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## Historical issues in Polish-Russian relations within the period of 1989 to 2007

Kwestie historyczne w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich w latach 1989-2007

**Abstract:** The article focuses on the issue of the influence of the historical conditions on the Polish-Russian relations at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The history of these two countries is linked by a long-lasting and difficult past, and thus numerous unresolved disputes, burdens, and myths arose that have been felt to this day. In 1989, after the fall of the Communist system in our country, new political elites managing the process of democratic changes in the Third Polish Republic made efforts that aimed at settling disputed threads from the common Polish-Russian history. On the way to making up for the past, the period between 1989 and 2007 was marked by a number of important events that could be seen as the symbol of the common reconciliation. Unfortunately, there were also moments of regression and deep crisis that negatively affected the cooperation of both countries in the matter of dealing with difficult cards of the common history. This was influenced by a different approach to the past that is understood differently in Poland and in Russia and that contributed to the emergence of numerous misunderstandings, as well as to the mutual accusations in this field.

**Keywords:** Polish-Russian relations, historical burdens, national stereotypes

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie wpływu uwarunkowań historycznych na relacje polsko-rosyjskie na przełomie XX i XXI w. Dzieje tych dwóch państw łączy wielowiekowa i trudna przeszłość, w wyniku czego powstały między nimi liczne nierozwiązane do końca spory, obciążenia i mity, dające o sobie znać po dzisiejszy dzień. Po upadku w 1989 r. systemu komunistycznego w naszym kraju nowe elity polityczne, kierując procesem przemian demokratycznych w III RP, podjęły starania zmierzające do rozliczenia spornych wątków ze wspólnej polsko-rosyjskiej historii. Na tej drodze wyrównywania dawnych zaszciości lata 1989-2007 obfitowały w ważne wydarzenia, mogące stanowić symbol wspólnego pojednania. Niestety zdarzały się również momenty regresu i głębokiego kryzysu, rzutujące negatywnie na współpracę

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obu krajów w kwestii rozliczania trudnych kart historii. Wpływ na to miało odmienne podejście do przeszłości, inaczej rozumianej w Polsce i Rosji, co przyczyniło się do powstania na tym polu licznych nieporozumień i wzajemnych oskarżeń.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stosunki polsko-rosyjskie, obciążenia historyczne, stereotypy narodowe

## Introduction

The current relations between Poland and Russia are strongly influenced by the historical background. Viewing Russia through the prism of history has become one of the most characteristic features of Polish foreign policy since 1989. The historical experience of Poles has significantly influenced and continues to influence the understanding of Polish national interests towards Russia, which is reflected in the concepts, programmes, and strategies of our eastern policy formulated by successive governmental teams of the Third Republic of Poland. The martyrological threads related to the history of mutual relations between the two nations, which are quite firmly rooted in the collective memory of a considerable part of the Polish society, have developed in the consciousness of many people an image of Russia and its inhabitants as a country that is unfriendly or even hostile to the Polish state. In turn, among a large number of citizens of the Russian Federation, Poland was perceived as an example of a disloyal country. It was an example of a country that betrayed its Slavic heritage by deciding to be baptised by Rome instead of Byzantium, thus joining the circle of Western culture and adopting values different from those close to Russians already in the past. Another important element must be added to these mutual implications – Poland's and Russia's radically different interpretations of historical events and processes, particularly in relation to the twentieth century.

This article attempts to assess the impact of historical conditions on Polish-Russian relations in the period 1989-2007, examining the actions of the Polish state in relation to Russia in matters of historical memory (filling in the blank spots in our common history), as well as the policy of the Kremlin authorities on the steps initiated in this regard. It is also important to show the role that historical burdens have played in the development of bilateral relations. The research questions identified here are designed to specify, first, what past experiences Polish diplomacy has drawn upon in mutual relations; second,

to what extent the Russian side was interested in explaining them and how these issues affected the mutual perception of the two nations. In order to properly address this issue, the research used mainly the method of historical and systemic analysis, as well as the institutional-legal method. In order to ensure an effective solution to the research problem and to obtain answers to the research questions posed, the structure of the work was shaped by the chronological and problematic system, which allowed for a fairly accurate presentation and discussion of this phenomenon. The analysis of the article shows that history has been, and still is, one of the biggest problems negatively influencing bilateral relations. Such relations are influenced by the fact that the history of mutual contacts so far is mainly the history of conflicts taking place not only in the territorial, but also cultural or political dimension. The relations with no other country were perceived by Poles to such an extent through the prism of history as with Russia. The stigma of the partitions, the Second World War, and the forced “communisation” have formed in the consciousness of the citizens of our country an emotional image of the Russians as the perpetrators of all evil in Polish politics. In the Russian society, too, there is an opinion that the uneasy relations between our countries are mainly the result of historical background.

## **1. On the way to reconciliation**

The collapse of the communist regime in Poland, which began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, initiated a profound change in the political system in our country. During the transformation taking place at that time, the then political elites, guiding the process of democratic changes in our country, undertook to gradually eliminate the existing ties of former dependence on our eastern neighbour. Importantly, these actions were accompanied by demands to settle accounts with the tragic past. As Tadeusz Mazowiecki stated in his exposé: “My government wants to establish alliance relations with the Soviet Union according to the principle of equality and respect for sovereignty. Our alliance will stand on a firm foundation if society ratifies it. Today there are favourable conditions for this. It will also open the way to reconciliation between our peoples, which will put an end to the bad experiences of the past and may have a far-reaching historical

dimension”<sup>1</sup>. The key issue for the first non-communist Polish prime minister in the discussion of historical issues became the question of Katyn. Significant progress in this area was made by the Polish side at the end of 1989 when, during the trip of the head of the Council of Ministers to Moscow, the USSR authorities gave their official consent to the visit of the Polish delegation to Katyn. Although the visit of the Polish Prime Minister did not lead to a breakthrough, as A. Dudek rightly noticed, it was a prelude to the official acceptance of responsibility for the crime committed on Polish officers by the Soviet authorities<sup>2</sup>. This happened on 13 April 1990, when the president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, handed over to Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was on a ceremonial visit in Moscow, copies of documents testifying to the real authors of the massacre of 1940. However, among the materials donated, those that the authorities of our country cared about the most, direct orders to exterminate Polish officers, were missing.

