment. One of the most significant reasons of so high a mortality rate was, for sure, awful sanitation policy, which resulted in infectious diseases that were quickly spreading. That tragic fact is, unfortunately, often juxtaposed with the number of Polish citizens murdered by the Soviets, which reached 21 000 people, including over 10 000 Polish officers murdered in spring 1940 in Katyn, Kharkov and Mednoye. The latter crime was performed on the written order of Stalin and the Soviet Political Bureau, what has been confirmed by the existing documents. Comparing those two events is a political abuse – neither a politician nor a historian should get into bragging match about the number of victims. Another sequence of misunderstandings, abuses and vulgar frauds concerns the whole period of World War II: first, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was a German-Soviet agreement; then the invasion of the Soviet army on Poland on 17 September 1939 and thus ensuing Katyn massacre; next – the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944 and the postponed attack of the Red Army, what made the insurrectionaries bleed to death; finally, the very assessment, sometimes inappropriate, of the new post-war order and limits of freedom in the socialist Poland between 1945-1989. That being so, a set of questions might be posed: if and to what extent was the then Poland an independent country and whether the decisions taken by the contemporary authorities were also independent? Can, in fact, the contemporary government be considered sovereign or did it consist of submissive Soviet governors, who were put in Warsaw just to control and fulfil the plans created in the Soviet Union? Would it be justified to talk not only about the Soviet sphere of influence and control, but also – as some people want – about the Soviet occupation of Poland that lasted till 1989?

If we assume that the whole 20th century does belong to the 'heated' history, there would be, I believe, two reasons for that. Firstly, during

the years 1945-1989, that is, throughout the PRL period, our common history was either passed over with silence, or distorted; therefore, there were no chances for an honest and unhindered debate or solid academic research on those particularly difficult moments in our shared background. Secondly, all attempts at clarifying and explaining the 'heated history' in the 1990s and 2000s were happening on a historiographical level and did not reach a wider audience. To illustrate this argument let me mention the Katyn massacre: from a scholarly point of view, historians have nothing more to add. We have got to know the documents, we have been given an opportunity to read scholarly studies on each and every aspect of that case; we have even got to know the names of the decision-makers of the highest rank as well as the names of the NKVD officers who were the principal executioners. And now we do know the names of the victims. However, there is still a feeling that the Katyn massacre continues to be the source of conflict exactly due to the fact that the scholarly debate has not become the common good and has not incited a wider debate in society. That could not have happened and all hopes were, to be honest, in vain. The reasons supporting that argument do not concern only the Russian bilateral relations with the Polish past or the Polish attitude with the Russian and Soviet history; the true reason is related to one's approach to their own history and memory. For instance, in the USSR, during the time of the Great Terror (1937-1938), there were arrested 1.7 million people, out of whom 750 000 were executed by firing squad. Then, in subsequent years, 350 000 people died in labor camps. Over 1 million victims lost their lives in their own country.

What is thought nowadays about that tragedy? According to the 2007 survey conducted by the Levada Centre, 9% of Russians believed that the Great Terror was a political necessity, hence historically justified, yet 72% of Russian citizens considered the same event a political crime that could not be justified. However, in 2017, the proportions changed: 25% of Russians started to justify the Great Terror and only 39% of respondents wanted to condemn that period of time.⁵ This regression has proven that there is no any significant reluctance

5 The results of the research can be obtained at www.levada.ru/2017/09/07/16561.

to have relations with Poland; this is just the matter of rejecting difficult events in one's own history.

This is the moment when one reservation is to be made: while discussing a common Polish-Russian history, it is necessary to pay attention to different scales of repression and thus ensuing differing perspectives. The memory of the Polish officers murdered in Katyn ought to be accompanied by the realization that in the very same forest, in the very same holes, there were buried tens of thousands of Russian citizens, who were the victims of their own country's murderous system. That being so, whenever we are faced with miscomprehension or shocked by the relativism argument (and it goes more or less as follows: How can one compare thousands of victims if the totalitarian regime was executing millions?), we must remember that neither is that relativism, nor lack of empathy; this is simply the issue of proportions and long-standing, tragic experience of being a victim.

One of the most significant events of long-term reach was the decision taken by Polish and Russian Presidents to establish the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters [Polsko-Rosyjska Grupa do Spraw Trudnych], which was announced during the visit of President Putin to Warsaw in January 2002. Consisting of several Russian and Polish politicians, political scientists, scholars and specialists in common relations, the Group met for the first time in November 2002 in Moscow. Unfortunately, due to aggravating circumstances, the activity of the Group was suspended for many years. After the Group was reactivated in 2008, a decision was made that it would be chaired by quite well-known politicians, that is, on the Polish side, by Adam Daniel Rotfeld, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and, on the Russian side, by Anatoly Torkunov, a Soviet and Russian diplomat and the rector of Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which is an academic institution run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. A relatively high political position of both co-chairmen was to provide the Group with prestige and enable it to get attention of the highest officials in both capitals.

