

The challenge of commemoration

Cases from Poland and Germany

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The Second World War remains one of the most **painful and conflicting episodes** of the European nations' memories. Present conflicts are embedded in history and in the use of history as a political tool. The cases of Poland and Germany illustrate how challenging it can be to commemorate history, especially in a politicised environment.

In Poland during the communist period and until 1989, it was nearly impossible to openly talk about the Second World War. First, due to friendship with the Soviet Union and later, after the fall of communism, Poland was busy creating its own government, introducing the democratic culture and fighting with an economic crisis in order to transform the country it became between 1989 and 2000. After this period, history and commemoration events started to play a very important role for the national and political identity of the country. Like in other Central and Eastern European states, Poland is an example of how history is used as a political tool in the museum narratives and exhibition forms, which also trigger conflicts.

“The past was important because we did not have time to tell the full story until the end of the communism,” says Jacek Kołtan, deputy director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, responsible for scientific research. “It started with establishing the museum of the Warsaw Uprising in the middle of 2000, which was the very first modern exhibition dealing with the recent past,” he continues.

Narratives of heroism

The Warsaw Uprising for Poland is a crucial event that took place in the summer of 1944 by the Polish underground state and led by the Polish national army – Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*). Created by the young political and military elite of Poland, the underground state is a fascinating phenomenon – it was an independent, secret, institutionalised structure of the state working and being active through the entire war, fighting against the German occupation. The Warsaw Uprising was an extremely dramatic and traumatic moment in Polish history, and many Poles were killed or imprisoned as a result.

In 2004 Lech Kaczyński, the third president of post-communist Poland and a member of the Solidarity movement from the 1980s, decided to create a modern museum that would tell the Polish public, for the very first time, the history of the Warsaw Uprising. Up until that time the complete story about Uprising remain untold. “That’s the moment of modernising Polish museums for the very first time. The similarities with the Terror museum in Budapest and the Warsaw Uprising in Warsaw are very deep. That’s the tendency in Central and Eastern Europe, where a new kind of era in museology began, when the past is dealt with in a very political way,” Kołtan summarises.

There was a huge debate in Poland in the second half of the 20th century as to whether the event of Warsaw Uprising in 1944 was worth organising. 150,000–180,000 people were killed and the youthful elite disappeared. “There is a right-wing tendency, which deals with the Second World War, by heroising the whole story. We are the heroes and the victims of two totalitarianisms,” Kołtan says. “And there is a second part of the debate which says it was a lack of pragmatism to organise this kind of catastrophe for the entire generation.”

The Polish government and the main political power in Poland since 2015 – the Law and Justice party – supports the Institute of the National Remembrance whose aim is, in part, to develop and popularise the social imagination and commemoration of heroism during the Second World War. One group of forgotten heroes became the “Cursed Soldiers” (*Żołnierze niezłomni/wyklęci*) who contained a broad and complex historic background. At the end of the war, when the Home Army was dissolved, some of its soldiers did not accept the situation and organised anti-Soviet and anti-communist Polish resistance. They later were named cursed soldiers. At the same time, they brutally fought against the civilians and, in some cases, were involved in war crimes against ethnic minorities.

“The new government decided to make the Cursed Soldiers national heroes and thus radicalised its own politics. They call it a counter-revolution against a liberal democratic state by introducing illiberal democracy. And as with every revolution,

they need their own heroes in the social imagination,” Kořtan adds. Radicalised politics, a black-and-white view of history and the present world, is quite common in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Russia. The heroic past is exalted, and history is used heavily as a political tool.*

Another example of using museums as a platform for the political radicalisation of history is the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. The initial idea of the museum provided a story of the war in a critical way by showing heroism of many people living in Poland, the country’s multiethnicism during the war and a critical narrative examining antisemitic motives of local people. The exhibition provided a balanced and complex view on Poland’s past, having both positive stories but also darker passages. The first director of the museum, Paweł Machcewicz, created the narrative to tell the history of the war from a social perspective, showing how tragic the war and military conflict is for all people. After 2015 it became clear that it was not the narrative that the new right-wing government wanted to express. Machcewicz was sacked and a new director was appointed who decided to put the Polish heroes who were fighting to save Jews and help the Jewish community during the war at the centre of the exhibit.** The critical aspects of the narrative were largely pushed to the background.***

