

## Conclusion

My research confirms Robert Traba's claim that in the years 1944/1945-1949 social memory of the Second World War had not yet been codified in Poland and was the subject of numerous, often competing narratives and memorial projects. Although, even at that time, certain topics connected with the events of 1939-1945, particularly those relating to the Soviet occupation, were strictly censored, on many issues debate was still possible. One area of controversy was the interpretation and method of commemorating one of the most traumatic aspects of the wartime experience: Nazi concentration camps and death camps.

Two institutionalised memory groups had a decisive impact on the course of this debate: the PZbWP, which mostly represented Polish former concentration camp prisoners, and the CKŻP, which represented Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust. Despite their partly shared experiences, these two groups remained largely isolated from one another. This was due to their differing fortunes during the war, their sense of alienation from society in general, the impact of Jewish self-help traditions on the emergence of separate social institutions, and anti-Semitism. Both organisations tried in various ways to shape society's image of the Second World War, and bitter conflicts often arose between them. However, these conflicts were waged not just between the PZbWP and CKŻP but also within the two communities concerned. For these memory groups did merely restrict themselves to promoting their own vision of the past: they also created a forum in which survivors could discuss their experiences of the camps, come to terms with those experiences, and find an appropriate means of expressing them.

The third important partner in the negotiations was the state: the PPR/PZPR and the Communist-dominated state administration. It was mainly to these institutions that the PZbWP and CKŻP addressed their demands concerning aid for survivors and the commemoration of victims. The PZbWP and CKŻP negotiated with state institutions in regard to providing care for camp survivors in the form of special welfare payments and subsidies for assistance campaigns; obtaining permission to organise commemorative events and ceremonies, erect monuments, and open historical museums and exhibitions; and mediation in conflicts between the two organisations.

The polemics and disputes of the second half of the 1940s concerned, among others, the image of former concentration camp prisoners: were they victims in need of assistance or heroes of the resistance movement? The answer to this question had far-reaching consequences, for it determined the PZbWP's admission cri-

teria as well as the organisation's profile. The trials of prisoner functionaries and the debate they triggered on camp morality were another important theme in the post-war settling of scores. Evaluating the conduct of the accused was especially difficult and aroused much controversy amongst the ex-prisoner community, since pre-war legal and moral standards proved completely inadequate when applied to the reality of the camps. While individual prisoners wished to bring their former tormentors to account, the PZbWP leadership tried to limit the scope of the debate, fearing that it could discredit the association in the eyes of the public. Equally painful discussions took place within the Jewish community in regard to evaluating individual conduct during the Holocaust and the meaning of heroism in a situation of absolute terror. Another contentious issue was the demand that the Nazi policy of extermination towards the Jews be recognised as distinctive and unique, and that Jewish martyrdom be given an appropriate status in the Polish landscape of remembrance. Finally, the issue of how to relay the camp experience and commemorate it properly was debated. This was a subject for which the traditional arsenal of forms and symbols had no adequate means of expression, and attempts to transfer knowledge about the reality of the camps to people who had not experienced them at first hand proved especially difficult—indeed impossible. The creators of memorials and museum exhibitions trod a fine line between celebrating horror and trivialising crimes.

Over time, the authentic and multi-faceted nature of the discourse conducted by these groups became uncomfortable for the state authorities. Gradually, as Stalinisation progressed and an ideological image of the Second World War took shape, new areas of conflict emerged. These concerned the issue of whether former prisoners should be defined as victims or heroes, the bringing to account of prisoners who had become entangled in the system of camp terror, and the national identities of those who had perished. The focus of the ex-prisoner community on welfare and its demanding attitude vis-à-vis the state ran contrary to the interests of the authorities, who did not want resources earmarked for the six-year plan to be re-allocated to social care. Meanwhile, as the heroic narrative became dominant and former prisoners were held up as heroes of the anti-fascist resistance movement, the authorities were able to use them to legitimise the new political system. The debate over the trials of prisoner functionaries shattered the clear division between the oppressors and the oppressed and challenged the image that the Poles had of themselves as innocent victims and heroes. Hence, the trials further fragmented an already politically divided society. Emphasising the unique nature of the Nazi policy of extermination towards European Jews proved, in turn, to be at odds with the official interpretation of history, according to which the principal enemy of fascism and imperialism was socialism as embodied by the Soviet Union. This conflict intensified in the late 1940s as relations cooled

between the USSR and its satellites on the one hand, and Israel on the other. The anti-Semitic campaign unleashed in the Soviet Union in 1948, which by the end of the decade had reached other countries of the Eastern bloc, including Poland (albeit in a milder form), also helped to turn the subject of the Holocaust into a taboo.

