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**MNEMONIC WARS IN POLAND:
AN INTRODUCTION TO NEW
RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In this special issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica*, we look at mnemonic wars in Poland from comparative and transnational perspectives.¹ While the mnemonic wars are a global phenomenon, Poland is an interesting laboratory of their specificities in Eastern Europe, a region that has undergone multiple transformations in the last decades. The last thirty years have brought changes in political regimes and economic systems, shifts in international safety networks, sudden social dislocations, and migration waves. In addition, the most recent political developments in the region, including the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the strengthening of an authoritarian regime in Belarus, and “anti-constitutional populist backsliding”² in Poland and Hungary,

¹ Zofia Wóycicka co-authored this article and co-edited the special issue thanks to the grant OPUS 22 of the Polish National Science Centre, ‘Help Delivered to Jews during World War II and Transnational Memory in the Making’, no. 2021/43/B/HS2/01596.

² Wojciech Sadurski, ‘Anti-Constitutional Populist Backsliding’, in: *id.*, *Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown*, Oxford Comparative Constitutionalism (Oxford,

make Eastern Europe particularly vulnerable to the conflicting uses of history. The contributors to this issue share their specific expertise from different disciplinary fields. By doing so, they continue the reflections presented in the special issue *Mnemonic Wars: New Constellations*, which we have recently co-edited for the *Memory Studies* journal.³ Back then, we identified the main currents of the growing research on memory wars, and the contributing authors wrote case studies on their various aspects in several parts of the world. Now, we focus specifically on our region, making these two special issues complementary in their topics and perspectives.

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO MNEMONIC WARS

We propose an interdisciplinary approach to mnemonic wars anchored in memory studies, a field of research that has been in the process of institutionalisation for the last four decades. While it has developed its distinctive theories, concepts and approaches, it still relies on the expertise of several other disciplines, both in the humanities and social sciences.⁴ Memory studies focus on contemporary (mis)uses of the past. Memory scholars usually place the question, “What do cultures, political systems, groups or individuals do with the past?” at the centre of their work. The answer cannot be discussed only from the perspective of one discipline, be it history, sociology, anthropology or cultural studies.

‘Doing’ something with the past becomes most visible and intensive when the action triggers misunderstandings and conflicts. Heated debates and contradictory interpretations of history affect public

2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 July 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198840503.003.0001> [Accessed: 11 Sept. 2023].

³ Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Zofia Wóycicka (eds), *Memory Studies*, xv, 6 (2022), Special Issue: *Mnemonic Wars: New Constellations*.

⁴ The discussion about the interdisciplinarity of Memory Studies was characteristic of the field’s institutional founding phase in the early 2000s, when first book series (e.g. *Media and Cultural Memory*, ed. by A. Erll and A. Nünning at De Gruyter since 2004), the first journal (e.g. *Memory Studies* since 2008), first chairs in Memory Studies (at the University in Aarhus since 2013), and finally the first academic association, the Memory Studies Association (since 2016) were founded. In the course of time, however, the idea that Memory Studies are a field (or discipline) between various (other) disciplines became common sense.

discourses, policy-making and cultural production. Although mnemonic conflicts are among the central issues of memory studies today, this has not been the case throughout the field's whole history. In the interwar period, Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, two scholars regarded as forerunners of modern memory studies, asked questions about shared, rather than conflicted, memories. Halbwachs' interest was shaping individual memories in a collective environment, while Warburg was fascinated with the continuity of certain motives in cultural history. The 'second wave' of memory studies followed in the 1980s and the 1990s, and was dominated by French and German debates about Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory) and Jan and Aleida Assmann's notions of communicative and cultural memory. They also focused on shared memories and presumed that societies are united by common visions of the past, which determine collective identities. Even though Nora included in his monumental, multivolume work *Les lieux de mémoire* a whole section on conflicts and divisions essential to French collective memory, some criticised the fact that he neglected memories related to the experience of national, ethnic or religious minorities in France, including those of colonial history or migration.⁵ Despite this critique, similar projects from other countries and regions followed. Especially interesting were attempts to discuss international *lieux de mémoire*, for example, in the multivolume edition of the *European realms of memory*.⁶ Other scholars took a more comparative approach, highlighting the differences between particular memories. At first, they usually compared allegedly homogenous national memory cultures – this was, for instance, the case of the large comparative project *Deutsch-Polnische Erinnerungsorte / Polsko-Niemieckie Miejsca Pamięci* [Polish-German Realms of Memory].⁷ With time, however, the scholarly interest moved towards i) a more processual and actor-oriented analysis and ii) internal and international conflicts of memory. Soon, it also turned out that in the face of accelerating globalisation, local developments in the field of memory

⁵ Kornelia Kończal, 'Miejsce pamięci', in Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Robert Traba, in coop. with Joanna Kalicka (eds), *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci* (Warszawa, 2014), 229–34.

⁶ Pim den Boer *et al.*, *Europäische Erinnerungsorte*, vols i–iii (Oldenburg, 2012).

