

From Neutralization to Zombification: Memory Games and Communist Perpetrators in Poland after 1989

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to discern and analyse three dominant strategies in the memory games employed in public discourse in Poland, all of which have the aim of ‘finishing the revolution’. These are: neutralization, retribution and zombification. Within this discursive framework, the dark legacy of the Communist secret police is seen to loom constantly over the rebirth of Poland and to be the root cause of social problems such as poverty, economic inequalities and ‘lack of moral standards’. Neutralization, retribution and zombification reflect three underpinning narratives that are interwoven into the politics of memory in Poland. The ‘neutralization’ approach, embedded in the vision of the past controlling the present, stands for an effort to deprive the perpetrators of their supposed hidden powers. The strategy of retribution translates into a demand to restore justice, thought of as a kind of ‘moral equilibrium’, both using legal measures and symbolic representations of the past. Finally, I use the term ‘zombification’ to describe widespread attempts to manipulate collective memory in order to bring dead perpetrators back to life.

Keywords: communism, secret police, politics of memory, Poland, transitional justice

Introduction

‘**T**he Night of the Files’ is a well-known expression in the Polish public discourse, denoting one of the most dramatic political crises after 1989. On 4 June 1992, the Minister of Interior Antoni Macierewicz submitted to the speaker of the Sejm a list containing the names of a few dozen MPs and members of the cabinet, who were purported to be registered as former communist secret police informers. Macierewicz was fulfilling an earlier act of parliament, yet the timing was chosen carefully. On this day the vote of no confidence was on the floor, and the right-wing government expected it to be pushed off the agenda when the lustration issue – the vetting of top-rank state officials – was brought in. Rumours pertaining to the names on the list immediately spread through parliament by word of mouth. The content of the list was frantically disputed by deputies in private. When Minister Macierewicz arrived for the vote with a tripled security retinue, some started to gossip that the government was poised for a coup d’état.

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Before the vote took place, Prime Minister Jan Olszewski took the podium and delivered a historic speech:

I saw the list and it is absolutely shocking. [...] Everything has changed. This is no longer a game about which cabinet is going to complete the budget by the end of this year. Now it's a game about what Poland will be like. Or perhaps I should say: to whom it will belong.¹

Eventually the government was defeated in a vote carried out at midnight. It is widely assumed that it had no chance anyway; yet the circumstances of its collapse created a powerful political myth that the cabinet was toppled by a secret alliance of former perpetrators and their agents. In the future, this myth was to serve as a foundational concept for the whole right-wing camp.²

In this article, I owe much to the notion of 'memory games' put forth by Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer, which I find exceptionally useful for my reflections. According to these authors, the concept of memory games encompasses the various ways by which political and social actors perceive and relate to certain historical events, according to the identities they construct, the interests they defend and the strategies they devise to define, maintain or improve their position in society. Mink and Neumayer seem particularly committed to recognising the meaning of mutual links between the narratives of memory and current political propaganda. As they acknowledge, 'historicizing strategies have been used to resuscitate atrophied dividing lines, thus wilfully bringing discord and dissent back to the fore'.³

The aim of this article is to discern and analyse three dominant strategies in the memory games employed in public discourse in Poland, all of which have the aim of 'finishing the revolution'. These are: neutralization, retribution and zombification. What is striking is that all of these approaches refer to and focus on the notion of perpetrators, essentially understood as UB (*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* – Security Office) and SB (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa* – Security Service) officers. Within this discursive framework, the dark legacy of the communist secret police is seen to loom constantly over the rebirth of Poland and to be the root cause of social problems such as poverty, economic inequalities and 'lack of moral standards'. Neutralization, retribution and zombification reflect three underpinning narratives that are interwoven into the politics of memory in Poland. Sometimes they exist simultaneously, but for the most part one follows the other. The 'neutralization' approach, embedded in a vision of the past controlling the present, stands for an effort to deprive the perpetrators of

1 *Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 17 posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 1992), p. 80. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Polish are my own.

2 The most prominent book on this myth is Jacek Kurski and Piotr Semka, *Lewy Czerwcowy* (Warsaw: Edicions Spotkania, 1993).

3 Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer, 'Introduction' to *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games*, ed. by Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 4, 157.

their supposed hidden powers. The strategy of retribution translates into a demand to restore justice, thought of as a kind of 'moral equilibrium', both using legal measures and symbolic representations of the past. Finally, I use the term 'zombification' to describe widespread attempts to manipulate collective memory in order to bring dead perpetrators back to life.

The scope of the paper will cover both politicians' statements and other forms of public activities geared toward shaping collective memory such as books, articles, and exhibitions. Essentially, my aim is to examine what sort of visions of the past have been conveyed by the 'memory entrepreneurs' of that time – to deploy a term coined by Elizabeth Jelin to denote those who take advantage of their privileged position to impose their own interpretation of the past onto others – acting almost unanimously.⁴ Moreover, these narratives of memory, albeit produced by many different subjects, share a common logic and 'grammar' and evolve into one easy to define direction. Their evolution traced in this paper seems clearly to prove the idea widely accepted in memory studies that 'with time, the "politics of the past" becomes instrumentalized as part of the "politics of the present"'.⁵

The Politics of History

The course taken by the memory games of the period since 1989 might be characterized as a change from politics in thrall of history to history in thrall of politics. While the right-wing diagnosis from the 1990s, which pointed to communist perpetrators as wrongdoers allegedly responsible for current social and political ills, stemmed from recent, vivid memory of the dictatorship, this did not seem to fade with the passage of time. Quite the contrary: the more distant the communist past becomes, the more prominent a place it occupies in the political imaginary. What is characteristic in this shift of mnemonic narrative is that – as we will see – the rationalization behind the political program has been totally transformed over time. Initially, (legitimate) worries were expressed about the entanglement of the new political elites with former political police. After two decades, this kind of reservation has been abandoned in favour of different concerns regarding how the woes of the past could apparently compromise the state's integrity. A fresh new form of danger appears to have been invented, which just so happens to prop up the ruling party's political agenda. Here, I outline the development of these memory games before showing how the strategies of neutralisation, retribution and zombification were deployed.

4 Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 51.

5 Filipa Raimundo, 'Dealing with the Past in Central and Southern European Democracies: Comparing Spain and Poland', in *History, Memory and Politics*, ed. by Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 136.

Poland was by no means exceptional against the background of other excommunist countries in its approach to the recent past. The question of transitional justice, overcoming institutional and symbolic legacies of communism and coming to terms with its memories, was a pivotal issue in public debates after 1989 across Central and Eastern Europe. With the disappearance of censorship and opening of the Polish United Workers Party archives, books and broadsheet articles abounded, mostly covering the political history of post-war Poland. They put emphasis on establishing hard facts and ‘unmasking’ the real face of the past, focusing on documenting social unrest, the scope and character of state terror, and decision-making processes within the party elite. At the same time the economic hardship accompanying the systemic transition (and, as many thought, resulting from it) induced a profound nostalgia for the pre-1989 past. The drastic surge in unemployment, which did not exist under a command economy, could not be alleviated by the abundance of commodities in shops and provoked memories of an alleged ‘communist welfare state’. Although it is not clear whether that nostalgia was embedded in private memories or rather emerged in opposition to the official memory imposed by ‘those at the helm who got our jobs’, it paved a path to the victory in the parliamentary elections of 1993 of the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* - SLD).⁶

