



CAN RUSSIA AND POLAND EVER OVERCOME THEIR HISTORICAL DIFFERENCES?

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In any discussion between Russia and the West, the positions of certain countries are known well in advance. Regardless of the issue at stake, Italy and Cyprus, for example, will almost certainly support any cooperation with Russia, while Poland and the Baltic states will be opposed. One recent example was the June 2021 proposal by France and Germany to invite Russian President Vladimir Putin to a summit with EU leaders. Despite the clout of Paris and Berlin, the proposal failed—largely due to the refusal of Poland and the Baltic states to participate in such a meeting.

It's true that sometimes other countries take advantage of the predictable Polish-Baltic intransigence to avoid confronting Russia themselves, but the influence of Riga, Tallinn, Vilnius, and above all Warsaw over the West's decisionmaking relating to Russia should not be underestimated.

Poland is the largest of the new EU and NATO states, a vast and rapidly growing economy, and an influential regional power with special interests in the western part of the post-Soviet space. All of this makes Warsaw's position important not only for those in the West who share a values-based approach to relations with Russia, but also for pragmatists. It likewise means that some kind of Polish-Russian reconciliation is essential for any lasting success in the dialogue between Moscow and the West.

THE PRISON OF THE PAST

Warsaw and Moscow's mutual distrust cannot be understood outside of its historical context: in particular, the events of World War II and those that preceded and followed it, which were integral to forming the contemporary national identities of the Russian and Polish people.

There must be no illusions that symbolic concessions, public apologies, and elegant gestures will suffice to overcome the deep distrust between the two sides. Historical disagreements and old grievances between Poland and Russia are too ingrained to be mended in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, Poland and Russia are low on each other's lists of foreign policy priorities and reluctant to invest significant financial and human resources in bilateral dialogue. It is therefore all the more important to understand how Warsaw and Moscow could make real progress, despite limited resources.



During the three decades since the end of the Cold War, Poland and Russia have amassed extensive experience in dialogue on historical issues. This experience shows, among other things, that a major stumbling block to normalizing relations has been the false belief that historical grievances are easy to overcome.

Oversimplified, sugarcoated perceptions of successes in Germany's historical dialogues with France and Poland led Warsaw and Moscow to aspire to nothing less than full-scale Russo-Polish reconciliation. Whenever their attempts inevitably failed, the sides found fault with each other, grew aggravated, and gave up all efforts as futile.

Focusing purely on the symbolic aspects of the reconciliation efforts of other European nations, Poland and Russia ignored the conditions—including geopolitical and economic—that made those reconciliations possible and the symbolic gestures effective.

Germany and France's reconciliation after World War II hinged on simultaneous Western European economic integration, joint efforts to fight the communist threat, and the leading role of the United States in Western Europe. The more limited rapprochement between Germany and Poland was driven by the unification of Germany, the resulting need to assuage Poland's fears, and the subsequent eastward expansion of NATO and the EU.

These favorable circumstances have been—and will likely continue to be—largely absent from relations between Poland and Russia. Thus, symbolic gestures such as open letters and public apologies will have little impact on Russo-Polish relations as long as they are put forward in an economic and geopolitical vacuum. Any impact that they do have will be brief and easily reversible, with historical disagreements being revived and generating mutual irritation afresh.

THE DYNAMICS OF DIALOGUE

This reversibility has been abundantly in evidence during the past thirty years. Just this June, Vladimir Putin and former Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski each published an open letter in the German media on the eightieth anniversary of Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. The two politicians exchanged bitter historical accusations typical of the Russian-Polish dialogue—yet just a decade ago, in 2009–2011, those same politicians, along with then Polish prime minister Donald Tusk, had made an intrepid and broad attempt at national reconciliation. Putin wrote an open letter to the Polish people condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and then joined Tusk in a ceremony commemorating the Soviet massacre of Polish officers in Katyn. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, made a historic visit to Poland, while a joint group of Russian and Polish historians wrote a collection of essays on the two countries' history.

However, the tragic plane crash over Smolensk in April 2010 that killed the Polish president Lech Kaczyński and nearly 100 other Polish dignitaries traveling to an event commemorating the Katyn massacre, of all things, along with the subsequent coming to power of conservatives in Poland and the hardening in Russian foreign and domestic policy all resulted in a rollback of Russo-Polish reconciliation. Warsaw and Moscow returned to their habitual mutual accusations.



