

Through reparations to reconciliation

Every mention of war reparations brings an allergic reaction from Berlin. In turn, payment thereof would be a milestone and an opportunity for Germany to lead to complete Polish-German reconciliation.

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“They killed in an insolent, unscrupulous manner,” Winicjusz Natoniewski ardently recalls. He was just six years old when, on February 2, 1944, the Germans burnt his family village Szczecyn in the Lublin Region. The same fate was then shared by several nearby locations suspected of supporting the partisans. In total, from 800 to as much as 1,300 people died that day, including women and children. This was one of the most brutal “pacification” campaigns conducted by the Germans in rural areas of the occupied Poland.

Natoniewski survived, but he was heavily burnt. The scars and the traumas have remained with him forever. “He says this is an open matter in his life,” his daughter Bożena explains. Her father never obtained a status of a war-disabled person because he does not match the statutory criteria. He never received any benefits from the “Polish-German Reconciliation” Foundation because the support was envisaged exclusively for specific categories of victims. Knowing he had not even least opportunities for any compensation before the court in Germany, he has sued the German state at the Polish court. Ineffectively: the Supreme Court claimed immunity of Germany. The complaint submitted to the European Court of Human Rights did not help either: the case was not even accepted for a trial.

Natoniewski’s case shows it clearly: we cannot say Germany has fully cleared its accounts with respect to World War II. During various celebrated anniversaries, German politicians indeed speak beautiful words about special historical responsibility of their country. Clearly, however, other than minor and often forced gestures, this is not to be any material liability. When it comes to specifics, we have references to legal tricks, unworthy playing to wait it out, have it time-barred and forgotten.

After the Federal Republic of Germany was established, at first, individual compensations for victims did not cover Polish citizens at all. Later payments, for victims of medical experiments or forced laborers, must be considered symbolic at the background of the gigantic hecatomb that the Germans imposed on the Poles in the period 1939-1945. Brutally speaking, the benefits were granted to those who lived long enough and were classified to the “appropriate” group of victims. And they also often felt they received just a handout.

A similar game goes around war reparations, namely compensations due not to individual victims but Poland as the state attacked and brutally occupied by Germany. Consecutive governments in Berlin try to convince the world that the case is legally closed. The same politicians who, in everyday life, often refer to morality, here speak with the heartless language of the codes. They attempt to explain why they *need not* pay the reparations. They avoid answering the question why they *do not want* to pay.

An argument is sometimes raised that the reparations lead nowhere, that reparations after World War I brought Germany to crisis and indirectly gave way to Adolf Hitler’s gaining power. As a historian, I cannot agree with this analogy. Nowadays, Germany is the largest economy in the European Union – incomparably stronger and more resilient to crises than during the prewar Weimar Republic. Hardly anyone knows that reparations for World War I were paid by the Germany until 2010. This did not inhibit them to build a wealthy state.

I sometimes hear that almost the entire Europe experienced the effects of World War II, and if all governments now claimed reparations, there would be no end to claims. Someone raising such an argument clearly is unaware of the specifics of German occupation of Polish lands, which was incomparably fiercer than in the western Europe. Almost six million victims, mass extermination in camps, both show-off and secret executions, forced displacements, looting of cultural goods, deliberate demolition of cities and burning of villages – all this not only left profound traumas, but also brought about horrendous losses which can be quite precisely calculated. None of our ancestors murdered during World War II or experienced other cruel acts gave us right to agree to complete amnesty with respect to all harm done by the Germans.

Indeed, Germany is our neighbor with whom we want to build good relations in the 21st century as partners in NATO and in the European Union. War reparations would be a milestone on this

path: an act of tough, material justice. I hope that also the government in Berlin will begin to perceive them as an opportunity for authentic reconciliation among our nations.

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