



The pendulum of memory. The (lack of)knowledge about German war crimes.

## ARTYKUŁ

# The pendulum of memory. The (lack of)knowledge about German war crimes.

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A lot was written and spoken about the crimes of the Third Reich during the Communist era - although in accordance with the official narration. After 1989, the memory about them gradually withered and a generation gap was created among its researchers. It's dangerous, especially in light of the aggressive historical policy of Germany.

-What did your father do during the war?

- He was lucky enough not to had been sent to the front. He served in a reserve Wermacht company at Hannover. In the kitchens.

- Like everyone – commented Boznański.

- It was an especially large kitchen with especially huge number of people.

- Yes, I've been travelling across Germany for so many years and never have I met any relatives of the officers of the SS who served in Warsaw, first slaughtered 200 thousand people in a few weeks, then burned the entire city down, and finally took Wyczółkowski as a souvenir so their grandchildren could erase the signatures a few decades later and, with the help of some experts, earn a proper coin for holidays in Thailand.

Such dialogue between a Polish and German art dealer can be found in the latest thriller by Zygmunt Miłoszewski, entitled *Priceless*. The novel tells the story of a search for the *Portrait of a Young Man* by Raphael, the number one on the list of Polish war losses<sup>1</sup>.

Contrary to the Soviets, the Germans lost the war and were brought to criminal responsibility for their crimes. However, in the post-war trials only some of the criminals were judged and sentenced.

I'm quoting this fictional conversation, because it paints a remarkably accurate picture of the memory and emotions of part of our society regarding the German war crimes committed at the Polish lands during the Second World War. The next stages of this phenomenon I would describe as a pendulum of memory which balances between the crimes committed by the two totalitarian regimes which divided Poland among them in September of 1939. The German crimes we call the forgotten crimes, while the Soviet ones – the mendacious crimes.

## **The Nuremberg Trials and cold winter**

Both occupiers broke the rules of the 4<sup>th</sup> Hague Convention from 1907 which described the rules of land war and the governance of conquered and occupied territories.

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**Execution in Kościan, 1939 Photo:**

**AIPN**

The International Court Martial in Nuremberg, processing since November 20<sup>th</sup> 1945, judged Hans Frank, the General Governor of part of the Polish lands. As one of the main criminals he was sentenced to death in 1946. Other architects and perpetrators of German occupying policies in Poland stood before the Supreme National Tribunal created on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1946. It's worth noting Arthur Greiser, the governor of *Reichsgau Wartheland*, sentenced to death several months before Frank. During his trial, the judges pointed out a certain double nature of the German soul: "No other nation can combine cruelty and elements of virtual kindness in its family and private lives."<sup>2</sup> Greiser was executed on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1946 in front of the gathered crowds in what came to be the last public execution in Poland. The Supreme National Tribunal sentenced to death more Nazi criminals, among others Ludwig Fischer, the former head of the Warsaw district as well as several of his assisting officers and Albert Forster, the former governor of the Gdańsk-Western Prussia region.

Most of the Germans responsible for murdering the Polish population have never had to stand trial. According to Andrew Nagorski, the author of the novel *Nazi Hunter*:

Following [...] the allied trials, the German courts began treating the wrongdoings of the accused as single murders. It was incredibly difficult to document. That is why there were so little cases and why such a small number of people paid the price for what they had done during the war. The number of those who were put

on trial, sentenced to death or imprisoned for their actions is a small percentage compared to the scale of the operation.<sup>3</sup>

## **Kidnapping of Eichmann**

Many German criminals hid after the war to avoid punishment. The example of SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann, one of the most active architects of the “final solution to the Jewish question” during all its stages, is one exceptionally spectacular. He was also the main organiser of the forced Polish relocations. He never directly participated in the executions, although he witnessed many of them. He was a typical “perpetrator from behind the desk”. At the end of the war, he hid himself and then fled to Argentina. Information regarding his whereabouts came to light by complete accident. They were found by Fritz Bauer, a western German prosecutor. He gave the case to the Israeli authorities, pressing them to take actions. Eichmann, caught in 1960 and abducted by the Israeli intelligence, stood before a court in Jerusalem. His trial, made loud by the media, was the first confrontation of the public opinion of the world with the Holocaust on such a scale. Eichmann answered for his participation in the murder of Jews, but the indictment also included other crimes against humanity. Point 9 (in the “crimes against humanity” category) mentioned the “deportation of half a million Polish civilian population from their place of living in order to settle Germans in their place”. Eichmann was executed by hanging and his ashes were scattered in the sea.



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**The “Valley of Death” in Bydgoszcz, 1939 Photo: MR Bydgoszcz**

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base for the crimes on the Polish population, were left almost entirely unpunished. The prime example for this would be Theodor Schieder, a historian and member of the NSDAP party since 1937, who prepared a memorial *The matters of relocation and nationality policies at the recovered lands* for the needs of SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler and his Reich's Commissariat for Strengthening Germanness.

### **A father of German historiography**

German scholars, creating a pseudoscientific base for the crimes on the Polish population, were left almost entirely unpunished. The prime example of this would be the story of Theodor Schieder, a historian and member of the NSDAP party since 1937, who prepared a memorial *The matters of relocation and nationality policies at the recovered lands* for the needs of SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler and his Reich's Commissariat for Strengthening Germanness. He was an associate of the gauleiter of Eastern Prussia, Erich Koch in terms of population policy at the occupied Polish lands. After the war, he was positively verified in a trial and became a professor at the Colony in 1948. He is considered to be one of the founding fathers of contemporary German historiography. One of his areas of expertise became documenting the "escapes and relocations" of the German population which took place by the end of the war and immediately after it.

