

POLAND'S POLITICS OF HISTORY SINCE 1989

CONSIDERATIONS • CHALLENGES • TOOLS • GOALS

Warsaw, Poland, June 12, 2018

Anna Karolina Piekarska [AKP]:

On behalf of our newly established board of editors – together with Dr. Franciszek Dąbrowski [FD] – I would very sincerely like to welcome our guests: Professor Rafał Chwedoruk from the Faculty of Journalism and Political Science [now the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies] at Warsaw University; Professor Andrzej Nowak from the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences, and a member of the Council of the Institute for National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN*); Professor Włodzimierz Suleja, from the Historical Institute at the University of Wrocław, and director of the Historical Research Office at the IPN; and Dr. Maciej Korcuć, head of the Branch Office for the Commemoration of Struggle and Martyrdom at the IPN in Cracow. Today's meeting is very important to us – in fact we feel it is an opportunity to symbolically lay the foundation stone for the editorship of a new magazine published by the IPN, to be entitled the *Institute of National Remembrance Review*. This English-language magazine, of

which I am pleased to be editor-in-chief, will be a tool that will allow the Institute of National Remembrance to join the mainstream of the international historical narrative. Its purpose is to present specific problems concerning the history of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which were forced to function under the control of two totalitarian systems during the twentieth century.

Our meeting today is devoted to the problem of the politics of history. We want to analyse not just our own Polish experience, but also to look at the situation in neighbouring countries – not just those regarded as regional powers, but the smaller ones as well. We wish to reflect on the conditions and challenges faced by the countries behind the former Iron Curtain, the tools which are at our disposal in the shaping of politics of history, and finally on the objectives which we should implement in order for our politics of history to bring results – both on the national scale and on that of Europe as a whole.

It's June 2018 – what is politics of history today?

Włodzimierz Suleja [WS]: To begin the discussion, I would say that the most important fact to consider is that politics of history does indeed exist. It is something obvious, it is a truism, but looking at what we're dealing with, it's hard to perceive its operation, or whether it's even present at all. I'm not saying that no efforts have been made in this field – at least by Professor Andrzej Nowak, who is sitting here with us, and by a variety of groups who are trying to outline the essential framework within which the state can act. This is extremely important, first of all because both our neighbours and other nations have historical policies at their disposal, which they use as tools consistently. However, in my opinion, we are dealing with various kinds of messages which often come into conflict and enter into polemics with each other.

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Prof. Włodzimierz Suleja

If, after 1989, on the horizon leading up to today, we could have perceived some dimension of a politics of history, it would have had a form which – from my point of view – would have been unacceptable. It was an attempt to produce – by resorting to historical argument – something

which has been very aptly described as 'a pedagogy of shame.' It was generally accepted that our history is not worth much, and that it consists (with particular intensity over recent years) of various kinds of dark stains scattered throughout the historical space. We should be ashamed of these stains, and we should perform a total, continual expiation in the areas created by those spots – but without reaching any deeper, without trying to weigh up these proportions in any way.

I am not saying that Polish history deals exclusively with a glorious past, of which we should only speak well, or even when 'on our knees'. In my view, politics of history should be part of our *raison d'état*, upon the condition that the *raison d'état* also has to be defined (and that's also a problem). However, I think that this definition should be based not so much on a defence, but on an attempt to rationally show what – for both present and past generations – the historical message was, how it constructed our identity, and how it cemented our community. If we bring these elements to the fore, in my opinion, we'll be heading in the right direction, and we'll finally take that step.

Andrzej Nowak [AN]: We can compare the state of politics of history in Poland in 2018 to the almost 30-year-long balance sheet of our state and our political community – since the elections of June 1989, which many of us consider as the year which marked the threshold of our recovered independence. So, at this point of departure, there was an almost universal belief that we were leaving history: a history had ceased to be valid. Of course, there was still a kind of 'extra time', in the form of attempts to remove some of the stains like the Katyn question and a couple of other things which in 1989 still needed to be dealt with in the public consciousness. However, we should as soon as possible to have arrived at a position which aligned with Francis Fukuyama's then-predominant thesis that hereupon follows the end of history – not just with a capital 'H', but with a small 'h'. That meant that we should have moved towards the future – as like the slogan of one of the then-reviving post-communist parties (the Democratic Left Alliance): 'Let's choose the future.' And indeed, a decline in interest in history could be observed in

the early years of the Third Republic, and a floating of the idea that here we go into the future, an implication that maybe we should stop bothering about what happened before, because the modern world is heading towards a post-historic state. But gradually it turned out that that wasn't the case.

And here is our first, humorous little polemic remark in relation to what Professor Suleja was talking about: it's not the case that we can be glad that we have a politics of history today, and that it exists – because politics of history always exists. Always. It also existed in 1989, 1990, 1991 – but at that time it was not being implemented by the state, but for example by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, or by a variety of entities operating in the vacuum that resulted from the withdrawal of the state. These non-state actors replaced the state in occupying civic awareness, social awareness, with certain examples, models of memory, and they did so very effectively at a time when the state had given up that role.

Independently, and at the same time, other states were pursuing their own historical policies, with Poland one of their subjects. Germany's politics of history was very capable, experienced and well-thought-through; aggressive, and not without some successes. There was also Russia's politics of history, and so on. We can name some more: perhaps the most important politics of history, because it's in some way global and has penetrated the world of mass culture, is that which has resulted from a specific phase of the memory of the Holocaust. There are tens of thousands of Holocaust short films, feature films, and not to mention documentaries. And gradually a certain model has become commonplace, where if there is a Polish thread in them, Poland appears in the role of the accomplice

(although fortunately not the sole culprit, as has happened in some contemporary publications). And so there is a pressing need to work out what to do in this situation.

The change occurred around 2005, which was initiated by the then Mayor of Warsaw, Professor Lech Kaczyński. He founded the institutional initiative, which then became the Warsaw Rising Museum. It was in 2005, during times of political change, when the first phase of the discussion about the need for a politics of history was first launched. The group gathered around Marek A. Cichocki and Dariusz Gawin began to speak about the need for the use of this formulation in the state's policy. That led to polemics and outrage. It was even said that reaching back into history for some kind of set of civic or educational values was evidence of our immaturity.

