

„Aus dem Geist des Konzils! Aus der Sorge der Nachbarn!“ Der Briefwechsel der polnischen und deutschen Bischöfe von 1965 und seine Kontexte

Published: 21.11.2016

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In November of 1965, as the final session of the Second Vatican Council was drawing to a close, the Polish bishops present in Rome presented their German counterparts with a remarkable letter. In an era of intense German-Polish hostility, the bishops struck conciliatory notes, culminating in the now-famous phrase, "We offer forgiveness and we ask for forgiveness." The letter, and the German bishops' response a week later, captured widespread attention and stimulated intense controversy in the months that followed. The exchange is now recognized as a critical turning point in German-Polish relations, advancing a gradual rapprochement in the decades that followed.

In his new book, Severin Gawlitta revisits the correspondence with the benefit of fifty years of hindsight. Drawing from the existing literature and newly available primary sources, including the papers of Cardinal Franz Hengsbach, Gawlitta skillfully reconstructs the political, social, and theological contexts that are essential for understanding the origin and impact of the letters. In so doing, he has produced what will likely remain the definitive treatment of the subject for many years to come.

The volume opens with unabridged versions of the lengthy letter from the Polish bishops and the shorter German response. This invites the reader to assess the documents on their own terms. The subsequent analysis unfolds in five chapters, which range chronologically from the prehistory of the letters to their long-term ramifications.

In the first chapter, Gawlitta deftly reconstructs the disastrous state of German-Polish relations in the immediate postwar era, which is essential for appreciating the significance of the correspondence. Germany's brutal wartime occupation of Poland left deep scars, and subsequent developments only magnified antagonisms. The society in what became known as West Germany, including its Catholic bishops, initially showed little willingness to acknowledge wartime German atrocities, emphasizing German suffering instead. The provisional settlement that shifted Poland's western border to the Oder and Neisse rivers was accompanied by the forced expulsion of some twelve million ethnic Germans, most of whom resettled in West Germany. Their insistence on their "*Recht auf Heimat*" made it perilous for West German politicians to

acknowledge the de facto border. Under Pope Pius XII, whose affinity for Germany is well documented, the Vatican continued to recognize prewar diocesan boundaries, reinforcing the sense of uncertainty regarding the border. Poland's communist regime hyped the supposed revanchist designs of West Germany and the Vatican to enhance its legitimacy and tarnish Poland's Catholic leaders.

Gawlitta explores developments in the early 1960s that foreshadowed the possibility of German-Polish reconciliation in the second chapter. In West Germany, a variety of grassroots initiatives signaled a growing willingness to acknowledge wartime guilt and to foster dialogue and exchange with the countries of the Eastern Bloc. In Poland, the Catholic Church's nine-year Great Novena encouraged Poles to commit themselves anew to core Christian principles like forgiveness. The West German refusal to recognize the Oder-Neisse border remained a sticking point, however. When Cardinal Julius Döpfner advocated in veiled terms for such recognition in a 1960 homily, he was alarmed by angry response his words ignited.

The early 1960s also witnessed the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), a seismic event in the Catholic Church that was a necessary precondition for the correspondence of 1965. Drawing from an ample trove of primarysource material, Gawlitta offers a richly textured account of the atmosphere of the council and the growing collaboration of the German and Polish bishops in attendance. The close proximity of Catholic leaders from around the world, the conviction that the Holy Spirit was guiding the proceedings, and the pope's call for *aggiornamento* expanded the possibility for bold action. Meanwhile, bishops from Germany and Poland began forging relationships with one another, gradually building trust and mutual esteem. The letters they exchanged at the end of the council were products of this good will.

In his fourth chapter, Gawlitta narrows his focus to the composition of the letters. He offers an outstanding analysis of the key players involved and a timeline of their actions. He pays particular attention to Bishop Bolesław Kominek, the driving force behind the Polish bishops' letter. Having been raised in the ethnic border zone of Upper Silesia, Kominek was better positioned than any of his Polish peers to broker an understanding with their German counterparts. Polish government agents suspected that Kominek was motivated by career ambitions, but Gawlitta suggests he was a visionary who dreamed of a future in which Poland was embedded in a Europe without rigid borders. Gawlitta charts how the Polish and German bishops began working on the correspondence already in October of 1965, and he unpacks the widespread myth that the German bishops were surprised to receive the Polish letter in late November. He also explores the complex political calculus behind the German response, including the decision to avoid mention of the Oder-Neisse border.

Gawlitta concludes his volume with a probing analysis of the reception of the correspondence and its ultimate impact. Days after the exchange of letters was published, Poland's communist regime recognized that in asking for and offering forgiveness, the country's bishops had moved well ahead of popular sentiment. Nothing in postwar Poland's public life had prepared people for identifying as anything other than victims of German aggression. The regime unleashed a fierce propaganda campaign designed to discredit the bishops and blunt the impact of the church's upcoming celebration of a millennium of Christianity in Poland. Forced on the defensive, leading Polish bishops quickly watered down the content of their letter—more than Gawlitta admits—and before long, they ceased talking about it altogether.

Gawlitta also explores a noteworthy discrepancy in the reception of the correspondence: While the Polish letter has been characterized as a brave and revolutionary act, the German response has been dismissed as too cool and cautious. He demonstrates how the propaganda campaign directed against the Polish bishops helped frame the positive evaluation of their letter. By contrast, the German response came to be judged a failure because it did not address the Oder-Neisse border. The idea soon emerged that the Polish bishops were disappointed by this omission, an idea Gawlitta discredits through an analysis of primary source documents. In so doing, he provides a useful case study of how unexamined assumptions and value judgments can harden into self-perpetuating narratives.

The "disappointing" German letter has often been cited as the reason why the bishops' correspondence did not have a more immediate impact on German-Polish relations. Gawlitta pushes back on this charge. He demonstrates how upon their return from the council, West Germany's bishops promoted greater German-Polish understanding and sponsored numerous charitable initiatives in Poland.

Gawlitta's volume is not without its shortcomings. His account of the bishops and society of East Germany is rather thinly sketched, especially compared to his more robust treatment of the West German and Polish contexts. Likewise, it would have been helpful if he had fleshed out more fully the trauma of the expulsions and the stigmatization expellees experienced in West Germany in order to better understand the resistance of many within this population to reconciliation. Finally, I would have liked to see him extend the timeframe of his account beyond the 1980s to encompass the definitive resolution of the border question.

In the end, these shortcomings are dwarfed by the considerable strengths of this very fine work. Gawlitta demonstrates a thorough command of a complex subject, drawing from a solid array of sources. His arguments reinforce the conventional wisdom at certain points and are boldly revisionist at others, but they invariably are nuanced and persuasive. The book represents a valuable contribution to the postwar history of Catholicism in Europe and German-Polish relations. It deserves a broad readership.



Citation:

Dr. Robert Alvis: Review for: Severin Gawlitta: „Aus dem Geist des Konzils! Aus der Sorge der Nachbarn!“ Der Briefwechsel der polnischen und deutschen Bischöfe von 1965 und seine Kontexte, 2016, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/en/node/4460#r5348>.

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