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Collective memory is a vision of the past which molds social identity. It is constantly in flux—formed not only by historical events, but also current interests. Monuments and museums, as well as social rituals and practices (ceremonies or commemorative anniversaries) comprise the material structure whose analysis provides an opportunity to explore and examine collective memory and to reconstruct the changes which have taken place therein (Halbwachs, 1992).

During the communist regime as well as nowadays, the memory of World War II has been fundamental to Polish identity. The totalitarian regime had thoroughly planned and realized the material and physical landscape of collective memory on a grand scale; the image of the past which it wanted to make available in the social imagination was simple and very clearly defined. In the era of Władysław Gomułka—due to his home as well as foreign policies—the national element was strongly accentuated. In World War II, the valiant military struggle against the Third Reich, Polish soldiers fighting alongside the Red Army, and the ideological persecution and discrimination of the Polish nation by the Nazis gave an underlying theme to the memorials and museums erected across the country. “The political-emotional system took advantage of the mobilizing function of language, implanting word

and iconic signs in minds around which ideological constellations were built.”

The memorials of World War II legitimized the communist regime, building subsequent constellations: they told passersby about the bravery of the fallen militia, peasant sons of this land, waging war against representatives of the repressive bourgeois establishment, which now stood guard, preventing a recurrence of the genocide of the Second World War of which German revisionists and imperialists were capable.

The communist regime in Poland partially succeeded in producing a peculiar and very selective orientation to the history of World War II, both at the level of official communist historiography and in popular memory maintained and debated in Polish family circles. It resulted in belittling or deleting many issues that would not reappear significantly in public discourse until the late 1980s:

1. Poles concentrated on their own fate and tended and still tend to disregard or belittle pains, tragedies and losses of other ethnic groups - Jews, Germans or Ukrainians. There are sometimes fundamentally conflicting memories of Poles and Jews and of Poles and Germans respectively. Poles would underline the fact that six million Polish citizens (half of whom were ethnic Jews) were killed during the war. However, for many contemporary Poles only the mem-

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ory of ethnic Polish losses is one of close experience. Some of them would even maintain that the international community has failed to recognize the depth and extent of Polish suffering.

2. Polish national memory tended to disregard the fact that although Poles were mainly victims they sometimes also victimized others, oppressing - in a milder or stronger form - minority groups who lived amongst them, especially Jews. The question of Polish-Jewish relations during and after the Holocaust was evacuated as a non-issue. Poles did not want to be reminded, let alone apologize for the behavior of some Poles during the war, who stood by with approval or mute acceptance as the Holocaust was perpetrated in their cities and villages. They preferred to remember those courageous Poles who, despite certain dangers, tried to help Jews in various ways. Poles were and still are especially sensitive to any attempts to equate German responsibility for the Holocaust to the Polish silence or complicity.

3. Poles tended to forget or minimize the fact that they on many occasions also unjustly benefited from these historical processes, that they were beneficiaries of certain acts of injustice. The Second World War and imposition of communism led to many injustices. The specificity of the Polish situation is that two types of injustices happened simultaneously. The change of private property by land reform and nationalization of industry (that is, effects of introducing a specific social and economic system) was accompanied by a drastic change of political borders and of the ethnic composition of the population. Many people, while unjustly losing something, also unjustly gained something else, with the second injustice hidden under the notions of recompense or “historical justice”. A considerable majority of today’s citizens of the Polish state are victims of unjust changes carried out at their own cost or that of their ancestors. Yet, many Polish citizens also became - mostly unwillingly - beneficiaries of other unjust changes done to other people with an obvious, even if usually justified, wrong presented as “deserved”: Germans, Jews, Polish factory owners and estate holders (Ziolkowski, 1999).

Marie-Claire Lafabre writes that shaping collective memory is possible under some conditions, mainly: “[…] that the interpretations of the past produced by authorities or the spokespersons […] not contradict the lived experience of individuals[…]” But the totalitarian regime policy introduced into the Polish fabric of World War II memory told a story that stood contrary to individuals’ experiences. This was the case in the obvious propaganda lie about the Katyn massacre.

