



The Institute of National Remembrance

Author: Daniel Koć; URL:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Institute\\_of\\_National\\_Remembrance\\_-\\_Marsza%C5%82kowska\\_street.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Institute_of_National_Remembrance_-_Marsza%C5%82kowska_street.jpg)

## Polish Public Debates on Historical Controversies

Piotr Osęka

Cultures of History Forum, published: 13.04.2015

DOI: 10.25626/0115

The recent past is frequently the subject of heightened public debates in Poland. Historians receive considerable media attention, their publications and statements draw comments from journalists and politicians. These disputes invariably revolve round three fundamental issues: Polish–Jewish relations, opinions about the Warsaw Uprising, and settling scores with communism. The article provides a critical review of the themes and arguments in each of these disputed areas.

### Recommended Citation

Piotr Osęka: Polish Public Debates on Historical Controversies. In: Cultures of History Forum (13.04.2015), DOI: 10.25626/0115

Copyright (c) 2015 by Imre Kertész Kolleg, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the copyright holders. For permission please contact the editors.

## Polish Public Debates on Historical Controversies

When the Institute of National Remembrance published the book "The Security Service and Lech Wałęsa: a Biographical Addendum" in June 2008, queues formed outside bookshops from the early morning. Its entire print run sold out in days and required a reprint. Even though the book dealt with a legendary figure – the leader of Solidarity after 1980 and Poland's first democratically elected president – such enormous interest might seem rather surprising. After all, it had been written in stiff, specialist language, and only covered one episode in the politician's life. Such situations were by no means uncommon, however.

History – particularly of more recent times, dating from 1918 – is able to fire up the emotions of Polish society. This phenomenon has been noticeably more widespread in recent years. Historical researchers have copious opportunities to be public figures as frequent guests on television talk-shows. Their publications and statements draw comments from journalists and politicians. Most dailies and weeklies devote full pages to historical articles, and history books are a fixture on bestseller lists, alongside thrillers and health handbooks. Clearly, history has learned to be the only branch of the humanities capable of operating outside the enclave of academia.

Lively discussions and even journalistic wars break out every few months, corresponding to new book releases, film premieres or exhibition openings. Adversaries brand one another as "traitors" and "ignoramus", accusing each other of hating the fatherland or trying to paper over inconvenient sides of the nation's history.

Disputes over the past invariably revolve round three fundamental issues: Polish–Jewish relations, opinions about the Warsaw Uprising, and settling scores with communism. Each of these great debates is a concatenation of themes surrounding individual events or biographies.

### The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto

The oldest debate concerns anti-Semitism and Poles' attitudes to the Holocaust, and dates back to the 1960s, when the communist authorities began to boost their national image, chiefly by tapping into wartime martyrdom. Books, films, exhibitions and monuments appeared, commemorating the suffering inflicted on Poles by the German occupiers. This propagandist narrative also encompassed – and to a certain extent "appropriated" – the Holocaust. Polish Jews who died in the gas chambers were treated and counted as "Poles slaughtered by the Germans". When certain historians attempted to isolate the Holocaust from national history – stating that Jews had been treated much more atrociously by the Nazi occupiers than the Poles had – the authorities would denounce it as "Zionist lies". At the same time, state propaganda would publicise stories of Poles who had saved Jewish fugitives, accusing the latter of "being ungrateful towards the custodians of the country to which they owed so much". At the height of the anti-Semitic campaign in 1968, some newspapers openly hinted that Jews were responsible for the misdeeds of communism, and claimed that they had penetrated the authorities, particularly the Security Service, under assumed Polish names in 1945.

The issue of the Holocaust's position in Polish history arose again during the 1980s, when the authorities' grip on the debate was considerably weaker. Around the time of the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, discussions about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and Jews in the communist

movement were waged in the pages of the underground press. In 1987, the Catholic *Tygodnik Powszechny* – an official newspaper which sympathised with the opposition – published the article "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" by Jan Błoński. In it, he called on Poles to examine their consciences, and reflect on their guilt as Holocaust witnesses who had stood idly by (or in some cases looked on approvingly, with a tinge of pre-war anti-Semitism) as their Jewish compatriots were being killed. The text galvanised public opinion, with some congratulating Błoński on his courage, while others castigated him.

