

REFLECTIONS ON GERMAN AND POLISH HISTORICAL POLICIES OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

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The aim of these reflections is to confront the German and Polish historical policies concerning the Holocaust. The author outlines their different historical backgrounds, and takes note of the most heated debate of recent times on this subject that revolved around the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) from January 2018. He ends with a case study analysis of the ways in which historians behave in the public sphere: the case of the researchers belonging to the so-called New Polish School of the Holocaust. Historical or memory policy is understood as the image of a society or a country as a whole, a certain hypostasis created by public discourses of political actors, intellectuals, and media people. This image plays an important role in international relations. Taking the perspective of critical theory, in particular an analysis of the status of knowledge/truth and its political role the author also explores media releases made by professional historians as well as political statements and actions directly pertinent to historical policy.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

I am not a historian, and in bringing up Auschwitz, I primarily consider its cultural representations rather than its historical context and significance. The Holocaust has become “one of the main elements of the origin of the concept of ‘historical policy’ as well as of the whole discourse related to this origin”—both in political practice and in historical science. Generally speaking, this concept came in response to the basic disagreement of different national historiographies on the interpretations of the causes and consequences of World War II in different national historiographies. In the first decades after the war this state of affairs inspired the

1. Rafał Chwedoruk, *Polityka historyczna* (Warsaw: PWN, 2018), 36.

attempts to rewrite the dominant approaches to the writing of the recent past in which Germans were to be the only perpetrators—above all—of the Holocaust. History as a scholarly discipline appeared to be then a form of rebellion and an efficient tool in making collective identity. This is a huge subject well elaborated in specialist literature, therefore there is neither need nor possibility to rehearse it even in a very rough form. This also applies to the presentation of shaping the German and Polish historical policies after the war. The topic in question also exceeds the length of one article and has been the subject of numerous scientific studies, too.² All those circumstances have led me to strictly narrow down this discussion to phenomena and events in the German and Polish public spheres if I am to carry out the topic successfully. The aim of the selection is to allow me to draw conclusions on the general picture, logic and character of the Holocaust memory policies which have been developing in these spheres. There is a danger of subjective and arbitrary choices in such proceedings: it is a risk I will have to take. And so, this article focuses on some case studies tailored to accomplish two goals.

First, what concerns me is to balance two societies understood as responsible for the constructs of two various long-term political strategies, in which the memory of the Holocaust plays a radically different role. Germans, for obvious reasons, as perpetrators have faced the challenge of officially coming to terms with their own tragic past in a domestic and an international public sphere. On the other hand, Poles, for equally clear reasons, as victims have been confronted primarily with the task of the commemoration of their own martyrology both in communist and in post-communist times. Above all, this memory paradigm has been legitimized by the post-war history in its two main periods—up to the events of 1989/1990, marking a turning point in European history and after that juncture until the present date. This paradigm is about historical memory that performs mainly a compensatory function associated with “returning to the sources” and thus creating the social imaginary of a great political nation which indeed identifies itself with an ethnic community and actually does not leave much room for others, in particular for Jews. There is a measurable social result of how the paradigm in question has been enacted in the past thirty years: the 2019 Ipsos sociological research indicates that a

2. About the concept of historical policy and particularly about Polish and German historical policies see e.g., Joanna Andrychowicz-Skrzeba, *Polityka historyczna w Polsce i Niemczech po roku 1989 w wystąpieniach publicznych oraz publikacjach polityków polskich i niemieckich* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2014); Klaus Ziemer, Joanna Andrychowicz-Skrzeba, eds., *Pomiedzy jubileuszami: Polityka historyczna w polsko-niemieckiej codziennosci* (Warsaw: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017), http://www.feswar.org.pl/fes2009/pdf_doc/Pomiedzy_Jubileuszami_5.09.2018.pdf; Michał Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności* (Kraków: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2017); Chwedoruk, *Polityka historyczna*; Michał Łuczewski, Paulina Bednarz-Łuczewska, Tomasz Maślanka, “The Politics of History in Poland and Germany,” in *Collective Memories in War*, ed. Elena Rozdestvenskaya, Victoria Semenova, Irina Tartakovskaya, Krzysztof Kosela (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 11–17.

majority of those under survey—as many as 74 percent—think that in its history the Polish nation has suffered more than all other nations of the world.³ The dominant martyrological narrative is composed of the discourses about the Katyn massacre, the Warsaw Uprising and the so-called accursed soldiers, and, finally, the Smolensk air disaster has a clear impact on politics. Such martyrology is not exclusive to but reigns even more powerfully within the electorate of the ruling rightwing PiS (Law and Justice) party. According to commentators, the romantic nineteenth-century tradition of the noble and heroic nation is combined with another hidden “after-burner” (a strong motivation) today, which is to be a competition with the Jews to become the most suffering community in history.

Second, I do not attempt to write a history of historical policies. They interest me only insofar as they allow me to make reference to the contemporary struggle to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, a struggle ongoing in the context of the aforementioned amendment to the IPN law. With the full knowledge of both the cognitive and moral risks I have decided to adopt the critical theory of social science, which considers that history as a science is not free from the constraints of political and ideological conditioning. If we additionally consider that the most important historical debates are ongoing in the media today, we would unavoidably also have to agree that history is actively involved in the creation of historical policy. I argue that this seems to be often neglected by Polish Holocaust historians. This is the source of my skepticism about their self-awareness, which is legible in the form and style of their public speaking in this case. From the perspective of critical social thought history does not have any specific privileged access to the truth in its social understanding and use, or any privileged position in relation to the versions of the truth which are created and disseminated by various intellectuals, writers, artists, prominent columnists, and politicians.

That is why I consciously look at the contemporary stage of remembering Auschwitz, which may contain pop-cultural images, movies, study courses, art exhibitions, etc. I treat the legislative act adopted by the Polish Parliament also as such a representation, no matter how the act can be assessed. Officially it was adopted with a view to eliminate the phrase “Polish death camps” from the global discourse, together with the semantic field connected with this phrase. Such a political effort therefore forms part of the area of practices now called “international public relations,” which shall be construed as endeavors to reach an agreement across the geographical, cultural or linguistic boards, endeavors whose impact is felt outside the country of their birthplace.⁴ I open with the question of how the Germans have

3. See Dominika Sitnicka, “Polacy wycierpieli najwięcej ze wszystkich narodów świata. Tak uważa 74 proc. badanych (Polaków),” OKO. press, July 13, 2019, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://oko.press/polacy-wycierpieli-najwiecej-ze-wszystkich-narodow-swiate-tak-uwaza-74-proc-badanych-polakow/>.

4. See e.g. Grażyna Piechoła, ed., *Public relations wobec wyzwań współczesności* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM, 2012).

handled themselves in the brand image field—in the struggle for dominating of their own representational discourse about the past in their country and abroad.

1. GERMAN HISTORICAL POLICY

In 1945 Alfred Hitchcock and a British producer Sidney Bernstein planned to make a film based on hundreds of hours of macabre images recorded by the Allied army in the German concentration camps. The film was supposed to serve as shock therapy for Germans and Austrians so that they could no longer excuse themselves that they did not know or did not see.⁵ The Allies gathered evidence of the atrocities not known in the history of humankind before. However, the recordings which were supposed to be the basis for the film ended up unexpectedly in a safe of the Imperial War Museum in London and were shown for the first time, in an incomplete version, in 1984 at a festival in Berlin, and in 1985 on the American public TV channel PBS. The material, re-edited by Andre Singer in 2014 under the title *Night Will Fall*, in accordance with Bernstein's draft project, and based on only a part of the recordings from the Bergen-Belsen camp, was shown in 2015, on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war.

The powerful effect of media images on our memory and imagination is evident with respect to Holocaust survivors as confirmed by the American historian Christopher R. Browning. In his book entitled *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (2010) he reconstructs the history of the prisoners who came to Birkenau from the labor camp in Starachowice (Radom district) and were received there by an atypical entrance without the standard selection on the ramp by Josef Mengele. However, some witnesses claimed in the 1990s that such an event indeed took place. According to Browning this situation “demonstrates the powerful capacity of popular media, especially film, to implant images and shape the way in which stories are retold.”⁶ The same prisoners relate their feeling of relief and surprise that they felt as they were standing under the showers and from the showerheads came water rather than gas. That version of the facts is beginning to be presented, the historian explains, “after the remarkable shower scene in *Schindler's List* had become an iconic image of the Holocaust.”⁷

The post-Nazi German society did not have a chance to experience such enormous media images. They were spared confrontation with the cruel images of the Shoah; *Bilderverbot* was a binding principle in education of consecutive generations. The politics of memory built on silence and invisibility of the crime actually protected the German and Austrian societies against confrontation with cruel violence

5. See a documentary about the unfinished film: *Memory of the Camps*, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/memory-of-the-camps/>.

