

# “Politics of memory” in Poland in the first half of the 21st Century: Historical narratives, challenges, and disputes. A case study

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## Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the specifics of Polish memory policy at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries and to trace the most important threads of the discourse surrounding it. The aim of the author is to characterize the conditions of continuation and modifications, and, above all, the challenges facing the Polish historical narrative. The research method used in analysis was the case study. The shaping of Polish politics of memory in the last three decades has been the result of many factors, including the post-communist nature of the state, the dispute over its role in narrating history, the Polish-Russian conflict over memory, the discourse on Polish-Jewish wartime relations, the internationalization of Polish historical narrative, as well as the “memory boom” and the development of public diplomacy. All the factors mentioned above influence the content of the Polish historical narrative. The Polish historical narrative, as in the case of many countries, includes a path of narrative about freedom and the presentation of the greatest scientific and cultural achievements. Regardless of the content of the Polish historical narrative, its greatest challenge is the asymmetry of knowledge about Polish past beyond its borders, not only in the context of losses suffered during World War II.

## Introduction

The article consists of three parts. In the first, theoretical part, key issues regarding the concept of memory policy and a case study will be discussed. The second part concerns the internal debate on the shape of Polish politics of memory and the changes in it after 1989 in the Third Polish Republic. The last part is an analysis of the main challenges of the Remembrance Policy in recent years.

A part of the nation-building process is extracting values from those elements of the past that are considered relevant today, as nations build their image of the past to shape their present and future. The term describing the process of referring nations to history is “politics of memory”. The concept of “politics of memory” was created at the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s and was

understood as a combination of political concepts and strategies for applying history in the public sphere. Professor Stefan Troebst links the birth of this concept to the publication of Howard Zinn's landmark book *The Politics of History* in 1970 and to the so-called the German dispute of historians (Zinn, 1970; Augstein et al., 1986; Troebst, 2013, pp. 15–34). Politics of memory is the organisation of collective memory by political agents; the political means by which events are remembered and recorded, or discarded. It consciously supports the memory of specific events and characters. Four groups of tools are used to implement politics of memory: management of public space in the public and material dimension (monuments, national days); activity of memory institutions (archives, libraries, museums); education, upbringing, and science (central education standards); and justice (settling the past by identifying and punishing those responsible, e.g., for crimes against nation) (Ruchniewicz, 2018, pp. 77–78).

### Politics of memory in Third Polish Republic: Internal debate, changes, and continuity in historical narration

The shaping of Polish politics of memory in the last three decades has been the result of many factors, including the post-communist nature of the state, the dispute over its role in narrating history, the Polish-Russian conflict over memory, the discourse on Polish-Jewish wartime relations, the internationalization of Polish historical narrative, as well as the “memory boom” and the development of public diplomacy. For reasons quite clear, World War II has become the most important reference point for this politics. As a result of the agreement between the Third Reich and the USSR known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (August 23, 1939), Poland was invaded by the German (September 1) and Soviet (September 17) armies, with its territory subsequently divided between the two occupiers (28 September 1939) (Davies, 2005; Kłoczowski and Łaskiewicz, 2011; Moorhouse, 2019; Kaminsky, et al., 2011; Müller and Troebst, 2016). The Polish government in exile (in France, and after June 1940 in Britain) continued the fight for “freedom and independence,” establishing the Polish Armed Forces in the West and the subordinate structures of the Polish Underground State operating in the occupied country. However, due to the decision of the Big Three (Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin) at Yalta in 1945, the territory of Poland was reduced – 45% of the pre-war area was incorporated into the Soviet Union – and its borders shifted to the west. Under the terms of the agreement, Poland found itself in the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War, with what would later become the Polish People's Republic emerging from the Soviet occupation in the years 1944–1945, administered by Polish communists loyal to Moscow. In 1989, communism collapsed, and the democratic Third Republic of Poland was established.

