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Krzyżowa – place of remembrance and dialogue about the resistance to totalitarianism

The former estate of the von Moltke family in the Silesian town of Krzyżowa near Świdnica is undoubtedly among the most important places of both European and Polish-German collective memory. It is here that German opponents of Hitler's regime, later referred to as the Kreisau Circle, met during World War II, and where, in November 1989, the first prime minister of free Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Helmut Kohl, the then chancellor of Germany undergoing the process of unification and striving for fuller liberation, exchanged the Christian sign of peace and forgiveness at a mass celebrated by Bishop Alfons Nossol. It is also here that you can visit the unique exhibition entitled *Courage and Reconciliation*, illustrating the path which the two neighbouring nations have travelled throughout the recent decades since the horrifying tragedy of the Second World War. However, when mentioning this Lower Silesian town, one should not forget about another, older exhibition addressing the vast body of problems related to civic resistance against totalitarianism, about the piece of the Berlin Wall placed in the palace courtyard, or about the international meeting centre for young people and adults, the foundation of which was stimulated by the *Reconciliation Mass* of 1989. Therefore, as aforementioned, Krzyżowa is a multidimensional meeting place of European reach (even supra-European, if one was to consider e.g. Korean-Japanese meetings), a place of dialogue and of remembrance about the pursuit of freedom, and a symbol of opposition to totalitarian and authoritarian systems.

The issue of resistance against inhumane regimes is in the focus of the numerous meetings held in this Silesian town. However, having participated in Polish-German academic conferences for many years, I have noticed that there are invariably significant differences in the culture of remembrance among the representatives of both national groups with regard to this matter. To generalise and simply this observation, one may claim that resistance often means something different for Poles and for Germans. The attitude towards the problem in question naturally depends to a great extent on the level of general – independent of nationality – knowledge of historical and political facts. Yet there are also some specific aspects characteristic only of one nation which have an impact on how resistance is defined (in the moral, individual, and social dimension) as well as on how resistance is perceived against a specific historical and political situation, for instance, with reference to the Second World War period. I would like to briefly highlight just a few of them in this essay.

The subject of this paper is the phenomenon of memory of the resistance to the 20th century totalitarian regimes in Poland and Germany. Theoretically, the situation of these countries may appear to be similar, yet even fundamental knowledge of historical facts makes it possible to notice that both differ significantly in terms of the sheer scale, proportions, and scope of the crimes committed by their respective totalitarian systems.

The Nazi ideology emerged in Poland along with the invader at the war outbreak, only to assume a far more inhumane form than in the Western European countries conquered by Germany. Crimes were committed with the full sanction of the draconian law, frequently before the very eyes of witnesses, and the probability of being imprisoned or sent to a concentration camp, even incidentally, let alone of losing one's life, was very high. General and very rough data mention the death of ca. 20% of the entire population throughout the years 1939–1945 (mostly civilians), as well as round-ups, arrests, forced labour, expulsions, unimaginable devastation of the country's infrastructure, destruction and plunder of its cultural heritage. Hitlerism was also associated with the earlier Prussian-German partition, but it also evoked certain other connotations, such as Bismarck, Hakata (German Eastern Marches Society), or Germanisation (despite the incomparably lower scale of brutality experienced before World War I). Consequently, one may risk a claim that, in respect of the Polish culture of remembrance, the understanding of the term anti-Nazi resistance often overlaps with that of anti-German resistance. At the same time, despite the defeat of September 1939 and the occupation of its territory, the Republic of Poland was a party to the anti-Hitler coalition; the Polish Underground State operated in the occupied country in close collaboration with the government-in-exile, while regular military units controlled by this government, and later also those established independently of it in the USSR, fought at different fronts of World War II against the armed forces of Nazi Germany. Another important aspect was the connection between the main resistance movements and strong decision making centres, namely London and later also Moscow.