The aim of the Group was to point to and define the most salient points of divergence of opinions between both countries and societies. However, the activity of the Group was, in fact, limited to pondering on remembrance and the past. Held twice a year, the meetings of the Group did not cover discussions other than those about history,

and that was an intentional plan. Both chairmen felt that history, although judged differently, would still be less problematic an area than the contemporary issues, which were assigned to politicians. Simultaneously, there appeared a false, I believe, impression that it was the past that constituted the most difficult topic in the Polish-Russian relations.

So far, one of the most significant achievements of the Group's activity has undoubtedly been the publication of an extensive scholarly work *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w polsko-rosyjskich stosunkach (1918-2008)*.⁶ Amounted to over 900 pages, the book has come out in Polish, Russian and, in an abbreviated version, in English. It consists of the articles by the Polish and Russian authors, which deal with the most problematic issues in our common 20th-century history. Beginning with the Polish-Soviet relations between 1917-1921 and the interwar period, the texts also analyze the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, that is, a Nazi German-Soviet agreement, then the war period and the Yalta Conference, which subjugated Poland to the Soviet sphere of influence as well as the post-war years and the assessment of the influence that huge authoritarian Soviet empire exerted on the relations with her smaller Western neighbour. The publication ends with the presentation of the Polish-Russian political relations after 1990, that is, when the USSR collapsed and Poland regained sovereignty.

From a few years' perspective, it is clear that the Group's achievements have been rather poor. Excellent from an academic point of view, the publication mentioned before could have been prepared at any university and no agreement between Presidents, support provided by the Ministers or long research would have been needed. A small group of scholars would have done the same job. Nonetheless, the book's success shows, paradoxically as it may seem, that we have been still running in a void space if one interesting scholarly work has turned out to be the groundbreaking moment in the common relations between two big European countries.

In 2010, thanks to the support of Polish and Russian Prime Ministers, the Group put forward a proposal to appoint permanent institutions that would engage themselves in the Polish-Russian mutual work

6 *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w relacjach polsko-rosyjskich (1918-2008)*, eds. Adam D. Rotfeld and Anatolij W. Torkunow, Warszawa: PISM, 2010.

in the sphere of culture. The idea of the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding [Polsko-Rosyjskie Centrum Dialogu i Porozumienia] drew, at least when it comes to Poland, on a successful co-operation between Poland and Germany initiated by the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation [Fundacja Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej], which was established over 25 years ago. The latter, funded by both countries and with the German-Polish administration and workers, the institution was supporting cultural endeavours, student exchanges as well as social, academic and publication projects that would lead to a better mutual understanding between the Polish and the German.

Unfortunately, in contrast to the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation, in 2011 there were established two separate institutions funded by the Polish and Russian government respectively, that is, the Centres for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding. It soon turned out that the institutions, not co-operating at all, were focusing on different aims and, contrary to the name, neither served dialogue, nor agreement.

Nowadays, the relations between the institutions are rather cool, the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters, although its new composition was appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs over a year ago, is actually not working as there has been nothing but silence on the Russian part so far. That being so, a research grant awarded to the Lublin Institute of East-Central Europe [Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej] and the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Science seems to be a significant project to continue this international dialog initiative. Entitled 'Poland-Russia: Hostility Determined? In Search of New Approach to History' [Polska – Rosja: czy fatalizm wrogości? O nowe ujęcie historii], this truly international endeavour aims at preparing solid educational assistance materials for high school pupils in Poland and Russia, which would discuss our common history since the modern times till the present day. The importance of the project notwithstanding, it only proves that we still reside within the sphere of historical issues. Another problem would concern the very implementation of such materials – as it is known, even the best thought-out ideas do not find their way to the wider audience that easily, not to mention their exhaustive use by schools themselves. The latter decision seems to be, however, political.

Of institutional nature, all the attempts mentioned above do not exert a significant influence on a wider social awareness despite the fact that nowadays there are many convergent paths and topics, not necessarily historically oriented, that would be useful for repairing our mutual relations. What is more, the memory of the past seems to be an attractive field that is being readily used in international relations, yet still in an instrumental and fragmentary manner. Historiography itself is a difficult domain that demands knowledge, professional preparation and, what is of outmost importance here, peace and empathy. One should also bear in mind how slight an influence of historiography on a wider social awareness is. The answers to the question, "What has been your source of information about World War II during the last year?" were as follows: 34% of the respondents pointed to the media (TVP, newspapers, radio), 41% – to feature films and 7% admitted that they have gained knowledge from the Internet and computer games. Scholarly works were mentioned so rarely that they were out of the margin of error.⁷ It is worth noting that 74% of Poles concerned 'historical re-enactment', which is – to be honest – fable writing and masquerade, the most effective way of popularizing historical knowledge.⁸

One of today's lectures began with a football example. In healthy circumstances of 'cool' history, a football match between France and Germany would not become a continuation of bloody wars from the past or political rows – those has been explained by historians and comprehended by the general public, thus becoming part of community memory (not experienced in person, yet constituting a significant attribute of social contacts). If, for example, the French win the match, they would not treat their victory as a revenge for the German using chemical weapon during World War I. Appositely, if the reverse is true, then the German would not thus compensate for their losing Lorraine. In healthy societies (with 'cool' history), football is a type of entertainment, nothing more, or less: simply, 22 young men are chasing an inflatable balloon.

