Collective Memory, Memory Groups and Myths of War under Communism

The terms ‘collective memory’ and ‘myth’ tend to be overused in contemporary scholarship as catch-all concepts. Nonetheless, historiography would be poorer without them, and the history of victims and veterans of the Second World War would be near-impossible to write. In December 1945 the communist party leader Władysław Gomułka gave a speech, at the First Congress of the Polish Workers’ Party, in which he set the tone of official remembrance for decades to come:

We came together as a Party during the period when Poland was lying in the grave of the Hitlerite occupation. We came together in order to fight, and we grew out of the fight with the German occupiers. At the very foundations of the Independence of Reborn Poland lie the blood and bones of thousands of members of our Party and soldiers who died in this struggle, who fought under our national flag.

Seventeen years later, this fragment became the motto for a novella composed by another prominent communist, Mieczysław Moczar: Barwy walki (‘The Colours of Battle’) was published in several print runs and effectively founded an entire mythology around the communist partisans. Both Gomułka’s speech and its indexing by Moczar point to the mythical origins of the new post-war state.

The ‘memory boom’ of the last three decades helps to shed light on attempts to construct such myths in the public sphere, despite controversies between scholars representing different stances in this expanding field. The authors of a

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1 The Polish Workers’ Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR) was a communist party in Poland from 1942 to 1948. It was founded as a continuation of the Communist Party of Poland (decimated in Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s), and merged with the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, PPS) in 1948 to form the Polish United Workers’ Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR), which governed the country until 1989.
review article that analyses several hundred scholarly texts in a range of academic disciplines concluded some time ago that memory studies is ‘a nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise.’ Nonetheless, it is possible to classify the existing approaches to memory by examining the history of the concept, as well as the objects and methods of contemporary research. Such an undertaking reveals that the fields of sociology, cultural anthropology and social psychology have set the principal intellectual trends in memory studies. In particular, many scholars from these fields still rely on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, who in the interwar years coined the concepts of the ‘social frames of memory’ and ‘collective memory’ in his disputes with the subjectivist and individualistic theories of memory by Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Halbwachs argued that the processes of recollection depend on the social conditioning of one’s memory and on the social group to which the remembering individual belongs. Remembered ‘histories’ are thus subject to alteration, selection and reinterpretation. Although Halbwachs’s theories have been criticized, for example for their lack of attention to the conflicts that result from different understandings of history or for overestimating the malleability of the past in the present, the term ‘collective memory’ and its various offshoots, such as ‘sites of memory’ and ‘cultural memory’, have embarked on a lightning career.

What is of interest here and may be termed the cultural approach in memory studies is based on analysis of the various products of culture that, depending on the methodological stance of a given author, are treated as representations and institutionalizations of some sort of ‘collective consciousness’ in the Durkheimian sense, or as products of the accumulation and interpenetration of various versions of the past. Among the contemporary classics who have provided such culturally oriented analyses are Jan and Aleida Assmann in Germany, as well as Pierre Nora in France. According to the Assmanns, cultural memory is a type of collective memory that is perpetuated by material forms and rituals. One of the most useful distinctions advanced by Aleida Assmann is that between ‘storage memory’ (Speichergedächtnis) and ‘working memory’ (Funktionsgedächtnis). The former

5 Maurice Halbwachs, Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire. Paris 1925; idem, La Mémoire collective, edited by Gérard Namer, Paris 1997 [1950]. There are countless discussions of Halbwachs’ theories. For a useful overview of the historical context of his theories in English, see: Patrick H. Hutton, History as an Art of Memory, Hannover 1993, pp. 73–90.
does not play any crucial role in the present (but might be activated one day), whereas the latter is important for the formation and maintenance of social identity.7

Pierre Nora’s concept of ‘sites of memory’ (*lieux de mémoire*) refers to events, processes, real and imagined people, artefacts, symbols and other historical phenomena that crystallize and embed a national heritage.8 What is most appealing in the methodology employed by Nora, his collaborators and numerous followers is the focus on the dynamics of the making of a particular *lieu de mémoire*. Sites of memory have their long and fascinating histories, consisting of conflicts, alliances and compromises between various agents before they become widely accepted heritage.

‘Social memory’ is understood in a narrower sense by a group of psychologists who argue that memory is social only insofar as the processes of remembering and forgetting are conditioned by social interactions.9 A number of cultural historians, e.g. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, have offered similar methodological propositions. In their dispute with the French sociological and historical schools, they advance the thesis that it is individuals who act to commemorate, sometimes organizing themselves into groups, and that they should be the object of study. These historians raise justifiable concerns that the term *collective memory* can lead to unnecessary abstraction:

The ‘collective memory’ of war is not what everybody thinks about war; it is a phrase without purchase when we try to disentangle the behaviour of different groups within the collective. Some act; others – most others – do not. Through the constant interrogation of actors and actions, we separate ‘collective memory’ from a vague wave of associations which supposedly come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned.10

Thus, what recent scholarship in memory studies teaches us is that collective memory is not just a collection of ideas about the past but, above all, a product of communication. In this process, private and vernacular memories are transformed into narratives that feature elements of ‘invented tradition’, and these are in turn

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8 Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vols 1–7, Paris 1984–92. The term *lieux de mémoire* has been translated into English as ‘sites of memory’ or ‘realms of memory’. In this book we have opted for ‘sites of memory’. (Author and translator’s note.)
transmitted to new members of social groups as the official history of the group,\(^{11}\) which can be also termed ‘public memory’.\(^{12}\)

