

Institute of National Remembrance

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With history into modernity – an article by the IPN President Karol Nawrocki Ph.D.



If the free world abandons an active politics of remembrance, it will give way to those who have learned nothing from the experience of 20th-century totalitarianisms.

Chance Phelps was nineteen years old when he fell on a mission in Iraq on Good Friday, 9 April 2004. Eight days later, he was buried with military honours in Dubois, Wyoming, his home state. On the same

day, Officer Michael Strobl, who helped transport Phelps' body to the US, gave his mother the St Christopher's medallion the boy had been wearing at the time of his death. 'I didn't know Chance before he died. Today, I miss him,' Strobl wrote sometime afterwards. A few years later, this touching story became the setting for the film *Taking Chance*, starring Kevin Bacon. It shows the reverence the American people have for their fallen heroes.

Free Poland also honours its heroes and buries them with proper respect – even if it has not been eight days but eight decades since they passed away. The Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which I have been entrusted to lead, operates a Search and Identification Office comprised not only of historians and archivists but also of geneticists and archaeologists. In Poland and beyond its borders, we uncover the remains of the victims of the 1917-1989 ethnic cleansing and the oppressive rule of two totalitarian systems, German Nazism and Soviet Communism. The remnants of people buried in unmarked death pits, intended to vanish from history forever. We are giving them back their identity. Our office has found the remains of more than two thousand people so far, and about 10 per cent of them have been identified. This means the families of the murdered can, in a sense, get their loved ones back and finally light the candles on their graves.

The search for the remains of our heroes is just one of the many tasks of the Institute. Its other functions include archiving, research, education, investigation, verification and much more. It is an institution that serves a free and democratic state, helping Poles overcome the

tragic legacy of two totalitarian regimes.

Completing the transformation

‘One careless move by the crane operator and the monument ceased to exist,’ announced the voice-over of the Polish Film Chronicle. On 17 November 1989, the mighty monument to Feliks Dzerzhinsky (Polish: Feliks Dzierżyński), the murderous head of the Bolshevik secret police, collapsed on Bank Square in Warsaw. The assembled crowd erupted in cheers – one of the symbols of communism has thankfully disappeared from the public space of the Polish capital. That December, the monument to Vladimir Lenin in Krakow’s Nowa Huta met the same fate. Certain square and street names have been changed to remove references to Communists. The totalitarian system installed in Poland under Joseph Stalin’s direction was slowly falling apart.

And yet, the transition proved uneven, and soon it seemed that it had stopped halfway. Former communists were now thriving in business and standing successfully in democratic elections. Many important positions were filled by former collaborators of the notorious Security Service (SB) – although the full scale of this practice was not yet known as the archives inherited from the totalitarian state’s secret services were still closed. There were many blank pages in the study of the past, and the research of the Second World War was dramatically neglected. Meanwhile, numerous victims of totalitarian regimes and well-deserved activists from the pre-1989 democratic opposition lived in obscurity, often in extremely difficult material conditions. These people had a legitimate sense of transformational injustice.

The Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, which came into force in January 1999, was a belated but very important attempt to change this situation. The members of parliament passed the law with the commendable belief that 'no unlawful action by the state against the citizens can be guarded as classified or left to oblivion' – as stated in the preamble.

The beginnings of the IPN were not easy. The parliamentary election for the Institute's first president dragged on until June 2000, and the complete handover of the archives, which were legally required to be given to the IPN within 60 days, took several years. Today, however, we are proud to have an archive of 93 kilometres of files, some of which have already been digitised. Alongside the material received from various institutions per legal requirements, our collection also includes donations from more than two thousand individuals from around the globe.

Today, anyone who suffered at the hands of the communist system in Poland can view the material regarding them collected by the security services and, where possible, learn the names behind the pseudonyms of the informers. Those aspiring for the most important positions in the state must disclose whether they have served in or collaborated with the communist security apparatus in the past. The Institute of National Remembrance verifies these statements in the interest of openness in public life. The IPN archive is also an invaluable source of knowledge for researchers and journalists, including those from abroad. Without our records, researching 20th-century Polish history and the Holocaust

would be much poorer.

The IPN Archive's extensive collections are also used by our prosecutors to investigate past Nazi, Communist and Ukrainian nationalist crimes. Although the passage of time is inexorable, in many cases it is still not too late to punish the perpetrators. The Regional Court of Berlin is set to begin the trial of Manfred N., a 79-year-old former East German Stasi officer, accused of murdering a Pole in 1974 for attempting to enter the West. A breakthrough in this case would probably not have been possible without the investigation opened by the IPN in 2018 and our request for the suspect's handover.

As in East Germany, the communist authorities in Poland did not hold back from the most horrific repressions to the very end. In August last year, we launched the Archive of Crimes project at the IPN. It aims to re-examine the criminal activities of the communist junta that ruled Poland in the 1980s. Our prosecutors are revisiting cases previously deemed unsolvable, sending a clear message: those who committed acts of assault, murder, and unlawful imprisonment in the past will not rest easy today. We are already seeing the first results. For example, it has been firmly established that the distinguished priest Franciszek Blachnicki, whose activities were a thorn in the Communists' side, did not die in 1987 of natural causes, as officially declared, but of poisoning.

