

## Marta Titaniec

### The Polish perspective

This year Poland celebrates a centenary of regaining its independence. Poland became independent in 1918, after 123 years of its non-existence on the map of Europe. Freedom lasted only 21 years, until 1939, i.e. until the outbreak of World War II.

The Polish experience of the Second World War is an experience of 2 totalitarianisms: the German Nazism and the Soviet communism.

Poland was split between Germans and Soviets. The two occupants adopted a very brutal policy on the occupied territories. The goal was to destroy both the Jewish and the Polish nation. Polish intelligentsia, officials, policemen and clergymen were arrested and killed methodically. The symbol of the German occupation was Auschwitz, the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, and also, for several years, the Warsaw Uprising, while the symbol of the Soviet occupation was deportations to Siberia and the Katyn massacre (killing of 22 000 Polish officers).

The war balance: 5.5 million killed, i.e. 17% of the society. This was the largest percentage of victims in the world, including almost 3 million of the Jewish population.

After the war, on the basis of the Yalta Conference, the Polish borders were shifted to the west and established on the Oder and Neisse rivers, and on the Bug River in the east. Poles, Ukrainians and Germans were resettled forcibly. Poland became an ethnically and religiously homogenous state.

After 1945

Poland was liberated by the Soviet Union, which immediately after the war killed members of the Polish underground army, Home Army. A puppet communist government was established. The nation's remembrance was shaped and used by the communist propaganda, and whoever resisted was fought bloodily, however, Poles were anti-communists to a high extent. The remembrance about the war and Auschwitz was born under this system.

The communist propaganda invented Germany as the enemy and scared people with it. An "external enemy" was invented to convince people about the Polish-Soviet friendship. Oświęcim (Auschwitz) played an important role in it and it had a strong presence in propaganda. Yet, remembrance was instrumentalised, and the Jewish remembrance was absent at all, since a strongly homogenous vision of the Polish society was created, in which Germany acted against Poland and the Poles.

Throughout the communist period any mentioning of the Warsaw Uprising (in which ca. 200 000 persons perished, including 180 000 civilians) was forbidden. The uprising broke out, because Poles wanted to liberate the capital on their own, in order not to depend on the Soviet Union.

In the face of the prohibition to commemorate the Warsaw Uprising, Auschwitz was used as a symbol of the German crime, because nowhere else so many Poles were killed in a single place

(75 000 plus 150 000 people were deported). The reason why the Jewish victims were marginalized was the scale of the Polish victims' drama, which was so huge that there was no room for thinking about others. Also, the communist concept needed a homogenous vision of the society, within which there was no room for others and for strangers, whereas the Jewish community was instrumentalised in a politically favourable moment, i.e. in 1968, and expelled from Poland. Until the end of 1970's, the Polish remembrance was dominated by German perpetrators and Polish victims in order to draw focus away from Soviet crimes.

The struggle for identity lasted in Poland until the end of 1970's. In 1966, Poland celebrated 1000 years of the origin of the Polish state. Separate celebrations were held, on a large scale, by the communist state and separately by Church, which had run an extensive national retreat for 10 years (the national novena in years 1957-1966), and in 1966, 500 000 people gathered in the national shrine of Częstochowa, which came as a great shock to the communist authorities. The genesis of the Solidarity movement, which contributed to the collapse of communism, is said to have been initiated in this process and in the activity of John Paul II. In the year being the 1000th anniversary of Poland's baptism, the Polish bishops wrote a letter to the German bishops with a request to reconcile: "we forgive and we ask for forgiveness." Church acted as a representative of the society, which was the role which, in a democratic system, should be assumed by the state. This gesture was highly criticised by the communist authorities, for which the anti-German narration was predominant. Primate Wyszyński was called a traitor and Church was called a collaborator.

The way of organising remembrance was religious at that time, as it took place in the space of Church, which was a depository of the remembrance.

In 1971, Father Maximilian Kolbe was beatified, which became a huge stimulus to reflect upon Auschwitz, the activity which was conducted by the Church. There was some fear in the church circles regarding the beatification, since this person forms a link between Germans and Poles.

Beginning with the end of 1970's, remembrance about the Second World War changed, as a strong anti-communist opposition was established. Underground publications started to be printed and distributed. A great number of such publications led to the creation of a public debate.

In the times of communism, a debate on parting with the Polish eastern territories, i.e. Vilnius, Lvov and Grodno, was frozen, and after 1989, nobody had time for it or it seemed to have been "worked through" in exile (Miłosz).

In 1980's and later, the regime was weakening, so the Warsaw Uprising, which was the work of the anti-Soviet resistance, gained recognition. The role of Auschwitz diminished. The Warsaw Uprising began to prevail, although in recent years it has been pushed back by the so-called Cursed Soldiers, continuing their armed struggle against the communist government of Poland after 1945. The second reason is that the Jewish victims of Auschwitz gained more recognition and the camp started to be referred to as the place of extermination of the Jews.

