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Historical Factor. Memory of the Second World War in the Polish-Russian Discourse (1989–2024)

**Czynnik historyczny. Pamięć o drugiej wojnie światowej
w dyskursie polsko-rosyjskim**

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Abstract

The article focuses on the issue of the impact of the historical conditions on contemporary Polish-Russian relations. The history of these two countries is linked by a centuries-old and difficult past, and as a result, numerous unresolved disputes, burdens and myths, that are still present, arose between them. The tensions that have occurred in these places of common memory became the source of the contemporary conflicts where both sides, referring to their historical argumentation, try to impose their own point of view. One of such areas of contact (memory nodes) in the common Polish-Russian history, which, like the vast majority of them, is of a conflicting nature, is the issue of extremely different interpretations of events and historical processes concerning the Second World War.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie wpływu uwarunkowań historycznych na współczesne relacje polsko-rosyjskie. Dzieje tych dwóch państw łączy wielowiekowa i trudna przeszłość, w wyniku czego powstały między nimi liczne nierozwiązane do końca spory, obciążenia i mity, dające o sobie znać po dzisiejszy dzień. Napięcia, jakie zaistniały w tych miejscach wspólnej pamięci, stały się źródłem obecnych konfliktów, w których obie strony, odwołując się do swojej argumentacji historycznej, próbują narzucić własny punkt widzenia. Jednym z takich obszarów styčných (węzłów pamięci) ze wspólnych polsko-rosyjskich dziejów, który tak jak zdecydowana większość z nich ma charakter konfliktowy, jest kwestia krańcowo różnej interpretacji wydarzeń i procesów historycznych dotyczących drugiej wojny światowej.

Introduction

Contemporary relations between Poland and Russia are shaped by a great deal of historical experience. Due to their geographical proximity, these countries have been continuously and to a different extent influenced by their past. A past that was marked above all by a history of conflict taking place not only in the territorial but also economical, cultural and social dimensions. These bad experiences of mutual relations have contributed to various historical burdens and national stereotypes strongly affecting the way the two nations perceive each other. The gravity of history, manifested in the issue of the perception and misperception of individual events and processes from common Polish-Russian history (e.g. the Polish intervention in the Kremlin at the beginning of the 17th century, Russia's participation in the partitions of Poland, the suppression of Polish national uprisings by Tsarism, the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920, contradictions relating to the Second World War or the assessment of Soviet domination in the years of the Polish People's Republic), has resulted in the emergence of many unexplained disputes, different myths and past problems negatively affecting the entirety of mutual relations.

The tensions that have arisen in these areas of shared memory have become a source of contemporary conflicts in which both sides, referring to their historical arguments, try to impose their own point of view. Significantly, the steps taken in this regard to resolve such feuds (untangling the knots of memory) may contribute to their further consolidation and entanglement. This is the case when, in the shaped narrative about the past, which in the identity dimensions serves to identify the nation in terms of "we", "our society" (it builds the self-esteem and

stability of community members, creates in individuals the conviction of the existence of special bonds connecting them to a certain group of other people) and to differentiate them from other nations, the undermining of one element – especially in the axiological dimension – results in the decomposition of the entire identity structure¹. Such a violation of a given fragment of collective memory, which “feeds” on historical knowledge, using it to construct desired images of the past according to its own rules, contributes to a change in the whole range of them and thus to a revision of the perception of the self, the community, the nation. Usually, this type of revision provides an argumentation to take a more critical stance towards a particular story and is therefore negative, or at least less positive. Instead of an idealized image of one’s own national group, portrayed in terms of an innocent victim, there is a component forcing the adoption of a more balanced judgement towards one’s own self-esteem. In this way, a given historical narrative ceases to be visible only in black and white but takes on a more complex form. For this reason, untangling such a knot of memory is extremely difficult and requires reaching a consensus on a vision of how a given part of history should be perceived².

One such point of contact from the common Polish-Russian past, which, like the vast majority of them, is of a conflicting nature, is the issue of the radically different interpretation of the historical events and processes concerning the Second World War. It is safe to say that the history of this conflict is now a major flashpoint, given the existing historical burden. This topic has caused constant tensions and problems from the very first moments of modern relations between the two countries³. Admittedly, in spite of the existing discrepancies, the beginning of the 1990s – when the political elite of the Third Republic of Poland, guiding the political transformation in our country, initiated a phase of reckoning with this tragic past – might have offered some hope that a common understanding could finally be worked out as part of the dialogue undertaken at that time⁴. For it was precisely at that time that the Kremlin leaders, as part of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which had begun several years earlier, and the ensuing process of democratization, in coming to terms with their history, showed the greatest

¹ Z. Bokszański, *Tożsamości zbiorowe*, Warszawa 2002, p. 27.

² M. Guibernau, *The Identity of Nations*, Cambridge 2007, p. 25.

³ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 22 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 22, 23 i 24 lutego 1990 r., Appendix no. 2, Warszawa 1990, p. 51–54.

⁴ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 28 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 26, 27 i 28 kwietnia 1990 r., Warszawa 1990, p. 273.

goodwill and kindness in clarifying the difficult and tragic threads of the mutual past of both nations. However, in the years that followed, tensions became increasingly severe and were caused by an ever-growing divergence of opinion, particularly with regard to the perception of certain facts and events of the past conflict, thus hindering the chances of achieving a common reconciliation⁵.

