



The button says "The worst sort of Pole". It refers to a speech by Jarosław Kaczyński, where he called betrayers of the Polish nation in this way. The opposition started using this phrase.

Author: Joachim von Puttkamer

The Past as a Source of Evil: The Controversy Over History and Historical Policy in Poland, 2016

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The Past as a Source of Evil: The Controversy Over History and Historical Policy in Poland, 2016

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History in Polish Life, January–February 2016 (Case No. 1)

In January 2016, soon after the new government had appointed him director of the Central Military Archives, historian Prof. Sławomir Cenckiewicz told the press that he had found the personal file on General Marek Dukaczewski (former chief of military intelligence – the Military Information Services) in the archives. Previously, Cenckiewicz was best known for alleging that Solidarity's legendary leader, Lech Wałęsa, had been an agent during the communist period.

Supporters of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość ("Law and Justice"), the party in power since November 2015, regarded the Military Information Services (MIS) as the nucleus of a post-communist *układ* (system). That term implies a "deal" or "arrangement" between an informal network of people linked to the former communist regime, whom (PiS supporters) feel has "enveloped" Poland and prevented it from developing to achieve genuine independence from Moscow. The MIS were abolished under PiS's previous government (2005–2007), but the *układ* was still presumed to exist. At the time, Cenckiewicz was one of those involved in disbanding the MIS, for which he later claimed he had received death threats.^[1]

Following PiS's latest election victory in 2015, the new defence minister, Antoni Macierewicz – a radical devotee of the *układ* theory – named Cenckiewicz head of the military archives. In early February 2016, the conservative weekly *Do Rzeczy* published an excerpt from the file on General Dukaczewski – a living officer who had never been accused of any crimes – and vetted his biography in public. "Marek Dukaczewski appears to be a communist janissary, committed to the (communist) Polish People's Republic from an early age... He has become a representative of a typical family with connections to the old system", wrote Cenckiewicz.^[2] He pointed out that, following Poland's first free elections back in August 1989, Dukaczewski had gone to Moscow for a two-month intelligence course. Supposedly, this was conclusive evidence that he was pursuing foreign interests, or even committing treason.

Thus, the civil servant head of the military archives disclosed the biography of a high-ranking officer and long-standing intelligence chief who was completely innocent in the eyes of the law. He did so publicly, in a privately-owned newspaper, without adhering to procedure, and accused him of the most serious crime – betraying national interests – without a shred of tangible evidence. No one is surprised by this situation in PiS-governed Poland, where such things are typical.

The Conspiracy, or the Polish Right Wing's Vision of History

History plays a huge role in Polish public debates, politics, and the ideology of the party in power. "Historical policy" is now officially on the agenda of the government and its agencies. Doctrine regarding the układ and all-pervading communist agents is now the official version of history.

History lies not just at the root of Polish political divisions, but also has an enormous influence on Poland's international status. According to the ideologists of the party in power, Poles are being subjugated with imposed historical guilt (e.g. complicity in the Holocaust during the war). These phenomena are all interconnected: the same people who once collaborated with the communist authorities now write about Poland's historical guilt in the media (n.b. privately-owned media, since they have been purged from state outlets), hand in hand with the Western media.

In order to unravel this tangle of theories and beliefs that is so impenetrable to Western readers, we can refer to the Polish right wing's highest authority. On 23 January 2016, Jarosław Kaczyński – the PiS chairman and currently the man with the most authority in the country (in 2015, he personally appointed and anointed both the prime minister and the president) – gave an hour-long speech covering his vision of history. It was delivered at a symposium titled "The Nature of Manipulation" – Causes and Effects, organised by the College of Social and Media Culture in Toruń. The venue was no accident: that private establishment is headed and owned by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a charismatic priest who founded an influential, radical conservative radio station in Poland, and is also one of Kaczyński's political allies.

In his lengthy speech, Kaczyński suggested that "two centres of manipulation" were at work in the country: the first emanated from the communist authorities; the second – and most important – he termed "dissident". Allegedly, this division sprang from the first congress of the Solidarity social movement in 1981, at which democratic opposition activists with left-liberal tendencies (who had dominated the opposition movement in the 1970s) unexpectedly found themselves in the minority. Solidarity then began to display a national-Catholic side they found frightening.

