

The populist rewriting of Polish history is a warning to us all

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Thirty years after communism ended, Poland's past is again being manipulated for political motives, this time at a museum in Gdańsk

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Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk: 'The museum's special focus was to be on the global context of the war and the fate of civilians in the bloody conflict.' Photograph: Czarek Sokołowski/AP

Populists treat the past like fast food: they go straight for what's tasty and comforting for them, leaving aside the bits that might be healthier and more nutritious for all. But the honest study of history is not about making you feel good.

The Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War [opened in 2017](#) to some fanfare; its distinguishing and unconventional features were to be its special focus both on the global context of the war and on the fate of civilians in the bloody conflict. The main exhibition took eight years to put together. The American historian Timothy Snyder called the project a "civilisational achievement" and "perhaps the most ambitious museum devoted to the second world war in any country".

But the populists who had come to power in Poland's elections two years earlier found this unbearable, preferring to promote a version of events that would airbrush real history and glorify the nation instead. Soon enough the minister of culture and national heritage, Piotr Gliński, [dismissed the Gdańsk museum director](#), Paweł Machcewicz. A [new director](#), Karol Nawrocki, was duly installed who set about altering the main exhibition – without consulting its authors. The revised approach was to tack closely to government guidelines giving emphasis to a glorification of Polish military actions and to cast Poland as a righteous nation: the museum would be a monument to national martyrology.

Nawrocki, for example, replaced a filmed summary of civilians' experiences in the war with another film altogether, in which the soundtrack includes claims that can only be described as propaganda, with phrases such as: “we saved Jews”; “we give life in the name of dignity and freedom”; “we were betrayed”; “the pope gave hope of victory”; “communists lose”; “we won” and “we do not beg for freedom, we fight for it”.

This is populist history. Populist historians tell people – especially those who have voted for them – what they want to hear about the past. Remembering the war is a zero-sum game to them: it's about winners and losers. They care little about the complexities and even less about acknowledging dark chapters of Poland's collective past. What have we really learned from the past? Old photos of a completely destroyed Warsaw reminded me of news images of other cities, such as [Aleppo](#), that have in more recent times experienced the full brutality of a military onslaught. All the more reason to be reminded of what went before us and of those caught up in the horror.

But for populist historians – and not only in [Poland](#) – history is not about learning lessons; it is either a plaything to salve national complexes or a weapon to use in foreign policy (for example, in Polish-Ukrainian or Polish-Israeli relations).

Machcewicz along with the museum's other founding historians, Janusz Marszalec, Rafał Wnuk and Piotr M Majewski, responded to all this with a loud “no”. They have sued the new director of the museum over the infringement of their copyright for the exhibition's content and managed to halt other changes to the museum. I totally agree with Machcewicz, who [describes this saga](#) as “Poland's most important dispute about history in years”.

The case, which the courts have yet to rule on, is the first of its kind in Poland and probably in Europe. I can't think of another example of an exhibition mounted by a major museum being censored by a government because it pays too much attention to civilians and because it insufficiently glorifies the nation. It feels more like the standards that would be applied in Putin's Russia than in a democratic member state of the [European Union](#).

The late [Leszek Kołakowski](#), one of Poland's greatest philosophers, wrote in his essay, Doctor Faustus: “We learn about the past to know how to recognise around us those faces touched by its

worst legacy.” To me, a young Pole, this surely is the best definition of the point of studying history. It will hardly surprise you that communist censors didn’t let Kołakowski publish those words. And now, 30 years after the communist regime collapsed in Poland, history is again being manipulated for political motives. It’s as if only one version – that approved by a rightwing government that has overseen countless acts of democratic backsliding and is seeking re-election next month – is acceptable. Anyone who sees things differently is deemed a public enemy.

When I started looking into the Gdańsk museum dispute as a news story, it felt like a good issue to report – especially as I had studied history at university and am passionate about it. But gradually it became something more deeply personal; I realised that this was about our collective values. And it should be personal for anyone who cares about pluralism and free debate. This is a battle to safeguard history that’s not written in black and white, nor aimed at serving a political agenda, but history that inspires us to make connections between the past and today’s world. Big words, you might say. But those four historians who are taking on the government have picked a fight that goes far beyond the future of one museum. This has a European meaning. It concerns us all.

- Estera Flieger is a journalist with Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza