

Dealing with the Past: Aspects of Trauma and Healing

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Why Lessons Learned should not be Unlearned

Polish journalists were among the first foreigners who visited the site of the S-21 prison and extermination centre in Phnom Penh in 1979. For many Polish observers the history of the Cambodian genocide unavoidably provokes associations with the history of the German Nazi occupation and genocide (Holocaust) committed during World War II. One of the most wide-ranging and thorough debates on difficult elements of the wartime past – but also on the more general themes of antisemitism, xenophobia and violence in Polish history and collective psyche – followed the publication of Jan Gross's groundbreaking book, 'The Neighbours' (in Polish in 2000, in English in 2001), about the 1941 pogrom of Jedwabne committed by Polish Catholics against their Jewish neighbours. The soul-searching debate led to an official apology to the Jewish people by Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski. Poland could be seen as having made significant progress in dealing with the past and confronting the sometimes-inconvenient truths: a sign of a mature democracy. However, the case of Poland also illustrates the lessons learned can sometimes be 'unlearned' if political circumstances change.

The political conflict over rival visions of history intensified when a new law criminalizing the expression of certain historical views was enacted by the Polish parliament on the eve of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day (the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp) in January 2018. The law was ostensibly meant to ban usage of the historically inaccurate term 'Polish death camps', but its wording was much broader: 'whoever accuses, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich (...) or other crimes against peace and humanity, or war crimes (...) shall be subject to a fine or a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years.' The phrasing was prone to widely differing interpretations and critics of the legislation pointed out it could seriously limit critical discussion of the less positive aspects of Polish historical record, even though the law included an exemption for undefined 'academic' and 'artistic' activities. Another part of the law specifically condemned the crimes against Poles committed by Ukrainian nationalists.

The massive controversy which erupted upon the bill's passage not only led to a major international crisis, complete with high level protests by representatives of Israel, Ukraine, and the United States, but it also resulted in an unprecedented wave of nationalist, mainly anti-Jewish, sentiment in Polish media and politics on a scale unheard of since the state-sponsored antisemitic campaign of 1968. Outright Holocaust denial has been rare in Poland but denying the facts of Polish participation in wartime and postwar pogroms against Jews (in Jedwabne, Kielce and other sites) has become commonplace. The problematic law was partly revoked in June 2018, but the political controversy continued. The surge in antisemitism is expected to have long-term social repercussions, even if some of its more extreme public manifestations can be stopped. Unfortunately, the phenomenon coincides with a broader crisis of democratic and humanist values both in Poland and in many other countries.