I will go no further into the depths of the terminological disputes; as a historian of ideas once wrote: ‘venturing into this terrain lets us neither leave it nor solve any of its problems.’\(^{13}\) In this book I use the term ‘public memory’ to refer to cultural representations of the past, but I am mainly interested in the actions and processes that influenced and conditioned these representations in the first place. I follow a considerable number of authors who claim that one of the most important elements of nation-building is the imposition by the power elites of a shared (‘working’) memory; i.e., elites’ attempts to convince society that there is a common past by enacting various rituals, symbols, and other widely available products of culture.\(^{14}\) Representations of war are frequently at the very centre of such a consolidated memory. In order to interpret the cultural history of the nation state, however, we must analyse more than just the symbolic content of such sites of memory; it is necessary to examine the distinct agencies that create narratives about the past.\(^{15}\)

In this respect I find the notion of ‘memory groups’ – as proposed, for instance, by Harold Marcuse – particularly useful. ‘Such groups usually share common experiences and goals, as well as images of the past … Individuals who accept the memories, values, and aspirations become part of a memory group; members who no longer share them, leave it.’\(^{16}\) Veterans, mothers of fallen soldiers, or camp victims might organize themselves in an official manner, but may also do without any formal structure; and they often exert pressure on the state in matters regarding policies of memory and commemoration.

At the same time, the category of ‘myth’ can help us to grasp these forms of collective memory that function as metanarratives about the past. As a story about origins, a myth serves cognitive, integrative, communicative and legitimizing functions, and in modern times is often advanced by the state. The time of myth is

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\(^{15}\) Olick and Robbins, p. 112.

‘a rejection of historicity’, a liberation from linear time, and enacting of the past in the present. Myth is recognizable above all in the system of symbols and rituals.\textsuperscript{17} Various memory groups might organize their stories and actions according to a myth, and they may contest dominant myths.

Political myth is a specific variety of myth: it contains the symbolic representations of power and justifies the political status quo. Two types of political myth are central to this study: revolutionary and national. The former divides time into the old and the new; this division is manifested in the system of symbols (new man, new society, etc.) and in utopian thinking – promises of a new, good and happy life. Revolutionary myth also demands the destruction of the residues of the past. Meanwhile, national myth is centred around the national collective with strong references to its historicity; and in the case of Eastern European societies, described by the Polish-French historian Bronislaw Baczko as ‘unhappy’, the nation is often imagined as a lost land that must be regained.\textsuperscript{18} Another prominent feature of Eastern European national mythology is messianism, in which the nation is construed as a saviour and martyr sacrificed for the redemption of traditional values.

It has been also widely argued that Marxist thought had a mythical structure. The struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie was presented as the final battle between good and evil. The struggle and suffering of the communist redeemer led to an ontological change in the order of the world, including the creation of the ‘state of the Sun’, or ‘kingdom of freedom’; a society without class divisions and ethnic belonging would be both the beginning and the end of history.\textsuperscript{19} In the political practice of communism in many countries, however, the proletariat was replaced by the ‘nation’ as a key category of state propaganda. Especially in Eastern Europe, the revolutionary and the national became intertwined for political reasons, creating a new wholeness. The revolutionary upheavals that uprooted the existing political and social order did not automatically result in changes within the vernacular memories that continued to strive to commemorate the past and seek sources of identity in bygone history. The revolutionaries were forced to create a vision of the nation’s past according to which they would be


seen as the most legitimate holders of power. Such a task entailed gaining control over the existing narratives of the past – otherwise these narratives would become a resource for the enemies of revolution. This is why the new political authorities did not only eliminate old representations of the past (sometimes by force), but also creatively adapted the existing images, symbols and rituals.20

There exists a substantial scholarly literature that examines this process as the gradual nationalization of the communist system in the USSR and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.21 For instance, Christel Lane has analysed socialist rituals, arguing that from the 1960s onwards the role of myth was to stabilize the system, rather than to provide guidelines for future action; the Marxist-Leninist elements of the rituals were overshadowed by patriotism. Lane shows that various rituals observed by the Pioneers (the communist children’s organization), workers’ collectives and soldiers, and even rites conducted in civil registry offices, sanctified the past and not the future. Moreover, mythologized history was rarely the history of the October Revolution alone; the Great Patriotic War, as the Second World War was known in the USSR, was often an equally important event.22

Amir Weiner has analysed the role played by the myth of the Great Patriotic War in connecting the revolutionary and national liturgies.23 A representative of ‘revisionist’ historiography in the USA, Weiner examines the institutionalization of the myth of the war on the example of the region of Vinnytsia in central Ukraine, and analyses the myth as an essential instrument for social engineering. In official Soviet ideology, the war was presented as a step taken by the masses towards


communism. However, the war altered the revolutionary conception of the political community: class-based solidarity was displaced by the bonds that resulted from blood spilled in the name of the fatherland. The war also changed the archetypal hero: from the ‘revolutionary’ to the ‘defender of the Soviet Union’. Similarly, the ideal enemy also changed, from the ‘kulaks’ and the ‘enemies of the revolution’ to ‘traitors’ and ‘collaborators’. Thus the myth of the war transformed the basic categories and relations operating in Soviet society. According to Weiner, however, the myth became embedded in society not primarily because it was the object of special political manipulation, but because the war had genuinely affected social life; the myth was sustained not only by communist institutions and activists, but also by informal structures. For this reason, the attempt to legitimize the political system on the basis of the public memory of the war was much more effective than the ideology of revolution. The myth of the Great Patriotic War was popular to such an extent that it survived Perestroika.24