At this point, another important element antagonizing mutual relations emerged. Namely, on what principles this Polish-Russian reconciliation, which includes settling accounts with the tragic past – above all with regard to the crimes of the communist system committed against the Polish people between 1939 and 1945 – should be based. Warsaw's position was that it should take a similar form to the Polish-German reconciliation, where the German side, by condemning the Nazi system, fully acknowledged its faults and took full responsibility for the genocide it committed during the Second World War on the occupied territories of the Second Republic of Poland⁶. This solution was not accepted by the Russian leadership, which believed that the Soviet Union and the Third Reich should not be put in the same framework and that therefore the crimes of the USSR had a different dimension than those committed by Nazi Germany (they could not be considered crimes against humanity).

As a result, in spite of several significant gestures made towards the Polish state by Kremlin leaders (e.g. the admission by Mikhail Gorbachev and his successors that the Katyn crime was committed by the NKVD, the symbolic placing of flowers by Boris Yeltsin in front of the Katyn Cross at the Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw during his visit to Poland in 1993, the consent of the Russian authorities to the opening of the Polish war cemeteries at Katyn and Mednoye in 2000), a progressive regression in the ongoing dialogue on common history became increasingly evident. The situation further deteriorated at the dawn of the next century. On the one hand, this was the result of a “new historical policy” initiated at the beginning of the 21st century by Vladimir Putin to minimize or justify the relevance of the most difficult moments of his state's history, particularly concerning the 20th century⁷. On the other hand, the rather strong “sensitivity” of the Polish side towards Moscow on symbolic issues, their excessive valuation,

⁵ R.T. Underwood, *How History Matters: Polish Memory Politics and Policies Toward Russia since 1989*, Morgantown 2015.

⁶ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 53 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 7, 8 i 9 marca 1991 r., Warszawa 1991, p. 76–77.

⁷ H. Bækken, J.D. Enstad, *Identity under Siege: Selective Securitization of History in Putin's Russia*, “The Slavonic and East European Review” 2020, Vol. 98, No. 2, p. 328–329.

as well as the tendency in our politics to shift the discussion on the crimes of the Second World War from emphasis on German crimes to the guilt of the Soviet state, caused a deepening of anti-Russian resentments⁸.

The aim of this article was to analyze how memories of Second World War are constructed in Polish and Russian public discourse and the impact of these narratives on Polish-Russian relations. Given that the history of this conflict – due to the deepening differences in how the two nations perceive and assess those events – has become a source of numerous tensions and disputes in the present day, it has become extremely important to identify here the main historical burdens that, to a greater or lesser extent, negatively impact mutual relations. In this context, answering four research questions was crucial: 1) which events from the period of Second World War have become the most frequent cause of disputes between Poland and Russia; 2) what were the reasons for the misunderstandings in this area; 3) how did Russian historical narratives regarding Second World War change after V. Putin came to power; 4) what role did existing historical burdens play in building bilateral relations? To properly address this topic in the research, the study primarily employed the methods of historical analysis and systems analysis, as well as the institutional-legal method. In order to effectively address the research problem and answer the research questions posed, the structure of the thesis was organized according to a chronological and thematic framework, which allowed for a reasonably accurate presentation and discussion of this phenomenon. The starting point for the analysis was the thesis that the history of Second World War remains one of the key factors contributing to conflict in Polish-Russian relations, and that differing interpretations of that past have become one of the main barriers to building stable neighborly relations after 1989.

The Katyn massacre

Analyzing the issue of the Second World War from the point of view of Poland and Russia, we can identify a number of fundamental points of contention which,

⁸ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne ze 102 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 4 maja 2005 r., Warszawa 2005, p. 4; Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 23 września 2009 r. upamiętniająca agresję Związku Radzieckiego na Polskę 17 września 1939 r., „M.P.” 2009, No. 63, Pos. 831; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 45. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 12 lipca 2013 r., Warszawa 2013, p. 281; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 61 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 13 kwietnia 2018 r., Warszawa 2018, p. 278–280; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 37. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 16 września 2021 r., Warszawa 2021, p. 286.

to a greater or lesser extent, have a negative impact on mutual relations. The first is the case of the Katyn massacre – the murder in 1940, on the orders of the highest Soviet authorities, of more than twenty two thousand Polish prisoners of war, taken captive after the Soviet aggression of 17 September 1939⁹. For the political elite of the Third Republic, the clarification of all the circumstances of those events and the desire to find and punish those responsible became the main priority of action in relations with Moscow from the very beginning¹⁰. For it was in fully establishing the circumstances of this murder that Warsaw saw an opportunity for joint reconciliation and better cooperation between the two countries, making political dialogue with the Russian Federation conditional on this issue¹¹.

Despite Russia's declarations recognizing the Soviet Union's responsibility in the commission of this crime and the many examples of goodwill undertaken in this regard, the Katyn issue soon became one of the most important elements negatively affecting mutual relations when it came to historical issues¹². This was influenced by several factors. Firstly, in the view of the Russian side, the official confirmation of the NKVD's murder of Polish prisoners of war could have contributed to creating an image in the world of the USSR as a criminal state, and thus Moscow's recognition that communism was evil. Meanwhile, the attitude of Russians towards the past regime has not changed much and is still mostly identified by them with something positive. Unlike the modern period, especially the 1990s, which the average Russian Federation resident primarily associates with economic collapse, a crisis of values, corruption, nepotism, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the times of the Soviet state are mainly epitomized by economic development, the fact that everyone had a job and the state guaranteed relative stability and the possibility of a relatively secure existence. All of this has resulted in the prevailing assessment in the opinions of ordinary people today that life was better and safer then¹³. Significantly, the years of the USSR's existence are

⁹ T. Urban, *The Katyn Massacre 1940: History of a Crime*, Barnsley 2020.

¹⁰ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 7 posiedzenia Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w dniu 12 września 1989 r., Warszawa 1989, p. 20.

