

*The Institute of National Remembrance and Coming to Terms with a Difficult Past:  
World War II and the Communist Dictatorship*

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I would like to begin with an obvious statement that bears repeating: When one travels to East Central Europe one might notice that history is an aspect of that regional culture which seems to matter more than it is valued in the United States or even Western Europe. Both the United States and Western Europe benefited from established democratic systems following World War II, in addition to time to come to terms with many difficult and painful historic issues. For countries that spent more than four decades under Soviet control and Communist dictatorship, the situation is quite different.

The Communist system acted, one could suggest, as a historical refrigerator. It blocked and froze numerous issues, facts and conflicts by way of political control and censorship. Such censorship did not allow pertinent topics to be normally discussed in public and analyzed by historians. After the collapse of the Communist system in 1989, all these issues escaped from the refrigerator – confronting us with many dramatic controversies, often going back to a relatively remote time – World War II and its aftermath. These issues include internal history of Central and Eastern European nations, as well as relations between the various nations or ethnic groups. In the case of Poland: The Poles and the Germans, the Poles and the Jews, the Poles and the Ukrainians, the Poles and the Russians, and the Poles and the Lithuanians.

Moreover, the Communist system not only sustained pre-existing conflicts in the region, but also created its own conflicts, dramas, and perpetrated awful crimes. After 1989, all of these issues became a central part of public debates in the countries of regained independence and democratic institutions. Although fifteen years have passed, historical issues still influence current public debates, political and intellectual disputes, to a much greater extent than in countries which were not under dictatorial systems, censorship, etc., for several decades.

The Institute of National Remembrance is the establishment that is at the very center of all of these historical debates in Poland. It was created to take on the leading role in these discussions and address the main burden of dealing with the difficult past.

In Poland, the idea of creating a specialized institution to deal with issues from the country's totalitarian past was suggested only several years after the fall of communism; later than in Germany or the Czech Republic, where such institutions were established in the early nineties. The law regarding the Institute of National Remembrance was passed in December 1998, with the support of the post-Solidarity parties who formed the government at that time. However, it was vetoed by president Kwasniewski, who came from the ranks of the post communist party. It took the parliament a few months to reject the veto, and almost a year to elect a chairman of the Institute who could start to organize the institution.

The Institute of National Remembrance started to function in mid-2000. It is an independent, apolitical institution; the Institute chairman is elected by a three-fifths majority in parliament for a 5-year term and is responsible only to the parliament.

Parliamentary law defined the primary goal of the Institute to be to deal with the repression and political crimes committed between the time of the outbreak of World War II up until the collapse of Communism. Generally, these issues include the Nazi, Soviet, and Communist crimes. There are three main ways to fulfill this mission and three corresponding branches of the Institute.

The first of the three Institute branches is the archival section. Its purpose is to make all archival documents related to the Nazi, Soviet, and Communist security apparatus activities available to the public. The second branch investigates and prosecutes crimes committed by Nazi, Soviet, and Communists authorities including war crimes and so-called crimes against humanity or genocide crimes. The third branch performs scholarly research and education regarding all of these issues.

During discussions in parliament and in public, it was often mentioned that the Polish Institute should take into account and model itself after the German approach to these issues, particularly the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Ministry of State Security Files, known as the Gauck's office, after the its founder and first chairman. The regulations adopted in Poland indeed resemble the German regulations, but the responsibilities of the Polish Institute are broader. First, the Institute of National Remembrance not only deals with the Communist dictatorship, but also the World War II era. Secondly, the Polish Institute prosecutes war crimes and crimes committed by Communist functionaries, which is not a responsibility of the German institute.

The founding of the Institute of National Remembrance evoked great discussions and emotions. The most controversial issue was related to the immediate goal of the Institute – taking over possession of all documents created by the Communist security apparatus and making them accessible to historians and the public. The most sensitive and controversial files are those of the secret informants of the Security Service. As in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania, they were supposed to become accessible both to the people who were persecuted under the Communist regime and to historians. There were fears that opening these files might lead to mass-scale drama. Not only would the files expose former Communist informants, ruining their careers, but they would also destroy the lives of people who may have been falsely reported on by Security Service, whose documents were often ambiguous, misleading, and tricky. There were warnings from the German experience, where after the disclosure of the Communist Security files dramatic situations took place – husbands and wives discovered that their spouses informed on them, and parents discovered the same things about their children. These warnings were often exaggerated – the German experience seems, in my opinion, to be a good example of how to deal with the files of the Communist secret police. A very interesting and fair analysis of this problem can be found in a book by Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History*.

