

Bronisław Geremek

In search of a united Europe

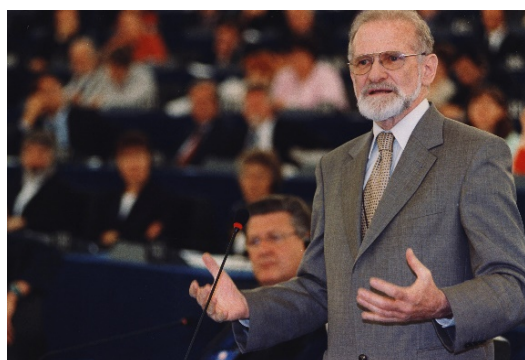
SUMMARY

From his childhood in the Warsaw Ghetto to his tragic death in a road accident while working at the European Parliament in 2008, Bronisław Geremek faced many personal, professional and political challenges during a period of constant turbulence. A world-renowned historian, he was interested in the poor, the excluded and the marginalised during the Middle Ages, mainly working as a researcher at the Sorbonne and Warsaw University.

The Soviet army's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 marked the start of his political involvement with those opposing the communist regime. He secretly gave history lectures, spoke in defence of workers persecuted following the cost-of-living riots in 1976, and went to Gdańsk in August 1980 to support the strike led by Lech Wałęsa. Geremek subsequently became an adviser to the founder of the Solidarność trade union.

His involvement led to his imprisonment following the military coup in December 1981 and the loss of his position as a professor, but guaranteed his place in negotiations between the communist regime and the democratic opposition in 1989. As a member of the first semi-democratic parliament in the Soviet bloc, he subsequently became Foreign Minister and started the negotiations for Poland's accession to the European Union. He was elected as a Member of the European Parliament in 2004.

His research as a historian focused on Europe as a civilisation, on questions of European identity and integration, and on civil society. Due to his historical research, he had a capacity for in-depth analysis that he used in his European political work and involvement. He concluded that a European public space was essential in order to encourage European civic engagement and awareness.



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Introduction

During the ceremony held on 21 May 1998 in Aix-la-Chapelle, at which he was awarded the [Charlemagne Prize](#) for his exceptional contribution to European unification in literary, scientific, economic and political terms, Bronisław Geremek questioned the nature of [his own contribution](#). He made reference to his illustrious predecessors, such as Jean Monnet¹, whom he admired for his vision of Franco-German reconciliation, expressed in the middle of the war in 1943 and acted upon barely five years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. His own contribution was the pursuit of his dream of freedom oriented towards the West. In that context, in 1989 he took part in the negotiations that led to both Poland's peaceful transition to democracy and the process of joining the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Geremek received numerous awards in addition to the Charlemagne Prize. He was made Officer in the Legion of Honour of France, and awarded the Grand Cross in the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. He also received the [Order of the White Eagle](#), which is the highest distinction in Poland, and the [Knight Grand Cross](#) in the Order of Leopold II, which is the most prestigious award in Belgium.

Child of the ghetto

Benjamin Lewertow was born in Warsaw on 6 March 1932 into a Jewish family. At barely 8 years old, he experienced exclusion and the stigma of the yellow star, followed by a life of hardship, hunger and brutal repression in the ghetto. He managed to escape with his mother and survived the Holocaust by remaining hidden, far from Warsaw, until the end of the war, thanks to a man named Stefan Geremek. His father was murdered in Auschwitz and [his brother](#), having survived the death camp, chose exile.

His address to the [Bundestag on 27 January 2002](#), during the commemoration of the victims of National Socialism, was one of the rare moments when he shared his memories of those times and underlined how important it was for Polish-German relations to remember that period. As a historian, his view was that relations between peoples must be based on historical truth, encompassing not only moments of courage and solidarity, but also of hardship, blood and sweat. The ordeal of war awoke his interest in the [plight of the excluded](#) and the poor, which formed the focus of his work as a historian and his political engagement.

The formative post-war years

The man who saved his life and adopted him not only gave him a new surname, but also introduced him to the Catholic faith. Bronisław Geremek was educated in a Catholic school, before returning to [Warsaw](#) at the end of the 1940s to study history at Warsaw University, his alma mater. The official line on the need to improve the plight of the poor and change society to make it fairer resonated with him. He joined the ranks of the Communist Party (the Polish United Workers' Party) in 1950. However, when, in 1968, the Prague Spring and the hope of 'socialism with a human face' were crushed by the Soviet army's invasion of Czechoslovakia, which was regrettably supported by Poland, he gave up his membership of the Communist Party, citing years of disappointment caused by the disconnect between promises and reality.