Obviously, it is merely a myth that the Polish defiance was absolutely common. Contrary to the rather typical autostereotype, consolidated for long years by the propaganda and historical education, also present in family accounts and stories – often slightly exaggerated, not every Pole of the war generation was an insurgent, a partisan, a saboteur, a soldier, or at least a conspirator. The fact that there was no pro-German collaborationist government in Poland, which was the case of Norway or France, does not mean that no-one committed disgraceful acts, just to mention people referred to as *szmalcownik*, who blackmailed the Jews in hiding. There are numerous examples of limited collaboration with or

submissiveness to the invader in the vast multitude of people's attitudes, which resulted from the ordinary survival instinct or fear, and this problem becomes even more multidimensional if one considers the fate of dozens of thousands of Polies from the regions of Silesia and Pomerania who were conscripted into the Wehrmacht (which they would later desert), and the foregoing shows all the more clearly that each case should be examined individually, without generalisation.

In summary, the anti-Nazi resistance in Poland is associated with an overt or underground struggle against the enemy who had attacked, occupied, and devastated the country, and the national liberation nature of this struggle proves to be of paramount importance, which was precisely the case of the earlier uprisings of the partition era. The ideological dimension of National Socialism – although it is obviously an important factor of the actions of the German aggressor – somewhat recedes into the background in this respect. Social support for a foreign system which, by definition, placed the Polish subhumans outside the margins of civilisation, was low in our country; resentment or hostility prevailed in a more or less concealed form, and nearly any action transgressing the strict framework of the occupation decrees was regarded as anti-Nazi resistance.

In Germany, however, the situation was considerably disparate, of which the participants of the meetings held in Krzyżowa, especially the younger ones, and predominantly from Poland, are not always aware. Hitler came to power in 1933 by way of elections (although the Nazi Party, NSDAP, never actually won an absolute majority of the votes), and his populist programme enjoyed support or at least relative acceptance of parts of the general public for many years. This was due to a combination of several factors. During the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the populist catchphrase of the *simple solutions* to the problems at hand, disseminated by the Nazis, met with a favourable response. This propaganda was reinforced by instrumentally appealing to the sense of injustice caused by the Treaty of Versailles and the desire to return to the imperial past of the pre-World War I Wilhelmine Germany which lingered on in part of the Weimar Republic's population. Diverse conspiracy theories concerning traitors, enemies of the fatherland, Jews, Freemasons, or homosexuals were disseminated and socially engineered. How easy it was to explain one's own failures in this manner! Who would shun the opportunity to belong to the nation's *healthy elements* group, especially if such an affiliation enabled social and material advancement by shortcuts, where the only criterion taken into account was often ideological allegiance? The Gestapo interrogating the main protagonist of the film entitled *Sophie Scholl*, formerly a simple tailor, may serve as a significant symbol thereof. The populist distribution

of goods as well as the pompous and megalomaniac programmes of *national* development of selected spheres, publicised using the propaganda, or the apparent or short-term successes obscured the view of many German citizens of the gradual and not always clearly noticeable deterioration of the existing legal order, and the subjugation of successive state institutions as well as of culture, education, judicature, media, and mass organisations by the Nazis, consequently leading them all towards an imminent disaster. Countered with a combination of propaganda, harassment, and terror, divided, entrapped to a growing extent by the political police, and ultimately left alone, the opposition was unable to mount an effective struggle, gradually becoming neutralised over the course of several years. Not even emigration represented a viable political alternative that would enjoy support in the country. The attitude of clergymen was somewhat ambivalent, while some of them even openly supported the National Socialist transformation. Conformism and opportunism began to play an increasingly important role in the public domain.

Some Germans accepted the September of 1939 as a sobering and terrifying proof of their country becoming totalitarian, while for many others, the initially victorious war became an object of national pride, another chance for social advancement, and an opportunity to plunder the conquered countries of their material riches (let us keep in mind that the use of violence as an element of both domestic and foreign policy was not as unusual in Europe of that time as it is now). The disenchantment of wider and wider circles of the society basically came with the military defeats at various fronts, with the growing number of casualties, with the increasingly frequent raids on German cities, with the deteriorating supply of food, and with the growing awareness of the war crimes committed in the name of Germany. One may argue whether the change in the general public's attitude towards National Socialism was triggered by the realisation of its true inhumane nature, or by the disappointment with the effects it brought. And again, each case should be examined individually, without jumping to generalisation.

