

POLICY PAPER

The ups and downs of Polish-German reconciliation and lessons for the Western Balkans

Adam Balcer, Klaus Ziemer

- In 2017, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the “Reconciliation and Remembrance” seminar, which aims to share the experience of Polish-German reconciliation as an inspiration for improving relations between the Western Balkan nations and overcoming historical barriers.
- The project is implemented in cooperation with the Krzyżowa Foundation and the German Embassy. Certainly, Polish-German reconciliation may serve to a certain degree as a source of inspiration for the similar processes taking place in the Western Balkans.



The relevance of Polish-German reconciliation stems from its showcase or paradigmatic character. Lily Gardner Feldman who has studied the policy of reconciliation of post-war Germany and Poland found that its success was based on the fulfilment of five criteria which are crucial in any process of reconciliation:

1. "Visions". Politicians must know what the relations between their states and societies should look like in the future and conceive a strategy towards realization of this aim.

2. "Leadership". A politician who is convinced of his "vision" should try to implement it even against political opposition.

3. "Symbols". They give the process of reconciliation a necessary emotional dimension.

4. "Coming to terms with history". This concerns on the one hand the sincere discussion of historians of both sides on difficult questions of common history. On the other hand, crimes committed must be punished.

5. "Continuity of institutional cooperation". Important for the persistency of grass-root bilateral cooperation is lasting public financial support, e.g. for partnerships between towns.

On the other hand, the idea of Polish-German reconciliation as a point of reference for such processes in the Western Balkans faces certain limitations. The main difference between Polish-German reconciliation and Western Balkan cases originates from the peculiarity of the legacy of past in the first case. Coming to terms with the divisive past of the Western Balkans requires discussion on not only the most recent conflicts (1991-1999) between Serbs and their neighbours (Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats)

but also the legacy of confrontations between them taking place in 19-20th centuries, including during WW II. Meanwhile, the legacy of WW II occupies a central place in Polish-German reconciliation. However, the death toll (of at least 2 million ethnic Poles), the dramatic asymmetry between the number of Polish and German victims respectively, and simplicity (Nazi Germany as the main perpetrator) reflect key differences between the Polish-German case and that of the wider Western Balkans.

The genocide committed by the Croatian fascists (Ustasha)² against the Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia represents relatively the most similar case to the Nazi German massive extermination of Poles. However, even in that case considerable differences may be observed. For instance, the asymmetry between the number of Serbs killed by Croats and Bosniaks vs. the latter killed by Serbs during WW II and after was decisively smaller than the disparity of death toll between Poles and Germans. Moreover, in that period, besides victims of genocides³ and crimes against humanity in Bosnia and Croatia, many people died due to conflicts of different character than purely national (civil political war, fight against occupiers). The disparity between Polish-German case and conflicts waged in the 90s in the former Yugoslavia concerning the death toll and asymmetry in ethnic background of victims is even more prominent⁴. Secondly, the drawing of lessons from the Polish-German reconciliation, as will be shown in our text, requires acknowledgement of not only its successes but also its failures. Generally, the Polish-German case confirms the fragility of reconciliations and that the instrumentalization of the past by politicians represents the most important challenge to the reconciliation.

¹ Feldman, L.G., *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation. From Enmity to Amity*, Lanham et al. 2012.

² Tomasevich J., *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945 Occupation and Collaboration*, Stanford 2001, pp. 380-415.

³ Certain massacres accompanied by ethnic cleansing committed by Serbian nationalist forces (Chetniks) should be recognized as genocide. Communist forces are also perpetrators in massive crimes against humanity during the war and afterwards. However,

all these crimes did not match the genocide committed by Ustasha. Tomasevich J., *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: The Chetniks*. Stanford 1975.

⁴ In the 1990s, the number of Croat, Bosniak and Albanian victims in conflicts with Serbs was higher than the Serbian death toll. A particularly huge gap concerning the casualties exists between Serbs, on the one hand, and Bosniaks and Albanians on the other.

The case study of the Polish-German reconciliation

Poles and Germans had several centuries of common history characterized rather by coexistence than confrontation. However, the WW II poisoned Polish-German relations to a degree which could hardly be worse. German aggression against Poland in 1939 was followed by a policy of systematic extermination which should be recognized as genocide. The Germans justified their crimes on the basis on the Nazi racial theory, which regarded ethnic Poles as racially inferior Untermenschen. The Nazi master plan entailed the expulsion of the majority of ethnic Poles, the enslavement of the rest of them and the extermination of elites. In effect, through the war ethnic Poles suffered everyday brutal persecution by the occupational German authorities, destruction of cultural heritage, mass executions (especially during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), imprisonment in concentration camps, forced labour and deportations and Germanization. By 1942, Poland became the main arena of implementation of the Nazi plan to kill every Jew in German-occupied Europe (ghettos, death camps).

