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POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw

Ad 1. Historians, including many of those mentioned in the introduction to this questionnaire, played a large role in undermining the legitimacy of the Polish People's Republic. From the late 1970s, attempts were made to describe the 'blank spots' in the official account of the recent past — the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the Katyń massacre, the nature of the regime that Bierut established, electoral falsification, legal abuses and judicial murders in the PRL and the development of opposition to the regime. At the same time there appeared in the underground press discussions of sensitive aspects of the country's history in relation to its national minorities, such as the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 and Operation 'Wisła', during which nearly 150,000 Ukrainians were 'resettled' after the war from south-eastern Poland in the territories newly acquired from Germany. Since the negotiated end of communism in 1989, research has continued in both these areas, stimulated by the abolition of censorship and the opening of the archives. Research on the history of the period between 1944 and 1989 has centred on a number of issues — how communist power was established, how far was the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) a sovereign state, can its political system fairly be described as 'totalitarian' and how far are the claims of the communist rulers to have achieved a major economic and social transformation of Poland justified? Linked with all these questions is the issue of periodisation — can the history of the PRL be treated as one entity or did the political changes of 1956 result in a qualitative change in the political system? A great deal also has been written on different aspects of the Church's experience under the Communists. In addition, there has been argument over the agreements which led to the negotiated end of the communist system in 1989 — how far should these be seen as a necessary and legitimate compromise and how far were they the result of the willingness of the more liberal wing of the Polish opposition to make unnecessary concessions to the communists. Although there have been significant disagreements, as is inevitable, about all these controversial issues, a degree

of scholarly consensus does seem to be emerging on the experience of the Poles under the communist system. What is still in dispute are points of detail as well as the moral assessment of participation in the system.

It has been much harder to reach consensus on the disputed topics of Polish-Jewish and Polish-Ukrainian relations. Since 1989, great deal of valuable research has been done on different aspects of the history of the Jews in the Polish lands. Among the topics which have been addressed are the successes and failures of Jewish integration, the history of Jewish women, Yiddish literature in Poland, the contribution of people of Jewish origin to Polish literature, Jews in Polish theatre, cabaret and musical life, Judaism both in its Orthodox and progressive forms, the origins and character of antisemitism in the Polish lands and the history of Zionism and of Jewish socialism. This research has contributed greatly to our understanding of the history of the Jews in the Polish lands and has led to a degree of consensus on the main issues it raises.

The history of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War and of the attitude of Polish society to the mass murder of Polish Jews carried out by the Germans on Polish soil remain disputed. The publication in 2000 of Jan Gross's *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny 2000) led to a wide-ranging discussion of the anti-Jewish violence which followed the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, which was incited by the Germans but in which local populations also participated. This occurred in all the areas annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1940 (eastern Poland, western Belarus and Ukraine, the Baltic States, Bessarabia). The debate it provoked in Poland has been the most serious, protracted, and profound on the issue of Polish-Jewish relations since the end of the war. Still disputed are the involvement of people of Jewish origin in the Soviet administration established in these areas, how actively the Germans participated in the killing and the extent of Polish involvement. This is a debate in which not only Poles but also the other national groups in the area and also scholars, often of Jewish origin, in the west have participated and it therefore calls out for comparative analysis. As is often the case with controversies of this type, the exchanges have been very bitter and have also been politicized. At the same time, I regard the debate as very necessary and hope that it can be continued in a collegial manner. Gross's work has stimulated a new school of Holocaust historians in Poland at the Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów (Centre for Studies of the Jewish Holocaust) in Warsaw, who have concentrated on the final stage of the Holocaust in Poland that took place after the liquidation of the ghettos in the large towns. In the smaller towns of Poland, the ghettos were more porous and many

Jews were able to escape — their number is disputed and ranges from 50,000 to 200,000. However, Polish-Jewish relations in these towns had been more distant before the war. The Jews who sought shelter among the local population often did not find it and many did not survive to the end of the war, as they were hunted down by the German occupying authorities with the assistance of the German-controlled Polish Police and, in some well-documented cases, murdered by underground units or betrayed by the local population. Linked with this issue is the larger question of the degree of collaboration of the German controlled local authorities and Polish police in the mass murder of the Jews as well as the issue of blackmailers (*szmalcownicy*) who blackmailed and sometimes denounced Jews in hiding. There has also been considerable debate on the evaluation of the number and motivation of those Poles who risked their lives to rescue Jews, which in the Polish lands carried the death penalty. All these are controversial matters, but what is encouraging is the degree to which the new research is archivally based and makes use in a sophisticated manner of eye-witness accounts. Statistical analysis is also important, since one of the key issues is the scale of all these phenomena. Certainly, the goal of all those involved in these discussions should be to replace assertions and apologetics by careful and detailed research and reliable and nuanced first-hand testimony.