Moscow’s admission that the Katyn massacre was committed by the NKWD was meant to show that the Kremlin was willing and able to clarify the difficult blank spots in the history of Polish-Russian relations. These symbolic gestures made by the head of state of the USSR concerning the 1940 Soviet crime raised hopes for further deepening of the dialogue on historical matters. In Poland, this was seen as the beginning of a common reckoning with the tragic past of both nations and, at the same time, as the first momentous step on the way to mutual understanding and reconciliation. Also, the leaders of the Soviet Union, seeing that, following the glasnost and perestroika initiated in that country, it was no longer possible to block or administratively impede the growing demand for true history, increasingly perceived the necessity for their country to confront its totalitarian past. However, fearing that the official confirmation of Soviet crimes against Polish officers could contribute to the creation of the image of the USSR in the world as a criminal state and also for political purposes (among others neutralization of possible Polish claims), Gorbachev found it necessary to find some “equivalent” for this deed. The consequence of

1 *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 7 posiedzenia Sejmu Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w dniu 12 września 1989 r.*, Warszawa 1989, p. 20.

2 A. Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989-2005*, Kraków 2007, p. 61.

this was the creation of the so-called “anti-Katyn”, creating a specific fact from the history of mutual relations, where the wronged party would be the Russian state. Such an event was to be the fate of the Red Army soldiers taken prisoner in 1920 who were alleged to be premeditatedly murdered in Polish prisoner-of-war camps<sup>3</sup>. The anti-Katyn issue soon became an important element of the political game with Warsaw, used by the Kremlin to justify and relativize Soviet crimes. It also had the effect of gradually straining relations between the two countries through a different interpretation of history.

Parallel to these events, Polish law enforcement agencies also took action to establish the circumstances of the Katyn massacre for the first time. In October 1989, the general prosecutor of the Polish People’s Republic sent a request to his Soviet counterpart to open an investigation into the Polish officers murdered in Katyn, Miednoje, and nearby Kharkov. Significantly, he also requested the rehabilitation of 16 leaders of the Polish Underground State kidnapped and tried by the Stalinist authorities in 1945. Initially, the response from Moscow on the subject of the Katyn massacre was negative, but as the matter began to be clarified, the Soviet side began investigating the issue a few months later<sup>4</sup>. Another important bilateral success was the disclosure by Moscow in October 1992 of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the new Katyn documents, holding responsible for this crime the leaders of the USSR: Stalin and his comrades from the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. A few days later, the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, gave an interview for Polish television, where he spoke about the “horrible Stalinist crime”, expressing his hope that “it will finally cease to weigh on the bilateral relations between Poland and Russia”. However, he emphasised that “the revived and democratic Russia does not bear responsibility for the crimes of the totalitarian Stalinist regime,” with which the Polish side disagreed<sup>5</sup>. Such a stance, it must be presumed,

3 M. Radziwon, *Polish-Russian Conflicts and Efforts Aimed at Reconciliation*, “Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej” 2018, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 133.

4 W. Materski, *Problem rehabilitacji ofiar zbrodni katyńskiej w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich*, “Nowa Polityka Wschodnia” 2012, no. 1, pp. 39-40.

5 O. Wasiuta, *Stosunki polsko-rosyjskie [in:] Polska wobec sąsiadów. Współczesne stosunki polityczne*, W.T. Modzelewski (ed.), Olsztyn 2009, p. 15.

was dictated primarily by the Kremlin's concern about the potential possibility of Poland suing the European courts with a demand to punish those responsible for this crime and (which could particularly worry Russia) for them to pay monetary compensation to the victims and their families.

Despite some disagreements, discussions were held at the same time on the appropriate commemoration of the victims of the Katyn massacre. From the beginning of this discussion, the dominant view on the Polish side was that, for the sake of national dignity and the dignity of the murdered officers, war cemeteries should be built in their resting places. A slightly different position was presented by the "eastern" partners. They repeatedly stressed the "need" to build common memorials, which, in their opinion, would commemorate all those killed by the NKWD apparatus in this place, arguing, among other things, that the victims cannot be divided after death. Eventually, the Russian side agreed with the Polish position, and in late 1992, joint negotiations were undertaken on concluding an agreement on protecting the graves and burial sites of the victims of war. Finally, two years later, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Russia signed an agreement on the construction of military cemeteries in Katyn and Miednoje<sup>6</sup>.