The young historian, confronted by ubiquitous propaganda, even in scientific works, and with his academic freedom severely curtailed, chose to study an earlier time that was less relevant to the

Charlemagne Prize, Aix-la-Chapelle



Source: Bronisław Geremek Foundation, photo by A. Giesz.

political regime: the Middle Ages. He carried out his research under Marian Małowist, who established the Polish historical school and interdisciplinary historical analysis. In 1955 he joined the Polish Academy of Sciences, with which he remained involved until his [retirement in 2001](#), except for a gap between 1985 and 1989.

Intellectual exchanges with the free world

Grants awarded by the French Government in 1956, 1957 and 1962 and his fluency in French enabled him to attend the prestigious École pratique des hautes études in Paris. His research into the marginalised of Paris propelled him onto the international scene as one of the main experts on mediaeval France, particularly on exclusion and marginalisation. He carried out his research in Paris in the spirit of the [Annales school](#), whose founders – Fernand Braudel and Georges Duby – he regarded as his teachers².

In 1960 he prepared his doctoral thesis and worked as an assistant lecturer at the Sorbonne, where he established the Centre for Polish Civilisation, acting as its director between 1962 and 1965. His life as a researcher was split between France and Poland. It was thanks to him that Polish historians learnt about the Annales historians.

Intellectual and political involvement with the opposition

At the end of 1975, he signed the '[Letter of Seven](#)' to protest about the dominant role of the Communist Party and links with the Soviet Union being written into the Polish constitution. When, in June 1976, the communist regime crushed the workers' strikes protesting about the cost of living in Ursus and Radom, intellectuals and workers, who had previously fought separate battles, joined forces. The Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) was created and organised assistance for the workers. Geremek saw this as the realisation of his idea of rapprochement between workers and intellectuals³.

Between 1978 and 1981, he gave lectures as part of the [flying universities](#). His clandestine classes in apartments and churches covered subjects prohibited by the regime, such as non-Marxist history or literature. Geremek's involvement with the opposition halted his academic career, with his appointment as a professor not coming until 1989. He was only permitted one trip abroad, to the Woodrow Wilson International Center⁴ in 1978. His publications were rare, with two books being published first in France⁵ and Italy⁶, before being published in Poland.

In August 1980, a strike broke out in the Gdańsk shipyard. Together with Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic intellectual and future prime minister of the first government to be independent of the communist regime, Geremek delivered a letter of support to the strikers, signed by leading intellectuals. Lech Wałęsa asked them to set up a committee of experts to help the workers in their negotiations with the communist rulers⁷. As an adviser to Lech Wałęsa, Geremek's life was dramatically changed by his involvement with Solidarność. This trade union, which was the first to be independent of the communist regime in the communist bloc, was banned on 13 December 1981. Under martial law, Bronisław Geremek found himself imprisoned in a detention centre for more than a year. After being imprisoned very briefly for a second time in 1983, he received an amnesty and was released.

Andreï Sakharov, Elena Bonner, Danuta Wałęsa, François Mitterrand, Lech Wałęsa and Bronisław Geremek



Source: Bronisław Geremek Foundation. Photo taken during the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Paris, December 1988.

From the Round Table to the Diet

Martial law could not break the spirit of freedom in Poland, despite the country sliding into an economic and political crisis. Weakened by further strikes, the communist regime agreed to negotiate with representatives of the opposition and Catholic Church. In a context of tension and potential threat from the Soviet neighbour, Bronisław Geremek was again at Lech Wałęsa's side in early 1989 to negotiate for trade union and civic freedoms. This led to the first [semi-democratic](#) elections in the Soviet bloc. Elected to the Diet as one of the first representatives of the opposition to the communist regime since the war, he sat on the Committee for Constitutional Reform and the Committee for Foreign Affairs, which he chaired until 1997.

