

# Preface

In the half century of communist rule in Poland, public memory of the Second World War played a substantial role in the transmission and legitimization of power. At the same time, it was open to reinterpretations, both spontaneous and planned, which were the results of international changes, generational turns, and activities of memory groups. Still, in the vast literature on how the Second World War has been remembered in Europe, research into what happened in Poland, one of the countries most affected by the war, is surprisingly scarce. This book fills this gap by giving an account of the emergence of the core Polish narrative about the war out of two embodiments of memory: the communist state's revolutionary story on the one hand, and various memory groups' initiatives on the other. It argues that the official patterns of war memory, which evolved from revolutionary rhetoric towards patriotic narratives of collective heroism and sacrifice, were to a surprising extent the results of negotiation between the state and memory groups.

Important features of those patterns of heroism and sacrifice are still present in Poland. Their long gestation, explored in this book, might help to understand why the country often finds itself in a 'mnemonic standoff', to use James Wertsch's term,<sup>1</sup> with Western Europe, which tends to favour imagining the war in a civil, post-Holocaust, human rights-oriented way. The specific focus of this book is the organized movement of war veterans and former prisoners of Nazi camps from the 1940s until the end of the 1960s, when the core narrative became well established. The book tells the story of how certain social categories (including social entitlements for veterans and victims) were created or contested over the course of time.

Applying concepts from sociology and anthropology (including *memory*, *myth* and *organization*) to the history of veterans and victims, the book provides answers to three broad research questions. In what ways was the public memory of the Second World War shaped in communist Poland? How did the state and social groups interact in order to create this memory? And finally, what was the relationship between the memory of the war and the state's social policies? By tracing the construction of 'imagined communities' of veterans and victims of the war at a time when the communist system was being formed and consolidated, the author advances two main arguments. First, that the memory politics of the Second World War in communist Poland is best understood in terms of three principal narratives: the myth of victory against fascism, the myth of the unity

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1 James V. Wertsch, 'A Clash of Deep Memories', *Profession* (2008), pp. 46–53.

of the resistance movement, and the myth of national innocence. The myth of victory was the most fundamental of these three, and it was complemented by the two other narratives in the aftermath of the 1956 Thaw as a result of limited compromise with society aimed at cementing the state's internal legitimacy. Second, it was at this time that there changed the social and political roles of the veterans and camp victims: whilst in the early post-war years they carried out largely symbolic functions, after the Thaw they came to represent group interests within the framework of a clientelistic state.

The chronological boundaries employed in this study (1945–1969) cover a specific and significant period in the evolution of political ideology in Poland: the dominant narrative changed from revolutionary internationalism to national communism. They also correspond to the years of the most fundamental changes in the development of the veterans' and victims' movement. The first post-war decade was a time when the Polish communist party gradually obtained a monopoly of power over public memory of the war. In 1949, the main collective protagonist of this book, a monopolistic union of veterans and victims of the war, the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (*Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację*, ZBoWiD) was formed. After the era of Stalinist rule (1949–1955), the mid-1950s brought a Thaw, during which the communists underwent a major re-evaluation of their attitude towards the traditions of the inter-war Polish state, including its wartime defenders (the soldiers of the 1939 defensive war, the Home Army and the Polish Armed Forces in the West). The second half of the 1960s was both the apogee of the myth of a unified Polish resistance movement and the period when anti-Semitic tendencies featured most explicitly in the discourse of the state. In the following decades, the veterans' and victims' movement was granted more solid foundations in law. At the same time, the veterans were aging. They continued to play an important ritual role, but their presence in the corridors of power was diminishing. The role of veterans in the Solidarity movement (1980–81) was less significant than their role in the 1960s. After 1989, the memory of the Second World War was affected much more by people born after the war than by those who had actually experienced it.