It should be emphasised here that the explanation of the circumstances of the Katyn massacre and the historical issues it raised became Warsaw's main priority in Polish-Russian political relations. Despite initial successes, however, it soon became apparent that further dialogue on this issue would not be that simple. This was due to the different perceptions of the event by the two nations. According to the Kremlin, neither side had to forgive the other because, firstly, the responsibility for this crime lay with the USSR and the political bureau of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) and not with contemporary Russia. Secondly, the "bill of wrongs" was evenly distributed, because, as a moral counterbalance to the crimes against Polish officers, Moscow raised the issue of the anti-Katyn case created by it – the fate of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner during the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920. Meanwhile, in the consciousness of the vast majority of Poles, the Russian state was perceived as the legal successor of earlier

6 K. Fedorowicz, *Polityka Polski wobec Rosji, Ukrainy i Białorusi w latach 1989-2010*, Poznań 2011, p. 100.

geopolitical bodies, namely the Soviet Union, tsarist Russia, and the statehood that preceded them. Thus, there was no distinction between Russian and Soviet guilt<sup>7</sup>. In Warsaw's view, Russia, as the heir to the Soviet Union, was obliged to take upon itself all the consequences of the Soviet state's historical activity. This divergence of views on the interpretation of the Katyn massacre and, more broadly, on the different perceptions of the history of mutual relations had a tremendously negative impact on further cooperation between the two countries. The Eastern neighbour's lack of determination to clarify quickly all issues concerning the Katyn massacre and the Kremlin's increasingly frequent raising of the anti-Katyn issue in mutual historical accounts began to be perceived by a large part of Polish circles as a signal that the historians' findings which had already been made on this issue were not accepted by some Russian politicians, which generated conflict in mutual relations and affected Polish-Russian cooperation as a whole. In turn, the unyielding and fierce efforts of the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland to fully establish the causes and circumstances of the 1940 Soviet massacre were treated by Moscow as a sign of "Rusophobia" and bad will. The problem of Katyn left a permanent mark on bilateral relations and became one of the most important topics generating serious conflicts in mutual contacts.

The key issue in Poland's relations with its Eastern partner after 1989 was to regulate the mutual neighbourly relationship by a new treaty, which in the contemporary political reality would define the entirety of bilateral relations. One of the most important issues in the mutual relations that required significant resolution was of a historical nature. However, for historical reasons alone, the very title of the proposed document aroused great emotions on both sides. After several months of talks, on 22 May 1992, during the visit of the first president of the Third Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa (who came from the Solidarity camp and had held this position since 1990) to Moscow, a joint agreement was ceremoniously signed<sup>8</sup>. Despite the efforts of

7 M. Filipowicz, *What Kind of History Do We Need? Remarks by a Participant in International Dialog Projects*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2018, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 19-20.

8 S. Weremiuk, *Polska wobec Rosji w latach 1992-2014. Od zależności postimperialnych do trudnych relacji. Analiza wybranych aspektów*, "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego" 2015, vol. 7, no. 13, p. 106.



the Polish authorities, however, it failed to include a provision condemning the Stalinist repressions and compensation for their victims. Especially on this last issue, the Kremlin leaders, as in previous years, refused any talks. Russia's reluctance to include references to difficult issues from the past in the treaty can be explained by a certain attempt to avoid taking moral responsibility for the crimes of the communist system. In the end, as a result of the efforts of Polish diplomacy, the presidents of both countries included a special statement referring to historical issues in the compromise document. It stipulated, among other things: "the parties recognize that the Stalinist regime inflicted enormous suffering and caused irreparable damage to the peoples of Poland and Russia"<sup>9</sup>. This rather restrained approach of the Russian side to historical events showed unequivocally that Moscow desired constructive cooperation with Warsaw, but on the condition that the Polish state did not raise too strongly the issues of settling the past and did not refer to the issues which were too uncomfortable for the Kremlin leaders for political reasons. This was in contradiction to the position and expectations of the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland, who saw in the full explanation of past guilt a chance for common reconciliation and better cooperation between the two countries. Nevertheless, despite these differences, it must be emphasised that the signing of the Polish-Russian treaty created a solid foundation for new relations, which were to be based on mutual respect, partnership, sovereignty and good neighbourliness, according to the hopes of its signatories. This created great hopes for the future for further cooperation and dialogue between the two nations in order to clarify all the blank spots in the history of their mutual relations. An important element of Walesa's visit was also the declaration made by Moscow authorities announcing a wide opening of Russian archives for Polish researchers.

An equally momentous event that evoked these historical issues was the visit of Boris Yeltsin to Poland in August 1993<sup>10</sup>. Yeltsin was the first

9 *Polska – Rosja. Traktat o przyjaznej i dobrosąsiedzkiej współpracy podpisany przez prezydentów Lecha Wałęsę i Borysa Jelcy na dnia 22 maja 1992 roku w Moskwie oraz inne dokumenty*, Warszawa 1992, pp. 27-28.

10 F. Ozbay, B. Aras, *Polish-Russian Relations: History, Geography and Geopolitics*, "East European Quarterly" 2008, vol 42, no. 1, p. 34.



Russian leader to lay a wreath at the Katyn Cross in Warsaw's Powązki cemetery, uttering the memorable words "prostítie" ("forgive")<sup>11</sup>. According to many eyewitnesses, tears supposedly flowed from his eyes that day. Some people interpreted these events as a milestone in Polish-Russian relations. Some compared it to the gesture that German Chancellor Willy Brandt made in front of the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes during his trip to Poland in 1970. A. Wasilenko's opinion is that, despite the breakthrough events that took place at that time, the view still prevailed on the Russian side that Russians, to a much greater extent than Poles, were the victims of the communist regime and therefore did not feel responsible for its crimes<sup>12</sup>. The gesture made by Yeltsin in Warsaw meant for the Kremlin authorities the closing of a certain stage of settling accounts with history. Moscow's leaders were rather reluctant to show repentance both to their own society and their foreign partners, let alone to repeat it. Meanwhile, the Polish side expected further acts of expiation, which had a negative impact on mutual contacts in the following years.

