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The Holocaust in Poland and Genocide in Asia: Does the Tragic Past Bring Us Closer?

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Abstract

The proposed paper centres on certain issues around European and Asian genocide analogies in the context of comparative Holocaust and genocide studies.

The lack of the experience of overseas colonization has often been mentioned as a factor that strongly distinguished Polish history and identity from its Western European counterparts. In consequence, many Poles, reflecting upon their history, tend to identify with the colonized rather than with the colonizer. On the other hand, it has been argued that their detachment from the colonization process has often 'absolved' the Poles from their share of 'European guilt' and thereby less inclined to sympathize with the suffering of the 'Third World'. At least one of the tragic pages in its history – World War II and the Holocaust committed by the Nazis and their collaborators – has put Poland firmly at the centre of the universal human narrative. Being the site of one of the world's biggest crimes, a paradigmatic instance of genocide, is arguably one of the biggest scars and challenges of Poland's relationship with its past (and with the world), one that is charged with the risk of rejecting the complexity and enormity of the tragedy in the name of a narrow-minded ethno-nationalist eulogy of one's own martyrdom.

The same tragic experience, however, provides an opportunity for Polish self-awareness in terms of connecting with humanity's most profound, existential issues.

A number of very early entries written by Polish visitors to the Tuol Sleng extermination centre in 1979 have recently been uncovered and deciphered by this author in cooperation with Cambodian and Australian scholars. The entries expressed horror at the atrocities committed by Pol Pot's dictatorship, and also expressed empathy with the Cambodian people as the victims as well as including references to the Nazi genocide committed on Polish soil by Hitler's occupation regime during World War II. The parallels between Cambodian suffering under the Khmer Rouge and the Nazi crimes in Poland were also reflected by several Polish authors who visited Cambodia in 1979, and published their accounts in book form (Domaranski, Gornicki, Warnenska). The S-21 entries and the above mentioned books pose a set of questions which are still relevant in the Southeast Asian, East European, and universal contexts: can the Khmer Rouge and Nazi dictatorships be justifiably compared without trivialising the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust and other genocides? Are there parallels between the predicament of the victims of the Nazis and the victims of the Khmer Rouge? What was the role of ideology in both cases and is the paradigm of totalitarianism adequate? What are the common challenges (as well as differences and risks) in 'dealing with the past'? Can we understand 'the other' by referring to 'the familiar'? Can the legacy of genocide be a tool for constructing solidarity and empathy between Poland, Cambodia, and other Asian nations such as Bangladesh?

Key words

Holocaust, Khmer Rouge, empathy

Author's Bio

Rafal Pankowski is a Professor at the Institute of Sociology of Collegium Civitas in Warsaw. He has published widely on racism, genocide and other issues including the books 'Neo-Fascism in Western Europe: A study in ideology' (Polish Academy of Sciences, 1998), 'Racism and Popular Culture' (Trio, 2006), and 'The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The Patriots' (Routledge, 2010). He is a co-founder of the 'Never Again' Association. He is also a member of the International Association of Genocide Scholars. In 2018 and 2019 he was a visiting lecturer at the Centre for European Studies of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok (Thailand).