The battle between contesting memories has intensified ever since that moment. The return of former communists to power triggered a widespread panic among many exdissidents, convinced that the process of system transition was about to be stopped or even reversed and blaming this almost entirely on a social amnesia.⁷ The anti-communist discourse, the solemn and unconditional condemnation of the former system, was considered as the only way to keep ‘forces of the old regime’ at bay and to defend the newly refought democracy. As Michał Głowiński, renowned scholar and expert on public discourse, wrote in 1995:

According to conventional wisdom, Poland is apparently entering the myth, far remote from the reality of the time prior to 1989. [...] Some speak of People’s Poland as a hell, others – as an Arcadia. It becomes the epitome of both a commies’ abomination, which makes us balk at the very mention – and the good old days, when life was so pleasant. Amnesia intertwined with fantasy has produced a myth of the Polish People’s Republic, peculiar because it was formed in a very short time span.⁸

The two opposite narratives contributing to the myth were by no means symmetrical. While nostalgia was devolved in its character, manifested mostly on the level of in-

6 Cf. Antoni Dudek, *Historia Polityczna Polski 1989–2012* (Kraków: Znak, 2013), pp. 278–79.

7 The selection of the intellectuals’ debate, demonstrating the kind of scare that was attributed to the SLD electoral victory can be found in Maciej Łukasiewicz and Elżbieta Sawicka, *Zmiana Warty, czyli jak to się stało* (Warsaw: Presspublica, 1995).

8 Michał Głowiński, ‘PRL-owskie mity i realia’, in *Spór o PRL* (Kraków: Znak 1996), p. 37.

dividual behaviours and opinions observed through the lens of sociological surveys, anticommunism took the form of patronising statements made by institutional actors such as political parties, the Catholic Church, public media, trade unions, veterans' and victims' societies, and schools. SLD, even when at helm, essentially abdicated any kind of active memory politics, instead proclaiming its creed: 'we choose the future'.

A similar stance was later taken by Civic Platform (2007–2015), which also abstained from producing and promoting any specific and coherent narrative on the communist past. It was because of this apparent passivity that the government of Donald Tusk was accused by its right-wings opponents of pursuing 'national amnesia' being driven by an ulterior motive – the effort to 'eradicate Poles' and 'impose the new European identity on them'.⁹ In this regard we can draw on typology put forward by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, which divides 'mnemonic actors' (by and large a synonym for 'memory entrepreneurs') into four categories: mnemonic warriors, mnemonic pluralists, mnemonic abnegators, and mnemonic prospectives.¹⁰ While left and liberal-leaning political forces certainly match the type of 'mnemonic pluralists', right-wing actors, including Law and Justice politicians, neatly fall into that of 'mnemonic warriors'. No doubt they see themselves as 'holders of truth', attacking purported attempts to falsify history, and at the same time they tend to instrumentalize the story about the past (spread via subordinated and supporting media outlets) in order to mobilize voters. In fact, for Jarosław Kaczyński's camp, the battle to restore 'the historical truth' remains at the top of their political agenda.¹¹

In this narrative, communism is represented by the perpetrators: Soviet advisors, party secretaries installed by the Kremlin, and above all, by the secret police officers. '*Bezpieka*' and '*ubecy*' are derogatory terms for the Security Office and Security Service that replaced the former in 1956, and stand for what is perceived as the underlying rule of the communist system: the all-pervasive terror. Within that paradigm, the political police constituted a primary causative force, a true subject of social and political processes. It was believed both to control intellectual life and be able to provoke economic crisis. According to Zdzisław Krasnodębski, a prominent right-wing intellectual:

Although SB omnipotence was obvious for everyone at the time, even we didn't recognize the real scope of the surveillance. It seemed to me that since the 70s, the zone of relative freedom had increased. I always thought universities of that time to be a space of considerable intellectual independence. Nowadays I'm becoming more and more scared that I lived in a kind of 'Matrix'. [...] Today's lack of trust in politicians is rooted in a recently acquired

9 Mariusz Cieślak, 'Narody są drapieżne – rozmowa z Antonim Libera', *Rzeczpospolita*, 22 November 2014, p. 14

10 Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', in *Twenty Years after Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

11 Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', pp. 13–17.

conviction that people are easily broken, agents are everywhere and that politics amount to a web of deception. No one can be trusted, and what seemed to occur accidentally might be meticulously staged. What until recently was seen as 'paranoid style' in politics and labelled conspiracy theories, *ex post* proved to be political prudence.¹²

To a great extent, such a perspective stems from intimate memories of the former dissidents engaged in subversive activities over the past decades, for whom secret police officers then posed a major threat and who suffered (sometimes a great deal) at their hands.¹³ Yet after 1989, that specific outlook has been smoothly promoted and turned into an official narrative on history. The very fact that political and intellectual elites of democratic Poland acted as a 'remembering community', that is, a community of victims sharing and publicizing their testimonies, has determined the way in which communism has been portrayed on the institutional level.¹⁴ Thus, both public discourse and the historiographical debate have been increasingly shaped by narratives which aimed at stigmatizing and exposing. Over time this phenomenon has even been strengthened and sharpened, as erstwhile readers, receivers of the memory transmission, were becoming its producers. 'In memory culture the cycle of production, representation and reception becomes a perpetual spiral', as noted by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Astrid Erll.¹⁵

The ramifications of this phenomenon have been accurately and comprehensively described by two historians from the University of Warsaw, Błażej Brzostek and Marcin Zaremba. As they write:

It is not difficult to note, that especially in the educational and popular descriptions, the tendency still prevails, and is perhaps even getting stronger, to present the past in a fairly simple scheme. So here it goes: in the People's Republic we had opposing one other 'society' and 'state authority', entities of opposite interests and alien to each other's' value systems [...]. Observation of social phenomena is subjected to an interpreting pattern, whose essential feature is politicization [...]. The shallowness of many descriptions results from their ideological perspective, which is anti-communism. It is expressed in the adopted purpose of the historical inquiry, which is disclosure (unmasking, settlement of scores) rather than understanding (clarification, explanation)... Some historians approach the object of their research with barely-concealed disgust, and their analyses seek to demonstrate the depth of corruption and moral bankruptcy of the described persons or organizations, and to condemn them to eternal infamy [...]. The result is sometimes such that we end up with a thorough knowledge of the structure of the appa-

12 Zdzisław Krasnodębski, 'W dekomunizacji nie chodzi o politykę, lecz o zasady', *Rzeczpospolita*, 25 September 2006, p. 15.

13 Cf. Cezary Trutkowski, 'Społeczne reprezentacje historii PRL', in *Elity rządu III RP 1997-2004. Portret socjologiczny* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2006), pp. 194-202.

14 I am borrowing this term from Sara Jones, *The Media of Testimony: Remembering the East German Stasi in the Berlin Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 38.

15 Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Astrid Erll, 'Introduction: On Transcultural Memory and Reception', in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*, ed. by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Tea Sindbæk Andersen (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 6.

ratus of violence in the People's Republic and the biographical data of its employees, but the wider social context of their actions remains unexplored: the characteristic attitudes, aspirations and conflicts of the time and within given social circles. Without this context, today's verdicts remain flawed.¹⁶

Over time, similar warnings have more and more frequently appeared in the scientific literature. Literary scholar Anna Artwińska wrote in 2013:

Simply put, we can say that collective memory legitimises a bipolar vision of Polish history: on one side some 'they': 'agents of communism', 'minions of Moscow', sole perpetrators of all evil; and on the other, pristine Polish society, the victim of the repressive system imposed from the top. Depersonalization and generalization apply to both groups: all perpetrators are evil, and all victims irreproachable.¹⁷

Dichotomous descriptions of the communist reality became the standard notion in rightwing journalism, and eventually became part of political manifestos. 'The Night of the Files' constituted a watershed both for a (fledgling) memory politics and considered strategies of transitional justice. It was the Center Alliance, predecessor of the national Catholic conservative Law and Justice party (PiS), that in 1993 sought for the first time to entice voters with the promise of a general lustration. The year 2005 marked the apogee of that policy, with an independent chapter devoted to the issue of lustration and de-communization, entitled 'The Cleansing of the State'. Since then the demand for vetting has gradually disappeared, while the references to the past were given more and more attention in subsequent versions of the party program. In 2014 PiS, in opposition at the time, published its election manifesto. No other political program before had paid so much attention to the sphere of historical memory. Jarosław Kaczyński's party included in the document a separate chapter devoted to 'identity and historical policy', which was to constitute 'an extremely important dimension of foreign policy and the existence of our country in the world'.

The document postulated political changes (such as the need for active state involvement in the management of society's historical memory) justified by conclusions derived from the history of the Polish People's Republic. The chapter 'The Enemies of Liberty and Our Resistance', contains the following observation:

After the atrocities of German and Soviet occupation, the communists rejected our basic values by using force and carrying out mass repression. However, Poles contested communism and rebelled in defence of traditional Polish values. This is mainly about a number of events from the history of the People's Republic - starting with social resistance symbolized by [...] 'the Cursed Soldiers' [anti-communist guerrillas in the years 1945-48] and ending with the Solidarity movement over the period 1980-1988. It is characteristic that many of

16 Błażej Brzostek and Marcin Zaremba, 'Polska 1956-1976: w poszukiwaniu paradygmatu', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 5/2.10 (2006), 25-37.

17 Anna Artwińska, 'Pamięć negatywna. Komunizm i sprawcy', *Teksty Drugie*, 3 (2013), 135-149.

the anti-communist agitations were associated with the defence of the Catholic faith and the universal Church. The tale is of the suppression, in all sorts of ways by the communist authorities, of a free Poland and free Poles survived.¹⁸

Thus 'The Night of the Files' in June 1992 marked and accentuated the split within the 'Solidarity' political camp, since it was now divided into left-liberal and right-conservative wings. From the perspective of supporters of Olszewski's government, the fall of the cabinet provided conspicuous proof that 'forces of the old regime' were still in control of the political realm. The SLD parliamentary election victory of 1993 only validated this point. Thus, according to common wisdom the year 1989 did not end the communist rule of Poland – the dictatorship just mutated into a web of clandestine, dirty connections.¹⁹ This approach has been fully captured in critical interpretations of the Round Table negotiations which paved the way to the victory of Solidarity in 1989. According to many right-wing journalists (now strongly supporting PiS) the 'alleged collapse of the system' was staged by the Security Service, exerting secret control over the opposition elites.

There is no doubt that the conviction that communism did not collapse in reality, and the system transition remained to be completed, was not only characteristic of Poland. Similar political agendas were formulated in other countries once constituting the Socialist Bloc, such as Hungary and Romania. The right-wing parties, brandishing anticommunist slogans, claimed that the system transition remained in fact, as James Mark phrased it, an 'unfinished revolution'. According to Mark:

For these groups, the 'founding sin' of the new system was the negotiated transition, which had failed to remove the communists from the political arena. This was blamed for the maintenance of corrupt clientelist networks in sectors of the economy and for crises of moral faith in the new system, which had not managed to remove former 'criminals' and 'perpetrators'.²⁰

It is important to stress that adherents of the 'negotiated transition' seem to have been pushed into positions of defence and right-wing 'memory entrepreneurs' clearly have had a greater voice. The partisan character of collective memory since the mid-noughties is twofold: it is controlled by the Catholic-conservative politicians and it furthers their agenda. While leftist and liberal voters have not generally cared much about their candidates' outlook on the past, it has been an issue of crucial importance for those supporting the right-wing parties. In what follows, I will discuss the three key strategies used by these memory actors in their efforts to 'complete' the 'unfinished revolution'.

18 *Program partii Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Warsaw, 2014), p. 9.

19 This point of view, presented in the most orderly way, is adopted in the book by Maria Łoś and Andrzej Zybortowicz, *Privatizing the Police State: The Case of Poland* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

20 James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution. Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 2.

Neutralization

The strategy of neutralisation aims to remove the supposed 'power' of former perpetrators through a process of uncovering their crimes: lustration has been central to this approach. The idea of lustration came to the fore as early as the beginning of the 1990s, along with the dissolution of the SB. The communist secret police left in its wake vast archives containing detailed information on tens of thousands of secret informers, some of them having thick files containing numerous handwritten reports, others barely mentioned by name in top-secret catalogues. The arguments for working out legal mechanisms for the archive's disclosure were twofold. On one hand they appealed to moral reasoning: the betrayal was deemed the worst, most wicked crime by the standard of anti-communist opposition members, for whom mutual trust was the only defence against the police. Therefore, those who would snitch to SB (no matter whether out of fear or for reward) and led to friends being incarcerated, should be publicly named and condemned: this is, in this view, the minimum of justice that those betrayed now deserve. There was also a pragmatic justification, according to which the informers of the communist security apparatus were in thrall to their former controlling officers, since signed commitments to cooperate and the original texts of their denunciations had been stolen from the archives and were to be used for blackmail.

The ties connecting officers with the informers bound the past with the present. The powerful guards of the communist regime were believed to retain clout, now exercised by proxies. Memory games of lustration were played out within the paradigm of an invisible web of immoral dependencies born in the communist era, and still entangling Poland. Unless thoroughly vetted, everyone could be under suspicion: cabinet members, MPs, the army HQ, top managers in state owned factories, diplomats, journalists, or scholars. Proponents of lustration also brought in the economic dimension of the problem, pointing to the fact that invisible and informal ties could have a devastating impact on the banking system and foundation of the emerging free market. It should be noted that similar or identical arguments reverberated in other countries of the former Socialist Bloc.²¹ On the other hand, the opponents of radical retributive justice stressed that massive lustration would not allow for individual consideration of each case of cooperation with the SB. Everyone would be assessed according to a simple either-or principle: whoever was registered in the secret police files would be automatically considered an informer, including those who had indeed signed a commitment to cooperate (for example as a result of blackmail), but

21 Barbara Misztal, 'How Not to Deal with the Past: Lustration in Poland', *European Journal of Sociology*, 40.1 (1999), 31-55 (p. 55); Nalaia Letki, 'Lustration and Democratisation in East-Central Europe', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54.4 (2002), 529-552; Cynthia M. Horne, *Building Trust and Democracy: Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Countries* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

who had also later refused to submit denunciations.²² The enacted legal procedures resulting from that debate left both sides of this argument with reasons to feel disappointed. The Parliament Act 1997 demanded the submission of so-called 'Lustration Statements' from those aspiring to be members of Parliament (the *Sejm*) and those taking the topmost positions in the country. The adversaries of a new law denounced the 'lustration prosecutor' and courts for giving too much credit to the content of the police archives. On the other hand, those who strived for a neutralization of past dependencies vividly expressed their annoyance at the fact that in cases when original files could not be found (presumably destroyed in 1989) judges exonerated defendants.

The feverish debate around lustration was raised to a record high in January 2005, when right-wing columnist Bronisław Wildstein retrieved from the archive the digital index of personal files, which was then leaked to the Internet in unclear circumstances. This so-called 'Wildstein's list' contained over 160 thousand names, yet it covered not only 'secret collaborators' but also 'candidates for secret collaborators' (who usually had no idea that security police proposed to recruit them) and those of regular officers.²³ However, with common opinion taking all persons on 'Wildstein's list' for active informers, the data proved to be political dynamite. As the index consists only of names and surnames, with no other identifying information, people could easily make a wild guess wading through the list in search of prominent figures. The ensuing chaos played into the hands of the 'memory entrepreneurs' supporting the idea of lustration. They claimed that the full disclosure of the archive was the only way to sort things out. After PiS won both the presidential and parliamentary election in the autumn of 2005, an attempt to significantly expand the catalogue of persons subject to lustration was made. The amendment to Lustration Act of 1997 was adopted in 2006, according to which journalists, scholars and members of local elites had to be included in the vetting process. A year later the new law was blocked by the Constitutional Tribunal.²⁴

Retribution

Complementary to the idea of neutralization of communist perpetrators came the projects of retribution. The issue of the judicial accountability of functionaries of the former regime stirred up strong emotions. Foremost, it concerned police officers

22 Aviezer Tucker, *The Legacies of Totalitarianism: A Theoretical Framework* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 92-93.

23 The Wildstein List has been portrayed by Lavinia Stan as an exemplary model of 'vigilante justice' meted out by the non-state actors acting in pursuit of transitional justice; Lavinia Stan, 'Vigilante Justice and Unofficial Truth Projects', in *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience*, ed. by Lavinia Stan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 286-87.

24 Piotr Grzelak, *Wojna o lustrację* (Warsaw: Trio Wydawnictwo, 2005).

who tortured and murdered opposition activists, as well as the leaders of the state responsible for the use of the army against demonstrators and striking workers in 1970 and 1981. In the end, only a few dozen people were put on trial, which in most cases ended in acquittals or suspended sentences. After 1989, only a dozen or so officers of the former security apparatus were imprisoned.²⁵

Perhaps the judiciary system of democratic Poland proved powerless rather than ineffective in pursuing communist crimes. The high legal standards restored in courts after 1989 (for instance, over 60% of the composition of the Supreme Court was replaced with new judges) prohibited them from issuing verdicts that would have pleased the (right-wing) collective memory. It should be noted that 'the impunity of former communists', against which the conservative press railed, was not – as commonly claimed at the time – a 'deliberate omission'. The actual 'settlements with communism' were influenced by various factors and processes. Serious crimes committed by the security apparatus (murders, torture) took place in the vast majority of cases during the Stalinist period, and after 1956 political killings happened only occasionally. Most of the perpetrators and witnesses did not live to see the transition to democracy. In addition, the passage of time made it difficult to collect evidence and recreate the course of events. In turn, the trials of the former leaders of the state (especially of General Jaruzelski) dragged on for years due to the complicated subject matter under consideration (the informal decision-making mechanisms in the communist state).²⁶

Nonetheless, the alleged ineptitude or reluctance in meting out justice to former perpetrators became one of the essential threads in a public debate, raising outrage. In this situation, the stigmatization of 'executioners and torturers' in public discourse was the substitute for actual punishment and was to meet the expectations of a substantial part of the population.²⁷ Poland abounded with memorial exhibitions, often arranged at the 'sites of terror', that is, in locations of former prisons and detention camps, commemorating victims of the regime and stigmatizing its executioners. Similar processes also took place in Hungary and Romania, where memorial museums played the role of 'cultural courtrooms' where 'the former system could be put on "cultural trial" and condemned'.²⁸ One could also notice that for twenty years, between 1993 and 2013, on each anniversary of the martial law imposed by General Jaruzelski (13 December 1981), the right-wing Republican League conducted nightly demonstrations in front

25 Tomasz Łabuszewski, 'Problem rozliczeń zbrodni stalinowskich – fakty i mity', in *Wina i kara. Społeczeństwa wobec rozliczeń zbrodni popełnionych przez reżimy totalitarne w latach 1939–1956*, ed. by Patryk Pleskot (Warsaw: IPN, 2015), pp. 364–386.

26 'Wrób, Proces za stan wojenny bez gen. Jaruzelskiego', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2 August 2011, p. 6.

27 Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, *Oceny i rozliczenia okresu PRL w opinii publicznej. Komunikat z badań*, June 2009 <http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2009/K_093_09.PDF> [Accessed 12 December 2018].

28 James Mark, *Unfinished Revolution*, p. 64.

of his home. Torches were burned, and patriotic songs were sung under banners with pictures of people killed by the communist police.

Throughout these years the right wing 'memory entrepreneurs' – the conservative and Catholic press – devoted much space to historical journalism, in which the PZPR (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* – Polish United Workers' Party) dignitaries and especially the SB functionaries were depicted as morally repugnant characters motivated by the meanest incentives. Similar language was used by politicians: already in 1992, Leszek Moczulski, a known opposition activist in the times of the People's Republic, during a parliamentary debate on the evaluation of martial law, ironically observed that the acronym of PZPR really means '*Platni Zdrajcy Pachołki Rosji*' ('paid traitors, Russia's minions').²⁹ For a number of years, it was customary during right-wing demonstrations to chant the slogan: '*raz sierpem, raz młotem czerwoną holotę*' ('once with a sickle, once with a hammer, strike the red rabble'), which expresses the wellestablished conviction, on that side of the political spectrum, that all left-wing and liberal parties are in fact a masked post-communist elite. In this memory game, rage at communist perpetrators has been distilled into political fuel, easy to store and to be used at a convenient moment – for instance against SLD presidential candidate Aleksander Kwaśniewski (who nonetheless won the election twice, in 1995 and 2000).

The perceived failures of the lustration and transitional justice projects, which bolstered expectations yet essentially failed in exposing the sinister plot entangling Poland, coincided with the apogee of the efforts at symbolic punishment inflicted on perpetrators in effigy. During the opening of the exhibition 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*' in July 2007, Janusz Kurtyka, the head of the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* - IPN), stated that:

The foundations of the communist security apparatus were put in place by the functionaries of the NKVD, and the apparatus itself also guarded Soviet interests. Secrecy and fear was the essence of the communist system. That's why tearing off the veil of this secrecy and showing the faces of functionaries serving that system was one of the most important things undertaken after 1990.³⁰

The name of this exhibition should be understood in a most literal way, as the exhibit was composed of panels containing the enlarged to unnatural dimensions ID card photographs of the top functionaries of the communist security apparatus. Viewers were actually presented with a peculiar portrait gallery – effigies of those who should

29 Transcript of parliamentary session, 1 February 1992 <<http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debate1.nsf/main/4E32B4D0>> [Accessed 15 Sept. 2018].

