



A STATUE in Warsaw. 'Any controversial aspects of a nation's history must be discussed openly and dispassionately,' writes the author. (Reuters)

The politics of memory: Poland and beyond

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

• By TOMASZ TADEUSZ KONCEWICZ

With the judiciary and public media in Poland captured, the time has now come to implement a "politics of memory," with one sanctioned vision of history, and capture the hearts and minds of the Poles. The most recent and dangerous installment of this politics of memory is the attempt to criminalize the public and erroneous assignment of blame to the Polish nation for crimes committed by the Third Reich.

Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, the most dangerous man in a government full of dangerous men, presented his rationale for this legislation as follows: "[...] the Polish government took an important step in the direction of creating stronger legal instruments allowing us to defend our rights, defend the historical truth, and defend Poland's good name everywhere in the world."

He alluded to the notorious "Polish death camps" designation occasionally appearing in the foreign media, and potentially suggesting co-responsibility on the part of the Poles for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany. He vowed to prosecute all those who defame Poland or the Polish nation. Already in its draft stage the legislation has sparked a furor regarding its scope and the severity of its sanctions (up to three years of imprisonment), and has been criticized as a "blunt instrument" (US president Barack Obama's unfortunate remarks in 2012 would be covered by this law), as another example of the nationalist revival in Poland and the return of revisionist history. Critics have also pointed out the possible dangers of limiting free speech and research and of building the martyrological narrative that the world does not understand how much Poland and Poles have suffered.

While this all true and cause for concern, there are important general lessons to be learned from this foray into the past. Polish leaders are currently in the business of no-holds-barred war on memory. The objective is to craft a one-dimensional explanation of where "we, the people" come from and what makes up our national identity, with anything else being a "mis-memory."

While mis-memory manifests in many places and under many guises, it has one unifying premise: denouncing the "Round Table Talks" in 1989 and the peaceful transition of power that ensued as a rotten compromise struck by Lech Wałęsa (now seen a traitor and secret collaborator with the communists), and his Solidarność (Solidarity) labor union with the outgoing communist regime as a means of keeping the old elites alive.

This war is vindictive: the Poles are entitled to greater respect and recognition for their significant suffering in the past, and Poland must be compensated for all the injustices it suffered at the hands of the "dark" foreign powers.

The historical debate and our collective memory become tainted by an imbalance, as certain elements are celebrated, while others that do not fit the overarching

narrative are relegated to the margins of public discourse, castigated, and now penalized. Anyone who counters the dominant understanding of our past is characterized as a liar and ostracized. Passing the new law will help this crusade progress even faster and in a more disciplined way.

CONTROVERSIAL ASPECTS of a nation's history must be discussed openly and dispassionately. Reopening historical debates to probe less known or potentially controversial aspects of our history should form an important part of our common effort to unearth past, present and future.

Seeking historical truth does not equate to finding it. Sometimes the process itself is gratifying, even if a final result is unattainable. This is the price for maintaining an overlapping consensus and living in a divided society with competing visions of our history. Every voice is important as long as it adds to the ongoing debate.

Nobody should be excluded, much less penalized, for taking part in the exchange of views about history, regardless of whether such views go against the mainstream (and often momentary) narrative, which is often rather more about politics than historical truth.

In trying to understand the current Polish way of remembering history the analysis of British historian Tony Judt can be very instructive. He argues that two kinds of memories emerged from what he calls the "official version of the wartime experience" which became dominant in Europe by 1948. One was that of the things done to "us" by Germans during the war, and the other that of things (however similar) done by "us" to "others" after the war.

This created "Two moral vocabularies, two sorts of reasoning, two different pasts. In this circumstance, the uncomfortably confusing recollection of things done by us to others during the war [...] got conveniently lost."

Crucially, it has built post-war national mythology around "examples and stories which were repeated and magnified, ad nauseam, in novels, popular histories, radio, newspapers, and especially cinema." Crucially, this mythology took on special importance in Eastern Europe. Judt rightly points out the communists' interest in "flattering the recalcitrant local population by inviting it to believe the fabrication now deployed on its behalf by the USSR - to wit, that central and eastern Europe was an innocent victim of German assault, had played no part in its own downfall or in the crimes perpetrated on its territory, and was a full partner in the work of liberation led by Soviet soldiers abroad and communist partisans at home."

With the new legislation, the signal is being sent that far from being internalized, the lessons of history are selectively instrumentalized to serve the new political masters' vision.