The foregoing elaboration clearly reveals how unreasonable it is to compare the anti-Nazi resistance movements in Poland and Germany. What they partially shared was the temporal dimension, while the entire range of socio-political conditions are completely incompatible. For the sake of simplicity, one may claim that the division applied in Poland was relatively plain: the enemy was the German, responsible for the deaths of millions of compatriots and for unimaginable destruction. In the Third Reich, however, the enemy was the state authority elected in a legally binding manner, as well as the compatriot, co-worker,

neighbour, or relative. In other words, it was someone with whom one shared the past and with whom one had to plan the future, in spite of all.

In this respect, the situation in Nazi Germany and the matter of resistance to totalitarianism had more in common with the reality of the post-war communist Poland, although it should be noted that *people's governments* attained and, to a large extent, also maintained its position not by way of democratic elections, but owing to the external support of the Soviets. The domestic representatives of the regime were backed, at least in theory, by Moscow's supremacy, which one could always blame for or refer to when trying to explain the pursuit of personal gains.

The most important political similarity between the Third Reich and the Polish People's Republic is undoubtedly the long-lasting systemic dominance of a single party, which organised and controlled (with varying effectiveness) virtually all the dimensions in which the respective states functioned. One should bear in mind that both the NSDAP and the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) were mass organisations numbering several million members, and this number could only be higher if members of various services and organisations dependent to a greater or lesser extent on the party were to be added. The motivation for joining the Nazi or the Communist Party obviously varied. Some supported even the most radical, or to put it bluntly – criminal ideological components to the fullest extent, while others signed up for the sake of career building, to make a living in difficult times, to gain safety and peace of mind, or simply because it was fashionable. Some of the followers were guided by idealistic visions, some were forced to take such a step, while to others, simplistic slogans were the only ones they could understand. Also, one should not disregard the fact that, upon joining the NSDAP, the PPR (Polish Workers' Party), or the PZPR, not always was it possible to anticipate the crimes to come, but also that some party members became its staunch opponents. However, to recapitulate on the foregoing, in both these cases the totalitarian system was built and sustained not by a few individuals of ill will or simply madmen, but by thousands of ordinary people cynically taking advantage of or being entangled in the ensuing situation, or possibly by people blindly believing in the simple totalitarian solutions for creating a better world and unquestioningly focusing on the instrumental flattery of the propaganda towards themselves.

An important factor to the discussion on the problem of resistance is the level of risk involved in the acts of defiance which, in the case of both countries, were comparable to a certain extent, yet only with regard to the repressiveness of the respective regime towards its own citizens. The death toll of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s alone was at least

several dozen thousands of domestic opponents of the authority, such as those secretly assassinated or placed in concentration camps and prisons, victims of show trials, as well as hundreds of thousands of people arrested. In a sense, a comparable scale of violence could be observed in communist Poland, especially in the first post-war decade, when at least several tens of thousands of people lost their lives in the casemates of the Security Service (UB), but also in armed clashes, in labour camps, or in follow-up to show trials, while hundreds of thousands were imprisoned.

What proves to be particularly important from the perspective of this elaboration is the propaganda surrounding these repressions. Even though many opponents of communism in our country had a history of anti-Nazi conspiracy, the *people's government* depicted them in the media as fascists who used to collaborate with the invader, while presenting itself as the main or only force fighting against Germans. After 1956, the regime of the Polish People's Republic became clearly less oppressive, although one must not fail to mention the subsequent deaths (e.g. in 1970 or 1981) and the widespread persecution of political and ideological opponents of the authority. A certain change could also be observed in the official culture of remembrance, making it possible – obviously only to a certain extent – to honour the underground effort of the members of the Home Army or the soldiers of the Polish armed forces fighting at the Western Front.

