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Remaking Polish National History: Reenactment over Reflection

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After bringing the constitutional court to a standstill and cleansing public television to make it conform to party-political criteria, the Polish government that dominated by the PiS party has shifted its attention to the politics of memory. The article gives a critical review of recent steps taken by the government and parliament to stir the public representation of contemporary history in a national conservative, "patriotic" direction. This "historical policy" not only comes at the expensive of pluralism, but it has also already resulted in public unrest.

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Remaking Polish National History: Reenactment over Reflection

After bringing the constitutional court to a standstill and cleansing public television to make it conform to party-political criteria, the conservative nationalist Polish government of the "Law and Justice" party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) has shifted its attention to the politics of memory. In late April, the Polish parliament passed an amendment on the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), the authority responsible for lustration in Poland, with the intent of converting this institute into an instrument of "patriotic" politics of memory. The Minister of Culture is making efforts to downgrade the multi-perspective Museum of the Second World War, to be opened shortly in Gdańsk, into a regional history centre for military enthusiasts, and the minister of education, for her part, has publicly cast doubts on established historical findings regarding the Jedwabne pogrom of 1941. While the pro-government media are using newly surfaced secret police files to discredit Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa, the "Law and Justice" government is doing all it can to promote the cult of the anti-communist resistance fighters of the late 1940s. In place of the compromise-seeking solidarity of the peaceful revolution of 1989, the ruthless "patriotism" of these so-called "cursed soldiers" (żołnierze wyklęci) is now apparently supposed to become the new paradigm of state politics of memory in Poland. Apparently, the party of Jarosław Kaczyński is questioning the historical legitimization of the democratic rebirth begun in 1989.

On the Way to a "Ministry of Remembrance"?

An expert commission of the German Bundestag recently documented the widespread consensus among historians and policymakers in Germany concerning the symbolic legacy of the Peaceful Revolution in the GDR by suggesting the gradual integration of the Stasi Records Agency (BStU) into the mainstream system of scholarship and archives. In Poland, the exact opposite seems to be happening, as the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), founded in the year 2000 following the model of the Stasi Records Agency, is being converted to a centre of state memory politics largely divorced from historical scholarship and Polish academia. An amendment to the Institute of National Remembrance law, passed in the Sejm (the lower house of parliament) by the "Law and Justice" (PiS) and the right-wing populist Kukiz movement, makes the head of the institute directly responsible to the political will of the parliamentary majority.

The Polish Institute of National Remembrance, by far the most well-endowed historical research institute in East-Central Europe, with a current yearly budget of 269 million złoty (63 million euros), looks back on a chequered history. Originally established with the primary aim of preserving and protecting the paper trail left by communist state security, it soon found itself embroiled in a heated debate over the Polish role in the 1941 murder of the Jews of Jedwabne. The mostly young historians working for the Institute of National Remembrance helped objectify the debate with their excellent research work on the subject, establishing the institute as a serious contender in the field of historical scholarship. This was followed, however, by a phase of politicization starting in 2005 under its newly elected director Janusz Kurtyka – a staunch anti-communist who viewed the files of the secret service as a means to compromise political opponents. During his tenure, the Institute of National Remembrance grabbed the spotlight with the exposure of real or alleged secret-police informers. Only after Kurtyka's death in 2010, in the tragic crash of the Polish presidential plane near Smolensk, did it enter calmer waters again. Under the leadership of moderate conservative Łukasz Kamiński, the institute succeeded in pluralizing its research, opening itself to social-history and gender-studies approaches, and rehabilitating its tarnished reputation in the

academic world.