Hence, after 1989, a natural reaction to the former “refusal of memory” was the “revival of memory.” During the first phase of the “revival of memory,” the main aim was to introduce into public discourse such a vision of World War II history that, on the one hand, revealed all the lies, manipulations and misinterpretations of the official communist version and, on the other hand, corresponded to private memory, family tradition, common knowledge and sentiments, and sometimes simply to the taken-for-granted and not fully articulated elements of the “silent knowledge.”

Gradually, however, an awareness grew that history is more complex than a black and white pattern opposing the false communist version and the one and only true but partially mythical popular representations of Polish history. Therefore, public discourse witnessed new information and new interpretations of facts that had practically never been present either in the official communist propaganda or in clandestinely transferred traditions.

New information and interpretations decidedly opposed the official communist version of events, yet at the same time aimed at some oversimplistic popular beliefs and stereotypes. There was an attempt to show that although the greatest crimes against the Polish nation were committed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, both of which started the most tragic war in all
Polish history, yet their neighbors had suffered as well, they also fell victim to injustice, and the behavior of many Poles was not, to put it mildly, beyond reproach. New information and interpretation referred to Polish-Jewish relations, the expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War, and the fate of minorities in Poland after 1945.

One of the most painful subjects in Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War is undoubtedly the memory of Jedwabne; a small township in Eastern Poland where the local Jews were rounded up, locked in a barn and burned alive on July 10, 1941. A commotion started in Poland in the year 2000 with the publication of “Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland” written by Jan Tomasz Gross.90

The author accuses the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne of burning their neighbors alive: “One day, in July 1941, half the population of a small East[ern] European town murdered the other half—some 1,600 men, women and children.”91

This statement caused a wave of astonishment among the Polish population: It seemed impossible that Poles could be victims and perpetrators at the same time. A polemic emerged, mainly in the columns of the Polish press, often called by media “a breakthrough in demythologizing the national past.”

Restoration of memory, therefore, first directed solely against the official communist propaganda, progressively opened new perspectives, less one-sided, parochial and nationalistic, and more pluralistic, self-critical and taking the gilt off of some of the national myths.

It seemed that at the turn of 20th and 21st centuries in Polish discourse, there coexisted three general interpretative perspectives of the World War II history, which could be called “communist,” “mythical-national” and “critical-debunking-pluralistic.” For the majority of opinion making groups, and leading newspapers in particular, the discussion was between “moderately national” and “moderately pluralistic” viewpoints.

However, in 2001, shortly after the 60th anniversary commemoration of murder in Jedwabne and the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [IPN, Institute of National Remembrance] investigation into the crime, Andrzej Nowak, a historian linked to conservative political circles, posed a question on the pages of the national newspaper “Rzeczpospolita” which expresses the crux of the matter—“Westerplatte92 or Jedwabne?” According to Nowak, “We are dealing today with a confrontation of the history of national glory with a history of national disgrace.”93 The author of this article places the burden of responsibility for this on the IPN which, immediately after its founding in 2000, instigated probes into crimes committed by Poles against Jews (Jedwabne) or Germans (Aleksandrów Kujawski). He sees IPN as stubbornly undertaking only two types of WWII cases - those connected with the Holocaust of the Jews on Polish lands or collaboration with Germans. As a result, everything associated with valiant and heroic symbols such as Westerplatte or the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is being erased from Polish collective memory of the Second World War. Andrzej Nowak claims that a nation cannot live in the constructed “community of shame” offered by the “critical history” in which the IPN and others are engaged. The “others” meant liberal or left-wing or post-communist politicians, like President of the Polish Republic Aleksander Kwasniewski, and newspapers like “Gazeta Wyborcza”.

Public debate on the Jedwabne case revealed major actors in the memory game in contemporary Poland. Right-wing politicians and conservative circles have been accusing so called post-Solidarity elites and the left of depriving the Poles of their national pride. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of Law and Justice Party, said in 2004: “In the 1990s I had watched the nation’s identity declining. I mean not only a turn away from its own history and memory but even wave of aversion to the national past.”94

The right sketched an apocalyptic vision of the lost nation without roots and moral values.
and has postulated an urgent need for a deliberate state policy of national memory.

The liberals and the left have argued that Polish nation has already gone through the communist experiment of “politics of memory” that resulted in biased, mythologized national past and that the right shows an unacceptable totalitarian desire to seize people’s minds.