In Poland, the anticipated explosion of sensational facts emerging from the Communist security files did not happen due to various reasons: one being the fact that the files were not accessible immediately after the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance. Unlike in Germany, where the Secret police (Stasi) was dissolved and Gauck's Institute took over not only the documents but also the archives (including buildings and storage areas), in Poland the process was more evolutionary and took more time. The Communist Security apparatus was not dissolved; it was transformed into the Security apparatus of the democratic state, which preserved its archives. The Institute of National Remembrance had to negotiate the transfer of documents and organize the entire logistical

and technical infrastructure required for storage (altogether roughly 80 km of documents, making it one of the greatest archival transfers in Europe). This explains why, unlike in Germany, in Poland took more or less two years until the public got the access to the documents.

Contrary to expectations, the first two years of the Institute's existence were not dominated by the ghosts from the time of Communist dictatorship, but by completely different kind of ghosts, much less expected at that time. In June 2000 – just when the Institute started to function – a book by Jan Tomasz Gross was published in Poland, entitled *Neighbours*.

The New York University sociologist accused Polish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne of murdering 1600 Jews in July 1941. According to Gross, the role of the German occupying forces was passive, the initiative and execution of the mass murder were Polish. These facts were generally unknown to the Polish public.

The publication of *Neighbours* started a great debate regarding Polish history. This was undoubtedly the most important public debate in Poland after 1989. Not only in regard to Polish-Jewish relations, but generally to twentieth century Poland. The debate touched on issues of vital importance to the Poles – German and Soviet occupation, Polish attitudes towards Germans and Jews, and the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust.

The very heated debate lasted several months; the question of Jedwabne has been the number one public issue, putting other matters in the shade, including politics and the economy. Though the situation was quite different, I imagine that in terms of force of public interest, the only suitable comparison may be the Dreyfus Affair which overshadowed all other topics in France a century ago.

One cannot escape the question why this debate began almost 60 years after the war. In my opinion the answer is obvious: honest research and open debate regarding such dramatic issues like the Jedwabne murders can only take place in a free and democratic country, where there is no censorship but free access to archives, no limitations imposed on historians or journalists – allowing them to take up whatever questions they wish. The Jedwabne case demonstrates very clearly the mechanism which I mentioned before: the Communist system acted as a refrigerator. The dramatic conflicts and tensions from the past, and also knowledge of them were frozen, suspended and after the collapse of Communism they re-emerged or even exploded. This was the legacy with which newly created Institute of National Remembrance was confronted - instead of the anticipated communist crimes.

IPN's research on the massacre of Jews in Jedwabne was simultaneously taking place on two different levels – yet independent of one another. The first was the formal investigation being carried out by the prosecution branch of the Institute, governed by the criminal procedure code. The second area was research done by historians from the Institute, and invited participants from the Polish Academy of Sciences and universities in Warsaw and Białystok. This research resulted in a two-volume book, published in November 2002, entitled, *Wokół Jedwabnego [The Jedwabne Case]*. It will hopefully be published soon in the United States as well.

These two volumes include all Polish, Soviet and German documents which were found after extensive research, as well as analyses prepared by scholars. During the research

phase, new very important or even sensational facts were uncovered, which went beyond the perspective of the book by Jan Tomasz Gross. It turned out that anti-Jewish pogroms had taken place not only in Jedwabne but also in nearby Radziłów. These were the locations of the two greatest massacres in which hundreds of Jews were burned alive.

However, there were other almost 20 localities where, in July-August 1941, Poles murdered Jews or participated in the murders organized and executed by the Germans. The numbers of victims in those localities usually were much smaller than those of Jedwabne and Radziłów.

These events should be seen in the broader context of a wave of pogroms that occurred along the front line from Lithuania to Bessarabia during the summer of 1941 after Nazi Germany attacked the USSR. Those who participated in the pogroms lived in areas that had been occupied by the Soviets after 1939: Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Romanians and, in the case of the Łomża and Białystok regions – Poles as well.

Historians from the Institute of National Remembrance found documents and transcripts of roughly 60 trials that took place from 1945-1960 and during which more than 100 people were accused of taking part in murdering Jews. These trials were not publicized at that time, received little press coverage, and as a result, they were completely forgotten. Now we must to rediscover this nearly forgotten sphere.