To sum up this first period of Polish-Russian relations after 1989, it should be stated that, as far as historical matters are concerned, despite the complexity of the problem and the frequently emerging differences in the interpretation of certain past events, it was the time when Moscow's representatives showed the greatest kindness and good will in explaining the difficult and tragic threads in the history of the two nations. The condemnation by the Russian state of the crimes of the communist regime, including those against the Polish state and its society, gave a chance for common reconciliation and better cooperation between the two countries. However, it was not long before a clear regression occurred in the matter of balancing historical accounts. This was the result, on the one hand, of Russia's refusal to accept the idea of a common reconciliation proposed by Poland, analogous to the Polish-German reconciliation, which the Kremlin justified by the fact that the Soviet Union and the Third Reich could not be treated in the same category. On the other hand, it was the re-

11 *Jelcyn w Warszawie*, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 25 August 1993.

12 I.A. Wasilenko, "Pieriezagruzka" w *rossijsko-polskich otnoszenijach: na puti k dialogu i soglasiju* [in:] *Na gruzach imperium... W stronę nowego ładu międzynarodowego i społeczno-politycznego w regionie Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, A. Stępień-Kuczyńska, M. Słowikowski (eds.), Łódź 2012, p. 81.

sult of a particular sensitivity to symbolic issues and their excessive valuation on the Polish side, often used by our politicians to stigmatize Russia in the international space, making it difficult to mitigate difficult historical disputes. The divergences that have emerged here have also been influenced by the growing rifts between the two states, which have resulted primarily from their different understanding of European security issues (Moscow's opposition to Poland's aspirations for membership in the North Atlantic Alliance). In addition, there were deepening contradictions in the approach to the shaping of bilateral relations (the Kremlin's aspirations to gradually eliminate the negative consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union and to create such forms of cooperation with former satellites of the USSR in Central-Eastern Europe which would allow it to retain its former strong position there)<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Cold indifference

This cooling of Polish-Russian relations could not be halted even by the coming to power in September 1993 of the centre-left parties (the Democratic Left Alliance and the Polish Peasant Party), which tried to improve relations with our eastern neighbour. Although, in his exposé, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the then government, Andrzej Olechowski, announced that "relations with Russia will be crucial importance to the new cabinet"<sup>14</sup>, but in the following months the mutual atmosphere between the countries deteriorated further. A significant role (of course, a negative one) was also played here by the historical background. The first serious manifestation of the escalating conflict in this field was Yeltsin's absence at the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising on 1 August 1994<sup>15</sup>. It can be assumed that this absence was due to the fact that Moscow did not intend to apologize for the inactivity of the Red Army, whose help the

13 J. Wiatr, *Europa pokomunistyczna, przemiany państw i społeczeństw po 1989 roku*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 349-356.

14 R. Stemplowski, *Wprowadzenie do analizy polityki zagranicznej RP Tom II. Aneksy*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 313-327.

15 S. Gregorowicz, *Polska w polityce Federacji Rosyjskiej w epoce Jelcyna i Putina*, "Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2010, vol. 45, p. 228.

Polish side was counting on, at the time when the Home Army (AK) was fighting militarily in the capital city against the Nazi occupation. Moreover, the participation of the head of the Kremlin in the celebrations right next to the president of Germany would have meant, in a way, charging Russia with the responsibility for the fall of the Uprising. It would somehow equate Russian guilt with German guilt, which probably Yeltsin's administration categorically did not want to accept.

Another evidence of the growing historical disputes was the subsequent absence of the president of the Russian Federation, this time at the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Red Army, which took place in January 1995. The president was represented only by the Chairman of the State Duma, Ivan Rybkin<sup>16</sup>. The low rank of this delegation and the non-participation of the Russian leader was perceived in Poland as a clearly unfriendly political demonstration. In response to these steps President Walesa did not appear in Moscow at the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the victory over fascism in May 1995. According to the Kremlin, such action was a manifestation of anti-Russian attitudes and disrespect for hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers who died during the liberation of Poland. Yeltsin reciprocated for these actions by his absence at the ceremony of laying the foundation stone and the act of erection for the future war cemetery in Katyn in June 1995, which was attended by a large Polish representation headed by President Walesa, Prime Minister Józef Oleksy and the then Speakers of the Sejm and the Senate<sup>17</sup>. Taking into account these hostile gestures by the heads of both states, the fact that the Moscow authorities handed over to the Polish archives in September of that year declassified Soviet military documents containing orders to carry out the aggression against Poland in 1939 can be regarded as a success.

The election of a candidate from the left-wing camp, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, as Head of State of the Third Republic of Poland in the autumn of 1995 might have created some chances for improvement of mutual relations. However, due to the fact that both Kwaśniewski and

16 M. Stolarczyk, *Rosja w polityce zagranicznej Polski w latach 1992-2015*, Katowice 2016, p. 176.

17 A. Grajewski, *Polacy i Rosjanie. Wzajemna percepcja* [in:] *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w relacjach polsko-rosyjskich (1918-2008)*, A.D. Rotfeld, A.W. Torkunow (eds.), Warszawa 2010, p. 955.

the ruling parliamentary coalition originating from the same political scene maintained unchanged Polish foreign policy goals, e. g., joining NATO (contrary to Russia's stance), these hopes remained vague for a long time. This was also reflected in the approach to historical topics. The discrepancies arising in this field were evidenced by the visit to Poland of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Yevgeny Primakov, in March 1996, where, in addition to current issues, the problem of the return of Polish works of art and archival materials seized during World War II was raised. Despite the discussion that took place at that time, no breakthrough was achieved in this matter. A significant positive signal on historical issues was given only by Kwaśniewski's trip to Moscow in April this year and his meeting with Yeltsin, during which the two leaders expressed their will to open Polish cemeteries in Katyn and Miednoye as soon as possible<sup>18</sup>. As a result of this visit, in October 1996 the President of the Russian Federation passed a resolution to allocate sufficient funds for this purpose<sup>19</sup>. The final step for the construction of the necropolis was taken by Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who in the same month signed a decree "On the creation of memorial complexes in places of burial of Soviet and Polish citizens – victims of totalitarian repression in Katyn (Smolensk region) and Mednoye (Tver region)"<sup>20</sup>.

