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GENESIS OF WORLD WAR II: HISTORIOGRAPHY, NEW RESEARCH — NEW PERSPECTIVES

The conference on the origins of World War II, organized by the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, was held in Warsaw on 26–27 May 2009. The main reason for this international meeting of historians was to reconsider the facts leading to War World II from the perspective of the seventy years which separate us from the beginning of the war. The programme of the conference included a discussion of the problems of the diplomatic events: from the Munich Conference (29–30 September 1938) to German and Soviet aggression on Poland in September 1939. The discussion was concentrated on diplomacy and international politics.

The conference was opened by the President of the Polish Academy of Sciences Michal Kleiber in the presence of the President of the Republic of Poland Lech Kaczyński. Introductory remarks were presented by Richard von Weizsäcker — former President of the Federal Republic of Germany who is the son of Ernst von Weizsäcker, Secretary of State in the German Foreign Ministry in 1939 — and by Karol Modzelewski, Vice-President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the well known Polish historian and politician. In his brief remarks, Modzelewski addressed historians arguing that the serious debate is necessary not only on the nations as victims of war but also on the motives and ideas of totalitarian dictators.

The conference worked in three sessions. In the first session, six papers were delivered. Horst Möller, from the Institut für Zeitgeschichte (München–Berlin) spoke on the problems of historiography concerning international instability and the unleashing of the Second World War by Hitler. He analyzed the events leading to the war and tried to reconsider Hitler's motives and objectives. The principal thesis of Möller's paper was the idea that the fundamental reason for the war was Hitler's decision to start it. He underlined the Nazi idea of 'living space' (*Lebensraum*) and the 'Hoßbach Conference' in Berlin in November 1937.

The second speaker was Anatoly V. Torkunov, rector of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. His paper concerned the place of the Second World War in Russian historiography and national memory. Remembering the general view of Russian historians on the genesis of the war, he argued that Soviet foreign policy in 1939 was oriented on the construction of the 'collective security' system in Europe. After the collapse of this idea in the summer of 1939, Stalin decided on a rapprochement with Germany. It should be mentioned that Russian historiography of the last years has tried to defend the Soviet pre-War

policy. The critical view on Stalin's era and his foreign policy, initiated during the *perestroika* and *glasnost'* times is now neglected.

Marek Kornat (Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences) tried to show the significance of Poland's decision to reject the German claims of 1938–9 and to refuse any participation in Hitler's endeavors. From a historical perspective the importance of this position cannot be underestimated. It put an end to the appeasement policy.

Three papers strictly concerned historiography. Sabine Dullin from Université Paris I–Sorbonne read a paper called: 'Soviet Foreign Policy 1935–9. What Is New in Historiography?', in which she spoke of the controversial problems of the Soviet policy before the outbreak of World War II and tried to critically reconstruct the Russian, post–Soviet historiography on the genesis of the war. Peter Neville from Kingston University aimed to reconsider British appeasement policy in the years 1937–8. His remarks were devoted to the reconstruction of the views of British historians writing on this phase of British policy — both critics and defenders of Chamberlain–Halifax diplomacy.

Gerhard L. Weinberg, professor *emeritus* at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, presented his critical view on the contribution of American historiography to the research on the origins of the Second World War, concentrating on the last two decades. Weinberg concluded that 'in recent years there has been very little serious historical work published by Americans on the origins of World War II'.

Session II was a panel discussion 'East–Central Europe on the Road to the War 1938–9' moderated by Włodzimierz Borodziej (University of Warsaw). In the discussion participated: Bernd Bonwetsch (Ruhr–Universität, Bochum), Holly Case (Cornell University–Ithaca), Sławomir Dębski (Polish Institute of International Affairs), Jiři Friedl (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic), Igor Lukes (Boston University), Mikhail Narinski (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), Richard Raack (California State University) and Stanisław Żerko (Western Institute in Poznań). A general conclusion of the debate was that the last two decades have brought real progress in the research on the diplomatic background of World War II, and especially on Soviet policy, however, the difficulties in access to Soviet primary sources were emphasized.

Session III began on 27 May with the paper of Aleksandr O. Chubarian (Institute of Universal History of the Russian Academy of Sciences), entitled 'The Soviet Union on the Eve of German Aggression (the end of 1940 — first half of 1941)'. In the author's absence his paper was read by Victor Ishchenko. Six scholars took part in the panel debate on historiography and the different memories of World War II: László Borhi (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest), Jaroslav Hrytsak (the Ivan Franko National University of L'viv), Magdalena Hułas (Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences), Marku Reimää (Foreign Ministry of Finland), Enn Tarvel (Museum of Occupation, Tallin) and Stefan Troebst (University of Leipzig). Discussion was moderated by Adam Daniel Rotfeld, former Foreign Minister of Poland and former director of International Peace Research Institute in Stockholm.

The idea of this debate was to show the different memories of the Second World War by European nations. For the Poles, the war started in September

1939 and their memory is marked by the experience of national survival under two occupations by totalitarian powers. From the perspective of the Baltic nations, the war started in June 1940 and for these nations the oppressor was the Soviet Union, not Germany. For Hungary the war began in 1944, as Lászlo Borhi mentioned. In the Ukraine the situation is also complicated, the Second World War is remembered as two opposite memories: the memory of Western Ukraine symbolized by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and the memory of Eastern Ukraine focusing on the common fight of the Ukrainians and the Russians against the Third Reich.

In the German historical perspective the tragic experience of the war is dominated by the conviction that this world conflict was started by Hitler's decision. This was *die Entfesselung des zweiten Weltkrieg bei Hitler* — noticed Horst Möller. For the Russians, the war began in June 1941 with the Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union. The term the 'Great Patriotic War' did not cease to function in the Russian collective memory after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The victory in this war is now the principal factor uniting the Russian nation around the common past.

The different national memories of the Second World War are a serious challenge for the historians. How to talk the same historical facts in the perspective of dialogue and obeying the old principle *audiatur et altera pars*?

As Bernd Bonwetsch rightly observed all the controversial problems which were discussed in Warsaw had been described many times. Nevertheless, the conference offered a new, fresh and original insight into many aspects of the diplomatic genesis of World War II.

Marek Kornat