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The Politics of the Past: Polish-Soviet and Polish-Russian Efforts at Historical Reconciliation

George Soroka

Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines Polish-Soviet, and subsequently Polish-Russian, relations through the lens of successive bilateral efforts to address “blank spots” in the shared history of these two neighbors. Considered are the different institutional guises such attempts have taken, the events and topics scrutinized, the ways in which both sides sought to mitigate the negative impact of troubled pasts on the present, and how effective these iterative bodies ultimately proved in countering contentious historical legacies. Evaluated as well is the extent to which they were affected by wider political dynamics and how these influenced their ability to function effectively.

The collapse of the ideological bifurcation that defined world politics for much of the twentieth century has led to the furious return of nationalized ways of remembering, with disputed pasts becoming not only a means through which to contest the narratives of neighboring states, but also to challenge the homogenizing influences of increasing regional and global interconnectedness. While this phenomenon is widespread, it is especially prevalent across post-communist Europe (Soroka 2017). There, some three decades after the Soviet Union’s suzerainty unraveled and the USSR itself dissolved, discordant ways of recalling what came before continue to intrude on present-day realities. However, although this region as a whole remains highly polarized due to its traumatic history, even here contentious narratives exhibit varying degrees of political salience. Arguably, there is no other interstate relationship that has been as powerfully afflicted by long-term mnemonic conflict as that between Poland and Russia.

Below I examine Polish-Soviet, and later Polish-Russian, relations over time through the lens of bilateral efforts focused on addressing what have been euphemistically termed “blank spots” in their shared history.¹ Attempts at improving ties have taken on distinct institutional forms over the years, and Polish-Russian efforts did not constitute a direct continuation of Polish-Soviet efforts to achieve a *modus vivendi* concerning their troubled legacies. However, given the difficulties both Poles and Russians have in disentangling their pasts from the USSR, evaluating Soviet and post-Soviet efforts together provides analytical leverage, highlighting the persistence of certain themes and dynamics in the relations of these two neighbors.

The first body officially convened to address these contested narratives, known as the Joint Historical Commission, functioned from 1987 to 1989 before succumbing to the political upheavals of the day. Efforts to reconcile historical narratives were reprised in 2002 with the creation of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters, but this initial post-Soviet

endeavor soon proved a failure due to its politicized makeup and the worsening of relations between Poland and Russia. It was not until 2008 that changing domestic and regional contexts enabled it to be reconstituted, albeit with a substantially new membership. Headed on the Polish side by former Foreign Minister Adam Daniel Rotfeld and on the Russian side by Anatolii Torkunov, the rector of Moscow’s State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), this iteration of the Group met regularly until 2013, when growing tensions between Poland and Russia led to the cessation of its activities. But this was not the end of the story. In March 2017 the Polish government unilaterally revived its half of the body, appointing a new chairman and permitting the selection of an updated roster of members. The gesture, however, was not reciprocated by Moscow; as a result, the Polish side was effectively disbanded in the beginning of 2019 without ever having met with its Russian equivalent.

That these attempts to improve interstate relations concerning history have been pursued over a decades-long span of time and across various constellations of governments and regime types, each with their own motivations for engaging in, or ignoring, cross-border dialogue over the past, renders them an ideal optic through which to assess the evolving role of mnemonic politics between these two states. So too does the fact that their disputed legacies stem almost entirely from the Soviet period and the disparate ways in which it has come to be understood. Moreover, with the exception of the short-lived 2002 Group, the entities established to mitigate these tensions were primarily comprised of academics who met at the behest of their respective governments but were not directly answerable to them (this was true even for the Polish-Soviet Commission, although the authoritarian context in which it operated did restrict its members’ ability to deliberate freely). This potential juxtaposition between scholarly and official narratives adds a further dimension to the analysis (see [Appendix](#) for a list of

members of these bodies). Meanwhile, the difficulties that successive incarnations of this body faced – which mainly resulted not from the personalities involved but rather political processes they were insufficiently insulated from – testify to, and permit investigation of, the entrenched nature of the past in the foreign affairs of both countries.

“The historical facts are incontrovertible,” Rotfeld and Torkunov write in their introduction to the seminal volume of historical essays that the Group published in 2010, “but they may be interpreted in various ways” (Rotfeld and Torkunow 2010, 11).² As this quote indicates, the primary mission of the body that they cochaired between 2008 and 2013 was not to achieve a common historical understanding, but to attenuate the discord that proceeded from the divergent, and highly nationalized, ways in which narratives over the past were recalled, the improvement of socio-political ties being less about fostering interpretive convergence than defusing the impact of problematic legacies and the instrumental uses to which they could be put.³ This held true for the other bilateral attempts at dialogue over history as well. Nonetheless, that most iterations of this effort were built around scholars gathering to scrutinize historical evidence in their professional capacities ensured there would be an inherent tension between research and politics. This was especially the case early on, when the facts surrounding the misdeeds of the Soviet era were not yet widely known and there remained unanswered questions about many of them.

Consequently, in analyzing how these bodies and the work that they performed changed over time, it is useful to disaggregate their organizational dynamics from the domestic and international contexts they functioned in. However, as neither sphere was entirely closed off from the other, it is necessary to consider not only how they operated internally, but also the extent to which they influenced, and were influenced by, external factors. Accomplishing this requires examining how understandings of Polish–Russian dialogue shifted temporally in response to changes in political leadership and related stimuli, and how these shifts affected attempts to attenuate the socio-political impact of conflicting historical interpretations.

The research question addressed herein is thus two-fold. First, what was the impetus for establishing such entities, and how did the expectations surrounding them evolve over time? Second, what, if anything, did these efforts to elucidate the past and reduce its rhetorical power accomplish in terms of improving relations between Poland and Russia? I begin by sequentially profiling the Soviet-era Commission, its 2002 post-communist analogue, the reconstituted 2008 body, and Poland’s failed 2017 effort to revive it. Next, I analyze their respective achievements, the longitudinal impact they had on interstate relations, and the factors that prevented them from being more effective. I conclude by considering the wider meaning of these successive attempts to resolve cross-border tensions over the past.

1987-1989: The Polish-Soviet Joint Historical Commission

The signing of the Declaration on Soviet-Polish Cooperation in the Fields of Ideology, Science and Culture during the visit of Poland’s General Secretary Wojciech Jaruzelski to Moscow on

April 21, 1987 brought about the first systematic attempt to deal with contentious legacies between these two countries.⁴ As stated therein, “the PZPR [Polish United Workers’ Party] and KPSS [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] attach great importance to the joint study of historical relations between our states, parties and nations,” and therefore “all episodes, including also the dramatic ones, should receive an objective and clear interpretation.”⁵ The Joint Historical Commission began meeting the following month.⁶

As Thomas Szayna writes, this new body was “extraordinary” in that it was “formed to address a specific problem that was previously officially ignored – namely, the deep animosity that Poles and Russians often feel for each other on a personal level” (1988, 40). At the same time, its implicit purpose was to coordinate and “control the process of reexamining history” between the two sides (Szayna 1988, 41). Consequently, the Commission “was composed of trusted historians picked by each Party, many of whom did not enjoy much confidence within the profession” (Valkenier 1991, 247 n. 2).⁷ Jarema Maciszewski, a historian of seventeenth-century Polish-Russian relations and the head of the Academy of Social Sciences, chaired Poland’s delegation. His Soviet counterpart was Georgii Smirnov, the director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and reputedly Mikhail Gorbachev’s advisor on ideological matters (Valkenier 1989, 7; Szayna 1988, 41–42).

From the beginning, the tactical nature of the Commission (and its link to broader issues in Polish-Soviet relations) was obvious. Maciszewski characterized it as “a political activity *par excellence*” (1990, 24), an assessment Smirnov corroborated in his memoirs (1997, 205). This is unsurprising, as it was very much a product of the unsettled politics of the mid-to-late 1980s, a period during which audacious socio-economic reforms were being enacted in the USSR and the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) was struggling to contain the oppositionist Solidarity movement.

Indicative of this fraught situation, Poland’s Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) had already in 1985 produced a list of historical “blank spots” that were fomenting public agitation and distrust of the authorities (Kwiatkowski and Szpociński, as cited in Valkenier 1989, 66 n. 6).⁸ The need to buttress the PRL was particularly acute, as growing political dissent was not only contributing to societal demands to know the truth about the recent past but also threatening the fundamental stability of the communist system. Likewise not trivial was the fact that Jaruzelski, who along with his family had been deported to Siberia by the Soviets during World War II, appeared genuinely interested in resolving the historical issues that plagued relations between the PRL and USSR.⁹

The Commission therefore had a dual purpose: to reconcile the historical views of Polish and Soviet citizens and help legitimize the regimes that they lived under. The specific goals of the two sides, however, were far from aligned:

While the Poles pushed for full truth and publicity about the blank spots and politically sensitive topics in Soviet-Polish relations, the Soviets resented being asked in effect to “repent” and preferred to direct attention to the study of issues that united rather than divided the two nations—like their common struggle against the Nazis. Obviously the Polish side was struggling for its political life, hoping to buy public support by exposing Soviet misdeeds, and

trying to mollify Polish nationalism. For the Soviet side the issues were not as pressing, either politically or emotionally. (Valkenier 1989, viii-ix)

Neither were the Polish and Soviet authorities equally dogmatic when it came to imposing ideological control over the Commission. As a result, its Polish members enjoyed much more autonomy than did their Soviet colleagues, who even in the late 1980s were still “severely constrained by Party discipline and constantly had to consult with the political authorities” (Valkenier 1989, ix).

Given the greater salience of unresolved historical questions involving the USSR to Poland, it was the driving force behind adjudicating what the Commission would consider. Polish interest focused on six topics, which none other than Jaruzelski enumerated in an article published soon after this body was constituted (it appeared in July 1987 in both *Kommunist* and *Nowe Drogi*, the respective party journals of the KPSS and PZPR) detailing why Poles were mistrustful of the Soviet Union. These included: the 1919–1921 Polish-Bolshevik War; Stalin’s purge of the Polish Communist Party in the 1930s; the USSR’s 1939 incursion into Poland; the 1940 Katyń massacre; deportations of Poles to the USSR; and the Red Army’s failure to aid the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (Valkenier 1991, 250). Not all these episodes, however, bore equal weight in Poland’s collective consciousness. As Maciszewski notes, it was Katyń that drove Polish participation in the Commission (1990, 3), although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which resulted in the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in September 1939, was also of great interest. There were likewise historical issues that Poles cared about intensely but that the Commission could not broach, among them questions regarding how Poland’s communist regime was installed and consolidated after 1945.