The democratic transformations of 1989 naturally liberated the collective memory from the constraints previously imposed by the communist system. The pluralism in the public life translated into the pluralism of research on and culture of remembrance. The recent years have seen a true renaissance of popularity of the so-called *cursed soldiers*. This is due to various reasons, including the strong inclination towards a thorough search for the historical truth after years of discrediting them in the times of the Polish People's Republic, as well as the objectifying, politically motivated diversity of views on the history of our country. Even without focusing too much on the details of this highly complex phenomenon, one can easily notice the related clear disproportion in the perception of the Polish post-war resistance to the communist dictatorship. In light of the foregoing, what slightly recedes into the background is the resistance activity conducted immediately after WW2 by Stanislaw Mikolajczyk's Polish People's Party (PSL), the groups centred around the Catholic Church, the circles built around such magazines as *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak*, or *Więź*, the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia, the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR), the Movement for Defence of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCiO), the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN), the students' riots of 1968, the workers' riots of 1956 in Poznań and of 1970 on the Polish coast, the unrest of 1976

in Ursus and Radom, and even the Solidarity (the latter being completely incomprehensible to the German participants in the meetings held in Krzyżowa) which ultimately – by way of the Round Table talks and the elections of 4 June 1989 – led to the overthrow of the communist dictatorship in Poland. Not trying to deny the tragic fate of many of the *cursed ones*, as already mentioned in the previous paragraph (I should also add that, many years ago, I personally visited the Osobowice Cemetery in Wroclaw to tidy up the newly discovered graves of the opponents of the communist authority murdered in the prison in Kleczkowska street), I must admit that they have recently become somewhat of a trend, often devoid of any reflection, where it is sometimes difficult to identify the boundary between commemoration and commercialisation, between the focus on mere *gadgets* and politically-biased objectifying treatment, let alone reliable scientific assessment of their deeds. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to notice the peculiar attractiveness of the *cursed ones* from the perspective of the ethos of the tragic Polish insurgents falling in uneven fight, uttering the name of their motherland with their dying breath, which is so deeply rooted in the Polish remembrance.

I am mentioning this to highlight another discrepancy between the Polish and the German perception of resistance, which surfaced during the meetings held in Krzyżowa, among other occasions. The Polish view of the resistance to totalitarianism is more clearly associated with spectacular armed struggle, blowing up trains, uprisings, while phenomena such as sabotage, writing slogans on walls, posting up/spreading leaflets, distributing underground press, widespread secret teaching, etc. are in a way considered to be the very minimum of resistance. On the other hand, endeavours such as regime overthrow planning by a circle of conspirators, criticising the authority in a closed group of people, or discussing the political format of the state following the period of totalitarianism are perceived in a different manner. For many Polish participants in the Krzyżowa meetings, this is an attitude rather than an act of resistance. The German participants see it differently, which may be related to the stereotypically perceived German upbringing in the spirit of respect for the existing legal order. They qualify the mere discourse aimed at the legal foundations of the state, understood as the traditional guarantor of the rule of law, much more often as resistance. For many of the Polish participants in the Krzyżowa meetings, on the other hand, not until the Kreisau Circle members were arrested and then sentenced to death was their anti-Nazi activity legitimised. The democratic, peaceful, and bloodless rejection of totalitarianism is simply boring and unspectacular for some Poles. By the way, one should also mention the difference between Germans and Poles in terms of the reasons why they would inform state authorities about

illegal activities. For the former, denunciation is more often the consequence of a civic duty as such, while for the latter, it is rather motivated by personal gain or revenge.