Nevertheless, the phase of polemics about whether we should pursue a politics of history at all passed at the moment when it became clear beyond all doubt that our neighbours were carrying out their own historical policies – at the expense of Poland. It turned out that even our other, smaller neighbours – because you also asked about the smaller countries – were

pursuing their own historical policies. They were not working against Poland at all. This is because there is a space which we can elegantly call 'the memory market.' And there is a limited amount of space here in

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which to work. Here I'll give the example of the Czech Republic; they have an extremely skilful, almost organic, politics of history, which the Czech state has been systematically implementing since the beginning of their recovery of independence. And this has led to a situation where, in school textbooks all over the world, the only example given of German occupation policy [in Europe] is Lidice. There is no mention of the Warsaw Rising, nor any mention of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; it is always Lidice. How did they do that? By sending ready-made texts to officials in specific ministries (I apologise for oversimplifying), most often ministries of education, from Cape Town to Buenos Aires; and by lobbying for that 'ready-made' history to be used – all one has to do is 'copy/paste'. In the last year, three Hollywood films have been made

about the assassination of Heydrich... I know it was a very spectacular event; the Polish underground did not carry out such spectacular actions during World War II. But at this point, one question arises: do we really not have any stories which would be worth telling? This again is the result of an interesting, well-run, enviable – although perhaps deserving of imitation rather than envy – politics of history, which has resulted in the development of a certain

place for the Czechs on the global memory market. And this is not something done by our enemies – because neither Czechoslovakia

was, nor the Czech Republic is, our enemy. We are only, in a sense, competing for the same position on that market. The question is whether we can do something together – or whether we have to argue with the Czechs over this position. Or maybe we can find a space we can cultivate together? Can what is today politically called the Visegrád Group, and historically was Central and Eastern Europe, create some common ground for cooperation together? Would it be just a question of the experiences of the victims of two totalitarian regimes during the twentieth century? Or something deeper, something more?... This is an interesting issue which we are facing today.

Because with regards today's politics of history – and here I agree completely with Professor Suleja – it's good that it exists, but it is certainly extremely unsatisfactory. And its condition can be described in three elements: chaotic, reactive and devoid of any kind of prioritisation.

Meanwhile, the situation is as follows: because we can talk about history forever, on an infinite number of topics, any entity which receives state money, on the basis of any kind of idea or the right connections, can take those funds and spend them under the banner of conducting politics of history. Now, the essential aim should be to organise this effort (which of course is to be undertaken at the taxpayers' expense), and reduce it down to a common denominator called 'politics of history'. Then we should problematize how this phenomenon can be controlled, in order to synergise with the other countries in the region, those which are fighting for a place on the market. Regarding the Czechs, I'll add two more examples of their activities in the field of politics of history: the excellent film about aviators, which was nominated for an

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Oscar [*Tmavomodrý svět; Dark Blue World*; 2001]; and the very good feature film about the heroic battle by one Czech battalion for Tobruk [*Tobruk*, 2008]. In contrast, there aren't any Polish films about the Polish Armed Forces in the West, not to mention Monte Cassino. There is nothing.

So we should – in a more thought-out, long-term way, and co-operating as much as possible with our neighbours with whom we have some points of contact – take the initiative in this direction. And finally: where can I see these points of contact? Well, not only in totalitarianism, not only in our experiences as victims, but also in the experience of this region's original contribution to the history and culture of Europe. We can prove that this is a very important part of Europe, with specific and significant achievements. And there's no

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sense in arguing whether Dvořák or Chopin is more important, or Bartók maybe. Rather, it's worth showing that the work of all of them is equally important for European culture, just as for example... the work of Tchaikovsky is. As for the

second aspect: I think the challenge for today's European memory comes not only from totalitarianism, the memory of totalitarianism, but also from imperialism and the memory of imperialism. Because very often we forget about that, and some of our interlocutors, such as Germany or France, often don't want to acknowledge that the problem in European history is not the nation-state, the nation, but imperialism, empire. The point here is the imperial temptation, to which among others the Germans and the Russians (the latter even

in the pre-Bolshevik era) have succumbed. This is the factor which created a large part of the evil which we had to face in the twentieth century, and to some extent also in the twenty-first century. So I would recommend paying attention – among these priority subjects for our politics of history – to the experience of empires.

WS: Can I ask something? Do I understand, Professor, when you're speaking of these three elements, namely chaos, reactivity and the lack of priority – in the latter case, I presume, the point is that there isn't an authoritative centre that could orient it?

AN: Yes.

AKP: In connection with the recollection of the times after 1989, and the lack of interest from state actors in creating a politics of history, here's a reflection which occurred to me: one definitely cannot leave the conduct of a politics of history to the media alone, because – by their nature – they will lead this discourse towards the extremes, causing extremely strong emotions.

AN: Or to the non-Polish media, to a great extent.

AKP: Yes, that's another very important issue. However, all the media have the habit that, in their pursuit of sensations, they create a kind of media-political discourse which easily allows the selective use of specific historical events to justify different, too often *ad hoc* theses.

Maciej Korkuć [MK]: Let me jump in here, by starting with a gentle correction to the

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words of Professor Nowak. It seems to me that it's important to highlight one element – the Polish underground did not carry out such a spectacular action as the Czechs did with Heydrich. They carried out hundreds of thousands of spectacular ones – yet they didn't strike at such a high-level official.

AN: For the sake of clarification: in the movies I'm talking about, the fact was underlined that the Czechs envy the Polish resistance – how wonderful, how wide-spread it was – "...while they caught every one of us!" That's how they talk in Hollywood films, so I have no complaints here. Only that they got Heydrich. That was really something!

MK: Yes. However, in today's film narrative, focusing on individual stories is enough to ensure that the attack on the local Gestapo is presented in accordance with the facts, as a stunning action by the Underground! For example, a film could be made about Franz Kutschera, or about some other big name.

