

Afterword:

The Long Shadow of the Communist Politics of Memory

‘The hero myth was also partly true, or true enough to make successive generations grateful.’¹

This book has tried, using both macro-political and micro-social perspectives, to outline the origins of three narratives that organized public memory of the Second World War under communism: the myth of victory over fascism, the myth of the unity of the Polish resistance and the myth of innocence. The principal subjects of these mythologies, the veterans and victims of the war, were co-opted as participants in the state’s memory policies; they effectively contributed to the transmission of the party’s legitimizing vision. Fulfilling a public role as ‘living symbols’ of the Second World War, they consolidated the official stories of heroism and martyrdom via the media, school education, popular culture and state rituals, as well as via legal settlements that ruled on privileges that were of paramount importance for them. After 1956, the veterans’ union was joined by people who were initially hostile to communist rule and the official memory narratives were thus challenged. The state responded by gradually increasing the social assistance available to veterans and victims of the war. This catch-all strategy, which was specific to communist corporatism, emerged as an effective method of legitimizing the political system. The history outlined in this book ends in the late 1960s because it was at this time that the war narratives of Eastern Europe’s communist countries became consolidated and relations between the state and key memory groups were stabilized. Official memory of the war retained its essential contours until the fall of the state socialism two decades later.

The Polish case, despite certain peculiarities, was not exceptional or isolated. In these concluding remarks I will therefore place the history outlined in this book into a wider context of the post-war memory politics of Europe. Such a perspective makes it possible not only to discern the broader role played by the heroic narratives

1 Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945*, New York 2006, p. 375.