The same admonition applies to confronting one's past and building a memory that captures the entirety of the historical baggage. Only then will Poles be able to remember honestly and move forward. By revealing the

past, we discover the present, and most importantly, build the future in keeping with the constitutional fidelity that binds us across generations.

American constitutional scholars J. Balkin and R. Siegel explain: "we turn to the past not because the past contains within it all of the answers to our questions, but because it is the repository of our common struggles and common commitments; it offers us invaluable resources as we debate the most important questions of political life, which cannot fully and finally be settled."

ALL THIS must not be read as belittling the suffering of the Polish people and the heroism of Polish Righteous among the Nations, or questioning Poland's resistance in the face of the atrocities of Nazi occupation. Nobody denies that. My point is different.

The unimaginable destruction of life - physical, spiritual and cultural - wrought on us would have been more than enough to wipe out entire nations less strong than the Poles. We survived because history was always a repository on which to build a new order and rebuild life. We relied on our accumulated constitutional fidelity and moved forward. We remembered both the good and the bad, and what saved us and our way of life. Therefore, my argument against an imposed understanding of history favors an inclusive historical memory that brings together and exposes all national experiences and narratives.

Building a historical debate calls for never-ending "pacting" among the past, present and future. Such pacting would move us away from what J. Connelly called "a historiography obsessed with minutiae and overgrown with easy assumptions about martyrology" and push toward a more critical reading of the where we come from.

A nation that is not ready to embark on a comprehensive journey into its past is impoverished and unable to move forward with true understanding of who "we" really are. When grand gestures dominate and less spectacular soul-searching is lacking, nations become captives of the past rather than its masters. It is here that Polish debate over "what really happened?" must be ongoing, and is far from over.

It must be subject to the most critical and demanding inquiry and exchanges. Imposing sanctions for statements that go against the grain of the mainstream understanding would clearly inhibit the free flow of views and lead to a "one and only" vision of the past. The debate will become flattened and ultimately stifled, as prospective participants who hold different views will be discouraged - and even excluded - from joining the discussion.

The media will think twice before stirring up a new controversy, even if it was viewed as justified by public interest. Consequently, public discussion will become predictable and one-sided, always sitting well within the expectations of the regime and its historical policy.

The last thing Poland needs today is the spreading of an all too easy "culture of treason," (abusing its own

vision of the past as a weapon with which to fight political adversaries and dividing Poles into "better" and "worse" sorts, imposing one historical orthodoxy on society and enforcing it through criminal law, all as part of the wicked politics of resentment and mis-memory.

Historical debate should strive for pragmatic recognition that our constitutional allegiances are shaped, reshaped and re-examined as we move forward. There is no place for fear of failure, because failure is part of the fidelity we owe to ourselves. American constitutional scholars J. Balkin and R. Siegel explain: "we turn to the past not because the past contains within it all of the answers to our questions, but because it is the repository of our common struggles and common commitments; it offers us invaluable resources as we debate the most important questions of political life, which cannot fully and finally be settled." The past must be the key to the future, but not only. By revealing the past, we discover the present, and most importantly, build the future in keeping with the constitutional fidelity that binds us across generations. Confronting one's past and building a memory must capture the entirety of the historical baggage. Only then will Poles be able to remember honestly and move forward.

Memory properly understood should challenge dominant accounts of history. It might be used to disguise and cover up, or to liberate and reveal. What matters, though, is that no single overarching master narrative exists, and that disagreement is part and parcel of many "contested paths." True historical debate must resemble democracy, where all voices are heard. As the majority must not oppress the minority, dominant historic narratives cannot exclude less popular views of historical events.

Unfortunately, in Poland the past continues to be seen as a collection of indisputable truths, not open to divergent interpretations and historical debate. This paranoid politics has already destroyed judicial review, the courts and the free media. It now sets its sights on historical memory. Politics of mis-memory poses the existential danger that Polish history may become an uncontested sphere, dominated by a truth superimposed from above, a truly foreign country with the power of story-telling available only to the "lucky few."

While captured institutions may be rebuilt, it will take generations to free captive minds and souls. As "we Poles" are imperfect, beautiful, impulsive, contradictory, all this and more, the historical narrative must be allowed to reflect and bring to light the diversity of not only our great moments, but also imperfections, frailties and dark sides. After all, this is my, your and our history. These are my, your and our myths and stories. Not theirs.

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