The Soviets similarly had grievances they wanted to address; these included the treatment of POWs held in Polish prison camps during the Polish-Bolshevik War and what they perceived as a dearth of monuments honoring Red Army soldiers who perished in Poland during World War II. However, the Polish side was “quite unresponsive to Soviet concerns” (Valkenier 1989, 16).

The Commission held its first plenary session in Moscow on May 18–20, 1987. Little immediate progress was evinced, but there were nonetheless indications that this body might have a positive effect on relations. Smirnov, for instance, published an otherwise formulaic and ideologically orthodox piece in September 1987 that made two startling concessions. First, he acknowledged that the Second World War for the Polish side was “from the very outset a defensive and just war,” contradicting the previous Soviet class-based condemnation of “bourgeois” interwar Poland. Second, he unequivocally repudiated Viacheslav Molotov’s remarks before the Supreme Soviet on October 31, 1939, where Stalin’s foreign minister presented what Smirnov termed “a preposterous appraisal of the Polish state as ‘an ugly product of the Versailles Treaty’” (1987, 20–21).¹⁰

Initially planned for November of that year, the following meeting instead took place in Warsaw between February 29 and March 3, 1988. This session likewise did not accomplish much, its work on issues of importance to Poland hindered by

deliberate stalling on the part of the Soviet authorities. However, the Commission’s Polish half continued its research independently, and in May 1988 the Poles provided their Soviet colleagues with a report contesting the findings of the Burdenko Commission’s 1944 investigation into Katyń.¹¹

Their conclusion that the Soviets rather than the Germans were responsible for the killings contradicted decades of official denials by the USSR (and PRL), guaranteeing that the third meeting of the Commission, which took place in Moscow from November 29 to December 1, 1988, would prove tendentious. Attesting to this, while published summaries of the first two sessions (which appeared in *Trybuna Ludu* and *Pravda*) featured a description of the proceedings accompanied by interviews with the Commission’s cochairs, the third conspicuously omitted the latter (Valkenier 1989, 24). Instead, a terse statement noted that the Commission’s members had examined the evidence “prepared by the Polish side on the basis of Western and Polish scholarly sources concerning the fate of the Polish officers interned in 1939 who died at Katyn, and decided that the question requires thorough additional study” (“Sotrudnichestvo istorikov” 1988).

This Soviet intransigence led some Polish Commission members to threaten to resign (Valkenier 1991, 253). It also instigated the release of a CBOS poll in July 1988 – timed to coincide with Gorbachev’s visit to Poland – that revealed 68.4 percent of secondary school students who reported knowing about the Katyń massacre blamed the USSR for it (Valkenier 1991, 252). Gorbachev, however, proved unwilling to admit Soviet culpability. During a tense meeting with Polish intellectuals in Warsaw, the Soviet leader conceded that he was aware many Poles considered Katyń to be “the work of Stalin and Beria,” but cautioned that this was not yet a foregone conclusion. He also emphasized that the massacre represented a “common tragedy,” noting there were two monuments in the Katyń Forest, one dedicated to the Polish prisoners and the other “to the Soviet POWs who perished, shot there by the fascists” (*Inteligencja wobec nowych problemów socjalizmu*, 1988, 89).¹² Such stonewalling eventually caused the Polish government to do what would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier: on March 7, 1989, PRL spokesman Jerzy Urban admitted that all indications pointed to the Soviet NKVD as being responsible for the killings (Valkenier 1991, 24, 1989, 253).¹³ Nonetheless, the Polish refutation of the Burdenko report, prepared by Commission member Czesław Madajczyk, was only made public in August 1989, after the defeat of the PZPR in the June elections (“Dokument w sprawie Katynia” 1989, 13–14).¹⁴

Held during a time when political reforms in the PRL and USSR were simultaneously accelerating and diverging, the Commission’s third meeting proved critical for Polish collective memory in another respect as well: its members had prepared a joint document dealing with the outbreak of World War II that was discussed in the plenary session. This groundbreaking text confirmed the existence of the “secret protocol” of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was taken as an indication that Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was beginning to permit criticism of Stalin’s policies.¹⁵

However, as Elizabeth Valkenier points out, although the report was factually accurate and “fairly well-documented,” within it the Soviet side tried to justify the USSR’s actions by arguing that the geopolitical context of the time was such that Stalin had little choice but to sign a non-aggression pact with Hitler, an interpretation unacceptable to most Poles (1991, 254). Further underscoring the politically conditioned nature of the Commission’s activities, the document was not made public until May 25, 1989, less than two weeks before the first semi-free elections since 1945 were to be held in Poland. Presumably, its release was intended to demonstrate that the PZPR-led government enjoyed more than a modicum of independence from the Kremlin. However, as the accompanying commentary in *Trybuna Ludu* made clear, the real purpose was to convince the Polish electorate not to undermine the alliance between the PRL and the USSR (Valkenier 1991, 255–256).

A fourth plenary session of the Commission was planned for May–June 1989, but it was never held.¹⁶ Instead, the historical investigations of the two sides went their separate ways after the PZPR lost its grip on power in the June 1989 election,¹⁷ with Maciszewski forced into retirement by the new Mazowiecki government’s decision to dissolve the Academy of Social Sciences in July 1990.¹⁸

The work of the Commission and relations among its members evolved significantly over its short existence, both paralleling and contributing to the unprecedented transitions taking place across Poland and the USSR. In particular, whereas before the Polish Roundtable Agreement the PZPR and KPSS were still in control domestically, afterward the situation changed markedly:¹⁹

In Poland, recognition of the opposition, electoral defeat [sic] of the Communists and the appointment of a non-Communist premier removed all the remaining constraints affecting the government, the media and scholars. When the Poles simply refused to attend any further meetings of the Commission, the advent of a wholly new era was evident. In the USSR, the Party and its spokesmen on the Commission held sway until late 1989. Thereafter, openness, a growing freedom, and individual scholarly initiative in investigating blank spots came to approximate the situation in Poland. And in this respect the breaking of fetters reflected the growing paralysis of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. (Valkenier 1991, 249)

In hindsight, the Commission made little practical headway in reconciling the historical narratives of these two states because for most of its existence the truth was still subservient to ideological and geopolitical considerations, especially on the Soviet side. Commission members were therefore not able to act in a truly independent fashion, and what progress they did make was contingent on the attitudes toward deciphering the past the leaders of their respective states exhibited. What it did accomplish, however, was to throw into sharp relief the mnemonic divides that existed between Poland and Russia, exposing the damage inflicted on cross-border relations as a result of decades spent obfuscating and manipulating history to political ends. The consequences of this became all the more evident as the Soviet Union’s ability to function as a veto player in the PRL’s domestic politics entered a stage of rapid decline, allowing the Polish side to pursue a more nationalized line of historical inquiry. This brought about an open interpretive dissonance between the PRL and USSR, as well as between

ordinary Poles and Russians and the authoritarian regimes they lived under, that by the late 1980s was impossible to ignore. Consequently, while the Commission was initially convened to bolster the legitimacy of the communist system and provide a “pressure valve” for relieving societal tensions within and across borders, it soon found itself caught up in series of unintended political consequences. These, moreover, differed between the two states, as reflected in the uneven functioning of this body’s respective halves.

Therefore, while the Commission was not the direct antecedent to Polish–Russian efforts to resolve differences in how the past is recalled, it did establish a model for subsequent dialogue. But it also reified lasting stereotypes and discursive fault-lines. Given that the Soviet side was less invested than the Polish in parsing the historical traumas that plagued Poland’s collective psyche – Stalin, and the twentieth century more generally, ensuring that the Soviets had more opportunities to victimize Poles than vice versa – it is understandable why the latter principally drove the Commission’s agenda. However, this led to the perception that Poland was constantly pressuring the USSR to confess and atone for past misdeeds. The Soviet side thus found itself perpetually on the defensive, which caused resentment both within and outside the Commission.²⁰ As a result, an impression took hold in the USSR that Poles were unreasonable in their stipulations. This belief has proven remarkably durable, with Russian elites today continuing to recoil from what many of them view as unceasing Polish demands that Moscow admit guilt for all the negative events associated with the Soviet regime.²¹

The 2002 Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters: Unrealized Promise

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Poland in January 2002, the first since that of his predecessor Boris El’tsin in 1993, came at a time of mounting tensions (in a gesture rife with symbolism, he arrived on the eve of the anniversary of when the Red Army wrested control of Poland from the Nazis). Before Putin landed in Warsaw, media sources had speculated that he would offer an apology for the Katyń massacre. When none was forthcoming, many in Poland responded with consternation. Meanwhile, the Russian establishment was chaffing from the growing equivalence Poles were drawing between Nazism and Stalinism, the proffered justification for which was the USSR’s signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. Nonetheless, Putin’s visit did bring certain breakthroughs, among them an agreement to establish a Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters.

The new Group proved a fiasco, as it managed to meet only twice in three years (on November 5, 2002 and June 7, 2005, both times in Moscow) (Mironyuk and Żegota 2016, 142; “O besede Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii” 2005) and yielded no tangible results before the initiative was halted. Unlike the Polish-Soviet Joint Historical Commission and the 2008 effort that succeeded it, the membership of this first post-communist attempt at improving bilateral relations concerning history consisted primarily of politicians and bureaucrats. Rotfeld, tapped to head the Polish side in 2002, confided years later that this body “was condemned to fail from the very beginning”

as it consisted of individuals who “could not resolve the problems [sic] that are non-negotiable” (IWM 2016, 49:02). Representing the official positions of their governments, members were unable to find sufficient common ground on which to discuss the most pressing historical issues dividing Poland and Russia.

This attempt, however, was doomed not only because of the Group’s composition, but also due to worsening relations between these countries (Rotfeld and Torkunov 2015, 2).²² Two specific external factors have been cited as contributing to its failure: the advent of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution and Moscow’s retaliatory embargo on the importation of Polish meat into Russia, which closed off access to a major market for Poland (Dębski 2011). The former, in particular, stoked tensions, despite the fact that Poland’s president at the time was Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a member of the communist-successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and someone who could hardly be labeled a Russophobe. Nonetheless, Kwaśniewski backed Viktor Yushchenko in this conflict, whereas Putin strongly favored his opponent, Viktor Yanukovich.