Kaczyński said: "This second [centre] is people who used to be in the opposition, but were previously linked to communism via their families. People who were active in the opposition during the 1970s and 1980s, but experienced the trauma of the first Solidarity congress [in 1981 – AL]. It was traumatic because they lost. They realised that they stood no chance as part of a democratic process, but still clung to their desire to rule Poland".

Kaczyński did not hesitate to point the finger at the people he implied. He described the entourage of *Gazeta Wyborcza* – Poland's largest daily newspaper, founded by members of the democratic opposition – as "an institution for placing former Communists into society". He felt the newspaper was imposing its authority figures and values onto Polish society. "It has engaged in educating by shaming, i.e. destroying national pride", said Kaczyński.

Let us understand this theory in simpler terms, for it is crucial, but may be incomprehensible to Western readers. According to PiS, the source of the profound rift in Polish politics is historical, and dates back at least to the birth of the democratic opposition in the 1970s. Its most important element – the Workers' Defence Committee – grew from left-wing and (to a lesser extent) liberal roots. It was often organised by people who were the children of communist activists (blood ties are significant in PiS's story). When Solidarity erupted in 1980, these people saw that, en masse, the Polish nation was alien to them and had quickly taken on national-Catholic features. For this reason, they supposedly formed an alliance with part of the communist authorities in 1989, and were guaranteed immunity and continued influence over the economy in exchange for jointly impeding the political and cultural aspirations of the national-Catholic

majority. From the 1990s onwards, they taught Poles to be ashamed of their own history, for example by exposing events like the massacre in Jedwabne, where Polish residents murdered several hundred of their Jewish neighbours in summer 1941. This "educating by shaming" served to strengthen their grip on Polish people's minds, teaching them to despise their own heritage. At the same time, corruption was rife in the country, and those who carved out careers and made fortunes for themselves were mostly linked to the post-communist, liberal układ. PiS is on a mission to reverse the situation, and a vital component is restoring the truth about the past, to give people genuine dignity and pride in their own glorious history. The movement is therefore revolutionary, conservative and emancipatory, all at the same time.

Just in case, I should add that PiS's opponents see this vision of history as proof that the party is obsessed with conspiracies. They feel that there is no evidence of any "alliance" against the nation's Catholic-conservative aspirations, and stubbornly remind us that, in total, less than twenty per cent of the Polish electorate voted for PiS. This version of history is standard for the party in power, however, and serves as the basis for its political activities regarding history.

History in Polish Life, January–February 2016 (Case No. 2)

In the first half of January, the legendary leader of Solidarity, Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Polish president Lech Wałęsa sent a letter to the director of the Gdańsk branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (INR) – a governmental institution dealing with history (including storage and analysis of former Security Service files). In his letter, he proposed a public meeting and discussions with those who accuse him of having been a communist Security Service agent in the 1970s (and possibly later), before he became a well-known opposition activist.

Such accusations have been repeated for years – particularly in a book by two INR historians published a decade ago, but which was based purely on circumstantial evidence (as the former president's file had been destroyed). Agreeing to discussions at the INR was humiliating for the former president since, throughout most of its existence, that institution had acted as an ideological weapon in the right wing's fight to reshape history. Wałęsa told the Polish Press Agency that he got the idea for a debate following an incident in a Catholic church on Boxing Day: "I'm coming out of church and two young girls run up to me. One has a microphone and the other asks me: 'How do you feel in church, being a collaborator and an agent who ratted on his colleagues?' That really annoyed me, and I said: 'That's not true, you little shits. Those accusations have nothing to do with me.' Because of this, I've decided – in spite of it all – to fight you once again, so I invite my biggest enemies to bring me their arguments", said Wałęsa.

After a couple of weeks' commotion – during which Wałęsa's detractors repeated all their allegations and the ex-president again refuted them – he ultimately called off the discussions.

"In my case, the INR's investigation into my alleged collaboration with the Security Service was inappropriate, dishonest and sloppy. In fact, the investigation was based on fabricated (evidence) put together by the Security Service (...) At the same time, the INR allowed irresponsible, unprofessional people to dig up and publish false accusations and libel. (...) The INR supported the manipulators and liars", wrote Wałęsa on his blog. This response was applauded in the pro-governmental media, since the national hero's humiliation was seen as an admission of guilt.