30 'Wystawa "Twarze bezpieki 1944-1990"', Onet.pl <<http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/wystawa-twarze-bezpieki-1944-1990/dd75k>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

deserve condemnation and contempt. Critics of the exhibition saw in it a kind of 'collective pillory'. The well-known journalist Ewa Wanat wrote in an internet blog:

Like a Middle Ages thief shackled in the stocks, or a witch exposed to the ridicule of the populace, or, as under communism, wrongdoers and layabouts in a display case of the Communist Party Basic Organizational Unit in a given area, the same mechanism: instead of the court, stigma. Those who committed the offense should face the court, let them be judged and if convicted serve their punishment... But is this about law and justice, or rather about revenge?³¹

'The Faces of *Bezpieka*' was not a one-off exhibition limited to a specific museum space, but a nationwide series of individual exhibitions (although subordinated to a single concept), on display between 2007 and 2012. It depicted images of SB officers from the central command, and also of those who operated in a given city or province. Apart from the 'main' version of the exhibition, there appeared dozens of local variations, showing thousands of faces. It seems plausible that originators were inspired by the similar strategy employed at the Budapest House of Terror with its 'Gallery of Victimizers' presenting dozens of portraits of ÁVO-men (*Államvédelmi Hatóság* – State Protection Authority, i.e., the Hungarian political police) and Arrow Cross shock-troopers. Organizers strove to make the exhibitions as visible as possible (or as offensive as possible), hence they were often located in public places; in the central squares of cities, along main streets, in parks and office halls. In Gdansk the portrait panels were placed within a shopping centre, in full view of the crowds coming out of shops and fast-food chains. In Warsaw, 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*' was located along one of the main streets, opposite the former Stalinist Ministry of Public Security (currently the Ministry of Justice).

Importantly, the 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*' cycle was devoted exclusively to alleged criminals, not their crimes. The images were in fact accompanied by brief descriptions of the career of the given individuals, but these were understandable only to specialist historians. For ordinary viewers information such as 'held the position of head of the Section VI of the Department II of the Metropolitan MO, and then was promoted to head of the Section III of the Department' obviously meant nothing. The authors of the exhibitions did not explain what the displayed officers actually did. 'The functionaries of the communist security apparatus are responsible for thousands of deaths, for imprisonment and persecution of hundreds of thousands of innocent people' – such an explanation features on one of the panels, but this sentence was

31 Ewa Wanat, 'Plac Wolności', *Salon 24*, 20 July 2007 <<https://www.salon24.pl/u/ewawanat/40116,plac-wolnosc>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018]. It is worth noting that in medieval France, for instance, punishing effigies of escaped criminals or cadavers of dead criminals constituted a common practice. These rituals of public atonement served as an act of 'collective healing', aimed at restoring moral order. See Paul Friedland, *Seeing Justice Done: The Age of Spectacular Capital Punishment in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 91.

not based on any content of the exhibits.³² Here any search for information on the methods that security services used in their daily work, on the control which they exercised over the majority of areas of social life, would be in vain. In this respect, comparison with the House of Terror could be drawn once again. As Zsófia Réti notes, the Budapest exhibition was overloaded with an abundance of various forms of text. Introductions, explanations, subtitles, hardly intelligible because of dim light and size of font: 'words extinguish one another, and they appear as visual noise or decorative fragments that bear no particular meaning'.³³ What is written serves barely as a background to what is shown. The police vernacular does not provide any information on its own, it is inserted into the narrative to highlight the perpetrators' alienation.

The biographies of the functionaries are lifeless: no descriptions of activities they initiated, nor of the course of their investigations; no testimonies of the victims. Moreover, the fight against the armed underground and organized opposition is only one chapter in the 46-year long history of the security apparatus. Incomparably more often than using torture and throwing suspects into prison, the security apparatus was engaged in the collection of information. This was the main sphere of UB/SB activity; the acquisition of informers, the breaking of people by small acts of blackmail, and the painstaking work of thousands of officers opening private letters and setting up wiretaps.³⁴ Without considering this dimension, the knowledge presented in the exhibit about the security branch and its officers is left hanging in the air.

The unstated, but imposing message of the exhibition is the peculiar unification of perpetrators. Since the presented biographies say nothing of the deeds which they committed, the viewer might get the impression that all of them are equally (and therefore to the highest degree) responsible for the crimes of the communist regime. In fact, SB officers are presented as comic book monsters, an army of equally depraved clones that may differ from each other only in unimportant details. This impression is compounded by the emphasis the authors of the exhibition put on the somewhat peculiarly understood private lives of officers. For example, 'breached service discipline and moral-ethical rules by consuming alcohol in service premises [...]. During alcoholic libations he forced the women present in his office to undergo indecent acts' was written in bold beside one of the portraits. Another panel featured a photocopy of a document describing the accident that the portrayed person caused while intoxicated. Yet another quoted an excerpt from the punishment order rebuking an officer for visiting a prostitute while on duty. We come across similar narrative strategies in the contents of other local versions of the exhibition. 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*' reveals

32 *Twarze bezpieki 1944-1990*, Ex. cat., (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2007) p. 6 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160407163749/http://arch.ipn.gov.pl/ftp/pdf/Twarze.bezpieki.1944-1990.pdf>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

33 Zsófia Réti, 'Past Traumas and Future Generations: Cultural Memory Transmission in Hungarian Sites of Memory', *The Hungarian Historical Review*, 6.2 (2017), 377-403 (p. 390).

34 Cf. Henryk Dominiczak, *Organy bezpieczeństwa PRL 1944-1990* (Warsaw: Bellona, 1997).

some of the intimate details of the lives of these functionaries: mistresses, domestic quarrels, alcoholism and sexual abuse. Infidelity and drunken brawls are certainly not glorious deeds, but it is not for this reason that the photographs of the functionaries were displayed in the exhibition. Regardless of the crimes which might have been committed by any given SB functionary, these methods attempting to bring them to public disgrace seem unsavoury and petty in the context of the purpose that they were to serve: namely (made explicit by the organizers), not to provide knowledge about the past, but to criminalize it and exert retribution.

The introduction in the exhibition catalogue ends with the following sentence: 'without waiting for the verdicts of the courts, we can cite the judgment of history: the communist security apparatus was a criminal organization'.³⁵ A similar point of view can be found in numerous journalistic texts, but also in studies of a more scholarly and factual nature. Antoni Dudek, a longtime adviser to the President of the IPN, in a book devoted to the history of the Institute, while commenting on the impunity of former functionaries of the SB, wrote:

What remained was to deliver justice by way of stigmatizing, and this was the purpose that the series of exhibitions 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*', and the equally numerous accompanying publications, were supposed to serve. I am not only convinced that the action was morally justified and – until the restrictions of their pension privileges in 2009 – the only form of punishment dished out to people serving in the most hideous institution of the communist era, but also deserving continuation.³⁶

Significantly, within the retributive memory game framework, radical anti-communist discourse is gaining momentum with the passage of time, particularly as the generation that does not have personal memories of the communist era enters adulthood. In 2011 the journalist Tadeusz Płużański published a book entitled *Beasts: Murderers of Poles* with the following subtitle: *Journalistic Investigation into the People who During Communism Murdered Polish Patriots and Were Never Punished*. The book quickly topped the bestseller list, and also won the Józef Mackiewicz prize, prestigious in right-wing circles. 'My goal was not to interrogate these creeps, getting to know their motives, dilemmas, subjects that are still welcome in Poland' – the author asserted spitefully in the introduction.³⁷ The somewhat chaotic narrative of the book focuses on presenting profiles of employees of the Stalinist apparatus of security and justice. Their life paths are shown according to a single template; as the embodiment of moral degeneration, a synthesis of national betrayal and human vile-ness. The terms most frequently invoked by the author are 'murderers', 'sadists', 'ex-

³⁵ *Twarze bezpieki 1944–1990*, p. 7.

³⁶ Antoni Dudek, *Instytut. Osobista historia IPN* (Warsaw: Czerwone i Czarne, 2005), p. 276.