Before examining contemporary historical narratives in Poland, it is necessary to mention that they stem from a critical assessment of the historiography written under the Polish People's Republic. One characteristic element of this assessment has been the rehabilitation of Polish historical events and figures previously absent from or presented in unambiguously negative ways by communist historians during 1944–1989 (Nijakowski, 2008, pp. 123–126; Traba, 2009). Recovered historical elements include the history of the Second Polish Republic and the presence of Poles in

the Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy Wschodnie*) from 1918-1939, the Polish government-in-exile from 1939–1989 and the Polish Armed Forces in the West, the armed anti-communist opposition as well as the communist repression of this opposition. According to its critics, the politics of memory of the Third Republic is a symbolic space built upon the negation of the symbols and myths of the Polish People’s Republic, where monuments and communist squares are removed and German and Soviet crimes equated. In contrast, supporters of the de-communisation of public space present this process, which includes the renaming of streets or monuments, as an attempt to protect history from falsification. The monuments to the Red Army soldiers who “liberated” Poland during the years 1944–1945 remain relics of Russian domination, which lasted until the early 1990s. The creation of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners in the People’s Republic of Poland<sup>1</sup> and the establishment of the Cursed Soldiers’ Memorial Day (March 1) are intended to restore the memory of armed and civil resistance against the communist totalitarian regime.

The years 1989–2020 have also been a period of internal debate about the role of the state in relation to history. Historian Professor Antoni Dudek interprets the practice of avoiding historical topics by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (a former communist minister and president from 1995–2005) as stemming from his camp’s fear of critical assessments of the communist period in Poland (Dudek, 2011, p. 43). This post-communist dodging is also related to the choice to place modernization as a priority: the political and economic transformation of the state and the process of integration with the structures of the Western world (NATO and the EU). Such criticism of the alleged passivity of the Third Polish Republic’s political class toward the past has been rejected by other historians. Professors Anna Wolff-Powęska and Paweł Machcewicz have pointed out that the creation of the cemeteries of Polish officers in Katyn, Kharkiv, and Mednoye in 2000 as well as the Eaglets’ cemetery in Lviv in 2005 were ironically a result of activities carried out by post-communist politicians (Wolff-Powęska, 2007, p. 18; Machcewicz, 2012, pp. 90–91).

This discussion can be seen in the framework of a broader debate over whether the discipline of history should comfort and glorify or question national mythos.<sup>2</sup> As historian Piotr Wandycz noted, the need to believe in one’s own nation, tinged with certain mythology, “seems necessary,” but it is harmful in excess (Wandycz, 2009, pp. 46–47). He considered the acceptance of the axiom that “chosen” nations do not exist as a barometer of normality in national narratives. Opponents of the idea of state involvement in history argue that states should only create “frames” for the circulation of various, often contradictory representations of the past and ensure the integrity of historical research and education (Tokarz, 2012, pp. 15–37). In contrast, defenders of the active role of the state point out that it has not only the right but also the obligation to shape collective memory and select historical content. This means building a community around “tradition” understood as

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<sup>1</sup> “Cursed Soldiers” is a term applied to various anti-Soviet and anti-communist Polish resistance movements formed in the later stages of World War II and its aftermath by members of the Polish Underground State. The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People’s Republic in Warsaw is located at a part of the former Warszawa-Mokotów Remand Centre. The opening of exhibitions is planned for March 1, 2023. “Otwarcie Ekspozycji Muzeum Żołnierzy Wyklętych i Więźniów Politycznych PRL w 2023 r.” Retrieved from: <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/otwarcie-ekspozycji-muzeum-zolnierzy-wykletych-i-wiezniow-politycznych-prl-w-2023-r> (2.07.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Clio is the Greek muse of history, and the name means “to make famous” or “to celebrate”.

a collection of elements used to identify the national community: rituals, symbols, and founding myths and heroes. They dismiss the fear that the state can create a mythologised and one-sided vision of history, stating that in free and democratic societies this is impossible. This debate can be seen as an expression of a desire to re-evaluate the role of state and national interpretations of history after the period of historical propaganda by right-wing and communist leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, the conditions that contribute to the shaping of Polish historical narration also include the so-called “memory boom,” (Kwiatkowski, 2014) or the need to discuss history and its practical significance for the betterment of society (Beiner, 2008, pp. 107–112; Huysen, 2003, p. 18; Berliner, 2005, pp. 197–211). This cultural change is complemented by the development of public diplomacy, whose role is to shape and support a positive image of the country and its society abroad (Ociepka, 2013, p. 70).