Historical Policy

Settling scores with suspected agents is but one front for the right wing to get even with history. Positive identity-building will be achieved through "historical policy", which the authorities are to implement so as to inspire Poles' national pride and "defend Poland's good name" abroad.

The idea to introduce Polish historical policy arose at the turn of the century, at the Centre for Political Thought, a small, conservative think-tank in Kraków. Thanks to a resolution from Prawo i Sprawiedliwość's political council in September 2004 – signed by Jarosław Kaczyński – it was to become the party in power's official cultural programme. The party leader and his politicians still mention it to this day.

Even though the architects of this historical policy have differing viewpoints, they often form a common front and share a fondness for the idea. They include philosophy academics such as Dariusz Gawin and Marek A. Cichocki, and another prominent figure, Tomasz Merta, who was made Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage following PiS's victory in 2005. According to his official job description, he was in charge of museums, monuments and cultural education. He died in the presidential plane which crashed near Smolensk on 10 April 2010.

In his essay *Remembrance and Hope* (included in the 2005 selection *Remembrance and Hope*), Merta wrote: "In the Third Polish Republic, history was either treated as superfluous ballast, or something potentially dangerous that could shake the foundations of the established democratic order". Advocates of historical policy maintain that any debates on the future are always dominated by supporters of what they call "critical history" (Merta) or "critical patriotism" (Gawin), which they regard as deeply harmful.

In his book *Power and Remembrance* (Kraków, 2005), Marek A. Cichocki traced the origins of this attitude which has been ascribed to the left-wing and liberal intelligentsia. He wrote that the left wing's desire for modernisation prompted its aversion to Polish tradition. It was accused of preserving semi-feudal social structures. Its penchant for "demythologising" national heroes and, thus, criticising Polish history emerged from a war declared on the rustic, quaint, traditional, kind-hearted, yet desperately backward country in Puerile Poland, by the illustrious, early twentieth century writer and philosopher Stanisław Brzozowski.

According to Cichocki, community-based, traditionalistic patriotism also became inconvenient for the liberals after 1989: "For a certain kind of dogmatic liberalism (...) the idea of patriotism is somewhat troubling, since the individual must shoulder obligations which extend beyond the horizon of individual interests. Patriotism derives the rationale for such obligations from community spirit, society at large, and finally the idea of the nation".

The authors of the historical policy accuse the left wing and liberals as follows: by exposing the bad sides of Polish history – e.g. Poles' collective guilt towards their neighbours, or cases of wartime collaboration – you are corrupting historical memory, not to mention the community. Cichocki wrote: "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Poles are a community which – to put it somewhat pompously – is devoid of roots, its heart excised, its memory reset. Therefore, according to the classical definition of a political community, it is rather a peculiar beast". What effects has this had? It is enough to switch on the television to see. The numerous problems of the Third Polish Republic – starting from corrupt politics with no ideology – cannot be solved without rehabilitating the national community, for which a state historical policy is required, concluded Merta, Gawin and Cichocki.

According to those in favour of historical policy, the philosophy of Poland reconciling with its neighbours and admitting its collective guilt has contributed to the unilateral moral vulnerability of Poles, left defenceless in the face of their neighbours' egotistical "historical policy". Whenever Poland admits to crimes committed by Poles during the resettlement of Germans in 1945, Germany speaks of the "expellees", diligently blurring the memory of its own war crimes by equating the suffering of German civilians after the war with what the Poles suffered under occupation (an example which recurs repeatedly in the writings of historical policy supporters). "Radical criticism (of Polish history – AL) has become an intellectual addiction, a mental attitude that clouds all reasoning", wrote Gawin.

PiS intends to change this by, for instance, investing in new museums, amending school curricula, and taking foreign media to court for their misleading use of the term "Polish concentration camps".