AN: Pilecki's escape from Auschwitz; now that's a Hollywood story!

MK: Of course!

WS: But Peter Weir would have to film it...

MK: Not necessarily. I think it's just that these Hollywood formats are more accessible

to us than it seems, but it's a question of wanting to do it. Going back to the '90s, I think it is worth noting that the state's turn away from an active politics of history is itself also a politics of history. The fact that the media – of different kinds and at different levels – tried to do their own thing, and

the state didn't do too much at that time, in fact almost nothing; that was also a politics of turning away from history, for example a politics of history. In the '90s, in a sense, we were all still paying for the People's Republic – even the elites operating within the mainstream of political life. And that was reflected – even leaving aside the issue of the state's activity – in the mentality of the public as well, or of that part which was interested in history. It seemed that we had to recover from the Polish People's Republic. It seemed that Poland's role in World War II was so obvious and so clear, that after recovering everything that was associated with Katyn, the Soviet occupation, the essence of Communist Poland as a totalitarian state, we would be able to say more about what we all already know and without any international disputes. Meanwhile, we know today – and I say this personally – that that was a wrong notion; that World War II is today and will remain a fundamental reference point for historical discussions, until – heaven forbid – there comes another conflict which will obscure it (I hope that nothing like that will ever happen). World War II is a point of reference and will remain a point of reference. As the generations pass, it is clear that it will not pass into the shadows; on the contrary, the generations who experienced the war (together with a certain baggage of fundamental truisms) are leaving us today, and it turns out that one can reformat historical experiences in every way possible. Today, through the reinterpretation of history, you can put forward every thesis you can think of, even if it has nothing to do with real historical experiences. And so, in future this task will become more complicated with each subsequent generation.

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Turning to the current state of affairs, it seems to me that this is one of the challenges facing the Polish state today. Part of this challenge is what Professor Nowak referred to as – and here I fully agree – the lack of prioritisation in the historical narrative, its reactivity; the lack of a systemic approach with a perspective of five to ten years, but with a generational effect, aimed at helping the Polish experience to pierce through into the consciousness of Europe and to the wider world. This absence is one of the most important problems for today's Polish politics of history. I think it stems largely from the fact that we still don't grasp sufficiently that politics of history is not only a discussion about history, but that it also represents an important element in today's current international policy, in its economic dimension, in its security dimension, as well as on other planes. Understanding that the reputation of Poland, as something built up with the long-term intention to push our historical experience through into the wider world, is an important element of state power, in any case. This belief should be the basis on which we should finally start constructing a strategy with regards the generational dimension.

AKP: It's also worth mentioning the economic aspect which Professor Chwedoruk has often pointed out in his work. At the moment when politics of history in Poland finally entered an institutional phase, which we can more or less date as having started in 2004 with the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum, the state began to support the politics of history with its own institutions. This activity has replaced or supported both the social activities and the tools which previously existed. Before, after all, we had a rich tradition – in fact from the time of the

partitions – of shaping our own historical consciousness in the face of occupying foreign powers. That was the traditional role of the Polish intelligentsia, as well as the family, tradition, the conveyance of knowledge, and consequently – thanks to the spirit and the idea of the 'organic work' – the endurance of the Polish statehood. However, now, politics of history is an indispensable tool for political action in general, as Dr. Korcuć mentioned. So we cannot simply hand over this area; we should develop it wisely, because the tool is as significant for the state as its economic policy, social policy and so on.

Rafał Chwedoruk [RCh]: I'll tell you, I have waded through dozens of books in five languages on the subject. All of their authors, in the cases of these countries, agreed on their approach to what features a historical politics should have. However, the term 'politics of memory' is more often used – apart, we should note, from in Poland, Germany, Russia and neighbouring countries.

Nevertheless, all the authors of these scientific publications are silent about its functions for making claims or demanding restitution. In practice, these latter issues are usually conceptualised by lawyers, or even more broadly by the judiciary. Meanwhile, when one reads the justification for the accusations or decisions (especially when it comes to settling accounts with dictatorships, both within individual countries and in the international sphere), it's very easy to see that they don't contain any discussions about economics or legislation alone. Instead, the arguments are specific interpretations of history. Sometimes these are very serious visions, based on scientific truth; at other times they are just – I would say – filtered through the media and politicians. Nevertheless,

they exist, starting from the claims and demands for restitution at a transnational level, which relate to very serious sums of money; and ending with smaller things, even at the local level. For example, there is a palace in Sieniawa, which, just like that, the descendants of one of the aristocratic families, Czartoryski, want to be given back to them, in other words, to *de facto* travel back in time. So that has to be accompanied by a determined and well-thought-out vision of history that would justify such a decision. At the same time,

when reading texts from the Polish debate about re-privatisation (property which was nationalised after 1944) – which has been ongoing throughout the '90s and the beginning of the twenty-first century in and around the Sejm – you realise that this is in fact a polemic, and not one which is being undertaken by professional historians, but by lawyers, MPs and so on. The contemporary world is unfortunately based on economics,

commerce, trade, and the global economy has been financialized to the point of absurdity. This also raises the question of where historical truth lies in all this. This shows the scale of the challenge.

So, I think that the first fundamental demand we should make of politics of history is that the more it is based on scientific research and the more it appeals to such research, the better (although that does not mean, of course, that the same research can't

be used to draw different conclusions). But despite it all, a complete detachment (in a postmodern sense) from the possibility of establishing the elementary facts would be very dangerous.

Turning now to this trend in the discussion which my distinguished colleagues here were kind enough to present, I fully subscribe to the narrative that politics of history is always present. It's often been the case that the more a given government, in the name of a specifically prospective orientation, has wanted to break away from the past, the more likely it has been to sink back into that past. For instance, the more the Jacobins wanted to break with the time of royal crimes, the more people chose to call themselves names like Brutus, and the ideal of antiquity became their point of reference. That led to one vision of the past being exchanged for another. The same with the Bolsheviks: an attempt to break away from history led to the devaluation of the history of Russia (or, in short, we might say 'White Russia'), and to the emphasize in history every single one of the small nations which found themselves under Bolshevik dictatorship; all of which ended up, finally – after the rule of a certain well-known Georgian when that history of Russia about which Professor Nowak was kind enough to write – returned.