6. Christopher Robert Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 251.

7. Browning, 251.

and concealed specific crime practices from them. As a result, these practices became also subjectless/impersonalized: *The Holocaust was done, or the Holocaust occurred or took place*—something impersonal, a homogeneous hypostasis without the division into perpetrators and victims.

This tendency to deprive the Holocaust victims and perpetrators of their national identity is not alien either in the United States⁸ or in the European states. However, in Europe this is most probably due not to political correctness demanded by the multicultural American society, but because of the problem of guilt and responsibility for this event. Undoubtedly, such a rhetorical solution must be more attractive to the perpetrators. As a result, we deal with different kinds of national memory in such countries as Germany, Austria, France, or Poland. Reductionist politics of memory enabled the German and Austrian societies to live peaceful and prosperous lives without trauma and “without sites of crimes and mass graves in their own countries, apart from the concentration camps that tell a different story than the specific killing sites and centers—all this just by situating the killing operations in the East, at the border or outside of the Reich, and with a specific politics of memory and representation and a deliberate construction of the crimes.”⁹ As a result, “Auschwitz” became the most important symbol, with the “black box” of a gas chamber in the center, depicting the Holocaust as an anonymous and almost hygienic process. Rare pictures from Auschwitz went around the world and are in circulation also today, but the events presented in them occurred in a specific place: in Poland.

According to the data of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, only approximately 10 percent of 8,000 members of the SS who served in the camp were tried after the war.¹⁰ In response to such an attitude of the German state towards its recent past, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), as probably the only one among the eminent German philosophers, reacted then with indignation. In 1966 he wrote about the politics and public life of new Germany as follows:

8. In his message on the International Holocaust Remembrance Day (on 27 January 2017) the US President did not even mention Holocaust victims—Jews. He only referred to the “Nazi terror” and “innocent people” on whom anonymous actors inflicted horror: “It is with a heavy heart and somber mind that we remember and honor the victims, survivors, and heroes of the Holocaust. It is impossible to fully fathom the depravity and horror inflicted on innocent people by Nazi terror.” Daniel J. Solomon, “Trump doesn’t mention Jews in Holocaust Remembrance Day Message,” *Fast Forward*, January 27, 2017, accessed July 6, 2020, <https://forward.com/fast-forward/361425/trump-doesnt-mention-jews-in-holocaust-remembrance-day-message/>.

9. Dirk Rupnow, “The Invisible Crime. Nazi Politics of Memory and Postwar Representation of the Holocaust,” in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 69.

10. http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=205&zaloga-ss&catid=10&lang-pl, accessed May 16, 2018.

[The Bundeswehr] was created and commanded by the officers who had served in the Nazi army, had followed Hitler, had been the spirit of this army (. . .). An analogous situation is in the circles of judges, professors, policemen, etc.

This continuation of old Nazis’ activity is a weakness of the internal constitution of the Federal Republic. (. . .) How modest and cautious they were still in 1948! Since then, along with the growing strength of economy and the new significance of the state in the world they have become increasingly self-confident as the leaders of a seemingly newly-reborn world power.¹¹

The Nuremberg trials (1945–49) of the major war criminals were proceeded before the International Military Tribunal in which judges and prosecutors were representatives of the superpowers: The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union. As follows from Jaspers’ comments, the Federal Republic dealt with its past in a far less radical way than the International Tribunal. Ultimately, the Federal Republic did it not so much by penalizing the criminals and restoring the authentic collective memory of their victims, as through a PR-based correction of the state’s image on the international arena. The economic strength of the country was supposed to determine the “real” vision of history. The philosopher did not see any chances for moral and political rebirth of Germany—he left the country and stayed in Switzerland until the end of his life. This was not solely his opinion. After the clashes between students and the police in Berlin during the visit of Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, in summer 1967 and the subsequent protest actions at German universities, the writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger diagnosed their causes in the following manner: “The return of old Nazis to key positions in the government, army, police and the judiciary; the militarization of the state; the totally philistine style of official Germany; trivial glorification of consumption; disastrous educational and scientific policy.”¹²

The Federal Republic of Germany had “old Nazis” among its political elites. However, it was not they who formulated the state’s “historical politics”: a category coined—not accidentally—by the German political scientists in the 1990s, already after the reunification of Germany. *Geschichtspolitik* was supposed to mean, in general, the exploration of “the public constructs of historical and identity images which emerge in rituals and discourses.”¹³

It must be understood that public construction of a collective identity is realized in discourses, that is in practices, preferably of ritual or ceremonial nature, which

11. Karl Jaspers, “Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?” in *Bundesrepublikanisches Lesebuch. Drei Jahrzehnte geistiger Auseinandersetzung*, ed. Hermann Glaser (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1980), 360–368.

12. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Klare Entscheidungen und trübe Aussichten,” in *Über Hans Magnus Enzensberger*, ed. Joachim Schickel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 225–232.

13. Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948–1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999), 32.

are reproducible, involving a certain group, its sphere of sharing experiences and imaginations. The practices fall under linguistic rules, determining what is true and false, good and evil, "ours" and alien. These rules call, represent and describe the possibilities and rights of existence of "our" world, essential to affirm or reject it. From that perspective, history is nothing but a representation of past events subjected to the external authority of collective desires ascendant at any given time. It is desires that allow us to learn about the past and keep memories of the past alive. After all, emotions hold a large share in living memory. Historical policy would therefore rely on the work of these desires, seeking to dominate the representational discourse of the past.¹⁴ State institutions are the strongest player in the struggle for hegemony of precisely this discourse. Some researchers therefore claim that the concept of political history is "as old as the state itself."¹⁵

The idea of freedom is essential to the identity of an open, democratic society. It is supposed to be one of the public constructs belonging to historical policy. Post-war West Berlin was dealing with the problems triggered by the surrounding Democratic Republic and did not have a chance to get involved in the process of coming to terms with the criminal past. The global audience and their imagination were mostly influenced then by the powerful image of American and not German freedom: a speech of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 in Berlin and a famous quote: "Ich bin ein Berliner" or Checkpoint Charlie became symbols, new logos of this city and new Germany.

At the end of the 1960s, Germany, with its booming economy, experienced a wave of a youth rebellion, similar to that which was sweeping across the United States at that time. The subcultures of flower children, hippies, and the like protesting against, among other things, the war in Vietnam, had their followers in Germany whose government officially backed the US involvement in this war. Moreover, the youth rebellion took a form of a generational conflict: the revolutionizing students opposed the generation of their fathers with their Nazi past who had become respectable citizens in the meantime. However, this rebellion did not result in any particular readiness to seriously face the tragic burden of the past that the young people inherited. The accusations and questions posed by them to their fathers were not intended to cope with their history: they had a more universal meaning, aimed at an everlasting change of generations, expressed by the slogan of *Vatermord*—murdering one's father; the goal was to replace the political and cultural elites of the state. The critical student movement was manifested not only in a leftist stance: it also helped overcome the social tabooing of Nazi attitudes which was mandatory in

14. In the 1990s, German political scientists were undoubtedly influenced by Michel Foucault. The concept of "historical policy"—sometimes interchangeably called "politics of memory"—is significantly associated with his concept of discourse. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. S. Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

15. Chwedoruk, *Polityka historyczna*, 192.

the first post-war decades. Since then, pleading guilty to the Nazi crimes has ceased to be a deterrent warning against the return of the past.¹⁶ In 1993 playwright Botho Strauss wrote about the connection between the counterculture riots of German youth and the reactivation of the right wing in one of the most famous texts in the post-war identity debate of Germany, entitled "Swelling He-Goat Song":

Violation of shame, which around 1968 was done wherever possible by the jesting and anarchistic youth, has been inherited now by the right wing. For the time being, the new young people are not doing anything else than the preceding generation: they pretend to be important, they are boasting and going through initiation by breaking the taboo.¹⁷

The destruction of the taboo is followed by the profanation of the victims of the Nazi crimes. Similarly, as Jaspers and Enzensberger, Strauss observes a situation of collective schizophrenia experienced by the German state and society. He notices that any attempts to commemorate Auschwitz, built on its "fictions" (following the Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, I put this word in quotation marks; see note 33), have little to do with any authentic social memory of this event. They are rather empty gestures of expressing shame—too insignificant when compared with the multitude of the Nazi crimes, too artificial, feigned, bourgeois. Their social and political context is the following: in the 1980s when the Christian Democrats came to power, an open attempt to revise history was undertaken. Helmut Kohl, a historian by education, formulated the historical politics of the new state and built historical museums in Berlin and Bonn which were supposed to be the media of the new collective memory. He established German Historical Institutes abroad—in Washington, DC (1987) and in Warsaw (1993). In the 1990s, a Holocaust Museum was founded in the center of Berlin. The authorities invited world-renowned artists/architects to participate in its creation so that they would produce a credible image of an open, friendly, multicultural society. This was another occasion when the process of coming to terms with the past was connected with the PR activity of the state. It happened at the time when a wave of neo-Nazi incidents, racism and hostility towards others was rising in Germany. In addition, that wave was accompanied by a number of political initiatives connected with the commemoration of the history of the so-called expelled Germans and the barbarous bombing raids on German cities by the Allied army at the end of World War II.