This failure demonstrates that if Poland and Russia want their troubled historical dialogue to be at all productive, they need not only good will and political resolve, but also a realistic understanding of the tremendous importance that events from their mutual history hold for both countries. They must understand that their reciprocal grievances are not temporary misconceptions, follies, or the personal opinions of particular political leaders: they are an important and often fundamental aspect of their national identities. These grievances cannot be revised or revoked with an open letter, any number of ceremonies, or even regime change.

PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY

The resilience of certain mass perceptions of national history is especially evident in the case of Poland. During the past thirty years, the country has enjoyed a more democratic political order, greater freedom of the press, and higher economic prosperity than Russia. Poland has become a full and active member of the EU and NATO. Yet these favorable conditions have had little effect on how the Polish people perceive themselves and their history.

A 2019 [survey](#) showed that 74 percent of Poles believe that their nation has historically suffered more than any other. The figure for those aged eighteen to twenty-nine was 67 percent, meaning that even Poles who have never personally experienced anything other than life in the EU are convinced that their country stands apart for the hardships it has endured.

Self-image as a wronged nation that nobly loses to stronger adversaries and finds moral triumph in this loss is as popular in Poland today as it was thirty, eighty, or a hundred years ago. A significant part of Polish society still views pragmatism and compromises as lowly and undignified, and hopeless campaigns against a stronger adversary as the epitome of honor and national duty. This demonstrates that neither prosperity nor democracy and new leadership automatically heal old wounds or change a nation's perception of itself and its history.

The collapse of the communist regime in Poland was expected to bring about a more realistic perception of history, since the communists avoided discussing the Holocaust and the ethnicity of Nazi victims. However, the [dynamics](#) of poll results relating to perceptions of the fates of Polish and Jewish people in World War II show a regression. In 1992, 46 percent of Poles believed that Jews suffered more than Poles; in 2021, that number had dropped to 26 percent. In contrast, the proportion of those who believe that Poles suffered more rose from 6 to 20 percent, and the share of those who think both groups suffered equally increased from 32 to 51 percent.

Thus, democratization only fueled the traditional Polish identity as a victimized nation. And a victim cannot also be the executioner. A law [passed](#) in 2018 envisaging prison sentences of up to three years for public statements accusing Poles of complicity in the Holocaust was no political anomaly for modern, European Poland. Although later Warsaw watered down the law under international pressure, a 2021 survey shows that 39 percent of Poles agree that historians who discredit Poland—for example, by writing about Polish involvement in the Holocaust—should be tried in court.



World War II is just as crucial for Russian national identity. When asked in polls which events in their history they are proud of, nearly 90 percent of Russians **consistently** name victory in the war, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, while 69 percent of Russians **consider** Victory Day Russia's biggest holiday.

However, whereas Poland sees its sufferings in World War II as evidence of its righteousness and nobility, Russia espouses a cult of victory: a victory achieved at great cost, and powerful proof that Russia can overcome all difficulties and win against all odds.

Still, the ultimate conclusions drawn by Poles and Russians are similar. Both nations see their role in World War II as exceptional and as one that still entitles them to special treatment by the rest of the world. The Poles explain this entitlement by the unsurpassed suffering their nation underwent during the war; the Russians by their unsurpassed contribution to the defeat of the Nazis.

Both nations are certain of their exceptionalism and the debt due to them from the rest of the world. Both nations feel passionately about events from eight decades ago. Above all, both nations view any accusations over the roles of their ancestors in the war as the greatest sacrilege, deserving of the harshest vengeance.

The rage Poles feel at the term "Polish death camps" and the extreme reaction of the Russian authorities to "defamation of veterans" are fruit of the same tree. They reflect the national conviction of modern-day Russians and Poles that the heroic acts and suffering of their grandfathers fully paid for any of their sins, so no one should dare talk of their wrongdoings.

This cult of the forefathers who fought in World War II is almost religious in its fervor and pervasiveness, and it is difficult to conceive that an agreement reached by historians or politicians could push the majority of Poles and Russians to abandon their beliefs for the sake of mutual forgiveness.

