

Reports, forum

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Report from the research conference “Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century. Research-Controversies-Perspectives. New research challenges”, Kielce, July 6, 2020

The Institute National Remembrance, Sub-Branch in Kielce, and the Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce organized the conference entitled “Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century. Research-Controversies-Perspectives”. The venture took place on July 6, 2020, and was held on the Internet due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.¹ That was the fourth edition of the conference, which had been originated in 2016 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Kielce *pogrom* of July 4, 1946. It was then the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Kielce Sub-Branch of Institute of National Remembrance, and the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity joined their efforts in running two debates entitled “Antisemitism as a tool for the communist regime. Queries-Hypotheses-Interpretations” and “Scholars in the face

¹ The conference may be viewed on the YouTube portal at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhJm54y4fpM> (18.02.2021). Abridged versions of the papers were also published in the „Kuryer Kielecki” paper as of 06.07.2020, available at the Institute of National Remembrance website: <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/publikacje/periodyki-ipn/dodatki-historyczne-do/102540,Nadrodze-do-wspolnej-pamieci-Kuryer-Kielecki-do-pobrania-PDF.html> (18.02.2021).

of the events in Kielce on July 4, 1946, Queries-Hypotheses-Interpretations”. There, scholars from Poland and abroad emphasized how many issues in the Polish-Jewish relations still required more study and how urgent is the need to explore this topic further.

At the conference entitled “Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century. Research-Controversies-Perspectives. New research challenges”, held on July 6, 2020, the following papers were presented: Prof. Dsc. Konrad Zieliński of the Marie Curie-Sklodowska University delivered the lecture entitled *Together, next to each other or against each other? On Polish-Jewish relations, 1905–1918*; Dsc. Sebastian Piątkowski of the Institute of National Remembrance, Sub-Branch in Radom, read his paper *In the darkness of tenement houses*; Dsc., Assoc. Prof. UG Przemysław Różański from the University of Gdańsk spoke about *Poland in the face of the deportation of Jews, Polish citizens, from Germany as of October 28–29, 1938, in the American diplomatic documents*; Dsc., Assoc. Prof. UG Grzegorz Berendt from the University of Gdańsk delivered the paper entitled *Divide and rule. Soviets towards Polish Jews, 1944–1945*; Ryszard Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki, PhD., from the Kielce Sub-Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, gave the lecture entitled „*Resolution to discontinue the investigation in the case of the Kielce pogrom as of October 21, 2004, and the current state of research with relation to the events of July 4, 1946, in Kielce*”; Mateusz Lisak of the Institute of National Remembrance Sub-Branch in Kielce spoke about *The picture of post-war Poland and the Kielce pogrom in the light of the selected non-Polish literature*.

In the first paper mentioned, namely *Together, next to each other or against each other? On Polish-Jewish relations, 1905–1918*, Konrad Zieliński undertook the effort to present the difficult Polish-Jewish relations at the beginning of the 20th century. The scholar presented the background of the said relations, such as the partitions of Poland and World War I outbreak and how those events affected the mutual perception and cooperation between ethnic Poles and Jews. The author did not avoid sensitive issues such as using anti-Semitism for political purposes, the increase of chauvinist nationalism in then-day Europe, or economic rivalry between ethnic Poles and Jews. In the historian’s opinion, ethnic Poles and Jews lived next to one another, but they were not together, and their relations grew more and more reluctant the closer it was to World War I. The conflict brought about mutual accusations of collaboration, property plunder, or sheer violence, all of which were detrimental to those relations, already tense at the time. However, the scholar remarked that the war was also an opportunity for cooperation in forming the independent Polish state. Nonetheless, since

chauvinist nationalism expanded in then-day Europe, there was no chance for drawing joint conclusions. In the historian's opinion, along with regaining freedom by Poland, mutual mistrust and accusations appeared, and the „Jewish issue” was one of the main subjects of public debate.

The second paper entitled *In the darkness of tenement houses* was delivered by Sebastian Piątkowski. The article raised the rarely discussed subject, which is saving the lives of Jews in large cities, particularly the role of tenement houses and their dwellers in that process. The author outlined that type of housing in pre-war Poland and pointed out the impact of the war outbreak on the lives of inhabitants of tenement houses. The historian noticed that with the gradual influx of people and overcrowded houses during the war, the earlier bonds among the inhabitants became weaker, and interpersonal relations came to be atomized. As the scholar also pointed out, earlier contacts and friendships developed by the inhabitants throughout the inter-war period could save their lives in the course of the German occupation of Poland. The historian added that hiding Jews in tenement houses was a more difficult undertaking than outside large cities due to the necessity of reducing the number of visitors and neighbors. At the same time, these houses gave the Jews who held forged identity documents a chance to survive owing to the assumed Polish identity and accommodation in one of such buildings.