Relations were likewise severely strained by the March 11, 2005 announcement of Russia’s Chief Military Prosecutor, Aleksandr Savenkov, that the decade-plus investigation into Katyń was being closed on procedural grounds, as all the perpetrators were deceased. Not only did Russia refuse to release the bulk of the archival records pertaining to the massacre (out of 183 volumes, 116 were to remain classified as state secrets), but it also declined to formally rehabilitate the victims or to recognize Katyń as a war crime or instance of genocide, consequential because the latter two categories are not subject to statutes of limitations under international law. Moreover, the final verdict only confirmed 1,803 deaths out of the nearly 15 thousand individuals incarcerated in the three main internment camps of Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobelsk. The fate of the more than seven thousand Poles held in prisons across western Ukraine and Belarus, typically counted among the massacre’s victims, went unmentioned (Kondratov 2005).

As if this were not enough to seal the 2002 Group’s fate, in 2005 the conservative and nationalistic Law and Justice (PiS) won both the Polish presidential and parliamentary elections, ensuring Poland’s government would pursue a more aggressively anti-Russian historical stance going forward. Underscoring the politics surrounding efforts to diffuse the salience of the past in Polish-Russian relations, the Group was only revived on the initiative of then-Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov after the center-left Citizen’s Platform (PO) took control of Poland’s legislature in 2007, removing Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS) from the post of prime minister and replacing him with Donald Tusk (PO).²³

2008-2013: Progress Amid Problems

The architects of restarting the Group on Difficult Matters on the Polish side clearly had the example of post-World War II reconciliation with Germany in mind. According to Sikorski, it was “an attempt to at least establish the facts of common history,” as “our experience with the Germans is that we were able to reconcile truly when the Germans owned up to the

facts” (personal communication, April 18, 2018). In particular, the 1965 letter Polish bishops addressed to their West German peers, wherein these prelates sought to establish a basis for forgiveness between the two nations based on Christian principles, provided a model for resuming dialogue.²⁴ (It also signaled why the Group was so eager to involve the Polish Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches in their plans.)

At the same time, they were not oblivious to the substantial differences between Polish-German (and Russian-German) reconciliation efforts and those of Poland and Russia. As Rotfeld points out, Polish-German relations improved not only because of international agreements, joint institutions and the herculean efforts of individuals on both sides, “but, most importantly, thanks to the emergence of a new *community of interests* . . .” (Rotfeld 2012).²⁵ Contrariwise, rapprochement between Poland and Russia has been stymied not just by institutional, legal, and cultural differences, but also by a sustained lack of shared objectives. Sławomir Dębski trenchantly observes that during the postwar process of rebuilding Franco-German relations (which began with the 1963 Élysée Treaty signed by French President Charles de Gaulle and West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer) these two nations were pursuing compatible political goals; conversely, what mutual interests Poland and Russia have in common are neither as obvious nor as pressing (2013).²⁶ Moreover, repairing relations with Russia requires understanding that Russians, unlike Germans, perceive themselves as victims rather than victimizers when it comes to twentieth century history.²⁷

Notwithstanding these issues, an agreement to reestablish the Group was concluded between Sikorski and Lavrov during their December 2007 meeting in Brussels.²⁸ Afterward, Sikorski asked Rotfeld to once again chair the Polish side (IWM Vienna 2016, 50:15). Rotfeld and Torkunov, who were already acquainted, first met in their new capacity as the Group’s cochairs in early February 2008, likewise in Brussels (Rotfeld and Torkunov 2015, appendix A). When conversation turned to selecting members, Rotfeld recalls that Torkunov proposed a slate of distinguished candidates that he nevertheless felt were insufficiently expert in Polish-Russian relations (IWM Vienna 2016, 50:30).²⁹ Instead, he offered Torkunov the names of seven Russians he thought would make good additions. That Torkunov agreed to include them, according to Rotfeld, convinced him that his cochair was serious about the endeavor and willing to include individuals who were “decent, honest, and with whom one can discuss [matters] in a very open way” (IWM Vienna 2016, 52:34). Nonetheless, Rotfeld recounts that “at the very beginning both sides were very cautious and oriented to confrontation,” making it necessary to build confidence in this body and establish trust among its members (personal communication, April 16, 2020).³⁰

However, while Russian Group member Artem Malgin maintains that the reformed body was “far from servile” to the political demands of either state (2010, 63), it was established without a concrete mandate. (Although its research and travel budget came from the foreign ministries of both countries, Rotfeld notes that the funding requests of the Group were modest and agrees that it was “very independent” [personal communication, April 16, 2020].)³¹ The work of defining its goals was thus largely relegated to the cochairs and members.³²

Who belonged to the Group, and in what capacity, was also a fluid concept. While Gennadii Matveev corroborates that the cochairs and their deputies bore the responsibility for selecting individuals to join their respective halves of the body (he too emphasizes that their “primary criterion was professionalism, and not political orientation”),³³ its deliberations also involved a rotating cast of external experts. For example, while the Polish historian Andrzej Paczkowski was never an official member, he participated in multiple of its meetings (both of the Polish side, which convened prior to every bilateral session, as well as of the joint body), and took part in all ensuing debates (personal communication, March 15, 2020).³⁴ Rotfeld confirms this was intentional, as he sought to keep the Group casual and to retain the ability to ask outsiders to join in debates as full participants when their input was deemed valuable.³⁵ Its formal membership also changed periodically, as happened in 2012 when the Polish political scientist Adam Eberhardt replaced sociologist Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, who was appointed Undersecretary of State in Poland’s Foreign Ministry (and would serve as ambassador to Russia between 2014–2016).³⁶

The most intractable of the myriad challenges facing this resurrected body, according to Rotfeld, concerned the existence of parallel historical narratives concerning the two country’s shared experiences (Dempsey 2014). This interpretational divide was exacerbated by widespread political and societal distrust on both sides. Right before the new Group’s first meeting was to take place, an inflammatory article appeared in the Polish daily *Dzennik* claiming that the Russians planned to accuse Poland of complicity in the outbreak of World War II (Wojciechowski 2008; Żukowska 2008). And when it met in Moscow in November 2008, a Russian journalist with *Parlamentskaia gazeta* wrote “it is not entirely clear why they [the Poles] push the matter of Katyn so,” musing whether it was so that “the world will once again ... see in Russia a monster, with an historical tragedy crossing over and becoming an instrument of contemporary politics?” (Dorofeev 2008).

Rotfeld therefore recommended during the first plenary session that Group members not engage in negotiations over historical interpretations (IWM Vienna 2016, 53:02). Instead, he wanted the body to operate according to two basic guidelines: members would express their views on history as individuals, rather than claiming to speak authoritatively for either nation, and all discussions were to be “depoliticized” insofar as possible (IWM Vienna 2016, 54:48) to avoid simply reiterating the well-known mnemonic grievances held by each side. The Group was thereby tasked not only with evaluating “factual material related to the complicated history of Polish-Russian relations,” but also “building a common historical consciousness that would take into account the complicated bilateral relationship” (Mironyuk and Żegota 2016, 140).

Rotfeld and Torkunov further assert that they decided not to broach topics that the Group had “no authority or authorization” to deal with, such as questions of property restitution and “other economic and financial matters” (2015, 4). Instead, they agreed it would develop “principled and realistic” policy recommendations for how to “remove historical obstacles from the agenda of current politics” and put together a volume on the entangled history of the two nations “that would reach the

widest possible audience” (2015, 5). Disseminating the Group’s findings broadly was an innovation from prior practice, when results were only directly shared with a more circumscribed audience of governmental elites and academics.

What emerged from these preliminary discussions was a list of 15 issues that the Group would address:³⁷

- Polish–Soviet relations, 1917–1921
- Interwar period
- Causes of World War II
- Soviet incursion into Poland, 1939–1941
- 1940 Katyń Massacre
- World War II, 1941–1945
- Postwar decade, 1945–1955
- Khrushchev’s Thaw
- Dissident movement
- USSR and martial law, 1980–1981
- Transformations in Poland/Russia
- Polish-Soviet economic relations
- Bilateral relations since 1990
- Mutual perceptions of Poles and Russians
- Archival access

Many of the episodes that the Polish–Soviet Joint Historical Commission was established to deal with reappear above, underscoring their tenacity in Polish–Russian relations. Predictably, Katyń again assumed center stage for the Polish side, with Rotfeld noting that “without deciding this issue we will not be able to move forward” (Masterov 2008). Torkunov, meanwhile, although agreeing on the need to close the matter of the massacre once and for all, emphasized that the Russian side must likewise “raise questions, especially regarding the general role of totalitarian regimes in Europe in the 1920s and 1930, including in Poland.”³⁸ Also stressed by the Group were points of historical friction that had not been possible to engage with during the Soviet period, such as the history of Poland in the decade between 1945 and 1955, and new issues resulting from the collapse of communism and its aftermath.