THE ROLES OF THE REGIMES

It is also naïve to hope that a change of political leadership will help overcome the deep divide. True, the Kremlin capitalizes on the memory and interpretation of World War II for its own political purposes: legitimizing itself and undermining the opposition. However, there is no reason to expect Russia's future rulers, even if they prove more democratic, to ignore an issue so important for Russian society. After all, democratic elections and changes in government in Poland have not made much difference.

It would be reassuring to attribute the obsession of the Russian regime with the memory of World War II to the personal predilections of the leadership, or lack of political legitimacy. However, the **statements** of the current Polish leadership, notwithstanding its democratic provenance, reveal a similar eagerness to harness the country's history for political gains.

President Putin's increasing preoccupation with the treatment of World War II in textbooks is frequently cited as evidence that he has lost touch with the real needs of modern Russia. But he is matched in this by Poland's de facto leader Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of the Law and Justice



party, who in a similar vein **insists** that the number of history lessons in school should be increased to six or seven per week because that is the only way to raise worthy and truly patriotic citizens.

It might seem that a new generation of politicians could fix the situation if they only had the political will. However, more than five decades of German-Polish attempts at reconciliation have shown that perception of history has less to do with the personalities of national leaders than one might think. The lengthy and laborious dialogue between Germany and Poland also sheds light on what Poland and Russia can and cannot hope to achieve.

THE GERMAN EXAMPLE

The historical dialogue between Germany and Poland began during the Cold War and was conducted in favorable circumstances, with the investment of significant resources. Still, notwithstanding all the efforts made, the process of reconciliation between the two nations remains incomplete, demonstrating how difficult it is to achieve progress in dialogue on sensitive issues of shared history.

As far back as 1965, Polish bishops sent an open letter to German bishops calling for mutual forgiveness. In 1970, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees at the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto in penance for Nazi crimes. In the years since, German officials and public figures have made numerous apologies to the Polish people, admitted full culpability for the tragedy of World War II, waived any counterclaims, and paid reparations to many Poles.

Over the decades, the Polish-German dialogue has spawned a plethora of joint commissions, programs, NGOs, and conferences dedicated to the shared history of the two nations. Since the late 1980s, these efforts have taken place in the favorable conditions of German and European unification, with Germany and Poland willing to offer major concessions to overcome the divisions of the Cold War and to make Eastern Europe a part of the West from the viewpoints of politics, economics, and values.

Yet half a century later, the Polish government is still demanding billions in compensation from Germany for the losses incurred during World War II. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has complained about attempts to blur Germany's responsibility for Nazi crimes. Poland is also calling on Germany to **erect** a separate memorial specifically to the Polish victims of Nazi terror. Such demands raised after so many apparent successes in the prolonged reconciliation process reveal that for Poland, the issue of Germany's culpability cannot be closed. It is one of the foundations of Polish national identity and Poland's perception of its place in Europe and the world.

The Russo-Polish relationship lacks the favorable conditions that sustained the German-Polish historical dialogue. Russia and Poland have shown little interest in closer economic cooperation or in working hard to improve relations. The two countries find themselves on different sides of the new geopolitical divide, and the scale of personal contacts between them is modest, despite their shared border.

Above all, Russia is steadfastly unwilling to admit fault or apologize for events related to World War II, as that would undermine the fundamental concept of Russia's identity as the nation that



saved the world from Nazism. This belief is just as vital to Russians as belief in the exceptionalism of their suffering is to the Polish people.

Germany's willingness to repent for its past was unique, shaped by its devastating loss in the war, the Nuremberg trials, and a lengthy foreign occupation. One might think that the failure of Soviet communism, the collapse of the USSR, and Russia's loss in the Cold War would prompt Moscow to reflect upon its history in the same way, but in reality they had the opposite effect.

Losing the Cold War has only made the Russian people value their victory in World War II more, viewing it as proof of Russia's great-power status, not to be lost due to temporary challenges. The dubious prospects of dialogue with a secondary foreign partner like Poland are hardly enough to compel Russians to forgo a key element of their national identity.