Let me very briefly present the main mechanisms of the pogroms which can be reconstructed in light of the research done by the Institute of National Remembrance. The anti-Jewish violence by Poles happened at a specific time and place. Prior to World War II, the Łomża region was an area where the Stronnictwo Narodowe (National Party) was particularly strong. This was a nationalist party with anti-Semitic tendencies. In the 1930's, the Łomża region was especially notorious for its anti-Jewish excesses.

The Soviet occupation widened the gap between the Poles and Jews in this region. A belief that Jews had collaborated with the Soviet authorities was widespread among the Polish population. In addition to any actual instances of collaboration, this belief was also based on the Jews' enthusiastic welcoming of the Red Army in September 1939, and on the role that some of them had played in the Workers' Guard early on during the Soviet occupation. If Jews took advantage of the opportunity for upward mobility in the Soviet system, this was also viewed as collaboration; the Poles meanwhile were now the oppressed population rather than the privileged group they were before the war.

During June-July 1941, in the vacuum that emerged after the Germans drove the Soviets out, spontaneous provisional local governments began forming in the towns and villages of the Łomża and Białystok region, as did "citizens' guards," which were sometimes even armed. During the first weeks of the new occupation, they were tolerated by the German military administration. It was the members of these formations who were often behind this anti-Jewish violence, either acting as instigators or participants. Often, it was people just released from Soviet prisons who were most active in instigating pogroms. The pretext for the outburst of anti-Jewish violence was usually revenge against real or imagined Soviet collaborators that sparked violence which was usually aimed at the entire Jewish population.

The anti-Jewish violence would have probably never taken on the dimensions of the large-scale massacres – as in Jedwabne and Radziłów – had it not been for the example set by

the Germans, as well as their consent, encouragement and even initiation of such activities. In a series of orders issued in late June and early July 1941, Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich's Main Security Office, told the heads of the special Security Police detachments to incite "popular pogroms" and "self-cleansing actions" against the Jews. Evidence of such activities can be seen in Radziłów, where a special Gestapo commando helped organize a pogrom. During the 1960's, a Jewish eyewitness named Chaia Finkelstein identified SS-Obersturmführer Hermann Schaper as the head of that detachment. That same technique was used eighteen kilometers away in Jedwabne three days later, where a Gestapo detachment also appeared, making it likely Schaper and his subordinates instigated that crime as well. Traces of the Schaper's detachment were found in the German archives by historians of the Institute of National Remembrance.

Let me just add one personal remark to conclude the Jedwabne subject. It was really a hard experience for a Polish historian to discover documents about such horrible crimes committed by Poles, the vast majority being completely unknown until our research, and was the decision to publish all these documents and findings was even harder. However, I think it was worthwhile. The openness of the Institute and other Polish institutions regarding Jedwabne was appreciated by a significant portion of Polish and international public opinion. Now no one can accuse Polish historians and Polish institutions of hiding any documents or facts. Thanks to this openness, I dare say that Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israeli relations are better now than they were before revealing the horrible truth about the Jedwabne massacre.

I might say that the Jedwabne case was probably the most difficult, controversial and emotional subject that the Institute of the National Remembrance has been confronted with so far. This, however, does not mean that other topics are easy and not controversial.

Other very explosive questions are related to Polish-Ukrainian relations in the past. On the one hand, the Ukrainians currently living in Poland expected the Institute to focus on the sufferings they underwent in Poland. First of all, on the so-called "Akcja Wisła" (Operation Vistula) in 1947, during which approximately 150 thousand Ukrainians were deported from South-Eastern Poland and resettled in small, dispersed communities throughout Western and Northern parts of Poland. The official explanation given by Communist authorities in 1947 regarding this operation, was liquidating the civilian support for the Ukrainian nationalist armed guerrilla. This explanation is still today supported by part of the Polish public opinion. Another part of Polish public opinion, including many historians, argues that the armed guerrilla could have been defeated without mass deportations of civilians. They remind that the Polish Anti-Communist armed guerrillas, also supported in many regions of Poland by the civilian population, were defeated without any mass deportations. According to this point of view, the real goals of these mass deportations were ethnic cleansing and building by the Communists homogenous nation-state in Poland after World War II.

The Institute of National Remembrance organized an academic conference, at which various aspects of the "Operation Vistula" were discussed by Polish and Ukrainian historians. It was the first big conference devoted entirely to this difficult issue.