⁷ Robert Traba, Hans-Henning Hahn (eds), *Deutsch-Polnische Erinnerungsorte / Polsko-Niemieckie Miejsca Pamięci*, vols i–iii (Warszawa–Paderborn, 2013–15).

cannot be abstracted from transnational processes.⁸ This does not mean that states have lost their power to shape collective memory and remembrance. On the contrary, in recent years in Europe and beyond, we can see many national governments pursuing a very active politics of memory.⁹ And still, they are in various ways influenced by transnational developments. This transnational shift occurred at the turn of the second decade of the new millennium, marking the beginning of the ‘third wave’ of memory studies, which benefited from the interdisciplinary background of the field.¹⁰ Studying the movements and dynamics of collective memories requires various methods and theoretical concepts to grasp the complexity of global patterns on the one hand and local tensions on the other. Even more important is interdisciplinary thinking during the ‘fourth wave’ of memory studies, which considers issues related to the Anthropocene and the contributions of non-human actors to cultural memories.¹¹

Although the discussion on whether memory studies are trans-disciplinary (i.e., combine different disciplines when approaching their research objects) or ‘only’ multidisciplinary (i.e., enter various disciplines without combining their concepts and traditions) is still ongoing, the irrefutable fact is that scholars who contribute to the field have different academic backgrounds.¹² Diverse disciplinary perspectives are of special importance when it comes to analysing mnemonic wars, as these conflicts are usually played out in different social spaces and by the use of various media. While some emerge in the private space, among family members, for example, others belong to the

⁸ Assmann Aleida and Sebastian Conrad, ‘Introduction’, in *eid.* (eds), *Memory in the Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (New York, 2010), 1–15; Lucy Bond, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Introduction’, in *eid.* (eds), *Memory Unbound. Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (New York–Oxford, 2018), 1–26.

⁹ Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, ‘A Theory of Politics of Memory’, in *eid.* (eds), *Twenty Years After Communism* (Oxford, 2014), 7–34; Maria Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’”: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security’, *Security Dialogue*, xvi, 3 (2015), 221–37.

¹⁰ Astrid Erll, ‘Travelling Memory’, *Parallax*, xvii, 4 (2011), 4–18; Gregor Feindt *et al.*, ‘Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies’, *History and Theory*, liii, 1 (2015), 24–44.

¹¹ Stef Craps *et al.*, ‘Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: a Roundtable’, *Memory Studies*, xi, 4 (2018), 498–515.

¹² Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, transl. Sara B. Young (London, 2011), 38–94 (chapter ‘Disciplines in Memory Studies’).

public sphere – either on a political or cultural level. Conflicts may be articulated verbally, textually, visually, or performatively; they may concern public spaces, such as monuments and street names, or the digital sphere. Furthermore, these spaces are by no means separated.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MNEMONIC WARS?

At the beginning of the new millennium, scholars debated the prospects of a ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘transnational’ or ‘European memory’.¹³ While hardly anyone claimed that this new mode of remembering would entirely eliminate traditional national master narratives and lead to a universal, unified interpretation of the past, many assumed that it would at least weaken national frameworks and lead to ‘shared cosmopolitan memory practices’¹⁴ or shared pan-European norms of dealing with the past.¹⁵ These were to include a self-critical approach to one’s own national history and the focus on victims and their suffering.

However, starting from the 2010s, new waves of domestic and international conflicts provoked scholars to introduce new terms to the academic debate. Those included, among others, ‘mnemonic warriors’, ‘antagonistic’ and ‘agonistic memory’, as well as ‘mnemonical security’. In their well-known typology of post-authoritarian communist regimes, Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik proposed a classification of political actors according to their attitude to history and memory as ‘mnemonic pluralists’, ‘abnegators’, ‘prospectives’ and ‘warriors’.¹⁶ “Mnemonic warriors”, as the two political scientists argued, not only pursue an active politics of memory, but they also “tend to draw a sharp line between themselves (the proprietors of the

¹³ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, ‘Memory Unbound. The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, v, 1 (2002), 81–106; *id.*, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia, 2006); Aleida Assmann, ‘Europe: A Community of Memory? Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, University of Konstanz, November 16, 2006’, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 40 (2007), 11–25; Assmann and Conrad, ‘Introduction’.

¹⁴ Daniel Levy, Michael Heinlein, and Lars Breuer, ‘Reflexive Particularism and Cosmopolitanization: The Reconfiguration of the National’, *Global Networks*, xi, 2 (2011), 139–59.

¹⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Europäische Erinnerungspolitik Revisited’, *Transit. Europäische Revue*, 33 (2007), 166–75.

¹⁶ Kubik and Bernhard, ‘A Theory of Politics of Memory’.

‘true’ vision of the past) and other actors who cultivate ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ versions of history. [...] So, for them the contest in the field of memory politics is between ‘us’ – the guardians of the truth – and ‘them’ – the obfuscators, perpetrators of ‘falsehoods’, or the opportunists who do not know or care about the ‘proper’ shape of collective memory”.¹⁷ For mnemonic warriors, historical interpretations are non-negotiable, and therefore, all alternative visions of the past have to be abolished and their proponents delegitimised and removed from public life. Memory regimes that emerge when a mnemonic warrior enters the public sphere are ‘fractured’ as their politics tend to divide and antagonise society.¹⁸ Though the categories developed by Kubik and Bernhard are universal and can be applied everywhere, they became particularly useful in analysing recent developments in former Eastern Bloc states.