LIMITED PROSPECTS

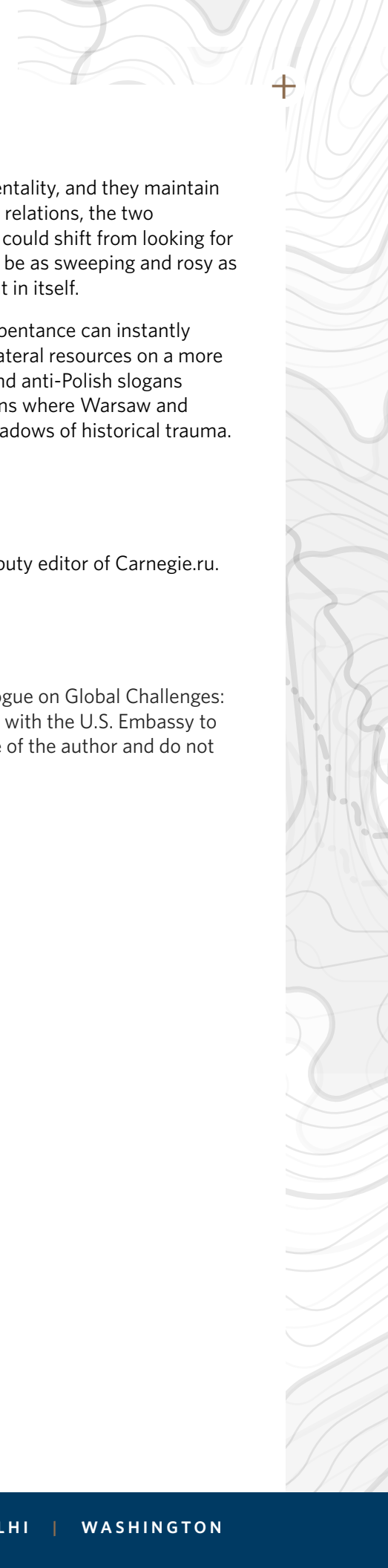
The Polish and Russian views of their mutual history, particularly the history of World War II, are incompatible. Attempts to achieve a comprehensive reconciliation between the two nations are bound to fail and may even drive the sides further apart. However, this does not doom Warsaw and Moscow to eternal estrangement. The German-Polish historical dialogue and Russia's relations with other Central and Eastern European states show that limited positive results are possible.

To start with, history should not be the only topic of bilateral relations, as it currently is for Russia and Poland. The two countries still have an extensive infrastructure of bilateral relations. Their constant clashes over sensitive historical issues could be lessened if the attention of numerous people in charge of the two countries' ties could be shifted elsewhere.

Russia also has differences with other European states, like [Hungary](#) and [Serbia](#)—some even greater than those with Poland—in their historical interpretations of World War II events. These differences have not dominated Russia's relations with those countries, however, because they have joint projects that offer benefits outweighing those of stressing historical contradictions.

Another lesson from the German-Polish experience is that focusing on targeted objectives can be more productive than attempting ambitious but hopeless national dialogue. The people of Poland and Germany have not achieved full reconciliation despite tremendous efforts and investments. However, there are many individuals, including in positions of power, who have relinquished mutual aversion, or at least discount that aversion in their decisionmaking. Polish politicians might never find themselves motivating voters with pro-Germany slogans, but Germany and Poland have been able to set aside their differences and build close economic cooperation.

Finally, Poland and Russia could greatly rehabilitate their relations if each more often ignored the interpretations of their mutual history the other uses for domestic consumption, and stopped fixating on each other's television talk shows and statements by mid-ranking politicians. Polish society will not accept the Russian interpretation of World War II and vice versa, so the two nations should stop trying to force their revisions onto each other and jeopardizing their relations over every historical bone of contention.



Poland and Russia have much in common culturally and in national mentality, and they maintain a strong interest in each other. Despite all of the challenges in bilateral relations, the two countries still have an impressive infrastructure of bilateral ties, which could shift from looking for opportunities for conflict to making progress. Such progress might not be as sweeping and rosy as some might like, but as long as it's tangible, this will be an achievement in itself.

It would be wiser to give up hopes that open letters and gestures of repentance can instantly cure the two countries' mutual grievances, and to focus the limited bilateral resources on a more targeted dialogue. This will not make anti-Russian slogans in Poland and anti-Polish slogans in Russia less popular. But it could bring those areas of bilateral relations where Warsaw and Moscow can achieve mutually productive cooperation out from the shadows of historical trauma.

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NOTES

This piece was published as part of the "Relaunching U.S.-Russia Dialogue on Global Challenges: The Role of the Next Generation" project, implemented in cooperation with the U.S. Embassy to Russia. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Embassy to Russia.