History in Polish Life, January–February 2016 (Case No. 3)

On 12 January, the deputy prime minister and minister of culture, Piotr Gliński, presented the tenets of his policy to the Senate commission on culture and the mass media. Two large folk-dance ensembles received ministerial support. Historical policy, including the development of institutions and grant programmes, is to become a priority, alongside the making of films about Polish history and identity. The minister stated that "one or two" blockbusters are to be made. Since autumn 2015, the winning party has affirmed that producing major feature films on Polish history (to show it in a favourable light) is among its priorities.

On 16 January, the Warsaw Uprising Museum – a flagship institution for historical policy, built under president Lech Kaczyński – announced it would be producing a film about Jan Nowak Jeźiorański, a famous courier for the Polish Underground State who travelled all over occupied Europe (this project is separate and unrelated to the minister's declaration). Shooting is due to begin in 2017. The Warsaw Uprising Museum's director stated that it would be in the style of American blockbusters such as Patton and Lincoln.

There is already a noticeable change in films being produced, however. *Sprawiedliwy* ("Righteous") was released in cinemas on 19 February, and tells of Poles saving Jews from the Germans during the Second World War. "It is also a story of the pure, impeccable bravery of 'village idiots' and the conscious, profoundly ethical heroism of the Polish elite", raved one reviewer from a right-wing portal, contrasting the new film with older works on the theme, which had been more critical of the role played by Poles in the Holocaust.^[3]

The film *Smolensk*, concerning the presidential plane crash of 2010, is due to premiere later in the year. During its finale, president Kaczyński meets the ghosts of Polish officers executed by the Russians in Katyn, near Smolensk, in 1940. The Polish Film Institute had previously refused to fund the film, its reviewers describing the script as biased, "fictionalised journalism about Smolensk", which suggested it had been a planned attack. Summarising its script, *Gazeta Wyborcza* wrote: "The film's central character is not the journalist, however, but president Lech Kaczyński. The film will contain archive footage of his speeches in parliament and Georgia (which he visited during the Russian invasion – AL) that the Russians 'vowed to avenge' – and it happened near Smolensk. The president is a paragon of flawlessness. He protects the helpless, thinks only of Poland, and is loved by the people. In the final scene, at the head of his delegation, he joins the ghosts of the officers murdered in Katyn".^[4]

Autumn 2016 will see the release of *Wołyń* ("Volhynia") by eminent director Wojciech Smarzowski, a film about the Poles massacred by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in eastern regions of the former Polish Republic in 1943. "It is our duty as film-makers. Just as we have told the stories of Katyn and the Warsaw Uprising, so must we portray the genocide in the eastern borderlands", stated Smarzowski during a press conference at Gdynia Film Festival in September 2015.

Two Polands

In 1836, Adam Mickiewicz began writing a drama in French, entitled *Jacques Jasiński ou Les deux Polognes* ("Jacques Jasiński or the Two Polands"). Although it was never completed, the division into two Polands that he outlined – a Poland of patriots and a Poland of traitors – has become an integral part of national debates on identity and politics. It had actually existed since the time of the Bar Confederation, at least, but gained more lasting appeal thanks to the poet's pen.

In 2012, Mickiewicz's drama was mentioned in a *Gazeta Polska* column by poet Wojciech Wencel, a writer of patriotic verse whom the right-wing press is happy to publish. Wencel recalled the diagnosis (which he termed "vital to the drama") offered by the old nobleman Stanisław, rejecting the civilizational changes occurring in the country. To quote Mickiewicz's old Stanisław:

"Who could have foreseen it? (...)
I knew not that Poland was so changed,
Or, rather, Poland was no more.
As though, indeed, one fine night
Our old Poland had been stolen from us,
And, awaking, what did I find?
An army in morning-coats (...) and wigs,
And ladies with tails!
What devilry is this (...)"

To Wencel, those "ladies with tails" are the same type of Poles he calls "lemmings" (I use the word in quotation marks, yet Wencel considers it normal). The poet commented: "It follows from the text that they are not so much traitors as thoughtless individuals imitating foreign fashions (...). Thus, above all, the line about Poland being stolen implies the annihilation of the traditional Polish way of life and culture, based on belief in God and common sense. The loss of political identity is simply a consequence of spiritual values being sacrificed. The old nobleman is in no doubt that it is the devil's handiwork".