These friendly gestures made by the Kremlin authorities on historical matters were the result of a certain revival which took place at that time in Polish-Russian relations. Their sources should be sought in the evolution of Russian foreign policy. The leaders of this country, despite their continuously negative stance towards Poland's aspirations to join NATO, realised that they were not able to stop this process in any way, which might have inspired them to look for some form of normalisation of the relations with their western neighbour. The election of Kwaśniewski as President of Poland undoubtedly had a significant impact on the change in the situation. Although he firmly emphasised the unchangeability of the Polish policy towards the Western struc-

18 R. Kuźniar, *Droga do Wolności. Polityka zagraniczna III Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 2008, p. 159.

19 S. Domaradzki, *Polityka historyczna w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich po roku 1989*, "Państwo i Społeczeństwo" 2008, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 38.

20 A. Przewoźnik, *Polskie cmentarze wojenne w Katyniu, Miednoje i Charkowie, zamierzenia, projekty, perspektywy realizacyjne*, "Zeszyty Katyńskie" 1997, no. 8, p. 9.

tures (NATO and EU), he also expressed his readiness to improve the relations with Russia and to establish good neighbourly ties, to which Moscow reacted quite favourably.

The warming of mutual contacts did not last long, however. The victory of the Solidarity movement in the parliamentary elections of October 1997 and the formation of the AWS government, the growing political instability in the Russian Federation and the accession negotiations undertaken by Warsaw in order to join the EU left their mark on bilateral relations. This had its repercussions also on historical issues. Despite the expressed declarations of Yeltsin that the creation of Polish cemeteries in Katyn and Miednoye would be quickly settled, the Russian authorities continued to delay issuing the relevant permits for the construction of the necropolises. This topic was raised during his next trip to Russia in June 1998 by Kwaśniewski. After a meeting with the President of the Russian Federation, the leaders of the two countries reiterated their desire to solve the problem quickly, which did not happen until mid-1999<sup>21</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church also joined in building dialogue between the two countries and finding ways of mutual understanding. This was manifested in the words delivered in April 2000 by Archbishop Józef Życiński, who, during a Mass celebrated in Lublin Archicathedral on the 60th anniversary of the murder of Polish officers in Katyn, stressed that the Russian nation could not be blamed for that tragedy and appealed for mutual reconciliation. As he himself pointed out, "Once the Polish bishops took this initiative in their memorable message to the German bishops (...) [t]oday, reconciliation between the Polish and German peoples has become a fact. We must take the next step. We must realize that the average Russian is not responsible for what was an expression of the fratricidal policy of the Communist authorities"<sup>22</sup>. Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek also spoke in a similar tone, declaring: "I would like to say to our neighbours the Russians, so cruelly experienced by Stalinism: we do not blame the entire Russian nation for Katyn"<sup>23</sup>, and Kwasniewski: "It was a crime

21 A. Przewoźnik, *Proces odkrywania prawdy i upamiętnienie ofiar* [in:] *Białe plamy – czarne plamy...*, p. 420.

22 *Nie wińmy za Katyń narodu rosyjskiego*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 10 August 2000.

23 *O Katyniu bez nienawiści. 60. Rocznica zbrodni katyńskiej*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 13 August 2000.

of an inhuman system, for which we cannot and do not want to blame the entire nation. Millions of Russians and other peoples living in the areas of the Soviet Union also became victims of this system"<sup>24</sup>. Unexpectedly, an equally important message came from Vladimir Putin, who was elected head of state of the Russian Federation in early 2000. In a telephone conversation with the President of Poland, he paid tribute to the memory of Polish officers. These important gestures by both sides gave hope for a symbolic closing of the old historical disputes and a joint Polish-Russian reconciliation.

Unfortunately, parallel economic difficulties, a different view of international security, the place of the United States in Europe, the position of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and the path of development of the countries of the former USSR, combined with several incidents that occurred at the time, spoiled the already difficult bilateral relations. Therefore, the opening of Polish war cemeteries in Katyn on 28 July 2000, and Miednoje on 2 September 2000, should be considered a success<sup>25</sup>. For Russia, these events symbolically closed the thorny issue of settling accounts with history. Meanwhile, the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland continued to raise quite significant problems in this field, such as the insufficient efforts of the Russian side to fully explain the 1940 massacre, the issue of compensating the Polish victims of Stalinism, as well as the return of Polish archival and cultural goods which were located in the territory of the USSR in 1939-1945. Additionally, in bilateral relations with the Russian Federation on "historical" issues, significant differences in the interpretation of certain themes have become increasingly frequent, primarily with regard to the 20th century. This state of affairs was significantly influenced by the historical policy initiated by Putin, aimed at developing a "new formula of patriotism" in the Russian nation. It was based on a selective treatment of past events, especially with respect to World War II, which played a key role in Kremlin policy because of the ever-expanding myth of a heroic Soviet Union<sup>26</sup>, a myth

24 *Przepraszam za milczenie o Katyniu*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 14 August 2000.