The growing conflicts between the state and organisations representing former prisoners meant that the autonomy of those organisations and their ability to influence society was gradually undermined. Step by step, the Communist authorities appropriated collective memory. They did so by breaking up or disbanding institutions that represented former concentration camp prisoners. The process began with the Communists assuming control over the CKŻP and the PZbWP, filling the top posts with party officials, and—as happened in the case of the PZbWP—carrying out purges within the ranks of the association. Representatives of both organisations tried to compromise with the authorities, if only to protect some of their existing prerogatives and ensure that their biggest concerns were addressed. Ultimately, though, in the late 1940s and early 1950s both communities were completely destroyed and marginalised: the PZbWP, significantly weakened, was incorporated into ZBoWiD and lost its identity. The majority of Polish Jews emigrated, while the CKŻP, CŻKH, and other Jewish parties and organisations were disbanded. The institutions that arose in their place—the Social and Cultural Association of Jews (TSKŻ) and the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH)—were entirely subordinate to the policies of the PPR/PZPR and devoid of wider influence.<sup>1</sup> The ex-prisoner community was also gradually distanced from jobs and institutions that played a role in shaping society's image of the past, such as the Department for Museums and Monuments of Polish Martyrdom, the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, and the Auschwitz Museum.

The Stalinist authorities did not monopolise memory by imposing a completely new interpretation of the past; they did so by adopting and using certain pre-existing narrative themes which they then interpreted according to their own model. Themes which did not serve the ideological dominance of the Communist authorities were wholly suppressed. While denouncing their political opponents and excluding them from public life, the Communists wanted at the same time to win over as many people as possible to the cause of national reconstruction and consolidation of the new political system. Communist propaganda took up the national-heroic narrative, which in the discourse of the immediate post-war years had figured as one of several interpretations of the past. This narrative was supplemented with an ideological aspect; namely, the phrase “heroes of the resistance movement” was prefixed with the adjective “communist”. Those who did

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1 An interesting angle on the subject of the Stalinisation of ŻIH in the years 1948-1950 is provided by: Stach, “Geschichtsschreibung und politische Vereinnahmung”, pp. 410-423.

not fit the image of a “fighter for freedom and democracy”, as propagated by the authorities, were either excluded from the PZbWP or had to reconcile themselves with their new identity. Victim rivalry between Jewish and Polish former concentration camp prisoners was resolved in favour of the latter. By internationalising the victims, i.e., by assigning murdered Jews to the countries of which they had been citizens, the Polish Communists emphasised that fascism (synonymous with imperialism) was the enemy of all humankind. In this way they also highlighted the martyrdom of the Polish nation, which, they stressed—beside the Soviet Union—had suffered the greatest losses in the fight against fascism. Fear and hatred of Germany, which permeated discourse about the concentration camps, was kept alive by Communist propaganda, albeit redirected towards the Federal Republic. The German Democratic Republic was incorporated into the anti-fascist camp. Themes which did not serve to legitimise the new regime, or which could antagonise an already divided society, were ignored. Score-settling within the prisoner community was thus brought to a halt. Those who opposed the heroic interpretation were silenced, and the Holocaust was no longer discussed.

In his book on memory of the Second World War in France, Henry Rousso describes the first post-war decade as a period of social mourning.<sup>2</sup> By this he means that people not only grieved for the murdered and fallen but also attempted to come to terms with their own past. According to Rousso, this mourning was left unfinished. Due to internal divisions and conflicts, after 1947 memory of the Second World War became an instrument of political struggle for Gaullists, Communists, and Pétain sympathisers alike. The result was an oversimplified image of the past. Social consolidation around the idea of national reconstruction demanded an end to trials of Nazi collaborators and a broad amnesty for individuals associated with the Vichy regime. As in Poland, this led on the one hand to the glorification of victims, and thus indirectly to the glorification of French society in general, and on the other to the avoidance of internal score-settling. In France and in other West European countries, however, this process was not so radical. Debates and disputes continued, and members of various political parties and witnesses to history were able to participate in them.

The situation was somewhat different in Poland: the influence of Communist historical policy on shaping memory of the Second World War, particularly memory of the concentration camps and death camps, ran much deeper than the impact of propaganda alone. The fact that “memory groups” were silenced, thus ending debate on the wartime experience, had far-reaching consequences. Stalinisation therefore interrupted social mourning, understood as a process of overcoming collective traumatic experience. It prevented or at least hindered a more profound at-

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2 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome. History and Memory in France since 1944*, Cambridge, Mass–London 1991, pp. 15-58 (chapter: *Unfinished Mourning*).

tempt to come to terms with the legacy of occupation, the consequences of which are still felt today. This is not to say that after 1950 Communist historical policy did not undergo any changes. On the contrary, as other authors have shown, the space for public debate on recent history broadened slightly after 1956 and some of the issues discussed in the immediate post-war years were revisited.<sup>3</sup> This was a result of the regime's internal liberalisation and its quest to gain broader public support, but it was also a result of Poland's dependence on financial assistance from Western Europe and the USA.<sup>4</sup> The debate never reached its previous level of intensity, however. This was due, first, to the passage of time and the greater distance separating Polish society from its wartime experiences and, second, to the fact that the memory groups present in the immediate post-war years had ceased to exist or had become marginalised.

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3 Cf., inter alia: Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej, 1949-1969*, Warszawa 2009.

4 Cf., inter alia: Marcin Zaremba, "Zorganizowane zapominanie o Holocauście w dekadzie Gierka: trwanie i zmiana", *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 2 (2004); Zofia Wóycicka, "Zur Internationalität der Gedenkkultur. Die Gedenkstätte Auschwitz-Birkenau im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ost und West 1954-1978", *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 45 (2005).