On the other hand, there are also very legitimate and perhaps more serious Polish grievances against Ukrainians regarding the historical past. Up until the collapse of Communism, it was not possible to do any research or publish any mention of the massacres

of the Polish population in Volhynia and in Eastern Galicia perpetrated in 1943-1944 by the Ukrainians – so-called Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

This subject was blocked by Communist censorship for two reasons:

- 1) after 1945 Ukrainians were treated as a friendly Soviet nation, a member of the USSR, and any mentions about Polish-Ukrainian conflicts should be avoided; they would be treated as Anti-Soviet
- 2) Volhynia and Eastern Galicia were territories lost by Poland in 1945, they were incorporated by the Soviet Union; any mentions about lost territories were not permitted by Polish Communist censorship; again they would be treated as anti-Soviet revisionism.

This subject was only tackled in Polish émigré publications and it is no wonder that it attracted much public interest in Poland after the collapse of Communism. The Institute of National Remembrance was confronted with demands that the whole truth about the massacres in Volhynia and Galicia should be revealed, that a total as high as 90,000 – 100,000 victims be officially recognized, and that the massacres be recognized legally as genocide. This would mean that the perpetrators should be prosecuted even today, sixty years later. There were expectations in Poland that Ukrainian historians and Ukrainian institutions acknowledge officially the number of victims. Moreover, some Poles expected the Ukrainians to recognize that these massacres were not just spontaneous acts of hate and revenge, but planned and organized by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Insurgent Army – a deliberate operation of ethnic-cleansing, whose aim was to kill as many Poles as possible and make all others flee from the territories which were to become part of a homogenous Ukrainian nation-state. These demands were very difficult for the Ukrainians. Although Ukrainian historians admit that thousands of Poles were murdered, they tend to lower the figure to 20,000-30,000. They also argue that Polish paramilitary organizations killed thousands of Ukrainian civilians which would make the numbers of victims almost comparable. The Ukrainian official institutions reject the notion of genocide with respect to the Volhynian and Galician massacres and are very reluctant to admit that the leadership of the Ukrainian Nationalist Organization took the deliberate decision to kill thousands of civilian Poles. Such a confession would, of course, severely damage the reputation of the Ukrainian independence movement which is a part of the tradition to which the current Ukrainian state refers. Ukrainian historians often suggest that anti-Polish violence in 1943-1944 was a reaction to the discrimination of Ukrainians in pre-war Poland.

The Institute of National Remembrance was placed in the middle of all these very emotional discussions. They were heated by the 60-year anniversary of the greatest wave of massacres in Volhynia, those of July 1943. The Institute organized a conference which included the participation of Polish and Ukrainian historians, who presented various and often conflicting points of view of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict. We also organized a touring exhibition about Polish-Ukrainian relations from 1939-1947, the most dramatic period. In this exhibition we included both the Volhynia massacres and the “Operation Vistula.” It was presented in many towns throughout Poland and also in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. Another initiative which should be mentioned is a volume of documents that the Institute will publish in cooperation with the archives of the Ukrainian Security Service, in Polish and Ukrainian, which will tackle all aspects of the conflict. The Ukrainian Security Service inherited the archives of the KGB. In the 1940s and 1950s, when it was still in combat with the Ukrainian clandestine independence movement, the KGB recovered many documents of the Ukrainian

Insurgent Army and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Thus far, most have not been accessible to historians and will be published for the first time in our volume.

The Institute has often been criticized by both sides of this historical conflict. When we focused on “Operation Vistula,” we were accused by Polish nationalist groups of representing the Ukrainian instead of the Polish point of view. When we dealt with the Galician and Volhynian massacres and tried to cooperate with Ukrainian partners, we were often treated with distrust and suspicion by Ukrainian officials. When a high level official from the Kuczma administration visited the exhibition prepared by the Institute, he pointed at the photographs of Polish civilians killed by Ukrainians, and accused the Institute of stimulating anti-Ukrainian feelings in Poland. In my opinion, this clearly demonstrates what I mentioned above: History really matters in East Central Europe, it still evokes lots of emotions and often overlaps with current politics.