On the other hand, I think that in the Polish debates, we do not sufficiently appreciate two of the original sources which meant that, when the circle centred around Marek Cichocki, Dariusz Gawin, Dariusz Karłowicz and Kazimierz M. Ujazdowski began to use the term 'politics of history', all of us – both supporters and critics – shouted 'Eureka!' Firstly, when analysing the origin of the term 'politics of history', we can look for a very broad range of historical antecedents for it.

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The Polish authors appealed to the German case. This expression was used – thrown into the debate – by the head of the German Historical Association (VHD), Christian Meier, in 1986, a historian more usually seen as much closer to the right-wing views than to the Social Democracy in Germany. This was how he framed the famous dispute among historians (and *de facto* not only historians) after Ernst Nolte's speech in 1986 (*der Historikerstreit*), calling it – in a somewhat old-school style – a dispute between right and left. Some argued that Germany must become a normal nation, and have a normal story, while others such as Jürgen Habermas said 'no, because it will end the way it did before'.

It is worth noting again that in the Western world, the state was treated for a long time as a stage for politics of history, and not as the subject thereof. It is the state which should lay the ground on which the fencers fence – and it would be best if they were historians (for example, in France in the past decade operated *Mission d'information sur les questions mémorielles* which dealt with the politics of memory in the National Assembly).

Historikerstreit, in this context, simply means a debate, and in this sense a politics of history *did* operate in Poland after 1989. Several researchers – I include myself in this – drew attention to the shallow character of this debate, which in sum was limited to just a few topics. However much we aspired to freedom, political pluralism, democracy and so on, in the '90s we easily adopted this way of thinking – noble in its premises, but which I think is more appropriate for a mature democracy. Also it is appropriate until the beginning of the contemporary structural crisis of those democracies. Yet it

appears that the state cannot withdraw from its role as the subject. Meanwhile, however, this thought was only put in the context of action by the state in twenty-first century Poland – as the honourable professor and doctor have already mentioned.

And the second point, which has already been signalled, was of course the appearance and reception in Poland of the concept proposed by Francis Fukuyama. While it became difficult – especially after 2001 – to defend his thesis when it turned out to be 'story-telling of the purest kind', in Poland after 1989 we didn't realise the world in which we were entering – I do not know whether it was its twilight (which sounds with too much pathos) – or a structural crisis – turns away from its past. This process was helped by the neoliberal revolution which, though made by conservatives, in fact, only retained from the heritage some old factories converted into museums, as Margaret Thatcher did.

MK: We tried this in Poland after some delay.

RCh: Yes, yes. Anyway, Poland's fascination with Thatcher is completely incomprehensible to me, because that famous notion of heritage, which in Poland has also been identified with inheritance, was actually more of the kitsch and nostalgic folklorized culture variety. Oh, let's go and see how the lords used to live. This has all been taken out of context, without the continuity of history; and the museums replacing the mines had to earn money on the market.

FD: So something like the fascination with neo-folk art in the '70s in Poland. I don't know what it was like in other Central European countries...

RCh: Even more so!

FD: ...but here it created a false picture

of past folk culture, which was accepted because of, let's say, the socialist aspirations of the state.

RCh: In the PRL [Polish People's Republic] it was all embedded in the teleological view of history, the basic idea of which was that the Polish people had been heading non-stop towards July 1944 since the time of Mieszko I. Returning to the sources of the debate over politics of history in Poland – the electoral victory of the Law and Justice party in the last decade [2015] marked the end of this debate, and allowed the country to follow the other

countries and continents.

Even the greatest opponents of politics of history in Poland today subscribe to the thesis that it cannot be avoided, and that we should argue about what it should be, and not about whether it should exist at all. The current Polish politics of history – it's good that it exists, even if it is reactive and inconsistent in many respects.

I've listened with great interest to what the previous speakers have said, and I remember well the text by Professor Nowak about our anti-imperialism, with its evocation of Piłsudski. We can draw the conclusion that Western opponents of colonialism might envy us and learn from us. But we aren't able to sell it. Incidentally, I would have added one more thing to

this: we cannot sell anti-fascism. We are the only country that was at war with Germany from 1 September 1939 to 8 May 1945 that did not succumb to any temptation to collaborate, and I'm not talking about different kinds of collaboration, but the very temptation itself.

MK: And, let's add, Poland's state did not take part in the Holocaust for even a second. In any form.

RCh: But of course. None of Poland's state institutions [took part in the Holocaust]. What's more – within its modest scope of possibilities – it tried to punish any such attempts. Meanwhile...

AN: ...in the House of European History in Brussels, our country is marked as one of the fascist countries.

RCh: That's why this museum is a polemic, not something that can effectively fulfil the function for which it was established.

Let's note that the anti-fascist paradigm, as leftist circles call it, still plays an important role in the West. One example of such was Italy. At some point, the communist resistance movement became a reference point for the whole of Italian historiography, and even the Italian centre-right of the '60s decided that it was better to fall in under that banner rather than bear the stigma of Mussolini and the Republic of Salò to the very end.

And we Poles still cannot do that. I don't know if this is an ideological bias, because this would require the government in Poland to give up some aspects of its current vision of history – acknowledging that the Polish Underground State had many ideological currents – and that the unifying factor was primarily the rejection of Nazi totalitarianism.

Our second problem in this context concerns Russia. Russia, whose anti-fascism was one of its last sources of legitimacy in the

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international space, has lost all its others. In this respect, we can consider two options, and at the same time this is our problem.

First, we could enter into a bidding war with Russia over who was more anti-fascist, who started first. That would require us to change and reinterpret certain facts (for example, the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade would then immediately fall out of Poland's politics of history, immediately! And instead, the role of our armed actions would increase). Or the second option: we could try to accept the thesis that the Second World War was a civil war within Europe. In a civil war, as a rule, everyone's a bit guilty.