This development is now on the verge of being reversed. The changes stipulated by the new amendment will once again politicize the Institute of National Remembrance and marginalize the role of historical scholarship at the institute. If the president of the institute was formerly chosen at the suggestion of the institute's council, whose members included renowned historians delegated by self-governing bodies in Polish academia, the nomination is now the sole prerogative of parliament. The academic advisory council has been replaced with a so-called Institute of National Remembrance council, the members of which are selected by the two chambers of parliament and the president. The influence of historical scholarship on the directors of the institute, which had guaranteed its independence from politics in recent years, has thus been fully eliminated. In July, the Law and Justice (PiS) elected Cracow historian Jarosław Szarek as the new head of the Institute of National Remembrance, Szarek having presented himself as a bold supporter of patriotic politics of memory. In a hearing at the Sejm's commission of Justice, Szarek exclusively blamed the Germans for the annihilation of the Jews of Jedwabne, thus ignoring the extensive body of historical research on that case and showing his agreement with recent television statements by the Law and Justice (PiS) minister of education, Anna Zalewska. The organisational restructuring in the making will also offer a myriad opportunities to implement staff changes at the lower levels of the organisational ladder.

In future, the main task assigned to the Institute of National Remembrance will no longer be independent historical research but the implementation of state-guided politics of memory. Arkadiusz Mularczyk, the Law and Justice (PiS) deputy who initiated the amendment, declared to the Sejm unmistakably on 29 April that the Institute of National Remembrance is to be refashioned into an "effective unit of creating Polish identity, of building up pride in Polish history."^[1] To this end, the hitherto independent Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites has been integrated into the Institute of National Remembrance, making the latter responsible from now on for the preservation of memorials and war cemeteries. Special importance is to be attached to the exhumation of Polish victims of war and tyranny, hence contemporary history is to be investigated with more archaeological and forensic methods than before. The focus of activity of the reformed institute will presumably shift more and more towards military heroes and victims. It is also likely that the Institute of National Remembrance will give in to long-standing demands of right-wing commentators to renew its investigation of the Jedwabne pogrom, with the aim of shifting responsibility from the local Polish population to the Germans. Finally, another new task of the Institute of National Remembrance is to counter the spread of "untrue historical content vilifying the Republic of Poland or the Polish nation" at home and abroad. Critical scholars such as Polish-American sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross, who repeatedly became the target of attacks from the Polish right on account of his books on Jedwabne and other cases of Polish complicity in crimes against Jews, will likely have to deal with the Institute of National Remembrance in the foreseeable future. Historian and publicist Adam Leszczyński is therefore right to note that the institute is on its way to becoming a "ministry of remembrance".^[2]

Reenactments of the Battle of Westerplatte instead of a State-of-the-Art Museum?

Yet another conflict that has recently flared up is further evidence that the historico-political offensive of the new Polish government has little to do with serious scholarship or tackling the past in a self-reflective way. In mid-April Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński announced out of the blue that the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk would be merging with the newly founded "Museum of the Battle of Westerplatte and the German-Polish War of 1939". This plan has a serious flaw, however. The Museum of the Second World War, which is housed in an ambitious new structure on the edge of Gdańsk's Old

Town and whose aim is to present the wartime experiences of Poland in a global context, is about to be opened after years of conceptualization and construction, whereas the Museum of the Battle of Westerplatte only exists on paper. According to the Ministry of Culture, this museum, drawn up in December 2015, is to highlight the historical site of the German-Polish battle by Danzig. It will be headed by Mariusz Wójtowicz-Podhorski, a controversial amateur historian and enthusiast of historical reenactments, who will employ the services of a local reenactment club to act out the historic battle of September 1939 with the use of authentic weapons.^[3]

The planned fusion of these two utterly different institutions is an obvious attempt to remove the director of the Museum of the Second World War, Paweł Machcewicz, and thus enforce fundamental changes to the permanent exhibition already in the making there. The 450-million-złoty (more than 100 million euros) Museum of the Second World War is a prestige project of the previous government. Law and Justice (PiS) politicians and right-wing historians have long accused the museum-makers of not representing the "Polish standpoint" emphatically enough. And yet the ministry was apparently not interested in an open and objective debate, having kept under lock and key three highly critical reports on the planned exhibition, which it only published in July when forced to do so by a freedom of information request. These reports penned by a Gdańsk military historian, a well-known right-wing journalist, and a Law and Justice member of the Senate, turned out to be full of factual flaws and ideological prejudices. Most of all, the authors complained about the negative approach to war presented in the exhibition and missed the depiction of what they considered the positive sides of warfare, e.g. the "steeling of character" and "bravery on the battlefield". They even went so far as to accuse the museum-makers of propagating the slogan "Never again war" (Nigdy więcej wojny), as a "communist propaganda stereotype".^[4]