Later books and articles published after the collapse of communism focused on Polish attitudes towards Jews under the occupation and during the first years of communist rule, touching on the anti-Semitism of pre-war Polish fascist groups and the post-war pogroms. There were also increasingly frequent cases of Poles who metamorphosed from being indifferent Holocaust witnesses into murderers: helping the Germans to hunt down Jews in hiding, or killing outlaw ghetto fugitives themselves. Debates reached fever pitch in the wake of the article "Poles/Jews: Dark Pages of the Uprising", published by *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 1994, which mentioned incidents of Jews being murdered by Warsaw insurgents. The author and the editorial staff were accused of "insulting the memory of the Home Army heroes", and elicited strong protests from veterans' organisations.

A journalistic war – for it could no longer be termed a debate – broke out in 2000 following the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's book "Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland". The author reconstructed the events of the horrific Jedwabne pogrom, during which Polish residents had murdered their Jewish neighbours in early July 1941. The biggest shock for public opinion (as well as professional historians) was that the local community was responsible for the crimes – not gangsters or the dregs of society, but "average people", many of whom had known the victims for years. Although the pogrom was probably initiated by the German gendarmerie, the bulk of the responsibility fell on the Poles.

While one group of intellectuals, researchers and journalists stressed that the book marked a crucial stage in investigating the truth, and that the nation needed to come to terms with its past, others attacked the author ferociously. The criticism garnered by *Neighbors* was only vaguely related to the actual controversy. The conservative and national-Catholic press (along with thousands of Internet users) showered Gross with insults, accusing him of deliberately lying and "falsifying history in line with orders from the 'Holocaust industry'". They maintained that the book was a provocation concocted by the World Jewish Congress to extort colossal compensation from Poland. "Neighbors" was depicted as part of an "anti-Polish campaign" intended to obscure the truth about national martyrdom.

The shockwaves triggered by Gross's book were reflected in political decisions. [The Institute of National Remembrance \(INR\)](#) launched a full-scale investigation into the Jedwabne crimes, while a state ceremony to immortalise the murdered Jews was organised on the site of the massacre. Speaking at the ceremony, president Aleksander Kwaśniewski apologised "in the name of all Poles whose conscience [was] disturbed by that crime".

The Jedwabne affair initiated a range of publications exposing dark sides of Polish history. Their authors, particularly historians from [the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research in Warsaw](#) hypothesised that Polish society had been involved in "hunting down" Jews in hiding, and plundering the property they left behind. The Centre's researchers affirmed that, although it was difficult to estimate the scale of the phenomenon, it certainly could not be pinned merely on people from the margins of society, as had been the case up until then. Average people had taken part in those crimes, not professional criminals.

Every book or article that exposed Poles as collaborators in wartime atrocities was met with furious reactions; authors were accused of "educating by shaming". The right-wing elite regarded stories of suffering and harm experienced by Poles at the hands of the German and Soviet invaders as a means to bind national identity. Any attempts to question that vision were considered "an attack on Polishness" and "a fight against patriotism". "The left wing wants us to be ashamed of being Polish, to renounce our autonomy, and to adopt a European identity", ranted the conservative journalists and historians.

In Poland, the controversy over remembrance has taken the form of confronting an imaginary enemy. A significant portion of the political elite and society are convinced that "the desire to blame Poles for other people's crimes" is a planned political operation. This is why tough legal measures – official protests and lawsuits – are instigated every time a foreign journalist or politician uses the term "Polish concentration camps" instead of "German concentration camps in occupied Poland". By the same token, right-wing newspapers attacked the German serial "Generation War" (also broadcast on Polish television in 2013), accusing it of painting a false picture of anti-Semitic Poles in order to divert viewers' attention from German crimes. Sometimes, the belief that Germany is Poland's perennial enemy gives meaning to Polish history. During the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald, in an interview for an online portal, a mediaevalist from Warsaw University stated that according to recent research, Poland had been the aggressor in the conflict with the Teutonic Order. The website was immediately inundated with offensive comments – a level of aggression rarely seen even in relation to political articles.