It is important to remember that the history of the expelled Germans was the result of the new division of Europe within the framework of the so-called Yalta and Potsdam order. We are referring to the German population forcefully expelled

16. See Hans Mommsen, "Die Last der Vergangenheit," in *Stichworte zur "Geistigen Situation der Zeit,"* Vol. 1, *Nation und Republik*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), 164–184.

17. Botho Strauss, "Anschwellender Bocksgesang," *Der Spiegel*, February 8, 1993, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13681004.html>.

by the Allies from the territories which were outside their occupation zones and Austria—that is from the states of Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania—to these occupation zones, and after these zones were eliminated in 1949—to the Federal Republic, West Berlin and Austria. Thus, in the German provinces in the 1990s, museums and exhibition rooms were established to commemorate the Germans expelled from the countries in which they had been the occupiers. The Center Against Expulsions (*Zentrum Gegen Vertreibungen*) was founded in 2000 in Berlin by the Federation of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*) with the support of Angela Merkel and CDU/CSU coalition. German politicians played all these instruments simultaneously, similarly to eminent intellectuals such as Ernst Nolte or Martin Walser at that time. The Germans increasingly wish to perceive themselves as victims of the war. On the eve of the seventy-fifth anniversary of D-Day—on June 5, 2019—German Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters that “this unique military operation eventually brought us the liberation from the Nazis.”¹⁸ Who and where were the Germans on these dates?

The answer to this question appeared however much earlier. In 1996 the book by American historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen entitled *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*¹⁹ was published. It focuses on the reasons which led the perpetration of the Holocaust. Its German translation was published yet in the same year, whereas it had been discussed for the first time already in April in Germany in the left-wing newspaper *Die Zeit*. The reporter was the first to recognize that the book provoked another “historians’ quarrel” (in German: *Historikerstreit*) after the first one which took place in 1986.²⁰ The instigator of the original “historians’ quarrel” was the German right-wing historian, a scholar of totalitarianisms, Ernst Nolte. He then began the controversy in the public sphere by means of the newspaper article about Nazism as “the past that will not pass” (in German: *Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will*).²¹ It also became a well-known issue among English readers.²² Our discussion will be confined to the Goldhagen’s

18. David Bond, “Queen and Donald Trump lead D-Day anniversary tributes,” *Financial Times*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/84280f6e-879f-11e9-a028-86cea8523dc2>.

19. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

20. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitlers willige Vollstrecker: ganz gewöhnliche Deutsche und der Holocaust* (Berlin: Siedler 1996).

21. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 6, 1986, accessed April 6, 2020, https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument_de&dokument=0080_nol&object=facsimile&l=de.

22. Ernst Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered,” in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 18–23; See also Jan Paweł Hudezik, “Theory of History vis-à-vis Two World Wars and the Holocaust,” *Jednak Książki: Głównie o Człowieku i Humanistyce*, no. 6 (2016): 29–56.

debate. As is well known, he formulates radical propositions about the Holocaust which was supposed to be the work of ordinary people. They are based on his own research concerning three types of the German killing institutions: labor and death camps, police battalions and death marches. Such a tremendous crime can arise only when many people come together. Germans killed Jews, says Goldhagen, of their own will. They were not forced to do it, but truly believed that killing Jews was the right thing to do. As a rule, they were not punished for refusing genocidal orders. Moreover, they were supposed to take their own initiative in murder and torture: their cruelty was almost always voluntary in nature. Anti-Semitism had thus penetrated every level of German society, which therefore could fully support Hitler’s plans for the Jewish people.

Such statements were widely echoed in Germany in the late 1990s. At the beginning the media waged an almost all-out war against the book and its author. He was criticized for the formulations concerning Germans’ collective responsibility: for putting the blame of individuals on the overall population; for the fact that as the son of a survivor he could not be objective in this respect, and so he was merely a “frustrated historian,” whose book did not bring anything new. Additionally, his statement that German anti-Semitism allegedly even before Hitler was oriented at the extermination of the Jews was “ignorant if not malignant.”²³ Instead of an academic discussion his statements triggered a fierce political debate which—as one commentator put it—“systematically and unfortunately efficiently buried his scholarly reputation and ultimately devalued him as a mere media event.”²⁴

A clear rejection of this book and its claims originally dominated the whole public debate from left to right. But at any rate since Goldhagen it became more evident in the German public sphere that Germans had murdered voluntarily and that the World War II was a “war of theft” (in German: *Raubkrieg*), and the genocide was a “mass theft murder” (in German: *Massenraubmord*). Moreover, the German people or, more precisely, as the historian Götz Aly calculates, 95 percent of them were its beneficiaries.²⁵ The “quarrel” between historians and “ordinary” public persons should have ended like this: the truth in its social dimension had finally come out.

Actually, this was predicted by the author mentioned above in the first review of the Goldhagen’s book in *Die Zeit*. The editor of one of the major and the most

23. Rudolf Augstein, “Der Soziologe als Scharfrichter,” in *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*, ed. Julius Hans Schoeps (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1996), 109.

24. Wolfgang Wippermann, “Goldhagen und die deutschen Historiker,” in *Die Frazz der eigenen Geschichte: Von der Goldhagen-Debatte zum Jugoslawien-Krieg*, ed. Jürgen Elsässer and Andrei Steven Markovits (Berlin: Elefant Press, 1999), 24.

25. See Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volkstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 2009).

influential papers in Germany argued that despite all objections this book forced rethinking previous views which had become familiar to Germans. He regretted that with it all hopes of a new carefree "normality" that had just emerged after the 50th anniversary of the end of the war were ruined. A brilliant assistant professor from Harvard appears suddenly and informs us that we will have still a long wait before we deal with this chapter in our history. Nevertheless, the editor is not losing ground: he also cultivates pragmatism alongside moral sensitivity. He does not forget about the political dimension of this academic event, and more precisely about its importance on the forum of international public relations. He writes with evident concern: "The severe strife caused by the appearance of this book in the United States shows that it strikes a nerve. Perhaps it expresses the fear many Americans have about the reunification of Germany."²⁶

2. POLISH HISTORICAL POLICY

It should be remembered that under the communist regime Poland was trying to cope with the Holocaust in a society subjected to intensive indoctrination, communist propaganda, and censorship. The official message that appeared in public discourse—in mass media and the language of political propaganda—said then that almost six million Polish citizens had perished during the war; however, the fact that nearly half of them were Polish Jews was not typically emphasized.²⁷ This message was consistent with the guidelines from Moscow and with the Soviet vision of contemporary history. According to that vision only Germans were responsible for the war: the parallel assault of the Soviet Union on Poland was interpreted as a gesture of help from an ally in the fight against fascism. In those circumstances, neither politicians nor intellectuals—scholars, journalists—were able to present the Polish experiences and their own point of view on history and the present time, either to themselves or to the outside world. Thus, for example, the very first major sociological debate about the Holocaust in Poland only came after the publication

26. Volker Ullrich, "Die Deutschen—Hitlers willige Mordgesellen," *Die Zeit*, April 12, 1996.

27. The academic history textbook from the 1980s states, however, that: "The number of 6 million of Polish citizens, who died, covers about 3.2 million victims of the mass exterminations of Jewish population." But already on the following page we read as follows: "There was the biggest and gigantic death camp on Polish territories in Oświęcim, originally limited to the extermination of Polish people, where, however, people of nationalities other than Polish were also subjected to mass extermination. It consumed about 3–4 million deaths." Józef Buszko, *Historia Polski 1864–1948* (Warsaw: PWN, 1983), 410, 411; See also: Hanna Węgrzynek, "The Presentation of the Holocaust in Polish History Textbooks," in *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010*, ed. Feliks Tylich and Monika Adamczyk-Carbowska (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 685–716.