Combining nebulous accusations against the nearly complete Gdańsk exhibit with outright appeals for the glorification of war, these opinions make it all too clear which brand of history the Law and Justice-led Ministry of Culture intends to foster. Instead of embedding the Polish experience of World War II in its European and global context and thereby truly honoring the remarkable achievements of, say, the Polish resistance movement, the history of the war is to be reduced to military heroism, embodied in the week-long defensive battle on the Westerplatte peninsula. A multiperspective approach to the past, addressing the day-to-day suffering of civilians during war, the fine line between the struggle for survival and collaboration, and the ambivalent role of the Soviet Union as an aggressor and eventually as a liberator and hegemon, is now supposed to give way to militaristic hero worship and national narcissism.

The attempt of the Law and Justice government to dismantle this ambitious state-of-the-art museum project through shady administrative manoeuvrings and to subordinate it to a local reenactment initiative has triggered vigorous public protest at home and abroad.^[5] Gdańsk mayor Paweł Adamowicz has resolutely stood up for the war museum, pointing out that the new building is being erected on city property. Historians with quite different academic and political affiliations, among them Timothy Snyder of Yale University and Andrzej Nowak, a Cracow historian well known for his conservative stance, have publicly declared their support for opening the museum as originally planned, opposing any politically motivated changes. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Culture has rejected all appeals for a matter-of-fact debate and imposed its new plans by decree in September 2016. By appointing military historian Zbigniew Wawer commissioner of the museums to be merged in February 2017, the ministry demonstrated once more its determination to subject the Museum of the Second World War to a conventional and strongly militarized interpretative framework. Noticeable changes to the exhibit concept are therefore entirely probable.

Dismantling a Symbol of Freedom

The law politicizing the Institute of National Remembrance and the campaign against the Museum of the Second World War are merely the most tangible expressions of the historico-political transition initiated by the current right-wing government of Poland. The ultimate aim of the new government is to question the version of Polish history portraying a peaceful victory over communism by a pluralist opposition movement. The prevailing citizen-oriented interpretation of Polish contemporary history since 1989, as a process of negotiation based on a mutual acknowledgement of differences, is one the Law and Justice government is trying to counter with a militarized myth of anticommunism centered on national interests and heroic struggle. Instead of critical reflection, this version calls for flawless heroes. A historically nuanced investigation of Polish society's manifold entanglement in the communist project (or even just in the pressures and constraints of the state bureaucratic people's republic), which the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) has only just now and ever so cautiously embarked on, is a thorn in the side of the Law and Justice, as are the efforts of the Museum of the Second World War towards a transnational contextualization of Polish history.

The party of Jarosław Kaczyński has therefore aligned itself with those who view the negotiated transition from state socialism to democracy and a market economy as the betrayal by liberal intellectuals of the supposedly unfinished anticommunist revolution, which they would now like to bring to its completion, if only symbolically.^[6] The new parliamentary majority was therefore quick to pass a "decommunization" law, obliging cities and local communities to remove the last vestiges of communist-tainted street names. While the toppling of Lenin statues throughout neighbouring Ukraine after the success of the Euromaidan may have been a meaningful gesture, similar moves in Poland – where no community seems to lack its Piłsudski or John Paul II Street these days – seem more indicative of anticommunist furor than an understandable concern for having appropriate democratic symbols in the public sphere. The last remaining monuments to the soldiers of the Red Army are now up for discussion as well. That Red Army soldiers liberated the country from German occupiers while also bringing a new kind of enslavement is apparently hard to square with a black-and-white view of history focused solely on national heroes and martyrs.

