



European Remembrance

Symposium of European Institutions dealing
with 20th Century History

14-15 September 2012, Gdansk

Between 14-15 September 2012 the *First Symposium of European Institutions Dealing with 20thth Century History - European Remembrance* took place in Gdansk. Over 100 specialists representing 66 institutions from 14 European countries and Israel participated. The symposium inaugurated a series of annual international conventions for academics and representatives of institutions engaged in the dissemination of knowledge about and research on 20th century history, with an emphasis on dictatorships. The main purpose of the series is to exchange experiences and develop methods and forms of cooperation between institutions from different countries.

Day 1

The symposium was opened by representatives of the organizing institutions: **Basil Kerski**, director of the European Solidarity Centre, **Rafał Rogulski**, Director of Secretariat of European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, and **Anna Kaminsky**, Director of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship. The conference was held in cooperation with the Museum of the Second World War (Gdańsk) and the Robert Havemann Society (Berlin), and with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as well as the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

The first day of deliberations was held at the historical Artus Manor in Gdansk. The day began with a lecture by **Markus Meckel**, Former Member of the Bundestag and the last Foreign Minister of the German Democratic Republic. He drew attention to the fact that a conference on European remembrance would not have been possible twenty years ago due to insurmountable differences between the way individual states perceived their own histories. He was appreciative of the fact that the opportunity existed for such a discussion to be conducted today. At the same time, he highlighted that it would not be easy, for it was necessary to take into account different points of view not infrequently connected with the specificity of national sensibilities and interpretations of history.

A discussion followed between historians and journalists from Poland, Italy, France and Germany. **Georges Mink**, a French sociologist and Director of Research at the College of Europe (Bruges and Natolin, Warsaw) spoke of the complex role played by politics in



**EUROPEAN
REMEMBRANCE**
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Gdańsk, 13–15 September 2012

shaping historical discourse. He claimed that conducting a European-level discussion is not easy, for historical themes are often instrumentalised for short-term political campaigns. Examples of such problems hindering dialogue can be found in various European countries. **Luigi Spinola**, an Italian journalist, presented the theme of European remembrance from an Italian perspective. He also thought that seeking an understanding is not easy, but he stressed that, although history is often exploited for political ends, this should not be demonised. He also mentioned marked differences in the historical narratives in West and East Europe. **Łukasz Kamiński**, President of the Institute of National Remembrance, asserted that we cannot currently speak of European remembrance, and he considered attempts to create a universal interpretation of history, for example in the form of a common European textbook, to be unnecessary and dangerous. At the same time, he highlighted the need for a dialogue on European remembrance based on values while maintaining an accurate assessment of both victims and perpetrators. This issue tends to be very complex and is frequently subject to distortion and manipulation.

Stefan Troebst, representing the Leipzig Centre for the History and Culture of East Europe, spoke of the influence of politics on national interpretations of history, which tends to hinder dialogue on historical topics in Europe. As an example, he included differences in the approach toward the commemoration of anniversaries of same events in different countries. **Robert Żurek** from the Historical Research Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin spoke, on the basis of Polish and German experiences, about achievements accomplished through dialogue between historians and about difficulties connected with the transfer of academic knowledge to broader social groups. He also pointed out that misunderstandings and tensions between different countries can sometimes accelerate learning processes within societies. **Markus Meckel** drew attention to the need to seek agreement and highlighted the importance of developing sensitivity and openness to different historical narratives among the younger generations. Meckel gave the Polish-Russian Commission for Difficult Issues as an example of action targeted at a search for agreement.

The academics and practitioners participating in the symposium took an active part in the discussion, stressing such factors as the need for further research and dissemination of knowledge about difficult and painful issues in European history, such as war, genocide, territorial disputes and forced migration. They also pointed out that the successes of partnership dialogue between historians were not the exclusive domain of the Polish and German academic communities, because we are currently witnessing, for example, the installation of the mechanisms of such dialogue in other countries, e.g. in the Hungarian-Slovak disputes over the Treaty of Trianon, the expulsion of Crimean Tatars, or the Polish-Russian dialogue on historical themes. The importance of positive events that have occurred in Europe was underlined, events which are worth going back to.

During the discussion, support was expressed for initiatives favouring dialogue in the various parts of Europe. Also recognized was the need to continue this form of convention and for



EUROPEAN REMEMBRANCE

1st Symposium
of European Institutions
dealing with 20th Century History
Gdańsk, 13–15 September 2012

the inclusion of institutions from other countries, such as Austria and the Czech Republic, in the organization of the next symposia. The discussion was dominated by the conviction that there was no single European historical narrative. The construction of European remembrance was characterized as a process of long-term international reflection requiring the intensive exchange of knowledge and experiences in a spirit of respect for different historical narratives. Both these debates and the symposium demonstrated that constructive discussion about the process of creating a culture of remembrance, a culture that influences more than one society, is not only possible but moreover necessary.