¹¹ Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 22 marca 1990 r. w sprawie Katynia, „M.P.” 1990, No. 11, Pos. 80.

¹² Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 27 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 15, 16 i 17 października 1992 r., Warszawa 1992, p. 231; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 51 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 8 czerwca 1995 r., Warszawa 1995, p. 57; Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 38. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 17 kwietnia 2013 r., Warszawa 2013, p. 147.

¹³ А. Барсенков, В. Корецкий, А. Остапенко, *Политическая Россия сегодня: высшая представительная власть*, Москва 1993.

a period that is enshrined in the consciousness of the Russian public as a time of being citizens of a powerful empire, a country playing the role of a superpower on the international stage, in contrast to today where the only pillar of national pride is the myth of a great recent past¹⁴. All this means that the Russian people, despite being aware of and condemning the crimes committed by the communist system, are still not prepared to unequivocally and universally condemn it. Hence, while admitting to the murder of Polish prisoners of war, the Moscow authorities tried to weaken their own guilt, often pointing out that it was an anonymous crime – in the statements of the Kremlin leadership, not identified with either Stalin or the Party – for which the present Russia cannot be held responsible¹⁵, which very often caused frustration and sometimes even unnecessary hysteria on the part of Warsaw.

Secondly, the issue of the legal legitimacy of the Katyn massacre, which was repeatedly raised by the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland and which, in their view, was a genocide (something the Russian Federation does not agree with), as well as the problem of holding the perpetrators of this crime accountable, as pointed out by Poland, and – something that particularly concerned Moscow – the issue of potential compensation for the families of the victims of NKVD repression, also remained a sensitive and inconvenient issue for the Kremlin. In the opinion of the Polish Government, a comprehensive explanation and resolution of these issues was necessary in order to fully rectify the evil that was inflicted by the Soviet regime on the Polish nation in 1940, as well as to emphasize that the perpetrators of this murder, even after a longer period of time, would ultimately be held to account¹⁶. However, the constantly raised demands to settle the above-mentioned matters and to establish all the circumstances of the Katyn massacre began to be received in Moscow with increasing hostility and nervousness, often recognizing that their real motivation was a desire to maintain an anti-Russian sentiment in Polish society. For in the contemporary Russian perception of shared history and those events, there is a conviction that the two nations have basically nothing to forgive each other for, either because

¹⁴ J. Sweet, *Political Invasions into Collective Memories: Russia*, "International Journal of Communication" 2016, Vol. 10, p. 4512–4531.

¹⁵ A. Goszczyński, *Dezinformacja i propaganda w polityce historycznej Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Polski i Ukrainy (na podstawie publikacji w rosyjskich i prorosyjskich portalach internetowych w 2023 r.)*, Raport, Warszawa 2023, p. 13.

¹⁶ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 64 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 8 kwietnia 2010 r., Warszawa 2010, p. 139–140.

they have done nothing to each other (since, in the Kremlin's view, the responsibility for Katyn lies with the political bureau of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and not with present-day Russia) or the "account of wrongs" is evenly distributed, since as a moral counterbalance to the crimes against Polish officers, Moscow raised the issue of the anti-Katyn case it had created – the fate of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner during the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920. This approach was at odds with Warsaw's position, where the desire for Russia to unravel all aspects of the Soviet crime and, crucially, show remorse was a common expectation¹⁷. This difference of opinion on how to view the Katyn case soon contributed to numerous misunderstandings and mutual accusations, becoming one of the main historical obstacles in Polish-Russian political relations.

With the complexity of the problem and the increasingly different perceptions of how the two nations assessed these events, it should be stressed that in the 1990s, Moscow representatives showed a great deal of kindness in clarifying the difficult and tragic issues related to Katyn. Already at the beginning of his presidency, B. Yeltsin apologized for the murder of Polish prisoners of war by the NKVD in 1940, in 1994 the foreign ministers of Poland and Russia signed agreements on the construction of military cemeteries in Katyn and Mednoye, two years later the Kremlin leaders decided to allocate special funds for this purpose, and in 2000 the ceremonial opening of the necropolis took place¹⁸. These gestures of goodwill by the Russian Federation were to show that the country expressed a strong desire to break with its Communist past and that it wanted to come to terms with the infamous legacy of the Soviet state. All this offered an opportunity for joint reconciliation and better cooperation between the two countries in terms of the levelling of historical accounts related to Katyn. Unfortunately, there was a marked setback in this area shortly afterwards, which was due to the fact that, as in many other cases after 1991, the positions of Warsaw and Moscow on this issue proved to be radically different.

While the Kremlin treated the settlement of the issue of the creation of Polish cemeteries as a symbolic closure of the sensitive topic of settling accounts with history, the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland continued to claim that quite significant problems remained in this field, such as the insufficient measures taken by the Russian side to fully explain the 1940 crime or the issue of

¹⁷ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 82. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 12 czerwca 2019 r., Warszawa 2019, p. 130.

¹⁸ M. Stolarczyk, *Rosja w polityce zagranicznej Polski w latach 1992–2015*, Katowice 2016, p. 185.

reparations to the families of the victims of the Katyn massacre¹⁹. On the one hand, the demands made by Warsaw to establish all the circumstances of the murder of the Polish prisoners of war can be regarded as legitimate in this respect. To date, most information has been obtained regarding Katyn, Mednoye and Kharkiv, where approx. Fifteen thousand officers are buried (both the identity of the murdered and the circumstances of their deaths are known). However, we still know little about the remaining seven thousand killed by the Soviet regime, resting in several lesser known and investigated sites. On the other hand, the demand for further expressions of expiation from Russia was increasingly rarely met with understanding on Moscow's part. For it must be taken into account here that the Kremlin leaders have never been too eager to apologies for their country's crimes, either to their own people or to neighboring states, let alone to repeat such apologies. Therefore, the gesture of B. Yeltsin, who during his visit to Poland in 1993, while laying a wreath at the Katyn Cross at the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw, uttered the memorable words "prostitie" (forgive us), thus showing great nobility and compassion towards our nation, should be appreciated²⁰. Meanwhile, the Polish side expected further forms of atonement of this kind, which had an increasingly negative impact on the issue of settling the historical burdens occurring in mutual relations.