But the historical revisionism being pushed by the Law and Justice is not especially radical for its desire to cleanse the streets and squares of Poland of its last communists and Soviet soldiers twenty-five years after the downfall of socialism, since all the parties represented in Polish parliament are basically agreed on this point. Rather, Polish national conservatives are using the opportunity to defame all those opponents of communism who to their mind were not ideologically sound, accusing them of collaboration – e.g., the left-wing socialists and liberal members of the opposition movement in the 1980s.

In this respect, it was quite opportune that a house search conducted in February in the private apartment of the widow of the last communist minister of the Interior, Czesław Kiszczak, revealed files of the former state-security service supposedly exposing early ties between the communist secret police and later Solidarity chairman Lech Wałęsa. It is a long known fact that state security tried to recruit the then 27-year-old electrician as an informer following the bloody suppression of the Gdańsk uprising in December 1970. The new files, however, seem to prove that he did actually sign a declaration of cooperation and meet with his case officers for a period much longer than previously suspected. Wałęsa himself denies this vehemently. Yet even contemporary historians the likes of Andrzej Friszke, who can scarcely be accused of being biased, consider the material credible.^[7] A politically inexperienced Wałęsa had apparently attempted, more or less skilfully, to outwit state security from 1970 to 1973 but still got

entangled in its nets, at least temporarily. As of 1973, informer "Bolek" delivered increasingly laconic information, until the secret police eventually terminated their cooperation for good in 1976 after repeated critical manifestations by Wałęsa.

The real scandal, however, is that these revelations have been used by a conformist state media to launch a full-blown smear campaign against the trade-union leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. The newly surfaced files give no indication that Wałęsa cooperated with state security after 1976, yet his opponents nonetheless insinuate that he was an agent of the communist secret police even after he became Solidarity leader. With that, Law and Justice-affiliated media and historians are ironically using the same tactic as erstwhile state-security officers, who tried unsuccessfully in the 1980s to frame Wałęsa as a spy with the aid of forged documents in order to prevent his being awarded the Nobel Prize. The dismantling of Wałęsa as a symbol of freedom serves other purposes nowadays. Damaging the personal integrity of the Solidarity leader is an attempt to undermine the credibility of the democratic opposition movement as a whole and present the creation of postsocialist Poland at the Round Table as an elite conspiracy driven by the secret police. Accordingly, it is not the institutions of the thus compromised "Third Republic" that are to appear as the guardians of democracy and the rule of law, but the Law and Justice government alone feigning to act on behalf of the Polish nation and eager to ruthlessly settle the score not only with communists but with the constitutional court as well, denouncing it as a stronghold of transformation profiteers.

"Cursed soldiers" instead of Peaceful Revolutionaries

Since the real conquerors of communism are not eligible as positive points of reference anymore, the Law and Justice government, in its symbol politics, has fallen back on the "cursed soldiers" to a hitherto unprecedented degree, elevating them to the lofty position of paradigmatic heroes of Polish history^[8]. Emerging from the armed underground movement during the war, these groups of nationalist partisans fought the communist state well into the early 1950s and were less notable for their actual successes than for their dogged adherence to ideology and the hopelessness of their strategic situation. It was this very ruthless fanaticism that, according to Polish president Andrzej Duda, makes the radical anticommunists of the postwar period role models for today's Polish youth. At a solemn state funeral for Zygmunt "Łupaszka" Szendzielarz, a partisan leader active in northeastern Poland who was sentenced to death in 1950 during a Stalinist show trial and exhumed by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in 2013, Duda asserted: "We are raising the new generation to follow their example, their heroicism, so this new generation can become like them: loyal to their fatherland until the very end."^[9]

