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Moving Beyond the Past: The Role of Historical Closure in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of historical closure in conflict resolution and reconciliation, departing from the example of the Polish Round Table negotiations in 1989. The concept of a “thick line” (“Gruba kreska” or “Schlussstrich”) was used in several historical contexts, showing the intention to detach from history when resolving pressing current societal issues. Historical evidence suggests that it was an intentionally chosen strategy by both sides taking part in the Round Table negotiations in 1989. Historical closure is known to have good consequences for building mutual trust, improving attitudes and making contact interventions more effective in improving intergroup relations. This is mostly attributed to the fact that historical crimes can have a long-standing impact on intergroup relations: past victimhood and perpetratorship lead to current grievances, denial, and mistrust. Only when these historical roles are overcome can both parties achieve any agreement. At the same time, historical closure breeds a sense of injustice among political followers and gives birth to numerous conspiracy theories. This article analyzes these problems in the Polish context and beyond.

Keywords

historical closure, Round Table agreements, trust, victimhood

In the most common game theory paradigm to study human interactions – the iterated prisoner’s dilemma – one strategy seems to be both the simplest and the most effective:



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the “tit-for-tat” strategy developed by Anatol Rapoport (1973). The agent using this strategy first introduces cooperation, and later replicates an opponent’s previous action. If the opponent defects – the agent defects, if the opponent cooperates – the agent also cooperates. One of the main characteristics of the tit-for-tat strategy is that it is a forgiving strategy: the agents start cooperating again immediately after they recognize the opponent cooperating (Nowak & Sigmund, 1992).

What can we learn from such a simple model of human interactions as the iterated prisoner’s dilemma? That the most efficient way to resolve conflict is to detach oneself from past grievances and to focus on one’s contemporary interests. This obviously seems to contradict much of modern social psychological theorizing on reconciliation, which proposes collective guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998), apologies (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008), and other history-repairing processes as central to reconciliation. In this article, I will try to resolve this contradiction by discussing the main advantages and disadvantages of historical closure in conflict resolution, based on the experiences of the Polish Round Table Agreements in 1989 (Reykowski, 2020, this issue; Grzelak, 2020, this issue).

Historical Closure at the Polish Round Table Agreements and Beyond

One of the main features of the 1989 negotiations in Poland was the intentional detachment from historical grievances (on the Solidarity side) and from the historical legitimacy of power (on the communist side). In that respect, the Polish model of systemic transition was different from many others, such as post-Ceausescu Romania or post-Suharto Indonesia, where historical grievances led to large scale political and ethnic violence after the collapse of authoritarian regimes (Tadjoeddin, 2014). When preparing the “scene” for negotiations, both sides expressed their progressive character and willingness to deal with the current issues (mostly of an economic nature) rather than focusing on historical injustices (Matynia, 2001). This included the nomination of the liberal editor Mieczysław Rakowski for the prime-minister position, as well as the presence of many young communist party activists (Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Leszek Miller) and opposition leaders (Władysław Frasyniuk, Zbigniew Bujak) at the key negotiations. The main group negotiating political reforms included numerous academics (e.g., Professors Piotr Winczorek, Jerzy J. Wiatr, Stanisław Gebethner, Janusz Reykowski, Jan Baszkiewicz, Jan Błuszkowski, Adam Strzembosch, Marcin Król). Both the composition and the agenda of the Round Table negotiations gave a strong impression of both sides being progressive and future-oriented.

This impression was not accidental. Janusz Reykowski summarizes it in the following way: “In negotiations between partners who have a long history of enmity, and where at least one side has a memory of serious wrongdoings attributed to the other side, there

are likely to be strong emotional reactions which act as a major obstacle to reaching any constructive solution to existing problems. Out of awareness of this danger, we agreed to exclude any debate about the past from both the political table and also the Magdalenka meetings. We accepted that these issues should be addressed in other contexts, but not during discussions aimed at solving present social problems and focused on shaping the future” (Reykowski, 2020, this issue, p. 13).

The support for historical closure was also expressed by the Solidarity side of the agreements. It was most openly voiced in 1989 during the introductory parliamentary speech by the first democratically elected prime minister of Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki: “We split away the history of our recent past with a thick line. We will be responsible only for what we have done to help extract Poland from her current predicament, from now on” (Blachnicka-Ciacek, 2012). The “thick line” (“*gruba kreska*”) metaphor was essential for the political stance of the first Polish government and it allowed fruitful cooperation of the partners with opposing political affiliations and divergent historical legacies.

