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The Role of Polish Intellectuals in the Process of Reconciliation with Germany. Lessons for Korea

Abstract

The experience of World War II (WWII) and its aftermath resulted in an unprecedented common hostility towards the Germans in the Polish society. In 1945 a Polish-German reconciliation seemed improbable. However, the process started quite quickly and became an interesting case of mental evolution of feud societies. The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of Polish intellectuals, which seems to be crucial for this process, in order to find some lessons to be learned in the context of North and South Korea division. We believe that deep understanding of factors standing behind the great success of Polish-German reconciliation may be useful when thinking about future reunification of the two Koreas. On the one hand we are aware that nothing can be directly transferred in such distant cases, but on the other hand we believe that Polish-German example may be a source of inspiration and a “food for thought”.

Keywords: Polish-German reconciliation, role of intellectuals, North and South Korea division, reunification of the Koreas, dialogue of elites, people-to-people contacts

Introduction

On September 1st 1939 Germany invade Poland, thus starting World War II. Once the Soviet army invaded Polish eastern provinces (September 17th), the fate of the country was sealed. After five weeks of fierce fighting the Polish army capitulated, and the country came under the toughest occupation in its history. Despite

the allied agreements with France and Great Britain, no military help ever appeared. Poland lost WWII twice: for the first time in 1939 and for the second time 1945, when its Western allies gave up the country to Joseph Stalin.

The outcome of the war was more than tragic for Poland. Over 17% of its citizens were dead, which was the highest rate among all the states engaged in the war (Holas & Lis-Turlejska 2016). Among the casualties there was an overrepresentation of young and well-educated people, as destruction of the national elite was one of the key aims of the occupants (Davies 1995). The Polish material losses are estimated around 850 000 000 000 USD (at the 2015 exchange rate, see Maciorowski 2015). Warsaw, the Polish capital, was completely destroyed in over 70% (Miasto Stołeczne Warszawa 2004). The numbers were huge and the sense of being betrayed was piercing.

The end of the World War II did not bring Poland any freedom. As a result of the decision of the 'Big Three'¹, the country became a part of the Soviet zone. The communist government in Warsaw, established and protected by the Red Army, started the process of transformation Poland into Stalinist-type dictatorship. After 1956 the regime was slightly liberalized but still not democratic; democracy was not restored in Poland until 1989. Since the Polish post-war authorities were lacking social acceptance and support, they attempted at achieving legitimization by stoking anti-German resentments.

One of the results of WWII for Poland was a fundamental change of its borders. The eastern provinces of the country were incorporated to the Soviet Union. As a partial compensation, since the new Polish territory was almost 20% smaller than before WWII, Poland received post-German territories on the west and north. This decision of the 'Big Three' was not accepted by the Federal Republic of Germany. That enabled the Polish communist party to portray West Germany as the greatest menace to the peace on the continent. The presence in the communist block was presented as an alliance with the USSR, protecting Polish western and northern borders.

The twentieth century history was the most tragic chapter of the Polish-German relations; however, Polish-German tensions had existed long before then. As Janusz Konrad Dobrosz emphasizes, the Polish German border was not only a line dividing nations and countries but a historic place of clashes between the

¹ Three superpowers that won the Word War II: the United States of America, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom.

Germans and the Slaves, absolute monarchy and democracy of the gentry, Catholicism and Reformation, a group of almost 300 German states and the multinational kingdom of Poland, and finally, during the 19th century – Poles deprived of its own country versus Prussian militarist superpower (Dobrosz 2001). No matter how one-sided this description is, it was popularized by the Polish pop culture of the communist era.

It is clear, therefore, that the circumstances for the potential Polish-German reconciliation were extremely unpropitious. However, the process started quite quickly. It is now interesting to witness the transition in the Polish-German relations, from the 19th century occupation through the hecatomb of WWII to the present dialogue and close cooperation.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the vital role of the Polish intelligentsia in the process of the Polish-German reconciliation. We understand intelligentsia as a group of independent, well-educated people, who try to guide the political, artistic, or social development of their society. In order to do that they should speak the truth and expose lies. As Noam Chomsky observes:

“Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression” (Chomsky 1967, p. 60).