7 A report on the CBOS survey no. 114/2014, 08/2014.

8 A report on the research conducted for a government programme 'Independent' [Niepodległa], Warsaw, 09/2016.

Let us now enumerate several, out of many, fields which, though at the margins of historiographical preoccupation, yield a significant dialogue power and might as well exert an influence on mutual relations. In spite of the fact that they do have the potential for success, they still have not turned out to be successful. One of such fields is undoubtedly a local visa-free traffic regime between Poland and the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation. Russian citizens were able to visit the border Polish voivodeships without visas since it was believed that nothing could establish better civil relations and trust than personal contact with the neighbour who was a member of the UE and NATO. However, a couple of years ago, Poland suspended cross-border travel with Kaliningrad. Hence, the Russian lost the ability to visit Poland easily. What is more, the Centres for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding also did not reach the goals that had been set for them, that is, organizing academic and student exchanges, supporting mutual cultural initiatives and, most importantly, co-operating. With time passing, it turned out that both Centres were acting separately and their activity even contributed to inciting new conflicts. Other possible areas of dialogue can be marked by the contacts between the Russian Orthodox Church and Polish Catholic Church, although they have been also quite mistrustful and cold.

Now seems to be the time for subjective, yet very important, reservations. Firstly, there are no unilateral agreements, which would be somehow decreed from above and, hence, inspired and fulfilled by a given country, especially an authoritarian one. A true reconciliation demands social dialogue which, in turn, is not possible in an undemocratic country, where every sphere of life is being controlled. Authoritarianism does not tolerate a critical reconciliation with the problematic moments of the country's own history. Moreover, by rejecting the idea of unhindered memory of the past, neither is authoritarianism able to have a deep and long-lasting dialogue with itself, nor with others.

Secondly, agreements are possible only between mature communities and societies that, first of all, do perceive their own history in a critical manner and, hence, are given an opportunity to do the same while pondering upon the history of the neighbours. According to the research, only 4% of Poles consider the massacre and homicide of Jews in Jedwabne (in July 1941, that crime took 340 Jewish lives) as shameful

and only 1% of Polish respondents believe that the corresponding crime committed in Kielce (in July 1946, Poles murdered 37 Jewish citizens of the city) is disgraceful. At the same time, 80% of Polish citizens regard Polish history as a reason for pride, whereas only 6% of respondents express an opposing opinion. The act of mythologizing one's own past seems to be, therefore, a hindrance to understanding both the past of the others as well as the other points of view on our own past. To illustrate this thesis, it is worth invoking one more survey: regarding the question "Which nation during World War II was the most heroic one?" 72% of Poles answered that it was the Polish nation. Barely 5% of respondents pointed to the Russian, 2% – to the English and 1% – to the Jewish. The distribution of answers to the question: "Who suffered the most during World War II?" corresponded to the instance mentioned above: 63% of the Polish respondents indicate the Polish nation, 36% of them mention Jews and 3% points to Russians.⁹ These results clearly show that it is extremely difficult to adopt a point of view represented by other nations or societies.

Finally, reconciliation is a process which cannot happen at an instant or be performed on a one-off basis. As a never-ending effort, it does need specific tools to be executed in an appropriate manner, that is, free trade, free movement of people and cultural relations between particular individuals and not just between countries. If one is to strike a pessimistic note, then reconciliation may be reversible as well. The past is being formed in the present and determination of many generations of people can be destroyed within a couple of months by populists. The idea of the enemy can also be shaped in a similar vein just as phobias and aversion may be nourished by the memory of past harm.

The effort of many people notwithstanding, we have not improved much on the issue of Polish-Russian relations, which nowadays neither can involve informed dialogue, nor honest social reconciliation. As it seems, official political gestures of reconciliatory symbolism are all that can be done now. In the short term perspective, the gestures as such may warm mutual contacts, but in the long term perspective,

9 TNS OBOP 'Collective Memory and Unresolved Issues from World War II' [Kolektywna pamięć i niezakończona sprawa z II wojny światowej], Warsaw, 08/2009.

they can never constitute a solid foundation for new and better relations. The symbolic acts such as, for instance, those legendary frames of Helmut Schmidt, a former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, kneeling in silence in front of the Monument to the Victims of the Ghetto in Warsaw, may turn out to be empty and meaningless, if they do not initiate a critical approach to one's own dark pages of history. Without a growing social awareness and civic engagement, such actions may fall victim to the current political manoeuvring and be forgotten.

The Polish-German reconciliation has been considered exemplary for a long period of time and could happen because the West German society did review their past and did judge their difficult history. Initiated when Poland was still an authoritarian country, the dialogue between both countries started to develop the moment Poland returned to democracy.

It seems that the present Polish-Russian relations need favourable winds which would lead to the democratization of the internal political affairs. Only then would there appear an honest bilateral belief that reconciliation and dialogue between the Polish and the Russian are truly needed. However, it must be remembered that it would be a long and painstaking process, and not a singular rising.

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