of *Modernity and the Holocaust* by Zygmunt Bauman in 1992.²⁸ Totalitarianism was predominant in philosophical discourse.²⁹ In the state historical policy the events crucial to the Polish martyrology were stressed: the Katyn massacre and the Warsaw Uprising. The dispute about the so-called papal cross (i.e. the part of the altar Pope John Paul II prayed in 1979, placed on Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp grounds), which was moved behind camp walls, to Gravel Pit in 1988, introduced Jews into Polish historical policy after the collapse of communism. For the first time it shook the Polish model of the culture of remembrance based on the heroic ethos and a return to the sources.³⁰

Almost thirty years after the downfall of communism it is worth remembering that in the former Soviet Bloc states there was simply no public sphere understood as a space for freedom of speech and assembly. The People's Republic of Poland was not an independent entity on the international arena, its politics was connected with Kremlin's policy, also with respect to Israel. In 1967, in reaction to the so-called Six-Day War and in compliance with the policy of the USSR which supported the Arab states, Poland broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, similarly to other countries of the communist bloc (except for Romania). In addition, it is worth noting that this event happened during the time when interest in the Holocaust had just begun. The fundamental work of Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, was published in 1961, at the time when the author, as he recalls himself, had an impression at American universities that "[he] was the only person who was trying to unearth and describe the German upheaval against the Jews."³¹ In Poland there were even fewer opportunities and an even less favorable atmosphere to deal

28. Zygmunt Bauman, *Nowoczesność i Zagłada*, trans. Franciszek Juszyński (Warsaw: Biblioteka Kwartalnika Masada, 1992). The original edition of *Modernity and the Holocaust* was published by Polity Press appeared in 1989. We can follow the stages of the discussion for example in the journal *Kultura Współczesna*, no. 2 (1993): 89–126. About the lack of historical research on the Holocaust during the era of People's Republic of Poland as well as about the absence of this topic in public discourse at that time see Włodzimierz Borodziej, Paweł Machcewicz, Grzegorz Motyka, and Feliks Tylich, "Pamięć jako pole bitwy: Rozmowa," *Przegląd Polityczny*, no. 52/53 (2001): 10–20.

29. Participants in the debate included, among others, Leszek Kołakowski, Józef Tischner, and Paweł Śpiewak. See, e.g. Józef Tischner, "Totalitarne wyzwanie judaizmu i chrześcijaństwa wobec totalitaryzmu dwudziestego wieku," *Res Publica*, no. 5 (1989): 79–88; Paweł Śpiewak, "Oswajanie ciemności," *Res Publica*, no. 5 (1989): 88–98. About philosophical discourse on the Holocaust, see also Jan Paweł Hurdzik, "Filozofia i Holocaust: związki i interpretacje," in Hurdzik, *Niepewność i filozofia* (Warsaw: Aletheia, 2006).

30. For more about this topic, see Piotr Forecki, *Od Shoah do Strachu. Spory o polską żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010); Michał Luczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności* (Kraków: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2017), 189–249.

31. Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory. The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 96.

with this issue. Until the 1960s the communist party was interested in the Jewish emigration to Israel at the most, and after 1967 it launched an anti-Zionist, and in fact anti-Semitic campaign which culminated in the events described by the Polish historiography as March 1968. This was a wave of persecutions, psychological pressure, and removal of people of Jewish origin from the public sphere such as it was, as a result of which more than ten thousand people left the country.

However, it is important for us that the geopolitical position in which Poland was placed as a consequence of the Yalta Conference (1945) deprived it of sovereignty for many decades and, consequently, excluded the country from a free exchange of ideas, studies and contacts with the world and denied chances to hold its own identity debate. Politically enslaved, absorbed in its own injustices suffered from its two neighboring superpowers: Germany and the Soviet Union, Poland had neither a chance nor an objective opportunity to present itself on the international arena and to voice its opinion on its allies, such as France or the United Kingdom, which had let Poland down during the war. Most importantly, Poland could not cooperate in partnership—conduct historical research or maintain normal human relationships—with Jewish survivors of the Shoah most of whom lived in Israel and the US.

These historical factors—radically different from those in which Germans have been involved after the war—had to leave a strong impression on the collective memory of Poles. One of the most recent diagnoses of Polish collective consciousness is contained in the book by Andrzej Leder under the title *Przeżniona rewolucja: Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* (*Sleepwalking the Revolution. An Exercise in Historical Logic*) (2013). It directly raises the question about the place of the Jews in Polish identity discourse. One would think that Poles see themselves for the first time in this study within a wide panorama of social changes in the 20th century. In this panorama the so-called “disposal of Jews”—that is expelling them from their homes, foreclosing of estates left behind after they were gassed by Germans or killed by their Polish neighbors—appears as an event which has been forgotten. The sociologist claims that it is its oblivion that forms a new Polish political subjectivity. The eponymous revolution which involves the establishment of a new society that has been made by turning a blind eye to crimes, betrayals, murders, and denunciations—and thus of denying all responsibility for them. The historical context presented above allows us to perceive that the escape from the memory of these events was not specific to individuals who wanted to purge themselves of guilt and shame. It is an external world in which they happened to live, together with its politics, education, religion, and media, that helped them in their efforts to forget and justify evil. It convinced Poles that nothing actually happened. It allowed them look into the “true” mirror of an oppressed nation endowed with a glorious and heroic past. The long-term effect of such a direction of awareness is thinking that idealizes itself and sees good anywhere but in itself, whereas in the others it sees nothing but evil. Such a bipolar world is built like a besieged fortress—the occurrence of the other, even thinking about him/her—is already a threat to my fragile identity there. Unable to remember my own past I cease to be an autonomous subject. As an insecure person I lose also

the ability to create a community with others: “The perspective in which saying the truth about me is a gift for another person vanishes [under those conditions].”³²

None of these thoughts by any means justify anything connected with the Holocaust. The goal is to make us aware that what we know about the Holocaust has been created in specific political circumstances. In the social sciences such an approach is called constructivism. According to it, knowledge is a form of power and every science and scholarly approach is also a political project.³³ Simply put, we could say that without politics, there is no science, and without science—history: there is no past, including the Holocaust. The historical truth about the Holocaust is the truth of its representations, the creation of which always has political significance. Hence, this is all about the images of this event, pictures in the media known to the global audience, whereas Poland—its intellectual, political, and artistic elites—did not participate in their production during the first decades after the war. Today we are at the stage of remembering about the Holocaust when—as Heller puts it—“we actually [remember] not Auschwitz, but the fiction associated with it: Auschwitz about which movies can be made, novels and diaries can be written; which can be commemorated, turned into the subject of speeches and the cause of tearful despair; which is a place for tourists and for monuments.”³⁴

The point is that the Polish “fiction”—in the sense as given above—associated with Auschwitz did not reach the awareness both of the Polish society itself and of the global audience, its media, discourse language, points of view—the others, to whom history was kinder, took the initiative in this field.

3. THE DEBATE ON THE AMENDMENT ON IPN ACT AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Practically from the moment the Law and Justice party won the parliamentary election in 2015, its government has been the object of incessant criticism inside and outside the country, which comes down to accusations of destruction of democracy. The amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, presented by the government at the beginning of 2018, has resulted in a row both within the country and on the international arena. Emotions have been stirred up especially by the following provision of the Act, the first section of Article 55a:

Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed

32. Andrzej Leder, *Przeżniona rewolucja: Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014), 93.

33. See e.g. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-network-theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005).