The social reality of communism was an enchanted reality, despite its appeal to rationalism. Also in communist Poland, one of the principal legitimizing strategies employed by the authorities was the saturation of the propaganda with historical figures and events, alongside either the co-optation or delegitimization of traditional, pre-communist narratives.25 Historian Edmund Dmitrów has proposed that the Polish communists’ propaganda be understood in terms of the foundational myth of the victorious war over Germany.26 This myth made it possible for the idea of victory to be given many different meanings, each facilitating the legitimization of the political order and the integration of society into the communist system. It repeated certain patterns of Soviet ideology, but at the same time, the symbol of a Polish military unit conquering Berlin was a viable and attractive alternative to the national complex of defeat and eternal victimhood. May 1945 appeared as a ‘better version of Grunwald’ (i.e. the battle of 1410 in which the Teutonic knights were defeated by combined Polish-Lithuanian forces): it purportedly eliminated the threat that had ‘hung over Poland for thousands of years.’ The myth of victory was designed, in Dmitrów’s opinion, to ‘encourage people to identify with the values that the political system attributed to itself, including strength, security, progress, development and justice.’27

In the following chapters, I examine the social genesis and functioning of three narratives about the war: the myth of victory, as depicted by Dmitrów; the

25 Zaremba, Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm, passim.
27 Ibid., p. 7.
myth of the unity of the Polish resistance movement; and the myth of Poles as innocent victims. All three were political myths that played a role in the spectacle staged by the communist authorities in Poland; they also supplied meaning to the experience of war. The most complete of them, foundational for the system of power, was the myth of victory over ‘fascism’. At its base was a Manichean division into the ‘camps’ of socialism and capitalism. A tale of the struggle of good against evil was inscribed into the events of the Second World War, also harking back to earlier historical origins such as the October Revolution of 1917 and the birth of the Polish proletariat in the nineteenth century. However, the myth of victory did not always fulfil an integrative function. In Stalinist times, it was a narrative used to ostracize unwelcome memory groups by means of false accusations of having collaborated with the Nazis. The myth’s legitimizing function was oriented externally: it was designed to explain and justify the communist rule in Poland as a necessary outcome of the international relations of the Cold War. The communists, labelled ‘fighters for peace’, were allegedly the only true victors over Nazi Germany, whereas the capitalist, insufficiently de-Nazified West was supposedly preparing a third world war; i.e., according to the Soviet propaganda, it was continuing ‘Hitler’s deed’. Only after the Thaw of 1956 did the war contribute to the creation of community, bringing together a divided Polish society. The myth of victory was then supported by related myths of the unity of the resistance movement and of innocent victims; together, these narrative and symbolic constructs played a vital and paradoxical role in the nationalist legitimization of the communist authorities in Poland.

**Agents: Veterans, Victims and the Nation State**

How do the veterans and victims of the Second World War interplay with all the matters discussed above? Analysing the legacies of war in France, Henry Rousso has distinguished four basic institutions engaged in the production of war memories. The first is the state itself, which usually offers an overall monolithic interpretation of the past. This memory is manifested in monuments, official

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28 The catch-all term ‘fascism’ in Eastern Bloc is sometimes confusing. During the war, Soviet propaganda kept calling Germans ‘fascists’ because it considered ‘fascism’ to be the last degenerated stage of capitalism that led to war. Later, during the Cold War (especially until 1956), the propaganda in communist countries labelled as ‘fascist’ nearly anybody who was not in favour of the influence of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. It is also important to note that in Poland, in the official memory of war, the very term ‘German’ was rarely used due to the friendly relations with ‘innocent’ East Germany. ‘Nazism’ was also rarely in use and more frequent was the term ‘Hitlerism’, which often superseded ‘fascism’.
commemorative ceremonies, and also in the implementation of law (e.g. in court judgements). The second are community associations, such as unions of war veterans or of victims of racial persecution, established both to preserve memories of the war and to lobby and pressurize the state. Third, Rousso identifies culture and the creators of images and narratives that influence the popular imagination, especially through literature and film. Fourth, he points to scholarship, both as practised by professional historians working within the academic field, and as it influences educational programmes and textbooks – the basic media in the modern nation state through which memory is passed to latter generations, and thereby becomes a tool for socialization.29

The people who are the focus of this book operate mainly within the first two levels of the institutional architecture suggested by Rousso, occasionally venturing into the third. Although their story is played out in the newly built communist bloc, there is little that is historically exceptional in their fate. Casting a light on the broader history of war veterans in Europe allows us to search for similarities, analogies and differences in the longue durée. Interaction between political structures and former soldiers goes back at least as far as ancient Rome, where the status of a veteran was a kind of retirement attained by legionnaires and soldiers of assistive divisions. However, the relationship between the state and veterans had a specific character in the modern nation state, the product of political mobilization and the increasing uniformity of culture. Both the defence and expansion of national territory became a justification for struggle and physical suffering. Throughout Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of the soldier heroically fighting for his country was a universal cultural symbol. The nationalisms of the turn of the twentieth century were military in nature;30 the army was one of the most important institutions in which the levelling of divisions of estate took place, in the era of accelerated modernization.31 The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were characterized by the cult of military heroism, as well as by its democratization – the feats of the simple and anonymous soldier were increasingly recognized and placed on a pedestal. Although the modern nation state often placed the cult of the dead above the cult of the living,32 former soldiers

29 Rousso, pp. 219–221.
30 Joanna Kurczewska, ‘Nacjonalizm i rzeczywistość mityczna’ in Edmund Mokrzycki, Maria Ofierska and Jerzy Szacki (eds), O społeczeństwie i teorii społecznej. Księga poświęcona pamięci Stanisława Ossowskiego, Warszawa 1985, pp. 496–505.
made up a specific category that linked the living and the deceased, because they had fought and suffered together with the people who died in the name of the fatherland. The veterans were ‘living symbols’ and ‘living witnesses’ of the heroic past, as well as an embodiment of the idea of the nation state.