The investigation of the Polish-Ukrainian past has also made progress, but this has been limited by the strength of national resentments on both sides of the San river and by the use of legislation in Ukraine to protect the reputation of the Ukrainian Partisan Army (UPA). As in the case of Polish-Jewish relations, it is the period between 1939 and 1947, which is the most acrimoniously contested. New research has concentrated both on the origin, duration and number of casualties of the murderous anti-Polish campaign initiated by the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA in Volynia in 1943 and the character of operation 'Wisła'. Polish historians have attempted to provide both long-term and short-term explanations for these events. Among the more remote causes, they stress the overpopulation and backwardness of the territories disputed by Poles and Ukrainians and the long duration of the conflict. They emphasise such events as Polish-Ukrainian War over East Galicia in 1918–1919 and the fact that a significant part of Ukrainian society saw Polish rule in the interwar period as a foreign occupation. They also examine the negative consequences of Polish rule, including the liquidation of the bilingual school system in former East Galicia, the 'pacification' of 1930 and the destruction of Orthodox Churches in the late 1930s. The struggle against the local Polish administration

led to a radicalisation of a section of the Ukrainian political elite and the acceptance of terrorism as a legitimate means in political struggle.

The immediate context of the massacres is the Soviet and Nazi occupation of these areas after the defeat of Poland in 1939. Soviet deportations in 1940 and 1941 demonstrated that it was possible to 'solve' problems by simply removing entire social groups. At the time, Polish and Ukrainian elites were decimated, and younger and more radical elements came to the fore. The massacres, which began in March and April 1943, have been seen as part of a strategy initiated by the more radical wing of the OUN (OUN-B), which established the UPA as a partisan formation in April 1943, but differ as to the factors which led to its adoption. Some stress the context of the weakening of Nazi control and the fear of the return of the Soviets as a pretext for 'cleansing' the area of non-Ukrainian elements, which had been OUN (B) policy since May 1941. Others have argued that the key factor was the defection of large numbers of Ukrainians from the German-controlled police force, many of whom had already participated in the murder of Jews and which meant that there were now many fighters in the underground, which probably numbered nearly twenty thousand. They were too weak to challenge the Germans and the local Poles thus became an easy target. In all, perhaps 50,000 Poles perished in Volynia and another 20,000 in East Galicia. Over 10,000 Ukrainians lost their lives in Polish self-defence and reprisal actions, some of the most brutal conducted by Poles in the German-organised police. These issues have been bitterly disputed in Poland and have also led to polemics with Ukrainian historians. However, in spite of the acrimonious character of these discussions they are, in my view, an essential part in the process of 'normalizing' the discussion of the past in Poland. The same could be said of the similar debates on Polish-German, Polish-Lithuanian and even Polish-Russian relations. In relation to this last we seem, however, to be very far from reaching a consensus.

Ad 2. I should like research to continue in the areas I have outlined above. What we need is a Polish-Polish dialogue in which the disputed issues would be discussed in a collegial manner. We are talking here about the past, which cannot be changed but only understood and accepted. The less the government is involved in this process the better.

While a great deal of research had been done on these topics, it seems to me that the period from 1890 to 1939 has been much more neglected. The archives for this period were accessible during the PRL and the degree of censorship was much less than that for works on the Second World War and the post-war period. As a consequence a great

deal was written on this period during the PRL, although its quality is uneven. This seems to have discouraged new research. Thus, although there has been a certain amount of investigation of Polish foreign policy in the interwar years, there is still much to be written on the emergence in the 1890s of the political groupings which dominated Polish political life until 1945, on the way the 'Polish Question' developed during the First World War, on the reasons for the breakdown of democratic rule in the 1920s and on the character of the Piłsudski regime and of its successors after 1935.

Ad 3. Obviously there are valid reasons for holding different views about key events in the past. What is most important is there should be mutual respect and a willingness to understand opposing views. The writing of history seems to oscillate between periods in which detailed research is done on specific topics and periods in which attempts are made to synthesise this research. There is a very strong need for a synthetic account of Poland during the Second World War and, more specifically under German occupation. It is striking that with the exception of Dariusz Libionka's more limited *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie. Zarys problematyki* (Lublin, 2017), a major synthesis of the type produced by Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce* (Warsaw, 1970) has not been produced.