The situation deteriorated further at the dawn of the 21st century. This has been influenced by the historical policy initiated by V. Putin, aimed at forging a "new formula of patriotism" in the Russian nation. It was based on a selective treatment of past events, particularly with regard to the Second World War, playing a key role in Kremlin policy due to the ever-expanding myth of a heroic Soviet Union²¹. Therefore, in Moscow's historical discourse, the issue of Katyn began to be increasingly omitted or even relativized in order to defend the pro-government narrative about the country's history. The image of the Second World War, which has become the main element in the current strategy of Russia's leaders in building the greatness of this country, was thus intended to create a picture of this conflict exclusively as a heroic, glorious act, demonstrating the power of the USSR. There was no place in this promoted narrative for the various dark sides of the activities of the Soviet state and the Bolshevik party. This also applied to

¹⁹ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 40 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 21 kwietnia 2009 r., Warszawa 2009, p. 83–84.

²⁰ F. Ozbay, B. Aras, *Polish-Russian Relations: History, Geography and Geopolitics*, "East European Quarterly" 2008, Vol. 42, No. 1, p. 34.

²¹ W. Materski, *Od cara do „cara”. Studium rosyjskiej polityki historycznej*, Warszawa 2017, p. 247.

the case of the Katyn massacre, with regard to which Moscow's representatives showed a steadily increasing decline in interest in settling this tragic page of our common past²².

An eloquent testimony to this new approach of the Russian Federation to historical issues was the decision taken by the Supreme Prosecutor's Office of that country in 2004, which, after several years of investigation, decided to discontinue the investigation into the Katyn massacre. Russian investigators found no grounds to consider the 1940 murder as genocide, classifying it as a common crime, subject to the statute of limitations. In the opinion of many in Warsaw, the use of such terms to describe the murder of Polish prisoners of war by the NKVD was a clear indication of the fact that the Kremlin authorities, as part of its historical policy, were attempting to minimize the responsibility of their state for the various heinous acts of the Soviet Union²³. The establishment of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters, consisting of a team of experts and scientists from both countries, to deal with, among other things, historical controversies – including the Katyn issue – may have offered some opportunities for breaking down barriers in this area. Although it soon ceased its activities due to deteriorating mutual relations, it was reactivated in 2008, which was seen by a large portion of the public – on both sides – as a first momentous step towards settling the existing historical burdens.

There were also high hopes of reaching a common understanding on the Katyn issue after the crash of the Polish presidential plane near Smolensk on 10 April 2010, which unleashed huge amounts of sympathy and solidarity from the Russians towards our nation²⁴. Significantly, this tragedy has led to a great deal of journalistic interest throughout Russia in the subject of the Katyn massacre, which, being widely reported in the local media, has become more widely known and understood by Russian citizens. The Kremlin leadership also began to speak more publicly to its own people about the responsibility of Stalin and the CPSU for the crimes committed against the Poles²⁵. It seemed that these dramatic

²² О. Петровская, *Инструментализация истории в отношениях России с Польшей*, [in:] *Pamięć i polityka historyczna w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich*, eds. S. Bieliński, A. Skrzypek, Warszawa 2017, p. 19–50.

²³ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 39. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 7 kwietnia 2017 r., Warszawa 2017, p. 359.

²⁴ R. Fredheim, *The Memory of Katyn in Polish Political Discourse: A Quantitative Study*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2014, Vol. 66, No. 7, p. 1167.

²⁵ Госдума приняла заявление «О Катынской трагедии и ее жертвах», <http://duma.gov.ru/news/5093/> [access: 17.12.2025].

events would trigger a breakthrough and have a positive impact on the process of mutual reconciliation. Unfortunately, it was not long before more and more discrepancies began to be observed in this field, caused above all by the ever-widening differences in the way certain facts of the Second World War history were interpreted.

This was influenced, on the one hand, by the actions taken by Moscow, which, as part of its historical policy, increasingly sought to shape the history of mutual relations by way of a selective and biased presentation of facts about the conflict – including the Soviet murder of 1940. This was due to the fact that history in the modern Putin strategy became an important sphere of state action with the goal of strengthening the authoritarian system of government, which was to be implemented by building an artificial community of interests between the authorities and society. Such an approach imposed the need for a selective and biased presentation of the history of the nation and the state, where an attempt was made to emphasize only those aspects of the past where Russia would be the aggrieved party, while remaining silent about its own crimes that were committed either against its own people or neighboring countries (including those relating to the Katyn massacre)²⁶. The nature of this kind of message, as far as the Polish-Russian historical burden was concerned, was further strengthened by the conviction, which still prevailed on the Russian side, that the Russians, to a much greater extent than the Poles, were the victims of the communist regime and therefore did not feel responsible for its crimes.