Filip Musiał from the Institute of National Remembrance has called politics of memory (*polityka historyczna*) “the reliable use of history as one of the tools of politics” to strengthen the identity of a society and build its external image (Musiał, 2011, p. 149). As tools of this politics, he mentioned the creation of specialized institutions to conduct scientific research and the commemoration of dates, places, and objects. In Poland’s case, the focus of politics of memory is broadly understood national freedom, with the alternating periods of independence and loss of sovereignty having perpetuated this. Another focal point of the national narrative is the coexistence, at other times competition, between “tradition” and “modernity” (Kostro, Wójcicki, Wysocki, 2014, pp. 322–360). By “tradition” is understood the defense of highest interests and values, with freedom and independence being inalienable imponderables. On the other hand, “modernity” and “modernisation” are political, social, economic, and cultural changes, including development. Naturally, the 20<sup>th</sup> century occupies a special role in Polish historical politics, leading to the appearance of new monuments dedicated to historical figures and episodes as well as new institutions: Marshal Piłsudski, the Battle of Monte Cassino, General Maczek, the Underground State, the Home Army, Roman Dmowski, Stefan Rowecki, Henryk Sienkiewicz, the Katyn Museum, the Warsaw Rising Museum, the KARTA Center (Habielski, 2011, p. 87). This emphasis stems from the apocalyptic nature of World War II, which constituted a hecatomb for Poland’s population, destroyed its national elite, and permanently changed the country’s ethnic and cultural mosaic.

In addition to those already listed, the last three decades have seen the establishment of institutions that narrate Polish history more cross-sectionally, for example, the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, the Museum of Polish Jews, and the Museum of Polish History. Institutions that decenter the ethnic Polish nation are partly a response to the powerful cultural shock that Poles, proud of their “beautiful” and “glorious” past and believing in exceptional suffering, experienced in the recent decades (Wysocki, 2018). The emerging accusations of Polish anti-Semitism and participation in the Holocaust by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2001; Gross, 2007) and others forced society to reflect on Polish historical narrative in general, and more deeply on the notion of Poland’s martyrdom during World War II. The pogrom of the Jewish population of Jedwabne in July 1941, inspired by the Germans and carried out by Poles, (“Pogrom Żydów w Jedwabnem”) became the topic of the most heated debate on contemporary Polish history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

(Michlic, 2002, p. 7). One positive effect of this experience was that it drew attention to the need for historical research on Polish-Jewish relations and the dissemination of their results through education (Forecki, 2010, p. 33). The Jedwabne case forced Poles to look at their wartime history differently and re-evaluate certain episodes; the investigation conducted by the Institute of National Remembrance confirmed that at least 340 Jews were murdered in Jedwabne, and that the perpetrators were Poles. Every year, official celebrations take place to commemorate Jedwabne with the participation of representatives of the President of Poland, the Embassy of Israel, the Chief Rabbi of Poland, a representative of the Catholic Church, and representatives of the Evangelical-Augsburg and Evangelical-Reformed Churches. ("Obchody 77 rocznicy zamordowania Żydów w Jedwabnem", 2018).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, despite this admittance of (some) guilt, the accusation of collective—as opposed to individual – Polish anti-Semitism and of materially benefitting from the Holocaust has encouraged an uptake in Polish historical politics.