Political situation however changed dramatically after 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections and brought important changes in public discourse about national memory and identity. One of the most powerful statements was made by a right-wing politician, Lech Kaczyński as early as in 2003. At that time as Mayor of Warsaw, he decided to build and open a museum dedicated to the Warsaw Rising of 1944 in time for the 60th anniversary of the event. After Kaczyński’s Law and Justice Party’s victory in the 2005 elections, the Museum has gained even more significance. Its director, Jan Oldakowski became a member of the Polish Parliament from the Law and Justice party. The Minister of Education, a leading politician in the nationalist League of Polish Families party, Roman Giertych and the President of the Polish Republic, Lech Kaczyński, are frequent guests of the Museum and advocates of the Warsaw Rising memory as represented there. Today’s political and intellectual establishments of Poland, both of conservative origins, are strongly engaged in efforts to set up the Warsaw Rising as a core of contemporary Polish identity, built up on mythical icons of the Polish past epitomized by such themes as “Polish heroism and patriotism,” “unpunished communist crimes against the Nation,” “opposition to Communism” and the equation linking Polish identity and Roman Catholicism.

The Warsaw Rising against Nazis was the final attempt to win full independence for Poland. The uprising broke out on August 1, 1944, and lasted until October 2. The losses of the insurgents amounted to some 17,000 killed and 6,000 wounded, with about 180,000 civilians dead. After the uprising, the entire population, nearly one million people, was expelled from the city. The Nazis started destroying what was left of Warsaw.

The big questions always asked about the event have to do with political and rational reasons for the Rising’s outbreak and Stalin’s refusal to intervene. The official Soviet explanation was that Soviet troops were exhausted from their long advance west, and they needed time for rest and re-supply. In Norman Davies’s complex account, the big three World War II leaders - Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin - were locked in an embrace of necessity that essentially served Stalin’s deep interest in squeezing the life out of Poland’s aspirations for independence (Davies: 2004). Stalin’s refusal to come to Poland’s aid made the uprising a sort of official nonevent in the decades of Soviet domination.

Immediately after the war, Warsaw insurgents, along with other Armia Krajowa (AK, Home Army) soldiers, were accused of collaboration with the Germans and called fascists. The mere fact of having taken part in the Rising might have become a reason for arrest by the Security Office.

Propaganda attacks from the first years after the war changed in Stalinist times into attempts to erase the Rising from social memory. It was forbidden to pay homage to the Rising. Anniversaries were not to be celebrated nor monuments erected.

After 1956, Communist authorities changed their attitude towards Home Army soldiers. Their war activity was no longer an excuse for direct persecution. However, the press, history textbooks, novels and films were still full of concealments concerning the Rising. It remained prohibited to erect statues of the Rising or commemorate its commanders. Until 1989 the state propaganda strategy was based on a distinction between heroic, ordinary soldiers and their cynical, irresponsible and clumsy commanders, who had ignited the Rising only to defend the interests of the “London Government” and the
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“proprietary classes”.

An entry in the “Encyclopedia of the Second World War” published in 1975 followed the guidelines of communist propaganda:

“The Home Army was an organization with a structure inappropriate for the needs of the ongoing fight against the German occupant, but instead intended to ensure that Government-in-Exile could take over power in the country through a popular rising... Its command... gathered a significant part of the patriotic forces and especially youngsters unaware of this organization’s political aims.”

Despite extensive propaganda, private memory of the Rising was alive and natural. Focused not on a political rationale but on transmitted to younger generations eye-witnesses’ testimonies, family memorabilia, graves, places in the city marked by tragic events, all what we name “hi(story) from below”. As early as in 1981 people of the “Solidarity” movement launched the idea of a museum dedicated to the Rising. Though the movement was broken by Marshal Law, the idea remained. Insurgent memorabilia have been collected since then and since 2003 many exhibits have been gathered for the forthcoming Museum of the Warsaw Rising.

Opened on the 60th Anniversary of the Rising in August 2004, it has been called the finest of Polish museums. Funded by the City of Warsaw in a building that was a former power station—rebuilt and redecorated—the Museum draws the attention of visitors with its outstanding modern vision of narrating and commemorating the past. The Museum follows in many details the pattern of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and House of Terror in Budapest.