On the other hand, in the consciousness of the vast majority of Poles, the Russian state was treated as the legal international successor of earlier geopolitical creations, namely the Soviet Union, Tsarist Russia and the statehoods that preceded them. Thus, there was no distinction between Russian and Soviet guilt. In Warsaw's view, the Russian Federation, as heir to the USSR, was obliged to take on all the consequences of the Soviet state's activities, including those relating to historical issues – for example the events of 1940. This difference of views with regard to the interpretation of the Katyn crime – and, more broadly, the different perceptions of the history of mutual relations – has had its negative impact on further cooperation between the two countries. The eastern neighbor's lack of determination to quickly clarify all issues concerning the Katyn massacre and the anti-Katyn issue, which the Kremlin repeatedly raised in mutual historical

²⁶ M. Domańska, J. Rogoża, *Naprzód, w przyszłość! Rosyjska polityka historyczna w służbie „wiecznego” autorytaryzmu*, Warszawa 2021, p. 13.

settlements, began to be perceived by a large part of Polish circles as a signal that the historians' current findings made on this issue are not accepted by some Russian politicians²⁷. In turn, the relentless and fierce efforts of the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland to fully establish the causes and circumstances of the 1940 Soviet murder were perceived by Moscow as a manifestation of "Russo-phobia" and ill will²⁸. The Katyn issue has left a permanent mark on bilateral relations, becoming one of the most important threads giving rise to serious tensions in mutual relations.

The issue of Soviet-German cooperation

Another point of contention in common Polish-Russian history, in terms of the knots of memory involving issues of the Second World War, which has recently become apparent was the question of the radically different interpretations regarding the role played by the USSR in the early stages of this conflict. The impetus for mutual polemics in this area was provided by increasing divergences of opinion regarding the assessment of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Soviet aggression against Poland on 17 September 1939 or Soviet-German cooperation in 1939-1941²⁹. The first serious antagonisms against this background began to emerge after 2000³⁰. This was a consequence of V. Putin's idea of strengthening the state. Within these plans, the history was to fulfill two important functions: firstly, to strengthen the power of those in power by using it as an important instrument allowing for greater control over society through appropriate management of the emotions it evokes among citizens (internal dimension). Secondly –

²⁷ *Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości*, Warszawa 2014, p. 157.

²⁸ Р. Лисевич, *Зигзаги польско-российских отношений в посткоммунистический период*, „Современная Европа” 2019, Vol. 93, No. 7, p. 43–45.

²⁹ *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 82 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 24, 25, 26 i 27 sierpnia 2004 r.*, Warszawa 2004, p. 267.

³⁰ The first voices from the Kremlin that relativised the responsibility of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact for triggering Second World War appeared during V. Putin's visit to Slovakia in February 2005, where he stated that the Soviet-German agreement of August 1939 was a response to the „Munich conspiracy” and the attempt by Western powers to direct the armies of the Third Reich against the USSR. Since then, the 1938 Munich Agreement has become a permanent anti-topic for the 1939–1941 Stalin-Hitler alliance in the Russian media and the messages of local politicians. See *Интервью «Радио Словенско» и словацкой телекомпании СТБ*, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22837> [access: 13.12.2025]. M. Domańska, J. Rogoża, *Naprzód, w przyszłość! Rosyjska polityka historyczna w służbie „wiecznego” autorytaryzmu*, Warszawa 2021, p. 13.

and what is particularly important – a means of combating opponents in the international arena (external dimension). In the latter case, the task of historical policy became to justify the imperial plans of the Russian Federation aimed at expansion into other countries as well as to strive to reconstruct the balance of power in the modern world.

Given the last point, in this historical policy of the Russian Federation newly shaped by V. Putin, the past played a huge role on the way to building and strengthening the international position to which Moscow aspired as well as to justify its aggressive foreign policy. For this reason, the Kremlin authorities tried to use appropriately selected facts and interpretations to build a “desirable” vision of the history of the country – in particular in relation to Second World War, which would, on the one hand, create the “uniqueness” of the Soviet state as an important link ensuring international security (ideologization of the Soviet Union in overthrowing Nazism) and, on the other, its “strength”³¹. Thus, in the minds of the Kremlin leaders, history became an important source providing convenient and irrefutable arguments that would enable them to realize their opportunistic interests. This mythologization of the USSR came down to exaggerating the achievements of the Bolshevik Party and, what is especially important, its elites – primarily the person of J. Stalin, who was created by Putin’s increasingly strong strategy as one of the greatest statesmen of his country. At the same time, all these activities were accompanied by the exposure of the image of Russia/the USSR as a state constantly threatened by the West, which, according to the story that Moscow has been creating for centuries, has always sought to annihilate it. In this way, the Russian authorities tried to embody the Kremlin’s aggressive policy and the resulting wars (including those in Soviet times) in terms of necessary and necessary steps taken to protect the state³².

Formulating this type of message was intended to justify Moscow’s aspirations to extend the control over areas considered to be its sphere of influence and, therefore, justify Russian imperialism. Achieving these plans by means of sacralization of the history of the Soviet state at the same time required the elimination of all other facts and interpretations that could weaken or discredit the Moscow narrative, including that coming from Warsaw. This was particularly true of the Second World War period occupying a central place in Moscow’s

³¹ R. Bäcker, *Rosyjskie myślenie polityczne za czasów prezydenta Putina*, Toruń 2007, p. 237.

³² A. Danilov, A. Filippov (eds.), *История России. 1900–1945 гг. Книга для учителя*, Москва 2008.

historical policy. Therefore, the Kremlin's propaganda efforts were simultaneously accompanied by omitting or even falsification of the worst moments of the country's history at the time. For this reason, it is no coincidence that Moscow presented the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a justified attempt to prevent the Third Reich's aggression against the Soviet Union from the Baltic states, while the Red Army's incursion into the eastern territories of the Second Republic of Poland was nothing more than a "peace operation", close to contemporary norms, which had nothing to do with war, while the cooperation with the Third Reich, which was difficult to deny, was explained as a forced necessity falling within the standards of international politics³³. All this has led to increasing "memory wars" between Moscow and countries challenging the Russian interpretation of those events, including Poland³⁴.