### Politics of memory: Major challenges

It is not surprising that Polish politics of memory is preoccupied with reacting to subtle accusations and insinuations that appear in international discourse alongside more legitimate scholarly pursuits that increase our knowledge about Poles during the Holocaust. In the first place, the false and hurtful phrase "Polish extermination camps" has prompted a number of actions from Polish officials, including protests, demands for correction by journalists and legal actions, which most significantly led to the recommendation by the *New York Times* Manual of Style and Usage against using the expression ("The New York Times bans Polish concentration camps", 2011). In a similar manner, in 2007 the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp – a world symbol of terror, genocide, and the Shoah world – changed its name to "Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Former German Nazi Concentration Camp." Polish officials and others are also trying to speak more effectively about the help provided by Poles to Jews during the Holocaust (Polish Righteous Among the Nations) by means of educational initiatives and institutions such as the Ulma Family – Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II.<sup>4</sup> On the initiative of the Jewish Historical Institute, the POLIN Museum of Polish Jews was also established in Warsaw, documenting the experience of nearly 1,000 years of Polish-Jewish relations. The joint commemoration of those who tried to help Jews during the war is meant to demonstrate the complementarity of the Polish-Jewish memory of the Holocaust while putting Poles in a more sympathetic light.

Poland's efforts to underline Polish suffering during World War II and to fight back against "Polish concentration/death camps" and similar phraseology have been plagued by multiple setbacks, however, some of which were of its own making. In late January and early February of 2018, the Polish Sejm (Parliament) passed an amendment to the Act on the Institute of National

<sup>3</sup> The first hierarch of the Catholic Church, who took part in the celebrations in Jedwabne (2011) was Bishop Mieczysław Cisek (chairman of the Polish Episcopal Committee for Dialogue with Judaism).

<sup>4</sup> During II World War, Józef and Wiktoria Ulma from the village of Markowa gave shelter to eight Jews. In 1944, the family was denounced to the Germans and killed. See "The Ulma Family," Retrieved from: <https://muzeumulmow.pl/en/museum/history-of-the-ulma-family/>.

Remembrance that penalised those who “accuse, publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich” (precise wording of Article 55A of the amended Act)(The 2018 Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. Amendments to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, 19 January 2018). Regardless of its original intentions, the Israeli government and society interpreted this law as an attempt to punish historians who dare to write and speak about Poles who collaborated with the Third Reich in its persecution of Jews, in particular about the so-called *shmaltsovníks* (Levine, 2018; Arens, 2018). The ensuing crisis between Poland and Israel was defused with the publication of a joint statement by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on June 27, 2018. Netanyahu conceded to the Polish government by asserting that the phrases “Polish concentration camp” and “Polish death camp” were ‘blatantly erroneous and diminished the responsibility of Germans for establishing those camps’ (“Joint declaration of prime ministers of the State of Israel and the Republic of Poland,” June 27, 2018). For his part, the Polish Prime Minister supported the “free and open historical expression and research on all aspects of the Holocaust so that it can be conducted without any fear of legal obstacles,” a provision of the declaration.

Beyond Polish-Jewish relations, the last three decades have witnessed an attempt to internationalise Polish historical narrative by universalising its message. For example, along with other countries of Central and Eastern Europe that experienced long-term consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Poland has sought to have the anniversary of its signing recognised as the European Day of Commemoration of the Victims of Totalitarian Regimes. The recognition of that day by the European Parliament is also one successful attempt to overcome the European asymmetry of memory with regard to the experience of communist crimes in Western and Eastern Europe. Moreover, exposing the Hitler-Stalin pact is a powerful challenge to the Russian myth of the Great Patriotic War and one of the manifestations of the Polish-Russian memory conflict (Wielomski, 2016, p. 105). On September 17, 2015, both Polish and foreign media quoted Sergey Andreev, the Russian ambassador to Warsaw, as stating that Poland was responsible for the outbreak of World War II (“Poland strongly protests against Russian ambassador’s statements,” Polish Press Agency, September 29, 2015). Andreev insinuated that Polish diplomats had allegedly halted the building of an international anti-Hitler coalition in the 1930s, which made Poland partly responsible for the 6,000,000 casualties of the Holocaust. In the same interview, the Russian ambassador expressed his dissatisfaction with Poland’s conduct toward Russia, saying that it paused all political and cultural contacts with Russia. Nowhere was this more blatant than after the initiation of the conflict in Crimea and eastern Ukraine by Russia, which led to one of the biggest political crises in Europe since World War II. On the Polish side, perhaps provoked by this statement, there were cases of hooligans devastating Red Army cemeteries in Poland, which exacerbated animosities between the two countries. It should be noted, however, that formal apologies for these despicable actions were issued by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs. It should be further noted that in its memory conflict with Moscow, Warsaw enjoys the support of Brussels: on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, the European Parliament

adopted a Joint Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, in which it strongly condemned the actions of the Soviet Union in the years 1939–1940 (“European Parliament resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe”, September 18, 2019).