25 R. Zięba, *Główne problemy w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich*, „Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations” 2018, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 10-11.

26 K. Łazarski, *Recovering Forgotten History: A study case of Politics of Memory in Poland*, „Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej” 2020, vol. 18, no. 3, p. 197.

on which no negative shadow could fall. All this did not augur well for reaching a common understanding and easing historical burdens.

Despite the increasingly evident contradictions in historical matters, the beginning of the 21st century could inspire a certain optimism. The hopes for this were raised by the visit to Poland of the Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in November 2000, during which both sides expressed their will not only to develop their mutual relations in an atmosphere of peace and friendship, but also – as it was emphasised – by drawing lessons from the past, the will to make every effort to discover historical truth<sup>27</sup>. Equally important in establishing a common dialogue was a trip to Moscow in February 2001 by the head of Polish diplomacy, W. Bartoszewski. During this trip, the Polish minister handed over to the Russian side the collection of archival documents concerning Soviet prisoners of war taken in 1920, which was very positively received by the Kremlin authorities<sup>28</sup>. This revival of Polish-Russian contacts that took place at that time was also continued by the new centre-left SLD-PSL government, elected during the autumn elections in 2001, which for a long time tried not to emphasise the difficult historical issues so that it does not adversely affect mutual relations.

The visit to Poland in January 2002 of Putin brought extremely significant echoes in the process of clarifying difficult issues in the history of relations between the two countries. During this trip, the President of Russia paid tribute to the victims of June 1956 in Poznań and, what is significant, laid flowers at the monument to the Polish Underground State. He also handed over to the authorities of the Third Republic of Poland photocopies of documents relating to General Władysław Sikorski. It was also then that a joint decision was made to establish a special Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters, consisting of a team of experts and scientists from both countries, the purpose of which was to deal with, inter alia, historical controversies<sup>29</sup>. This primarily involved the joint clarification of such contentious issues as

27 *Dobra wola obu stron*, „Rzeczpospolita”, 24 November 2000.

28 M. Stolarczyk, *Rosja w polityce zagranicznej Polski w okresie pozimnowojennym (aspekty polityczne)*, „Studia Politicae Universitatis Silesiensis” 2013, vol. 11, p. 54.

29 J. Chucherko, *Znaczenie dla stosunków polsko-rosyjskich Polsko-Rosyjskiej Grupy ds. Trudnych*, „Kra-kowskie Studia Międzynarodowe” 2011, no. 3, pp. 13-14.



the Katyn investigation, as well as issues of compensation for Polish citizens for forced labour in the former USSR and for Poles who were victims of Stalinist repression. These symbolic gestures of the head of the Russian state and the mutual announcement of the creation of an institution aimed at resolving difficult and not fully explained issues of the past created confidence in the achievement of Polish-Russian reconciliation. Although Aleksander Kwaśniewski had already pointed out before his visit that he would not discuss historical issues with the Russian leader, while Putin emphasised that the present and current affairs were more important than apologies and forgiveness<sup>30</sup>, according to most of the media and politicians, the trip was an important point on the way to settling the heavy and painful issues of the past.

### **3. Exacerbation of mutual contradictions**

Unfortunately, in the following years another serious regression took place, caused, on the one hand, by current political events and changes in the geopolitical conditions of Polish-Russian relations, and, on the other hand, by the lack of progress in solving the most urgent problems in the historical field. Contrary to Putin's announcements, the Russian state did not take any steps to compensate the Polish victims of Stalinism. Further deterioration of the situation was caused by the decision of the Supreme Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation made in 2004, which after several years of investigation decided to discontinue the investigation of the Katyn massacre. Russian investigators found no grounds to recognize the 1940 massacre as genocide, qualifying it as an ordinary crime, subject to statute of limitations<sup>31</sup>. In the opinion of many politicians in Poland, such an approach to the murder of Polish citizens by the NKWD was dictated by the political decisions of the Kremlin authorities, who, as part of their historical

30 *Wizyta oficjalna Prezydenta Federacji Rosyjskiej – Konferencja prasowa*, Prezydent.pl, 16 January 2002, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aleksandra-kwasniewskiego/aktualnosci/rok-2002/> [27.11.2020].

31 J. Kurczab, *Zbrodnia katyńska jako ludobójstwo. Próby systematyzacji kwalifikacji prawnokarnej*, "Dzieje Najnowsze" 2017, vol. 49, no. 3, p. 27.

policy, tried to play down the responsibility of their country for various dark sides of the Soviet Union's activities<sup>32</sup>.

The differences of opinion concerning the interpretation of World War II were becoming more and more visible. This was reflected, for example, during the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. Although the Russian leader paid tribute to the veterans of the Home Army in his special words to the soldiers of the Uprising, emphasising their valour and sacrifice, which was warmly received by Warsaw, a letter from the Ambassador of the Russian Federation caused great consternation when he wrote about "mutual cooperation" and "joint military effort" of the Polish underground and the Red Army in fighting the German invaders<sup>33</sup>. Even greater rifts could be observed in connection with the 65th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, celebrated in the same year, which became the subject of polemics between politicians and historians from both sides on the origins of the conflict and the consequences of Soviet-Nazi collusion. The Kremlin leaders began to interpret the unequivocal Polish criticism of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet involvement in the events of September 1939 as a manifestation of, in their view, incomprehensible "Russophobia." At the same time, the Russian media increasingly presented the view that the August alliance between the USSR and the Third Reich was forced by the Munich Agreement and was a necessary move to effectively overcome the threat of the country's isolation. The ensuing attack of the Red Army on the Second Polish Republic was nothing else but a "peace operation" close to contemporary standards, aimed at protecting the Ukrainian and Byelorussian population living in the eastern Polish territories from the German army<sup>34</sup>.