Only soon after Kubik and Bernhard presented their typology of memory regimes, Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen diagnosed the emergence of “new antagonistic collective memories constructed by populist neo-nationalist movements” flourishing across Europe.¹⁹ These movements, as described by the two authors, tend to “essentialize [...] a collective sense of sameness and we-ness”;²⁰ they are celebratory and nostalgic about the past of their own ethnic or national community and share a Manichean vision of history with a clear distinction between us/good and them/evil. Bull and Hansen underlined that these antagonistic memories are not to be regarded as a simple re-invention of the nationalistic traditions of the ‘first modernity’ but that they form a new development. They explained their rise as a counter-reaction to the ‘cosmopolitan’ memory model, propagated in the 1990s and the 2000s by the European Union and other national and supranational memory agents. As a solution to this, inspired by Chantal Mouffe, they proposed the development of an agonistic mode of remembering that would allow different,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹ Anna Cento Bull and Lauge Hans Hansen, ‘On Agonistic Memory’, *Memory Studies*, ix, 4 (2016), 391 (online first version: 27 Nov. 2015). Compare also: Anna Cento Bull, Lauge Hand Hansen and Francisco Colom-González, ‘Agonistic Memory Revisited’, in Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner (eds), *Agonistic Memory and the Legacies of 20th Century Wars in Europe* (Cham, 2021), 13–38.

²⁰ Bull and Hansen, ‘On Agonistic Memory’, 393.

at times contradictory, historical perspectives and interpretations to exist and compete with each other in a common public sphere.

The same year, Maria Mälksoo introduced the concept of ‘mnemonical security’. Referring to the ontological security theory in International Relations, she uses this term to describe political measures, introduced by countries and transnational bodies, to make “certain historical remembrance secure by delegitimizing or outright criminalizing others”.²¹ The propounders of such a policy consider memory “as a vital self-identity need” for a national community and thus tend to regard historical interpretations as unnegotiable and treat competing visions of the past as an existential threat to their own in-group.²²

Mälksoo mentions memory laws as one of the most effective tools for “securitizing memory”. First such regulations were introduced in some Western European countries between the 1980s and the 2000s.²³ They were aimed at preventing Holocaust denial and the belittling or justifying other genocides and crimes against humanity, e.g. the Armenian genocide by Turks. Thus, problematic as they were, their primary goal was to protect previously oppressed minority groups from defamation and further persecution. However, in the 2010s, some Central and Eastern European countries, including Russia, Poland and Ukraine, started to use memory laws as a means of protecting majority groups from accusations of participating in the crimes mentioned above.²⁴

As argued by Mälksoo, memory laws not only restrict the freedom of speech and research, but at times, they also legitimise the use of force to protect a specific master narrative. Thus, the securitisation of historical memory “tends to reproduce mutual insecurities and reinstate

²¹ Mälksoo, ‘Memory Must Be Defended’, 221.

²² *Ibid.*, 224.

²³ Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars. The Politics of Memory in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, 2018).

²⁴ Uladzislau Belavusau, Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, and Maria Mälksoo, ‘Memory Laws and Memory Wars in Poland, Russia and Ukraine’, *Jahrbuch des öffentlichen Rechts*, 69 (2021), 95–117; Nikolay Koposov, ‘The 2014 Russian Memory Law in European Context’, in Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (eds), *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin’s Russia* (Indiana University Press, 2021), 193–209; Danielle Lucksted, ‘Memory Laws, Mnemonic Weapons: The Diffusion of a Norm Across Europe and Beyond’, *Memory Studies*, xv, 6 (2022), 1449–69.

historical animosities instead of alleviating them”.²⁵ Like Cento Bull and Hansen, Mälksoo proposed the implementation of an “agonistic politics of memory” instead.

Although the notions discussed above come from various disciplines and different epistemological perspectives, they all reflect, in one way or another, the concern with instrumental and conflict-causing uses of the past that have intensified in recent years. Scholars have noticed that while the globalisation processes in their different facets clearly impact the shaping of social memory, against previous generally optimistic assumptions, they do not lead to a rapprochement of the different historical narratives. On the contrary, they trigger new tensions and conflicts now being played out in the global arena.²⁶ Transnational or inter-governmental organisations and networks influence national memory cultures by promoting specific themes and modes of remembering. At the same time, however, local memory agents often hijack these international platforms to pursue their particularistic goals.²⁷ Mass migration, in combination with the activity of international NGOs, has also led to local conflicts being played out internationally.²⁸

The digital media is another factor that often leads to the escalation of memory conflicts.²⁹ Not only does the very structure of the World Wide Web and social media networks contribute to the inter-

²⁵ Mälksoo, ‘Memory Must Be Defended’, 223.

²⁶ Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (New York, 2013); Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, ‘Introduction’, in Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (eds), *Transnational Memory. Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin, 2014), 1–25.

²⁷ Jens Kroh, *Transnationale Erinnerung: der Holocaust im Fokus geschichtspolitischer Initiativen* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006); Andrea Pető, ‘The Lost and Found Library: Paradigm Change in the Memory of the Holocaust in Hungary’, *Mémoires en jeu: enjeux de société / Memories at stake*, 9 (2019), 77–81; Zofia Wóycicka, ‘The “Righteous” as an Element of Transnational Memory Politics: The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust and the Memory of the Rescue of Jews during the Second World War’, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 125 (2022), 133–53.

²⁸ A good example of this is provided in Sachiyo Tsukamoto, ‘The Counter-Boomerang Effect of Transnational Revisionist Activism on the Memory of “Comfort Women”’, *Memory Studies*, xv, 6 (2022), Special Issue: *Mnemonic Wars: New Constellations*, 1346–59.