A biographical exhibition and a brochure published by the IPN are among the ways Father Blachnicki is remembered today. The Institute of National Remembrance Publishing House is the undisputed leader of

the historical book market in Poland. We have over 4,000 historical titles. Now that our online bookshop has been registered on Amazon, we can reach a foreign audience more effectively.

Telling the world about Poland

Several decades of communist enslavement meant that Polish historiography hardly reached the free world. Consequently, an educated person in the West has heard about the massacre of the French village Oradour-sur-Glane, razed to the ground by the Waffen-SS, but not about the 817 Polish villages brutally pacified during the Second World War. They have heard of Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, the mastermind behind the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler, but they may be completely unaware that in occupied Poland, there was an underground Home Army fighting for freedom and democracy, which at its peak numbered some 380,000 sworn soldiers.

The fall of the Iron Curtain did not make these disparities vanish overnight. Although the Polish archives opened widely to Western historians and journalists, they still preferred to use British, French or German sources – partly out of habit, partly, I suspect, for language-related reasons. Free Poland, which had long neglected the politics of remembrance, could not offer the world an effective account of its history. As a result, the Western view of our past is still shallow and often distorted, as in the permanent exhibition at the House of European History in Brussels.

It wasn't until 2015 that the government in Warsaw began to systematically implement a conscious historical policy. From the beginning, it faced criticism, such as the demands to 'leave history to the historians.'

To all those who preach naïve slogans of a politics without history, I say over and over again: every modern state pursues a kind of politics of remembrance. A vote in the Bundestag has decided that a monument commemorating the murdered Jews of Europe will be erected in Berlin. This is but one of the many ways in which the German authorities try to convince the world that they have done an exemplary job in dealing with the grim legacy of the Third Reich. The Russian Federation has a very specific kind of history policy in place today. It is based on a vulgar lie, contempt for the victims of communist totalitarianism and reverence for their executioners. Suffice it to say that while Warsaw's toppled Dzerzhinsky monument ended up in a museum, Moscow recently erected a new one in his honour.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year made us more aware than ever how important it is to remove names and symbols that still perpetuate communism from Polish public life. In March 2022, I appealed to the local authorities to do so, and we did not have to wait long for the results. Of the sixty so-called monuments of gratitude to the Red Army that were still scarring Polish cities and towns, more than half have been removed so far. In their place, we are erecting memorials to real Polish heroes, such as Witold Pilecki, who was imprisoned by the Germans in Auschwitz and murdered by the

Communists after the war.

We also commemorate our heroes abroad. Last year in Ancona, Italy, we unveiled a monument to the Carpathian Lancers Regiment that liberated the city in July 1944. In the distant town of Rusape, Zimbabwe, we opened a renovated cemetery as a final resting place for Polish refugees from the Second World War.

Our activities abroad are aimed at local Polish communities but increasingly also at the foreign-speaking public. Through the 'Telling the World about Poland' project, we reach readers on several continents, including the audiences of such prestigious titles as the *Chicago Tribune* and *L'Opinion*. We translate our books and even computer games into other languages.

A modern history lesson

A new generation, born long after the fall of communist dictatorship and even longer after the Second World War, is reaching adulthood. They are spared the direct historical lessons that their grandparents and great-grandparents had to endure. Traditional education will not work miracles here. An important role is played by memorial sites, especially those at former German concentration and extermination camps and Communist execution camps. However, the main sources of historical knowledge for today's secondary school students are the internet and computer games, as they frankly admitted in the Education for Remembrance study commissioned by the IPN at the end of 2022.

We do not ignore this reality. The Institute of National Remembrance will never stop organising scientific conferences and publishing monumental monographs. But to engage in dialogue with the younger generation, we need to be able to speak their language. For pre-school children, we have prepared, among others, a performance and an animation about Wojtek the Bear. It is an attractive way for children to learn about the fate of the legendary soldiers of General Władysław Anders, who fought for the freedom of Poland and other nations during the Second World War and became famous for capturing Monte Cassino. To reach teenagers, we use comic books and computer games. The latter are being effectively developed by the IPN's Office for New Technologies, which I created. Since its première at last year's PAX East in Boston, our *Cyphers Game* about the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik war – in which the Polish army defeated the Red Army and saved Europe from communist enslavement – received excellent reviews. The latest IPN production, *Aviators – War in the Skies*, is a tribute to the Polish pilots of the Second World War, who played an invaluable role, especially in the Battle of Britain.

When I meet representatives from the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Romania, I often hear that they regard the Institute of National Remembrance as a model of historical policy. Meanwhile, the newly elected Polish parliament has no lack of voices calling for the abolition of the IPN. That would be a step towards historical amnesia. But history – contrary to Francis Fukuyama's thesis – has never ended.

Karol Nawrocki

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