This relationship between the state and the cult of the soldier, however, did not in general mean that the European state was the principal initiator of the veterans’ organization. Indeed, the opposite is true: in the majority of cases, associations have been founded through initiatives at the grassroots level. An important practical reason for soldiers to unite was to lobby for the group’s interests. The first veterans’ organization in the history of the Prussian army was the militärische Schützenbruderschaft (Military Brotherhood of Defence), established in 1786 in Pomerania by former fusiliers. One of its main aims was to gather funds for the burial of deceased comrades. The number of Prussian veterans’ associations increased steadily as more wars were waged; each was supported by members’ fees and private donations.33 At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Deutscher Kriegerbund (German Warrior League), a federation of veterans’ organizations that had over a million members in total, created a unified system of finance that organized welfare payments, set the level of membership fees, and gathered surplus monies from interest on capital as well as from various commercial initiatives, such as fencing schools.34

The Great War was another important caesura in the history of European veterans’ movements: ‘veterans emerged as a distinct group, defined by a construction of war commemoration and identity as well as by their legal demands and rights.’35 Nonetheless, material interests still played an important role, and were for instance the main impulse for the establishment of veterans’ associations in Poland after the country had regained its independence (1918) and defended its borders in the Polish-Soviet War (1919–21). By 1922, 800,000 soldiers had been demobilized. Marek Jabłonowski writes: ‘Frontline soldiers were returning, dressed in rags. Officers had received severance packages that did not cover a modest living. In addition, the economic situation throughout the country was
worsening: the black market was burgeoning, inflation was on the rise and work was increasingly hard to find.36 Veterans not only formed unions; they also established co-operatives, companies and collaborative workshops in order to earn an income.37

Similarly in France, where social support for disabled people has a long history (with the telling example of the Hôtel des Invalides, built at the end of the seventeenth century), the insufficient state provision for former soldiers after the Great War was one of the main reasons behind the establishment of veterans’ associations. Numerous unions were founded by soldiers who were no longer able to continue their military careers or return to normal life: some could not even return to their families.38 The objectives of these unions included both lobbying the state for permanent financial support and creating support groups for former combatants to alleviate their despair.39

The public recognition of war veterans is most clearly illustrated by the Fasci di Combattimento in early-twentieth century Italy. The ideology of fascism attached a great value to frontline experience, also placing a symbolic premium on heroic death and physical injury. It sacralized the common struggle and a community of spilled blood.40 As many scholars have shown, fascism sought to draw on a wounded sense of national pride and dashed hopes at the level of everyday life. A similar role was played by right-wing veterans’ organizations in the Weimar Republic. Large numbers of discharged officers and soldiers of the republic’s

36 Jablonowski, p. 19.
39 Jay Winter, ‘Forms of Kinships and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War’ in Winter and Sivan, pp. 49–51. Also during the Great War, the Polish disabled soldiers created one of the first organized veterans’ associations. They first came together in 1915 in Kraków, in a school for disabled children that they believed would help them to adapt to a working life and enable independent living. Jablonowski, pp. 31f; Jan Z. Mierzwa, Kombatantcki Kraków 1918–1938, Kraków 2002, p.14, 15. In the Partition period (1795–1918) the only Polish veterans’ organizations existed in Austrian-controlled Galicia (after 1870): the First Corps of the C.K. Military Veterans (I Korpus C.K. Veteranów Wojskowych) and the Polish Association of Military Veterans (Polskie Towarzystwo Veteranów Wojskowych).
army struggled to find employment, and neither their qualifications nor the general economic situation helped their cause. Despite deaths and injuries, the soldiers’ experiences at the front provided grounds for a belief that an association of men who had together spilled blood was the only dignified type of social organization for a country recovering from military defeat.\textsuperscript{41}

Nonetheless, the ideological dimensions of veterans’ organizations should not be interpreted only in terms of the categories applicable to fascism, for two main reasons. First, many veterans had never been frontline soldiers. The example of inter-war Poland shows that in countries with a history of fighting for independence, veterans’ privileges were often granted to non-professional soldiers: Polish legislation and culture recognized not only former soldiers of Józef Piłsudski’s legions, the wounded in action, and other categories of regular soldiers, but also the insurgents of the January Uprising (1863), the Silesian Uprisings (1919–21) and the Wielkopolska Uprisings (1918–19). Victims of Tsarist-era deportations to Siberia were also given special privileges and social recognition.\textsuperscript{42} Second, and more importantly, veterans do not necessarily profess right-wing views. The French historian Antoine Prost has studied the fascinating case of French veterans after the First World War, many of whom declared pacifist views\textsuperscript{43} and contributed to the ‘moral disarmament’ of the French society.\textsuperscript{44} Many soldiers sympathized with communism. They rejected nationalist ideology as opium fed to them in the battleground, where – in their opinion – they had fought to defend the interests of the bourgeoisie. Class-based justice was a central concern for many soldiers, although some were convinced that it could be achieved even within a nation state. Thus, the ideas and social practices of the veterans’ movements formed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a variety of functions in response to a range of social needs.