In 1989, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after turning communists away from power, the historic narration changed. Yet, the historic revision was a slow process. There was no vetting in Poland, so the historic remembrance has not freed itself sufficiently and it is burdened with

connotations with the successors of communism, which can be seen in contemporary politics from time to time.

So, three trends struggled with one another after 1989: post-communist, pro-European, liberal at the same time, and right-wing. Each of them had a different historic narration concerning war victims and Auschwitz. The post-communist one does not count. The pro-European trend, seeing in Germans a European promoter, did not take up the subject of Poland's war losses, which were passed over after 1945, due to communism. The right-wing trend, prevailing in the Polish politics since 2015, strongly emphasises the ties with the pre-war tradition, with the Home Army, and also, it runs a revisionist historic policy, pointing out huge war losses of Poland, which have not been settled until now (which caused deterioration in the relations with Germany) and it also underlines decades of distorting history by the so-called "elites" (including in free Poland after 1989). This narration blocks the revision of true Polish-Jewish relations. A lot is said about the Righteous Among the Nations, not mentioning the Poles' participation in pogroms against the Jews during World War II and after the war. The importance of the Warsaw Uprising is highlighted and the post-war anti-Soviet underground army, called the Cursed Soldiers, as they had been erased from memory, is glorified.

There are three drivers of triggering nationalist emotions in Poland: an anti-German attitude, anti-Semitism and an anti-Ukrainian attitude. It can be observed since 2015, when a conservative party (Law and Justice, PIS) came to power.

### Challenges

**Relations with Jews:** A renowned amendment of the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) of January 2018, which spoilt Polish-Jewish-American-Ukrainian relations, was to punish "whoever, publicly and against facts, ascribes responsibility or co-responsibility for crimes committed by the Third German Reich or other crimes against humanity, peace and war crimes, to the Polish nation or the Polish state, shall be subject to a fine or imprisonment up to three years. The same penalty may be imposed for "gross diminishing of responsibility of real perpetrators of such crimes." However, there were few statements about "Polish death camps" (ca. 100 within a year). **The goal of this amendment was to "defend the truth about the Polish fate and to defend the reputation of Poland and the historic truth."** On 27 June 2018, the Polish Parliament removed a provision concerning punishment for ascribing responsibility for crimes of the Third Reich to the Polish nation.

The present narration emphasises strongly the role of the Polish Righteous Among the Nations (a new museum in Markowa (the Ulm family, including 6 children, murdered for hiding Jews), construction of a museum called Remembrance Identity by Father Rydzyk), while we have not worked through Poles' participation in the extermination of Jews. There have been extensive debates, but it is difficult to talk about the third category of a witness and a participant.

**Relations with Ukraine:** The Wolhynia massacre and the interpretation of those events remains an open wound. We can speak about the "Polish-Ukrainian battle of remembrance." On the one hand, since the Euromaidan, Ukraine has emphasised its historic struggle for independence, and on the other one, Poland underlines the role of Poles in the struggle against external aggressors. Presently, there is a deadlock in the formal Polish-Ukrainian relations. On the one side, monuments are destroyed, and on the side, there is a prohibition to exhume the Wolhynia massacre victims. The conflict escalates. Poland is losing its coalition-building capabilities in this part of Europe. Since 2015,

there has been a change in the approach to the eastern policy, which was conducted in the Third Republic of Poland (Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński and Bronisław Komorowski), and the foundations of which were laid down, as we might say, by John Paul II, whose pilgrimage to Poland in 1991 was one big call for closing historic disputes.

The Law on the Institute of National Remembrance: “The provisions enabling initiation of criminal proceedings for denying crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists and Ukrainian formations which collaborated with the Third German Reich are still applicable.” It also means recognising Ukrainians, and hence also free Ukraine, as one of the main enemies of Poles and Poland. The historic policy regards, as one of the pillars of the Polish national identity, the remembrance about the dramatic Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Wolhynia, yet only in the version according to which exclusively Poles were the victims, and Ukrainians were exclusively the murderers.

At the same time, Poland was strongly involved in help during the Maidan Revolution and almost 2 million Ukrainians live presently in Poland.

It is interesting that the Polish-Ukrainian dialogue began 30 years ago, in 1987, when Ukraine prepared for the celebrations of the centenary of the baptism of Kievan Rus in 1988.

- 2003 – a pastoral letter of Greek Catholics – appeal for reconciliation
- 2005 – a joint letter of both Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences
- 2013 – a joint declaration of both Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences (call for joint testimony)
- 2015 – a joint document on reconciliation (Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences)
- 2016 – a communication of the Polish Bishops’ Conference on reconciliation

**Relations with Russia:** The Smolensk air crash, support for Ukraine during the Revolution of Dignity, demolishing Russian monuments, maintenance of sanctions against Russia and suspension of border traffic with the Kaliningrad Region deepen mistrust. Presently, the Polish-Russian relations are treated by both parties as the worst since the Second World War.

**Relations with Germany:** comeback of the subject of war reparations, which were closed for a long time.

The role of Church becomes more and more important. Its current task is to look for its orientation and place in Europe as a part of the community and related tasks.