In Warsaw's view, all these actions constituted an eloquent testimony to the fact that Moscow is increasingly trying to evade its legal and moral responsibility for the crimes of the communist system, despite the fact that it has repeatedly and openly referred to the historical and political legacy of the Soviet Union³⁵. This attitude of the Russian Federation, according to the majority of politicians in our country, was meant to be a clear signal that the country has so far failed to account for the true cost of its total legacy³⁶. For this reason, many decision-makers in Poland felt that serious differences of a "historical" nature still existed in bilateral relations with our eastern neighbor due to divergent views on the interpretation of certain phenomena and processes from their shared history. Therefore, a significant part of the Polish political class took the view that a dispute with the Russian Federation in this field was virtually inevitable³⁷.

The origins of these disagreements on how to approach the history linking the two countries, particularly in the context of the Second World War, can be traced to several fundamental factors. The first of these was the fact that, despite measures taken under President B. Yeltsin to uncover the pages of Russia's history

³³ W. Materski, *Polityka historyczna Federacji Rosyjskiej po 2000 r.*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2014, Vol. 46, No. 4, p. 98.

³⁴ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 98 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 3 marca 2005 r., Warszawa 2005, p. 151.

³⁵ Pełny zapis przebiegu posiedzenia Komisji Sprawiedliwości i Praw Człowieka (Nr 83) z dnia 5 marca 2013 r., Warszawa 2013, p. 3–7.

³⁶ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 39. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 9 maja 2013 r., Warszawa 2013, p. 234.

³⁷ Pełny zapis przebiegu posiedzenia Komisji Spraw Zagranicznych (Nr 73) z dnia 4 kwietnia 2013 r., Warszawa 2013, p. 21.

that had been covered up for decades, the country has still not fully come to terms with its own past³⁸. The truth is that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, access to archives was significantly expanded and hundreds of thousands of documents were declassified, which gave rise to hope that as a result of the activities initiated in this field, there would be a kind of *catharsis* – the release of blocked suffering and the self-purification of the Russian nation. However, it was Russian society that still could not completely accept the crimes the USSR had committed, as this would have meant admitting that communism was simply evil. Meanwhile, in the perception of most of the country's citizens, in those bleak 1990s associated for the most part with poverty, corruption and nepotism, the myth of the former power of the Soviet Union became the sole foundation of Russians' generational consciousness³⁹. The superpower that saved the world from the Third Reich.

This memory of the historical role of the Soviet empire, the only – according to the narrative promoted during the communist era – true opponent of Nazism, which saved humanity from annihilation, provided an important refuge in the difficult times of transition. Thus a comprehensive adoption of the Polish point of view over the history of Second World War, and full recognition by the Kremlin of Soviet guilt in this conflict, would be tantamount to the acceptance that the communist system, on which this country was based, operated on human harm and misfortune. An admission that the martyrology of the victorious “Great Patriotic War”, which is at the center of the historical memory of the Soviet Union, and which is a fundamental tool for the consolidation and reconstruction of the current national identities of Russians (belief in the greatness and purity of that Triumph), is based on false assumptions. For Russians, the legend of the heroism of the USSR is a key element of their sense of national pride, it is also an important factor unifying the country, without which the country cannot exist. Rejecting these values could lead to the fragmentation of the historical memory and the increasingly strong formation of local visions of the history that would arise outside the national narrative. Thus, history would cease to play the role of the factor unifying the state and would increasingly become a field of competition where ethnic narratives and memory would clash, contributing to the slow loss

³⁸ P. Malendowicz, *Konflikt sposobów myślenia o świecie*, [in:] *Spółeczne oblicza Europy XXI wieku*, eds. B. Koszel, D. Mierzejewski, Z. Popławski, Piła 2015, p. 81.

³⁹ J. Brunstedt, *The Soviet Myth of World War II: Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR*, Cambridge 2021, p. 214–220.

of Russian consciousness in favor of local codes of memory. All this could result in the slow disintegration of a state deprived of a significant point of common identification, and for this, Russia could not afford.

This ambiguous approach by the Russian Federation as to how it views its state's past, in particular the early years of the Second World War and the role played by the USSR during this period, has been further exacerbated with the rise to power of V. Putin. This was because history, in the plans implemented by this leader, was to constitute an important element of politics, used to build a new national identity for Russians and achieve the Kremlin's imperial ambitions. Fulfilling these objectives required, among other things, challenging the post-Cold War order also in terms of the interpretation of history, mainly that concerning the 20th century. Hence, the defense of the Soviet interpretation of history has become an important sphere of action in Putin's strategy, above all with regard to the Second World War period⁴⁰. A defense aimed at eliminating narratives in neighboring countries – especially those coming from Central and Eastern European countries – that were at odds with the Kremlin's vision of events. At the same time, the narrative of the past conflict promoted by the Moscow authorities, described in terms of the sacral-messianic victory of the Soviet Union, was gaining acceptance of the ordinary Russian people as it restored in them a sense of national dignity and pride, centered on the victories and power of the state⁴¹.

The other factor influencing the mutual antagonism caused by the different perception of the role played by the USSR in the initial period of the Second World War was the fact that there was a rather strong "sensitivity" to symbolic issues in the Polish perception of Russia⁴². This repeated misuse of the memory of tragic events and trials has often served politicians in our country to pillory the Kremlin in international opinion. To a large extent, this was the result of the adopted cultural strategy of the Polish political and intellectual elite, which saw Moscow as the main threat to our country's security. This is because the stigma of the Partitions, the Second World War and forced communism have developed in the consciousness of the citizens and authorities of the Third Republic of Po-

⁴⁰ A. Nikžentaitis, *Kultura pamięci i polityka historyczna w dzisiejszej Rosji*, „Acta Baltico-Slavica” 2018, Vol. 42, p. 45.