The third major caesura in the history of veterans’ organizations was the Second World War: throughout Europe, the distinction between soldiers and civilians became rather blurred. In addition to traditional veterans’ organizations (i.e. unions of soldiers), numerous associations of former resistance fighters and victims of persecution were formed. The members of these victims’ unions constructed their identity on the basis of their wartime sufferings, which were


\textsuperscript{42} Jablonowski, pp. 166–179; Mierzwa, p. 6.


very different from the experiences of soldiers at the front. According to Pieter Lagrou, in Western Europe this divergence was a fundamental challenge for the politics of national memory:

There was no homogenous and properly national *milieu de mémoire* such as the veterans of the First World War had created, as conscripts of a national army. The soldier-hero was replaced by much more controversial hero-types: terrorist guerrillas, often primarily engaged in an ideological battle. Many were foreigners, and even more numerous were the communists who fought for an ideal seen as anti-national by traditional patriots … The problem of interpretation was greater still for the martyrs: no fallen soldiers, but tens of thousands of civilian victims of ideological persecution and genocide … And what was the legacy of the labour conscripts, taken to Germany against their will but working for the Nazi economy? Contrary to the homogenising effects of the First World War, the consequences of the Second World War need to be studied in specific groups, identified according to their specific war experience, and not according to pre-established categories of analysis.45

Nonetheless, the nation state remained an important point of reference for veterans’ and victims’ organizations. Various unions not only pressured the state for reparations and social welfare support; they were also important media for the post-war reconstruction of national communities and their symbols. However, as a result of the differentiation of memory groups, this process was not devoid of conflict. In France, the country for which scholarship on this subject is most abundant, disputes between different interest groups, sometimes dramatic in nature, overlapped with political divisions and attempts to rehabilitate collaboration with the Nazis.46 Official symbolism was a domain over which the power elites and interest groups constantly argued: the meaning of patriotism and the conception of national martyrdom and suffering were among the contested ideas.47 For example, conflicts between the *Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés de la Résistance* (National Federation of Deportees and Internees of the Resistance Movement, an organization that brought together former political prisoners associated with the non-communist resistance movement) and the *Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Résistants et Patriotes* (National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots; a left-wing organization that united members of the resistance and victims of persecution, particularly Jews) resulted from different understandings of the concept of ‘resistance’: the former took a more traditional viewpoint (that of a soldier and warrior) whereas the latter advanced an egalitarian idea of mass combat. Soldiers from the Second

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45 Lagrou, p. 3, 4.
46 In 1951 the *Association pour Défendre la Mémoire du Maréchal Pétain* (Association for the Defence of the Memory of Marshal Pétain) was formed. Its activities were never banned. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, pp. 43–49.
47 Lagrou, pp. 226–234.
World War who aspired to the special privileges of war veterans, in particular long-serving prisoners-of-war, were confronted with the disapproval of the Union Française des Anciens Combattants (French Union of Former Combatants), who maintained that soldiers who had surrendered were not worthy of recognition as veterans. It was in the heat of these debates in the 1950s that three important and mutually hostile ex-combatants’ organizations were founded.\(^{48}\) An additional complication was provided by the Cold War: in national organizations in Western Europe, new divisions appeared along the lines of the German question and the vision of a united Europe, inspired by international veterans’ organizations: the communist Fédération Internationale des Résistants (FIR, International Federation of Resistance Fighters) and its opponents, the Fédération Internationale Libre des Déportés et Internés de la Résistance (FILDIR, Free International Federation of Deportees and Internees of the Resistance), the Union Internationale de la Résistance et de la Déportation (International Union of Resistance Fighters and Deportees) and the Union de la Résistance pour une Europe Unie (Union of Resistance Fighters for a United Europe).\(^{49}\)

In summary, veterans’ organizations emerged on a wide scale when the modern nation state became consolidated. Veterans were seen as an embodiment of the values propounded by the state, but those values were also subject to debate. At the same time, in an ideologically conducive atmosphere, veterans used their organizations as instruments for pressurizing the state, making material demands and asserting their identity. This book relates the Western European history outlined above to the experiences of veterans and victims in an East European communist state. In Eastern Europe, described as the ‘Bloodlands’ by Timothy Snyder, millions lost their lives or their health in both Hitler’s and Stalin’s atrocities, as well as in effect of local vendettas and ethnic cleansing.\(^{50}\) Obscuring the identities of many

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\(^{48}\) The left-wing Association Nationale des Anciens Combattants de la Résistance (National Association of Former Resistance Fighters), and the Gaullist Association Nationale des Combattants Volontaires de la Résistance (National Association of Volunteer Resistance Fighters) and Confédération Nationale des Combattants Volontaires de la Résistance (National Confederation of Volunteer Resistance Fighters). Lagrou, pp. 42–47.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., pp. 262–285.

\(^{50}\) According to Timothy Snyder, 14 million civilians and PoWs were killed between the years 1933 and 1945 in Eastern Europe, and a substantial portion of the atrocities committed by the Stalin and Hitler regimes took place in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, western Russian and the Baltic States. Cf. Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin, New York 2010. Critics accuse Snyder of employing arbitrariness in his work’s chronological frames as well as in the geographical boundaries of the ‘Bloodlands’, supplying inaccurate figures, belittling the significance of the Holocaust, and ignoring the roles played by local collaborators in mass murder (including a pro-Polish bias that allegedly permeates the work). Positive reviews give justifications that mirror these criticisms: the book is
victims and perpetrators, the communist states simultaneously advanced heroic and martyrological narratives, because these were best suited to the legitimization of communist rule in the region. At the same time, various memory groups strove for their version of history, despite the authoritarian constrains.