We claim that without the engagement of a few different groups of intellectuals, from left-wingers to catholic bishops, establishing friendly links between the two nations would have been much more difficult, if possible at all. We stress that at the beginning the bilateral dialogue was very much an elite-driven phenomenon, which only later paved the way for broad network of people-to-people contacts and initiatives that finally fundamentally changed the Polish-German relations. On the basis of this assumption we share some thoughts that might be found useful also in the context of Korean reconciliation.

As for the structure of the paper, we have recognized three major groups of the Polish intellectuals that had been particularly active in the process of dialogue with Germans:

- a) Secular liberals;
- b) The Catholic intellectuals (including some bishops);
- c) Emigrant democratic opposition, in particular Jerzy Giedroyc and his magazine *Kultura*.

In the next three chapters we are going to briefly present the role of each of these three groups. Having no ambitions to draw a complex and detailed picture, we focus only on the major characteristics of each group and the most important facts. In the concluding part we try to present some lessons-learned for the Korean case.

The First Wave – the Role of Secular Liberals

In the first decade after WWII the fresh memories of war atrocities, bolstered by the anti-German propaganda of Polish authorities, effectively prevented any citizen initiatives towards reconciliation with Germany. However, one can point out a few voices that tried out to break the official line and challenge the dominant social sentiment.

In 1947–1948 Edmund Osmańczyk published a book ‘Poles’, in which he suggested that the Poles should learn from the Germans how to work hard instead of blaming everyone else for their misery (Kowalik 2005). He also underlined the crucial role of cultural collaboration in the future Polish-German reconciliation and warned that animating anti-German resentments would distance Poland from Europe.

Another example of an attempt at suggesting German-Polish reconciliation was a poem by Jerzy Waleńczyk entitled “Do nieznanego Niemca na Zachodzie” (“To the unknown German from the West”), in which he opposed the official propaganda demonising Western Germans. Another publication, the memories of Feliks Młynarski, was blocked by the censorship. Młynarski, a Polish economist, advocated democratisation of Germany and called for the economic support for this country (Jackowska 2013).

As Marek Zybura (2016) accentuates, Leon Kruczkowski also made scratches in the imposed anti-German attitude. The initial title of the Kruczkowski’s famous drama “Niemcy” (“The Germans”) was “Niemcy są ludźmi” (“The Germans are humans”). However, these were voices of the minority, while the major part of the society, intellectuals included, supported the government’s tough policy towards Germany. World War II was portrayed by the propaganda as a yet another example of the eternal hostility and barbarity of Poland’s western neighbours.

Following the Polish October 1956, Władysław Gomułka took over the chair of the First Secretary of The Polish United Worker’s Party and the system was slightly liberalized. The change in the government and relaxing its tight censorship of

media stirred inland intellectuals to action. In 1957 the editorial board of *Tygodnik Powszechny* (further referred to as TP), a liberal Catholic weekly, was invited to Vienna for the Catholic Press Congress. Surprisingly, the government allowed them to go, and the strong representation of the TP – including Jerzy Turowicz, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Stanisław Stomma and Dominik Morawski – went to Austria. The ruling communist party decided to use this delegation unofficially to examine Austrian and German views on the perspectives of rebuilding relations with Poland, which was made easier by the fact that during his stay in Vienna Mr. Stomma was also invited to visit West Germany (Kalicki 2012). The congress in Vienna created the first major opportunity after WWII to create direct links between inland Polish, German and Austrian intellectuals, though it is worth noting that emigrant groups had already established contacts.

In 1957 Polish writer Leopold Tyrmand published in TP a series of reports from his one-month trip to Germany. These articles bore a testimony to the social and generation changes in the country. According to the author, the young Germans were hardworking, open-minded, liberal Europeans, very critical of the Nazi past of their parents. It meant that there were new partners for a dialogue, and the time came for the Poles to reach them (Kalicki 2012).