As a consequence of German genocidal policies, around 5,5 million (from among 35 million in 1939) Polish citizens were killed during the WW II. More than 90% of the three million Polish Jews were extinguished under German command.⁵ In 1945, the Big Three in Yalta and Potsdam decided to give to the Soviet Union almost all the Eastern territories of Poland which already in 1939 had been occupied by the Red Army on the basis of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Poland received in exchange hitherto German territories East of the rivers Oder and Neisse (except the Northern part of East Prussia which was given to the Soviet Union). The absolute majority of the Germans living in these regions fled or were expelled from their homelands in

consequence of the activities of the Red Army and Polish Communist authorities towards largely destroyed Germany in its new borders. Several hundred thousand of them perished due to the hunger, diseases, exhaustion and massacres.⁶

During the first decade after 1945 it was highly understandable that Poles had a deep antipathy towards the Germans. On the other side, many Germans considered themselves victims of the war (expellees, victims of the allied bombardments etc.) without considering what the reason for the fate had been. Contacts between Poles and Germans were made even more difficult by the beginning Cold War and the division of Germany. On the state level, there were no diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and Communist Poland until 1972. A breakthrough in the public discourse about Poland and other countries East from Germany was brought in October 1965 by a memorandum by the German Protestant Church on the relationship between the Germans and their Eastern neighbours.⁷ On the one hand, the sufferings of the German expellees and their contribution to building up post-war Germany were exposed. On the other, for the first time the question of German guilt and what consequences Germany had to bear for that became a topic of public discussion. This memorandum initiated an unprecedented fierce discussion among public and split the German society. In the long run, however, this memorandum contributed to a new perspective of German responsibility for World War II and the crimes Germans had committed. It also paved "bottom-up" the way for Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the acceptance of the post war Polish-German border in German society.

On the Polish side, a few weeks after the publication of the memorandum by the Protestant Church, the Polish Catholic bishops present in Rome at the Second Vatican council addressed in November 1965 a letter to the German

⁵ Materski W., Szarota T., Polska 1939–1945, straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warsaw 2009.

⁶ Douglas R. M., Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War, Yale University Press, 2012.

⁷ "Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn", Hannover 1965, online at https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/ostdenkschrift_1965.pdf [31 October 2019].

bishops.⁸ As the moral authority of Polish society, especially under Communist rule, the Catholic bishops drew in this letter a picture of a thousand years of Polish-German neighbourhood which for centuries had been mostly good. This interpretation of Polish-German history was completely different from the discourse of the Communist party (a thousand years of struggle) and culminated in the words: "We forgive, and we ask for forgiveness".⁹ These words were a shock for Polish society which was completely unprepared for such a message. In response, Communist leadership launched a fight against the Catholic church which was the fiercest one since Stalinist times. The difficulty of Polish bishops' situation was further enhanced as the answer of the German Catholic bishops was rather half-hearted. They wanted to avoid a clear positioning towards the new Polish-German border because of their close relations to CDU/CSU and the organizations of the expellees. Their attitude changed after the ratification in 1972 of the treaty in which the Federal Republic recognized the new Polish-German border.

Whereas the Protestant memorandum in Germany led to a change in the attitude towards Poland in a politically significant way, the letter of the Polish bishops started in Poland during the Communist period a change in the attitude towards Germany only among a small group of Catholic intellectuals. At the beginning of the 90s, most of Poles and Germans expressed mutual antipathy in opinion polls.¹⁰ Nevertheless, since the end of the 1960s meetings of members of Polish "Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia" and West and East German intellectuals, especially connected with the Protestant and the Catholic church, were at the beginning of an authentic dialogue between a small but influential minority which got acquainted with the way of thinking of the other side. This was especially

important for the Polish partners, as among their members protagonists like Tadeusz Mazowiecki or Władysław Bartoszewski obtained leading political offices after 1989.