Duda of course failed to mention that "Łupaszka" and so many other "cursed soldiers" were anything but morally impeccable heroes by today's standards. These irregular, nationalist partisans routinely committed bloody assassinations of real or alleged supporters of the new order, were guilty of robbing the politically innocent, and were occasionally involved in massacres against non-Polish civilians. In the case of "Łupaszka", who was reinterred with the highest state honors, a recently published Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) study shows with considerable detail that in June of 1944, he was responsible for the murder of at least 67 innocent civilians, mostly women and children, in the Lithuanian village of Dubinki and neighboring villages, and that he wilfully defied the explicit orders of his superiors in the Polish Home Army, the Armia Krajowa, who categorically prohibited acts of revenge against the civilian population.^[10] The thousands of people who took part in the memorial service for Łupaszka at Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw were evidently not disturbed by this. On the contrary, some of the participants took the president's appeal to follow in the footsteps of the "cursed soldiers" quite seriously, physically assaulting members of the private television broadcaster TVN, known for its critical stance

towards the government, and ultimately cutting the cable of the broadcasting van to prevent the ceremony from being filmed.^[11]

The previous, liberal-conservative government did, in fact, promote the commemoration of these anticommunist fighters in the postwar period. The national day of remembrance for the "cursed soldiers", celebrated in Poland on March 1st, was introduced at the initiative of the late president Lech Kaczyński and supported by his successor Bronisław Komorowski. The transformation of the Warsaw detention center on Rakowiecka Street into a central museum of the "cursed soldiers" under the new Law and Justice government was also initiated by Komorowski. However, if state policies of memory in Poland had previously been civilian in character and embedded in a reflective context, there is now an increasing emphasis on a military perspective and "reliving" this history in a less than critical fashion, for instance in the form of historical reenactments of partisan battles. Even seemingly quirky performances like the reenactment of the wedding of Polish Army cavalry captain and wartime hero Witold Pilecki, who was executed by the communists after a show trial in 1948, are being elevated to official ceremonies through the presence of high-ranking government representatives including the Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński.

It is noteworthy that the problematic myth of the "cursed soldiers" has meanwhile begun to eclipse the two most important focuses of the "patriotic" culture of history in Poland to date: the Polish underground state, which during the Second World War established a singular conspiratorial network for social, cultural, and national self-preservation; and the Warsaw Uprising, the most resolute moment of Polish resistance against German and Soviet oppression. Both the tradition of the underground state, focused on salvaging the remnants of state order, and the Warsaw Uprising, aimed at a politically pluralistic postwar Poland, pale in comparison to the new heroes propagated by the Polish right wing: unrelenting forest fighters whose rebelliousness, anarchic resistance, and virility easily lend themselves to pop culture. The symbols of anticommunist partisans on the T-shirts of young right-wing radicals and football hooligans, who worship the tradition of the protofascist National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny, ONR) of the interwar period, have now succeeded in supplanting those of the Warsaw Uprising. What's more, the Law and Justice government is bestowing its blessing on this neo-right-wing pop culture by dint of its official state politics of memory.^[12]

There is no telling where the historico-political flirtations of the conservative nationalist Law and Justice with the right-wing fringe will lead. Apparently, National Radical Camp radicals and their ilk feel encouraged by the government's tacit support. During another solemn state funeral in Gdańsk at the end of August, this one honoring two subordinates of "Łupaszka", the right-wing crowd in attendance physically attacked a group of liberal oppositionists wanting to take part in the ceremony. The police remained passive - while President Duda waxed pathetic, claiming that the ceremony was helping "the Polish state finally win back its dignity after 27 years."^[13] Less than two weeks later, Warsaw historian Jerzy Kochanowski was brutally beaten while riding a tram, simply for speaking German with one of his German colleagues. The significant increase in violent attacks against people who are not considered part of the Polish national collective is hardly surprising in a country where "cursed soldiers", known for even more ruthless violence against arbitrarily defined "others", are presented not as tragic heroes and the victims of their circumstances, but as flawless role models worthy of emulation.