Remaining faithful to the logic of dissent, Geremek's speeches often focused on his values, rather than on his immediate political interests. Given that these were the first political battles in a nascent democracy, the insinuations, aggressiveness and animosity increasingly directed at him were the price to be paid⁸. He therefore failed in his attempt to become prime minister.

Convinced that his country's place was within the EU, he voiced this ideal on many occasions. During the foreign policy debate in the Polish parliament in May 1994, he identified the country's integration within the [structures of the EU](#) and NATO as a key objective of [Polish diplomacy](#), guaranteeing the country's security. As a long-standing European, he highlighted the mutual interest in expanding the EU into central Europe. In his view, Poland's accession depended on its economic and democratic transition, with any authoritarian tendencies being eliminated once and for all. Among the challenges facing the country, he cited not only economic and financial issues, but also mental barriers that needed to be broken down in order to avoid the danger of self-isolation and not opening up to the free world through cooperation.

He saw the Weimar Triangle (Poland, Germany and France) as a mechanism that could support this process. He also regarded it as a link in the Polish-German reconciliation that was so important⁹ for both foreign policy and neighbourly relations. He wanted the Višegrad Group – consisting of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary – to take on the task of defining a common vision for their policy with their neighbours to the east. His European vision, in which Poland would form a bridge between east and west, went beyond the framework of the EU.

The European and transatlantic integration of [Spain](#), a country with a similar size and population to Poland and sharing the same Christian tradition, was a constant inspiration to Geremek. He often talked with admiration about the non-violent transition of Spain from Francoism to EU membership, which was a model for Poland to follow.

Alternative diplomacy

In the 1980s, Bronisław Geremek laid the foundations for Polish diplomacy outside the official channels. This 'alternative diplomacy', which did not question Poland's place in the Soviet bloc, was recognised to a certain extent by the authorities and welcomed by Western contacts for its moderation.

Following the military coup in December 1981, Western diplomats and academics called for Geremek's release, while the authorities blocked his academic career on many occasions. Following his meeting with British Foreign Minister Geoffrey Howe in 1985, Geremek was sacked from his post at the Polish Academy of Sciences, but was reinstated in 1989.

From 1985 onwards, official visits by Western diplomats included meetings with Bronisław Geremek or Lech Wałęsa as ordinary citizens.

Visits by Solidarność delegations to the West in the late 1980s followed the principles of 'alternative diplomacy' defined by Geremek, and supported calls for assistance made by the regime, recognising the place and role of the Communist Party.

In 1989 and 1990, Geremek was the main contact for Western diplomats concerned about the rapidly developing situation in Poland and the risk of instability for the bloc.

Geremek's moderate diplomacy prompted mixed reactions among the opposition ranks, and in particular made life difficult for the regime, which did not know how to counter this approach while the existing political system was not being challenged.

Source: Patryk Pleskot, [Siła alternatywnej dyplomacji](#), Warsaw, 2010.

European and transatlantic engagement

As Foreign Minister from 1997 until the Buzek government resigned at the end of June 2000, Bronisław Geremek strove to keep his country moving along the road towards membership of NATO and the EU. Just a few days before the EU accession negotiations opened, he explained to parliament [the progress](#) that had been made along this road chosen by the people and all the political parties which had governed Poland since 1990. He confirmed his belief that European integration did not pose a threat to the identity of Member States, but rather formed a defence ensuring internal and external security.

He was asked to open Poland's [EU accession negotiations](#) on 31 March 1998. In his statement, he emphasised his country's adherence to the fundamental values and principles of the EU, such as democratic government, respect for human rights, an open and pluralistic society, and free markets as the best way of organising society. He confirmed that Poland shared these values – which, in his view, had their roots in Christianity – as well as the principles of equality, solidarity and subsidiarity as the basis for European integration. He also underlined his country's assets: a young well-educated population that had positive and stable relationships with its neighbours to the east. He stressed the need for dialogue with social partners to ensure successful European integration. The following year, when presenting his [review to parliament](#), he stated his belief that negotiating efforts needed to be intensified. He highlighted the unwillingness of EU Member States to welcome new countries, as well as the negative stereotyping of those countries, particularly with regard to worker mobility. In his view, this situation called for action to demonstrate the positive aspects of enlargement for all concerned.