³⁷ Tadeusz Płużański, *Bestie: morderycy Polaków* (Warsaw: 3S Media, 2011), p. 13.

ecutioners' and 'minions of the Soviets'. It is the same narrative that was used by the authors of 'The Faces of *Bezpieka*'.

In this uniformly black presentation of the perpetrators there appears a clear contradiction: the officers of the Stalinist security apparatus are portrayed simultaneously as fanatical communists, obsessed with the idea of destroying Polish independence, and as conformists, acting with the basest motives. But what really matters in this narrative effigy of the 'security state' are emotions, not logic. It is not about reflecting on the past (considered morally unacceptable, in this context), but about the induction of hate, the highest degree of condemnation, which is to be a form of redress to the victims.

Plużański's book is woven mainly from the testimonies of witnesses, former prisoners. Undoubtedly, these are harrowing stories: descriptions of sophisticated ways of inflicting suffering on the accused, beatings during investigations, the tormenting of prisoners' families, and above all death sentences issued on the basis of confessions extracted by torture. This is by no means an exceptional strategy: victims' collective testimonies are typically presented at the post-communist memorial sites, thus serving as a form of symbolic punishment for the perpetrators.³⁸ Yet Plużański goes much further. Despite the fact that the evils painted by him, it should be said emphatically, are authentic, the book's biased narrative is simply jarring. The author (himself the son of a Stalinist prisoner, which he emphasizes) juxtaposes the suffering of the victims to the subsequent impunity of perpetrators, and, by insults and mockery, seeks to render justice. The titular 'beasts' he describes as 'ignorant creeps seeking social advancement', 'without any restraints as security functionaries' who persecuted 'innocent people just because they were threatening to the communist plague spreading in Poland'.³⁹ Debasing former officers is a substitute for punishment. The author repeatedly claims in the pages of the book that the perpetrators did not belong to the Polish nation, and that this was the case not because of their moral decline, but because of their alien ethnicity. He meticulously emphasizes the Jewish background of the *bezpieka* officers and he notes that torture and sentences on the anticommunist activists were the result of collusion between the Jewish 'compatriots' – thus implying that communist terror stemmed from a Jewish plot. While mentioning high-level functionaries of the Ministry of Public Security he gives in brackets their previous, Jewish names. And concerning their superior – the head of the UB, Minister of Public Security, Stanislaw Radkiewicz, son of Polish peasants – he makes a note that he was 'just a figurehead'.⁴⁰ The implication: a puppet in Jewish hands.

38 See Sara Jones, "Simply a Little Piece of GDR History?": The Role of Memorialization in Post-Socialist Transitional Justice in Germany', *History and Memory*, 27.1 (2015), 154-181.

39 Plużański, pp. 90, 31, 42.

40 Plużański, p. 91

In this way Płużański refers to the myth of 'Judeo-Communism', popular among the pre-war Polish nationalist right. According to this vision, communism was the instrument of a Jewish conspiracy against Poland (and more broadly, against Christianity). The plan to build a classless society was a product of the 'Jewish spirit', and the followers of this ideology were those who were 'poisoned by the ethics of the Talmud'. Since 'native' Poles – that is, Catholics – were naturally immunized against communism, the revolution could come only from outside, as a form of anti-Polish aggression.⁴¹ The belief that the evil perpetrated by the communists was a matter of family heritage and not of an individual choice is repeatedly expressed throughout the book. Płużański exposes not only the former functionaries of the security apparatus, but also their currently living children, and especially if they belong to the social circles opposed by contemporary right-wing adherents. For example, Danuta Hübner, member of the European Parliament from the liberal Civic Platform, is accused of hiding from voters the fact that her father was an officer of the security apparatus ('Has Danuta Hübner disowned her father?').⁴² Józef Chajn, the Deputy Director of the Jewish Historical Institute, is reproached for being the son of Stalinist Justice Minister Leon Chajn. Płużański stresses that the son of another senior security apparatus functionary 'since 2002 holds the position of the Chairman of the Jewish Commune in Katowice'.⁴³

In *Beasts* the historical crimes committed by the security apparatus become a weapon in a contemporary ideological war. Płużański constructs a dichotomous vision: in contemporary Poland the conservative right is the only champion of justice and rightful punishment of communists, while liberal circles defend former criminals and therefore share in their guilt. Writing about an attempt to bring to justice a former Stalinist judge, Płużański scoffs:

The indictment was made by the Institute of National Remembrance. This fact alone should cause reflection among all human rights defenders, gay and lesbian organizations, those fighting racism, xenophobia and intolerance, in particular the Open Republic Association (*Stowarzyszenie Otwarta Rzeczpospolita*), and in general among all the progressives.⁴⁴

Zombification

Beasts might be considered a significant example of a mnemonic narrative that fuses two different threads of the memory games: it demonstrates how the attempt towards

41 Paweł Śpiewak, *Żydokomuna. Interpretacje historyczne* (Warsaw: Czerwone i Czarne, 2012).

42 Płużański, p. 24.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 436. The Open Republic Association is an NGO founded in 1999 devoted to combating anti-semitism and xenophobia.

(symbolic) retribution mutates into zombification of perpetrators. After 2010, the temperature of the political dispute in Poland rose sharply. The death of the conservative President Lech Kaczyński in a plane crash while in Russia inflamed emotions in the public sphere. The Law and Justice (then) opposition party accused Donald Tusk's centrist government of hiding the real cause of the accident. Soon, the right-wing media and politicians decided that it was not an accident at all, but an assassination contrived by the left-liberal elite together with Vladimir Putin. In the autumn of 2010 the opposition leader (and brother of the late president) Jarosław Kaczyński accused the government of treason, of being the agents of foreign interests, and described the ruling coalition as the 'Russian-German condominium'.⁴⁵

This logic of political conflict was reflected in historical narratives. In the autumn of 2013 three right-wing journalists published a book under the title *Resortowe Dzieci: Media* (Ministerial Children: Media).⁴⁶ The first paragraph of the book repeats the thesis, well-established in right-wing circles, that political transformation after 1989 was a fiction, and that political changes were carried out strictly according to a secret script arranged by conspiratorial bodies. This is the so-called 'setup' (*układ*), a notion which for over a quarter of a century has been ascendant in Polish public opinion. According to the authors,

much was said about the compromise concluded with the Communists during the Round Table Talks.⁴⁷ The opposition agreed on the enfranchisement of the *nomenklatura*, not only in the sphere of business. Our publishing series will establish in a synthetic form that the 'thick stroke' [i.e., the refusal to bring to justice the communist perpetrators] was in fact consent for the taking over of the majority of crucial structures of the Third Polish Republic by the people associated with the People's Republic apparatus.⁴⁸

The authors of *Ministerial Children*, however, go one step further. They argue that all the pathologies and wickedness of the Third Polish Republic result from the fact that the elites – in media, business, politics and academia – have been overrun by the descendants of the Communist *bezpieka* and party apparatchiks. 'The blame, at the root, lies in these circles', we read in the book. The parents installed high in the structures of the People's Republic's political police took care of the careers of their children, who, thanks to the hidden interconnections and protection of the 'setup', maintained their privileged social position after 1989.

45 'Kaczyński: Kondominium rosyjsko-niemieckie w Polsce', *wPolityce.pl*, 8 Sept. 2010, updated 3 Aug. 2011 <<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/105419-kaczynski-kondominium-rosyjsko-niemieckie-w-polsce-po-sld-i-psd-oburzone-zwolujaja-konferencje-wszyscy-przeciw-pis>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018]

46 In Polish, 'Resort' stands for 'Ministry', an abbreviation of the 'Ministry of Internal Affairs', the name officially used in the People's Republic to describe the political police; after 1989, the word took on an ironic tone.

