

German-Polish Relations (January 31, 2005)

Abstract

Journalist and historian Peter Bender cautions against premature hopes of lasting warm relations between Poland and Germany. The burden of history, he asserts, casts long shadows and normalization of relations is a more realistic goal than quick reconciliation.

Source

Normalization would be a lot

The German-Polish relationship is a long way from "normalization": nowhere in Europe did two countries struggle as much with rapprochement. An essay by the late journalist and historian Peter Bender.

The first treaty with which Poland and the Federal Republic wanted to regulate their relationship, the so-called Warsaw Treaty, was given a modest title and purpose in 1970: it was intended to create the "foundations of normalization," that is, not even normalization, but only the foundation on which it would be possible. After a brief euphoria, the treaty was followed by disappointment on both sides. Relations developed in a rather unfriendly fashion, and five years went by until, in a second treaty package, the most urgent demands made by Bonn and Warsaw were satisfied, after a fashion. Both the Poles and the Germans had given the treaty a realistic purpose, but in the end they expected too much. The same thing happened to many others later. West German politicians often visited Poland; inspired by the best intentions, they invoked reconciliation and were quite surprised when they met with reserve: with the naïve notion that they would be able to reconcile forthwith, they had shown that they had no idea of the dimension of what had to be resolved between Poles and Germans.

It would appear that we are still dealing with this lack of awareness today. Much has improved in all areas of German-Polish relations, from the economy to politics to private relations; even Polish and German soldiers hold joint exercises. Reconciliation, at least understanding, seems to have been achieved, but suddenly everything looks different again. Berlin and Warsaw are in open conflict, familiarity has given way to doubts or even mistrust, old prejudices are erupting again. It proved an illusion that everything would work out fine between Poles and Germans if both sides belonged to the same military alliance and the same European community. Did we once again expect too much? For clarification it might help to remind oneself what drove Poles and Germans apart since the last century. What is still alive from our terrible past? What has already been overcome? There were, it would seem, two kinds of causes of conflict: some were the result of circumstances, the others were historical in nature.

The most important circumstance was the Cold War. Poland was in the eastern camp while the larger and stronger part of Germany, the Federal Republic, was in the western camp. Poland was governed by a semi-communist, authoritarian party elite, the Federal Republic by democratic governments. Warsaw and Bonn were compelled to show bloc discipline and had only limited possibilities for action beyond the East-West border.

[...]

All that has now been over for a decade and a half: the Soviet Union, the GDR, the Warsaw Pact, the Cold War, the Communist power in Poland no longer exist. If we come into conflict with one another today, it

results from current events or has deeper, historical causes. Or possibly both since present differences are grounded in history.

The first thing to mention is the war, and more than that, the German occupation of Poland between 1939 and 1944. It was the worst that Poland suffered through in its history. Six million Polish citizens, Jews and non-Jews, did not survive those years. Most of those, about ninety per cent, were not victims of the war, but of an extermination plan that was targeted especially against the intelligentsia. Poland was not to be dominated, but eradicated as a nation. Murder and annihilation were combined with humiliations that the German “master race” inflicted every day on the “Slavic sub-humans.” They affected some much harder than the threat of death and continued to live on in future generations.

[...]

What is currently happening in Poland and Germany seems like a continuation – the demands for compensation as well as for reparations confirm as much. The terrible history still represents an explosive issue, which can be used by anyone who is interested in playing with fire. Those heading associations of expellees, in which there are fewer and fewer expellees and more and more children and grandchildren of expellees, must find new issues that also justify the continued existence of these associations. Those in Poland looking for scapegoats for whatever can find them most easily west of the Oder river. Yet agitators on both sides would not be able to stir up anything if the old enemy images and above all the traumatic experiences were not still alive and ready to be mobilized. And since talk of German occupation and Polish expulsion is precisely not based on mere imagination, but on events that were experienced, lived, and suffered through, one has to take them seriously as hidden but constant dangers for the relationship between Poles and Germans.

Even the most recent disagreements, especially their surprising intensity, can be understood only if one looks for their historical roots. Warsaw followed the U.S. into Iraq while Berlin demonstratively refused to do so. The Poles felt a strong bond with America even before 1990, about six-and-a-half million U.S. citizens are of Polish extraction, the dollar was the second currency in the country. Moreover, Poles had had bad experiences with the Europeans: some conquered, divided, and ruled over the country, others abandoned it in its time of need. And so Warsaw is now sticking with the U.S. Perhaps it could have saved Poland from Stalin in 1945, as some believe, but in any case, America is the strongest power in Europe and even in the world and thus the best guarantor for Poland’s security, security above all against the Russians and the Germans, who are strong once again.