* In Eastern Europe one observes a tendency to equate Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes. As a consequence, in September 2019, the EU issued a resolution *on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe* which states that the two totalitarian regimes with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 “paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War”. See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0100_EN.html. Predictably, it enraged Russia. In June this year, the President of Russian Federation has published an article *Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II*, which sparked outrage in Poland and the Baltic states. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and its secret protocols is regarded in Putin’s essay as a necessary defensive measure, a moral equivalent to the 1938 Munich Agreement between France, Germany, Italy and the UK that ceded Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland to Hitler’s Germany. See <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

** Polish collaboration and antisemitism stay in the background and insufficiently presented in Polish debates. In 2000 a book of Jan Gross *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* appeared in Polish language (in 2001 in English edition). A short essay in this book about mass killing of Jewish by locals started to be a huge problem and tension in a public and political debate about Polish co-responsibilities. See also Plucinska, Joanna “Princeton Professor Faces Libel Probe for Saying Poles Killed More Jews than Nazis in WWII”: <https://time.com/4075998/jan-gross-poland-jews-wwii/>.

*** The original end of the exhibition in the WWII museum contained a film showing that 1945 is not the end of the war, but there were conflicts in the world, on the West and the East side of the borders until 1989. The film has critically showed that the world did not liberate itself from the war,

Germany. History as a point of interest

Since the end of the Second World War, history was important in Germany, with certain crises and waves, since the 1960s. “History of the Nazi past in Germany became important in the 1960s related to the students’ movement, but they were rather interested in the role of their parents’ generation during the Nazi times. There was even a crisis of acknowledgment of history in society at the beginning of the 1970s,” says Ulrich Baumann, deputy director and curator of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

In the second half of the 1970s, there was a wave of interest in history in West Germany. There was the so-called “Hitler Wave”* and Nazi signs appeared again in the streets with Nazi stickers, biographies of, and right-wing publications, about

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Hitler began to multiply, as did other books, articles, plays, television programmes, films and documentaries. The peak of interest was around 1977/1978.

It was also in 1978 when a growing interest in Jewish history and the history of the persecution of Jews in Germany started to emerge. The film *Holocaust* was made in 1979 which was important for Germany. It portrays a Jewish family’s struggle to survive the horrors of Nazi Germany’s systematic marginalisation and the extermination of their community. These developments coincided with the 40th commemoration of the November Terror in 1938, a pogrom against Jews carried out by the Nazi party’s paramilitary wing.

At the same time, there was a parallel process and an expanding interest in local and biographical history. In the 1980s many in Germany started to look at local history, which was also related to the development of *Geschichtswerkstätten*, or history workshops. The trend first emerged in Scandinavia during the 1970s with a focus on local history and the connections between historical dimensions with the present day life. Around this time, the history workshop movement rose in England as well. In Germany the first history workshops emerged as part of the New Social Movements, which focus first and foremost on cultural and social life, individual self-realisation and human rights rather than on materialistic qualities

the conflicts are still ongoing. A newly appointed director replaced this film with a computer animation showing Polish heroism during WWII. See the video animation currently displayed at the WWII museum IPNtv: *Unconquered*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7MSG4Q-4as>.

* See Sandkühler, Thomas *NS-Propaganda und historisches Lernen* <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/213523/ns-propaganda-und-historisches-lernen?p=0>. Also see Lukacs, John, “The Hitler of History” <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/l/lukacs-hitler.html>

such as economic wellbeing as well as political and military security. “There was a rising interest in the history of the place where I am living during the Nazi period. A local approach was very important. We now have a rising number of studies about local history projects in a certain place,” Baumann adds. All this strengthened the general interest of the Nazi time as well as the war.

Clashes of memory

In the 1990s there was a significant debate in Germany about the role of the German Army, the *Wehrmacht*. The discussion was triggered by two exhibitions produced by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research: one in 1995 and the other in 2001, focusing on the atrocities and crimes of the Wehrmacht during the war. The exhibition, despite its controversies, brought a critical view on the German *Wehrmacht's* involvement and participation in the extermination of Jews, their treatment of prisoners of war and the civilians.

