

Remembering as Pacting between Past, Present and Future

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Tomasz Tadeusz Koncewicz Sa 13 Jan 2018

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In loving memory of my late grandmother Czesława Strąg, The Righteous Among the Nations of the World who tirelessly taught me that in order to really move forward we must never forget about our historical baggage, good and bad

“If this is your land, where are your stories?”

T. Chamberlin, *If this is Your Land, where are Your Stories? Reimagining Home and Sacred Space* (Pilgrim Press, 2003)

Prelude. From captured states to captive minds

The past has not been spared from the “politics of resentment” engulfing Poland for the last two years. The peculiar (mis)understanding and political instrumentalization of history by Polish rulers provide an important cautionary tale against one-sided partisan historical debate as it impacts how we remember the past and see ourselves today.

The most recent installment of this „politics of memory” came with the proposed change to the *Act on the Institute of National Remembrance* to criminalize publicly and erroneously assigning to the Polish nation any blame for the Nazi crimes committed by the III Reich. The Minister of Justice, Mr Ziobro, the most dangerous man in a government full of dangerous men, presented his rationale as follows: „[...] the Polish government took an important step in the direction of creating stronger legal instruments allowing us to defend our rights, defend the historical truth, and defend Poland’s good name everywhere in the world”. He alluded to the notorious “Polish death camps” designation occasionally appearing in the foreign media, and potentially suggesting co-responsibility on the part of the Poles for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany. He vowed to prosecute all those who defame Poland or the Polish Nation. The draft has already sparked a furore over its scope and the severity of its sanctions, and has been criticized as a “blunt instrument”, yet another example of nationalist revival in Poland and the return of revisionist history. Critics have also pointed out the possible dangers of limiting free speech and research and of building the martyrological narrative wherein the world does not understand how much Poland suffered.

Catchy headlines aside, there are important general lessons to be learnt from this foray into the past.

„Memory capture”

„Memory capture” is a generic and novel concept. It rejects an inclusive approach to the past which would allow all voices to be heard. Instead it offers a one-dimensional explanation of where “We, the people” come from and what makes up our national identity, resulting in a „mis-memory”. While the mis-memory manifests itself in many places and under many guises, it has one unifying premise: denouncing the “Round Table Talks” in 1989 and the peaceful transition of power that has ensued as a rotten compromise struck by Lech Wałęsa (now seen a traitor and secret collaborator with the communists) and his *Solidarność* (Solidarity) with the outgoing communist regime as a means of keeping the old elites alive.

According to this narrative, Polish politics and institutions (e.g. constitutional review) are all a sham, and the Third Republic (brought into existence in 1989) has never been a real state, but rather a phantom state based on the intellectual corruption of the political elites, bribery, dysfunctional government, caving in to Brussels, selling off Poland to strangers for peanuts, and waiting at the beck and call of Germany.

„Memory capture” is vindictive: the Poles are entitled to greater respect and recognition for their significant suffering in the past, and Poland must be compensated for all the injustices done to it by the „dark” foreign powers. „Memory capture” arranges these bits and pieces in a particular order, thus enslaving the past within one dominant narrative. The historical debate and our collective memory becomes tainted by an imbalance, as certain elements are celebrated, while others that do not fit the overarching narrative are relegated to the margins of public discourse, castigated, and now penalized. Anyone who counters the dominant understanding of our past is characterized as a liar and a traitor. Passing the new law will, according to this narrative, help this crusade progress even faster and in a more disciplined way.

Historical debate: owning up to our fallibility?

Any controversial aspects of a nation’s history must be discussed openly and dispassionately (for the relevant ECtHR case law, see detailed analysis [here](#)). Reopening the historical debate to probe less-known or potentially controversial aspects of our history should form an important part of our common efforts to unearth the past, present and future. Seeking the historical truth does not equate finding it. Sometimes the process itself is gratifying, even if a final result is unattainable. This is the price for maintaining an “overlapping consensus” and living in a divided society with competing visions of our history. Every voice is important as long as it adds to the ongoing debate. Nobody should be excluded, much less penalized, for taking part in the exchange of views about history, which may go against the mainstream (and often momentary) narrative, often rather more political than about seeking historical truth.

In trying to understand the current Polish way of historical remembering – or rather our national “mis-memory” – the analysis of Tony Judt can be very instructive. He argues that two kinds of memories emerged from what he calls the “official version of the wartime experience” which became dominant in Europe by 1948. One was that of the things done to “us” by Germans during the war, and the other that of things (however similar) done by “us” to “others” after the war. This created „(t)wo moral vocabularies, two sorts of reasoning, two

different pasts. In this circumstance, the uncomfortably confusing recollection of things done by us to others during the war [...] got conveniently lost". Crucially, it has built post-war national mythology around "examples and stories which were repeated and magnified, *ad nauseam* [sic!], in novels, popular histories, radio, newspapers, and especially cinema".

Importantly, this mythology took on special importance in Eastern Europe. Judt rightly points out the communists' interest in „flattering the recalcitrant local population by inviting it to believe the fabrication now deployed on its behalf by the USSR – to wit, that central and eastern Europe was an innocent victim of German assault, had played no part in its own downfall or in the crimes perpetrated on its territory, and was a full partner in the work of liberation led by Soviet soldiers abroad and communist partisans at home”.