### **Scientific research and collective memory**

During the Communist era the pendulum of memory tipped more towards the German crimes. For more than half a century no one was allowed to speak about the Soviet aggression from September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1939, the German-Soviet alliance, the Katyń massacre, the mass deportations to the east and the depolonisation of the Borderlands. In turn, a historical policy was introduced which consequently shaped the social identity of the Polish population on the basis of remembering German crimes. However, the story was under strict control of the official, state narration. Such matters like the annihilation of the state-shaping elites of the Second Republic of Poland, fate of the Polish landlords and aristocracy and forced relocation of the last remnants of the "privileged classes" were simply omitted. Some details regarding the deportations of Poles from the lands taken by the Third Reich were also excluded, since it would be necessary to mention the German-Soviet

cooperation during the ethnic exchange from various parts of occupied Poland. The subject of the Polish Underground State (more often described as “the resistance”) and conspiracy was strictly censored. Edward Serański wrote *Greater Poland under the shadow of the Svastika* which originally counted 1200 pages. After censorship the book came out with half of that number, in the year 1970. Due to similar reasons, no full list of the material and personal war losses came out.

By the end of the Communist era, the politically narrowed down knowledge and historical education, rooted in the times of Gomułka and Gierek, had already taken a form of a state ritual which – maybe apart from the veteran communities and their families – lacked any authentic social interest.



**Execution in Konin, 1939 Photo:**

**IZ Poznań**

## **On the side lines**

Following the political changes of 1989, the pendulum swung back towards the Soviet crimes. It is perfectly understandable, since for half a century talking about them was persecuted by the Communist prosecution as the “Katyń lie”. The interest of researchers, editors, filmmakers as well as most of the society became directed towards filling in the “blank spots” regarding the Soviet repressions. The German crimes were pushed to the side lines. A common belief prevailed that since this subject was touched on for decades, had countless research and scientific work done on it, then it needed no further care nor special focus.

In the Polish school book for the first class of high school e.g. we can see a map marked with various places of genocide of the Jewish population but, at the same time, places of mass murder of Polish elites are nowhere to

be found. The situation of Poles at the lands joined to the Third Reich is also omitted.

After twenty years of marginalising the issue, the memory of the German occupation faded away in the collective consciousness and, what's worse – a generation gap was created among the researchers. It coincided with the German offensive historical policy – intense actions of journalists, filmmakers as well as some politicians and researchers – aiming to raise the subject of collaboration of other nations during the time war crimes were being committed and to change the adjective “German” to “Nazi”. The narration of German historian, Götz Aly, which we can find in his book *Hitler's People's State*, presenting the issue of the general participation of ordinary Germans in the crimes, is rather an exception:

[...] it needs to be stated that the German government did not change most of the Germans into fanatics or devoted supporters of the new power. However, the government often managed to make them into its beneficiaries – of larger or smaller calibre. Many Germans succumbed to a rush similar to that of gold prospectors, living with the hope of imminent fortune with money lying on the streets. As the entire state had become a criminal syndicate, ordinary people transformed into passive, corruptible clients of the system. Soldiers became armed butter salesmen. Common folk took ownership of goods which a few years prior they had had no knowledge of. [...] If someone doesn't want to talk about the benefits of millions of ordinary Germans, then that person should not speak up about national socialism or the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

## **The past is inaccurate**

The past is i n a c c u r a t e. Who has lived long enough knows how much what he had seen with his own eyes has become a rumour, a legend, a changing news. <<It wasn't like that at all!>> - you would like to shout, but you won't, since all they'd see would be lips moving without a sound

- Czesław Miłosz accurately diagnosed the problem of the collective memory in one of his essays.

The time of the witnesses of history is inevitably coming to an end. In a few years, the knowledge passed on

in memories of direct witnesses of the German war crimes will ultimately disappear. School books don't make the problem any easier as they are often written in the spirit of political correctness where stress is put on different aspects of history. In the Polish school book for the first class of high school e.g. we can see a map marked with various places of genocide of the Jewish population but, at the same time, places of mass murder of Polish elites are nowhere to be found. The situation of Poles at the lands joined to the Third Reich is also omitted. Polish students won't learn that in the initial stage of the Auschwitz camp's activities it was the Polish intelligentsia which was massively exterminated there.<sup>5</sup>

How to talk about martyrdom to effectively reach the minds of the youth? It is a challenge which the contemporary historical education needs to face. Writers achieved some success in this field. The aforementioned thriller by Miłoszewski, despite being a fiction, includes a lot of actual knowledge about the theft of Polish pieces of art. The family story by Anna Janko *Minor Genocide* (2015) about a trauma present to this day, inherited from her mother – a child from Zamojszczyzna, is very captivating. Nonetheless, the imagination and collective memory are first and foremost shaped by TV series. The popularity of the *Time of Honor* shows that it's possible to bring back the memory and interest in the Silent Unseen. Very needed is a series touching on the everyday life under occupation. Unfortunately, the best film on this subject so far, *Polish roads*, was created during the Communist era.

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<sup>1</sup> Z. Miłoszewski, *Bezcenny*, Warsaw 2013, p. 85

<sup>2</sup> P. Świątkowski, *Polakom i psom wstęp wzbroniony. Niemiecka okupacja w Kraju Warty*, Poznań 2017, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Naziści: nierozliczone zbrodnie*, „Uważam Rze Historia” 2017, nr 1, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> G. Aly, *Państwo Hitlera*, Gdańsk 2014, p. 393–394.

<sup>5</sup> S. Roszak, J. Kłaczek, *Poznać przeszłość. Wiek XX. Podręcznik do historii dla szkół ponadgimnazjalnych. Zakres podstawowy*, Warsaw 2012.