34. Agniesz Heller, “Pamięć i zapomnienie: O sensie i braku sensu,” trans. Andrzej Kopacki, *Przebieg Polityczny*, no. 52–53 (2001): 26; Translation of Heller, “Vergessen und Erinnern. Vom Sinn der Sinnlosigkeit,” *Sinn und Form*, no. 2 (2001).

by the Third Reich (. . .) or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or whoever otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the true perpetrators of said crimes—shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years.³⁵

The legislative initiatives concerning the Act on IPN of the politicians from Warsaw in January 2018 can only be considered in the categories of historical policy and international PR—decisions relating to the state's image. I do not intend to and cannot present all the details of this event. But some details are necessary:

The amendment has aroused controversy especially in Israel, the USA and Ukraine. On January 27, 2018 during the celebrations in the Auschwitz camp, the ambassador of Israel to Poland appealed for a change of the amendment. She emphasized that "Israel regards it as a possibility of penalizing the Shoah survivors' testimonies."³⁶ On 31 January 2018 the US Department of State issued a statement which included the following words:

"The history of the Holocaust is painful and complex. We understand that phrases such as "Polish death camps" are inaccurate, misleading, and hurtful. We are concerned, however, that if enacted this draft legislation could undermine free speech and academic discourse. We all must be careful not to inhibit discussion and commentary on the Holocaust. We believe open debate, scholarship, and education are the best means of countering inaccurate and hurtful speech. (. . .) We encourage Poland to reevaluate the legislation in light of its potential impact on the principle of free speech and on our ability to be effective partners."³⁷

Poland's official reactions definitely dispel these concerns: the President, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Institute of National Remembrance spoke with one voice. In reply to the statement of the US Department of State, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs assured its counterparts that the enacted amendment does not restrict freedom of research, historical debate, or artistic activity. The Ministry pointed out that the main purpose of the amendment was to "eliminate public and contrary-to-fact conduct that attributes responsibility or co-responsibility

35. I quote from Marta Bucholc and Maciej Komornik, "The Polish 'Holocaust Law' revisited: The Devastating Effects of Prejudice-Mongering," *Cultures of History Forum*, February 19, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/poland/the-polish-holocaust-law-revisited-the-devastating-effects-of-prejudice-mongering/>; For the original, see *Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej, Dziennik Ustaw* (2018), Item 369.

36. Bartłomiej Kuraś, "Ambasador Izraela na obchodach w Auschwitz: Ustawa o IPN jest nie do przyjęcia," *Wyborcza.pl*, Kraków, January 27, 2018, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,22951374,ambasador-izraela-na-obchodach-w-auschwitz-ustawa-o-ipn-jest.html>.

37. Statement by Heather Nauert, Spokesperson. *Legislation in Poland Regarding Crimes Committed During the Holocaust*, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://pl.usembassy.gov/legislation-holocaust/>.

for Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich to the Polish Nation or the Polish State. Using expressions such as 'Polish death camps' was one manifestation of such conduct."³⁸ On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the following note was posted: "In 2014 the Polish Foreign Ministry and its diplomatic missions intervened 151 times to correct misrepresentations of history. The most interventions took place in the United Kingdom (53 times), followed by the United States (18) and Germany (14), according to information presented to the Polish parliament (Sejm) by the foreign ministry." The Minister of Foreign Affairs commented:

"There are many voices in Israel alleging that Poland wants to ban the truth about individual, shameful cases of Jews being turned in to the Germans by Poles during World War Two, or that [Poland] wants to penalize such cases. This is impossible if you look at the Polish law and this piece of legislation as a whole. We want to get this message across to our partners in Israel."³⁹

One example of using the phrase in question is quite pertinent. The irony is that on August 21st in that same year as the amendment, 2018, the German Federal Court of Justice (in German: *Bundesgerichtshof*) in Karlsruhe annulled the judicial decisions of lower German courts, which upheld the sentence of the Court of Appeal in Kraków, of December 2016. The Court of Justice dismissed the application made by one of the Auschwitz prisoners, who sued ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) TV Station—Germany's national public television broadcast—demanded an apology from it for using the phrase "Polish death camp." In its reasoning the Court claimed the right of freedom of expression and of the media.⁴⁰ The sentence was hotly debated in Poland by the so-called right-wing media, whereas it went unnoticed by the left wing ones which had only recently been engaged in campaigning for the withdrawal of the amendment of the act on the IPN.

It is not my task to determine who is right and who is wrong in this argument. I see its sense in the context, outlined before, of so-called historical policy. In the public debate, which has been going on in Poland since the 1990s, there are various opinions on the participation of Poles in the crimes against the Jews, including extremely contradictory ones. I mean here primarily the discussions about such books as: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*

38. Małgorzata Cichucka, (The Embassy of the Republic of Poland), accessed April 6, 2020, A comment on the new law about Nazi crimes in Poland, <https://www.document.no/2018/01/30/a-comment-on-the-new-law-about-nazi-crimes-in-poland/>.

39. Minister Czaputowicz: *Israel's position on IPN legislation is based on misconceptions*, Embassy News and Events, accessed April 6, 2020, https://waszyngton.msz.gov.pl/en/news/minister_czaputowicz_israel_s_position_on_ipn_legislation_is_based_on_misconceptions.

40. See "Niemiecki Trybunał Sprawiedliwości: ZDF nie musi przeproszać za 'polski obóz,'" *Rzeczpospolita*, August 21, 2018, accessed July 26, 2019, <https://www.rp.pl/Spoleczenstwo/180829819-Niemiecki-Trybunał-Sprawiedliwosci-ZDF-nie-musi-przeproszac-za-polski-oboz.html>.

(2001) by Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish-American sociologist and historian, or *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night Without an End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland] (2018), a collection of articles edited by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski.⁴¹ However, a situation in which one “truth” should exclude another one institutionally, by means of some legislative barriers, is inconceivable. In Poland such a mechanism is unthinkable: the institution of censorship was not fully effective here even in the communist period, since the underground circulation of publications functioned alongside officially published books and journals. The studies on the Holocaust history are developing intensively in Poland, both at public universities—for instance, there is a strong research center at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin where I work—and in other institutions. These are both scholarly institutes, starting with the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw which describes itself as “one of the most important research institutes concerning Polish and Central European Jews,” and cultural ones, such as the “Grodzka Gate—NN Theatre” Center in Lublin (archives, oral history, artistic and educational events).

The Act on the Institute of National Remembrance tries to bring empirical data back to consciousness of the contemporaries. Can a law be successful in this project—in the fight for the past? It is not possible to settle historical truth, solve the problem of moral guilt, or evoke authentic memory of the victims in the contemporary people by means of law. The amendment is rather a gesture of helplessness from those who are novices at politics of memory and try to work on it after more than seventy years. They do it ineptly because it is certainly not possible to settle historical truth, or solve the problem of moral guilt, or evoke authentic memory of the victims in contemporary people by means of law. The legislative initiatives of the politicians from Warsaw can only be considered in the categories of historical politics and international PR—decisions relating to the state’s image. The Germans—and indeed Austrians and French—had already proven themselves to be the masters in this field a long time ago. From the beginning they tended to adopt a position according to which, metaphorically speaking, Cain—the perpetrator—did not exist. They wanted to take sides with Abel—the victim—that is the Jews. However, the empirical data are unalterable. It is easy to access this data at a time of a popular discourse on the Holocaust, when movies are made about it, books are written and university departments are opened. Moreover, in this maze of images it is easy to mix up the empirical and symbolical forms of its commemoration. Law can only pertain to the former ones: it can regulate institutional forms of commemoration based on such material truths as, for instance: “Unlike most other countries occupied by Germany during the war, Poland did not provide a ready recruitment

41. See Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018).

base for Nazi collaboration.”⁴² However, such truths can only support the abstract memory, and not the authentic one which hurts and about which Heller can only speak negatively that it “does not take the forms of explanations, histories and the efforts of constituting sense, and it can’t be about remembering in the form of empty ceremonies or kitsch.”⁴³

Authentic memory asks existential questions about forgiveness from the deceased, to which there are no answers. The questions are about something which is extremely difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, politicians neither need to know about this, nor have to spend time thinking about it, as they are lost in the heat of the fight for power. However, if intellectuals do not know anything about it, either, this is a problem. A number of Polish colleagues—among them truly eminent historians together with the politicians supporting them, mix up the empirical and symbolical orders. Their unrelenting research on as yet undisclosed Polish crimes against Jews, their attempts at an exact determination of the scale—specific numbers—of this phenomenon, are in accordance with a university’s mission. This is clear. They are right to attempt to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. Unfortunately, I dare say that they have little to do with the task of supporting the authentic memory (its existential and emotional components) of the victims which they would like to impose on the society outright in the public debate. Before I discuss their research, I will formulate some methodological—indeed abstract and general—remarks.