²⁹ Dieter De Bruyn, ‘World War 2.0: Commemorating War and Holocaust in Poland through Facebook’, *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, 4 (2010), 45–62; Andrew Hoskins (ed.), *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (London, 2017).

nationalisation of the antagonisms, but they also add new actants: algorithms of digital platforms that prioritise particular narratives and images of the past.³⁰ This mechanism contributes to further polarisations of the discourse, as the algorithms suggest content to the users that is similar to that already received and shared. Although many public institutions working in the field of memory and history developed programs to counteract this process, mainly by providing high-quality and source-based knowledge to social media, algorithmisation and distance have become serious issues for memory over the last years, especially during the COVID pandemic.³¹

Moreover, in the last decade, due to the rise of illiberal, populist, and neo-nationalist movements and parties in Eastern Europe and beyond, the past has increasingly been used in an instrumental and conflicting fashion as a weapon against internal and external political foes. These antagonisms have often been nourished by faked historical facts or conspiracy theories. In some instances, these mnemonic wars anticipated and prompted actual physical violence and military conflicts. Such was the case with Vladimir Putin's memory politics, which proved to be a harbinger of the current war on Ukraine. But examples can also be found elsewhere. In May 2023, a lecture by professor Jan Grabowski titled 'Poland's (growing) problem with the history of the Holocaust' scheduled to take place at the German Historical Institute (GHI) Warsaw was violently interrupted by the Sejm deputy from the far-right Konfederacja Party, Grzegorz Braun. This act of aggression and vandalism was the result of an attack on Jan Grabowski and the GHI, launched a few days earlier in the state-controlled public media and right-wing press. This media campaign was part of systematic efforts of the then ruling Law and Justice Party [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS] to deny any Polish complicity in the

³⁰ Mykola Makhortykh and Mariella Bastian, 'Personalizing the War: Perspectives for the Adoption of News Recommendation Algorithms in the Media Coverage of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine', *Media, War & Conflict*, xv, 1 (2022), 25–45; Mykola Makhortykh, Aleksandra Urman, and Roberto Ulloa, 'Memory, Counter-Memory and Denialism: How Search Engines Circulate Information about the Holodomor-Related Memory Wars', *Memory Studies*, xv, 6 (2022), Special Issue: *Mnemonic Wars: New Constellations*, 1330–45.

³¹ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 'Commemorating from a Distance: The Digital Transformation of Holocaust Memory in Times of COVID-19', *Media, Culture & Society*, xliii, 6 (2020), 1–18.

Holocaust but also to antagonise the Poles and the Germans. While the two examples are incomparable in scale, they both testify to how history and memory are being weaponised for political purposes and how they are used to incite and justify violence and hostility.

To summarise, what we understand by mnemonic wars is the misuse of history and memory: they become instruments used to fight political opponents, as well as unite societies around political parties and leaders on either side of the political spectrum by identifying alleged internal and external enemies. This is often done with total disregard for historical facts and current academic discourses.³² Moreover, such weaponisation of the past very often foreshadows and triggers real violence and military aggression. While mnemonic wars have been led for various purposes since ancient times, currently, we observe an intensification of this phenomenon, one of its hotspots being East-Central Europe. This all happens, however, under totally new geopolitical circumstances of a rapidly globalising world.

POLISH MNEMONIC WARS IN A COMPARATIVE/ TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Over the last decade, East-Central Europe has become a region particularly vulnerable to memory wars. This has been a result of both historical legacies and conscious political actions. The historical upheavals of the twentieth century, including armed conflicts, genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass terror, border changes, population transfers, and the rise and collapse of communist regimes, have deeply traumatised Polish and other societies in the region.³³ The upheavals created a considerable conflict potential and, at the same time, contributed to the accumulation of various types of ‘mnemonic capital’, that is, references to the past as moral and symbolical resources usable for political purposes.³⁴

³² For more on the theory of ‘abuses of history’ see Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York–Oxford, 2009), 9–48 (chapter ‘A Theory of the Abuse of History’).

³³ Marcin Rzeszutek *et al.*, ‘Exposure to Self-Reported Traumatic Events and Probable PTSD in a National Sample of Poles: Why Does Poland’s PTSD Prevalence Differ from Other National Estimates?’, *PLOS ONE*, xviii, 7 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287854> [Accessed: 3 Nov. 2023].

³⁴ Kate Korycki, ‘Political Parties’, in Yifat Gutman, Jenny Wüstenberg *et al.* (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (New York, 2023); Michał Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne późnej rzeczywistości* (Kraków, 2017).

The strive for reconciliation and the promotion of a more cosmopolitan, thus victim-centred and human rights-oriented mode of remembering in the 1990s and early 2000s have brought only partial results, even though it was backed by the European Union's ideological and financial frameworks.³⁵ Those have been seen above all in formerly disputed territories of many East-Central European countries, with cities like Wrocław, Vilnius, Chernivtsi or Lviv highlighting their multicultural heritage. The policies and memorial practices stressing the ethnic and religious diversity of local traditions have not only brought political and commercial gains but have also fostered greater tolerance and openness towards 'others' and, in some cases, created opportunities for encounters between descendants of former and current inhabitants of those cities.³⁶

However, the attempts to work through the Holocaust memories and silences in the region, especially those relating to the various forms of implication of the local population in the Jewish and Roma genocide, became as successful as highly contested and fuelling ongoing memory conflicts.³⁷ The same could be said about the divergent interpretations of the Holodomor in Ukraine, ranging from genocide and mass atrocity to denial.³⁸ Also, the mass deportations and atrocities committed by the NKVD and the Red Army in Eastern Europe in the years 1939/40–41 and after the Soviet Union re-occupied these territories in 1944/45 led to many clashes of memory, to mention only the street riots and the diplomatic éclat with Russia caused by the relocation of the *Bronze Soldier* from Tallinn to the outskirts of the city in 2007.³⁹

³⁵ Marek Kucia, 'The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, xxx, 1 (2016), 97–119.