However, I think that this very difficult dialogue was worthwhile and brought about some tangible results. In July 2003, a joint Polish-Ukrainian commemoration took place in Poryck, a village in Volhynia whose Polish inhabitants were killed in 1943. The presidents of both countries took part in the ceremony, and a monument to the victims was erected. There was some disappointment in Poland that President Kuchma had not explicitly apologized on behalf of the Ukrainian state for massacres of Poles. Many people compared it with the position taken by President Kwasniewski who, in 2001 during the ceremony in Jedwabne, begged pardon for the Polish massacres of Jews. Nevertheless for me this difficult Polish-Ukrainian dialogue was a success, it was the first time when both sides discussed openly and together the most dramatic parts of a shared history. Like the Jedwabne discussion, it demonstrated that openness is always a better strategy than hiding difficult facts and subjects, waiting for better times, which may never come, to reveal them.

As I already mentioned, topics such as the Jedwabne and Volhynia massacres have become a part of public debates only very recently – the last few years. The case of the Polish-German dialogue was very different. Since the beginning of the 1990’s Polish-German reconciliation was in the process of realization. Polish historians have published books and volumes of documents regarding the sufferings of German civilians immediately after the war – forced deportations of Germans from the territories taken over by Poland in 1945 and camps in which thousands of German civilians were imprisoned.

These topics were also described by and discussed in the mass media. The majority of public opinion was convinced that interpretation of the historical past would not be an issue that would bring about heated polemics and disputes – which turned out to be a wrong assumption. During the last two years we witnessed the outburst of very serious quarrels regarding the history of World War II and its immediate aftermath, which also jeopardized current political relations between Poland and Germany. It is all very closely related to the activities and claims of the Federation of the German Expellees led by Erica Steinbach.

A majority of Poles oppose the idea of creating in Berlin, with German federal funds, a special Center to commemorate the sufferings of the Germans expellees from East Central Europe, primarily Czechoslovakia and Poland. Similarly, Polish public opinion rejects claims by Erica Steinbach that German expellees are entitled to compensation from the Polish state, if not necessarily financial, at least moral – in terms of public apologies for mass deportations of the 1940’s. Erica Steinbach is rather equivocal regarding the question of financial compensation and taking back the property left in Poland by expellees. But there are other

organizations, very close to the Federation of the German Expellees, which put forward financial claims and declare that they will sue the Polish state and recent new member at the courts of the European Union.

All these claims brought about great amazement and indignation in Poland, not only in terms of fear regarding the financial claims. The most widespread reaction was that we were witnessing attempts to reinterpret the history of World War II and its results – the attempt to focus on German sufferings which would present Germans mostly as victims and not perpetrators. The Poles would lose their victim status and become perpetrators, responsible for brutally expelling German civilians who were not guilty of any war crimes. Such reactions were reinforced by publications in Germany, which argued that the deportations of the forties should not be seen as a result of a brutal war and incredible crimes committed by Nazi Germany, but rather the separation of nations as a hard but inevitable solution, as decided in Potsdam by victorious Allies.

According to this point of view, the deportations were the realization of deeply rooted historic attempts to create homogenous nation-states in Poland and the Czech Republic. As such, mass deportations of Germans would not be the result of war and Nazi occupation, but rather a part of ethnic cleansing, similar to that in the Balkans. This perspective, of course, is not acceptable to the Polish public regardless of political and intellectual orientation.

The Polish reaction was to publish hundreds of publications on Nazi crimes committed in Poland. The Institute of National Remembrance is of course a part of this debate. Polish historians proved that the Germans started mass deportations as early as during the first months of the occupation: hundreds of thousands of Poles were expelled from their homes in Polish areas that were incorporated into the Third Reich. Another response among Poles was to begin evaluating the material damages suffered by Poland under the German occupation.

The most spectacular case of such damage was Warsaw, which was more than 80% destroyed and its entire civilian population expelled by Germans following the defeat of the October 1944 Warsaw uprising. However, other towns also started evaluating their wartime damages and recently the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that such assessments be done across the country. And recently the Polish parliament unanimously passed a resolution stating that the Polish government should claim reparations for wartime losses from the German government.

In a nutshell, I would say that if the Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Jewish dialogues regarding difficult pasts were successful, the Polish-German dialogue was not, and has proven a failure.

We should mention some attempts to change this situation. The Institute of National Remembrance and other Polish institutions started a dialogue with the German Ministry of Culture regarding the idea of creating of a network of institutions from Poland, Germany and other East Central European countries. The goal of this network was to organize multinational conferences, exhibitions, and publish books on World War II, addressing the sufferings of civilians and mass deportations – of several peoples, not only Germans. This might be a reasonable alternative to the Center in Berlin which is to focus exclusively or mostly on the sufferings of German expellees.