There is a stereotypical conviction lingering on in the Polish culture of remembrance that the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany was puny and opportunistic. It partially results from the aforementioned specificity of how the very notion is defined, and partially from the lack of knowledge as well as the objectifying approach to this matter, which clearly matches the overall body of problems concerning Germany in their broad understanding, subject to an extremely intense propaganda pressure for years. It goes without saying that the so-called German argument was used extensively for social engineering purposes both in the entire post-war period as well as more recently, or even until the present by various political fractions. Favouring Germans was an accusation often used against the Home Army, the Freedom and Independence (WiN) organisation, the Polish People's Party (PSL), the workers striking in Poznań in 1956, the bishops addressing their German brothers in faith in 1965 with the memorable words "we forgive you and ask for the same," members of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) and the Solidarity Trade Union, as well as both Britons and Americans. However, past 1989, the outcome of democratic elections was determined by the social engineering figure of the *grandfather in Wehrmacht*. The German threat concept was used to motivate people to act for productivity's sake, as well as to justify the subordination to the Soviet Union, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact in 1968, but also the voting against Poland's accession to the European Union in referendum. For many years, similarly objectifying was obviously also the use of the image of the German anti-Nazi resistance. Shortly after the war, the Polish propaganda completely denied that it had ever existed (the rare exceptions being such individuals as Thomas Mann, Pastor Martin Niemoeller, or the Scholl siblings). As cooperation with East Germany intensified, from the years 1947–1948 onwards, the anti-Nazi activity of communists started being glorified, for example the deeds of Ernst Thälmann and Rosa Luxemburg, who had died by then, as well as of Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht, who held the highest positions in the state authority in the GDR established in 1949. However, such one-sided presentation of the German anti-Nazi resistance was unbelievable for many Poles, and its effect was often quite the opposite to that intended. The long-lasting outcome of such an activity was not only rejection of the propaganda manipulation by the communist authority, but unfortunately also far-reaching denial of the very existence of any anti-Nazi resistance in Germany. This trend was further strengthened by how the propaganda presented the assassination attempt on Hitler of 20 July 1944 as an internal power struggle among the Nazis. Its originators were accused of

opportunism and of the intent to secure specific territorial spoils in light of the Third Reich's deteriorating strategic standing at the Second World War fronts.

Individual events from the pre-1989 history, meant to present the problems of the German anti-Nazi opposition in a more objective manner, including the aforementioned bishops' address of 1965, the meetings of scientists held under the aegis of the German-Polish textbook committee, the German-Polish contacts established by the Catholic intelligentsia, or the rare publications which described individual heroes (e.g. Pastor Dietrich Bonhöfer), were too elitist in nature and their reception was too narrow to exert any influence on the common image of the German anti-Nazi resistance popularised in our country. Overall, the climate of that time was not conducive to that; saying anything positive about Germans was often considered politically and socially incorrect, and not just because of the official propaganda, but also on account of the peculiar memory of the victims of the occupation.

The changes of 1989 triggered a certain change in terms of how the German anti-Nazi resistance was remembered in the Polish collective memory. The paradigm which used to glorify only German communists ceased to apply, which sometimes led to complete denial of their contribution to the struggle against national socialists, which was equally unjust. Books and press articles were released as an attempt to present the German opponents of Hitler in a fairly objective manner, however, they remained rather elitist in nature. The political climate was obviously not without significance for this discourse. The Reconciliation Mass in Krzyżowa, the border treaty of 1990, and the treaty on neighbourly relations of 1991 definitely improved it, and the status of Germany changed from that of a tried-and-tested enemy to one of Poland's most important allies on the latter's way to the NATO and the EU. The German opponents of Hitlerism were commemorated in many places in Poland (besides Krzyżowa, these sites include Dietrich Bonhöfer's monument at the Wrocław market square and a plaque at Niepodległości Avenue in Warsaw commemorating Wilhelm Hosenfeld, the Wehrmacht officer who helped Poles and Jews, and who was posthumously awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta – a figure widely known from the film entitled *The Pianist*). An yet the old models of perception of the anti-Nazi opposition in the Third Reich still dwelt in Polish cultural memory. The game of German guilt, extensively disseminated in times of the Polish People's Republic, was also observed coming in waves after the year 1989. This manifested itself, for instance, in the highly emotional papers and heated disputes concerning recent German wartime film productions which appeared in the press. Such articles kept using invariably hurtful generalisations about supposedly incidental German anti-Nazi resistance, claimed to be far from serious (Sophie Scholl and the White

Rose) or opportunistic (Claus von Stauffenberg and the conspirators of 20 July 1944). Whether that was due to a lack of knowledge, ideological zeal, or perhaps political calculation is certainly only known to the respective authors. One might even risk a claim that the readiness to acknowledge the effort and sacrifice of the German opponents of Hitler was a specific indicator of the Poles' readiness to reconcile with Germans, and – assuming an even wider perspective of this problem – to adopt the Christian attitude, supposedly so common in our country.