The following paper entitled *Poland in the face of the deportation of Jews, Polish citizens, from Germany as of October 28–29, 1938, in the American diplomatic documents* by Przemysław Różański, elaborated on the issue of the deportation of Jews from Germany on October 28–29, 1938. The author described the *Polenaktion*, in which about 17 to 18 thousand Jews were deported from the Third Reich to Poland. The Polish government negotiated the issue of the property of the deported Jews and analyzed the possibility of retaliation acts against Germans in response to the inappropriate treatment of Jews. The scholar pointed out that the American Embassy in Poland and the American Secretary of State included a friendly attitude towards the Polish government regarding the aid provided to the expelled Jews. In the historian's opinion, the American Ambassador in Poland was convinced that further repressions and forced deportation were avoided thanks to the actions of the Polish government. After signing the agreement on the issue of *Polenaktion*, Przemysław Różański added, the Polish government also permitted the reunion of the Jews deported to Poland with their families.

In his paper entitled *Divide and rule. The Soviets towards Polish Jews, 1944–1945* Grzegorz Berendt discussed the lives of the Jews who lived in the Soviet

Union at the time of World War II. The historian characterized the issues faced by the Jews and how the Soviets treated them. According to the author, the Communist authorities treated the Jewish minority instrumentally, and this issue concerned both Jewish communists and that part of the Jewry, which was not ideologically related to communism. At the same time, as the scholar pointed out, the Soviet Union created its image of the country where Jews and their fate were cared for by the state. That was supposed to be demonstrated in giving equal right to the Jewish minority and including it in the new state machinery, namely that of the Polish People's Republic. In the historian's opinion, the Jews themselves used the influence they had in the structures of the new regime to take revenge on the collaborators of the war period and to recover children placed by the Jews in Christian families during the conflict. The shortcomings in knowledge regarding the Soviet reality caused that the slogans of equality and anti-racism allowed the Soviets to win over supporters abroad. Also, as the historian said, the Soviet authorities used Jews for the purpose of that misinformation.

The fifth paper, presented by Ryszard Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki, entitled *Resolution to discontinue the investigation in the case of the Kielce pogrom as of October 21, 2004, and the current state of research with relation to the events of July 4, 1946, in Kielce*, raised an important issue of the invalidation of the IPN's investigation concerning the *pogrom* in Kielce as of July 4, 1946. The historian recalled the most recent works concerning the subject and written after the IPN's investigation, and then he discussed the issues that should be reconsidered in the study of that *pogrom*. The historian is in the position that more attention should be paid to the story of Henryk Błaszczyk and his absence on July 1st–3rd, the army's role in inciting the incidents, high discipline of the law enforcement agencies, and omission of significant sources of information. The historian also spoke about the alleged death of a Polish army officer during the *pogrom*, ambiguities related to the Ludwików Foundry, and an incredible weakness and passiveness of the Soviet army. At the end, Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki spoke extensively about Prosecutor Jan Wrzeszcz, who tried to use his function-based authority to take control over the uniformed services to calm down the situation but an anonymous officer refused him such right. The scholar posed a question of whether one may speak of a "chaos under control" if the crisis was managed outside the law. Hence, Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki concluded that there are still many unexplored research areas related to the *pogrom*, and studies of the issue should be continued.

The final paper, entitled *The picture of post-war Poland and the Kielce pogrom in the light of the selected non-Polish literature*, by Mateusz Lisak, raised the

question of how the Kielce events and the post-war period are presented in the non-Polish historiography. The author presented the issues that have been most frequently raised by scholars outside Poland, such as the attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland towards the incidents in Kielce or the alleged weakness of the new communist authorities in Poland. The historian further indicated that the point of view of the non-Polish modern historians concerning some issues related to the *pogrom* and the post-war period had their source in the immediate post-war literature, which was affected by the communist propaganda. Then the author characterized the “Western” perspective and mentioned the potential reasons why the particular issues related to the Kielce *pogrom* and Polish-Jewish relations after the war were presented in such different manner. The historian also presented the differences in the paradigms of Polish and “Western” researchers and the dangers of adopting a specific perspective.

The presented papers enabled the scholars to extend the knowledge of Polish-Jewish relations and indicated new research issues that have to be faced by historians. To better understand the historical reality and the past events, it seems necessary to go beyond the traditional role of a historian and reach out for new research tools. The papers presented at the conference also demonstrated that it is necessary to use both micro and macro-history to understand such challenging issues as Polish-Jewish relations. A comprehensive perspective would make it possible to present individual issues against the background that accompanied events, and the variety of the subjects discussed proves that the theme of the mutual relations between Poles and Jews during the war and afterward requires further study.