The second part of the day began with a visit to the future seat of the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) museum, which currently is under construction. In this building, which is still at an early stage of construction, symposium participants watched a presentation about the future permanent exhibition at ECS. Second, presentation concerned the conception behind the Museum of the Second World War, which is also under construction in Gdansk. The next item on the program was a visit to the Westerplatte site of remembrance, where, on 1 September 1939, the Second World War began.

Day 2

On the second day of the Symposium, the deliberations were held in the historical BHP Hall of the former Lenin Shipyards, the site of Solidarity's foundation. They began with a debate between representatives of institutions from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Germany. Stimulating five-minute mini-presentations were given by **Zbigniew Gluza** (Karta Centre), **Anna Kaminsky** (Federal Foundation for the Research into the SED Dictatorship), **Mária Palasik** (Archives of the Hungarian State Security), **Peter Jašek** (Slovakian Institute of National Remembrance), **Rüdiger Sielaff** (The Federal Commissioner for the Files of the State Security Service of the Former German Democratic Republic in Frankfurt an der Oder), **Paweł Ukielski** (Warsaw Rising Museum) and **Olaf Weißbach** (Robert Havemann Society). After the presentations, there was a discussion about problems associated with the need to take into account different national perspectives, as well as deficiencies in the cooperation between institutions engaged in 20th-century history, the possibility of different institutions making an impact and different ways of coming to terms with one's own history.

The participants offered a number of suggestions regarding the next symposia. They pointed out, among other factors, the need for greater participation from institutions researching the Second World War, as well as institutions from West European countries, in order to facilitate the exchange of experiences and develop a dialogue between the eastern and western parts of Europe. During the debate, it was stressed that difficulties had been encountered in knowledge transfer from academia to public debate on both national and European levels. It was also pointed out that there was a need to create tools facilitating efficient information exchange and cooperation between institutions from different countries. There was a proposal to create an Internet platform and newsletter for institutions researching



EUROPEAN REMEMBRANCE

1st Symposium
of European Institutions
dealing with 20th Century History
Gdańsk, 13–15 September 2012

20th-century history. Referring to these comments, **Rafał Rogulski** made it known that the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity is working on the construction of a portal of this kind and that it will be launched in 2013. The portal is meant to help European and non-European institutions search for partners, provide information about their own events and find out about activities being undertaken in other countries. But, first and foremost, it is meant to serve as a tool enabling them to work more efficiently and realize their own intentions in a spirit of dialogue, understanding, and solidarity.

An example of the practical implementation of the idea of European remembrance was provided by **Andrea Mork**, who presented the concept behind the House of European History project in Brussels, of which she is the academic coordinator. This project is being created with the cooperation of academics from European Union countries representing various stances towards European remembrance. Mork stressed that the aim of the House of European History will not be to retell the history of Europe, but instead to create a space for dialogue, an area of common ground on which different historical narratives can converge.

Summary

While summarizing the deliberations, **Jan Rydel** and **Matthias Weber**, representing the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, underlined the need for further discussion on difficult historical themes between academics and representatives of social institutions. Only through free exchange of views can a European culture of remembrance be created, which should be based on values such as the pursuit of objectivity, solidarity, mutual respect and understanding, respect for fundamental human rights, and freedom of the individual. The task of institutions such as those represented at the symposium should be to influence society, the media world, and politics in such a way as to ensure that dialogue on historical themes is conducted in a manner that is factual, open and accessible to everybody. One important aim should be the dissemination of knowledge about historical events in different nations, especially among the younger generation. Remembering is not, however, synonymous with the ordinary memorization of facts. There is no point in striving to create a single universal historical narrative or a single portrait of history common to everybody. The diversity of historical narratives is the manifestation of a joint perception of European history; it is our national and supranational heritage. It is important to develop sensitivity toward and acceptance of different historical narratives and assessments of past events. This particularly affects successive generations who have not personally experienced the suffering and cruelty associated with dictatorships. It is also possible in this way to enrich our own understanding of history through the experiences of others. The multiplicity of viewpoints should take into account the perspective of neighbouring countries and be bound up with a desire for understanding and dialogue, respect for the sacrifices borne by other nations, and avoidance of hurtful, sweeping judgments.

EUROPEAN REMEMBRANCE

1st Symposium
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dealing with 20th Century History
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One of the symposium's aims was to make it possible for representatives of institutions to exchange views more freely, in order to take up new initiatives and create new projects. Of the numerous undertakings and forms of cooperation discussed during the sessions and behind the scenes, the proposal that attracted the most interest was the Karta Centre's proposition to create an Internet platform called *The Defiant: Opposition and Dissident Movements in Communist Europe, 1956-1989*, which would contain biographic entries relating to opposition activists from various communist countries, articles about the resistance in particular countries, interactive discussion forums for former dissidents, and so on.

The symposium participants expressed their willingness to prepare a joint document presenting good practices for the research and dissemination of 20th-century history in the spirit of a European culture of remembrance. This document will be designed over the next few months and presented for discussion to participants at the symposium and other institutions which participated in it this year.

Organizatorzy:



Partnerzy:



Współfinansowanie:

