News

Black and white photo of German troops marching through Warsaw, Poland, in September 19

German troops march through Warsaw, Poland, in September 1939. The Polish bishops' conference has cautiously endorsed government demands for $1.29 trillion reparations from Germany for World War II damage. (CNS photo/National Archives)



Jonathan Luxmoore

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The Polish bishops' conference has cautiously endorsed new government demands for $1.29 trillion in reparations from Germany for damage during World War II, although a spokesman said the church hoped this would not impede relations between the neighboring countries.

"The question of reparations should be seen in the context of Polish-German reconciliation -- we want this to be very clear," said Jesuit Fr. Leszek Gesiak, Polish bishops' spokesman.

"Our conference president has said forgiveness must be accompanied by truth, a recognition of evils inflicted and an eventual repair of the damage. But the concrete ways for doing this are up to the state authorities."

On Sept. 1, the 83rd anniversary of Germany's 1939 invasion of Poland, a parliamentary commission released a report confirming the Polish government would demand reparations for the wartime damages.

Gesiak told Catholic News Service Sept. 6 that in 2018, Polish government officials asked Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, president of the Polish bishops' conference, for information held by the Catholic Church on war losses.

"However, at that time the church did not have such data at national level -- it existed only in a few dioceses," Gesiak said.

The report, compiled over five years by the 30-member commission, said that, under Germany's 1939-1945 occupation, 5.2 million Poles had died at more than 9,200 places of execution and mass murder. More than 2 million Poles were deported as forced laborers.

It added that each Polish death had been valued at $168,000, while separate values had been placed on destroyed buildings and lost industry, agriculture, energy and banking, as well as on sacred objects and works of art and culture.

Germany's Foreign Ministry said the issue of war reparations was now "closed," adding that Poland's previous failure to demand damages formed "a fundamental base for the current European order."

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In a Sept. 3 statement, Gadecki said issues raised in the report should be viewed "in the context of a long process of Polish-German reconciliation" initiated by a conciliatory 1965 letter from Poland's Catholic bishops to their German counterparts.

However, he added that "mercy and forgiveness, especially in political life," should be "accompanied by prudence and justice," and said St. John Paul II had warned in 1997 of the need for truth, and for "evil done to be recognized and, as far as possible, corrected."

"State institutions are called upon to decide the practical forms for restoring justice," the Polish bishops' president said. "But the reconciliation process should not disregard the crimes committed, forget the victims or be closed to the feeling of wrongs suffered."

Germany made reparations to other European countries but has argued Poland made binding pledges not to seek further damages in 1953. However, Polish politicians have argued the pledges were made under duress from Moscow when Soviet forces controlled their country.

Gesiak said there had been no reaction so far from the German church to Gadecki's statement and no plans for bishops from the two countries to debate reparations.

"Of course, there are certain subjects on which we differ, such as the current Synodal Path in Germany, but reparations are a completely separate problem and shouldn't be connected," the spokesman said.

"Our mission as the church is to recall the values of conversion, forgiveness and reconciliation, and everything which could stand against this mission needs to be reflected on. We have regular contacts with the German bishops, and I don't think this latest report should be the cause of new difficulties and tensions."

In a Sept. 1 survey in the Rzeczpospolita daily, 51% of Poles agreed their country should demand damages from Germany, compared to 41.5% disagreeing and 7.5% holding no opinion.