I mention Wencel's reference to Mickiewicz to highlight the perennial, incessant debate on national identity in Poland. The division into "two Polands" – nowadays visible in the chasm that divides the "Smolensk people" from "Civic Platform Poland" – has a protracted history. In 1768, the Bar Confederates were preparing to fight the foreign, Russophile king in order to defend the Catholic faith and the nobility's traditional liberties. Paradoxically, the Confederation was both modern – certain historians see it as the first national insurrection – and traditional, since its ostentatious goal was a return to the idealised fatherland of their ancestors.

One may delve even deeper into the past. In 1733, before his second election (which was as futile as the first), the unfortunate King Stanisław I Leszczyński drafted a proclamation to the people. In it, he sang

the praises of a Commonwealth freed from its foreign – i.e. Russian and Saxon – yoke, which would become possible after the death of the German King Augustus II, who had been placed on the throne by Moscow. "By the grace of Divine Providence, the Commonwealth shall cease to be a foreign estate (...) and return to its own, absolute faith", the king announced. Meanwhile, Poland, "by virtue of being *Iurium Suorum Domina*, has the power to elect and dismiss its own rulers". He declared that it would "regain its native right to exert its own authority and rule", and condemned the "foreign" Saxon administration. (Paradoxically, Stanisław I Leszczyński attempted to return to the throne using French funds and support, which is not obvious from this rhetoric).

Perhaps it was at that time – the mid-eighteenth century – that certain trends which still persist today began to form in Polish political culture. For example, the appearance of *jurgiel*, paid by Russian ambassadors to the corrupt Polish elite. In fact, the word "pseudo-elite" is more apt, since this narrative paints them as nothing but crooked individuals; immoral, bribable, spineless people in positions of power owing to strokes of fate and the backing of others.

It was no accident that this corrupt pseudo-elite – to whom history was kinder than the Confederates and other conservative "patriots" would have wished – was both cosmopolitan and enlightened. The hesitant King Stanisław II August – the Tsarina's lover, installed on the throne thanks to her position and wealth – initially modernised Poland by creating an administration modelled on the West and a secular education system to replace Jesuit schools, and ordered the building of Western-style factories. He later joined the Targowica Confederation when he realised that the war with Russia to defend the constitution was doomed to fail. Indeed, perhaps he had been conspiring from the very outset against Poland with the Tsarina (who was his ex-lover, after all), just as the "patriots" had suspected.

The Bar Confederates, led by Kazimierz Pułaski, even attempted to kidnap the king in 1771, but carried it out so ineptly that the monarch – guarded by just one sentry in a mill between the villages of Młociny and Buraków, near Warsaw – managed to escape.

The Confederates later claimed that the kidnap attempt had been provocation: it is unclear whether this was due to the outrage it provoked, or because it had been so disgracefully incompetent. Seeking to shift the blame for one's own ineptitude onto foreign meddling has been a constant feature of the "national" tendency in Polish politics, and it recurred in the myth of Smolensk being a planned attack.

The Confederation's propaganda gave rise to a mixture of elements which still apply today: a corrupt elite susceptible to foreign influence; foreign "modernity"; a fascination with things foreign and contempt for all that is native; and anti-Christianity (particularly anti-Catholicism). The "modern" rejection of ancestral traditions, customs and religion has become synonymous with being in the pay of foreign powers and high treason.

On 21 April 2010, less than two weeks after the Smolensk disaster, Rzeczpospolita published a poem "submitted by the author", Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz:

"And once more – two Polands, with two different faces.
 Jakub Jasiński arises from Mickiewicz's pages.
 Poland never did ask if his wish was to die,
 Yet he knew not to question nor deliberate why.
 Two Polands – the Poland that the prophets foretold,
 And the Poland embraced by the Tsars of the North.

A Poland that for worldly approval does fawn,
 And another, its corpse on a gun carriage drawn.
 Bedecked in our blood as in royal attire,
 Our hallowed ancestors' wounds secret and dire.
 They'll say that it's pathos, yet pathos is fitting,
 For such is the fate that for us has been written.
 "So what will you do now?" our ancestors would know,
 And 'tis but to ourselves that an answer we owe.
 That which tore us apart shall forever be cleft (...)"