Visitors find three floors of exhibition to work their way round showing not only the military history of the 63-day battle, but also the life of civilians in a city under siege. More than 500 exhibit items, plus about 1,000 photographs, films and sound recordings, depict the days leading up to the outbreak of the rising, its day-by-day development, the forced evacuation of the fighters from Warsaw, and their ordeal after their fight was over. Photographs provide the main body of the exhibit, some jubilant and upbeat, others terrifying. Amongst the smiling soldiers are pictures of boys and girls as young as 12 years old, who were enlisted as messengers and couriers.

Since former regime propaganda showed the same pictures of young insurgents to depict human tragedy behind the Rising’, the Museum’s team declares: “By presenting all aspects of the Rising in this way, we hope to convey the rationale behind one of Poland’s greatest historical moments.”

Up-to-date technologies serve to recreate the atmosphere of the period to young people, who are the Museum’s chief audience.

The Museum’s narrative about the Rising tends to underline the romanticism of young insurgents on the one hand, and the Allies’ and Soviets’ responsibility for the Rising’s failure, on the other:

“It is a fascinating and disturbing story [the Rising], partly because of the Polish Home Army, which, despite being small and woefully ill-equipped, resisted the Germans for 63 days; and partly because of the complicated issues surrounding the event: the Rising’s ultimate futility, the severe consequences of its failure, the inaction of the Russians, and what many Poles still perceive as the betrayal of Poland by its Western
Allies, Great Britain and America.” Seven to eleven year old children visiting the Museum are invited to The Room of the Little Insurgent. Equipped with replicas of historical toys of late 1930s, puzzles with the Rising’ motifs, even with little barricade and insurgents’ helmets and camouflage jackets, the room is a playground as well as an education spot. One could raise a question of a moral value: what do the children learn there? How to make a war? The main exhibition works with views, lights and sounds. Huge pictures, monitors, computers play major role here. The tour shows chronology of events which leads the way to theme rooms. The visitors walk amidst ruins of Warsaw, touch walls, gather calendar cards with daily news about battles, barricades, losses. On the first floor guests learn about the life in Warsaw under Nazi occupation and causes of the outbreak of the Rising on August 1, 1944. Many Polish historians indicate that AK headquarters’ decision about an uprising in that political and military situation was not the correct one and brought immensely tragic consequences. The mission statement of the Museum declares:

“The Rising has been criticized in the past as a pointless gesture that brought needless death and destruction upon the city; however the Museum shows the importance of this ‘gesture,’ which serves as an example of the strength of the Polish spirit - the same spirit that eventually helped overthrow Communism and secure Poland’s status as a free country.”

On the same floor, in a separate room, original 1940s printing machines produce announcements, leaflets and the bulletin of the Rising.

The Museum also has a number of excellent video and interactive presentations to be found in arranged bunkers, walls, barricades. A cinema screen on the Mezzanine shows footage of the first month of the struggle, when the Poles scored some important victories against the Germans.

There are also a number of ‘replica’ exhibits, one of the best of which is the mock sewer, which visitors can travel through. The sewers were often used as places of refuge and flight for the Polish Home Army—particularly as their position became increasingly desperate—and some of the gruesome realities of living in such squalor are brought home by the exhibit.

The final exposition, “Death of a City,” shows footage of Warsaw as it was before the War, and after the Nazi backlash. Thousands were executed in retribution for the Uprising and every building considered of any importance to Polish culture was destroyed.

Like U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Museum of the Warsaw Rising expresses its commemorative mission in various places and forms. A steel monument situated in the center of the building, reaching from its first to second floor, with the inscribed calendar of the Rising’ events constitutes the heart of the Museum. Literally a heart beating is heard from it as well as the sounds of fighting city. On the second floor, the monument is surrounded by big-size photographs of insurgents.

The Memory Place located on the second floor of the exhibition is a triangle of ruined walls with pictures of perished insurgents and...
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...civilian Varsovians and replicas of their modest, provisional graves. Here, overwhelmed by sounds of the virtual Rising and German bombardments, visitors find their moment of reflection and meditation.

A Catholic chapel consecrated in 2005 in the Warsaw Rising Museum building shows that for the Museum founders and its directors the idea of Polish identity is linked to Roman Catholicism.