³⁶ Eleonora Narvselius and Julie Fedor (eds), *Diversity in the East-Central European Borderlands: Memories, Cityscapes, People (Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society)* (Hannover, 2021).

³⁷ Jelena Subocić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (New York, 2019). For the concept of implication, see Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, 2019).

³⁸ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "'Capital of Despair": Holodomor Memory and Political Conflicts in Kharkiv after the Orange Revolution', *East European Politics and Societies*, xxv, 3 (2011), 597–639.

³⁹ Karsten Brüggemann, 'Denkmäler des Grolls. Estland und die Kriege des 20. Jahrhunderts', *Osteuropa*, 6 (2008), 129–46; Siobhan Kattago, 'War Memorials and the Politics of Memory. The Soviet War Memorial in Tallinn', *Constellations*, xvi, 1 (2009), 150–66.

The mutual Ukrainian-Polish violence culminating in the massacre of thousands of Poles in the years 1943–4 has been subject to continuous antagonisms, despite the efforts of Polish and Ukrainian historians to reach a consensus on these issues. Today, even the post-1918, post-1945 and post-1989/91 borders are being contested by ‘mnemonic warriors’, such as Vladimir Putin or Victor Orban, in their revisionist rhetoric built from an arsenal of historical *topoi* and the neo-nationalist, militarist phraseology. The memories of post-1989 transformations form another type of negative mnemonic capital used especially – but not exclusively – by the populist parties in the region who have criticised incomplete transitory justice, chaos and austerity measures of the 1990s.⁴⁰

In Poland, the presidential plane crash near Smolensk (2010) was the caesura marking the intensification of the ‘weaponisation of history’. The 96 members of the Polish political elite who perished in this catastrophe were en-route to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre (1940), in which thousands of Polish officers were killed by the Soviet NKVD.⁴¹ The conflation of mass crime and the plane crash became a subject of conspiracy theories and memory politics, but above all, it contributed to the redefinition of the uses of history at the right wing of the political spectrum. Already in the first decade of the new millennium national-conservative politicians and intellectuals expressed their concern with the insufficiencies of the conciliatory and rather restrained, liberal-type memory politics and the flawed transitory justice.⁴² After the opening of the secret police archives and the establishment of the Institute of National Remembrance [Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN] in 1999, they were active in uncovering the crimes committed by Soviet and Polish communists and their collaborators. They also influenced the structure and functioning of the Institute and defined its position on the political scene. Finally, they were involved in commemorative projects endorsing the ‘two totalitarianisms’ thesis, as, for instance, in the Warsaw Rising

⁴⁰ Bernhard and Kubik, ‘A Theory of Politics of Memory’; Veronika Pehe and Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds), *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989* (New York, 2023).

⁴¹ Alexander Etkind, Rory Finnin *et al.*, *Remembering Katyn* (Cambridge, UK, 2012).

⁴² Michał Łuczewski, *Kontrewolucyjne pojęcie. Polityka historyczna w Polsce*, *Stan Rzeczy*, i, 10 (2016), 221–57.

Museum (2004).⁴³ They contributed to the ‘fracturing’ of the Polish memory regime, especially under the first PiS government (2005–7).⁴⁴

However, it was only after the Smolensk tragedy that PiS and its followers consolidated its civil society support and undertook intense bottom-up memory activism,⁴⁵ spreading in the right-wing/Catholic networks nationalist representations of contemporary Polish history and the cult of local anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet heroes. Those lay interpretations of history were formed in the shadow of the moderate-conservative yet pro-European and generally pluralistic politics of memory of the then-governing Civic Platform–Polish People’s Party coalition (2007–15) with its large museum projects, such as the Museum of the Second World War or the European Centre of Solidarity in Gdańsk. And yet, the neo-nationalist visions of the past have offered a viable alternative to those somewhat elitist and cosmopolitan projects by mobilising the disappointments of transformation and anxieties caused by an increasingly more complex European and global reality. This mnemonic populism, that is, a “poll-driven, moralistic and anti-pluralist imaginings of the past”⁴⁶ has contributed to the victory of PiS in the parliamentary elections in 2015, and as argued in this special issue by Mateusz Mazzini, has helped the party to maintain high levels of popularity ever since. Though PiS has lost the last parliamentary elections from October 2023 to opposition parties, with 35 per cent of votes it still remains the biggest political grouping in the Sejm.

Over the last eight years, PiS introduced administrative, legal, and financial measures to ‘securitise’ its vision of history. This was done, among other things, by seizing control of museums and other research

⁴³ For more information on the museum see <https://www.1944.pl/en/article/the-warsaw-rising-museum,4516.html> [Accessed: 3 Nov. 2023].

⁴⁴ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, ‘Roundtable Discord: The Contested Legacy of 1989 in Poland’, in Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years After Communism*, 60–84.

⁴⁵ Marcin Ślarzyński, ‘Transformation of Civil Society in Poland under the United Right Government: From Compartmentalization to Political Division’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, lv, 1 (2022), 131–54.