FD: 'A civil war among white people', as it was allegedly said about the First World War.

RCh: Yes. A whole continent bathed in blood, and basically nobody knows what it was about, maybe it was just so that people could kill each other. Terrible when people kill each other, it should be immediately condemned, and so on; we should be reconciled over those common graves like Mitterrand and Kohl did, and by the way, we should admit guilt.

MK: ...like the Austrians did.

RCh: So our problem is, either we line up together with the Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, etc., or we take the same side as Russia, but we say that we did fight the fascism even more and always uncompromising even cleaner. I don't know the answer to this paradox, but I think this is our structural, long-term – and here I agree with Professor Nowak – dilemma that the effects of World War II will define it. I don't see a simple answer here, especially in light of the generational transformation in Poland.

MK: I think we need to get away from systematising specifically Polish factors.

Here I would still like to return to the concept itself... because in my opinion 'politics of history' and 'politics of memory' are not identical concepts. In my opinion, this is a relationship between a subset and a broader set. Politics of history may vary: it may refer to the state's activity in the field of creating new myths and duplicating lies (or in creating specific concepts that have nothing to do with the facts); or politics of history can simultaneously be a politics which only refers to the facts and the findings of historians, and to building a corresponding narrative in order not to let memory die. And for me this is particularly

important from a Polish point of view: we don't need – like Russia – to maintain old myths or create new ones. Today, Russia has returned to a Stalinist policy: theses from Stalinist times are encased in a Russian imperial outlook, and they are multiplied through the myth of Russia's specific historical role in the twentieth century, which manifests itself in the idea that Russia defeated the greatest enemy of humanity, Adolf Hitler.

However, Poland doesn't need a mythology – either Stalin's, or the right's or the left's – or any other. Poland has a duty to remember precisely because of its

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This is particularly important from a Polish point of view: we don't need – like Russia – to maintain old myths or create new ones.

Maciej Korkuć PhD

own unique historical experience. If we do not try (within a framework of actions measured in generations) to introduce into European thought an understanding of the specifics of our experience, primarily related to World War II, we're always going to float in a vicious circle into which we'll keep trying to introduce a narrative. To the Germans, we'll say that the Russians are beating us; to the Russians, we'll say that the people of Western Europe are beating us, which in turn the Russians will say: hey, so did the Home Army fight with the Red Army? Yes, they did. This means that they were not a reliable ally of the United States (and such a narrative has already emerged). So, does that mean that the United States today should draw the conclusions? So today the Polish army, which is in NATO, promotes the myth of the Home Army's heroism and puts it on a pedestal, while the myth is linked with disloyalty to the coalition – because the Home Army's soldiers fought with the Red Army. The Russian government spokesman, whose name I can't remember now, recently alluded to this topic very clearly.

And these are the lessons which we have not learnt since Communist Poland. I believe that our narrative about World War II has only changed slightly since then (for example, we know that Katyn was the responsibility of the Soviets and not the Germans, and that has to appear in historical textbooks), but more generally we use the same schemes that were devised in the communist period. So, for example, there's no place in them for something which was obvious to the elite in the Polish government and Polish society in general in 1940, namely the existence and operation of two states of war, both caused by unprovoked aggression: the state of war with Germany and the state of war with Russia.

The latter was temporarily suspended in the Sikorski-Maisky Pact, but in 1943 the Russians returned to aggressive action, which should be described as aggression within a coalition. And this is precisely the nature of the uniqueness: Poland was the only country on the map of Europe which was attacked by two types of totalitarian regimes in 1939. Poland was the only country in Europe and the world which, while participating in World War II, while still fighting the Germans, became the subject of a new act of aggression by an ally. And the various entanglements of the Home Army, the Warsaw Rising, resulted from this fact; the strange situations which no other country in the world experienced resulted from that: we were in the camp of the coalition that won the war, yet we were the losers, and we were subjected to Soviet occupation. To understand the specificities, it's essential to understand not only the fact that we had a different point of view from the Soviets or the West; but also, for example, from the Czechs, who had only one enemy, and who weren't entirely forcibly enslaved by the Soviets, but rather they themselves helped build Stalinism [in 1948].

WS: I'm not at all surprised that we're talking primarily about our message to the outside – about a message which involves building the image that we want to achieve in our polemic against the various narratives which are contrary to our narrative. World War II is a perfect example of this. I think in a sense it is essential when it comes to the reputation of our country in international relations. But before we get into this subject and develop it, I'd like to return to the thread which speaks about the use of politics of history for domestic purposes. Because we are not talking about it here, and in my opinion this is extremely important.

AKP: Thank you.

WS: I refer here to the common experience – which I share with Professor Nowak – that we were dealing precisely with the classic politics of history whereby the young generation began to be robbed of history. It's hard to forget about it. If you see all the adventures associated with the way in which the teaching of history was introduced, what took place in this century: and it is very evident that we're moving away, not even from the classic model, – and we have to deal with this postmodern shredding of reality, in order not to actually teach something, but to produce some images which are desirable from someone else's point of view.

MK: To be able to plant anything in their heads.

WS: Well of course. All the leftovers are accepted. There's no doubt about it. If we don't reverse the process, and I hope in some way that is happening, any action that we try to take on the outside will lack the basic foundation which is decisive here. All the time I repeat like a mantra: history is very complicated, and the images [thereof] are more or less diverse; but if we move away from what I believe is incredibly important – from the restoration, by history and historical narrative as well, of an attitude of dignity – then we will not achieve this external effect either. For me these things connect, and without an understanding of their essence, all the elements I have mentioned will be wafted away in the air, and will dissolve.

AN: I'd like to refer to the vision of Professor Chwedoruk, which presents the practical dilemma that we face. Dr. Korcuć has somehow omitted this dilemma, that is, he has set the maximalist task: we have to teach the world and Europe the true vision of Polish history.

MK: That is, to start with ourselves, ourselves first! Create a common narrative!