⁴¹ A. Miller, *Russia and Europe in Memory Wars*, „NUI Working Paper” 2020, Vol. 887, p. 14.

⁴² A. Jach, *Pamięć historyczna jako przejaw polocentryzmu w spojrzeniu na historię relacji polsko-rosyjskich*, [in:] *Pamięć i polityka historyczna w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich*, eds. A. Skrzypek, S. Bieleń, Warszawa 2017, p. 133.

land an emotional image of Russia as the source of all evil in Polish politics⁴³. For this reason, it has become a feature of contemporary governments in Warsaw in their relations with their eastern neighbor to constantly expose martyrdom themes – the Soviet-German collusion of August 1939 and its consequences, the Soviet aggression of 17 September, or the repression of the USSR in the occupied eastern lands of the Republic⁴⁴. This linking by the Polish side of historical issues with the current challenges faced by both nations did not improve mutual relations or overcome existing historical burdens. Significantly, Poland's constantly repeated demands in its current political contacts to settle this tragic past have increasingly caused frustration and displeasure in the Kremlin, thereby aggravating the discussion on those events. As a result, multiple negative statements or publications began to appear on both sides, thus triggering a whole series of mutual polemics and even accusations, further deepening the difference in the interpretation of shared history.

Disputes about the Yalta-Potsdam agreements

The last significant landmark regarding the memory covering the issues of the Second World War, which to a greater or lesser extent had a negative impact on the mutual relations of both countries, was the issue of an extremely different assessment of the decisions made during the peace conferences in Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam towards Poland and the consequences that resulted out of them. For most of the society and the decision-makers of the Third Republic of Poland these events have been remembered as a symbol of the betrayal of the allies, loss of independence and even another partition of Poland, which, although were fighting from the first day of the war, found themselves – like other countries of this region – under the Soviet yoke⁴⁵. In consequences, this resulted in the final division of Europe into spheres of influence and – what followed – the subordination of our country to the communist system, brought here by the Red Army and brutally led by Polish communists. The system, which – as indicated by the

⁴³ S. Bieleń, *Identyfikacja wizerunkowa Rosji w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, [in:] *Wizerunki międzynarodowe Rosji*, ed. idem, Warszawa 2011, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 35. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 9 lutego 2017 r., Warszawa 2017, p. 109.

⁴⁵ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 57 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 24 i 25 sierpnia 1995 r., Warszawa 1995, p. 93.

authorities of the Third Republic of Poland – brought Poland another enslavement, absorbing thousands of victims, previously burdened with cooperation with the Third Reich and responsible for the aggression of 17 September 1939, the deportation of the inhabitants of the Eastern Borderlands into the USSR or the crime committed in Katyn.

Meanwhile, for the Russian Federation, the Yalta-Potsdam agreements emphasized the strength and greatness of the USSR. Because of them, the Russian-Soviet state gained its greatest power in the history of the country. And a very important element shaping the sense of national pride of Russians, both currently and in the past, is the fact of being a citizen of a powerful country that would play an important role in global politics. This factor was a key element building their self-awareness, largely influencing the system of views, aspirations and interests approved in this country. The collapse of the Soviet Union put into question the geopolitical position of the Russian Federation, which had lost many of the attributes of its former greatness. However, despite the losses suffered in terms of territory, population and economic power, the ingrained sense of superpower still remained one of the most important components of the identity of the average Russian. Hence, the Yalta-Potsdam decisions were identified as something positive, as it fulfilled the country's imperial ambitions⁴⁶. Importantly, this order established during the conferences became an important element of the political game of the Moscow authorities, aimed at regaining Russia's former position⁴⁷. Achieving superpower interests by implementing the Yalta vision of international politics, in which societies are the object, not the subject, of political processes. Such shaping of geopolitical conditions by the Russian leaders based on past historical experiences has become the cause of further misunderstandings between Warsaw and Moscow.

Disagreements on this background has gained strength during the presidency of V. Putin, who, as part of his new historical policy, aims to challenge the post-Winter War order also in the dimension of the interpretation of history, e.g. by rejecting attempts to undermine the liberating character of the Red Army offensive in 1944-1945 and here defending the Soviet version of the past. A version based on exposing the myth of the Soviet Union as the liberator to the central and eastern European countries from Nazi occupation, which brought them political

⁴⁶ S. Plokhyy, *Remembering Yalta: The Politics of International History*, "The Harriman Review" 2009, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 45.

⁴⁷ Е. Примаков, *Мир без России? К чему ведёт политическая близорукость*, Москва 2009.

freedom and independence. These actions become part of the wider context to the policy of the Russian Federation aimed at idealizing the Red Army's victory over Nazism, which, in the face of the inability to create a new concept of national and historical identity during the rule of B. Yeltsin – eliminating all positive associations with the past system – was to be for the first time another, universal and indisputable point of reference for the collective consciousness of Russians during the 21st century. Furthermore, this shaped, historical narrative played an important role in making real the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and its global role. Because with the defeat of the Third Reich, the USSR achieved the position of a superpower, one of the two that subordinated large areas of the world to its sphere of influence. All this was to justify the Kremlin's contemporary right to play the role of hegemon over areas historically recognized by Moscow as its area of influence (Ukraine, Belarus)⁴⁸.