A year later, tensions over historical issues continued, with the Yalta-Potsdam agreements becoming the main point of contention. In connection with the 60th anniversary of the Crimean Conference in

32 *Sprawozdanie stenograficzne z 39. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 7 kwietnia 2017 r.*, Warszawa 2017, p. 359.

33 *Powstańcy warszawscy oburzeni na ambasadora Rosji*, Wirtualna Polska, 27 July 2004, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/powstancy-warszawscy-oburzeni-na-ambasadora-rosji-6031216452863105a> [3.12.2020].

34 *Propaganda historyczna Rosji w latach 2004-2009*, oprac. L. Pietrzak, B. Cichocki, Warszawa 2009, pp. 10-15.

early 2005, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a special statement, in which it was stated that, in Poland and other countries of our region, attempts were being made to “distort” the results of the decisions of the Big Three, while, as the statement proclaimed: “it was at the meeting in February 1945 that the leaders of the main countries of the anti-Hitler coalition reaffirmed their desire for Poland to be strong, free, independent and democratic, and as a result of the Yalta-Potsdam arrangements Poland gained a significant enlargement of territory in the north and west”<sup>35</sup>. This statement, issued shortly before the celebrations of the end of World War II planned in Moscow on 9 May, provoked vivid reactions of the media and publicists in our country. A large part of politicians of the Third Republic of Poland considered these actions as an element of Putin’s policy aimed at imposing the Russian version of those events on the world. Therefore, some of them, especially those from the right-wing opposition parties, strongly objected to the presence of the Polish President at the anniversary celebrations which were to be held in the Russian capital<sup>36</sup>. In their opinion, they were nothing more than a propaganda show by the Kremlin aimed at promoting the Russian version of history. Despite the ongoing discussion on this issue, eventually Kwaśniewski decided to go to Moscow, although, unfortunately, the visit was not without serious problems. The fact that the Head of State of the Republic of Poland was given a seat only in the back row during the celebrations and that, in his speech, the Russian President did not mention the Polish contribution to the military effort of the Allies during World War II, although he did not fail to appreciate the importance of the German and Italian anti-fascists, was considered an insult from the Russian side. Therefore, the anniversary celebrations that took place in Russia were characterized by the vast majority of Polish commentators as insulting and disrespectful to our country<sup>37</sup>.

The Polish-Russian relations, which were in serious crisis due to historical factors, cooled down further when the Law and Justice party came to power in the autumn of 2005 (at the same time, one

35 *Rosyjski MSZ fałszuje historię*, <http://old.pis.org.pl/article.php?id=343> [7.09.2020].

36 *Nie dla uroczystości w Moskwie*, <http://old.pis.org.pl/article.php?id=275> [7.09.2020].

37 G. Zackiewicz, *Moskiewskie obchody 60. rocznicy zakończenia II wojny światowej w świetle polskich komentarzy prasowych z 2005 roku*, “Rocznik Historii Prasy Polskiej” 2019, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 83-95.

of the party's founders, Lech Kaczyński, was elected president of Poland). From the very beginning of its existence, the party emphasised a strong attachment to tradition and the legacy of the Polish nation, setting as one of its main goals an active historical policy on the international arena. In the opinion of Law and Justice politicians it played a particularly important role in the context of relations with the Russian Federation<sup>38</sup>. The leader of this party, Jarosław Kaczyński, believed that in bilateral relations with our eastern neighbour there are serious "historical" differences caused by divergent views, especially on the interpretation of World War II. For this reason, members of this group were of the opinion that a dispute with this country in this area was practically inevitable<sup>39</sup>. In their view, it resulted, on the one hand, from Putin's attempt to defend himself against the "new historical policy" pursued since 2000, which minimized or justified the most difficult moments of Putin's history during World War II and, as a consequence, put a strain on the relations between the two states by a different interpretation of the past. On the other hand, the relations with the Russian Federation for the members of this party were a key factor for the whole Eastern policy. As the leaders of the Law and Justice party declared: "We want Polish-Russian relations to be a lasting element of European stability by basing them on mutual equal respect, truth and openness, observance of the principles of international law, withdrawal from the belief in a special status of one country in relation to the other"<sup>40</sup>. In this context, according to the activists of this group, Poland, which aspires to the role of an ambassador for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in the European Union and at the same time fights for the role of a leader in conducting the EU eastern policy, has a duty on behalf of the other countries of our region to demand historical truth from Russia.

To this end, in April 2005 the leaders of this party and the Lithuanian conservatives signed a joint declaration demanding that the Kremlin reveal the truth about the history of this region in the 20th century

38 R.T. Underwood, *How History Matters: Polish Memory Politics and Policies Toward Russia Since 1989*, Morgantown 2015, p. 6.

39 J. Sanecka, *Polityka historyczna partii Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, założenia i realizacja*, "Athenaeum" 2008, no. 19, p. 63.

40 *Program Prawa i Sprawiedliwości*, Warszawa 2014, p. 157.

and condemn the crimes committed by the Soviet regime during that period. The signatories of the document stressed that they strongly oppose any efforts to falsify the past of this part of Europe and “to distort it for current political purposes.” At the same time, they emphasised that “only the true picture of history and unambiguous condemnation of the evil done will make it possible to appreciate the contribution of millions of citizens of the Soviet Union to the process of liberating Europe from Nazism. The truth will also allow our Russian neighbours to free themselves from the fetters of the imperial myth, which cost the lives of no fewer Russians than the war with Hitler”<sup>41</sup>. This truth was to be the admission that among the aggressors in 1939 there was also the Soviet state, which was the best ally of the Third Reich, while the main determinant of Stalin’s policy was the aggressive partition treaty – the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, never (in their opinion) condemned by the USSR.