AN: Yes, I certainly agree with that, God forbid, I'm certainly not criticising this attitude; I even think that we need to preserve it above everything else. Otherwise we will succumb to the temptation to learn different languages in which we will have to talk about our history, at the expense of surrendering its essence. But still the question of languages is important, and Professor Chwedoruk was speaking about the two languages which we are trying to use. And I immediately want to point out that the more dangerous language seems to me the one which says that war is an absolute evil, and therefore we should actually remember World War II and Poland's role in it in terms of Poland's blame for its outbreak. This narrative is already present in Poland as well, in the writings of some columnists. To an extent this type of narrative is represented by Piotr Zychowicz who claims that it would have been best to avoid war, to submit to Hitler; then maybe he would have taken the burden of war upon himself, and we would have found ourselves in the victors' camp.

MK: In their editions of the documents, the Russians cite Zychowicz!

AN: ...and in general, this stubbornness of ours in defending our independence caused the same misfortune; this is the vision, because the war started from this point.

WS: Those unreasonable Poles!

AKP: Yes.

AN: Yes. Without them there wouldn't have been

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a war, there would have been no suffering, and ultimately the Holocaust would not have happened. I think we are heading in this direction – that these unwise, stupid, heroic (or bad, heroic means bad!) Polish attitudes caused something that postmodern sensibilities do not accept: mass suffering. In 1939, the Polish people accepted that they were running the risk of suffering in the name of higher values. Today there is no higher value than the escape from suffering, from trouble, from pain. And this perspective is nothing but a denial, not only of Polish history, but the history of mankind; it's just throwing it into the rubbish bin! It means the confirmation of the narrative which is presented in the above-mentioned House of European History in Brussels, that is: good history begins in 1945, and before that there was nothing good, except maybe Marx.

FD: The history of Europe begins with the French Revolution, and before there was nothing, darkness.

AN: Right. Maybe Marx appears in the darkness of history. However, what is acceptable in the European community has only existed since 1945. Well, this is the most

frightening vision, because it's the most distant from what makes us human. Of course, it's not only the wartime experience which makes us human – we are primarily created by a cultural, historic identity, one built by conflict, which above all requires something

more of us than just an escape from pain. Because escape from pain would mean that we would all still be in the trees, right? No civilisation of any kind would have resulted from that.

Analysing the Soviet (or anti-fascist) language, we see that this isn't good either. And this is a very important contemporary language for Western Europe, due to its very strong position in the European establishment of parties with a communist, and above all a Marxist pedigree.

RCh: The generation of '68 is even more important in the learning environment than those parties.

AN: Yes. And that is why, for example, the first Pole positively portrayed in the exhibition [the House of European History], to which I'll return, is Felix Dzerzhinsky – as someone who somehow tried to defend the October Revolution – and he's a Pole, so we have something to be proud of. Piłsudski is obviously terrible and the worst is Sienkiewicz. There aren't any more Poles there.

Therefore, the adoption of this language is also bad, but we have to bear both languages in mind and understand that they are important. And what then? How can we show our true history, about which Dr. Korcuć was discussing?

I think that first of all we must show the risks which come from the total reductionism of history associated with these two languages. That is to say, one in which not only the war dies off, but also the whole of European culture, because that's the point where the whole European culture disappears, by the way – there is no Bach, no Chopin, no Mozart, no nothing. There is only anti-war rhetoric and Marx, who leads us in the direction of this rhetoric.

WS: ...with a flashlight.

AN: This terrible reduction of experience is also present in the leftist... and actually the communist vision of history. It's not only us who refuse to accept it, but there are many in Europe who can't consent to it either.

The history of Europe begins with the French Revolution, and before there was nothing, darkness.

Franciszek Dąbrowski PhD

I think, therefore, that the task of politics of history in Poland is primarily to show how dramatically primitive and stultifying these two languages (anti-war rhetoric and Marx) are, and how many aspects of reality – not only those related to our history, but to the history of Europe – are simply being thrown aside.

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begin to effectively carry out the task of telling our history the way it really was, with all its nuances. However, this will only be possible after liberating ourselves from the dictates of the alternatives mentioned above; either speaking the language of communism or the language of post-historicity.

MK: Of course, both of these tasks can be performed in parallel.

AN: Yes.

RCh: I would add that these languages and visions of history, or basically these ways of conducting historical narrative, are also guided by the interests of globalisation, of European integration, which promote the universal language of guilt – because it resets everyone's history.

WS: It resets experience.

RCh: And that's appealing to some citizens

I think, therefore, that the task of politics of history in Poland is primarily to show how dramatically primitive and stultifying these two languages (anti-war rhetoric and Marx) are, and how many aspects of reality – not only those related to our history, but to the history of Europe – are simply being thrown aside. So it's necessary to make a broad attempt to stem the expansion of these two languages as the exclusive tools we can use to discuss the past.

And only then can we

in various countries, including Poland. And there's also the game of interests, not only of abstract entities.

AN: 'The thick line'. In a certain European, pan-European sense.

RCh: In a way, yes. In contrast, as I listen to my distinguished fellow speakers, it reminds me of Ferdinand Lasalle, the founder of German social democracy and a great pragmatist, who once said: "Do not tell me where we should go, only how." And I don't think we can settle this question today... Because I, for example, don't see any way at all of breaking out of this dichotomy. Because this dichotomy – and here let me agree only partially – is much more serious. It first involves distinguishing between the concepts of 'memory' and 'history'. I'm sorry, but in the science of history there is no concept of 'memory'. Memory is only one of the sources, for example, the collection of reminiscences.

FD: A tool.

RCh: Yes, one of many tools.

AN: And a primitive tool.

RCh: Regarded as primitive for many years.

FD: Not primitive, but flawed.

RCh: Yes. Limited. However, since the '70s there has been a so-called 'memory turn', where somewhere in other fields – first on the border areas of sociology, then in its mainstream – memory has been fully revealed. But this memory is understood

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Prof. Rafał Chwedoruk

quite differently here; the study of history is not based on what really happened, but rather just on how people felt, how people today remember it to be.