When the original, Polish version of my book appeared in 2009, a number of near-simultaneous publications supplied findings that corresponded with my own. In his superb work on the social history of Soviet veterans, Mark Edele\(^{51}\) analyses the rise of the veterans’ movement in the USSR from its beginnings in the immediate post-war period, when it was not officially welcome, to the cult of the war under Leonid Brezhnev’s leadership, with its favourable climate for transforming veterans into ‘a status group’ benefitting from ‘scarce goods, services, and esteem’ despite shortages of the communist economy.\(^{52}\) Edele’s story ends with the veterans established as ‘an institutionalized pillar of the political system’,\(^{53}\) so powerful that they could saturate the new political agenda after 1991 with the ideology of the Great Patriotic War. The history of the Soviet Committee of War Veterans (Sovetskii Komitet Veteranov Voiny, SKVV), as described by Edele, resembles that of the main agent of this book: the Polish counterpart of SKVV, the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację) which also rose to prominence in the 1960s. Similarly to SKVV, ZBoWiD ‘was not simply a recognition “from above” of popular aspirations, but rather an appropriation “from below” of an institution which was created for fundamentally different purposes.’\(^{54}\)

Comparable claims have also been advanced by Heike Karge with regard to the case of Yugoslavia, although her study focused less on social entitlements and more praised for its methodological innovation in demonstrating the transnational dynamics of mass murder and its introduction of ‘new’ categories of victims into scholarly historical discourse, able use of statistics and personal accounts, and sensitivity to the different narratives dominant in several national historiographies. See e.g. Omer Bartov’s book review in Slavic Review 2, 70 (2011), pp. 424–428; ‘Bloodlands – eine Debatte über die Massenmorde der stalinistischen Sowjetunion und NS-Deutschlands’ (discussion featuring Manfred Hildermeier, Dariusz Stola, Dietrich Beyrau, Sybille Steinbacher, Dan Michman and Johannes Hürter), Journal of Modern European History 3 and 4, 10 (2012), pp. 289–314, and pp. 433–451; ‘Review forum: Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin’ (discussion featuring John Connelly, Mark Roseman, Andryi Portnov, Michael David-Fox and Timothy Snyder), Journal of Genocide Research 3, 13 (2011), pp. 313–352.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., p. 185.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 181.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 162.
on the forms of cultural and social remembrance instigated by the Union of Fighters in the War of National Liberation (Savez Boraca u Narodnooslobodičkom ratu u Jugoslaviji, SBNORJ). Karge describes the diverse commemorative practices of this organization, which were hidden behind politically controlled narratives. Karge also notes that an important shift took place in the union’s activities in the 1960s: from actions targeted at the war generation to those aimed at the emerging generation that lacked first-hand experience of the war. This shift, also observable in Polish ZBoWiD at the same time, would have a profound impact on subsequent memory politics in both countries.

Finally, a recent book by Philipp Neumann-Thein shows that there were a variety of remembrance activities behind the official curtain of the memory politics of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with regard to the victims of Nazi camps. An orientation towards the camps’ victims (who, by the way, for long had been marginalized by the official remembrance of the USSR) was also an important feature of memory policy from the very beginning of communist rule in Poland. The Polish communists relied a lot on their ties with the East German Association of Persons Persecuted by the Nazi Regime (Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes, VVN), as well as with the International Committee of Buchenwald-Dora. Despite the diversity of memorial practices, the main patterns of commemoration were to a large extent politicized, and some GDR blueprints were transferred to Poland. One of the salient features of this transfer was the heroization of victims of racial persecution in Poland (Jews and Slavs); camps' victims were put on an equal footing with former fighters by being turned into martyrs for a revolutionary or national cause.

**Structures: Organizations in the Communist System**

Examining the post-war veterans’ and political prisoners’ movements from an Eastern European perspective brings us to another dimension of this book, which is a return to the discussion on the seemingly totalitarian traits of the communist state. Let us consider some of the classical terms of this debate. According to the conception advanced decades ago by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzeziński, there are six features of a totalitarian system: (1) a ruling ideology or official doctrine that embraces all essential aspects of human existence; (2) a single mass


party dominated by a dictator; the party is hierarchical, blindly submissive, devoted to the ideology, and closely intertwined with the ruling bureaucracy; (3) terror, directed not only at the enemies of the regime, but also exerted arbitrarily against various population groups; (4) full control over the means of mass communication; (5) a monopoly of use of all kinds of weaponry; (6) an economy that is entirely subject to centralized control and bureaucratic management.57

Within this model, there is essentially no point in asking what role veterans’ unions (or any other large state-sponsored organizations) played in society: their function could only be to ensure control of the rulers over the ruled and to transmit the official ideology to the people. The organizations’ structure seemed conducive to these aims: they mimicked the structure of the communist party and reflected the principles of democratic centralism, according to which higher structures had a clear supremacy over lower ones, and decisions flowed from top to bottom. For instance in Poland, most of the communist mass organizations divided their members into groups (kola, literally, ‘circles’; these numbered from less than a dozen to several hundred individuals) based in geographic areas; sometimes, such groups were created within places of work. The group were subordinate to directorates (zarządy), which comprised the next administrative level. The directorates created a system for monitoring the population, which was complemented by additional supervision of the regional and central party organizations. Such an organizational structure, with controlled elections within a multi-layered system was designed to make the state authorities more appreciative of the powers-that-be.