Archival-based research underlying the historical profession provides to historians’ audiences, readers, or students an abstract memory, whereas it should be remembered that no research is indifferent for the existential and emotional components of memory. In other words, history supplies more than simply factual knowledge. Its meaning and significance as an academic discipline depends on by whom and for what purpose it is done and used, what social and political order it legitimizes. The critical model of social sciences and humanities gives answers to these questions.⁴⁴ Following this model there is no scientific research free from axiological and ideological foundations. Historians’ choices and appraisements of examined phenomena are also guided by criteria belonging mainly to publicly funded research institutions in which they are employed. They pursue surreptitiously ideological and political interests of various social groups, states, and nations. It is then difficult for historians—and more generally, intellectuals—to break free from the role of ideological planners, in which they are cast by these collective subjects. Consequently, the question of whether the role of academic engagement in forming

42. Seth J. Frantzman, “Setting history straight,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 29, 2018.

43. Heller, “Pamięć i zapomnienie,” 24.

44. See e.g. James Bohman, “Critical Theory as Practical Knowledge: Participants, Observers, and Critics,” in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, ed. Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003); For a more extensive bibliography see James Bohman, “Critical Theory,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

what is known as historical policy or international public relations is something abnormal seems to be rhetorical. The theory of social sciences, and also history, assumes that the awareness about this belongs to the self-understanding of the researchers. They must anticipate that the knowledge produced by them spreads into social life and shapes attitudes towards tradition and collective identities, as well as affects political and intellectual groupings. They need to know that "the academic" is not at all a fixed thing, does not consist in setting certain knowledge or "hard data"; rather it relies on constant and repeated interpretational or hermeneutical efforts: on the continuous verification of underlying assumptions and existing arrangements.

4. HISTORIANS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE—A CASE OF THE PARIS CONFERENCE

I shall now deal with the media statements and expressions made by professional historians. A critical approach to them is based on the analysis of the political status of knowledge: namely they refer to the people who enjoy high social prestige given by the fact that they possess academic degrees and by their place of employment, i.e. university or research institute. The aim of a critical study is not to establish "an objective" truth but to show that nobody has a privileged access to "the objective" truth, in other words, that it is something constructed. The idea is to unearth the participation of "objective" science—of history—in constructing the "actual" past as an object of study. A historical vision of the past may vary from the remembered one, but it does not mean that one is indifferent towards the other, that the voice of professional historians producing "objective" images of the past is helpless in the public sphere. Knowledge is a form of power. In the contemporary world and the knowledge-based society, history as a science is also able to shape and influence the collective memory, it can evoke both negative and positive feelings towards images of past events.

Let us try then to illustrate the lack of that kind of reflection among the historians mentioned above by means of one example. They participated at the international conference organized by French scientific institutions in Paris in the auditorium of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales on February 21–22, 2019. The conference title: "The New Polish School of History of the Holocaust." The members of the "new school" are scholars associated with the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, which was established at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The key aim of the conference was to present their latest research contained especially in the above-mentioned book entitled *Night Without an End*. The conference was to be a continuation of Polish-French academic cooperation launched in 2005, which is of course an important aspect. Moreover, a similar conference took place earlier in Poland with little public response—but also with another key difference as far as it is possible for me to discern. And so, I feel there is more to the event than is immediately apparent. I'm not going to recount the meeting; I'm specifically interested in its media representations and

repercussions, especially since it took place when the debate on the 2018 amendment to the IPN law was still raging, and so unsurprisingly attracted a great deal more attention than such events usually do. In a manner of speaking it was a part of the debate. The media visibility of the conference in question—from my theoretical perspective, its central aspect—cannot be understood without that context.

The most important thing for me is still the conference's capacity-building for historical policy-making or the State's brand image-making. I therefore understand this event in the following way: The very idea of organizing such a conference in Paris seems to be imprudent and risky for a number of reasons. First, the conference under this banner—"new school"—was not used earlier at home, in Poland. Why then should it go out abroad? It was not a closed conference among scholars, but a meeting open to a wider audience and media. Second, Paris is not just any city: it has sheltered (not only) Polish political refugees and dissenters since the nineteenth century, people who have been persecuted in their own country and have defied the state authorities. There is then an implicit presumption that it is the historians who played such a role at the event. They had decided to take a confrontational stance: the participants of the meeting were only members of the "school," no one else was involved, like for instance from the Institute of National Remembrance, which is a state public institution just like the Polish Academy of Sciences. The responses were easily predictable. Domestic recipients of the conference—represented by (some circles) of the Polish Diaspora in France—could rightly feel that it is they who inherit the responsibility for all the evil the speakers talked about. Other scholars, mainly from Poland, in turn, could consider themselves framed in the position of swindlers and counterfeiters of the past. In contrast, the foreign audience could get an impression that the reward both for faithfulness to the truth and maintaining humanity during the war belongs to their ancestors and to them. However, in all this, as rhetoric teaches, the plausibility or credibility of arguments depends both on the character of a speaker and the attitudes of his/her audience. As Aristotle puts it: "his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions."⁴⁵ Nothing has changed in this respect from ancient times.

The confrontational nature of the event described is further confirmed and enhanced by the language of its responses—of course only through what was leaked to the media. They also do not seem to serve the historians' arguments intended to reach a consensus on the substance of the case. There is more than just the issue of reliable or unreliable journalism: I assume intellectuals have to face different types of journalism and estimate the effects of their own public performances. However, this premise is not so obvious. During his introductory lecture (the second keynote lecture was by French sociologist Jean-Charles Szurek), one of the conference participants, Jacek Leociak, was heckled by the audience. After that, he revealed: "I

45. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys. Roberts, 8 (1356a), <http://www.bocc.ubi.pt/pag/Aristotle-rhetoric.pdf>

don't expect the heckling people during the Paris conference to be able to listen with understanding. That's to be expected from the media, even if they were right-wing or nationalist ones."⁴⁶ Such an assumption is naive and faulty. The widely circulated video on the internet—a fragment of the lecture by Leociak—shows something which looks like an activist's speech in content and form. This is evidenced by the almost hysterical and raised voice of the speaker and his violent gestures. You can hear a voice of outrage—"That's not true"—in the hall when he says that "Jews live snug as bug in a rug in their autonomous provinces [during World War II], namely in ghettos, which were given to them by Germans, so that eventually they could burn their kinpereons in the crematoria. Such sleazy anti-Semitic jokes can be heard on national television today."⁴⁷ According to the reports of the Agence France-Presse—as the same media report shows—about thirty persons during the conference "repeated traditional anti-Semitic prejudices, were frequently hissing, shouting, and passing out leaflets entitled 'Gross's lies.'"⁴⁸ Other observers deny that such things took place.⁴⁹ The available video does not contain these reactions of the audience. Papers also reported that during the conference Jan Tomasz Gross said: "Poles in rural areas killed more Jews than Germans in the death camps."⁵⁰ In turn, Barbara Engelking, the head of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, absent from the conference, became known in the media for her widely quoted statement given to the TVN-24 station on January 31, 2018:

This Jewish death was a result of the absolute impossibility to reach an agreement. For Poles it was simply a biological, natural question—just death, nothing more, whereas for Jews death was a tragedy, dramatic experience, metaphysics, the encounter with the highest.⁵¹

46. Jacek Leociak, "Paryska awantura," *Krytyka Polityczna*, February 25, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/swiat/leociak-paryska-awantura/>.

47. In the Polish language version: "Żydzi mieszkają sobie jak u Pana Boga za piecem w swoich autonomicznych prowincjach [w czasie II Wojny Światowej] czyli gettach podarowanych przez Niemców, by w końcu palić swoich braci Żydów w krematoriach. Takie plugawe antysemitkie dowcipy można dzisiaj usłyszeć w telewizji państwowej." The stock footage on the website: "Atak na Polskę na konferencji w Paryżu: Do sieci trafiło nagranie," *Do Rzeczy*, February 22, 2019; <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/94467/Atak-na-Polske-na-konferencji-w-Paryżu-Do-sieci-trafiło-nagranie.html> (retrieved October 21, 2019).

48. I quote from "Atak na Polskę na konferencji w Paryżu."

49. See "Jakub Kumoch przedstawił nagranie z konferencji 'Nowa polska szkoła historii Holocaustu,'" *Dziękuję*, March 4, 2019, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://dziękuję.pl/aktualnosci/jakub-kumoch-przedstawił-nagranie-z-konferencji-nowa-polska-szkola-historii-holocaustu>.

50. "Jakub Kumoch."

51. In the Polish language version: "Ta śmierć żydowska wynikała z całkowitej niemożności porozumienia. Dla Polaków to była po prostu kwestia biologiczna, naturalna—śmierć jak śmierć, a dla Żydów to była tragedia, to było dramatyczne doświadczenie, to była metafizyka, to było spotkanie z najwyższym (...)." The stock footage on the website accessed October 21, 2019, <https://niezłomni.com/barbara-engelking-bom-dla-polakow-smierc-to-była-po>.

It is understandable that this statement triggered a wave of online arrogant comments.