⁴⁶ Kornelia Kończal, ‘Mnemonic Populism in Europe’ [project description] <https://portal.volkswagenstiftung.de/search/projectPDF.do?projectId=10138> [Accessed: 11 Sept. 2023]. See also: Kornelia Kończal, ‘Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and its Afterlife’, *European Review*, xxix, 4 (2021), 457–69.

and educational institutions, sometimes even by breaching or bending the law. One of the examples is the controversial takeover of the already-mentioned Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk in 2017.⁴⁷ At the time, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, in its attempt to dismiss the founding director of the museum, Paweł Machcewicz, before the end of his term, merged two museums, one of which existed only on paper; thus, the Ministry established a new institution and appointed a new director who replaced Machcewicz. This was done without consulting the Museum Council, which, according to law, should approve all such mergers. Another way of curtailing the public debates on history was by cutting funds to non-conforming institutions and establishing and sponsoring new museums, institutes and foundations propagating the national master narrative.⁴⁸ Moreover, the PiS government also opened legal paths to threatening historians, journalists, artists, and others expressing opinions contrary to the officially endorsed version of history. In 2018, the Sejm introduced an amendment to the IPN-Law that provided for a penalty of up to three years imprisonment for anyone who “claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich [...], or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes [...]”.⁴⁹ The amendment

⁴⁷ Paweł Machcewicz, *Der umkämpfte Krieg. Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Danzig. Entstehung und Streit* (Wiesbaden, 2018).

⁴⁸ Ljiljana Radonić, “‘Nasze’ i ‘odziedziczone’ muza – PiS i Fidesz jako mne-moniczni wojownicy”, *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2020), 129–54.

⁴⁹ Cited from an unofficial English translation provided by the *Times of Israel* (1 Feb. 2018): <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-polands-controversial-holocaust-legislation/> [Accessed: 6 Sept. 2023]. For the original see ‘Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary’, *Journal of Laws*, 2018, item. 369, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20180000369/T/D20180369L.pdf> [Accessed: 6 Sept. 2023]. On the amendment, see also: Belavusau, Gliszczyńska-Grabias and Mälksoo, ‘Memory Laws and Memory Wars in Poland, Russia and Ukraine’; Marta Bucholc and Maciej Komornik, ‘The Polish “Holocaust Law” Revisited: The Devastating Effects of Prejudice- Mongering’, *Cultures of History Forum* (19 Feb. 2019), <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/the-polish-holocaust-law-revisited> [Accessed: 5 Sept. 2023].

was partially withdrawn under combined Israeli and US-American pressure.⁵⁰ Another example is the libel suit against Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, editors of the collective monograph *Night without End*, which reconstructs the fate of Jews during the Second World War in selected counties of German-occupied Poland.⁵¹ The two researchers were accused by a relative of one of the persons mentioned in the book of slandering his name by suggesting he was “co-responsible for the death of dozens of Jews who were hiding in the forest and were denounced to the Germans”.⁵² Throughout the trial, the claimant was financially and logistically supported by *Reduta Dobrego Imienia* [Good Name Redoubt – Polish League Against Defamation], an NGO financed by the PiS government. There are also strong indications that it was the Redoubt that initiated the whole suit. The two historians were acquitted of all charges in the court of appeal.

Such politics of memory provoked intense antagonisms both within Polish society and on the international level. Fighting against the ‘pedagogy of shame’ allegedly practised by their predecessors, the PiS politicians foregrounded the image of Poland as an innocent and heroic victim of the Second World War. They also argued that the Polish nation is being falsely accused of collaboration in Nazi

⁵⁰ *Obwieszczenie Marszałka Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 3 października 2018 r. w sprawie ogłoszenia jednolitego tekstu ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu*, Dz.U. 2018 poz. 2032, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20180002032/T/D20182032L.pdf> [Accessed: 6 Sept. 2023].

⁵¹ Cited after the Polish edition: Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (eds), *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vols i–ii (Warszawa, 2018). English edition: *eid.* (eds), *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, 2022).

⁵² Quoted after Polish edition: Barbara Engelking, ‘Powiat bielski’, in Engelking and Grabowski (eds), *Dalej jest noc*, i, 150. For more on the trial and the history behind see: Adam Leszczyński, ‘Zaczął się proces badaczy Zagłady za wyniki badań. Stawką jest wolność badań naukowych’, *OkoPress* (16 Jan. 2021): <https://oko.press/proces-badaczy-zaglady-za-wyniki-badan> [Accessed: 6 Sept. 2023]; Sebastian Klauziński, ‘Sąd: Engelking i Grabowski nie muszą przeproszać za wyniki badań nad Zagładą’, *OkoPress* (16 Aug. 2021): <https://oko.press/grabowski-engelking-wyrok-dalej-jest-noc> [Accessed: 6 Sept. 2023]; Adam Leszczyński, ‘Za procesem Engelking i Grabowskiego stali rządzący. Dowód? Minister na pogrzebie powódki’, *OkoPress* (18 Oct. 2021), <https://oko.press/za-procesem-engelking-i-grabowskiego-stali-rzadzacy-dowod-minister-na-pogrzebie-powodki> [Accessed: 6. Sept 2023].

crimes and therefore needs to defend its ‘good name’.⁵³ An example is the reaction to the misnomers such as ‘Polish death camps’ and ‘Polish concentration camps’, which have been deplorably but often accidentally used by foreign media and politicians in relation to the concentration and extermination camps established by Nazi Germany in occupied Poland. As false and insulting as these expressions are, the campaign against them already under the first PiS government (2005–7) and later during the Civic Platform–Polish People’s Party coalition (2007–15) raises doubts about its efficacy. Google search analysis showed that the campaign resonated mainly with the Polish public, deepening feelings of national grievance.⁵⁴ The amendment to the IPN law mentioned above – which had been officially passed to counter such misnomers – was formulated so vaguely that it allowed to charge anyone who ascribed a (co-)responsibility for Nazi crimes to any Polish person.⁵⁵ This and other similar actions not only strengthen antisemitism and widespread distrust towards academics and public intellectuals, but they also have implications in relations with Israel and the Jewish diaspora.