Another commemorative figure is the 156-meter long Memory Wall in the Museum’s Freedom Park, which is adjacent to the building. The names of thousands of insurgents who died in the battle in August and September are engraved on the gray granite slabs. So far, more than 6,000 names have been added, and the list is continuously supplemented with new names from survivors or relatives. The list includes the names, surnames, pseudonyms and military rank of every insurgent. The names are verified against archive documents, lists from the Red Cross and other sources. The names are placed according to the so-called Dutch System, in numbered columns, in alphabetical order.

Since the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the House of Terror in Budapest had served as models to Warsaw museum, a similar oral history project could not have been neglected here as well. Some chosen from already gathered testimonies are presented on the exhibition in an attractive form of “phone calls to the eyewitnesses.”

Educational activities of the Museum reach beyond its walls. Its website, apart from basic information, presents:

- “Virtual Museum” – online tour of the complete exhibition of the Museum, including images, documentaries, songs etc.
- “Virtual History” – day by day history of the Rising
- “Oral History Archive” – online collection of 200 interviews with the insurgents
- “Virtual Wall of Memory”
- “Photo archive”
- “Photographs and Visuals Archive”
- “Virtual Museum”

Education, historical research and art activities are domains of Starzynski Institute – an institution affiliated to the Museum of Warsaw Rising. The Museum’s political orientation is quite apparent now, when intensive city council election campaign is going on. A former prime minister, Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, a temporary commissioner in the Warsaw city administration is the Law and Justice Party candidate for Mayor of the capital. The Rising Museum cooperates extensively with the city administration organizing political debates in the Museum building and discussions about visions of Polish “historical policy.” The 62nd anniversary of the Rising was an occasion to promote a conservative meaning of “patriotism” (or nationalism) presented in a modern way, which is attractive to a wide audience. The Museum participated in preparing historical reconstructions of the Rising battles and hosted rock concerts – tributes to the insurgents.

The Minister of Education has announced a new subject to be soon introduced to school curriculum: “lesson of patriotism.” The Warsaw Rising Museum serves as an essential background to these sort of initiatives. A noticeable fact is that school trips and history lessons offered by the Museum are booked in advance until the end of this year.

Polish public television praises the Warsaw Rising Museum for its mission and outstanding exhibition. The Museum is constantly present in...
news, commentaries, family entertainment programs. It seems that the “historical policy” of memory of the Rising ’44 and Second World War as proposed by Law and Justice party becomes a social fact. Does it much differ from the one imposed in the era of communist regime?

The war experience of the capital city, Warsaw, had been always used by the communists as an icon of nation’s unity. However, Polish experience of World War II was not that unified. As an example one can look to the fate of large group of Silesians enlisted forcibly to Wehrmacht or Orthodox peasants from eastern borderlands persecuted by Polish nationalist partisans. Or that silent majority of ordinary people who did not take a part in any resistance movement, some of them had hardly ever seen German soldiers. Or Polish Jews who perished in ghettos and death camps.

Despite those facts, contemporary Polish identity is structured by the memory of ethnic Roman – Catholic Poles engaged in the heroic anti-Nazi conspiracy, victimized by Germans and Soviet Russians, betrayed by Western Allies – hence victimized by History. There is little opportunity to reflect upon issues such as Polish-Jewish, Polish-German or Polish-Ukrainian relations. The “we” vs. “them” dichotomy is deeply perceived and resented. Paradoxically then, a heritage of communist policy of social memory has endured major political and social changes: some facts and notions (such as for example “Polish-Soviet combat friendship”) were only replaced with others that fit the present pattern.

The Warsaw Rising Museum conveys tradition of Polish 19th century romanticism, its ideas and values expressed in the slogan “God – Honor – Homeland” and plays a crucial social role in shaping and maintaining uncritical, mythologized and nationalistic history of the Poles.

Notes

87 First Secretary of the Polish United Workers Party and Premier of the Polish People’s Republic from 1956-1970.
88 M. Monko, Semiotyka umysłu zniewolonego, „Odra” online, http://odra.art.pl.
91 Ibidem, p xviii.
92 Battle of Westerplatte – one of the first and longest battles of the Invasion of Poland in 1939, became the symbol of Polish bravery.

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