However, political elites on both sides were not ready for tightening their cooperation yet. The position of the Polish communists was obvious: anti-German sentiments were fundamental to their way of thinking. However, also German politicians were not ready to establish closer links with Poland; particularly the Christian Democrats remained sceptical. The Social Democrats were in favour of more active eastern policy and more open for cooperation with the communist regimes behind the Iron Curtain. In 1958 one of the SPD leaders, Prof. Carlo Schmid, visited Poland, as the highest rank West German politician after WWII. During his speech at the Warsaw University he called for the Polish-German cooperation for a better future world (Jackowska 2013).

At the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties journalists from West Germany started to come to Poland. Many of them, like Klaus Skibowski, Ludwig Zimmerer and Hansjakob Stehle, presented very open and friendly attitude towards the Poles, which was then reflected in their articles. In this way they influenced their own society and changed their the mindset.

In 1962 TP published another set of articles about West Germany. The author, Stefan Kisielewski, shared Tyrmand's views on the generation change in West Germany, and he underlined the role of the economic boom, which induced a change

in the mentality of the West Germans, who became kinder and more open. Kisi-elewski spotlighted the rising positive social interest in the issues of the eastern neighbours and the falling role of radical groups (Kalicki 2012).

Those early voices of Polish intellectuals started to confuse the minds of the Poles, slowly altering their perception of the Germans, which had been full of prejudice. However, it was the Catholic Church that gave the first impulse for the reconciliation which strong enough to reach wider audience and to drive a visible change.

The Milestone – the Role of Catholic Intellectuals

After the 1945 the Catholic Church was the only one officially recognized institution in Poland that was somewhat independent from the Communist Party. Its leaders, some of them well-educated and broad-minded, played an important role in the process of reconciliation with Germany, laying foundations of strong cooperation between the churches and ordinary people.

At the end of the Second Vatican Council, in November 1965, Polish bishops published an open letter to German bishops, which turned out to be a real milestone in bilateral relations. The main sentence that went down to history was “we forgive and ask for forgiveness”. The letter was written in German, by archbishop Dr Bolesław Kominek, in collaboration with archbishops Prof. Kazimierz Kowalski and Dr Karol Wojtyła (future Pope John Paul II), and bishop Dr Jerzy Stroba (Kucharski 2016). The letter consisted mainly of a summary of the common Polish-German history including both the bright and the dark episodes; however, it underlined not only German but also Polish sins. It was a major change in the approach, for earlier the Polish picture of the bilateral relations had been black and white, with Poland always portrayed as the victim and Germany as the invader. The address was also an invitation for the German bishops to take part in the celebrations of 1000th anniversary of Christianity in Poland.

The content of the letter had not been discussed with lay intellectuals associated with the Polish Catholic Church, not to mentioned lower-rank priests. The idea behind the statement proved to be far beyond the public mood. The initiative was met with severe criticism and misunderstanding by the Catholics in Poland, and the reaction on the side of the ruling communist party was hostile. The initial reaction of the German Church was also quite cold, but still the process of reconciliation moved on.

According to Antoni Dudek, there were at least three sources of motivation behind the letter (Dudek 2016):

- 1) patriotic, to encourage Germans to accept post-war borders;
- 2) religious, to fulfil the Christian precept of reconciliation;
- 3) political; to establish Polish church administration on the post-German territories passed to Poland after the WWII and to take over the initiative in creating the Polish policy towards the West.

The letter of the bishops was definitely an initiative of the intellectual elite of the Polish Roman Catholic church. However, there were also some symptoms of readiness for the reconciliation on the German side, too. In October 1945 the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, further referred to as EKD) delivered the so-called “Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt”, in which they confessed their responsibility for their inadequate opposition to the Nazis and asked for forgiveness. One of the authors of the declaration was pastor Martin Niemöller, who in 1957 was the head of the first official visit of EKD in Poland.

In 1958 the Lutheran Church in Rhineland established *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (The Action Reconciliation Service for Peace), a peace organization promoting the knowledge of the Nazi war crimes among the German society. In 1960 archbishop of Berlin Julius Döpfner in his sermon on Silesian Saint Jadwiga Day talked about the German responsibility for the WWII and an obligation of repentance. In his speech he also called for the Polish-German reconciliation and stressed that peace in the future is more important than today’s borders (Kucharski 2016).