Regarding the Group’s working procedures, both Polish and Russian were utilized, with each side primarily employing its native language.³⁹ As Leonid Vardomskii explains, this body “consisted of historians who knew each other well, and who had a good knowledge of both languages and the subject of discussion” (personal communication, May 24, 2020).⁴⁰ Its insular nature is likewise emphasized by Vladimir Baranovskii, who contends that participants in most cases were already acquainted with one another’s historical views and positions (from publications and other sources) before the Group convened (personal communication, June 4, 2020). Its members also repeatedly reference the professionalism and sense of purpose exhibited by both sides, with Matveev crediting the “extensive diplomatic experience” of the cochairs as a critical factor in creating a “friendly, business-like atmosphere” within the Group, where “each member had the opportunity to express and defend their position” (personal communication, July 23, 2020). Similarly, Igor Zhukovskii describes the body’s work as being guided by a “spirit of amiability and a sincere desire to find common ground” (personal communication, May 26, 2020).⁴¹ This does not mean, however, that

disagreements did not arise. As Baranovskii details, “views on specific issues were far from congruent” not only between the two sides, but even within the Russian delegation. Nonetheless, from his perspective what was important was that “no one tried to formulate their position (say, more liberal or more conservative) in an offensive, much less extremist, form.” Consequently, while everyone was free to express themselves, “the polemics never acquired a hostile or even acutely emotional character” (personal communication, May 24, 2020).⁴²

Concerning the total number of meetings that were held, it is virtually impossible to come up with a definitive figure given the numerous working groups, consultations and unofficial discussions members were involved in. However, appendix A of the 2015 English-language edition of *White Spots-Black Spots* provides summaries of twelve major sessions:⁴³

- (1) Plenary session, Warsaw, June 12–14, 2008
- (2) Plenary session, Moscow, October 27–28, 2008
- (3) Plenary session, Kraków, May 28–29, 2009
- (4) Plenary session, Moscow, November 9, 2009
- (5) Plenary session, Warsaw, October 4, 2010
- (6) Extraordinary session, Riga, June 1, 2011⁴⁴
- (7) Plenary session, St. Petersburg, December 8, 2011
- (8) Working meeting, Kaliningrad, May 15, 2012
- (9) Plenary session, Warsaw, May 31–June 1, 2012
- (10) Plenary session, Moscow, December 3, 2012
- (11) Plenary session, Gdańsk, June 7–8, 2013
- (12) Plenary session, Kaliningrad, November 16, 2013

A thirteenth meeting, meanwhile, was scheduled to take place in Lublin in May–June 2014, but the conflict in Ukraine, catalyzed by Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and support for the Donbas separatists, caused it to be rescheduled repeatedly and finally postponed indefinitely.⁴⁵ As such, the Kaliningrad assembly in 2013 marked the practical end of this iteration of the Group, though Rotfeld resigned from his position as its cochair only in December 2015 (the Russian side was never formally disbanded).⁴⁶

Space constraints preclude a detailed overview of what was covered in these sessions and the results they produced, but three overarching observations may be drawn. First, the topics discussed evolved meaningfully over time. Second, this body had considerable contact with representatives of the Polish and Russian Churches, and sought to actively involve them in its work.⁴⁷ Third, the cochairs and other Group members routinely interacted with the political leaders of both countries and managed to persuade them to support key initiatives, suggesting that the latter viewed their efforts as more than merely symbolic.

Apropos of the first point, earlier meetings focused on the interwar period and events surrounding World War II (though this time around the Russian side actively pushed for consideration of the historical issues that interested it, such as the deaths of Red Army POWs held in Polish internment camps as a result of the Polish–Bolshevik War). However, after the 2010 volume was completed, the Group’s deliberations expanded well beyond these topics. During the 2011 meeting in Riga, for example, not only were contemporary EU–Russia relations discussed, but so

too was an upcoming conference on Russia’s Time of Troubles (1598–1613).

This thematic broadening suggests that by 2011 the body’s members had accomplished as much as was feasible relative to such perennially controversial topics as Katyń and the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Meanwhile, new challenges had arisen in Polish–Russian relations, prompting the Group to respond. Indicative of this, during the 2013 meeting in Gdańsk participants discussed how the refusal of the Russian government to return the wreckage of the doomed Tu-154 that crashed outside Smolensk on April 10, 2010 – killing Polish President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others traveling with him to Russia to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of Katyń – was ratcheting up tensions between the two countries.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, illustrating this body’s contacts with the Polish Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches, the cochairs met with Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk in Moscow on April 24, 2009. One month later, during the Kraków plenary session, Group members had an audience with Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz. Such interactions with high-level clerics laid the groundwork for sustained cooperation between this body and the national Churches. The apogee of these efforts came on August 16, 2012, when the head of the Russian Church, Patriarch Kirill, visited Poland – the first such visit in a thousand years – and the two Churches issued a joint declaration regarding the need for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation (IWM Vienna 2016, 55:30). In Rotfeld’s opinion, this represents the most under-appreciated achievement of the Group, and one he believes history will eventually view as among its most momentous (personal communication, April 16, 2020).

Finally, emphasizing the importance Polish and Russian politicians attached to this work were the frequent contacts between Group members and government officials and the influence this body wielded with them.⁴⁹ For example, during the Warsaw plenary session in 2008 the cochairs were received by Kaczyński and also spoke with Sikorski and Tusk. Subsequently, they met with Lavrov as part of the October 2008 Moscow plenary session (Radziwinowicz 2008). Moreover, foreign ministry officials from both countries regularly participated in Group meetings,⁵⁰ and this body likewise maintained ties with the quasi-governmental Polish–Russian Civic Forum (co-headed by Polish movie director Krzysztof Zanussi and former Russian ambassador to Poland, Leonid Drachevsky), the latter providing “a convenient channel through which to inform the general public” of its work (Rotfeld and Torkunov 2015, 7).

Other noteworthy accomplishments included the concurrent establishment of Polish–Russian and Russian–Polish Centers for Dialogue and Understanding, which resulted from a written appeal Rotfeld and Torkunov made to the leaders of both countries on June 22, 2009 (Rokossovskaja 2012; Masterov 2010).⁵¹ (The Centers were soon created, but the original plan, which was to have the Group act in an oversight or advisory capacity, was not realized.)⁵² The Group’s activities also facilitated the unprecedented joint visit of Putin (then Russia’s prime minister) and Tusk to the Katyń Forest memorial complex outside of Smolensk on April 7, 2010 to pay respects to the victims of the massacre. Group members

met with both of them during this event, which took place just three days before the ill-fated flight of President Kaczyński and the delegation accompanying him to Katyń crashed while attempting to land in heavy fog, killing all aboard.

Nonetheless, many of the projects proposed during the Group's meetings (which typically involved publications) never came to fruition. And despite all its achievements, interpretative divisions between Poland and Russia over historical matters have remained pronounced, or even hardened, in the last decade. For example, while in the wake of the Smolensk disaster both sides made a concerted effort to mend relations, the results were decidedly mixed. A positive outcome was the passage of a resolution by the Russian Duma on November 26, 2010 denouncing Stalin and condemning Katyń as a political crime.⁵³ Less salutary, in that nothing ever came of them, were the assurances offered in November 2011 by Russia's ambassador to Poland, Aleksandr Alekseev, that the decision to formally exonerate the massacre's victims and declassify all the documents pertaining to it had already been made "at the highest levels" (Wojciechowski 2011).⁵⁴

Another major fault-line in Polish–Russian relations that the Group was unable to bridge concerns the legacy of the Polish-Bolshevik War, which remains a vigorous point of contention between the two countries. Since the beginning of the 1990s the Red Army POWs who died in Polish custody as a result of this conflict have served as a rhetorical "anti-Katyń"⁵⁵ for Russian nationalists and others inclined to relativize Polish suffering at the hands of the Soviet Union, but recourse to such arguments has intensified dramatically in recent years.⁵⁶ However, while the incarcerated faced indisputably harsh conditions, mainstream historians (including the Group's Russian members) have consistently maintained that the overwhelming preponderance of these deaths were caused by contagious diseases such as cholera, the spread of which was exacerbated by overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions in the detention centers, rather than a deliberate policy of extermination. Nevertheless, there are those in Russia who remain unconvinced. How many perished is also disputed; as a result, while the numbers published in the Group's 2010 volume suggest anywhere from 16–17 thousand (as cited in the Polish side's account) to 25–28 thousand (according to the text penned by Gennadii Matveev)⁵⁷ prisoners may have lost their lives, Russian politicians and journalists routinely cite much higher figures.⁵⁸

It must be emphasized, however, that the principal drivers of this continuing mnemonic discord are not conflicting historical narratives per se. Disagreements over how the past should be understood are instead symptomatic of broader geopolitical fractures across the post-communist world. The most significant of these concerns the crisis in Ukraine and the resultant imposition of sanctions on Russia by the West, which brought about a disastrous deterioration of relations between Poland and Russia since 2013.⁵⁹ Negative media reports, both those critical of the opposing side's role in the two countries' shared history and the Group's functioning overall, have likewise played a role in worsening already strained relations.⁶⁰

2017: A One-Sided (And Failed) Attempt

On March 9, 2017 Poland's Foreign Minister, Witold Waszczykowski, declared that the Polish half of the Group on Difficult Matters was being re-launched with a new membership, claiming that despite the problems between them, "Russia and Poland are neighbors, and substantive dialogue that overcomes stereotypes lies in our mutual interest" ("Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters" 2017). Historian Mirosław Filipowicz, director of the Lublin-based Institute of East-Central Europe (IEŚW), was recruited to serve as its chairman. During the inauguration ceremony, Filipowicz stressed that the decision to reactivate the Polish side was meant to demonstrate Poland's willingness to keep open "non-political communication channels with the Russian side" ("Professor Mirosław Filipowicz Named Co-Chair" 2017). (The only regular contact the two countries maintained at the time was over Poland's UN Security Council status [Dudina 2017].) In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied that it harbored "serious doubts" about renewing the Group's work given the poor state of relations with Poland, the blame for which it placed squarely on Warsaw (Rokossovskaja 2017).⁶¹ Torkunov, meanwhile, made clear that while the Group's previous iteration had "achieved a great deal," he would not cochair it in any rejuvenated configuration ("A. Torkunow nie będzie" 2017).

Filipowicz reports being quite surprised that Deputy Foreign Minister Marek Ziółkowski had asked him to head this effort during a fall 2016 meeting in Warsaw, as he was not "a person connected to the new [PiS] government" (personal communication, June 21, 2018).⁶² Nonetheless, Filipowicz agreed to participate after he was promised autonomy in reconstituting this body and choosing the topics it would consider.⁶³ Hoping to achieve a meaningful breakthrough in relations, he also acceded to the Foreign Ministry's request to not emphasize controversial topics in talks with the Russian side.

On the day the announcement was made Filipowicz wrote to Torkunov. They met soon thereafter in Moscow at MGIMO, along with Aleksandr Chubarian, the head of the Institute of World History at the Russian Academy of Sciences (with whom Filipowicz was already collaborating on a textbook project) and Vladimir Grigoriev of Russia's Federal Agency for the Press and Mass Media (Rospechat). During this gathering Torkunov allegedly stated that while he refused to again lead the Russian side, he was interested in participating in a renewed dialogue over history. However, Filipowicz claims he was left with the impression that his counterparts were waiting for an indication from the Russian Foreign Ministry on how to proceed.