47 The Round Table Talks, from February 6 - April 5, 1989, legalized independent trade unions and paved the way for the democratic transition in Poland.

48 Dorota Kania, Maciej Marosz, and Jerzy Targalski, *Resortowe dzieci. Media* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Fronda, 2013).

In this perspective, the children inherited the iniquity of their parents. Although the authors stipulate that ‘everyone is responsible for their own actions’, they in fact emphasize that the choices, worldview and value system of the ‘ministerial children’ were determined by their upbringing. In this way the dichotomous division used by the right to describe the Polish People’s Republic is transferred to the political analysis of current times. As the authors argue, the left-liberal elites in the Poland of 2013 represent traditions foreign to the national community, and are the heirs of the anti-Polish values that motivated their parents, the officers of the UB and SB. As Sylwia Krasnodębska writes:

In their homes no carols were sung, no one ever went to midnight Mass, no flags were flown on November 11 [National Independence Day], and grandfather never recounted by the fire-side the story of his participation in the war against the Bolsheviks (unless from the opposite side). How are the people originating from these circles to know the value, before cutting a loaf of bread, of making the sign of the cross, and how are they to understand that an important family memorial is a rebel band [the white and red band worn by soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising] [...]. If one’s brother was a secret SB collaborator then one cannot praise Piotr Gontarczyk and Sławomir Cenckiewicz for the book *The SB and Lech Wałęsa* [disclosing Wałęsa’s cooperation with the Security Service]. If the father was ‘strengthening the people’s power’ with the help of a gun, then it is difficult to write an article about the heroism of the Cursed Soldiers.⁴⁹

Ministerial Children and its sequel (*Resortowe Dzieci: Służby*, published in 2015), have achieved record sales: according to the publishers, the first volume alone sold 150,000 copies.⁵⁰ The publication was met with an enthusiastic reception among Law and Justice Party politicians and right-wing columnists. The ‘authors’ courage’ was praised since they dared to ‘break the biggest taboo of the Third Republic’ and revealed the truth about the ‘red dynasties’. Some saw in the book ‘sociological insight’.⁵¹ Online commenters expressed satisfaction with the book’s stigmatization of those whom they consider to be responsible for their life failures. Some online comments read:

Post-communist mafia lives and gobbles thanks to our hard toil [...]. Let’s not kid ourselves. For all this life of misery in recent years, emigration, poverty, separation and lack of jobs in Poland [...] the blame lies with a group of people called the system’s children. We know their names and we will learn much more in the near future.⁵²

49 Ibid.

50 Sylwia Krasnodębska, “Resortowe dzieci. Służby” już bestsellerem!, *Niezależna*, 1 April 2015 <<http://niezalezna.pl/65640-resortowe-dzieci-sluzby-juz-bestsellerem>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018]

51 Jakub Szczepański, ‘Bronisław Wildstein: “Resortowe dzieci” mają różne braki. Wielu ludzi nie powinno tam być’, *Polska Times*, 17 January 2014 <<http://www.polskatimes.pl/artykul/3299592,bronislaw-wildstein-resortowe-dzieci-maja-rozne-braki-wielu-ludzi-nie-powinno-tam-byc,id,t.html>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

52 Comments recorded from the discussion forum in the website wPolityce (wpolityce.pl/forum) in January 2014. Currently unavailable.

On the other hand, critics of the book called it the 'literature of insinuation'. They claimed that *Ministerial Children* distorted facts, manipulated taken out of context fragments of SB documents, and actually did not provide sufficient evidence to prove its allegations. The authors did not conduct any systematic archival research, but checked only old passport files of journalists known for their criticism of the political right (to obtain a passport in the People's Republic one was required to submit a detailed questionnaire and provide information on parents and relatives).⁵³ In most cases, 'the Ministry parents' turned out to be in fact outside the inner circle of the communist leadership; rank and file members of PZPR, the directors of local enterprises, officials in the ministries. While indiscriminately copying SB documents, the authors mixed up persons, positions, circumstances, and with amazing meticulousness highlighted which of the described persons had Jewish roots. The fact that the authors did not mention that most of the people attacked in the book were before 1989 involved in the anti-communist opposition was considered particularly scandalous.

The whole case gains additional flavour by the fact that the narrative of the *Ministerial Children* books (anti-communist through and through) duplicated the language and arguments of the official propaganda of March 1968. At that time the communist authorities, in response to the mass protests of students, organized a huge media campaign proclaiming the leaders of the youth rebellion were the children of Stalinist dignitaries of Jewish origin. It actually turned out that the authors of *Ministerial Children* used the same SB documents which, thirty-five years earlier, amenable journalists received from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁵⁴ The book's publishing success meant that the concept of 'ministerial children' became a permanent feature of Polish political discourse. In its project to replace the old elites, the Law and Justice Party openly referred to the logic of 'bad origins'. The hitherto existing opinion-forming circles, those influencing the political, intellectual and economic life of Poland, are, in this narrative, the 'spiritual heirs' of communists, and therefore should be replaced by 'genetic patriots', in the words of one of the deputies of Law and Justice Party. Proponents of the nationalconservative revolution often referred to Poland in the years 1989–2015 as *Ubekistan* – a state governed by the descendants of *Ubeks*.⁵⁵

Jarosław Kaczyński, in his autobiography published after the PiS victory in the parliamentary elections of October 2015 wrote:

53 Marcin Zaremba, 'Jabłka i jabłonie', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 19 January 2014 <<https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/jablka-i-jablonie-21623>>, pp. 3-4.

54 Piotr Osęka, 'Resortowe dzieci: tropiciele ze szkoły SB', *Newsweek Polska*, 4/2014, pp. 17-20.

55 The term 'ubek' is another scornful description of the communist secret police officer and it refers to the first acronym of that institution - *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* (Security Office). The term 'ubekistan' (the land of ubeks) term was coined and introduced into political discourse by journalist Jerzy Targalski, one of the authors of *Ministerial Children*. See 'Targalski: III RP to ubekistan' [Targalski: the Third Republic Is Ubekistan], *Telewizja Republika* 29 Feb. 2016 <<http://telewizjarepublika.pl/dr-targalski-iii-rp-to-ubekistan,30171.html>> [accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

The milieu which emerged in the course of a long (because it started in 1956, or maybe even a little earlier) process of the decomposition of Polish communism, consisted of people who were mainly involved in its support – either in person, or at least by close family ties. These people did not have much in common with authentic Polish political traditions.⁵⁶

The political potential connected with the strategy of zombification – resuscitating dead perpetrators through their living descendants – proved to be an irresistible temptation. Since its 2015 victory, the PiS government, with strong support from the right-wing media and public television, has energetically undertaken the task of sorting out Polish historical memory. From the speeches of politicians, the scenarios of anniversary celebrations, feature articles, broadcasts, and online commentary there has emerged a new, corrected version of national history. Its essence is the de-legitimization of the dissident movement from the communist era as the ‘secular left’: a formation advocating liberal values, but indifferent to the national-Catholic tradition. One of the main slogans of the new government has become ‘restoration of the memory of the Cursed Soldiers’. The anticommunist guerrillas from the second half of the 1940s are presented as a model of civic virtue and true patriotism. ‘The Cursed’ did not agree to compromise, did not join the party, and instead of participating in negotiations with ‘the Soviet invader’, they were shooting at him.