The next important step was the Memorandum of Tübingen. It was a manifesto written by eight prominent German Protestant intellectuals and sent to Bundestag in 1961. The authors protested against the planned nuclear armament of West Germany and demanded the recognition of the Oder-Neisse line as the border between Germany and Poland.

Another action preparing the ground for the initiative of the Polish bishops was the memorandum on policy towards Eastern Europe published by EKD in October 1965. The document “The situation of displaced persons and the relationship of the German people to its eastern neighbours” is recognized as a one of the milestones on the way to the political reconciliation between Germany and Poland. It was also the base for forthcoming regular and close contacts between the Evangelical Church in Germany with the Polish Ecumenical Council (Kipp 2015). The

main idea behind the memorandum was the acceptance of the post-war border between Poland and Germany.

For the first twenty years after WWII the authors of all these initiatives, mostly German intellectuals, met with the same problem as the authors of similar initiatives in Poland: reluctant or hostile reactions of their societies and governments. However, notwithstanding the defiance of other social actors, the cooperation of the elites started to involve ever wider circles, and thus the reconciliation between Poland and Germany could move on. As Stanisław Bieleń (2014, pp. 8–9) noticed:

“Discussing the complicated history was a lesson of different sensitivities and mentalities. Mutual trust was achieved only through sincere and factual dialogue, through modesty and humility, through focusing on what we have common, on what connects the two nations [...] However, there was also an awareness that the process of reconciliation cannot lead to oblivion, impunity and relativization of the evil that had been done”.²

Despite the social defiance towards the Polish bishops’ letter of 1965, Primate of Poland Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński in his speech in Jasna Góra in May 1966 repeated the words of forgiveness to the Germans. The process of cooperation between Polish and German churches continued. It was visible among the elites, who united in common actions in favour of the beatification of Maxymilian Kolbe (1971) or consecration of Karol Wojtyła as pope John Paul II, as well as in everyday work of priests, the example of which was the German financial support for the Polish Roman Catholic Church like grants, scholarships and internships.

People-to-people cooperation played a particularly important role in the process of reconciliation. As former Jesuit Stanisław Obirek underlined, summer internships in German parishes or scholarships at German universities created great opportunities for his generation, people born in Poland just after WWII, to get know the western neighbour, bypassing the communist propaganda information monopoly. Professor Obirek recalled his amazement when he saw in the country a monument erected to Wehrmacht soldiers. The Poles found it difficult to acknowledge that people perceived as war criminals had families who were mourning for them (Frenkel, Kamiński, Obirek 2016). It was the people-to-people contacts that created an opportunity to see that people on the other side of the border were not only enemies but also human beings. It was also an important element in the process

² Own translation.

of reconstruction or even building new elites on the other side of the iron curtain, which would help with the reconciliation in the forthcoming decades.

The existence of strong Catholic elites, convinced of the necessity of reconciliation, respected by millions of Poles, seems to have been a decisive factor that launched the whole process. The bishops' letter broke the ice and opened the door for institutional cooperation with the Germans, which resulted in hundreds of bigger and smaller initiatives that brought together old enemies. However, the reconciliation would not have been possible without other actors, who influenced people not associated with the Catholic Church and the Polish diaspora spread around the world.

“We all follow his ideas...” – the Role of the Emigrant Democratic Opposition

During the Cold War era there existed three major Polish emigrants' opposition centres: the aforementioned monthly magazine *Kultura* published in France, Radio Free Europe broadcasting from Germany (Munich) and the most numerous group of political expatriates in London, financed by the Americans. Out of these the magazine *Kultura* seems to have been the most influential. The majority of Polish high-level politicians after 1989, including all presidents apart from Andrzej Duda, have admitted to reading *Kultura* and wanting to follow the ideas of Jerzy Giedroyc, the magazine's editor-in-chief. Sometimes they even argued as to who is the most accurate follower of Giedroyc (Brzezicki 2010).