Concerning the goals of this new body, Filipowicz was adamant that it would make no sense "to return to the questions that were raised during Rotfeld's tenure." For him, Katyń and the Polish–Bolshevik War were thus closed matters (though to his mind the issue of how to characterize the Soviet Union's 1939 incursion into Poland remained open). Instead, he proposed emphasizing "positive episodes" of historical cooperation in order to defuse the negative stereotypes Poles and Russians

had of one another. Doing so was also intended as an “antidote” to the conspiracy theories swirling about Poland concerning the Smolensk crash, which a not insignificant number of Poles regard as an assassination orchestrated by Moscow.⁶⁴

As for how the members were selected, Filipowicz notes that while he consulted Rotfeld for advice, he also employed three personal criteria: his level of trust in an individual, their practical usefulness, and the expertise they brought with them. One of his choices was quite unconventional: Fr. Prof. Henryk Paprocki, a prominent Polish Orthodox theologian Filipowicz asked to join the Group in order to demonstrate to Russia that he was willing to upend the status quo.⁶⁵

Even though the Polish side had no Russian equivalent, once comprised it did function. Its activities included having regular meetings with Deputy Foreign Minister Bartosz Cichoński throughout 2017 and conferring on Russia-related matters with other Polish officials. As for why efforts to restart the full Group stalled, Filipowicz ventured that neither side sufficiently thought through its revival. Specifically, he observed that Poland’s relevance for Russian foreign policy had declined, citing Warsaw’s weakened position in the EU and the problems its adoption of a controversial memory law in January 2018 (discussed below) engendered in relations with Israel and the United States, all of which curtailed Russia’s enthusiasm for resuming talks with Poland over the past.⁶⁶

Filipowicz, however, is measured in assigning political blame. He agrees that Russian actions in Ukraine hurt bilateral relations, but notes that Ukrainian and Polish nationalists also bear responsibility. Reflecting on the future prospects of this body in 2018, Filipowicz opined that if attempts to restart dialogue were to only involve inter-governmental contacts, he “would be one-hundred percent pessimistic,” but added that there were many in Russia who wanted to resume talks with the Polish side. As such, he believed that if Poland’s Foreign Ministry were to modify the Group’s remit, it might be feasible to cooperate with non-governmental actors in Russia even at a time of heightened geopolitical tension between the two countries.

But while Russia refused to reconvene its half of this body, not all avenues of cooperation were blocked off. Though it did not formally take place under the Group’s auspices, Filipowicz and his team at IEŚW continued working with Chubarian’s people at the Institute of World History during this period to complete a series of history textbooks for Polish and Russian teachers.⁶⁷ However, this arrangement blurred the lines between the IEŚW and the Polish half of the Group, which would have eventual consequences.

In the end, Poland’s 2017 overture to Russia to restart bilateral discussions over the past failed. Moscow steadfastly rebuffed calls for renewing dialogue, claiming it was awaiting the normalization of diplomatic relations before moving forward.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, in late November 2018 Poland’s government announced that it would dissolve the IEŚW and replace it with a new research institute dedicated specifically to Central European (i.e., not Russian) issues (Domagała 2018). This decision led IEŚW to close on December 20, 2018. It also notably affected the Polish side of the Group, which had coalesced around this organization and its director. Filipowicz afterward expressed bafflement at the decision, stating he

could not “rationally explain why the Polish government does not see the need for dialogue about mnemonic differences with Russia and its other eastern neighbors” (Kowalski 2019).⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Filipowicz had previously made clear that if Warsaw attempted to disband the IEŚW, he would view this as a vote of no confidence in him personally and resign from the Group, which he in fact did not long after plans for IEŚW’s dissolution were made public. Consequently, by early 2019 the Polish side of the Group was defunct. This outcome, though certainly influenced by Russia’s reticence to revive bilateral talks over history, predominantly resulted from Warsaw’s political priorities shifting away from the former Soviet states and toward Central Europe.⁷⁰

Analysis: Similarities and Differences over Time

Historical commissions have been set up “in a variety of contexts where ‘difficult’ and shameful historical episodes cast a long shadow over contemporary society and where debates over the past have become the subject of political wrangling” (Karn 2018, 2). Moreover, reliance on them to assist in overcoming troubled legacies has grown tremendously over the last several decades, to the extent that cross-border bodies dealing with the Holocaust – the paradigmatic example of such commissions – are now “a fixture in Europe” (Barkan 2009, 901). However, these entities, the majority of which were created through official channels, have functioned not only normatively, as truth-tellers and justice-seekers, but also “as political troubleshooters for their governments, which were still largely guided by the logic of *realpolitik*” (Karn 2018, 2). This applies to the Polish-Russian situation as well. While the bodies considered above aided in mending relations when circumstances favored it, their success or failure was conditioned on political factors they could not control or, in many instances, even adequately anticipate.

The 2008 Group is a case in point. It made considerable progress in parsing the complex historical legacies Poland and Russia share, but after 2013, as Rotfeld notes, the “political will [to continue] evaporated” (personal communication, April 16, 2020). Turkunov makes a similar observation; characterizing the Group’s work as “academic diplomacy,” he underscores that in order to be effective, such bodies not only have to be professional, but also “influential within their own countries.” From his perspective, political leadership is thus decisive in determining the outcome of these efforts, particularly as many contemporary problems involving history arise from its instrumental exploitation (2013).⁷¹

Historical commissions are inherently self-limiting; they exist to bring about sufficient understanding and closure about the past to cause themselves to become superfluous. However, there is a stark difference between bodies that cease deliberating because they accomplish their goals, and those that do so because their mission is impeded by politics. Notwithstanding their positive achievements, the bilateral attempts at rapprochement considered here all fall into this latter category.

This does not preclude evaluating these successive entities relative to one another; doing so, however, requires a comparative metric. One means of differentiating between them

involves focusing on their respective *scope of inquiry* and *scale of impact*. These two categories, in turn, may be further subdivided to reflect *endogenous* or *exogenous* effects. At an endogenous, or intra-group level, the scope of inquiry pertains to the types and number of events considered by the body in question. Conversely, at the exogenous level, it encompasses the extent to which its deliberations are circumscribed by external actors or forces. Similarly, the scale of impact at an endogenous level describes how successful members were in achieving internal goals, whether these involved unearthing new evidence or reconciling extant narratives. In contrast, the scale of impact at the exogenous level concerns how effective they were in sharing their findings with wider audiences, and how influential these proved among political elites and the general public.

Applying this typology, overt political interference was most apparent in the case of the Polish-Soviet Historical Commission, which was hobbled in both its scope of inquiry and scale of impact by the communist regimes of the PRL and USSR. The fact its members were trusted by their governments (or else they would not have been appointed) speaks to the Commission's narrow endogenous scope of inquiry. But their work was likewise constrained by the exogenous oversight they experienced due to functioning in an authoritarian context. There were multiple historical issues that were either too politically sensitive or ideologically dissonant for them to consider, and the Soviet authorities, in particular, were restrictive in granting archival access.

Likewise, this body's scale of impact was limited, though with one important caveat. Endogenously, its mission was restricted by the Marxist-Leninist worldview its members formally espoused. However, the Polish side ended up conducting independent research, raising the scale of its internal impact in comparison to the Soviet side. The same held true for the scale of exogenous impact; although Polish society under the PRL remained ideologically corseted to an extent, the Commission's findings were disseminated earlier and much more widely in Poland than in the Soviet Union. Moreover, most of the episodes considered focused on Polish suffering at the hands of the Soviet authorities. This, coupled with the moral gravity Poles assign to events such as Katyń, ensured the Commission would be followed more closely in Poland.

Meanwhile, the 2002 Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters, while not operating in an authoritarian setting and therefore not nearly as limited in the scope of its inquiry by exogenous factors, was nevertheless constrained endogenously, as the bulk of its members were government representatives acting in their official capacities. Concurrently, the scale of its impact was nominal in both endogenous and exogenous terms, as it only met twice between 2002 and 2005 and produced no discernible societal resonance.

The 2008 iteration of the Group, in contrast, was much more efficacious. It covered wide-ranging topics, and it was largely scholars, rather than externally imposed political agendas, that determined its deliberative priorities. This points to a high endogenous scope of inquiry, as the exogenously imposed constraints on it were low. The scale of its impact was also vastly more expansive than that of its predecessor. Completing the projects that it

undertook required considerable internal cohesion and cooperation, rendering the Group's endogenous impact high. Its exogenous impact, however, can only be described as moderate; while the objective, evidence-driven approach it employed produced deliverables that were disseminated well beyond the Group itself, their socio-political impact was fairly limited. This was because members lacked sufficient institutional mechanisms through which to easily communicate their findings and influence societal discourse, producing a disjuncture between the Group's accomplishments and its ability to enact substantive political change.

As Rotfeld muses:

The deliberations of the [2008] *Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters* did not concern mainly facts and events. The facts had been known for years. However, it was important to juxtapose Polish and Russian perceptions and different historical memories on the same facts. A remarkable result was that the Polish and Russian experts had surprisingly convergent views on the most sensitive and difficult issues (e.g., the Katyn Crime, the origin of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Red Army's invasion and incorporation of eastern Poland, etc.). It proved a much tougher task to ensure that the truth, brought to light after seventy years, reached millions of Russians. Making that happen was beyond the power of the Group. (2012)⁷²

Regarding the Polish side of the Group that was re-launched in 2017, both the scope of its inquiry and the scale of its impact were inherently narrow because of Russian nonparticipation. More specifically, its endogenous scope of inquiry was high, given the autonomy the chairman and members were granted in determining what historical episodes it would consider, while the level of exogenous interference was low. At the same time, its scale of impact was minor along both exogenous and endogenous dimensions, as it never had the opportunity to function in its intended capacity.

Moving away from the theoretical to add empirical texture to the analysis, it is obvious that efforts to resolve the impact of the past on Polish-Russian relations enjoyed their greatest success between 2008 and 2012, despite several instances of intense strife between the two states.⁷³ During this time Dmitrii Medvedev was president of Russia, and he appeared more inclined to pursue reconciliation than his predecessor. This was especially so immediately following the April 2010 Smolensk disaster, which represented a potential critical juncture in Polish-Russian relations given the favorable reaction Poles exhibited toward the seemingly sincere condolences emanating from the Kremlin.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, although PiS controlled the presidency up until Lech Kaczyński's untimely death, Poland's Prime Minister from 2007 to 2014 was Donald Tusk, a pragmatist who favored a future-oriented approach to dealing with Russia that contrasted sharply with the backward-looking "blame and shame" rhetoric employed by his predecessor, Jarosław Kaczyński.