FD: The study of narrative. That's how written sources are also being considered now.

AN: This is simply part of the postmodern mainstream.

RCh: Yes. And this is one problem that disrupts both right and left from inside the intellectual debate. Because there is also a right-wing postmodernism, which demands ethical reflection, involvement and a consideration of systems of values in historians' interpretation of

the past, as history is important, for example, to the national community. And this problem has yet another angle. Until the 1970s history, and above all political history, focused on tales of great deeds and heroes; even the mainstream of social history, which was especially fashionable in the UK and Germany, dealt with the fate of

large social groups, for example. The notion of the Holocaust was not yet being used. Israel was based on the memory of the Ghetto Fighters, and even the Israeli right sought inspiration in the Maccabees. Both the democratic Western countries (not just in Italy, but for example in the United States with 6 June [D-Day]) and the communist states did the same. In this game, there were no fundamental differences, but rather just an auction: who played the greater role, who had the bigger heroes, and so on. It wasn't any different in Communist Poland. In the People's Republic, the Ghetto Uprising was part of the history of the Polish resistance movement.

FD: There remains the impression that this narrative was created by people raised in nineteenth-century historiography, which mainly shows great rulers, great characters, great events, and reduces history to these things.

RCh: Yes, of course. And this narrative was later adapted by... let's call it revolutionary-leftist historiography: the crowned heads were replaced by the heroic peasants (in Communist Poland, the uprisings in the nineteenth century were assessed with regard to their relationship to the peasants' question, and the other issues became secondary). Incidentally, as we've mentioned Karl Marx, I can't avoid reflecting that he was the biggest Polonophile in the nineteenth century, whose vision of an independent Poland was a vision of a power which would be militarily directed against Russia. If today we presented the views of Marx in one of the liberal periodicals in Poland, and we asked the readers to guess who had written it, most would assume it was a figure from the hard right.

[laughs]

MK: Marx wasn't consistent in what he wrote...

RCh: No, he absolutely was consistent in what he wrote to the end. This was a man who chronically hated Russia, something which Russia willingly recalls today, right? Marx and his followers are recognised there today as the destroyers of the Tsarist Empire's growing power.

AN: So I would like to submit one specific proposal for Poland's politics of history. Helena Michnik published a large volume on Marx and the Polish question [*Marks i Engels o Polsce. Zbiór materiałów w dwóch tomach* (Marx and Engels on Poland. A collection of materials in two volumes), ed. H. Michnik,

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Prof. Rafał Chwedoruk

introduction by C. Bobińska, Warsaw 1960] which is a really excellent collection, published in the original language, German, and in Polish. And now this collection should be published in English. The IPN (or some other institution) should do it, because such a release would play a powerful role in the reception of Poland's politics of history... we only have to ask Mrs. Michnik's son [Adam] for the rights to reprint it, because from a scientific viewpoint the work was very solidly done.

[laughs]

AKP: If you can submit it to the President of the IPN... [laughs]. Then, of course, we'll certainly do it.

AN: But I'm serious now, because it's very important! This source should be promoted by all possible means, and in English!

RCh: ...to finish the thought – once again we have our dilemma: should we – in order to be understood and to retain our truth and our specificity – talk about our heroes (and we can think about who'd be on that list), or must we also present ourselves primarily as victims?

I'm not enthusiastic about the latter option, but it has a certain force. We are the greatest victims, because some wanted to exterminate us, and others wanted – at least – to turn us into a satellite. But it's not that simple, because we live in a strange world: today everyone wants to celebrate their successes (like the United States), but on the floodplain of history, everyone really wants to join the group of victims and issue a bill – see how much we suffered, now you have to pay us back! Pay us back! And at this time, we're doing one thing and the other at the same time, and I'm afraid that we just look a little bit too lightweight.

MK: But I think this dilemma is different.

To close the question, I'll say briefly: the essence of things doesn't lie in the question of whether we should talk about our sacrifices or about our heroes; but only in response to the question of "who are 'our people'?" Who do we mean by this? Because we aren't describing the Second World War, and so we are not at all describing the Polish experience from 1918 until the present day, unless we recall that the mainstream narrative of twentieth-century history, and especially during World War II, is a mainstream narrative about the history of states: states as actors which take decisions, attack, or form alliances, or are on the side of the Allies or the Axis, or remain neutral. But this is the trend of the story of the state. A lot was done to blur it out during the communist period in Poland.

RCh: But on the contrary...

MK: Yes, of course! With respect to World War II, the communist narrative went like this: 1939 was the war fought by the state – the state of Poland. In 1941, that state still functioned (when Gen. Sikorski signed an agreement with Stalin in its name), but later this gets blurred, and somehow turns into a government-in-exile; and the power slowly, from 1944, begins to find itself on the street and the internal 'revolutionary forces' take it up. And they are the ones who supposedly rebuilt the state. The narrative doesn't include what should be obvious in the textbooks today: that Stalin did not win

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Prof. Rafat Chwedoruk

power in Poland and did not hand power to the communists. He took power at a time when the state itself had been fighting for independence in the Allied camp since 1939, and he did so by building up an alternative state structure and planting it in Polish soil through the use of violence.

And only this statement allows us to explain our complex circumstances: the dilemmas of the Warsaw Rising, the soldiers of the Home Army, explaining that it wasn't just some unspecified conspirators whom the Russians arrested, but the soldiers of an allied army, the armed forces of the Republic of Poland. This is the key – in my opinion – to the narrative on the front, the 'Soviet' front, in quotes. But it is also an important key to the narrative about phenomena such as the Holocaust; a key to the narrative when we ask about collaboration. Was there any collaboration or not? Poland did not hand over any of its services to co-operate with Germany. And there was no Polish collaboration.

WS: With respect, there was the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN).

MK: The phenomenon of the totalitarian states which entered Polish territory using their citizens for their own purposes – that's something completely different...

AN: No, there was collaboration with the Soviets on a large scale...

MK: But again it is the same issue: a totalitarian state which came here and created its own order, and used the Poles...