Another important element of memory policy pursued by PiS were demands directed to the Federal Republic of Germany to compensate Poland for war damages. While one could argue that the reparations received by Poland after the Second World War did not make up for the enormous human and material losses caused by the German invasion, experts, historians, and lawyers point to the fact that the claims lack legal grounds as the issue has finally been settled by

⁵³ Jörg Hackmann, ‘Defending the “Good Name” of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, xx, 4 (2018), 587–606.

⁵⁴ A Google search analysis carried out for the years 2005–13 showed that the term ‘Polish death camps’ was searched mainly by Poles, but hardly by English-speaking Internet users, see Michał Bilewicz, Anna Stefaniak, and Marta Witkowska, ‘Etnicyzacja odpowiedzialności: psychologiczne aspekty wadliwych kodów pamięci’, in Artur Nowak-Fur and Łukasz Zamecki (eds), *Wadliwe kody pamięci. Zniekształcenia pamięci o zbrodniach międzynarodowych w dyskursie publicznym* (Warszawa, 2015), 73–5. Compare also results of a similar Google search analysis for the years 2012–18, which took into account the impact of the amendment to the IPN-law on the internauts: Maria Babińska et al., *Stosunek do Żydów i ich historii po wprowadzeniu ustawy o IPN. Analiza przygotowana na zlecenie Biura Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich* (Warszawa, 2018), 21–7.

⁵⁵ Bucholc and Komornik, ‘The Polish “Holocaust Law” Revisited’, 3.

the official renunciation of reparations claims by the Polish People's Republic in 1953 and by the Two-plus-Four Treaty of 1990.⁵⁶ Unlikely to succeed, the public claims made by Polish state representatives fostered anti-German resentments and led to growing tensions in relations between both countries.

At the domestic level, PiS's nationalist vision of history reverberated into multiple mnemonic wars against ethnic and religious minorities. As demonstrated by Paweł Dobrosielski, Krzysztof Jaskułowski, and Piotr Majewski in this special issue, PiS tried to suppress memories that are non-aligned with the national and Catholic mainstream. Among others, PiS strongly promoted the cult of the 'cursed soldiers' [*żołnierze wyklęci*], i.e., members of the armed anti-communist underground after the Second World War.⁵⁷ Some of these partisans were implicated in robbery and violence against Jews, Belarussians and other civilians, which makes them highly contested figures in local communities. However, the narrative fostered by the state in textbooks, public media and official commemorations does not allow for any ambiguities. The case at hand is the official remembrance of Józef Kuraś, *nom de guerre* 'Ogień', in the Podhale region, where all the controversies about that dividing figure are silenced.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, *Polskie zabiegi o odszkodowania niemieckie w latach 1944/45–1975* (Wrocław, 2007); Jan Barcz and Jerzy Kranz, *Reparacje od Niemiec po drugiej wojnie światowej w świetle prawa międzynarodowego. Aspekty prawa i praktyki* (Warszawa, 2019); Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, 'Pieniądze za wojnę', #BLOGIHISTORIA (29 Aug. 2017): <https://krzysztofruchniewicz.eu/pieniazde-za-wojne/> [Accessed: 12 Sept. 2023]; *id.*, 'Czy dziś Polsce należą się odszkodowania wojenne?', *Pomocnik Historyczny POLITYKI – "100 pytań na 100 lat historii Polski"* (Warszawa, 2018), 98; Adam Puchejda, 'Reparacje niemieckie to kwestia zamknięta' (interview with Władysław Czapliński), *Kultura Liberalna*, cdxlix, 33 (2017), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2017/08/15/czaplinski-puchejda-reparacje/> [Accessed: 13 Sept. 2023].

⁵⁷ Kornelia Kończal, 'The Invention of the "Cursed Soldiers" and Its Opponents: Post-War Partisan Struggle', *Contemporary Poland. East European Politics and Societies*, xxxiv, 1 (2020), 67–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419865332> [Accessed: 3 Nov. 2023].

⁵⁸ Łukasz Łoziński, 'Kontrowersje wokół Józefa Kurasia "Ognia" i jego podkomendnych. Narracje historyków oraz mieszkańców Podhala', *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*, ix, 12 (2019), 191–226. See also: Towarzystwo Edukacji Obywatelskiej o historii, 'Józef Kuraś "Ogień" – bohater czy watażka? Rozmowa z prof. Rafałem Wnukiem', *Historia BEZ KITU*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr49HDTzSGU> [Accessed: 13 Sept. 2023].