“Many Germans tend to say that they themselves had been victims of the war, victims of a small group of criminals who captured power and persecuted the Germans. But I think in the last 20 years it became clear by a lot of books that there was a big affirmation among Germans and the participation in the atrocities of the war and the Holocaust,” says Baumann.

In the last five years, the culture of remembrance in Germany has been facing challenges from the right-wing political spectrum. In 2017 Björn Höcke, a politician with AfD (Alternative for Germany), called for a “180-degree turnaround in memory politics” and described the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a “memorial of shame”. It is a clash of memories between those who are in favour of memory and commemoration, and those who are fighting against them. Currently, many memorials experience vandalism at the hands of far right groups. In November 2015, for instance, the Submarine Bunker Valentin/Bremen-Farge opened to the public as the memorial *Denkort Bunker Valentin*. Almost from its initiation, the bunker *Valentin* became a constant object of vandalism. In May 2016 commemoration wreaths at the monument *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (“extermination by work”), in front of the main entrance, were burnt. In December 2017 “Stoppt den Schuldult” (“Stop the cult of guilt”) was sprayed on the walls near the bunker.

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How to present memory?

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (or the Holocaust Memorial) has been advocating for a documentation centre in Berlin that would deal with, and inform, the public about the German occupation of Europe, especially civilians of the occupied Soviet Union during the war. It appealed to offer a general comparison of today's 40 states. However, this initiative has ended, but "everything started again with the parallel project of the Memorial for the Poles (*Polen Denkmal*). We saw the next initiative and we wanted to suggest something which is encompassing more entities than only the Poles," explains Baumann.

The advocates of the *Polen Denkmal*, the German Institute of Polish Affairs in Darmstadt and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, started a discussion about a commemoration space for victims of the war. Together in June this year they created a compromised document which could be the basis for the German federal parliamentary decision. Though this initiative still awaits the decision of the German federal parliament, at the time of writing it signifies the birth of the Documentation Centre for the Victims of German Occupation in Europe and the *Polen Denkmal* (which will complement it).

This documentation centre and the *Polen Denkmal* is planned to be a three-dimensional work of art – encompassing not only the documentation centre and the memorial for Poles, but also a space for debates, meetings and other educational


initiatives. "The documentation centre is a lot about symbols. It should be placed in the centre of Berlin at a place or a square named symbolically "1st September 1939" – the start date of the war with the invasion of Poland. The documentation centre will be about all of occupied Europe," Baumann explains.

Advocates of *Polen Denkmal* want to have a non-permanent solution until a permanent one comes along. "I could imagine that even in the documentation centre Poles will say 'no, our role is so different and special to the role of Lithuanians or Ukrainians, that we do not want to appear together with Italian or French people in the documentation centre,'" Baumann says.

He agrees that it is important to talk with representatives of other commemoration cultures, but in the end it is the decision of Germans and the German historians on what shape this centre will take. Baumann concludes on the importance and meaning of the documentation centre: "One thing we learn, for example, now from this debate about the *Polen Denkmal*, is that there is a certain ignorance and

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unwillingness to see the history of neighbouring nations by many Germans. I think it would be one step to be more interested especially in Eastern nations.”

Even if the initiators of the centre succeed and invite others to the conversation, there still remain some challenges to overcome. Perhaps it is not the Polish part of the story that is the most challenging; it might be more difficult to talk about collaboration of France, where the Vichy regime and many French people supported Hitler; or the Italians, until 1943, being an ally of the Nazis. One thing is clear, however. We need history to work on prejudices. The government and politicians have enabled commemoration culture in Germany, but commemoration itself is designed by well-informed experts who know the content and can implement it creatively. Let's hope it will stay this way. 

Kristina Smolijaninovaite is the deputy director of the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum* in Berlin. She initiated the Forum's working group on Historical Memory and Education in 2013. She was one of the curators of the exhibition *Different Wars: National School Textbooks on World War II* and co-authored the accompanying catalogue. Within the *EU-Russia Civil Society Forum*, she builds the programme *Different Wars: Remembering the Past* which deals with conflicting history of the 20th century in the EU and Russia.