## The Controversy over the Underground State

Fronts often intersect in Poland's wars concerning modern history. The occupation during the Second World War is seen in the context of Polish–Jewish and Polish–German relations, but also in the activities of the Underground State – the underground civil and military bodies (the Home Army, or HA) subordinate to the Polish government-in-exile in London. Traditionally, the longest-running controversy surrounds the Warsaw Uprising, undoubtedly one of the most dramatic events in the country's modern history. Observing the Russians' violent offensive in summer 1944, the HA supreme command decided to launch an insurrection behind the front lines, liberate Warsaw, and ally themselves with the invading Red Army, but as Poland's rightful rulers. The plan ended in disaster when the advancing Soviets, who were just on the outskirts of Warsaw at the time of the Uprising, suddenly stopped, giving German forces time to defeat the HA. After two months of fierce combat, the city was utterly obliterated, with losses in the hundreds of thousands among the partisans and residents of the capital.

After the war, the communist authorities paid tribute to the victims of the fighting (particularly the civilians) but condemned the Home Army's commanders, describing the Uprising as an "irresponsible London-led adventure". Meanwhile, the Warsaw Uprising – suppressed by the Germans and betrayed by the Russians – was generally perceived as a symbol of anti-communist resistance and the struggle for independence.

Only the turning point of 1989 shook off the political connotations of this debate. Arguments about the Uprising started to become more pertinent, and its opponents were no longer elements of communist propaganda. Documents were analysed, various possibilities were pondered, and for the first time the question was raised as to whether the HA commanders knew of Stalin's hostility towards the exiled Polish authorities – and if they did, why had they failed to take it into account when drawing up their plans?

On the other hand, the heroism, dedication and suffering of the insurgents continued to occupy centre stage in Polish history, symbolising the nation's nobleness and greatness. Such heroic rhetoric even seems to have grown more popular in recent years; the passage of time has stirred up emotions, rather than cooling them off. When it opened in 2004, [the Warsaw Uprising Museum](#) overtly declared its exhibits to be "a homage to those who fought and perished for free Poland". Nowadays, the Museum is still breaking attendance records, and some even regard it as a national shrine.

In such circles, to question the wisdom of the insurgency is seen as an attack on "patriotic values". It is worth emphasising that, in the controversy over the Uprising, the dividing line is completely different to that found in debates on the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Ardent supporters and opponents of the Warsaw Uprising both subscribe to the same right-wing conservative values, the only difference being in their attitudes to historical tradition. The former feel that national identity springs from valour in combat (however unsuccessful), and the latter believe that an international position is attained through dispassionate diplomatic manoeuvring, while Poland's main national defect could be summed up in the phrase "to die with honour".

For several years, champions of political pragmatism – right-wing journalists and historians – have had a noticeable media presence and their books are bestsellers. They believe that the Warsaw Uprising was a futile exercise that turned into a national disaster. To them, the HA commanders started the fight with no chance of victory, steered by emotion rather than reason, and thus condemned the nation's elite to extermination.

Some of the Uprising's opponents go one step further and criticise the actions of Polish diplomats on the eve of the war. In their opinion, Warsaw should have accepted Hitler's offer to join the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1937. According to a concept put forward in 2012 by a right-wing journalist in his renowned book "The Ribbentrop–Beck Pact" (after Józef Beck, a Polish pre-war foreign minister), it would have been more worthwhile for Poland to enter the war as an ally of the Third Reich than to fight to preserve its own independence – which was doomed to failure from the outset. This concept was rooted in the belief that communism, not Nazism, posed the deadliest threat to Polish national identity. This alternative version of history found many fervent supporters, bewitched by the vision of the Polish army conquering Moscow alongside the Wehrmacht. However, most historians and journalists categorically condemned the idea of such an alliance, calling it meaningless and amoral.

## On the Trail of the "układ"

A journalistic war over attitudes towards Poland under communism, and ways of dealing with the communist past, has played a key role in Polish politics and society. Its first act was the famous "night of the long files" on 4-5 June 1992, when parliament dismissed prime minister Jan Olszewski's right-wing government in a climate of scandal. The cabinet was dissolved due to the way it had implemented the law on lustration. The minister of internal affairs, Antoni Macierewicz, had published a list of suspected communist Security Service agents who had held governmental and parliamentary posts since 1989. The list contained the names of numerous famous members of the opposition, including president Lech Wałęsa.

