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The bill for Poland's monstrous wartime losses cannot be declared time-barred

What happened on 1 September 1939? For a Pole, this question is rather bizarre. Almost every Polish child will answer that Germany attacked Poland that day. They may not even be able to read school books yet, and still, they know it, because the memory of this tragedy and its consequences remains alive in the vast majority of Polish families. However, visitors to the House of European History in Brussels will find this question quite challenging to answer. The date certainly won't catch their eye in the flurry of information about the evil Middle Ages, the good Karl Marx, Franco-German reconciliation and the bright future of Europe with Berlin and Paris leading the way. For the sake of a peaceful future, Europeans are told to forget the past. Wrongdoings are being pushed into oblivion.

Evidently, constantly reopening wounds is not conducive to a peaceful future. The question is who wants to forget and what, or how they want to shape European memory. There is no such thing as a morally neutral history, just as there is no morally neutral politics. Even today, the politics of remembrance still prevails, if only to erase traces of the past. One could say that the more obvious this erasure is, the more these traces turn into festering holes. After martial law was imposed in Poland in December 1981, the communists promoted “national reconciliation”. With mass arrests and the revocation of remaining civil rights, it was difficult to call this programme anything other than “reconciliation of the back and the whip”. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that millions of Poles refused to accept it. Sadly, in the long run, this appears to be the direction in which German-Polish reconciliation is heading.

Polish-German relations have existed for over a thousand years, with varying levels of prosperity. There have been better and worse times, but the positive influence of German culture in Polish history should not be forgotten. However, there have also been a number of dramatically bad years. Suffice it to recall the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the 18th century, the Kulturkampf, the actions of the German Eastern Marches Society, the Weimar Republic's hostility towards Poland reborn after 1918 and finally the long-term consequences of the German invasion of 1 September 1939 followed by the genocidal policy of the German Third Reich towards the Polish people. Without the German invasion, there would not have been the Soviet invasion on 17 September 1939 and the effective defeat of Poland, which – despite being on the winning side – was subjugated by the USSR after 1945 and Sovietised for 45 years. In terms of the level of income per capita, the Polish economy would today be on a par with that of Spain or Finland, as it was in the 1930s, rather than struggling to make up for the losses of three enslaved generations.

After 1990, unifying Germany was already a power, while Poland, ruined by communism, was treated as a victim of fate rather than of gruesome history. Polish-German “reconciliation” looked promising, just like the sign of peace Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki exchanged during the mass in Krzyżowa. A united Germany supported Poland's ambitions for EU and NATO memberships, benefiting from the opening of the Polish economy to German goods and investment. However, Berlin was increasingly convinced that the past was no longer a factor that needed to be considered in mutual relations. The signal for a new attitude towards Poland came with the activities of Erika

Steinbach and the displaced homies, tolerated by the government, who had moved from Bonn to Berlin. More and more Poles rubbed their eyes in astonishment at the German claims for compensation for land lost after the war. It seemed that those who made these claims had forgotten the cause of the border changes in 1945. The German mass media promoted the responsibility of the “Nazis”, as if between 1933 and 1945 Germany had been ruled by foreigners. They avoided mentioning the Polish victims of the Third Reich and even brought up Polish collaborators, of whom there were remarkably few on Polish soil. The height of insolence was the German state-funded TV miniseries *Generation Wars*, which portrayed the heroic Home Army fighting for Polish independence as a handful of surly anti-Semites.

Today, Germany is trying to be Europe’s card dealer. It is the largest economy, but it also claims the right to teach democracy to its recent victims and interferes in Polish political life. However, as the German authorities today celebrate the end of the Second World War as the day of liberation from Nazism, one might ask why the Germans fell into this nightmare in the first place, and why they were unable to free themselves from it. Is the commemoration of 1945 the best occasion to celebrate the superiority of German democracy? Was dependence on Russian gas and oil, and thus the effective financing of Russian armaments, the easiest way to bring democracy to Poland or Ukraine?

Polish-German reconciliation has come to a standstill, and this is not Poland’s fault. For years, the German side did nothing to commemorate the Polish victims of the Third Reich. There were commemorations for Jews, Romani and even homosexuals, but not for Polish victims. Recently there have been signs of a willingness to change this. Then suddenly, at the beginning of June, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth, arrived in Poland with an unexpected offer to build not a monument to the Polish victims, but... a German-Polish House as a place to “discuss” the “thousand-year history of Polish-German relations”. Instead of facing facts and problems that require solving, they offer us endless debate on another topic. It brings to mind the old saying that gentlemen do not discuss facts.

Roth further stated that Polish-German relations should not be overshadowed by the six years of the Second World War. But if this shadow is to be lifted, the Germans really must rethink their attitude toward Poland. They cannot one-sidedly declare the bill for Poland’s monstrous losses from the 1939 aggression and its aftermath as time-barred. It is not the culprit who determines the magnitude of their wrongdoing. The Polish bill is not excessive anyway, and it is only too well documented.

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