The old Federal Republic, too, believed that its security was in good hands with America and not France or Great Britain, and in that respect there is German understanding for Poland’s policy. What separates Berlin and Warsaw is the assessment of Russia and the relationship with it. “All Polish uprisings were directed against the Russians,” a Polish member of the Central Committee told me many years ago. For the Poles, Russia remains a danger, perhaps not an acute danger, but certainly a latent one. For the Germans, however, it no longer is that. The Soviet Union has ceased to exist, the decades-long fear that the Soviet military machine would roll over Germany and Western Europe hardly still worries any German today. Poles and Germans can spend days exchanging arguments about whether Russia is a threat or not, they will hardly persuade each other. The difference in opinions is too deep, because it is historically rooted. And it becomes even more difficult to overcome for Poles when they see German chancellors in Moscow, Helmut Kohl familiar with Boris Yeltsin, Gerhard Schröder with Vladimir Putin. Some say “Rapallo,” others are thinking it.

The second quarrel, too, can be explained only historically. It revolves around the question of how strongly Poland should be represented in the European Union, and it has the same roots as the previous absoluteness with which Poland insisted on the Oder-Neiße border: anyone who was treated as second-rate for so long demands equal status. And they will do so all the more vis-à-vis a neighbor who in the

past insulted them with their arrogance.

That arrogance has largely – but certainly not entirely – disappeared. Still, that is a significant change, Germany's Eastern policy is no longer only Russia policy, as it used to be, but both political dealings with Moscow and with Warsaw. In recent years that also meant politics on behalf of Warsaw to help in Poland's entry into the EU. But therein, too, lay an element of inequality: one side helps, the other side needs help. When the Poles then raised demands that seemed unreasonable, even expressly pro-Polish politicians in Berlin called them ungrateful.

The matter gets more complicated still because not only the Poles, but the Germans, too, have problems with their self-confidence, and this is now manifesting itself more strongly. After the war and Auschwitz, they were the pariah of Europe. Since Adenauer they have been following the rule that after Hitler, Germans must show more caution, understanding, and consideration than others. Don't be boastful, better to tone it down. Never try to push something through alone. That attitude did not disappear when Germany was reunified and became sovereign without limitations, but it did become and is becoming less pronounced. German suffering and losses, the Allied bombing and expulsions, are now to be given more attention, German interests to be asserted more strongly. Schröder's outright "No" to Bush's Iraq war, his clear opposition to a core piece of American policy – ten years ago, this would not have been possible. Kohl kept out of the first Iraq War by secretly paying for it.

Self-assurance and a craving for recognition have grown in Poland and Germany and have now collided; recent history explains in the case of the Germans, for the Poles earlier history does so too. Paternalism and a sense of superiority are the consequences on the one side, a desire for recognition and an exaggerated sense of self on the other. Both coincide with a very old phenomenon. Poles and Germans are fixated on the West. In the process, the Poles encounter the Germans, but they are turning their backs and are eagerly searching out the French. To explain it with a banal example: if a German pronounces the city of Bordeaux as Bor-de-auks, he is laughed at; if he pronounces the city of Łódź not as Lods, but correctly, he is not understood. The unequal interest in one another has been separating the two sides for centuries and has been far more of an obstacle in the last fifty years than we were aware of. Well into the seventies, perhaps even longer, only a few Poles saw what the problem in German-Polish relations was: not the German push to the East, but German indifference toward the East.

Normalization was supposed to be the first step by which Germans and Poles will draw closer. The simple meaning of normalization is: removing everything that is not normal in the relations between two nations. Can one speak of that when historical impressions still lead to conflicts? When differences in opinion escalate into fundamental debates? When the memory of wounds the neighbor inflicted lives on so strongly that it can spoil the relationship at any time? When the memory is used for selfish purposes? When sensitivity and irritability are still so high that a wrong word can trigger a crisis in the relationship? May one speak of normalization if the cover over much that did not become normal is so thin?