## Conclusions

The development of Polish “politics of memory” during the Third Republic focuses on the story of freedom. The concept of a historical Polish path of freedom was created by Joachim Lelewel in his *Remarks on the History of Poland and its People* (Lelewel, 1855, pp. 275–276). According to Lelewel, the foundation of the Commonwealth was its communal civic administration by all nobles, which allowed for its multicultural and multireligious character.

Nowadays, the freedom story refers to the experience of a state that resisted two criminal totalitarian regimes, with the Round Table Talks of 1989 as the latest installment of that struggle. Furthermore, there is also the modernity element that underlines cultural and scientific achievements across Polish history, which, next to the creation of “Solidarity,” also includes the passing of the Articles of the Warsaw Confederation, a symbol of religious tolerance of the First Republic of Poland inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World list, and the Constitution of May 3. At the same time, the challenges to the success of politics of memory include not only the black stains on Poland’s wartime record such as Jedwabne but also the international skepticism toward any overarching national narratives, which become instruments of right-wing and left-wing political propaganda.

The greatest challenge to the Polish politics of memory is the knowledge asymmetry between Poland and other countries regarding the experiences of World War II (Troebst, 2011, pp. 117–154). This results in attempts to impart onto the Polish historical narrative a character of consonance and complementation with other storylines. Examples include the development of Polish-German dialogical memory in relation to World War II and Polish-Jewish dialogical memory regarding the Holocaust, as well as the reinforcing of shared memory regarding communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe. In this respect, the Polish-Russian war of remembrance, which results from different assessments of Stalin’s role in the outbreak of World War II, remains one of the obstacles. Perhaps a greater one is the ongoing conflict with Israel, during which the right-wing Polish government has made blunders that damaged the country’s public image. In the difficult task of dealing with this issue, in which geopolitical and financial considerations affect an emotional historical dispute, Warsaw might wish to manifest special caution and a delicate approach, refraining from populist posturing directed at its domestic audience while successfully opposing hurtful stereotypes. In some ways, despite an indisputably smaller amount of inherited wartime guilt, Warsaw has a more difficult balance to strike in the current international climate, which encourages admission of wrong and discourages national martyrology.

It is very difficult to determine the effectiveness of Polish politics of memory. Daniel Fried from the Atlantic Council put Poland among “honest countries” that came to terms with

their history, in contrast to Russia, which still has something to do in this matter (Fried, 2020). In Polish public opinion, the last thirty years of Polish politics of memory are disappointing. Despite the great Polish contribution to the overthrow of communism, neither Solidarity nor the Round Table Talks have been encoded in Europe's memory to the same extent as the fall of the Berlin Wall (Ociepka, 2013, pp. 155–156). Nor do Germans or Russians have much knowledge of Polish history. The 2020 study by the Russian Levada Center showed that 70% of respondents were not able to name any famous Pole, which indicates that Polish culture and history in contemporary Russia are little known (“Raport: ponad 70 proc. Rosjan nie potrafi wymienić żadnego sławnego Polaka”, 2020). Likewise, Poland and Germany need to implement joint projects to improve knowledge of Polish history in Germany, including a four-volume history textbook written by historians from both countries (“Blaski i cienie polsko-niemieckiego podręcznika do historii”, 2022). There is also the planned monument dedicated to the Polish victims of World War II, which is soon to be erected in Berlin, but it remains unclear whether it will please the Polish side (“Bundestag will Gedenkort in Berlin für polnische Weltkriegsopfer”, 2020). We will need to wait a little longer to assess the fruits of Polish politics of memory.

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