A storm erupted, both in parliament and the media. Macierewicz was accused of blindly trusting police materials and blackening the good name of honourable politicians on the basis of doubtful assumptions. In a dramatic speech to the parliament, premier Olszewski defended the list, maintaining that it revealed

just how closely the Polish elite was embroiled in collaboration with communism. At this point, the foundations for a certain historical discourse were laid, which continued to develop in subsequent years, challenging the legal validity of the Polish political elite (or a large part of it, at least).

This transformation of the political system was alleged to be the result of a secret układ [implying a "deal" or "arrangement"] between a left-wing faction of the underground "Solidarity" and the communist party. The PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party] had reputedly allowed former members of the opposition to join the authorities, in exchange for guaranteed impunity and the chance to get rich by taking over state assets on the wave of privatisation in the early 1990s. Moreover, supporters of this conspiratorial view claim that the Solidarity delegation which participated in the round table talks was in fact made up of former Security Service agents that the communists were able to blackmail and control.

This view of history mainly serves to explain the current situation: it introduces a clear division between the good and the bad, points the finger at those responsible for all the poverty and unemployment, and highlights the incompetence of state officialdom. The conspiracy of former Security Service officers and their agents from the opposition has spun a "red web" to entangle all aspects of life, especially the media and the banks.

This historical controversy became the axis for a political battle between the two largest parties in Poland. In its manifesto, the opposition Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice, or PiS] party mainly underlines the need to carry out extensive lustration to expose all the hidden links between personnel from the former regime (particularly secret police officers) and current officials. The "post-communist układ" not only guards its influence and property, but also implements deliberate "anti-Church" and "anti-national" policies. The essence of this theory, supported by many Catholic and conservative journalists hailing from the "patriotic camp", is the belief that the key to putting the country to rights can be found in the "files" – the Institute of National Remembrance's archives that conceal knowledge of a grim conspiracy rooted in Poland's communist years.

The public debate is dominated by historical symbols, as proven by events of the past few months. The political conflict is fuelled not by tax reform or health care issues, but assessments of the past. It would seem that the way history is discussed is subject to the logic of party struggles. Years later, society's attention is once again focused on iconic protagonists of bygone events, whose names now reappear on banners.

There are some characteristic examples. Lech Wałęsa is respected by left-wing and liberal groups, yet is fiercely attacked (as an ex-secret police agent in "Solidarity's" ranks) by the national-conservative camp. The situation was similar concerning general Wojciech Jaruzelski, the last communist dictator and first president of post-communist Poland. His funeral in May 2014 – with full state honours – caused a storm in the media, and his funeral procession was accompanied by angry demonstrations. Even though the ruling elite of Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform, or PO] and the opposition PiS both emerged from "Solidarity", their views on the general differed greatly in later years. The former felt that Jaruzelski should be respected for handing over power peacefully in 1989, while the latter still bore grudges for the workers shot dead and the brutal internment of thousands of trade union activists under martial law.

Partisan use of historical paraphernalia in the political struggle is visible during historical anniversary celebrations. For example, on the 33rd anniversary of the declaration of martial law – one month after the elections – the opposition organised a street demonstration to protest against presumed electoral irregularities. For several years, one of the main state holidays – the anniversary of the day when Poland

regained its independence on 11 November 1918 – has been a pretext to stage anti-governmental "Independence Marches" in the capital, involving tens of thousands of demonstrators. The nucleus of these marches comprises members of right-wing organisations carrying banners of pre-war Polish nationalist groups. They often dress as "Accursed Soldiers", the anti-communist guerrillas of the 1940s. This patriotic atmosphere spreads to football fans, who descend on the marches from all over the country, their club scarves adorned with HA and Underground State symbols. They then furiously attack the police, whom they see as the embodiment of Poland's enemies.

Although PO and PiS both love to reproach one another for "communist tendencies" (implying authoritarian ambitions), there is no doubt that the opposition is more likely to reach for its historical costumes. Perhaps it is simply a political marketing stunt. When addressing a rally at the Gdańsk Shipyard (the legendary cradle of "Solidarity") in 2006, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński said: "We stand where we stood before; they [PO] are where the ZOMO [Polish communist riot police] once stood". Clearly, many politicians believe that referring back to historical myths and sentiments is the most effective way to mobilise voters.

Translated by Mark Bence