The idea of historical closure as a strategy of reconciliation and conflict resolution was not unique to the Polish Round Table Agreements. The concept of a “thick line” (“*Schlussstrich*”) was also present in the post-Nazi era of West Germany. In his speech in October 1949, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer declared that “the past should be left as the past” – cutting out discussion about further denazification and debates about individual involvement in historical crimes for the sake of social cohesion (Dodd, 2018, p. 255). In the following years, this view was considered to be highly controversial – although it allowed the integrity of the German political system to be restored, it failed to address historical injustices and limited chances for compensation of historical victims. Empirical studies looking at this issue found that these Germans who view the Nazi era as a closed chapter with no ongoing consequences are less supportive of compensation of former victims and are less likely to experience collective moral emotions about the past (Imhoff, 2010). Of course, there are obvious differences between the Germans in *Schlussstrich* in the late 1940s and the Polish *gruba kreska* in the early 1990s. The German case was a direct consequence of a military defeat and it was a one-sided decision to detach from historical crimes committed by the ingroup. In the Polish case, the historical closure was rather a negotiated process and also allowed the forgive-and-forget strategy (cf. Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008) for the victims who righteously forgot about the past crimes caused by the outgroups. Both cases are however examples of a broader phenomenon of historical closure, observed in many historical conflict contexts across the world.

Looking globally at the effects of historical closure, one might build a much more favorable view of this conflict-resolving strategy. A study that we conducted on 1197 university students from two continents (mainland China, Taiwan, the Philippines, France, Russia and Poland) looked at the consequences of historical closure for reconciliation after World War II (Hanke et al., 2013). The study found that historical closure was

not only associated with greater levels of forgiveness, but it was also predictive of contemporary trust between the nations who were enemies in World War II. Historical closure predicted forgiveness even after controlling for other relevant antecedents of forgiveness (costs of forgiveness, outgroup trust, national identity and anger), and these effects were relatively stronger in Asia than in Europe.

There is also experimental evidence supporting the view that detachment from history could positively affect reconciliation. A study performed during meetings between Polish youth and Jewish youth from Canada, Australia and the US showed that by focusing contact-based interventions on contemporary issues, one could observe a more pronounced attitudinal change than when such interventions are focused on historical matters (Bilewicz, 2007). Those Polish students who were discussing only contemporary issues with their Jewish peers developed more positive attitudes toward Jews, considered Jews as more similar to oneself, and showed a decrease in intergroup anxiety (as compared to those participants who had no opportunity for such contact). No such effects were observed when Polish adolescents touched on historical topics during these interventions. Similar outcomes have been observed among Jewish participants of the intervention program. This suggests that even among adolescents from historically conflicted groups, who have never had any prior intergroup contact, cross-national reconciliation could be achieved by means of future-oriented interactions rather than by history-related discussions.

Why Historical Closure Could Be Beneficial in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation?

The positive effects of historical closure on intergroup reconciliation could be attributed to different processes among historically victimized groups and among historical perpetrators. The need-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) proposes two aspects in which history can pose a threat to post-conflict intergroup relations. For the victimized group, the history of conflict is a threat to their basic sense of power and agency. For the perpetrator group, this history carries the burden of immorality, threatening the basic sense of communion.

The history of victimhood does not only threaten victims' sense of agency, but it also creates a framework to interpret opponents' current intentions. Research performed in Poland, Ukraine, Spain and the United Kingdom (Bilewicz & Liu, 2020) showed that people from historically victimized countries (Poland and Ukraine) who focused on their country's historical victimhood were less trustful of others and of national institutions. They also more often believed in conspiracy theories about politics. Similarly, a study performed on a nation-wide representative sample in Poland showed that people who focus on their nation's historical victimhood tend to interpret contemporary political events in a conspiracist way, and that this, in turn, leads to a "traumatic rift" – a deep

division in society between the followers of the conspiracy theory and those who do not accept this theory (Bilewicz, Witkowska, Pantazi, Gkinopoulos, & Klein, 2019).

The focus on history among members of victimized groups can alter their perceptions of the contemporary political reality: they are less trusting, tend to believe in malevolent intentions of others and become hypervigilant. This was true also in the case of the Polish Round Table Agreements. As Janusz Grzelak recalls: “the doubts and fears (...) were justified by decades of experience with the communist regime. (...) Each party was initially afraid that the other one would like to cheat and outwit the other party. Distrust was very well grounded in the past experience of the Poles” (Grzelak, 2020, this issue, p. 7). Experiences of treason were relatively common among the older generation that sat at the roundtable – their childhood memories included the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as the later Stalinist regime that offered liberation but brought another wave of oppression. For the members of the Solidarity movement, there were also recent memories of suppressing democratic changes by the martial laws of 1981.

Historical narratives are also threatening for powerful groups. They serve as a reminder about the burden of responsibility on their shoulders. Collective memory of historical crimes can make members of the perpetrator group defensive in relation to both the victims and their descendants. Contrary to the previous expectations, our research on collective guilt found that this emotion leads to negative intergroup outcomes: it increases psychological distance between historical perpetrators and victims (Imhoff, Bilewicz, & Erb, 2012). Germans who experienced collective guilt tended to anticipate any contact with contemporary Jews as a negative, unpleasant experience – and this, in turn, led to avoidance of victims’ descendants. There are numerous other negative consequences of historical reminders for historical perpetrators: dehumanization of victims (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006), morality shifting (Leidner & Castano, 2012) and attributional biases (Bilewicz, Witkowska, Stefaniak, & Imhoff, 2017). If the Solidarity side would remind their opponents about the recent communist crimes (e.g., assassination of the anti-communist priest fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984 or pacification of the Wujek coal mine in 1981, in which nine strikers were killed and 21 were wounded by the Polish police and army), the most obvious reaction of the governmental side would be a withdrawal from the negotiation table or, at least, an increase of mistrust in the negotiation process. This would be a typical example of historical defensiveness, a very frequent process among perpetrators of violent/immoral acts (Bilewicz, 2016).