A key step for the Polish-German reconciliation was the signing in 1970 of the treaty in which the Federal Republic of Germany acknowledged the existing Polish-German border. In the long run, more important was, however, the symbolic impact of Brandt's kneeling down in Warsaw.¹¹ After the ratification of this treaty in 1972, diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and Poland were established. A weak point of Ostpolitik became, however, evident when Solidarność was founded in Poland in 1980. While the aims of Solidarność corresponded with the political values of the West German political elites, the issue was that the partners of Ostpolitik were governments which were not democratically legitimized. The stronger Solidarność was getting, the more the Communist partners of Ostpolitik were losing the basis of their political power. The political attitude of the German government was rather ambivalent when martial law was introduced in Poland in December 1981 and Solidarność was repressed. In contrast, the reaction of German society was overwhelming. Hundreds of transports with food and other goods of basic need were organized, millions of parcels were sent to Poland which was experiencing a severe crisis of supply. Many Poles were astonished by the extent of spontaneous help and started to perceive German society in a new way.

A new chapter in Polish-German relations was opened when Solidarność defeated the Communist regime in 1989. Prime minister Mazowiecki declared in his program of government that Poland wanted to create Polish-German relations according to the pattern of German-French relations. It seemed symbolic that in the evening of the first day of chancellor Helmut Kohl's carefully prepared visit to

⁸ "Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, Orędzie biskupów polskich do ich niemieckich braci w chrystusowym urzędzie pasterskim", online at https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/oredzie-niem_18111965.html [31 October 2019].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, "Stosunek do innych narodów", online at https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_017_19.PDF, [31 October 2019].

¹¹ "Układ między Polską Rzeczpospolitą Ludową a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o podstawach normalizacji ich wzajemnych stosunków z 7 grudnia 1970 r.", https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Uk%C5%82ad_mi%C4%99dzy_Polsk%C4%85_Rzecz%C4%85pospolit%C4%85_Ludow%C4%85_a_Republik%C4%85_Federaln%C4%85_Niemiec_o_podstawach_normalizacji_ich_wzajemnych_stosunk%C3%B3w_z_7_grudnia_1970_r, [31 October 2019].

Poland the Berlin wall collapsed. During this visit, the historic “mass of reconciliation” in Krzyżowa took place. The Polish and the German chiefs of government, Mazowiecki and Kohl, offered each other the “sign of peace”.

Less than a year later, Germany was united and two fundamental treaties for Polish-German relations were signed,¹² confirming the existing Polish-German border and establishing good neighborly relations and cooperation by setting the legal basis for the future cooperation between the civil societies of both sides. An intense cooperation between municipalities and regions all along the common border from the Baltic Sea to the Czech Republic was established. Currently, there exist almost 1000 very vivid partnerships between Polish and German towns. The Polish-German Youth Office, founded in 1991 according to the German-French model, has in the meantime contributed to interactions between some 3 million young Poles and Germans.¹³ There is an intensive exchange between schools and a close cooperation between universities, NGOs and think-tanks supported by both central and local governments.

The common commemoration of important events by top Polish and German politicians were important for the reconciliation process as well. During his participation in the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising in 1994, the Federal President Roman Herzog asked the Polish people for forgiveness for the suffering brought upon them by the Germans during the war. The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Władysław Bartoszewski, later during his speech in German Parliament called Herzog’s speech “the real and long expected answer” to the letter of the Polish bishops of 1965 and he expressed sympathy to “the individual fate and the suffering of innocent Germans”

who lost their homeland.¹⁴ During a common opening ceremony of an exposition in Berlin on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, the presidents Komorowski and Gauck delivered in the presence of veterans of the uprising touching words showing how a common commemoration of tragic events may bring Poles and Germans closer to each other even today. Also the speeches by presidents Duda and Steinmeier in Wieluń and Warsaw on the same occasion in 2019 resonated very well in Polish public.

Coming to terms with history – lessons learned

Dealing with history is an integral part of a successful reconciliation process and establishment of sincere discussion of historians from both sides on the difficult topics of common history is an important step in its facilitation. Apart from the discussion of historian with the purpose of setting unbiased narratives about historic events, crimes committed in the name of the former dictatorship must be punished. Because of insufficient denazification among public prosecutors and judges, the systematic persecution of war crimes began in Germany only in the 1960s, when it was too late for many war criminals to be hauled up before a court. However, Polish and West German historians in 1972 founded a joint commission on school-books concerning history and geography which is functioning until today.¹⁵ A German Historical Institute in Warsaw was established in 1993 and a Polish equivalent in Berlin in 2006.¹⁶ Co-operation between Polish and German historians became very intense and fruitful. Hundreds of

¹² “Traktat między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o potwierdzeniu istniejącej między nimi granicy, podpisany w Warszawie dnia 14 listopada 1990 r.”.