A few days earlier, Poland's accession to NATO, alongside Hungary and the Czech Republic, had marked the bloc's first expansion towards the east. On 12 March 1999, Minister Geremek filed Poland's protocols of accession to [NATO](#) in the presence of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, herself of Czech origin, during an official ceremony at the Truman Library in Kansas City, Missouri. This was the first step in Poland extricating itself from the grey area between the West and Russia, and met the call for Poland to assume its legitimate place in the family of western democracies and in the [free world](#). Based on the same logic, together with Madeleine Albright, Geremek founded the [Community of Democracies](#) during the ministerial conference in Warsaw in 2000, with 106 countries signing the [Warsaw Declaration](#) committing to their transition to democratic regimes and their consolidation in the world.

Honorary doctorate

The François Rabelais University in Tours was probably the first to award Geremek an honorary doctorate in 1982, while he was still in prison.* He was also awarded this degree by the Jagiellonian University of Krakow (the oldest university in Poland), by Bologna University (the oldest in Europe) and by Columbia University in New York.

* See footnote 8.

Academic involvement

The historical perspective that he gained through his research gave him an overarching view when analysing¹⁰ political life: despite his political commitments, he was still teaching in 1992 and 1993. He was the second Pole, after the great poet [Adam Mickiewicz](#), to hold a chair at the Collège de France. His inaugural lecture in 1993 was entitled 'Social history: exclusions and solidarity'.

In 2002, the former minister became the holder of the [chair in European civilisation](#) at the College of Europe in [Natolin](#), near Warsaw. He helped develop this second campus of the College of Europe, which, together with the original campus in Bruges, has trained some of the European elite since 1992. He was responsible for introducing the analysis of European integration in a historical context and through an anthropological and social approach, as well as promoting a vision of Europe extending to the east. In 2011, after the professor's death, the European Parliament renamed this course the 'EP-Geremek European Civilisation Chair' in his memory. The [Bronisław Geremek Prize](#) was created to recognise an outstanding publication in European civilisation and history.

Between 2006 and 2008, Geremek was President of the [Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe](#), which is based in Lausanne. The Foundation has published his lectures on the EU in one of its [Red Books](#).

MEP

Poland became an EU Member State on 1 May 2004, with Bronisław Geremek being [elected](#) on 13 June 2004 as one of [54 Polish Members](#) of the European Parliament. He joined the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and sat on the [Committees](#) of Constitutional Affairs and Foreign Affairs. He was also a member of the EU-Russia Delegation.

His popularity and his deep-rooted and long-standing commitment to European integration made him a [candidate](#) for the position of President of the Parliament. He secured 208 votes, with his support extending beyond his own group (88 votes) and the Group of the Greens (44 votes). Following internal negotiations between the political groups, and due to his perceived conservative positions and support for the Iraq War, he lost to the socialist candidate, Josep Borrell (388 votes). 'I have a dream of a Europe of solidarity and justice', he said in his [election speech](#), and he called for 'a Europe that grows ever more united'. He wanted the European Parliament to become 'a forum for strategic debate', 'a community of nation states and citizens, because Europe owes its greatness to its nations. We need to learn to live together if we are to fulfil our role'. As in his political life in Poland, his moral attitude also prevailed over his political views at European level. This sometimes caused him to adopt positions that were difficult to reconcile, such as opposing nationalism and xenophobia while highlighting national sentiment¹¹.

Always active in his role as an MEP, Geremek along with other MEPs sent written declarations to the European institutions and Member States defending causes such as the [eradication of poverty](#) in Europe, the founding of a fairer European social model, the signature by all Member States of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) reflecting European social values, a [foreign policy](#), security and defence union, and the anniversary of [17 September 1939](#) as a fact in the collective memory.

In this last text, co-written with four other MEPs, the historian called on 'the institutions of the EU and its Member States to preserve a place for these tragic facts [the invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939 by the Soviet army, following the invasion by Nazi Germany] in Europe's collective memory' and declared that 'a permanent European bond founded on reconciliation among nations and respect for freedom can only be based on the truth of what occurred in the history of Europe in the twentieth century'.

In September 2005, he was one of a group of MEPs to table a motion for a resolution on the 25th anniversary of [Solidarność](#). This text made a link between the fight by Polish workers and the fall of the Iron Curtain, opening the way to the unification of Europe around values of freedom and solidarity. He returned to the subject in 2007 during a European Parliament debate on the risk of [closure of the Gdańsk shipyard](#). Recalling that this site 'stands as a major European memorial and testimony to the fact that social solidarity is one of the founding values of the European Union', he called on the European Commission to reconsider its recommendation, which threatened closure of this site of historic importance.