The impact of these individual agents, however, does not alone explain why concerted cooperation was evinced during some periods and not others. Geopolitical incentives need to be considered as well, along with underlying structural and institutional factors. The Polish-Soviet Commission, for example, resulted from Gorbachev's implementation of glasnost and the

need of the PZPR to appear more responsive to Polish society at a moment in time when it was under existential threat from a popular opposition movement. Soviet participation in the Commission was thus motivated by a desire to reaffirm the alliance between the PRL and USSR, as the former was a critical partner for the Soviet Union. For Poland, meanwhile, openly confronting painful episodes in Polish-Soviet history was viewed as a means through which to bolster the legitimacy of the PRL.⁷⁵ Neither side, however, thought the Commission a prelude to regime change. So while some of the evidence unearthed by the Polish members of the Commission did deepen the PRL's legitimacy problems and turn Polish society further against the USSR, the removal of the PZPR from power in 1989 was much more an indictment of the old system's ricketiness than a testament to the Commission's impact.

Consider another example: while the activities of the 2008 Group helped facilitate the meeting that took place between Tusk and Putin in Smolensk on April 7, 2010, its role should not be assessed absent a broader context. Specifically, a leaked February 2010 memo indicates that Russian officials feared Poland would hamper the deepening of relations between Russia and the European Union if questions over the Katyn massacre were allowed to fester (Gaaze and Zygar 2010).⁷⁶ Since then, however, Russia's appetite for seeking rapprochement with Europe and the West more generally has diminished, attenuating the utility of improving relations with Poland over their intertwined and difficult history.

The political parties in power, and, at the extreme end of the spectrum, regime type, are also important variables to take into account. Populist, nationalist, and various utopian-minded parties (e.g., fascist, theocratic) all mythologize history so as to construct and validate narratives that glorify, or at least do not actively impugn, the nation/state.⁷⁷ Such a tendency is likewise apparent in procedural democracies, where the pluralistic exchange of ideas that is a defining feature of liberalism – and which seems necessary, if not by itself sufficient, to come to terms with problematic legacies in a nuanced fashion – is often perceived as a threat by political elites or the titular ethnonym. And in altogether non-democratic contexts this characteristic is even more pronounced.

Post-communist efforts at bilateral dialogue were therefore most successful when more centrist actors and parties were in power.⁷⁸ Contrariwise, Putin's statist turn circa 2004, which was heavily influenced by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, had a negative impact on the ability of the initial post-Communist Group on Difficult Matters to serve as an effective arbiter for change. Similarly, as Russia moved in a more neo-authoritarian and reactionary direction after Putin's reelection as president in 2012, the ability of the second iteration of the Group to influence Polish-Russian relations deteriorated. In part, this reflected the effect of political disputes unrelated to contentious historical narratives; for example, Russia's crackdown on public demonstrations and free speech rights as a result of the 2011–2013 Bolotnaia Square protests had a chilling effect on relations with its democratic neighbors. However, even if the initiating confrontation did not deal directly with past legacies, its effects frequently manifest as a rise in tensions over historical recall. In this same vein, prior instrumental

uses of history have been repurposed to delineate the contours of new geopolitical conflicts. This is what occurred with the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, which was to a significant extent predicated on the Kremlin's increasingly selective appeal to Soviet and Czarist referents over the course of the last two decades to reinforce the idea of Russia's great-power status and justify Moscow's foreign policy.⁷⁹

Such politicization (and attendant public moralization) of history has made compromise over how the past is to be understood an unviable position for Moscow to adopt. Exemplifying this, Russia passed a memory law in 2014 that enshrined the findings of the Nuremberg tribunals as inviolable – important because they did not consider Allied war crimes, such as those the Red Army committed against German civilians as it advanced on Berlin – and made it illegal “to spread intentionally false information” regarding the USSR's role in World War II or to offend public sensibilities by questioning the official narrative of its victory over fascist Germany.⁸⁰ But Russia should not be singled out in this regard; similar dynamics are also prevalent in many of the former Warsaw Pact states, where nationalistic narratives routinely downplay instances of collaboration between coethnics and German forces while simultaneously suggesting that the USSR was singlehandedly responsible for the imposition of communism on their nations.⁸¹

This propensity to uncritically entwine history with identity is amply evinced in contemporary Polish politics, which have moved in a more ethno-nationalist and populist direction since 2015. The election of Andrzej Duda as president, along with PiS gaining control of the legislature, prompted Warsaw to pursue a politics of history focused on valorizing Poland's past while overlooking its defects. Reflecting this, in January 2018 the Sejm passed a controversial mnemonic statute that prohibited besmirching the good name of the Polish nation or accusing Poles of committing wartime crimes. Although international pressure finally caused this law to be modified in June 2018, in its original form it could have theoretically precluded public discussion of such atrocities as the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom.⁸² Given these tendencies in the domestic politics of both Russia and Poland, the observation Rotfeld made in 2016 that “neither Russians nor Poles are ready now to enter into dialogue ... for the reasons [sic] of a very internal nature” appears strikingly apt (IWM Vienna 2016, 1:04.08).

Conclusion: Is Historical Reconciliation (Politically) Possible?

None of the efforts to bring the two sides together to discuss their contested legacies, with the partial exception of the Polish–Soviet Joint Historical Commission,⁸³ monopolized historical debate. Nor was the Soviet-era effort the only precedent for later attempts at bilateral dialogue.⁸⁴ (Poland and West Germany had begun to make formal reconciliatory overtures to one another by the early 1970s [He 2015, 46–114; Müller 2004].) Successive iterations of the Group on Difficult Matters were also not the lone government-sanctioned bodies tasked with improving Polish-Russian relations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union; others included the previously noted Polish-Russian Civic Forum and the Intergovernmental

Commission on Economic Cooperation. Neither did they represent the only attempts to examine the two countries' disputed history. These have ranged from Russia's protracted investigation into the Katyń massacre (which began in the early 1990s and lasted until 2005) to Poland's creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in 2000.⁸⁵ Similarly, their focus on the political ramifications of the past is also not without parallels: consider the 2009 establishment of the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. Meanwhile, inter-governmental efforts to repair cross-border relations affected by contentious historical narratives were not confined to the dyad of Poland/Russia, but were also reflected in entities like the Foundation for Polish–German Reconciliation, the Polish–Ukrainian Commission on History, and the Russian–Japanese Commission on Difficult Matters.⁸⁶ However, what sets the Polish–Russian Group, as well as the earlier Polish–Soviet Commission, apart is the degree to which the past has played a deleterious role in relations between these two neighbors, as well as the politically motivated inability to overcome it both sides have repeatedly exhibited.

Despite sharing a border, in many respects Poles and Russians do not really know one another. This realization goes a long way toward explaining why the ostensibly symbolic task of “getting history right” influences their interactions to such an outsized extent. Sikorski observes that in recent years Russia has “reverted to an imperial use of history for the greater glory of the Russian state” (personal communication, April 18, 2018), but Poland has likewise adopted more mnemonically exclusionary positions. Given their mutual embrace of increasingly nationalist rhetoric and its accompanying illiberal tendencies – which make it more difficult to be sympathetic toward alternative viewpoints and favor zero-sum interpretations of history – it is difficult to imagine how a genuinely constructive dialogue about the past can occur in the foreseeable future. This is concerning, as the historical sources of conflict between Poland and Russia are exhibiting an ever-more entrenched and path-dependent logic.

However, it would be unjustifiably pessimistic to conclude that Polish-Russian attempts at rapprochement have yielded no lasting results. It is encouraging, for example, that members of the 2008 Group developed a high degree of consensus on how the past should be interpreted, and that what quarrels did arise were more often among the national contingents than across them (IWM Vienna 2016, 55:30).⁸⁷ These efforts have also produced unexpected effects well beyond their original context. Not only was the work of the body headed by Rotfeld and Torkunov “very carefully observed in various parts of the world, including Asia,” but Filipowicz notes that he himself has traveled several times to Korea and remained “in constant contact with Japanese historians, because they want to use our Polish experience in preparing a dialogue about history between Korea and Japan” (Kowalski 2019). Neither has the Polish Foreign Ministry given up on the prospects for bilateral dialogue, having called once again for re-launching the Group in late 2019.⁸⁸

In the end, the members of these successive bodies could generally reach a consensus on the empirical facts, or at least comprehend why their interpretations of the past differed. That

this same level of concord has not been evinced in the rhetoric that Polish and Russian governments today display on historical matters is not a problem of scholarship, but rather of politics, both domestic and regional.⁸⁹ Historians can come to objective conclusions, but politicians may make it impossible for reconciliation to proceed.⁹⁰

Notes

1. I have previously written a shorter and less-developed study of this topic (“Tenacious Pasts: Geopolitics and the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters”) that is forthcoming as a chapter in Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (eds.), *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Contemporary Russia* (slated to be published in 2021 by Indiana University Press).
2. In order to maintain consistency with the listed reference and to avoid confusion, I have given Torkunov's surname in its Polish form (Torkunow) in the citation. This work was also published in a Russian-language edition (Torkunov and Rotfeld 2010). Five years later an updated but truncated English-language version was released (Rotfeld and Torkunov 2015).
3. Rotfeld made a similar point (commenting on the 1940 Katyń massacre) before the 2008 Group's first meeting: “We are not dealing with studying facts, but resolving the problems that block, and sometimes paralyze, normal relations between our countries” (Przybylski 2008).
4. Although the stage for this had been set earlier, beginning with a meeting that took place between Jaruzelski and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev on April 27, 1985 (Szayna 1988, 38–39).
5. Translation as given in Valkenier (1989, 66 n. 8). The original text appeared in *Trybuna Ludu* on April 22, 1987. Regarding the Declaration, see also Szayna (1988, 39–40).
6. For more details on the Commission's conception and early functioning, consult Szayna (1988, 40–46).
7. Six of the members were also military officers (see Appendix).
8. These included: the Katyń massacre, Soviet policy toward Poland in 1939, the events of 1956, the Warsaw Uprising, the establishment of the Polish Communist Party, and Poland's postwar boundaries. CBOS was established in 1982 by the PRL government.
9. Jaruzelski (who became Chief of Staff of the Polish Armed Forces in 1964 and Poland's Minister of Defense in 1968) recounts raising questions about Katyń with his contacts in the Soviet military as early as the 1960s and 70s (2010, 9–10). He also broached the issue with Gorbachev on more than one occasion during the 1980s.
10. Reflecting Polish sensitivities, Molotov's comment is often translated into Polish as “the bastard of the Versailles Treaty.”
11. Headed by the prominent Soviet physician Nikolai Burdenko, this body was convened to counter accusations that the USSR was responsible for the Poles' execution. After several weeks of ostensive investigation, it falsely concluded that the Nazis were behind the killings, which it claimed took place in 1941 rather than 1940. Additionally, the report stated that German troops also executed some 500 Soviet POWs in the Katyń Forest (ironically, it was claimed they were forced to help the Germans falsify evidence pointing to Soviet culpability before themselves being killed), an allegation that has since been invoked repeatedly by Soviet and later Russian politicians in an attempt to relativize Polish losses (Soroka in press). Today there is still a marker honoring these apocryphal POWs at the entrance to the Katyń memorial complex, despite their existence never having been independently corroborated. For his part, Alexander Guryanov of the Russian human-rights group Memorial terms this account a “complete fabrication” (personal communication, March 20, 2020; see also Guryanov 2017, 22–25).
12. However, the monument erected to honor the slain Poles blamed their deaths on the Germans, whereas the other one commemorated