Still, Poland is not yet lost. For months now thousands of Poles have been protesting the politics of the Law and Justice government. In May a quarter of a million individuals took to the streets of Warsaw to demonstrate against narrow-minded nationalism and show their support for European values. The protests were organised by the grass-roots movement Committee for the Defence of Democracy

(Komitet Obrony Demokracji, KOD), a very intentional nod to the Committee for the Defence of Workers (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR), the nucleus of democratic opposition in late-communist Poland. Luckily Polish contemporary history is much too complex to be reduced to the legitimatory purposes of a single nationalist party ideology, and Polish society seems sufficiently experienced in opposing political regimes that resort to rewriting history in order to tighten their grip on power.

Translated by David Burnett

Footnotes

1. Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 17. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dniu 29 kwietnia 2016 r., p. 222.
2. Adam Leszczyński, Będzie Ministerstwo Pamięci, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (1 April 2016).
3. Sellin o Muzeum Westerplatte i dumie narodowej. "Chcemy opowiedzieć o całej wojnie obronnej w 1939 r.", wPolityce.pl (23 January 2016), retrieved 30 April 2016, URL: <http://wpolityce.pl/historia/279213-sellin-o-muzeum-westerplatte-i-dumie-narodowej-chcemy-opowiedziec-o-calej-wojnie-obronnej-w-1939-r>.
4. The reviews are available at the museum's website alongside with a reply by the museum management, both in Polish and English, URL: <http://www.muzeum1939.pl/en/aktualnosci/act/news-info#article-eb8a8696685b792b3d7359fc9805fb2e>.
5. See, e.g., the numerous letters of international support published at the museum website, URL: <http://www.muzeum1939.pl/en/aktualnosci/act/news-info#article-a05805ca744d2ec0f3fb72581b052fff>.
6. James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, New Haven, 2010.
7. Adam Leszczyński, Prof Friszke o aktach 'Bolka': Mam wątpliwości, czy to pismo Wałęsy, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (25 February 2016).
8. Cf. Maria Kobielska, Die "Verstoßenen Soldaten". Embleme eines Erinnerungsbooms, *Zeitgeschichte-online* (19 July 2016), retrieved 14 August 2016, URL: <http://zeitgeschichte-online.de/thema/die-verstossenen-soldaten>.
9. Wystąpienie prezydenta na uroczystościach pogrzebowych płk. Zygmunta Szendzielarza "Łupaszki", *prezydent.pl* (24 April 2016), retrieved 30 April 2016, URL: <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/art.39.wystapienie-prezydenta-na-uroczystosciach-pogrzebowych-plk-zygmunta-szendzielarza-lupaszki.html>.
10. Paweł Rokicki, Gliniszki i Dubinki. Zbrodnie wojenne na Wileńszczyźnie w połowie 1944 roku i ich konsekwencje we współczesnych relacjach polsko-litewskich, *Warsaw*, 2015.
11. Sebastian Klauziński, Ekipa TVN 24 zaatakowana na pogrzebie "Łupaszki", *Gazeta Wyborcza* (27 April 2016).
12. Paweł Krysiak, Wszystkie koszulki Kukiza. Rozmowa z prof. Rafałem Wnukiem, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (20 February 2016).
13. Wystąpienie Prezydenta RP podczas uroczystości pogrzebowych "Inki" i "Zagonczyka", *prezydent.pl* (28 August 2016), retrieved 5 September 2016, URL: <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/art.71.wystapienie-prezydenta-rp-w-czasie-uroczystosci-pogrzebowych-inki-i-zagonczyka.html>.



Historian and new Head of the Institut for National Remembrance (IPN) Jarosław Szarek in the Polish parliament

Author: Paweł Kula / Source: Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AJaros%C5%82aw_Szarek_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AJaros%C5%82aw_Szarek_(1).jpg)



Commemoration for the "Cursed Soldiers" in Sanok 2016 where young people were showcasing the portrait of former Home Army Captain Jan Borysewicz

Author: Silar / Source: Wikimedia Commons: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/69/02016_Sanok%2C_Versto%C3%9Fene_Soldaten.jpg/800px-02016_Sanok%2C_Versto%C3%9Fene_Soldaten.jpg