

Abstract

History and the emotions linked to the past have been a source of conflicts. In particular, the different interpretations of events – or the impossibility to talk about so-called “white spots” – bring tensions between groups within society, but also among various countries. In order to create a dialogue over history and to appease bilateral relations, historical commissions have flourished in Europe, especially after WWII. Their aim, implicit or explicit, is reconciliation. In spite of these commissions on the road to reconciliation, there are still some unresolved questions in public debate, for example concerning the 1944-1946 expulsions or Katyń. Some new tensions even emerge. How and why do historical commissions achieve or do not achieve their primary goal, i.e. reconciliation? Our first answer is that the mere objective of reconciliation is contested within these commissions. Moreover, reconciliation in practice is difficult to achieve with historical commissions. Furthermore, their impact on society is limited and difficult to measure.

This work is based on two main case-studies: the Polish-German Schoolbook Commission, established in 1972 and the Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters, created in 2002 and reactivated in 2008. The corpus, collected within the framework of my PhD, is composed of 54 interviews, archives, as well as additional sources such as participant observations, discourses, the press and opinion polls on reconciliation in Poland. A qualitative analysis of these diverse sources composes the main method used for this paper. Historical commissions constitute one tool of conflict transformation on the long-run, whose study proves to be essential in order to better understand the pillars of a consolidated security. In this paper I want to precise the scope and limits of these commissions and insist on the variables explaining their (non-) continuity and (non-) success on overcoming traumatic historical experiences.

This paper is structured around three main points. Firstly, it explains the main objective of these commissions: reconciliation. Secondly, it analyses reconciliation in practice within these commissions. Thirdly, it studies the limits and failures of these commissions toward reconciliation.