- the alleged Red Army POWs mentioned in the discredited Burdenko report.
13. Valkenier cites translated excerpts from Urban's comments, which appeared in *Trybuna Ludu* on March 8, 1989.
 14. It was published in the USSR as well, though not until May 1990 (Gorbachev conceded Soviet responsibility for the massacre during Jaruzelski's visit to Moscow on April 13, 1990; see Maslov 1990, 300–319).
 15. Polish Commission member Włodzimierz Kowalski had already published the text of the protocol the previous year (Valkenier 1991, 254, n. 14). The Soviet Union, however, did not confirm the agreement's existence until late February 1990; the text was subsequently published in the March 1990 edition of the Ministry's *Vestnik* (Valkenier 1991, 263 n. 34).
 16. Though Commission members met outside these sessions as well, and sub-groups featuring external experts were convened on an ad hoc basis (Valkenier 1989, 6; Szayna 1988, 46).
 17. For a discussion, see Valkenier (1991, 262–266).
 18. Soviet academics unsuccessfully proposed reviving the Commission in fall 1990 (Valkenier 1991, 266–267).
 19. The Roundtable Talks, which took place between February 6–April 5, 1989, resulted in a blueprint for the pacted transition of power that began when the PZPR lost political control after the June 4, 1989 election.
 20. See, for example, Smirnov (1988).
 21. As Andrei Kozyrev, post-Soviet Russia's first foreign minister argues, Russia is the USSR's legal successor, but this represents political rather than moral continuity. Observing that all the states that emerged from the dissolution of the USSR were new states, Kozyrev notes “we all shared [an] awful past, it's over” (personal communication, February 16, 2015).
 22. Artem Malgin, a Russian member of the 2002 Group, corroborates this assessment, noting that “bilateral relations worsened catastrophically” during this period (n.d.).
 23. The new Polish government initiated a meeting between Tusk and Putin, then Russia's prime minister, in early 2008 (“V Moskve proshli peregovory” 2008). This was the first visit of a Polish Prime Minister to Russia since 2001.
 24. This letter was widely regarded as auguring a turning point in their relations (Kosicki 2009). It was sent in response to the Evangelical Church of Germany's published appeal to the West German government to accept the loss of German territory in the east that accompanied the war settlement and establish a dialogue with Poland (Phillips 1998, 70–71).
 25. Emphasis in the original.
 26. This has especially been the case since Russia gave up on trying to become a “normal” European country that plays by established Western rules, as was the initial goal of its post-Soviet leadership in the early 1990s.
 27. According to Rotfeld, Russia's unwillingness to acknowledge responsibility for Soviet-era crimes (in contrast to Germany, which accepted its guilt for World War II), was a fundamental problem “from the very beginning” of Polish-Russian dialogue over history (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
 28. There were critical strategic reasons for both sides to want to improve relations. Tensions between Russia and the West (and especially the United States) were rising rapidly at the time, as indicated by Putin's incendiary February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, where the Russian leader excoriated Washington's unilateralism in international affairs. Poland was intimately involved in this, as it was to be a key part of the United States' proposed missile shield, which was stridently opposed by the Kremlin (the situation only stabilized when US President Barak Obama finally announced in September 2009 that long-range missiles would not be deployed in Poland or the Czech Republic). Regional mnemonic conflicts were also on the rise at this time; the most infamous of these was Russia's row with Estonia in early 2007 over the relocation of a bronze statue honoring Red Army soldiers killed in World War II from a square in Tallinn to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the capital.
 29. As Rotfeld later put it, “to have authority you have to have authoritative members of the Group,” which for him equated to having “the best people” available for the task at hand (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
 30. Rotfeld further claims that he “intentionally did not use the word reconciliation” when referring to the Group's mission, as this term is a “spiritual, rather than political, historical or sociological” concept and he “did not want to promise too much.”
 31. Members of the Russian side of the Group substantiate this observation. Igor Zhukovskii, for instance, avers that the Group functioned in a “highly autonomous” manner, which permitted it to independently formulate and implement its agenda, albeit within the officially established parameters of its remit (personal communication, May 26, 2020). Similarly, Vladimir Baranovskii notes that while it can be assumed that there was contact between the Group's chairs and government officials, he did “not know of a single case that could be interpreted as an attempt to ‘direct,’ ‘orient,’ [or] ‘correct’ the nature of the debates in the Group and the projects and initiatives discussed in it.” On the contrary, he claims that the Group formulated initiatives that were then passed “upward” via its cochairs (personal communication, June 4, 2020).
 32. However, as the Russian historian and Group member Gennadii Matveev observes, given that both sides were officially sanctioned by their respective foreign ministries, coordination did sometimes take place with them on certain questions (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
 33. Regarding the Russian side, Group member Leonid Vardomskii notes that, given Torkunov's position as the rector of MGIMO, the university became the focal point around which the Russian side was constituted (personal communication, May 24, 2020).
 34. This was in the period 2008 to 2010. The last Group-related activity Paczkowski clearly recalls attending was in Smolensk on April 7, 2010, although he allows that he may have been present at subsequent gatherings as well.
 35. Matveev corroborates that experts from outside the Group were invited to individual meetings based on the agenda, though he claims that usually there were not many of them (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
 36. The author thanks Tomasz Stępniewski for serving as an intermediary and forwarding Eberhardt's response (personal communication, April 15, 2020).
 37. These eventually became the thematic basis for the 2010 book. Rotfeld subsequently mentioned that his intention for this volume was “not to bring Russians and Poles closer to each other, but the opposite – to illustrate what was the Polish interpretation and what was the Russian interpretation.” As such, the individual chapters, which address the same topic from the points of view of Polish and Russian experts, were written without their content being vetted in advance, though the resulting essays were reviewed by both sides (personal communication, April 16, 2020). Matveev, who contributed a chapter, further clarifies that the “texts in the book were absolutely the authors' own, they were not subjected to any outside editing” (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
 38. June 15, 2008 *Interfaks* interview (the author thanks the interviewer, Peter Cheremushkin, for providing a copy of the text [personal communication, December 14, 2018]).
 39. Rotfeld reports the Poles who could speak Russian did so when appropriate, though the majority of them could read Russian but not necessarily hold a conversation in it. He himself speaks the language fluently, and utilized it during informal conversations with his Russian counterparts (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
 40. Attesting to the longevity of some of the personal relationships, Matveev observes that he had kept up contact with the Polish historian Wojciech Materski, a fellow Group member, since the 1970s (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
 41. Baranovskii similarly characterizes relations between the two sides as “cooperative, respectful, [and] in a number of cases friendly” (personal communication, June 4, 2020).

42. Vardomskii offers a somewhat less sanguine assessment (see note 87).
43. The fifth meeting listed is referred to as the sixth plenary session in the appendix.
44. This coincided with an international conference held on the ninety-th anniversary of the Riga Peace Treaty.
45. "Given the atmosphere at the moment," Rotfeld explained, "talks concerning this matter would be somewhat abstract, if not absurd" (Grodecki 2015).
46. He resigned after PiS came to power, as he felt its leaders "should appoint a person they trusted" to this position (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
47. The intention to do so was noted in the statement released by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs after Rotfeld and Torkunov met for the first time in their capacity as cochairs (Paszkowski 2015, 641).
48. Two Polish members of the Group, Andrzej Kremer and Andrzej Przewoźnik, were among the victims (Rotfeld and Torkunov 2015, 12). Attesting to the role this tragedy played in subsequent relations between the two countries, in March 2015 the Polish media reported that Moscow had sought to schedule the next meeting of the Group, which was initially supposed to take place in Lublin in the spring of 2014, for April 10 (or April 9, according to another source), leading former Polish diplomat Witold Jurasz to post on Facebook that this was a "deliberate provocation," as the date marked the fifth anniversary of the Smolensk tragedy ("Posiedzenie Polsko-Rosyjskiej Grupy" 2015).
49. Though this was something of a double-edged sword; Matveev claims that Group members "constantly felt the attention" that government officials were paying to their work (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
50. Matveev notes that Russian and Polish foreign ministry officials "at the department-head level" were included in the work of this body (personal communication, July 23, 2020).
51. Representatives of the Centers also participated in Group meetings (such as those held in Warsaw and Moscow in 2012, and Gdańsk and Kaliningrad in 2013). Rotfeld reports pursuing the idea because he felt these bodies could play a critical role in fostering goodwill, especially at times of worsening relations (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
52. Although they still exist, in recent years these organizations have operated largely independent from one another, and have even on occasion worked at cross-purposes (e.g., the Russian center has sponsored Polish students to visit Crimea after its annexation from Ukraine) (Radziwon 2018, 137, 139).
53. However, the resolution's language made every effort to delineate Russia from the Soviet Union and to cast Katyń as a mutual tragedy perpetrated by a totalitarian regime. It also repeated the unsubstantiated claim that Soviet POWs were executed there ("Zaiavlenie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy" 2010).
54. This statement may have represented a preemptive attempt to ward off the consequences of an impending ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECoHR) regarding the massacre that was not expected to be positive for Russian interests. The ECeHR had agreed in 2011 to hear a case brought by the relatives of 12 Katyń victims (*Janowiec and Others v. Russia*) who alleged their rights were violated by the Russian authorities, whom they accused of not carrying out a thorough investigation into the matter. However, the Court's final verdict, delivered on October 21, 2013, was widely viewed as unfavorable for Polish interests (Kamiński 2015).
55. See Radziwinowicz (2000).
56. Drawing equivalencies between the Red Army POWs who perished in Polish camps and the victims of Katyń has also been increasingly sanctioned by the Russian state. For example, Russia's Ministry of Culture in February 2015 pledged to expand and complete museum complexes at Katyń and Mednoe (those killed in the massacre are buried at both sites), noting that planned exhibits would also address the fate of the Red Army POWs who perished as a result of the Polish-Bolshevik War, despite them not being buried at either site ("Szczydry gest Kremla?" 2015; see also Guryanov 2017).
57. An earlier Polish-Russian study (in which Matveev participated) estimated the number of Red Army prisoners who succumbed was closer to the Polish estimate (*Krasnoarmeitsy v pol'skom plenu* 2004).
58. Anatolii Anisimov, for example, writes in the newspaper of the Russian Federal Assembly that "up to 130 thousand Red Army soldiers found their way into Polish prisons, out of whom few returned home alive" (2013).
59. Tensions stemming from this not only halted the activity of the Group, but also brought about the cancellation of reciprocal year-long cultural celebrations planned for 2015.
60. Matveev cites some Polish media as being "especially negative" toward the Group (personal communication, July 23, 2020), though critical accounts appeared in both Polish and Russian sources.
61. Earlier that year, however, it was reported that the Russian side was also interesting in resuming cooperation (Wroński 2017).
62. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes and paraphrases attributed to Filipowicz derive from this interview.
63. This promise was not fully kept, as Waszczykowski insisted Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz be removed from the list of potential members (Wroński 2017).
64. Promoted by such prominent figures as former Prime Minister (and current PiS head) Jarosław Kaczyński and former Foreign Minister Ana Fotyga, these accusations served to kindle anti-Russian sentiment. Moreover, they took on new life after PiS' electoral wins in 2015. Indicative of this, on February 4, 2016 Poland's Defense Minister at the time, Antoni Macierewicz, announced that the crash would be reinvestigated, even though both the Russian and Polish accident reports released in 2011 concluded pilot error was to blame ("Warsaw Opens New Probe" 2016). Showcasing how polarizing this issue has become in Polish politics, between 2012–2015 the percentage of Poles who agreed that the crash was "definitely" or "more likely than not" deliberately caused ranged from 25% to 33%. However, attitudes were highly correlated to party affiliation: for instance, while overall 31% of respondents in early 2015 reported believing that the Smolensk crash was an assassination, fully 58% of PiS supporters agreed with this contention, while only 10% of PO supporters felt likewise ("Przed piątą rocznicą katastrofy" 2015).
65. Despite admitting that he held a critical attitude toward organized religion in his interview with the author, Filipowicz also involved a Polish Catholic priest, Fr. Leszek Kryża, in the effort. According to him both the Russian Orthodox and Polish Catholic Churches "evinced great interest in dialogue" (Kowalski 2019).
66. These issues are relevant because they diminished Poland's capacity to serve as a potential honest broker between a Russia under sanctions and the West.
67. This resulted in the issuance of two volumes (they appeared in both Polish and Russian) dealing with the history of Polish-Russian relations from the 14th to the 19th century. Meanwhile, the text of a third volume, focusing on the 20th century, was (as of June 2018) completed but not yet approved by the Russian side.
68. The position of the Russian ambassador to Poland, Sergei Andreev, is informative: "until in Poland they recognize, without any reservations, their debt of gratitude to those Soviet soldiers who died here, until today's disgrace – when liberators are called occupiers – ends, there is officially nothing for us to talk about regarding history" (Dudina 2018).
69. Filipowicz tried to arrange a meeting with Jacek Czaputowicz (Poland's Foreign Minister since January 2018) to advocate for preserving both the IEŚW and Group, but Czaputowicz reportedly declined to see him (Kowalski 2019).
70. Noteworthy in this regard was Poland's focus on regional cooperation in Central Europe (see Soroka and Stępniewski 2019).
71. More broadly, how history is utilized by various governments is profoundly context dependent. Consequently, as Zhukovskii notes, while the Group "performed an important symbolic and scholarly

- role,” it was the product of the specific “historical and political conditions in which it was created and conducted its designated activities.” Since that time, he observes, “the situation has changed; accordingly, the needs for various forms of expert dialogue have also changed” (personal communication, May 26, 2020).
72. Emphasis in original.
 73. These included: the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 (Kaczyński doggedly backed Georgian leader Mikheil Sakaashvili, traveling twice to Georgia that year to show his support); a series of verdicts issued by Russian courts between 2007–2011 declining to rehabilitate victims of the Katyn massacre; and the decision of the ECoHR in 2011 to hear the case of *Janowiec and Others v. Russia* (see note 54).
 74. Intriguingly, Rotfeld today considers the Smolensk disaster to have been a *negative* turning point Polish-Russian relations, noting that while he tried to keep up contacts with the Russian side in the years following the tragedy, this became progressively harder to do, as the “Group stopped being important” (personal communication, April 16, 2020).
 75. Mounting societal unrest for the truth about the past to be revealed was also a dynamic present in the Soviet Union during the late 1980s, albeit to a lesser relative extent.
 76. This suggests Moscow viewed the politics of history in a securitized fashion (Miller 2020).
 77. See Soroka and Krawatzek (2019); Kopusov (2017).
 78. This constitutes a general rather than absolute observation, as the attempt to restart the Polish half of the Group in 2017 was undertaken by a PiS-led government (though so too was the decision to dissolve it soon thereafter).
 79. Putin overtly framed the annexation of Crimea as the righting of an historical injustice (“Obrazhenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii” 2014).
 80. For details, consult Kopusov (2017).
 81. As Andrei Artizov, the head of Russia’s Federal Archival Agency (Rosarkhiv) and a member of the 2008 Group, puts it, “the leadership of present-day Poland denies the contribution of the red Poles [Armia Ludowa] to defeating the Nazis and counts only the white Poles [Armia Krajowa] as heroes.” He goes on to accuse the Armia Krajowa of aiding the Nazis by undertaking a rear-guard “terrorist action against the Red Army” (Novoselova 2015).
 82. This was the so-called “death camp law,” the main function of which was to make clear that the World War II-era concentration camps located on Poland’s territory were established by the occupying Germans, and not Poles (see Belavusau 2018; Kopusov *in press*).
 83. During the late communist period academic exchanges became freer and it became easier to publish material that would have been previously viewed as subversive. However, most of this took place on an informal basis.
 84. This is not to imply that either the 2002 or 2008 iteration of the Group on Difficult Matters was a continuation of the Polish-Soviet effort. Rotfeld, for one, is adamant that there was “no connection between” these bodies (personal communication, April 16, 2020). Filipowicz made a similar observation about the 2017 attempt to reconstitute the Polish side of the Group (personal communication, June 21, 2018).
 85. IPN’s original mandate was to study matters related to World War II and the communist period, though it has mainly focused on post-1945 events.
 86. The latter was headed by Torkunov (see Zavadskii 2016).
 87. Vardomskii confirms this, noting that although “overly radical and emotional speeches did occur,” these took place “mainly within the national delegations” (personal communication, May 24, 2020).
 88. This was in response to comments Putin made in late 2019 accusing Poland of helping to start World War II due to its actions after the 1938 Munich Agreement was concluded (“Stanowisko MSZ RP wobec falszywych narracji” 2019).
 89. As Vardomskii emphasizes, much has changed since the Group stopped functioning, with the contrast between the two sides’ interpretations increasing as “history turned into ideology” (personal communication, May 24, 2020).
 90. See, for example, the exchange between Ambassador Sergei Andreev and Sławomir Dębski, the director of the Polish Institute of International Affairs and the Center for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding (“Polemika: O trudnych relacjach” 2015).
 91. This list appears in Valkenier (1991, 267–268).
 92. As given in Rotfeld and Torkunov (2015), appendix A.
 93. Names are reproduced from the list provided in “Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters” (2017).

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Appendix

Composition of the Polish-Soviet Joint Historical Commission⁹¹

Polish side:	Soviet side:
Jarema Maciszewski (chair)	Georgii Smirnov (chair)
Col. Eugeniusz Kozłowski	Valerii Zhuravlev
Marek Kuczyński	Valentina Parsadanova
Col. Marian Leczyk	Tamara Porfirieva
Czesław Madajczyk	Oleg Rzheshhevskii
Ryszard Nazarewicz	Aleksandr Chubarian
Bronisław Syzdek	Inessa Iazhborovskaia
Mieczysław Tanty	Col. V. O. Daines
Col. Kazimierz Sobczak	B. S. Popov
Włodzimierz Kowalski	Col. P. A. Kochegura
Czesław Łuczak	Aleksei Narochitskii
Gen. Tadeusz Walichnowski	
Marian Wojciechowski	

Composition of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters (as of May 31, 2012)⁹²

Polish side:	Russian side:
Adam Rotfeld (chair)	Anatolii Torkunov (chair)
Jerzy Bahr	Andrei Artizov
Sławomir Dębski	Inessa Iazhborovskaia
Adam Eberhardt	Andrei Iurasov
Dariusz Gabrel	Aleksandr Kuznietsov
Andrzej Grajewski	Natalia Lebedeva
Leszek Jesień	Artem Malgin
Łukasz Kulesa	Mikhail Narinski
Andrzej Kunert	Vladimir Baranovskii
Włodzimierz Marciniak	Sviatoslav Belza
Wojciech Materski	Leonid Vardomski
Jerzy Pomianowski	Gennadii Matveev
Katarzyna Rawska-Górecka	Albina Noskova
Władysław Stępnia	Efim Pivovar
Andrzej Towpik	Vladimir Sedych
	Piotr Stegni
	Andrei Zagorski
	Igor Zhukovskii

Composition of the 2017 Polish side of the Group⁹³

Prof. Mirosław Filipowicz (chair)	Prof. Andrzej Nowak
Prof. Wiesław Caban	Fr. Prof. Henryk Paprocki
Dr. Adam Eberhardt	Dr. Adam Pomorski
Dr. Andrzej Grajewski	Dr. Marek Radziwon
Fr. Leszek Kryża	Prof. Rafał Wnuk
Prof. Jerzy Menkes	Prof. Mariusz Wołos
Prof. Grzegorz Motyka	Dr. Wojciech Woźniak
	Dr. Ernest Wyciskiewicz