To conclude this description of disputes going back to the time of World War II, I need to mention the Polish-Russian dialogue regarding the Katyn massacre. In 1940 the Soviet Political Bureau decided to liquidate all Polish officers captured as prisoners of war in 1939 after Red Army invasion of Poland. The NKVD killed twenty-two thousand Polish POWs.

In 1943, a mass grave was discovered by Germans in Katyn (near Smolensk). Soviet propaganda accused the Germans of committing this crime and maintained this lie until the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the nineties, Russian President Jelcyn revealed documents proving Soviet responsibility, a gesture that was appreciated in Poland.

However, the Polish public expected that a legal investigation would be carried out to identify individual perpetrators and to put on trial those still alive. After several years of investigation by Russian prosecutors, Moscow recently announced its decision to terminate the investigation arguing that, according to Russian law, the only people who could be prosecuted for this crime were members of the Political Bureau and they are all dead. The NKVD functionaries who were the direct perpetrators cannot be prosecuted, because they were merely executing orders from superiors. Additionally, the Polish legal qualification of the crime as genocide was rejected by the Russians.

Polish public opinion was seriously disappointed. The issue was discussed on the highest political level by President Kwasniewski during a subsequent visit to Moscow. The Polish response will be probably opening an investigation by the Institute of National Remembrance. It will be more a symbolic and moral gesture, because without the help of Russian institutions it seems rather impossible to identify perpetrators.

Now, let us return to a subject discussed earlier: ghosts from the time of Communist dictatorship.

As mentioned above, it took some time before documents of the Communist security apparatus were revealed to historians and the public. For this reason, the activities of the Institute of National Remembrance were initially dominated not by controversies of Communist dictatorship, but rather by issues such as the Jedwabne massacre and the Polish-Ukrainian conflict. Over the last few years however, many important documents were finally revealed and shed new light on the Communist past. They were analyzed by historians, and influenced public debates.

These documents changed our view of the Communist system in Poland, which – according to widespread opinion – was the most liberal in the Soviet bloc, especially in its last decades, reducing citizen repression considerably. Now it turns out that the scale of the repression and the surveillance were in fact larger than we thought. For instance, the number of death penalties issued against political enemies in the 1940-50s was much higher than historians believed before the Institute was created. Documents from the Institute's archives also prove that brutal policies against the Catholic Church and political opposition continued into the 1970 and '80s. In the early seventies, special clandestine sections were created within the security apparatus and tasked with using illegal methods (including beating, kidnapping, and sabotage) in combating the Catholic Church and political opponents.

Perhaps the most shocking finding was about the secret informants recruited by the security apparatus. It turns out that the highest number of informants was not during the

Stalinist years – as everybody expected – but rather during the late eighties. This was an allegedly liberal époque, just before the Round Table negotiations. The dynamics are at least as amazing as the sheer numbers: in 1980 there were about 30,000 secret informants, and by 1988 the number had grown to roughly 100,000. Their ranks more than tripled in less than ten years. Many informants were recruited from the ranks of the underground “Solidarity” and opposition groups.

And now some of the informants have been exposed. Usually not by historians, but by people who were under surveillance of the Communist secret police and who now – as in Germany – are being given access to the secret security files, discover who informed on them, and who the secret police used against them. Sometimes they share in public the knowledge they got from the documents obtained from the Institute of National Remembrance.

Some cases have sparked many controversies. For instance, recently it turned out that one of the most famous publishers of the underground samizdat had been a Communist security agent and helped the secret police in controlling an important part of clandestine publishing. Evno Azef, an agent of the Russian Okhrana active in the ranks of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was recalled during the debate in Poland around this case. The publisher is not willing to admit his guilt and in doing so provoked a great debate as to whether it is legitimate to put forward accusations relying only on the documents of the security service.

Let me conclude by noting that what we now face in East Central Europe is a revival of historical controversies dating back to World War II. Those debates, which seemed to be distant and closed, have now returned and overlap with more recent issues that arose during the Communist dictatorship. In Poland, the Institute of National Remembrance is at the very center of all these controversies, sometimes acting as a catalyst or accelerator of the historical discussion by revealing documents that were previously inaccessible to the public, or by opening legal investigations into political crimes committed in the past. One might call it a specific Polish model of coming to terms with a difficult past.