He remained committed to a Poland that was open to, and liberal in, the interpretation of its history. In April 2007, alongside Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Geremek opposed the [lustration law](#), a procedure that aimed to limit the involvement in political life of those who had cooperated with the communist secret services. Having already been subject to this procedure in 1997, Geremek denounced the introduction of this 'policing of memory', which, in his opinion, disempowered those facing smear campaigns, by weakening the legal protection of their rights. Under the new procedure, this refusal would have resulted in his mandate as an MEP being revoked. Faced with this risk, a [debate](#) took place in the European Parliament, with MEPs mobilising in [his defence](#). The Constitutional Court found that some parts of the procedure were [unconstitutional](#), which put an end to the heated controversy.

Bronisław Geremek died on 13 July 2008 in a car accident in Poland as he was returning to Brussels to continue his work at the European Parliament. In April 2009, the [Bronisław Geremek Agora](#) was inaugurated at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Geremek – European thinker

Geremek as a researcher in mediaeval history and European civilisation cannot be separated from Geremek as an adviser to Lech Wałęsa, a Foreign Minister or an MEP. This 'lover of politics'¹² used his research and scientific methods in his various positions and roles. His intellectual contribution and his European thinking were recognised during the Belgian Council Presidency when Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt invited him, together with four other eminent Europeans, to form a '[Committee of Wise Persons](#)' to help draft the [Laeken Declaration](#) on the future of the EU.

The committee's analysis of the European institutional system was enhanced by the [lessons learnt](#) from the partitioning of Poland between three neighbouring powers. Geremek was keen to highlight that the *liberum veto*, and therefore the principle of unanimity, was one of the factors that resulted in the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a powerful monarchy until the 18th century. He drew parallels with the requirement for [unanimity](#) in some EU decisions, underlining the risk of decisions being blocked and democracy being weakened.

Geremek shared his historical reflections during a hearing in the [National Assembly](#) on issues of memory in June 2008, just three weeks before his fatal accident. While highlighting the risks of the political instrumentalisation of history, he stressed the importance of commemoration and of creating historical sites and monuments to allow work on the collective memory. In the case of European integration, this meant [unifying memories](#), which he considered much more difficult than economic and administrative unification. People have conflicting memories, such as the carnage in the Verdun trenches versus the independence regained at the end of the First World War by the countries of central Europe. The Second World War led to memories that were even more different, reinforced by nearly 50 years of the continent being divided by the Iron Curtain. While highlighting the common spiritual roots in the Middle Ages, Geremek, as an expert in that period, also pointed to the differences that were developing at the time. He also found parallels with the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment, which rooted Europe in humanism and reason. Human dignity and spirituality were therefore two key elements of the European vision.

According to Geremek, standard history textbooks and work by historians could solve the problem of conflicting memories, as, in his view, [collective memory](#) was the result of education, choice, and political and ideological guidance. He regretted that the European treaties made no reference to supporting European culture in its unifying aspect, for fear that European unification would come at the cost of national specificities. He felt that this posed a risk of a nationalist trend, echoing the nationalist trends and the temptations of economic patriotism in some of the long-standing EU Member States.

As a historian, he challenged the statement wrongly attributed to Jean Monnet: 'if I were to do it again from scratch, I would start with [culture](#)'¹³. Attempts to unify people torn apart by war would have been doomed to failure in the years following the end of the war. He believed that it was not until the 2000s that the EU could be given its political and cultural dimension, following economic integration. In this respect, and paraphrasing Massimo d'Azeglio on the unification of Italy, he said that, after building Europe, there was a need to build Europeans; otherwise, there was a risk of losing it¹⁴. He would have preferred 'for the [European Union](#) not to be seen as the work of chief accountants. The European Union ought to make room for the poets of life, the philosophers, the

Bronisław Geremek with Simone Veil



Source: [Archives of the European Parliament](#). Photo taken at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, February 2007.

citizens. That's where I see Parliament having a part to play'. He also wanted the European Parliament to have a central role in the creation of a European public space.

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