

Arkadiusz MULARCZYK: Poland is still experiencing the effects of World War II

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During World War II, Poland suffered the greatest personal and material losses (relative to the total population and national assets) of all European countries. These resulted primarily from the German occupation policy based on the belief in the racial inferiority of the Polish population. The Germans deliberately and in an organised manner exterminated the people of the occupied territories and heavily abused Polish society through forced labour and economic overexploitation. They also drained Polish capital accumulated over centuries by robbing deposits, imposing excessive fiscal burdens and shifting the costs of the war and occupation onto Polish society. Their work of destruction culminated with the demolition of the state capital, Warsaw, and thousands of Polish cities and villages.

The effects of World War II – demographic, economic, infrastructural, scientific, educational and cultural – are felt by Poles until today. Each year of war and occupation pushed the Polish state back to a lower level of development in all aspects of public, economic or social life. Poland would be in a completely different place of civilisational growth today, were it not for the effects of World War II. Several generations of Poles had to make an enormous effort to rebuild what the war had damaged and raise the country from the ruins.

To this day, Germany has not accounted for its pillaging activities and systematic plundering of works of culture and art belonging to the Polish state and its citizens. The legal successors of the Third Reich do not feel obliged to make reparation for the crimes and damage caused, they do not show any will to repair the damage done to Poland and the Poles, nor do they want to return the plundered resources. They question their political and legal responsibility towards Poland for the consequences of World War II, and their actions are limited to symbolic gestures and words on moral responsibility.

Unfortunately, the international community has little – and in many respects a downright false – idea of the scale of the war damages that ultimately reduced Poland's development potential. This fully justifies the need to make a more realistic and detailed account of the losses suffered by Poland as a result of World War II.

The enormous scale of wartime losses cannot be reflected by any quantitative calculus, as it is impossible to fully account for the extent of wartime misfortunes, human deaths and related, sometimes multi-generational, tragedies. Still, for the sake of present and future generations, as well as for the sake of historical truth, a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the war losses suffered by the Republic of Poland is essential. The lack of such an account prevents, among other things, a full assessment of Poland's actual achievements after World War II up to the present day. However, the issue of a complete evaluation of the losses suffered by Poland as a result of World War II has a much broader and certainly no less important aspect than that of mere compensation. Describing the magnitude of the harm suffered by Poles during the war is an act of respect and a tribute to the victims and their hardship.

At the same time, it should be stressed that a precise evaluation of all war losses will never be possible – their scale is so significant that some of them elude all research methods. Another obstacle is the lack of statistical data from before and after World War II, based on which it would be possible to determine more precisely the scenario of the socio-economic situation development. The fact that evidence of war crimes was systematically destroyed, and traces of many wrongdoings were erased is an additional impediment. On top of all that, it is impossible to count and value the consequences of the physical and psychological suffering of the victims: thousands of orphaned children taken from their parents, displaced or Germanised, prisoners of war, concentration camp inmates and forced labourers. Counting the traumas and injuries caused by the loss of loved ones is impossible. But undoubtedly, all of that had a massive impact on the efficiency and productivity of Polish society as a whole and thus on the extent of Poland's losses.

Today, the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany are linked by good political and economic relations, both countries are also members of the UN, the European Union, the Council of Europe, NATO and other organisations working for peace and security in Europe and the world, and the societies and governments of both countries wish to deepen and develop these positive relations. Therefore, the consequences of German actions on Polish lands during World War II should be regulated in a bilateral agreement concluded by the Polish and German governments.

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