The totalitarian model of communism has had a significant influence on the scholarly literature during the Cold War, and was also an important point of reference for opposition movements in many countries of the Eastern Bloc; nonetheless, it has been criticized by social scientists since the 1970s and 1980s. Alternative models helped to analyze both the system of government and society at large, with the concept of corporatism as a different key to this system.58 Corporatism was conceived of as ‘a decision making structure in which major functional interest groups are incorporated into the policy processes by the state and its leaders.’59 It was a system for the representation of interests whose units were aggregated into distinct, compulsory, non-cooperating, hierarchical, and

functionally autonomous mass organizations, which were licensed (if not created) by the state, with a recognized monopoly over the social categories in which they operated.60

In the post-Thaw communist system, corporatism was the state’s answer to the deficit of pluralism, growing complications in the processes of decision-making, the need for information and the expansion of the bureaucracy. Mass organizations were important both as bodies that controlled the masses through mechanisms of cooptation, and as substitutes for groups that brought together people with common interests. They enacted a state monopoly over group interests, but simultaneously enabled large numbers of people to participate in the political system. They conditioned those groups to be loyal to the state, in exchange for some consideration of their wishes when decisions were taken on their behalf. Mass organizations therefore depended on a transaction: economic goods (privileges) were exchanged for political goods (including the legitimization of power). As such, these organizations were part of a sui generis communist welfare state.61

Three issues are central to the present work. First, the organizations’ means of management and their goals were affected by conflicts in the higher echelons of power, in which diverse views and interests were at odds with each other, despite an outer semblance of unity. Second, although the structure of nearly every formal organization in communist Poland was hierarchical, various defence mechanisms operated at each level of the hierarchy, advancing and protecting diverse interests. Individual cells within a given organization could manipulate information in order to influence the actions of higher authorities. Third, organizations developed secondary structures of informal ties parasitic on the organizations’ declared formal aims: patron-client relations that manifested concrete goals and strivings, in contrast to the abstractly defined socio-political categories with which the organizations themselves operated.62

Non-totalitarian interpretations of the communist system were later also supported by the ‘second generation of revisionists’. Following Sheila Fitzpatrick,

61 This has been shown for instance by Barbara A. Nowak, whose work on the Women’s League in Poland argues that this organization simultaneously served the aims of dictatorship and women’s interests. See her Serving Women and the State: The League of Women in Communist Poland. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004.
they questioned the usefulness of the totalitarian thesis even in relation to the Stalinist period, arguing that Soviet society did not stand by as a passive object of state manipulation. They pointed, for instance, to the mobility of the lower classes, which affected the creation of a new power elite and the legitimation of the system, and to the inability of the communist party to exert total control over society. A large number of scholarly works have appeared that examine local phenomena and the everyday functioning of the Soviet system in the USSR and its dependent countries, with a significant emphasis on understanding people’s subjective perceptions of the realities of their time. These studies draw attention to official ideology, but from the perspective of asking to what extent it held sway over the creation of new cultural and social norms.63

This short overview does not at all show that the totalitarian model should be discarded; it still retains a heuristic relevance as a Weberian ‘ideal type’. The ideological history of this model starting in Cold War also reminds us, however, that our epistemological structures are unstable: they are dependent on the time in which they are constructed.64 One of the main contributions of the sociological and political sciences was that they pointed out the clientelistic character of the communist system. These findings cannot be easily refuted. Meanwhile, the significant achievement of the second generation of revisionists was their attempt to apply different (non-totalitarian) theories and models to the interpretation of communist society. These theories, which for example concerned social roles, interactions and socialization, or concepts borrowed from cultural anthropology, have assisted the discovery of new social spaces previously hidden from the scholarly gaze.

It is also worth considering theories about social institutions put forward without overt reference to the communist system. Mary Jo Hatch, for example, has proposed three basic perspectives from which to study organizations: the modern (system-based), symbolic (interpretive) and postmodern.65 Of these approaches, the present study adopts a method that is closest to Hatch’s symbolic-interpretive perspective. Organization theorists who use this approach, often citing Berger and

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64 This is demonstrated elegantly by Abbott Gleason’s study of the history of the concept of totalitarianism: Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War, Oxford 1995.

Luckmann’s classic work *The Social Construction of Reality*, emphasize that the circumstances, structures, cultures and operations of organizations are the result of social ‘negotiations’ that accumulate through the course of history. The task of the researcher is therefore to examine the processes by which meanings and symbols are created, as well as their impact on the form of the organization. I believe that adopting such a perspective in a study of communism makes it possible to engage with the findings of earlier studies whilst also avoiding anachronisms in the analysis of the period under consideration. In implementing this approach, I have tried to show how myths about the war in communist Poland were made and then revised through complex and often informal social negotiations within the structures of the mononopolist mass organization.

**Sources Consulted**

The published sources consulted in this study include legislative acts (laws and statutes), journals, and bulletins issued by veterans, as well as irregular sources where available. However, archival sources were the principal target of my research. I read hundreds of minutes and shorthands of sessions of the central and local authorities of ZBoWiD. Despite being written in the communist newspeak, these documents contain invaluable descriptions of the goals, activities, and everyday practices of veterans’ and former camps’ prisoners in Poland. A ‘grassroots’ perspective is gained through the consultation of available correspondence, minutes and reports from two provinces: Warsaw and Lublin voivodeships (województwa). Warsaw voivodeship practically chose itself as an area to study in detail, because of the importance of the memory of the Warsaw Uprising (1944) and Ghetto Uprising (1943), and the fact that the headquarters of numerous resistance organizations were located in the capital. Lublin voivodeship with its more rural character provided a counterweight to the largely urban memory of Warsaw: various partisan movements were active here; the camps of Majdanek and Sobibór were located in this region; many individuals were deported to Germany as forced labourers; and the first communist government, the Polish Committee for National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, PKWN) had its headquarters in Lublin from 1944 and was active in the recruitment of soldiers for the Moscow-led Polish army. The material from Lublin voivodeship was especially valuable for the micro-level interpretation of the Thaw, i.e. 1956–57.