The book is divided into five chapters. The introductory Chapter 1 presents the general framework of this study; it argues for a memory studies approach in analysing veterans' and victims' movements, draws attention to some features of these movements in Europe since the nineteenth century, and discusses the role of mass organizations under communism. Chapter 2 shows that in the first years after the war the activity of Polish veterans and former political prisoners was pluralistic and varied, and that after 1947 the state authorities began to suppress autonomous social initiatives. Centralization imposed a monolithic interpretation of recent history, implied a denial of the need for different associations, and yielded

one of the peculiar features of communist memory politics by merging victims and veterans of the war under a single organizational roof. Chapter 3 examines the myth of victory over fascism in the Stalinist period. This dominant myth served the politics of the Cold War by deploying a narrative of the military glory of the Red Army and the Polish Armed Forces in the East, and sought to mobilize the masses into participating in state rituals at former Nazi camps. Simultaneously, the proponents of this myth excluded many individuals and groups by labelling them as traitors of their fatherland. Despite declaring ‘unity’, the myth atomized veterans’ and victims’ groups. Chapter 4 shows the results of the rejection of the Stalinist politics of memory by various social groups in 1956–57 and the negotiation of a new legitimizing narrative, the myth of the unity of the anti-Nazi resistance. The new myth rang in harmony with the patronage functions of the state towards former partisans and soldiers. Chapter 5 analyses the myth of the innocence of the Polish victims of Nazism in the light of both international politics within the German-Israeli-Soviet triangle and the anti-Semitic currents in Polish society in the 1960s. Finally, the Afterword explores the peculiarities of the Polish politics of the Second World War in the context of the Eastern Bloc as a whole, as well as presents some common threads of the communist politics of memory when compared with Western Europe; it also demonstrates the long-lasting effects of the communist politics of memory in present-day Poland.

This book was initially written for Polish readers.<sup>2</sup> At the time it was conceived as having three principal purposes: to stimulate memory studies in Polish historiography; to bring history into sociology and vice versa; and to write a bottom-up history of communist Poland, which was still a rare approach at the time. When working on this project in the early 2000s, I was very much influenced by earlier rewritings of the histories of post-war (Western) European states.<sup>3</sup> Even though important shifts in the study of both Poland and Europe have taken place since the book was published (memory studies and histories from below have become ubiquitous also in Eastern Europe, and European history now favours transnational treatments over studies of single states), it still remains the case that Poland’s internal mnemonic conflicts in the aftermath of the war are largely unknown to international readers. For this reason, I have decided to introduce only minor revisions to the English edition.

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2 The Polish edition appeared as Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej. 1949–1969*, Warszawa 2009.

3 Such as István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt (eds), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, Princeton 2000; Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965*, Cambridge 2000; Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, transl. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge, MA 1991.

The English version has been shortened and slightly amended. It omits some facts, names, metaphors and quotations that could have seemed too detailed to non-Poles (such as various specifics of the wartime partisan movement). It also leaves out the literature review on memory studies in Poland. Instead, the English edition contains explanations of wartime and post-war events and organizations that would have been transparent to Polish readers. The original introduction has been replaced by this preface, and the epilogue by a new afterword that sheds a comparative light on the results of this study and invites readers to link the research findings on Poland with those in other European countries.

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I am indebted to many individuals and organizations for the opportunity I have had to carry out this research. The book is based on my doctoral dissertation, defended at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw in 2007. The initial idea was conceived in 2000 when I attended a seminar course on ‘Bad Memories’ by István Rév at the Department of History at Central European University in Budapest. Further refinement of the study would have been impossible without the stimulating and generous support of my dissertation supervisor, Marcin Kula (Institute of History, University of Warsaw), a doctoral scholarship at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Warsaw, and regular contact with the Department for the Sociology of Work and Organizations at the Institute of Sociology. I was able to elaborate the theoretical foundations of the work and improve my knowledge of Polish-Jewish relations thanks to a fellowship at the Transregional Center for Democratic Studies at the New School for Social Research in New York (2001). The sociologist Barbara Szacka, one of the pioneers of memory studies in Poland, helped me greatly in getting acquainted with scholarship on collective and cultural memory. The staff of Polish state and regional archives provided indispensable assistance in finding source materials, and the individuals who agreed to share their experiences with me via interviews gave me fresh insights into the realities of the times.

In the course of writing, fragments of the eventual book were listened to by the participants of a doctoral seminar run by Włodzimierz Borodziej, Jerzy Kochanowski and Marcin Kula at the Institute of History at the University of Warsaw. I am grateful to these three professors and to all of my seminar colleagues for their many comments, criticisms and suggestions. I would particularly like to thank Błażej Brzostek, Małgorzata Mazurek, Zofia Wóycicka and Marcin Zaremba for in-depth discussions on specific topics. I also received kind assistance at numerous conferences in Poland and abroad and through written correspondence with numerous individuals. I am especially grateful to Krzysztof Ruchniewicz (Willy Brandt Centre for German and European Studies in Wrocław) for providing

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