Law and Justice politicians repeated in their actions in a uniform and consistent manner that, in the face of attempts by the Kremlin authorities to relativize the past, one should take a clear and firm negative stance. They believed that such an attitude on the part of the Russian Federation proves that the country has not yet come to terms with the true cost of its total legacy. For this reason, the activists of this group considered the protection of “Polish memory” in terms of history to be the main goal of their foreign policy. As they themselves declared, historical truth was and still is the most important value for them, and they demanded the same from Moscow, thus emphasising the axiological dimension of their actions. The resulting harsh narrative combined with the policy of confrontation as a tool for executing historical policy was to show that the Law and Justice party strongly disagrees with Russian views on the past and the way it is used for current political games.

Despite all these divergences, from the moment they took power, Law and Justice politicians emphasised their willingness and readiness to continue the dialogue with their eastern neighbour, thus trying to show that they are not a party of “Russophobes”. For this reason,

41 *PiS i litewscy konserwatyści wspólnie przeciwko fałszowaniu historii*, <http://old.pis.org.pl/article.php?id=257> [12.07.2018].

at the initiative of representatives of this party, the issue of reactivating the activities of the Group for Difficult Matters was raised, which had not shown any activity since the first months of 2005, which was one of the topics of the talks during the visit to our country by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, in 2006. Unfortunately, contrary to the positive sentiments of this trip and the hope for warming mutual contacts, the following months did not lead to a real breakthrough in mutual relations. As M. Lakomy rightly observes, it was influenced by the fact that, despite the friendly declarations of the leaders of both countries expressing their will to “overcome mutual distrust”, no real improvement in bilateral relations was achieved, and none of the issues which had been a source of tension since 2005 and before were resolved<sup>42</sup>. What is more, the relations cooled down again soon afterwards, with new historical problems<sup>43</sup> also contributing to this. The efforts of the Law and Justice leaders to defend historical truth can be regarded as legitimate at this point. However, it must be stated that, in the Polish perception of Russia, excessive sensitivity to historical issues, their overvaluation, as well as repeatedly abusing the memory of tragic episodes and processes did not serve the common reconciliation and settlement with the tragic past.

## Conclusion

History has been, and still is, one of the most important problems in Polish-Russian relations. From the very beginning, contemporary relations between the two countries have been shaped by the overwhelming experience of the history of these two nations. The elucidation of circumstances related to the blank spots in history and the need to settle difficult issues from the past have become key objectives for the Polish political elites of the Third Republic in their relations with the

42 M. Lakomy, *Główne problemy w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich na początku XXI wieku* [in:] *Stosunki Polski z sąsiadami w pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku*, M. Stolarczyk (ed.), Katowice 2011, p. 89.

43 In mid-2007, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage drafted a bill on national memorials, envisaging, among other things, the possibility of removing from public space monuments that would “glorify and commemorate the introduction of Nazi and Communist dictatorships”. According to the Kremlin, these actions opened the way to the dismantling of Soviet monuments in Poland. The Russian authorities threatened that the adoption of such solutions would lead to a serious diplomatic conflict.

eastern neighbour. Analysing Polish-Russian relations since the beginning of the 1990s, it should be stated that, as far as historical issues are concerned, this area has caused constant tensions and problems. This has been influenced by a different approach to the past, understood differently in Poland and Russia, which has contributed to the emergence of numerous misunderstandings and mutual accusations in this field. These serious differences of a “historical” nature caused by divergent views, above all on the interpretation of certain events from World War II, have made it difficult to reach a common consensus and to ease old burdens. The situation further deteriorated at the beginning of the next century. This was a result, on the one hand, of Putin’s “new historical policy” aimed at minimizing or justifying the most difficult moments in his country’s history, especially with regard to the 20th century. On the other hand, despite Moscow’s several significant symbolic gestures towards Poland (including recognition by Yeltsin and subsequent Russian presidents of the Katyn massacre as a crime of the USSR, and the Russian authorities’ consent to the opening of Polish war cemeteries in Katyn and Miednoye in 2000), Warsaw expected further acts of contrition. This was not conducive to easing difficult historical disputes. In this process of settling old historical scores, the years 1989-2007 were full of momentous situations that could serve as symbols of common reconciliation. More and more often, however, there were moments of regression and deep crisis, negatively affecting the cooperation of both countries on the path of settling difficult pages of history. It is reasonable to assume that there was a lack of mutual consideration and understanding, which would have built a path to common understanding, and when it did appear, it was accompanied by destructive actions. The demand for further acts of expiation from the Kremlin was increasingly rarely met with understanding on the part of Moscow, and mutual dialogue began to be replaced by a series of mutual polemics related to the interpretation of history and prestige issues. It is necessary to share the view that, in the Polish perception of Russia, excessive sensitivity to historical issues, their overvaluation, as well as frequent misuse of the memory of tragic episodes and processes do not serve the common reconciliation and settlement with the tragic past. In Russia, on the other hand, one can still see that the leaders of this country have not yet come to terms with their own past, which also has a negative impact on the



state and nature of political contacts between the two countries. Disputes over history have become the main theme of debate in contemporary Polish-Russian relations, and, given the conflicts they generate, this is likely to continue to be the case in the future.

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