Two questions come to the fore: First, could such public conduct of the historians and the accompanying information strategy serve an academic debate, scholarly dispute, critical analysis of information sources, or some other? Could it promote an "exchange of experiences and views in a group of specialists"⁵² (the sessions of the conference were open), as Jerzy Duszyński, the president of PAN afterwards naively tried to explain the Paris brawl? Second, do the historians actually believe that by these means of communication they could settle accounts with the past, render justice to victims and arouse in contemporary people—i.e. the descendants of the perpetrators of the crime—*authentic memory* about them? Let us consider another perspective of their conduct. Perhaps it is ostentation that causes their behaviors; such a character flaw that according to Aristotle belongs to the art of leadership in politics.⁵³ It would be the hubris of intellectuals: the guardians of the ultimate truth. Perhaps more than reaching an agreement and leading dilettantes to understand the true knowledge the professionals are rather concerned with showing them the exceptionalism and hypermorality of people standing face to face with truth in the classical, Platonic sense of that word. But this attitude might result in an outcome the exact opposite of that intended: it deprives intellectuals of their credibility; instead of understanding and friendliness on the part of the recipients it gives rise to misunderstanding and hostility—instead of renewing memory about victims it enhances their oblivion, instead of empathy it fosters aggression and anger.

In the above examples, the intellectuals do not seem to talk to the audience, but rather to speak to it *ex cathedra*: they appear to behave like exclusive residents of the ivory tower. And they seem to be saying: just wait, we are going to tell you what really happened and how much you are to blame, how evil and cruel you and your/our ancestors have been. Such a message, which in social psychology and communication theory is ascribed to the principle of confusion, has a destructive influence on individuals and interpersonal relations, reinforces a person's belief that everything he or she sees, feels and understands is false, thus he or she is not worth anything, cannot do anything and is not responsible for anything in life. Others know the truth and only they can be responsible for everything. Such communication is not based on dialogue and does not create open personalities, able to sympathize with others, obey moral rules and eliminate behavior which undermines

-prostu-kwestia-biologiczna-smierc-jak-smierc-dla-zydow-to-była-tragedia-metafizyka-spokanie-z-najwyższym/.

52. Jerzy Duszyński, "Stanowisko Prezesa PAN dot. konferencji 'Nowa polska szkoła badań nad historią Zagłady Żydów,'" *Stacja Naukowa Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Paryżu*, accessed October 3, 2019, <http://paris.pan.pl/stanowisko-prezesa-pan-dot-konferencji-nowa-polska-szkola-badan-nad-historia-zaglady-zydow/>.

53. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 9.

the acknowledged values etc. Instead of understanding and pain it can rather cause aggression and resistance, or lead to depression.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the perspective of critical theory accepted above, history as a science is also a social phenomenon. In a democratic state—with its universities and research bodies—it shall be assumed that there are as many methods of studying social phenomena and explaining history as there are groups and social interests pursued by those studies. The collective memories and oblivion of World War II and the Holocaust belong to both German and Polish identity discourses which have been shaped in radically different political contexts. They are a form of response in the face of different conflicting demands of a particular society to certain domestic and foreign policies. The politics of memory created on the basis of keeping quiet about the crime and its invisibility has made a key contribution to building the identity of the postwar Germany. This approach is illustrated *inter alia* by the national debate about Goldhagen's book. The presence and absence of the Holocaust in Polish collective memory has been strongly politically controlled both in the communist times and in the period of the Polish Third Republic. The law amendment of the Institute of National Remembrance was the turning point—it revealed the mechanism involved in the interactions between institutions of the state and the politics of historical truth. What remains, as a result, is the issue of authentic social memory discussed in this article. There is little or no chance for it to be shaped under conditions of open cultural war which is being waged between academic communities divided politically into two camps—the right and the left one. Unfortunately, it is Polish society that becomes the victim of this war. From the research perspective adopted here there seems to be only one problem-solving therapy in this case—the therapy worked out by increasing the methodological awareness of scholars on both sides of the conflict. Perhaps this reasoning is naïve and seems like wishful thinking, but there is probably no more powerful remedy for this state of affairs than a responsible public intellectual could propose. Obviously, it is not a matter of an illusory reconciliation of the two sides. This is about rising awareness of the need for the key findings of critical theory, according to which the historical ways of representing the past use metaphorical language and narrative constructions constituting the same historical past as a research object. They come from different cultural fields: religion, ethics, literature, mythology, and art. They are present in social imaginaries and are themselves material for politics—as can be seen from the relationships between the discourses of historians and the political statements described in this paper. What does this methodological maxim mean in regards to the authentic memory of the Holocaust particularly in Poland?

Neither historians nor politicians can proclaim guilt or innocence in connection with crime. The Holocaust may be categorized as an absolute and definitive evil which cannot be governed or manipulated. Therefore, it is not possible to assess its

scale compared to other crimes, or to justify it by political, economic or any other circumstances. Guilt and innocence are symbolic factors which cannot be measured or estimated with empirical facts or numbers. If so, not even the communication strategy implemented by the Polish historians—the tone and the form of their story—will change our state of being guilty or innocent. The strategy is based on the assumption that Poles still live in a state of “innocence”: in an unconscious or false consciousness. And only with the subsequent discovery of the as-yet unknown facts will they learn how much political, moral, and criminal responsibility they bear for the crimes of their ancestors. Such thinking leads to social self-alienation rather than contributing to an enlightened political community, open to its Others, understanding their injustices, capable of feeling guilt, and taking responsibility for what happened. All of this would be done not just to renounce one's own identity; on the contrary, to create an autonomous identity which is not a homogeneous monolithic whole but rather an entity aware of its own failures and imperfections, capable of facing them honestly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TO THE EDITOR:

Professor Jan P. Hudzik deserves praise for his courage to address in one article, "Reflections on German and Polish Historical Policies of Holocaust Memory" (*The Polish Review* vol. 65, no. 4, 2020), a subject that, as he admits, "is well elaborated in numerous scholarly studies" and, we may add, in an immense volume of non-academic testimony. He is also wise to signal his awareness of "a danger of subjective and arbitrary choices in such proceedings; it is a risk I will have to take." I grant that the risk here is well taken, if only because Professor Hudzik has not fallen into the trap of heated arguments between the opposite camps in the ongoing historical-political debate about the behavior of the Poles toward the Jews during World War II. He calls one exchange, at a recent conference in Paris, "a brawl."¹

But subjectivity has many levels and ways to highlight or to shade parts of the landscape under consideration. In Professor Hudzik's succinct analysis, the shade falls on the early period in the history of Poland's reckoning with Zagłada (annihilation), that is, the first decade after the war, long before the word *Holocaust* came to the fore. In his article, this period is only briefly alluded to in a couple of sentences that, correctly, point to the communist control of all historical discourse, in which, as Professor Hudzik states almost correctly, only the Germans were blamed for all the war atrocities. I say "almost" because for a time the operative word was the more inclusive *fascists*. Professor Hudzik further asserts: "The Poles [...] as victims have been confronted primarily with the task of commemorating their own martyrology both in communist and in post-communist times." Only when Pope John Paul II in 1982 prayed at the altar erected at Birkenau, "the Polish model of the culture of remembrance based on the heroic ethos" would be shaken "for the first time." This suggests that nothing had been done before to question that model, to confront—as we were reminded over and over again—the heroic myths.

Lucjan Dobroszycki, the historian who could not be accused of Polish nationalist bias, wrote the following in his contribution to the 1993 conference organized by the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: "The Polish literature on the subject of the ghettos and

Zagłada is enormous and in its quantity has no equal. It can be said without exaggeration that without the knowledge of this literature, writing about the fate of Jews under the Nazi occupation would be impossible today."² He ends with a note that on the subject of the relations between the Poles and the Jews during World War II he defers to the widely discussed essay by Jan Błński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto" [Poor Poles look at the ghetto], published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* in January 1987; the debate over this essay apparently has never ceased.

Simultaneously with historical publications on Zagłada, the first postwar decade saw a virtual avalanche of cultural tributes to the Jewish victim. The first monument erected in devastated Poland was to honor the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, streets were named after them, the first feature films (Aleksander Ford's *Ulica Graniczna*, Wanda Jakubowska's *Ostatni etap*) told stories of the martyred Jews and, yes, of Poles who contributed to their misery. The same can be said of novels, plays, and poetry. Major Polish writers—Jerzy Andrzejewski, Zofia Nałkowska, Tadeusz Borowski, Kazimierz Brandys, and Kornel Filipowicz, to name only a few—did not shy from depicting not only the bystanders' indifference but also murderous actions by Polish antisemites, from all walks of life. Practically every poet, old and young, lamented the fate of Jews. At the same time nothing could be written about the Warsaw Uprising and the wartime persecution of Poles in Soviet Russia, while the Home Army was vilified, its heroes tortured and executed after openly broadcast show trials. And no one came to the rescue, if we think about it!