Relevant information was also found in the documents of many other institutions, including the party, army and secret police. The secret police files, now kept in the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), can be used as a ‘corrective’ lens against official documentation only to a limited degree. I was astonished by the number of errors and inaccuracies in the facts they present, in terms of both wartime history and the post-war present day (including names, pseudonyms, etc.). More importantly, the secret police (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB; from 1956, Służba Bezpieczeństwa, SB) did not write ‘everything’ in their reports; instead, they concentrated on ‘enemy’ themes. In the period after 1956, these were mostly anti-Soviet or anti-party statements, or those that criticized the SB itself. The reports tended to exaggerate the statements and views of the individuals under surveillance. They contain many accounts of threats by political opponents to ‘beat the communists’; yet it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which such threats were actually made, and, on the other hand, the extent to which they were the products of the animosity of the reports’ authors. It is interesting, for example, to consider the recurrent formula in reports from after 1956 that concerned the immediate post-war years: ‘he had [miiał] murder and armed assault: does this phrase mean that the individual concerned actually committed these crimes in the past? Or that he only ‘had’ them in his records, possibly as a result of trumped up charges? Members of ZBoWiD were monitored by the secret police with extra care, because of a fear that an anti-communist resistance movement would re-form under the auspices of the veterans’ union. This anxiety also influenced police evaluations of individuals: ‘an enemy element of the reactionary type’; ‘a bandit element of WiN [Wolność i Niezawisłość, an anti-communist organization, 1945–52]; ‘formerly bandit element of WiN’ (distinguished, it must be said, from the ‘common bandit’); and ‘member of the former organization of the Home Army’ (an ‘organization’ rather than an army, and a ‘former’ one: no longer extant and so having no legitimacy).\(^67\)

Furthermore, the secret police reports are also entangled in the internal conflicts within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Reports from the Third Department of the Ministry, overseen by deputy minister Antoni Alster, make up the majority of materials of this kind dating from the late 1950s and the early 1960s and used in this book. Alster was in conflict with another deputy interior minister, Mieczysław Moczar, who was at this time seeking accords with selected members of the Home Army, including former partisans who had supported the anti-communist underground movement in the early post-war years. Moczar was becoming increasingly popular among lower- and mid-level officers of the Security Service. Alster, meanwhile, had emphasized at a gathering of ministry functionaries in

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67 On the Home Army (Amia Krajowa, AK), WiN and other organizations mentioned in this section see explanatory footnotes in Chapter 2.
1957 that the fight against the anti-communist underground had been ‘our holy and righteous deed’, and there were a number of officials in the Third Department who had begun to doubt Alster’s policies. For example, a negative opinion about Bolesław Kukielka, one of former commanders of the anti-communist Peasants’ Battalions (Bataliony Chłopskie, BCh), voiced by an official from Lublin, was met with disapproval by a senior officer of the Third Department in Warsaw:

It seems to me that comrades who continue to see Kukielka as a bandit are, to a certain extent, being overly impressionable on this point. And moreover, I cannot help thinking that their point is to show that they are capable of grinding down an individual like Kukielka. Personally, I see no grounds for the expulsion of [Kukielka] from ZBoWiD, nor for his demotion from his current post within the organization.

In the provinces, a UB/SB functionary was sometimes faced with the very real inconvenience of having to put up with a neighbour who had returned from prison as the result of an amnesty. Reports filed by such officials may have been coloured by personal biases and vendettas. Finally, the role of alcohol must not be neglected in the critical reading of these sources: the most flamboyant statements made by veterans under surveillance were often uttered during meetings between highly inebriated comrades, and then recorded by Interior Ministry informers. Materials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, therefore, illustrate above all the prevailing atmosphere within the secret police, which is important for this study, especially given that the Security Service not only influenced disputes over Second World War memory in Poland, but was also internally divided.

Significantly, in secret police files, I did not find many details about memory groups other than the Home Army, of which there were many – including demobilized soldiers, former PoWs, prisoners of concentration camps, and smaller but important (because of their closeness to state power) groups such as partisans of the People’s Army (Armia Ludowa, AL), participants of the Spanish civil war and communist veterans of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. For this reason, I do not show in equal detail the problems and polemics surrounding these groups. The focus of this study remains on the memory conflicts concerning the Home Army and anti-communist underground, as well as on the various consequences of the inclusion of concentration camp victims into the veterans’ union. This bias

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is in keeping with the overall aims of the book: the issues surrounding the Home Army, the underground, and the camps were a significant and constitutive part of the changes that affected the ideological shifts of the 1956 Thaw and of 1967–68 in Poland. These were conflicts about the legitimacy of the system of power, so other fields of memory were of secondary importance.

Last but not least, I also recorded oral history interviews with fifteen former members of ZBoWiD. In the process of drawing up a list of interviewees, I tried to ensure that different military and camp groupings were represented and that my informers came from different rungs of the organizational hierarchy. These were semi-structured conversations about the war experience, circumstances of joining veteran associations, and the activities carried out in ZBoWiD. It is only thanks to these conversations that I have been able to notice certain recurring but hidden themes in the written sources. They included: the importance of social matters to the groups under study (whereas the archival sources suggested primarily ideological concerns), and the prevalence of informal ties over the formal organization. This helped me to develop a more corporatist explanation of how ideology was put into practice in the 1960s, and to conceptualize more clearly how the memory of war was negotiated in Poland, despite the restrictions imposed by communist dictatorship.
2.1 Map of post-war shifts of borders. Wikimedia Commons.