“Traktat między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o dobrym sąsiedztwie i przyjaznej współpracy z 17.06.1991 r.”.

¹³ Polsko-Niemiecka Współpraca Młodzieży, <https://www.pnwm.org/o-pnwm/>.

¹⁴ Ziemer K., From Hatred to Friendly Cooperation: Poland and Germany after the Second World War, in The India-Pakistan

Reconciliation and other Experiences in Post-conflict Management, ed. Gilles Boquerat and Richard Asbeck, Paris 2009, p.115.

¹⁵ Wspólna Polsko-Niemiecka Komisja Podręcznikowa, <http://deutsch-polnische.schulbuchkommission.de/pl/strona-glowna.html>.

¹⁶ Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau, Niemiecki Instytut Historyczny w Warszawie, <https://www.dhi.waw.pl/pl.html>, Centrum Badań Historycznych PAN, Das Zentrum für Historische Forschung Berlin der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, <http://www.cbh.pan.pl/de>.

books were published together by Polish and German authors.¹⁷

The view on history in society, however, is determined not only by historians, but also by politicians, the media, and family narration. History is often used (and misused) in political conflicts. At the beginning of the 2000s a wave of publications, documentations and films focused on the fate of Germans at the end of WW II appeared, irritating Polish public. Moreover, in 2000, a foundation created primarily by functionaries of the Federation of Expellees (BdV)¹⁸, demanded the creation of the Center against Expulsions (ZgV) in Berlin.¹⁹ In Poland this was perceived as a re-writing of history by the Germans, turning perpetrators into victims. The chairwoman of the BdV, Erika Steinbach (for many years CDU-deputy to the Bundestag, today close to AfD), in Germany a rather little-known hardliner, dominated for a couple of years the headlines of Polish media with controversial statements and burdened Polish-German relations. In Germany this was hardly noticed. The situation was further aggravated with the establishment of the "Prussian Trusteeship" by hardliners of the BdV, demanding the return or compensation of real estate of former German owners in territories now belonging to Poland. This caused fears among millions of Poles. The "Prussian Trusteeship" took this question even to the European Court of Human Rights in 2006 and lost in 2008.

The rule of coalition dominated by the Law and Justice (PiS), a national populist party, contributed to increased

tensions between Warsaw and Berlin in 2005-2007. In 2007 and 2015, when PiS was in opposition, the Polish-German bilateral relations improved significantly, although Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of opposition, remained strongly critical of the reconciliation with Germany presenting it as an insincere kitsch.²⁰ In 2015, PiS returned to power and established the first single party government for in Poland's history. The transformation of Poland's political system under the rule of PiS from liberal democracy based on checks and balances into the "majoritarian" system dominated by the ruling party undermining the rule of law in the country ignited harsh criticism from the EU and an unprecedented deterioration of relations between Poland and various EU actors, including Germany. In response, PiS strengthened the use of historical arguments evoking the WW II in its policy towards Germany which translated also into a regress in the Polish-German reconciliation. Kaczyński accused Germany of attempts to water down the German responsibility for the crimes committed during the WW II and to shift the blame on other nations, including Poles,²¹ suggesting also that Germany has not changed dramatically since the WW II.²²

In response to the proposal by the EU to limit the allocation of EU funds to Poland based on the problems with rule of law, Polish government raised the issue of German reparations for the crimes and devastation committed during the WW II. Immediately after the elections in 2015, PiS established the committee on reparations in the Polish

¹⁷ Four-volume publication *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci* („Polish-German places of memory”) represents one of the most prominent examples of cooperation between Polish and German historians.

¹⁸ Bund der Vertriebenen, www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de.

¹⁹ Zenter gegen Vertreibungen, www.z-g-v.de.

²⁰ Kaczyński declared that Germany wants to subdue Poland because it dreams of territories lost after the WW II. According to him, Germany can someday realize its dreams and “we will wake up in smaller Poland”. Therefore, through this lens, German investments in Western Poland pose a threat to Polish security. Kaczyński also accused many times a huge part of Polish cultural elite and political opposition of being the fifth column on German payroll. In the Law and Justice's discourse, Germany is often presented as a traditional ally of Russia trying together with Moscow to divide Poland, as it happened several times in the past (especially recalling Ribbentrop-Molotov pact). Kaczyński called

many times his own country a German-Russian condominium. See Jarosław Kaczyński, *Polska naszych marzeń*, Warszawa 2011.