According to Marek Chodakiewicz, an American historian greatly esteemed by Poland’s political right:

It’s really about the fact that in the nineteen forties there were Poles who recognized that evil must be called by its name: Hitler and Stalin – and they never surrendered. They refused to be a part of a collaborating setup...They didn’t schmooze with reds. They shot. While those others [the ‘Ministerial children’s’ parents] gained much. They saved their lives, and kept their privileges, living certainly more affluently than the other slaves of communism. They are still here [...]. In this way the Cursed Soldiers are the symbol of the aspirations of the Poles who dreamed of independence, freedom and victory over all the old setups. And they are the cause of remorse for the collaborators and the heirs of the red executioners, as well as diverse kinds of leftists.⁵⁷

Mass protests against the current dismantling of democratic institutions are repudiated by drawing historical analogies. According to Jarosław Kaczyński in a widely quoted interview:

You could say that ministerial children defend themselves, and today as the main stronghold they have chosen the Constitutional Tribunal. In Poland there is a horrible tradition of

56 Jarosław Kaczyński, *Porozumienie przeciw monowładzy* (Warsaw: Zysk i S-ka, 2016).

57 Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, ‘Żołnierze wykleci’, *Najwyższy Czas!*, 1 May 2013, <<http://inczas.com/publicystyka/chodakiewicz-zolnierze-wykleci-wyrzut-sumienia-dla-kolaborantow-i-spadkobiercow-czerwonych-katow>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

national treason. It is in the genes of some people, the worst sort of Poles. And this sort is extremely active, because it feels threatened. War, communism, the transformation promoted this type of people. And they are afraid that these times will change.⁵⁸

This strategy has culminated in the 'De-Ubekization Act' adopted by the Parliament in December 2016. It drastically cuts the pensions of the retired uniformed services of the Polish People's Republic (mostly, but not exclusively, former SB officers) for having been 'officers in the service of a totalitarian state'. The adoption of the law coincided with demonstrations against limiting the freedom of the opposition media. PiS politicians stressed that this was not an accidental coincidence. The defence of allegedly threatened freedom of expression is only a pretext, they claimed, and in fact the opposition, dominated by 'ministerial children', is fighting to defend the privileges of the *bezpieka*. The slogan 'the third AK generation is fighting the third UB generation' has become the leading theme of right-wing journalism.⁵⁹

The memory game played by the PiS has no loose ends. All the dots are connected and different layers of 'historical policy' address each other. In April 2017 President Andrzej Duda gave an interview to Polish public television:

Numerous influential posts in contemporary Poland, in media and other important institutions, foundations etc. are occupied by individuals, whose parents or grandparents fought against Cursed Soldiers in an effort to buttress the communist system. In brief: they were traitors. Therefore, it comes as no surprise those children are not interested in paying homage to the Cursed Soldiers. They are not interested in revealing the truth about who was fighting for an independent Poland and who was handing it over into Soviet hands and became Soviet governors in our country. Let's be honest: this is an ideological clash, this is a historical clash, yet this is also a clash over who is entitled to rule peoples' hearts and minds, a clash to prevent communists from taking over that rule.⁶⁰

Similar examples could be offered endlessly. Every few days, pro-PiS media announce that communist perpetrators have just been found among ancestors of a given adversary of the ruling party (be it politician, journalist or scholar). The political gain attributed to the memory game seems obvious. Those now ruling the country present themselves as the heirs of the armed anti-communist tradition, while they portray the opposition as the heirs of *bezpieka* officers. The PiS revolution (deemed a 'good change' by the progovernment media) is shown to be the completion of the guerrilla war in which patriots killed UB officers. Such a historical interpretation also boosts

58 Maciej Orłowski, 'Kaczyński: "Resortowe dzieci się bronią"', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 11 December 2015, <<http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,19334126,kaczynski-resortowe-dzieci-sie-bronia-ich-twierdza-to-trybunal.html>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

59 Tomasz Karpowicz, 'Wywiad z Andrzejem Gwiazdą', *wPolityce.pl*, 13 Dec. 2016 <<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/319189-nasz-wywiad-andrzej-gwiazda-kod-wystepuje-ramie-w-ramie-z-beezpieka-to-walka-trzeciego-pokolenia-ubekow-z-trzecim-pokoleniem-akowcow>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018]. AK refers to the *Armia Krajowa*, the dominant Polish resistance force during WWII. It was officially disbanded in 1945, but some regiments continued opposing Soviet domination of Poland until the end of the 1940s.

60 Andrzej Duda, 'Wywiad Prezydenta RP dla TVP Historia', *Prezydent.pl*, 30 April 2017 <<http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wywiady/art,104,wywiad-prezydenta-rp-dla-tvp-historia.html>> [Accessed 12 Dec. 2018].

the right-wing and nationalistic agenda. While ‘patriotic forces’ are equated with Catholic Poles born and bred, the opposition represents an alien tribe, which in 1944 invaded Poland along with the Soviet army.

Sometimes, the zombification strategy is being employed almost literally: dead perpetrators are deemed responsible for the current government failures. As I write these words, a fresh political scandal reverberates in Poland. The chief of the Financial Supervision Authority, the governmental body responsible for the safety of the banking system, has been secretly recorded when demanding a hefty bribe (40 million złoty, which is equivalent to almost 10 million euros) from the owner of one of Poland’s private banks. While the opposition has claimed the affair may involve numerous high-level PiS officials and demanded an independent and thorough investigation, the ruling elites and its supporters in the media have maintained that the government succumbed to a ‘provocation’, plotted by the former communist police. Jacek Karnowski, editor-in-chief of the right-wing weekly *Sieci*, wrote in an editorial: ‘I was told by a wise, old man: the whole affair is to be blamed on your generation, because you forgot what was and what is “ubecja”. You don’t know what they are capable of. You don’t know their chekist mentality.’⁶¹ Nonetheless, the article did not contain any clue or indication of how the functionaries of the authority dissolved almost thirty years ago could actually be in position to control current political life in Poland.

The mnemonic narrative evolution from neutralisation to zombification is a story of how the pursuit of transitional justice could eventually warp the horizon of political discourse. What initially seemed to be a valid, sensible political argument in a debate on systemic transformation, concerning vetting as a prerequisite for holding public office, has turned into a kind of black hole, the gravity of which affects both politicians and society – or at least the vast part of it. The memory game has captured its players: partisan memory warriors have become so accustomed to utilizing history that they cannot find equally powerful political fuel. Likely, the right-wing, conservative politicians are in no position to abandon the narrative on the communist perpetrators if they want to retain integrity in the eyes of their voters. In effect, in contemporary Poland the past is so densely intertwined with the present that one can hardly tell the difference. The current political conflict has been dressed in historical attire on an unprecedented scale. Time has been declared null and void, and the zombies of hundred-year-old Stalinist executioners are struggling with Kaczyński’s political camp. The memory game, employed by PiS and its stalwarts, exemplifies the profound shift in a mnemonic narrative on the communist period and the convoluted path it underwent. The dark legacies presumed to be settled paradoxically have ultimately been revived.

61 Jacek Karnowski, ‘Skąd ta afera?’, *wPolityce*, November 2018, <<https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/421497-skad-ta-afera-wielu-zapomniało-do-czego-jest-zdolna-ubecja>> [Accessed 15 November 2018].

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