Although *Kultura* is widely known for the helping rebuild Poland's relations with its eastern neighbours after 1989, the magazine also advocated reconciliation with Germany and Poland's joining the Euro-Atlantic political and economic organizations. Jerzy Giedroyc, developed a broad and precise concept for the future Polish presence in Europe (the so-called “Giedroyc doctrine”). He argued that a genuine and multi-faceted Polish-German reconciliation influenced the process of reconciliation between Poland and its eastern neighbours, and vice versa. Without reconciliation, Giedroyc argued, tensions on one border would limit the room for manoeuvre on the other. Moreover, were Poland to leas rebuilding the good-neighbourliness in the region, superpowers like Russia would lose their position as international gendarmes.

Jerzy Giedroyc published a book concerning Germany as early as a few months before the first issue of “*Kultura*” was issued. It was Jerzy Stempowski’s diary from his journey to Germany in autumn 1945. As Basil Kerski (2016) noted³:

“Stempowski’s diary is a deep analysis of the Allies’ war and post-war policy towards Germany as well as a fascinating reportage and multilayer document describing live of DPs⁴ [...]. This is also the first public criticism of the carpet bombing of German cities [...] – described here as an unjustified destruction of the European cultural heritage”.

Jerzy Stempowski continued to write his reports about Germany in the next decades, describing social and intellectual changes he witnessed in Germany and searching partners for the Polish-German dialogue.

Democratic allies in the German society were also found with the help of The Congress for Cultural Freedom in Berlin (1950), an international conference of liberal/non-communist intellectuals. Jerzy Giedroyc and his close associate Józef Czapski took part in the event and made contacts, which over the years resulted in stable cooperation with many German democrats. These connections led to publishing and popularizing numerous Polish books in West Germany, thus breaking to some extent the iron curtain on the cultural and intellectual level. As the future proved, the process of reconciliation initiated through the cooperation of the elites and than spreading in the society proved surprisingly successful.

Clearly, the main aim of *Kultura* was changing the Polish attitude towards the Germans, not the other way round. Therefore, the German issue was presented in magazine quite often. Fig.1 shows that texts about Germany appeared on the pages of *Kultura* regularly, averaging to more than 12 articles per year. Out of the topics related to foreign affairs only the eastern policy was reported more frequently.

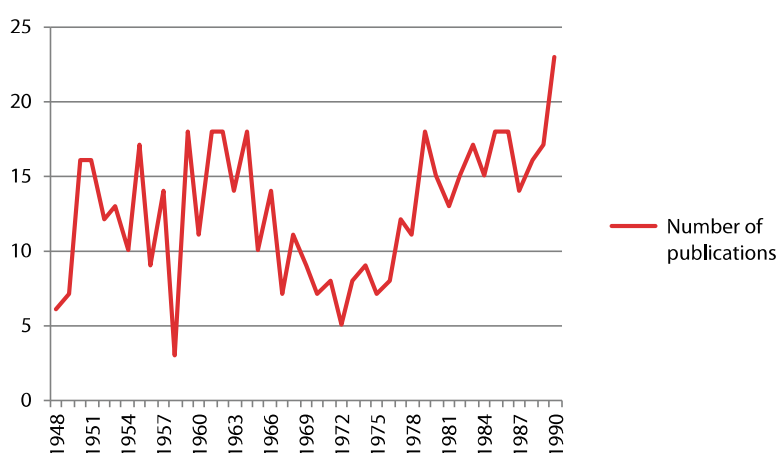
Jerzy Giedroyc believed that people-to-people dialogue and citizen initiatives were crucial to the process of building friendly relations with the Germans. Hence, he consequently inspired and documented trans-border, academic, social or cultural cooperation. Iwona Hofman in her book about *Kultura* presented a detailed picture of this longstanding labour (Hoffman 2009).

³ Own translation.

⁴ DP = Displaced Persons: political refugees, former prisoners of war or slave laborers of the immediate post-Second War period who refused to return to Soviet-dominated eastern Europe.

The magazine *Kultura* was the most influential and authoritative among all the Polish media before 1989. It was widely read by the intelligentsia both in Poland and abroad, provoking the elites to reconsider their attitudes to Germans. It complemented and reinforced actions undertaken by the Church and secular intellectuals in Poland.