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Adequately to the current developments in memory studies, the contributors to this special issue represent various disciplines, including sociology, ethnography, political sciences, cultural studies, museum studies, literature studies and linguistics. Using their respective methodologies and theoretical approaches, they analyse public conflicts related to social memory in Poland and the region. While some of the articles speak directly to the concept of mnemonic wars and the weaponisation of history for political causes, others deal more broadly with contested memories, while searching for models of solving such conflicts.

The volume opens with an article by Mateusz Mazzini on the significance of history and memory for populism. The political scientist argues that the antagonistic memory politics pursued by most right-wing populist regimes is not solely a by-product of their policy but a 'thickening agent' – an important factor that allows populist politicians not only to gain power but also to keep it even in face of unfulfilled electoral promises. Despite the paper's rather theoretical character, the author uses the current Polish example and the memory policies under the second PiS government to illustrate and support his argument.

The second paper, authored by Paweł Dobrosielski, Krzysztof Jaskułowski, and Piotr Majewski discusses the relation between official, hegemonic interpretations of the past and the often contradictory local memories of ethnic and religious minority groups. Based on interviews conducted with representatives of the Belarussian minority in Poland as well as on participant observation of commemorative ceremonies, the sociologists and cultural anthropologists describe different strategies applied by Belarussian memory activists in reaction to the commemoration of the 'cursed soldiers' propagated by the Polish state. Belarussians were among the targets of the armed anti-communist underground operating in Poland in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Thus, the memory of these events remains highly contested in Podlasie, a region with a significant proportion of the Belarussian population. The responses range from establishing a counter-memory to adopting the official master narrative accepted as a toll to be paid for complete assimilation into the majority group.

In her contribution, the sociologist Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak deals with another powerful memory agent in Polish public life, the

Catholic Church. Using classical tools of critical discourse analysis, examining speeches, press releases and other publications, she discusses the attitude of the Catholic clergy in Poland towards Shoah. According to Nowicka-Franczak, the situation can be characterised as a 'non-debate'. Isolated voices by engaged clergymen (and clergywomen) do not change the general conclusion that the Catholic Church in Poland avoids discussions about its position and actions during the Second World War and supports right-wing narratives about Poles being a nation of heroes and innocent victims of the Nazi occupation; this stance further contributes to the exacerbation of mnemonic conflicts in Poland.

In turn, the article by Maria Kobielska and Kinga Siewior is rooted in museum studies. The authors look at four exhibitions in peripheral Polish cities with either multicultural or simply non-Polish history. They ask questions about the tensions between the ethnonationalistic master narrative in Poland and the cities' (almost) non-Polish past. The centre-periphery relation proves to be founded upon a power imbalance. It can be clearly seen in the exhibitions that combine different, sometimes contradictory narratives, which is why Kobielska and Siewior speak of memory frictions, revealing another field of mnemonic contestation.

The following paper, by Sabina Giergiel and Katarzyna Taczyńska, also treats museums as useful source material to analyse changes in collective memory. The authors discuss the German legacy in Serbia, providing a deep contextual analysis of the Museum of Danube Swabians. They show how local memory activists and heritage practitioners worked through the legacy of long-lasting mnemonic wars against the Germans to offer a reconciliatory perspective on their former existence in Vojvodina. While this is one of the few non-Polish case studies in this special issue, it closely corresponds with the previous article on historical museums in peripheral towns in Poland, pointing to alternative ways of dealing with the multicultural heritage of borderlands and other formerly contested territories.

It would be impossible to talk about Poland not relating to what is happening currently just behind its eastern border. Analysing changes introduced to the main exhibition at the National Museum of History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv since 2014, backed by surveys, Joanna Konieczna-Sałamatin, Barbara Markowska-Marczak, and Tomasz Stryjek describe how the Russian annexation of Crimea

and the Donbas (2014) and the full-scale Russian war on Ukraine (2022–) altered the Ukrainian understanding of history. While the memory war waged by Putin against Ukraine since the early 2010th foreshadowed the actual military aggression, the current war led to a profound and very rapid shift in Ukrainian collective memory, which according to the authors, accelerated the country's transformation from a peripheral Soviet colony to a European nation-state.

While the two articles mentioned above, by Kobielska and Siewior, and Giergiel and Taczyńska, discuss how multicultural, in particular, post-German heritage, is being approached in contemporary Poland and Serbia, Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska goes back further to examine the transformation of the narratives of the Polish soldiers who settled in the post-German territories in the direct aftermath of the Second World War. While the published memoirs of the so-called 'military settlers' and their role in the anti-German mnemonic wars led by the Polish communist state have been thoroughly researched, Ćwiek-Rogalska offers a novel and nuanced reading of those memoirs that reveals important shifts in their content after they lost their propagandistic value.

Most papers already discussed focused on memory wars and conflicts between different nations, or ethnic and religious communities. The last article in this volume deals with gender memory and the (under-)representation of women in contemporary Polish streetscape. Justyna Walkowiak and Małgorzata Rutkiewicz provide a quantitative approach towards street names (as one of the most visible fields of memory policies), looking at the (non-)presence of female namesakes in public spaces. In terms of disciplinary approaches, they ascribe their research to 'critical toponymy'. The article provides empirical data on the underrepresentation of women in street naming in Poland. Despite this general conclusion, they also observe a change of the trend – more and more women become street 'patrons'. Yet these new namesakes contribute to nationalistic discourses, too, as they do not stand for equality or human rights but rather for family and religious values (names of queens or female saints) and the narrative about Poles rescuing Jews during the Holocaust.

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