„Memory capture” on the rise in Poland painfully shows that the past is indeed, and continues to be, a “foreign country”. With the new legislation, the signal is being sent that far from being internalized, history lessons are instrumentalized to serve the new political masters' vision of the past. The same admonition applies to confronting one's past and building a memory that would capture the entirety of the historical baggage. Only then will Poles be able to remember honestly and move forward. By revealing the past, we discover the present, and most importantly, build the future in keeping with the constitutional fidelity that binds us across generations. This is so because „we turn to the past not because the past contains within it all of the answers to our questions, but because it is the repository of our common struggles and common commitments; it offers us invaluable resources as we debate the most important questions of political life, which cannot fully and finally be settled”.

All this must not be read as belittling the sufferings of the Polish people and the heroism of Polish Righteous among the nations of the World, or questioning Poland's resistance in the face of the atrocities of Nazi occupation. Nobody denies that. My point is different.

The unimaginable destruction of life – physical, spiritual, and cultural – wrought on us would have been more than enough to wipe out entire nations less strong than the Poles. We survived because history was always a repository on which to build a new order and rebuild life. We relied on our accumulated constitutional fidelity and moved forward. We remembered both the good and the bad, and what saved us and our way of life.

Therefore, my argument against an imposed understanding of history favours an inclusive historical memory that brings together and exposes all national experiences and narratives. Building a historical debate calls for never-ending “pacting” between the past, present, and future. Such “pacting” would move us away from “a historiography obsessed with minutiae and overgrown with easy assumptions about martyrology”. Jeremy Waldron is correct that “[o]nly the deliberate enterprise of recollection (the enterprise we call “history”), coupled with the most determined sense that there is a difference between what happened and what we would like to think happened, can sustain the moral and cultural reality of self and community”.

A nation that is not ready to embark on a comprehensive journey into its past is impoverished and unable to move forward with true understanding of who “We” really are. When grand gestures dominate, and less spectacular soul-searching is lacking, nations

become captives of the past rather than its masters.

It is here that Polish debate over “What really happened?” must be ongoing, and is far from over. It must be subject to the most critical and demanding inquiry and exchanges. Imposing sanctions for statements that go against the grain of the mainstream understanding would clearly inhibit the free flow of views and lead to a “one and only” vision of the past. The debate will become flattened and ultimately stifled, as prospective participants who hold different views will be discouraged – and even excluded – from joining the discussion. The media will think twice before stirring up a new controversy that would be justified by public interest. Consequently, public discussion will become predictable and one-sided, always sitting well within the expectations of the regime and its historical policy.

A narrative of contested pasts

The last thing Poland needs today is spreading an all-too-easy “culture of treason”, (ab)using its own vision of the past and history as a tool to fight political adversaries and divide Poles into “better“ and “worse” sorts, imposing one historical orthodoxy on society and enforcing it through criminal law, all as part of the wicked politics of resentment and mis-memory. As [Jan Błoński](#) put it in his now classic analysis, „on this Polish graveyard our obligation to carry the past must boil down to seeing this past in truth”.

Historical debate should strive for pragmatic recognition that our constitutional allegiances are shaped, reshaped, and re-examined as we move forward. There is no place for fear of failure, because failure is part of the fidelity we owe to ourselves. The past must be the key to the future, but not only. Memory properly understood should challenge dominant accounts of history. It might be used to disguise and cover up, or to liberate and reveal. What matters, though, is that no single overarching master narrative exists, and that disagreement is part and parcel of many “[contested pasts](#)”. True historical debate must resemble democracy, where all voices are heard. As the majority must not oppress the minority, dominant historic narratives cannot exclude less popular views of historical events. Unfortunately, in Poland the past continues to be seen as a collection of indisputable truths, not open to divergent interpretations and historical debate.

Truly disconcerting is the new role played by the law in the process of framing the historical debate, namely to enforce “the official truths” while suppressing any disagreement. To prevent this from happening, each of us in our own way must try, paraphrasing Milosz’s „[Captive Mind](#)”, to move beyond being a mere passive spectator of the historical narrative and become a critical actor in how this narrative is written, shaped and understood, what stories are (re)told and how. The paranoid politics has already destroyed the judicial review, courts, and free media. It now sets its sights on historical memory. We must never let it turn us into captive minds. This is where the politics of mis-memory pose the existential danger that the Polish Past and History will become an uncontested sphere, dominated by a truth superimposed from above, a truly [foreign country](#) with the power of story-telling available only to the “lucky few”.

Poland of 2018 finds itself at a critical juncture – suspended between old myths and the narratives of “what happened” on the one hand, and the rejection of any attempts to finally

discover the multi-dimensional pasts that Poles must own up to, on the other. The capture of the state and institutions in Poland is relentless and all-embracing. While the captured institutions might be rebuilt, it will take generations to free captive minds and souls. As „We Poles” are imperfect, beautiful, impulsive, contradictory, all this and more, the historical narrative must be allowed to reflect and bring to light the diversity of not only our great moments, but also imperfections, frailties and dark sides. After all, this is MY, YOUR and OUR history. These are MY, YOUR and OUR myths and stories. Not theirs.

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