Figure 1. The number of articles about Germany published in *Kultura* in years 1948–1990



Source: own calculation on the basis of I. Hofman (2009), *Polska. Niemcy. Europa. Program zachodni paryskiej Kultury*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, pp. 327–328.

Conclusions. What Can the Koreans Learned from the Polish-German Reconciliation?

The process of Polish-German reconciliation after the atrocities of WWII was launched by a few groups of Polish intellectuals, those living in communist Poland and those in exile. After the slight liberalisation of the political system in Poland in 1956, elites were able to criticise the official anti-German propaganda more openly and start building the network of people-to-people dialogue.

The milestone was reached in 1965, when Polish bishops wrote the letter to their German counterparts in which they “forgave and asked for forgiveness”. Despite the initial chilly reaction of the Germans, this act proved to be a real ice-breaker. In the next years the Catholic Church established an important channel

of bilateral dialogue. Simultaneously, secular intellectuals engaged in cultural and academic collaboration.

This dialogue of elites made ground for more people-to-people contacts, which involved people from various socio-economic classes and took various forms. The Germans generously supported the oppressed Polish dissidents, and the Poles started to do small business on the streets of West Berlin (this activity had also a darker side – leading to some negative stereotypes). In consequence, when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet system collapsed, the process of reconciliation between the two societies was quite advanced. The Poles did not protest against the Germans buying collapsed Polish companies, and the German government became the most important advocate for the Polish integration with the NATO and the European Union.

This success would have not been possible without the intellectuals. They were the first to notice that hostility between the two nations was only in the interest of the Polish communist government and its Russian patrons. It was them who first had the courage to call in question anti-German sentiment of the vast majority of Poles. Then they advocated for reconciliation for many years, in different forms, whether they lived in Poland and or in exile.

What lesson can the Koreans draw from the Polish-German experiences? Firstly, we want to stress that divisions between the two nations were really deep. However, regardless of the fact that war left injuries impossible to heal, the real reconciliation proved to be a success. Therefore, one should take for granted that reunion is always possible.

Secondly, successful though it was, the whole process really very laborious. Reconciliation did not take place overnight, and both sides had to be persistent and patient. It took a few decades in the case of Poland and Germany, and one should not expect that in the case of the Koreans the process will unfold any quicker.

As a side note, the Polish-German example also shows that even after many years since setting off, the rebuilding of the relations might be an easy target for the populist propaganda. This the case of the currently ruling party in Poland – that is reviving anti-German sentiments to distract social attention away from internal problems.

Thirdly, the role of intellectuals was decisive, in particular in the first stages. Independent, broad-minded people, whose opinions were respected by fellow-citizens, played a crucial role in changing the mindset of both the Poles and the Germans. That raises the question if in the Koreans such a group of people is vital enough. Levi (2016, p. 56) claims that it is not:

“The western theoretical framework (Chomsky) does not fit with North Korean reality, given that North Korean intellectuals cannot expose the truth, being as they are wholly dependent on the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). Over the Three Kims’ era the role of intellectuals has remained the same: to defend the WPK. After the purges of the 1950s and 1960s, intellectuals started to work in the affiliated Juche Institute, propagating the official North Korean ideology”.

We may agree with his conclusion that intellectuals based in North Korea would not forward any type of major change in their country as they are not independent but loyal to the WPK (see also Ford 2008). The North Korean intelligentsia is emerging, but only in exile, mainly in South Korea. That makes a case of totalitarian North Korea radically different from communist Poland, where domestic independent voices were always present. Intellectuals abroad, like people publishing in the aforementioned magazine “Kultura”, were influential indeed, but only as an external force supportive of internal dynamics.

The comparison cases so distant in terms of geography, culture, and historical context is never easy, and one should be very careful when making any generalisation and recommendation. However, we may not imagine the process of reconciliation between two societies without the existence of independent intellectual elites that may influence masses. In Poland this vital role was played “intelligentsia” in the Western understanding of this term. The Koreas will need their own equivalent of this social group.

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