A real problem connected with the German anti-Nazi opposition and its place in the collective memory – perhaps particularly in Poland – is its diversification, both in political and ideological terms, with regard to the goals of specific activity and the means used to that end, as well as on account of the different periods of activity. It is difficult to find a common denominator for the early parliamentary opposition, for the communist militias fighting against the SA and SS storm troopers in the streets, for those whose protested under the aegis of the Confessing Church, for the youth groups such as the White Rose or the Edelweiss Pirates, for the Catholics protesting against the eradication of prayer, religious education and crosses from schools, for the lone wolves like Georg Elser, for the intellectuals of the Freiburg Circles, for the fearless clergymen like fathers Bernhard Lichtenberg and August Froehlich and bishops Konrad von Preysing and Klemens August von Galen, for those clustering around the Mayor of Leipzig Karl Goerdeler, for the activists in exile: from Otto Strasser, to writer Thomas Mann, to the communists representing the National Committee for a Free Germany operating in the USSR, for the conspirators from army officers' circles, such as Henning von Tresckow, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, or the assassins of 20 July 1944, for the legendary head of the Abwehr Wilhelm Canaris, shrouded in mystery until the present, and last but not least for the Kreisau Circle, regarded as the most mature and advanced German anti-Nazi resistance group. One could hardly define such an inherently diversified group using the notion of *resistance*, so profoundly ingrained in the Polish culture of memory. It is also difficult to explicitly determine the numbers of active members and less active supporters. What should also be stressed is the ambiguity in the Polish perspective of numerous oppositionists, as some of them can be described as sworn enemies of the Polish nation or nationalists. Nevertheless, German opponents of National Socialism made more than a dozen attempts to assassinate Hitler, tens of thousands of oppositionists were kept in concentration camps even before the outbreak of war, and the repressions following the attempted coup of 20 July 1944 alone consumed the lives of several thousand people.

The overall body of problems of the anti-totalitarian resistance – including anti-Nazi resistance – in the culture of memory still continues to cause much controversy and misunderstanding. This is exemplified by the meetings and discussions held in Krzyżowa, which have stimulated the conception of this very essay. What one can observe during these meetings and discussions is the multitude of different approaches to the resistance against inhumane regimes depending on the individual level of knowledge and empathy, but also on the essence of one's historical experience characteristic of a given national group, or even its part. The perception of anti-Nazi resistance which had developed in the former communist German Democratic Republic was different than that of the Federal Republic of Germany, and yet another – and not merely a simple combination of the foregoing two – was observed in the united Germany. Similar differences can be observed when one compares the press of the early communist Poland, the nationalist-oriented periodicals published over the recent years, whose message is paradoxically very similar to that of the former, the contemporary magazines such as *Tygodnik Powszechny* or *Polityka*, and reliable scientific publications. Unfortunately, both the Polish perception of the German anti-totalitarian opposition and the German view of the Polish anti-totalitarian opposition are marked by the simple lack of knowledge, stereotypical half-truths and prejudice in too great an extent, which the participants in the meetings and discussions held in Krzyżowa quickly realise. The youngest generation is also not fully aware of the brutality of totalitarian regimes. People of both nationalities ask questions such as "was it not possible (in totalitarian Germany and Poland) to raise one's objections, for example, in the media?"

One and the same conclusion is typically drawn on such grounds: what truly matters in the discourse of anti-totalitarian opposition is having a critical and mindful approach, particularly to extreme opinions, and being open to new facts and their interpretations. It is also important not to rely on emotional, political tweets and *spectacular* anonymous posts which can be found on internet forums, but to reach out to a variety of sources guided by reason, because such an approach makes it possible to break out of stereotypical thinking and better understand both the essence of anti-totalitarian resistance and the reality which surrounds us. For this is precisely the kind of attitude which allows you to discern the combination of appreciation, bribery and intimidation to which totalitarian systems willingly resorted, creating a spiral from which it is very difficult to break free once you have reached a certain point – usually hard to notice.