What to do with our historical burdens? To begin with, it seems important to recognize them as historical: there is something between Germans and Poles which cannot be so quickly and easily cleared away. Politics and economics are not enough, as the quick pragmatists believe. We must deal very carefully with each other, we must try hard and realize that it will take a long time in spite of it all. Nowhere in Europe did two nations have such a difficult time in once again forging a closer relationship.

But we are not only the products of our past, we can make history ourselves. And there are examples and models for that. First, the examples. Because it was the first step toward Poland, the Warsaw Treaty of 1970 left much open, but it opened the doors between Poland and the Federal Republic, and not only for the economy! Churches, universities, as well as schools, radio stations, associations of displaced Germans open to reconciliation, writers, theater people, musicians, engaged private individuals, who came together in many German-Polish organizations, sought and found connections to Poland. After

sometimes tough disputes, professors on both sides agreed on recommendations on how nationalism should be removed from school books – they did good work, since the nationalists on both sides criticized the recommendations. A 280-page book published at the end of 1982 recorded the “cultural cooperation” that could be identified, and it included by no means everything, as the editor Winfried Lipscher emphasized. The Warsaw authorities, too, surely much to their discomfort, had lost sight at the end of the seventies of all the things that were going on beyond the state’s oversight. But once the doors had been opened fairly wide, almost anything was possible in Poland, one only had to know how or know someone who knew.

The officially prescribed friendship between Poland and the GDR proved a door-opener, for it made possible non-prescribed, genuine friendship. Not only functionaries, but teachers, professors, artists, writers, and experts of every kind were supposed to communicate, and they often did so more than they were supposed to. Professional “consultation” grew into personal relationships. The non-convertibility of their currencies forced mutual assistance. Both sides also honored each other. To this day, some East Germans are happy to hold an honorary doctorate from a Polish university. The Germans impressed – and annoyed – the Poles through efficiency, the Poles enticed – and unsettled – with freedoms. Like the joke about the two dogs that are swimming through the Oder, meet and wonder what the other wants on his own side: the Polish dog wants to eat his fill in the GDR, the German dog wants to bark in Poland.

[...]

And now the models. First, one should mention the churches on both sides, who forged well ahead of politics. In 1965, the position paper of the Protestant Church rose above the one-sidedness of the West German perception and honored the fate of both nations, the German pain over its lost homeland and the Polish fear for its new one. It did not recommend the recognition of the border, but made that recognition seem inevitable as a consequence. Shortly thereafter, the Polish bishops breached the wall of one-sidedness and spoke the greatest words that were ever uttered between Poles and Germans: “We forgive and ask for forgiveness.” The German bishops responded in a way that was less Christian and more diplomatic and thereby abandoned their Polish brothers to the malicious attacks of the Party. Five years later the Party itself did what it had accused the bishops of and itself came to an agreement with the Federal Republic. Tadeusz Mazowiecki complained bitterly in 1970 that Polish Catholics had prepared the way, but now rapprochement with the Germans was leaving them out.

Credit is due, second, to the Polish and German politicians who had the courage to rise above difficult experiences, vicious opposition, and their own reservations. Who also did not allow themselves to be enticed by populist opportunities and did what rapprochement required. The third side to which credit is due is nameless. It is due to the countless unknown individuals who quietly labored for decades in small ways to prevent the terrible memories and the entrenched prejudices from continuing to shape the image of the Poles and the Germans. If peoples are to come together, politics must create the preconditions, but the essential work happens beyond politics. Only the dense, fairly solid network of connections, acquaintances, and friendships across the borders has made it possible to get through the difficult eighties. That network forms the foundation on which Poles and Germans can come together in freedom in 1990.

A look back to the first postwar years show that unimaginably much has been accomplished since then. The recollection of the unending difficulties of the subsequent period shows that more could not be achieved. Historical burdens and imprints do not vanish in half a century. But one can also do something about that. The example of Willy Brandt proves it. “My government accepts the events of the past,” he said to the Polish Minister President Józef Cyrankiewicz in 1970 at the signing of the border treaty. That meant: we accept that Germany ends at the Oder or the western Neiße. He kneeled before the ghetto memorial in Warsaw. That meant: we know that there is a German guilt toward Poland that no politics can expunge.

Source: Peter Bender, "Normalisierung wäre schon viel," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 5-6/2005, January 31, 2005, p. 3.

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