A negative consequence of the existing differences of opinion over the issue were the disputes regarding the Soviet monuments located in Poland (similar tensions also appeared in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe that undertook the process of decommunization in their country), commemorating the Red Army soldiers who died in this area. For Warsaw, Soviet monuments – massively erected after the Second World War by the then political elites of the People's Republic of Poland – were a symbol of communist enslavement and suzerainty over its eastern neighbor. Because of that, from the early 1990s, as part of the political transformation initiated, the Polish state began to gradually remove from social life all elements (including Soviet monuments) that identified or propagated the past system, which from the very beginning caused great disappointment in Kremlin⁴⁹. A significant intensification of this kind of conflicts took place in 2016, when the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland decided to comprehensively regulate the issue of decommunization of public space and complete this process as soon as possible. These steps, however, provoked a firm reaction from Moscow, which claimed that Warsaw moves “distort the facts and insult the memory of Red Army soldiers.” Such statement resulted from the fact that for the contemporary policy of V. Putin, the ideologization of the victory of the USSR was an important element in shaping the new state consciousness of the Russian Federation. Any actions that could undermine or violate

⁴⁸ J. Olędzka, *Rola pamięci o Wielkiej Wojnie Ojczyźnianej w strategii utrwalania jedności narodu rosyjskiego*, „Studia Podlaskie” 2016, Vol. 24, p. 144.

⁴⁹ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 23 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniach 3, 4 i 5 września 1992 r., Warszawa 1992, p. 165.

such image (the removal of Soviet monuments was seen as one of them) are perceived by Moscow as an attack on the Russian national identity.

The myth of the "Great Patriotic War" and the victorious Red Army, built on a grand scale, occupied a special place within the current Russian politics, as it also allowed for the interpretation of these phenomena in supranational categories. Using them, the Kremlin authorities could influence neighboring countries. The important carriers of this historical memory were, in fact, the already mentioned Soviet monuments, constituting an important tool for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space in the Kremlin's strategy. For this reason, the main goal of the contemporary concept of historical Moscow was to expose the legend of the heroic Red Army, that saved Central and Eastern Europe from Nazi annihilation. Therefore, according to Moscow, the countries of this region should be grateful to the contemporary Russia (which is the successor of the USSR), and monuments erected in honor of Soviet soldiers and burial places of Red Army soldiers should be subject to special protection and remain where they were originally located, even if in the opinion of the nations of these countries, they are considered as the symbols of Soviet subordination and enslavement. Any steps taken by the countries of the former Eastern Bloc that led to the removal of Soviet monuments are treated by V. Putin as an attempt to question this idealized Russian narrative about the liberating role of the Red Army. Thus, such actions meet with strong opposition from the Kremlin's side and are even exposed to the threat of sanctions by the Russian Federation, which was painfully experienced by Estonia in 2007 and which Poland still fears.

Conclusions

One of the most important maladies in Polish-Russian relationship was and still is the history. From the very beginning, the contemporary relations between these countries have been strongly influenced by the experiences of the history of these two nations. Clarifying the circumstances related to the blank spots in the history and the need to solve the difficult topics from the past became a key goal for the Polish political elites of the Third Republic of Poland in relations with its eastern neighbor. Analyzing Polish-Russian relations from the beginning of the 1990s, it should be stated that when it comes to the historical issues, this area has always caused constant tensions and problems. It has been influenced by the different approach to the past, understood differently in Poland and Russia,

which contributes to numerous misunderstandings and mutual accusations in this field. These serious differences of a "historical" nature, caused by divergence of views, above all, over the interpretation of certain themes from the Second World War, made it difficult to reach a common consensus and to alleviate the past burdens. The situation got even worse at the turn of the next century. On the one hand, this was the result of Putin's new historical policy aimed at minimizing or justifying the most difficult moments of his country's history, especially in relation to the 20th century. On the other hand, despite of Moscow numerous symbolical gestures towards Warsaw, Poland waited for the further manifestations of remorse. All this was not conducive to solving the most complex and controversial issues of old Polish-Russian history.

Occurring historical burdens and national stereotypes have had a negative impact on the state and nature of political contacts between these two countries. To make matters worse, in addition to the never-settled issues regarding the existing historical events, newly occurring problems overlapped, which further intensified the state of distrust and reluctance between the two nations, negatively affecting mutual cooperation in explaining difficult pages from their common history. As it should be assumed, there was a lack of mutual prudence and understanding that would build the way to common understanding, and when it did finally appear, it was accompanied by destructive actions.

This state of tension that prevailed in mutual relations when it came to issues concerning existing historical burdens worsened sharply after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when history began to be increasingly used by Moscow's authorities to realize the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and justify its aggressive foreign policy. The implementation of these intentions was served by strong ideologization, and even mythologization of the history of this country, which boiled down to relativization and even distortion of its history by means of various manipulative measures aimed at legitimizing Russia's interests. The formulation of this kind of message was intended to justify the Kremlin's aspirations to spread and maintain exclusive influence in the post-Soviet area (Russian *mir*) and, more broadly, to create opportunities for influence also on the former Eastern Bloc countries (Baltic states, Poland). Achieving these plans by means of sacralization of the history of the Soviet state at the same time required the elimination of all other facts and interpretations that could weaken or discredit the Moscow narrative, including that coming from Warsaw. This was particularly true of the Second World War period occupying a central place in Moscow's historical policy. Therefore, the Kremlin's propaganda efforts were simultaneously accompanied

by omitting or even falsification of the worst moments of the country's history at the time. All this has led to increasing "memory wars" between Moscow and countries challenging the Russian interpretation of those events, including Poland. The disputes over the history have become the main topic of debate in Polish-Russian relations in modern times, and given the conflicts they generate, this will probably be the case in the future as well.

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