²¹ “German politics of memory [is] conducted for 70 years in a very consistent manner, in order to reduce Germany's guilt and at the same time convince the world that Germany is completely different.” “Prezes PiS: Stuprocentową odpowiedzialność za Holokaust ponoszą Niemcy”, tvpinfo.com, www.tvp.info/37865894/prezes-pis-stuprocentowa-odpowiedzialnosc-za-holokaust-ponosza-niemcy, [31 October 2019].

²² Alluding to Germany, Kaczyński said, “One needs to remember where and in which culture the greatest threats to Europe, the world and moral order exist.” “Jarosław Kaczyński o pogromie w Białymstoku: to była wina państwa niemieckiego i narodu niemieckiego”, *Wirtualna Polska*, www.wiadomosci.wp.pl/jaroslaw-kaczynski-o-pogromie-w-bialymstoku-to-byla-wina-panstwa-niemieckiego-i-narodu-niemieckiego-6027392472183425a, [31 October 2019].

parliament. However, Poland has not made an official demand for reparations yet and for German side the matter is closed due to existing international treaties which have been signed since the end of WW II. Nevertheless, the issue continues being raised by Polish authorities. For instance, in an interview with German tabloid Bild, Poland's President Andrzej Duda said that the Polish-German relations are a model example of a reconciliation but added that paying the WWII reparations to Poland is "a matter of accountability and morality."²³ According to opinion polls, the demand for reparations is supported by majority of Poles while Germans decisively reject it.²⁴

Conclusion

The Polish-German reconciliation, started more than 50 years ago, achieved a spectacular progress particularly taking into consideration the burden of enormous crimes committed by Nazi Germany during the WW II against Poles. Growing mutual perception of Poles and Germans has contributed to reconciliation and improved substantially over the years. However, the opinion polls show that the gap exists still between a more positive attitude of Poles towards Germans than vice versa.²⁵ This is probably due to the fact that Poles are much better acquainted with Germany than the other way around. The most important anchor of the reconciliation is today – apart from a continuously growing economic exchange – the intense relations between both civil societies. It makes a decisive reversal of reconciliation highly unlikely. Because of this success, Polish-German reconciliation may serve as a source of inspiration for the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that a substantial difference between

legacies of history in Polish-German case and Western Balkan equivalents limits the relevance of the reconciliation between Poles and Germans for the Western Balkan nations. Paradoxically the legacy of wars taking place in the 20th century in the Western Balkans, considerably more complicated than the Polish-German modern history, may make the reconciliation process more difficult and challenging.

Currently, even more important lesson which the Western Balkan nations may draw from the Polish-German reconciliation is its fragility and exposure to negative spillovers from bilateral interstate relations and internal political developments. Indeed, Polish-German relations on the level of governments have deteriorated in recent years contributing to a certain regress in reconciliation. The issue of coming to terms with a difficult past is again emerging - as the case of reparation demands shows - as one of key divisive issues. Moreover, the aggravation of bilateral relations resulted also in the mutual decrease of sympathy between both nations, though until now to a lesser degree in Germany. The achieved degree of mutual understanding between Polish and German societies is not given once and forever. It is a task to be continued daily and it may be endangered when politicians playing with nationalistic fire are emphasizing the negative memories of the past for short-term political interests.

²³ „Wir werden eine Rechnung vorlegen!“, Polens Präsident Andrzej Duda im Bild-Interview“, Bild, www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/jahrestag-des-zweiten-weltkriegs-polen-praesident-duda-im-bild-interview-64306980,view=conversionToLogin.bild.html, [31 October 2019].

²⁴ CBOS, „Postrzeganie II wojny światowej i poparcie dla domagania się reparacji od Niemiec“, www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2019/K_113_19.PDF, 31 October

2019], „Große Mehrheit gegen Reparationen für Polen und Griechenland“, Die Zeit, www.zeit.de/news/2019-08/30/grosse-mehrheit-gegen-reparationen-fuer-polen-und-griechenland, [31 October 2019].

²⁵ Łada A., „Polaków lubi tylko jedna trzecia Niemców“, Polityka, www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1751244,1,polakow--lubi-tylko-jedna-trzecia-niemcow.read, [31 October 2019].

About the Authors

Adam Balcer, WiseEuropa Institute, Poland

Klaus Ziemer, German Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland

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