Both Polands have their own authorities, traditions and language, or at least their own ways of depicting reality. "They'll say that it's pathos, yet pathos is fitting", wrote Rymkiewicz. The haughty grandiloquence of the "patriots" is offset by the irony, sarcasm and derision of supporters of "things foreign". The former differ from the latter not only in the set of values they claim to cherish, but also their entire symbolic mindset. One side recalls the grandeur of the Polish kings and victories at Vienna, Khotyn and Kirchholm, while the other sarcastically remarks that Poland's former might be hinged on peasant slave labour (they made up ninety per cent of the population) and its kings were a parade of immature losers: after all, Władysław III was gay, Alexander I Jagiellon died of syphilis, and Michael I and Augustus III both died from overeating. Augustus II, meanwhile, earned his nickname "the Strong" for breaking horseshoes and for his extraordinary sexual prowess (even in those immoral times), rather than competent diplomatic, organisational or leadership skills.

Both narratives spur each other on: as one side fills with pathos, the other ramps up its debunkings and sarcasm. They resemble two sides of the same coin: without the other, neither would have a reason to exist.

The former has become state policy, however, and is deadly serious for the PiS government who remain unaware of how grotesquely ridiculous it is.

P. S.

In February 2016, the widow of the last Communist minister of internal affairs, General Czesław Kiszczak, offered to sell the Institute of National Remembrance some secret documents her husband had removed from his office when leaving the post. Among obsequious letters addressed to the general by writers and actors, there was also a file on agent "[Bolek](#)", a young worker who had collaborated with the Security Service between 1970–1976 by informing on his colleagues. In all likelihood, "Bolek" was the future Solidarity leader and Polish president, Lech Wałęsa.

This affair divided Poland. Some historians stressed that there was no evidence that the authorities controlled Wałęsa after 1976, when he broke off his collaboration with the secret police. Others, however, saw it as a perfect element in the tale of the treacherous elite: if Solidarity's leader was an agent, then the entire transition – including Polish democracy after 1989 – had clearly been a fraud. In that respect, the Communist secret police has exacted its revenge on Poland's transition from beyond the grave, by soiling it in many Poles' eyes, and calling its credibility into question.

Translated by Mark Bence

Footnotes

1. For example, in an interview for the Onet portal, dated 12 February 2014: <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/cenckiewicz-grozo-no-mi-smiercia/4kzw4>
2. Stanisław Żaryn: Dukaczewski, "janczar komuny" z sowieckim dyplomem pod pachą. Tekst Cenckiewicza powinien zakończyć medialną karierę b. szefa WSI. Czas odejść do "rezerwatu postkomunizmu"? URL <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/280287-dukaczewski-janczar-komuny-z-sowieckim-dyplomem-pod-pacha-tekst-cenckiewicza-powinien-zakonczyc-medialna-kariere-b-szefa-wsi-czas-odejsc-do-rezerwatu-postkomunizmu>
3. Łukasz Adamski: „Sprawiedliwy”. Pierwszy taki polski film o bohaterach ratujących Żydów. Scenarzysta „Róży” uderza w mit Polaka antysemitę, URL <http://wpolityce.pl/kultura/279622-sprawiedliwy-pierwszy-taki-polski-film-o-bohaterach-ratujacych-zydow-scenarzysta-rozy-uderza-w-mit-polaka-antysemity-recenzja>
4. Agnieszka Kublik: "Ruskie zabili Kaczora" [Znamy scenariusz filmu "Smoleńsk" Krauzego] URL http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,17349025,Ruskie_zabili_Kaczora_Znamy_scenariusz_filmu_Smolensk.html#ixzz49ZgiwRBD



On 12 March 2016 one of the largest anti-government demonstrations took place in Warsaw. The demonstration consisted of various parties and movements from all across the political spectrum.

Author: Joachim v. Puttkamer



One of the anti-government posters from the demonstration reads "I give an unused president to good hands".

Author: Joachim v. Puttkamer



The anti-government movement KOD asked the activists not to slander the political opponent of the ruling PiS party. This participant of the Warsaw demonstration found his own creative way of expressing his opinion of Jaroslaw Kaczynski. The reference to a duck goes back to the president's name: Kaczynski in Polish sounds similar to the Polish word for duck.
Author: Joachim v. Puttkamer