The consequences of that disparity for the national consciousness and for political developments after the fall of communism can hardly be underestimated. They would be continuously exploited by feuding political agendas, less for the human tragedy on all sides and more for gains on either the domestic or international opinion markets. Professor Hudzik is certainly aware of such a split option of which he gives a good example, citing the dispute over a German court sentence in the case of the use of the expression "Polish death camps" in a television program. "The sentence was hotly debated in Poland," he writes, "by the so-called right wing media, whereas it went unnoticed by the left wing ones." Lost in such current debates is the acknowledgement by "the political right" of the complexity of the cultural reaction to the Holocaust in the early postwar period in Poland, while "the political left" ignores the rich legacy of Holocaust studies and cultural representations that existed despite severe political constraints.

Professor Hudzik concludes his "Reflections" with an apt admonition to present-day historians for their attempts to "change our state of being guilty or innocent." He alludes to the efforts by scholars associated with the Polish Center

2. Lucjan Dobroszycki, "Polska historiografia na temat Zagłady: Przegląd literatury i próba syntezy," in *Holocaust z perspektywy polskiej*, ed. Daniel Grinberg and Paweł Szapiro (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1993), 177. The quotation has been translated by Joanna Rostropowicz Clark.

1. The conference, "The New Polish School of History of the Holocaust," was held on February 22 and 23, 2019.

for Holocaust Studies at the Polish Academy of Science and their strategy of “discovery of the as-yet unknown facts”—that is, cases of wartime anti-Jewish violence in remote Polish villages. This strategy, he warns, “leads to social self-alienation rather than contributing to an enlightened political community open to its Others.” Not being a historian, I can only vouch for the obvious—that it is imperative to unselectively remember what had happened *avant nous*. This includes the time when despite their often-best intentions historians and artists alienated themselves from society at large and, in turn, alienated a vast segment of Poland’s population from the “Others” whose legitimate claim for the full recognition of their cause may have been largely dismissed. Herein lurks the most regretful possibility—that the all-time tragedy could be turned into a farce.

JOANNA ROSTROPOWICZ CLARK
Princeton Research Forum
February 23, 2021

Jan Hudzik replies:

DEAR MADAM EDITOR:

Let me start by thanking Dr. Joanna Rostropowicz Clark for responding to my article, “Reflections on German and Polish Historical Policies of Holocaust Memory,” and her valuable additions to it. This great tradition of comments, opinions, and polemics in scholarly journals unfortunately has long since disappeared in Poland. Academics often write because they are driven by the principle “publish or perish” that no longer has room for discussion. (By the way, this principle is of U.S. origin.) But to the point:

Let me repeat that I am not a historian, which is what I have in common with Dr. Rostropowicz Clark. I have been involved professionally in philosophy and the theory of science—both the social sciences and the humanities, including history as a science. And precisely this point of view interests me in my “Reflections.” Actually, of course, Dr. Rostropowicz Clark is perfectly right when she recalls numerous and extraordinary historical and literary accounts of the fate of the Jews during World War II, as well as the actions of commemorating their fate in the form of monuments, street names, and the like. However, all such events—or at least most of them—were used by the communist authorities for propaganda objectives rather than for social and educational purposes. The interests of the party and its monopoly on all ideology, including the vision of common history subordinated to the idea of class struggle and the fight for socialist dictatorship (in other words that was the historical policy at that time), were more important than concern for the collective memory. It may be helpful to illustrate these historical circumstances by referring to some records from that era penned by Stefan Kisielewski (his literary pseudonym was Kistel). The government, i.e. its topmost decision-making centre, had completely

banned his writings from printing after the so-called events of March 1968, during which he was beaten by “unknown perpetrators” in the Old Town in Warsaw. In his journal of October 2 of the same year Kiesel wrote the following:

There is an anniversary of the war, the Uprising, anniversaries so important and profound, there are still some unveiling of monuments, plaques, military tattoos, guards in cemeteries, but, well, everything is disparaged by the ever-present communist propaganda—even the talking about the martyrdom of Jews in Treblinka. The minister made it a weapon of the anti-West German propaganda (children of these victims are allied with German criminals...). They will disparage and loathe the holiest thing, every feeling, every anniversary—we never had any repose, even on the day the war ended.

The stories of Tadeusz Borowski and Zofia Nałkowska belonged to the school reading canon in the 1960s and the 1970s, and inevitably participated in the same political game as the memorial rites Kiesel talked about. Precisely because of this, they did not shape the so-called Polish identity discourse at that time. When at the end of the 1960s—and I cannot break away from these “subjective” connotations (by the way, as a theorist of science, I have a serious problem with understanding the meaning of “objectivity”)—I went on a school “trip” to “Oświęcim” (this name, rather than Auschwitz, was then enforced), I was still looking at evidence of a fascist crime against “six million Polish citizens” there. Such a message was constructed both by the historiography of the time, especially for school education (see one of the textbook examples in my article), and by mass culture. The dominant mass media images of the war—obviously steered by the cultural policy of the state—most generally concerned the acts of heroic resistance against the German fascists in Poland. It was not films such as *Ulica Graniczna* (directed by Aleksander Ford, 1948) that preoccupied public attention to the extent that they could finally shape collective consciousness; much more important for shaping this awareness were films such as *Kanał* (directed by Andrzej Wajda, 1956), *Eroica* (directed by Andrzej Munk, 1958), or *Lotna* (directed by Andrzej Wajda, 1959). A film about Janusz Korczak, directed by Andrzej Wajda, would be made only in 1990.

It is only against the background of such national-centered discourses—and the state of collective consciousness they formed—that Jan Błoński’s 1987 essay makes a breakthrough in the public debate. If it were otherwise, if this collective imaginary was influenced by the “avalanche of cultural tributes to the Jewish victim,” rightly recalled by Dr. Rostropowicz Clark, the entire heritage of knowledge and memory about Jews (I am referring to Lucjan Dobroszycki’s remark), then why the sudden need for changing the perspective on the tragedy of Jews in the 1980s?

At any rate, this is not what my article is about—it is not historical matters that interest me, but rather something much smaller or—as it would seem—less important in the face of the history of the Holocaust: it is the so-called methodological awareness of its researchers. In the face of traces—most often only traces of the crime, since the evidence of murders was systematically destroyed by the

perpetrators—the researchers are not free from the temptation offered by the “objectivity” of scholarly and scientific research and the associated sense of direct access to the whole truth. Like Dr. Rostropowicz Clark, I fear the consequences of this approach, that is, the gradual alienation of scholars from society when scholars treat their audience as children who need to be told the whole truth and only the truth.

The last decision of the court of the first instance in Warsaw (on February 21, 2021) in respect of civil proceedings against Polish historians of the Holocaust about the inaccuracies in their work *Night Without an End* . . . only confirms this kind of fear. I may add: First, no court has the power to establish historical truth. There must be the right to freedom of scholarly and scientific research, but—second—those who enjoy this freedom must also know that they are not alone in the world, that other people also live next to them and have their own subjective (and what other?) memory, written in their family histories. Third, scholarly and scientific research cannot therefore infringe upon personal rights: in a democracy everyone has a right to defend his/her reputation. This is obvious. Each memory, no matter if collective or individual, in order to fulfill its function, must be selective—there is no absolute memory as well as absolute truth—because it would confuse and paralyze our minds. The important thing is that these memories exist side by side, and none of them should be ignored. Of course, for the international markets of opinion, the aforementioned decision of the Warsaw court will only confirm the enslavement of the courts and restriction of the freedom of scholarly and scientific research in Poland ruled by a right-wing government. The point, however, is that such opinions will not change anything; they will only confirm scholars and scientists’ belief that society does not have and cannot have a voice on “scholarly” and “scientific” matters.

My friend’s family died along with the Jewish family that hid in their one-room house in a village when a grenade was thrown inside by a German soldier. The mixed remains of Polish-Jewish bodies were buried in a single grave. No one has ever “investigated” these historical events: the (aged) witnesses still alive today cannot even imagine that someone writes books about such stories. These events are part of their own lives—and theirs alone. Is there any place for such a memory within the only true, objective history?

JAN P. HUDZIK

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
February 26, 2021