AN: ...but with the voluntary participation of the Poles, unlike the case of the Third Reich.

MK: But that leads to the conclusion (I'll insist on sticking to my story) that we don't have a problem with talking about an officer from the UB [communist security police] or about the crimes, just as we don't have a problem

talking about the 'navy-blue uniform' policeman [Polish police under German command in the Generalgouvernement] and his crimes, because one was an officer of the totalitarianism created by Stalin and the other was a functionary of the totalitarianism created by Adolf Hitler and the Reich.

AN: I get the impression that Dr. Korcuć is talking about very important matters, specific and difficult, and practically unexplainable to anyone outside. These are things which can be understood by you, sir, by the IPN's historians, maybe by a group of enthusiasts within Poland. Explaining this in a simple form, not even to a mass audience, but to the average, or even highly educated recipient in the West, absolutely exceeds the capacity of any country, because it requires the teaching of history – the precise teaching of history to the recipient. And we can't achieve this. In contrast, I'll return to the question: what should the priority be in such a case? And here let me disagree head-on with Dr. Korcuć over the assessment that only World War II is important and will remain important, and will be the most important thing. No, the tendency in postmodernism is such that World War II may at any moment become just as important as the Second Punic War. [laughs] Obviously I'm joking, but only to a certain extent. Because today the period of Martial Law [1981] is just as abstract for young people as the First World War – there is no difference. Therefore, it's only a matter of mass culture, the commissions that appear in it, to create one historical frame of reference or another. And what should we do in this situation, if we acknowledge – tentatively – that we should focus only (or mainly) on the history of the Second World War? Well, I think that if you broaden the spectrum of history which we draw

upon, we see that we have more opportunities for telling our story. And we must not remain a victim of this reduction – for example: are we accused of the Holocaust or not; were we heroes in World War II or not? And this – I insist – is a huge resource, which is culture, and which is also life, that is, not the life of either a victim or a hero. But it is a life which accumulates very important cultural products which locate us within Europe, within a certain community of values, of traditions, which we can draw from in different directions. And I think that the centralisation which I'm appealing for, the prioritisation which I'm appealing for does not mean uniformity, but rather diversity: in addressing different audiences at the same

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WS: That means multithreading.

AN: For example, in the Arab world (a very important recipient, why don't we think of the Arab world as a recipient of our vision of history?) poetic tradition is very important. Poets aren't as important in the culture of the Western world, but in the culture of the Arab world they're

very important. This is a place where we can promote our romantic poets. It sounds abstract, but you just have to look at it.

MK: There is no dispute here. If I'm talking

about the Second World War, I'll put more emphasis on prioritising that field; and I completely agree: we should pay attention to the world of Chopin and Copernicus, which is often forgotten.

AN: I also think that we can't forget that there are about a billion Catholics worldwide. Emphasising our Catholic identity in relation not to the salons of Brussels, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, but to a billion other recipients across the world who are also important, and we can't forget them. The fact that Poland is a country of important saints – the country of Kolbe, Pope John Paul II, the Blessed Sister Faustina, etc. – this is a very important aspect of our politics of history, addressed to a slightly different audience. Professor Chwedoruk has talked about the victim/hero dichotomy. But there are also people in the world for whom the vision of sacrifice is important, as well as those who read the stories of heroes. And they live in the same communities. The undimmed demand for biographies of various great figures on the shelves of British and American bookstores testifies that the demand for heroes hasn't dropped off at all.

MK: This is the way – through a combination of both – in which Israel is progressing today.

AN: So we have to publish books about both Piłsudski and Chopin. We also need to make movies – talking about the heroes and the role of the victim at the same time. The one does not exclude the other, because these markets of memory overlap, and I think that a well-considered politics of history can develop many of those – I would say – niches on that market (sorry for sticking with this clumsy metaphor). We need to recognise them well and build properly on the strengths

we have. And we have a great variety of them. In the case of the Holocaust... I think that the best way is to show the immense richness of Jewish life which was here for a thousand years. After all, the fate and history of the Jews is not only based on being victims. At the beginning the Polin Museum did just that, before it became an ideologically-committed institution, and this activity was something very good... Both in Israel and among Jews living in other countries we can find many allies – those who take their history seriously. So it isn't only a question

of continually defending ourselves against the lies, though of course a defence against the false images is extremely important.

WS: ...yes, exactly, they were here...

AN: ...they were here and they created something fascinating in their interaction with Polish, Christian culture, and the experience of Jews on Polish soil is not only the Holocaust.

So I think that there are hundreds of ways in which we should try to tell our history, opposing the reductionism of language – whether communist or post-communist, or post-historical language. That's how it seems to me.

MK: But at the same time, we should not be afraid of our martyrdom, we should treat the Holo-

caust as part of our martyrdom as well.

AKP: I have another question for Professor Nowak. Do you think you could see an opportunity, in the present conditions in Poland, to construct and operate a mechanism which would allow us to agree on the objectives of politics of history at the level of the state – both domestically and externally?

AN: It seems to me that the only natural centre is the president, because this office stands, or rather should stand, above current political divisions, and can break through the departmentalism which means that both the IPN and the departments in the Foreign Ministry have their own historical policies – in fact, right now almost every ministry wants to have its own politics of history. So I think that only the president could form such a centre, if the president wanted to, but for now it doesn't seem to me that he has expressed any intention in this direction.

FD: There's yet another issue: politics of history, and coming to a consensus on it, is not only a question of institutions. It's also a matter of social strata, even of individual activists, cultural or social, if we can say so. And here the mechanism to reach such a consensus seems to be quite difficult, because everyone has their own opinion.

WS: That's not the point. I think we're dealing with the question of accepting what we should bring outside. And I'm not talking about a single image here, but something...

AN: ...pluralised, which contains the various sensitivities within itself...

WS: ...but not one which is – to use a colloquialism – depressing, but one that should convey a positive message, addressed to the outside. And that is where the trouble lies.

AN: It has to be consistent with the truth.

WS: Of course, consistent with the truth.

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Prof. Andrzej Nowak