Ad 4. The study of the past still seems to play a central role in Polish national consciousness. This is in spite of the weakening of the interest in history in Poland under the impact of the need for national consolidation, of globalisation and of the post-modernist concept that history is merely an ideological construct and that each different version of it serves the needs of the individual or group who uses it to tell their own 'story'. Linked with this is the idea that historical study devotes excessive attention to national suffering and trauma — that history is, in the words of Stephen Dedalus, the hero of James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake". In 1949 Władysław Konopczyński observed that history is the "mainstay of [our] national existence", a view seconded in 2004 by Andrzej Paczkowski claiming that "[t]here is a universal conviction that Poles have a special attachment to the past — something which distinguishes them — and that nowhere do 'coffins rule' more than in Poland". In that same article, Paczkowski observed that one of "the most significant phenomenon of the last fifteen years has been the emergence, concretization (also in political life) of competing positions in the sphere of memory and in relation to the national past". This is even more the situation today. These divisions, which are clearly linked to arguments over

the totalitarian experience of Poland, reflect different visions of society. One sees society as made up of different and often competing groups in which understandings of the past may differ and in which a reckoning with the negative aspects of the national history is necessary for building a pluralistic, outward looking and tolerant polity. It sees the nation as something which emerged in particular circumstances and whose identity can change over time. It draws on the criticism of the 'romantic-heroic' view of the Polish past that was provoked by the catastrophic failure of the 1830 and 1863 uprisings and rejects the view of Poland as 'hero and martyr of the nations'. The other view is centered on the nation and the community which it creates, which is seen as primordial, transcending the transient individuals of which it is made up. It strongly supports patriotism and sees its opponents as having succumbed to the lures of cosmopolitanism. It particularly values the concept of a Polish struggle 'for your and our freedom' with its determination to continue this fight against seemingly invincible enemies which it sees as a major factor in the survival of Poland as a nation. As Brian Porter-Szűcs has argued, for those who hold this view, history is "the biography of the national community and the source of the traditions and values that hold everything together". In 2016, the Institute for National Remembrance defined the goal of historical study as follows:

Historical policy refers to the interpretation of facts, lives, and events and is assessed according to the interests of the society and the nation, as an element that has a long-range character and constitutes the foundation of state policies. Historical policy is a type of history that serves to shape the historical consciousness of society, including economic and territorial consciousness, as well as to strengthen public discourse about the past in the direction of nurturing national bonds regardless of the momentary policies of the state.

The issue here is not historical truth as such; instead, history is important because it is the 'long-range... foundation of state policies'. It is those stories that a community tells and retells in order to establish a bond between generations and to teach young people what 'we' believe. This is why historians who take a more critical stance are seen as undermining national identity. This is not only a Polish phenomenon. Official custodians of memory in Lithuania and Ukraine, such as the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania and the Centre for Research on the Liberation Movement in Ukraine are also committed to this concept of history and enjoy some support from their respective

governments. The same process can be observed in Belarus, although it is less pronounced and often takes a neo-Soviet form. In Germany, the more liberal concept of historical scholarship does seem to prevail, but is also under fire. We have seen in recent months how the Russian government has attempted to advance its interests through the use of a falsified patriotic history.

There is considerable common ground between these two understandings of how history should be written, and it is important not to demonize the historians of whom one disapproves. There is a role both for a patriotic history which celebrates the achievements of the nation and for one which also points out the mistakes and wrongdoings committed in the past. It was the English historian Edward Gibbon who wrote "History... is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind". In dealing with the difficult problems of the past, we need to base our work on the careful use of primary material. Governments should understand that these are complex issues. Although official support for historical study is to be welcomed, this is best carried out in universities and academic research bodies, independent of direct state intervention. Just as truth is the first casualty in war, so complexity is the first casualty in historical wars.

We also need find ways of reaching a wider, transnational audience. In this context, it is important to stress that there are many scholars outside Poland dealing with these issues. Our collective enterprise will show how similar situations gave rise to similar reactions and that the issue is not one of a unique 'national guilt'. Our goal should be to encourage scholarship based on a wide range of sources, from a variety of points of view and in different locations which will ultimately make possible a degree of normalization both in the attitudes of Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians to the now disputed past and to their mutual relations and those with their Jewish neighbours and citizens.