Another problematic aspect of historical reminders during conflict resolution is the risk of historical analogies that could be used by both sides. During the Round Table agreements, this was not only the case for the Solidarity side, who were afraid of military suppression of democratic agreements (either in the form of an intervention from allied communist countries or in the form of a coup d’état by the army and the more conservative fraction of the local communist party). This fear was also shared by

the governmental side of the negotiations. As Reykowski (2020, this issue) notes, “in this camp there were also people who (...) remembered the tragic consequences of attempts at democratization in Hungary (in 1956) and in Czechoslovakia (1968). Both were invaded by Soviet army (in the case of Czechoslovakia, also by armies of the other so-called socialist countries)” (p. 2). It is important to note, that the communist party members involved in the democratization processes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia faced severe repression after these changes were blocked by the Soviet intervention.

Historical analogies play four different roles for people engaged in conflict resolution: they shape and communicate the representation of the current situation, define the role of the actors in that situation, shape the decision-making process by anchoring it in previous decisions, and serve as a means of persuasion (Ghilani et al., 2017). This persuasive aspect of historical analogies has been subtly used in the Round Table agreements by the governmental side, but it never had a fundamental role in the negotiation process. Both sides agreed that the whole process of negotiation should be focused on resolving present-day issues rather than dwelling on the conflicted history.

Conclusion and the Limitations of the Historical Closure Strategy

The choice to detach from history in the negotiation process in 1989 Poland seems to be a justified one. It allowed the main actors of the Round Table negotiations to design the democratization process in a manner that would be accepted by both governmental and opposition sides. Of course, there were serious economic interests shared by both sides. The bureaucracy and managerial elites connected to the communist party (“the new class”, Dilas, 1957) were already suffering relative deprivation when comparing their own situation with that of the activists of West-European communist parties. The expectation to improve people’s economic situation is also visible in the results of a survey conducted by the OBOP institute in February 1989 (when the negotiations started) on a representative sample of the inhabitants of Warsaw. The two most often declared expectations about the Round Table agreements were legalizing of the Solidarity trade union and economic reforms (88% and 71% of the participants declared that they would expect both sides to agree upon these issues). Only approximately 50% of the surveyed Poles from Warsaw believed that the negotiations would lead to structural reforms of the political system or to the end of censorship (OBOP, 1989).

The situation in which both sides shared a similar approach to the negotiations allowed historical matters to be overcome that would otherwise make the conflict-resolution process more complicated. The improvement of the economic situation was a common ground, on which the pro-reformatory part of the communist regime could agree with the representatives of the democratic opposition. This is an example of a problem-solving approach that probably allowed mutual trust to be built regardless of

negative history. This is clearly visible in the following recollections of Janusz Grzelak: “Initial distrust weakened week by week through learning about the intentions and goals of the other side and discovering the growing scope of the common interest. Distance, and perceived hostility gave way to more partner and problem solving attitudes. A zero sum game-like view of the situation gradually turned to a complex non-zero-sum game (mixed motive game) view with some conceivable win-win solutions” (Grzelak, 2020, this issue, p. 7).

Historical closure as a strategy in conflict resolution has some obvious shortcomings. It can create the illusion of a shared fate in a situation that, in fact, is unequal, which is often described as “an irony of harmony” (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). Although this is how the Round Table Agreements are often portrayed, in reality, both sides of the negotiations shared many weaknesses, and neither of them could be considered a real power-holder (Reykowski, 2020, this issue). More importantly, historical closure can breed many conspiracy theories about the elites agreeing above the heads of their supporters. The agreement could be considered as a betrayal of the historical legacies of both sides. This seemed to be a dominant narrative among the conservative members of the communist party (the “beton” faction), and, even more so, among the opposition members who were not included in the Round Table negotiations. The “thick line” conspiracy became, for many years, a key theme in Polish conspiracy theorizing, suggesting that the Solidarity leaders betrayed the legacy of the Polish opposition for the sake of economic benefits, and that the Round Table Agreements paved the way to the dominance of former communist party members in the Polish free market economy. This theory became the basis for a collective conspiracy mentality in Poland that also included other “examples” of this treason (Soral, Cichočka, Bilewicz, & Marchlewska, 2018).

Taking all these limitations into account, one still has to admit that historical closure is probably a prerequisite of any agreement between historically severely conflicted sides. It is important to note that, at the Round Table, legitimate representatives of the workers’ movement sat together with the people who only a few years earlier organized shootings of workers and who supervised the political police responsible for crimes against them, and former prisoners sat together with the leaders of the regime who installed these prisons. In such a case of extreme grievances, only historical closure (a “thick line”) could make any negotiation process possible.

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