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The Memory of Communist Poland in the Third Polish Republic. A Tentative Systematisation

Abstract

The political discourse in Poland in the final years before the fall of communism in 1989, was based on a strong opposition between the authorities and the rest of society. Even then, however, support for the opposition was not unanimous, and it was even less so in previous years. Most Poles considered the communist system forced, exogenous, oppressive, unacceptable, and supported by the Soviet threat. Still, individual reactions were varied: there were different paths to be taken through communism. The authors of the paper discuss how these paths contributed to differing recollections of the period. They focus on the collective memory of political parties and politicians, particularly on the controversial question of collaborating with the communist regime and the rights to veteran status among the former opposition members. It is a story of two types of memory: the one stressing reconciliation and the other pushing the distinction between former regime representatives and democratic opposition members.

Keywords: politics of memory, the Third Polish Republic, Solidarity, Post-Communism

Introduction

On December 5 2014, the Polish Parliament commemorated the passing away of two people with different political biographies: the anti-communist opposition activist Kazimierz Świtoń and the actor Stanisław Mikulski, famous for the cult communist-era TV series “Stawka większa niż życie”. The latter’s engagement on the behalf of the old regime (including membership in the Polish United Communist Party, PZPR), irked some commentators. This reaction baffled others, who remembered his acting rather than anything else. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of November’s municipal election,

the right-wing Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) combined its annual march in remembrance of the anniversary of the introduction of Martial Law of 13 December 1981 in Poland with the protests against the alleged election fraud. The rest of the political stage found this rather tasteless. These headlines, gathered during just a single December week, show that the memories of the Polish People's Republic (PPR, *Polska Republika Ludowa*)¹ still strongly influence the political landscape and people's emotions in the Third Polish Republic.

The political discourse in Poland in the final years before the fall of communism in 1989, was based on a strong polarization between the authorities and the rest of society. To some degree this did reflect the reality of those days, with the weakening regime contested by a powerful coalition under the standards of Solidarity (*Solidarność*). Yet even then the support for the opposition was not unanimous, and even less so in the earlier days. Thus, transposing this dichotomous opposition on the entire period of the PPR is unwarranted [Artwińska, 2013, pp. 140–144]. Most Poles society considered the communist system forced, exogenous, oppressive, unacceptable, and supported by the Soviet threat. Still, individual reactions were varied: there were different paths to be taken through communism.

The aim of this paper is to show that these paths contributed to the different recollections of the period [Grabowska, 2004; Fik et al., 1996; Skibiński, Wiścicki, Wysocki, 2011]. We focus on the collective memory of political parties and politicians, particularly on the controversial question of collaborating with the communist regime and the rights to veteran status among the former opposition members. It is a story of two types of memory: the one stressing reconciliation and the other stressing distinction [Czapliński, 2006, p. 75]. The memories of the individuals in question are less political and more “privatised”. This is partially caused by the natural evolution of autobiographical memories, and partially by the “pragmatisation of consciousness” in the Polish society, evident from the 1990s onward [Kula, 2006, p. 44; Ziółkowski, 2001, p. 16]².

A growing number of citizens have little to no memories of the previous regime. Their “post-memory” of the PPR is indirect. With the design of the school curricula resulting in very limited formal education on this period in history, young people are particularly easily swayed by stories told by their parents, simplistic visions presented in the media (also often drafted by people who have no knowledge of the previous epoch), or by narratives of big political parties [Nijakowski, 2008, p. 205;

¹ Formally, the Polish People's Republic was established in 1952, and existed until 1989. Following the common practice, we use this term for the entire period of communist rule in Poland after World War II.

² On the different types of private PPR memories, see K. Stańczak-Wiślicz [2013, p. 150].

Nycz, 2013, p. 7; Malicki, 2012]. This makes the grand political narrative we discuss even more important.

The paper is divided into two parts. First, we give a brief chronological overview of the different political paths taken throughout the years of communism in Poland. In the second part, which is divided into four smaller units, we show how these paths informed the political memory of the past in the Third Polish Republic.

Paths through the Polish People's Republic

As a result of the Jalta conference and Soviet military successes, Poland came under the power of Moscow-controlled communists. After a transitional period, when some political activity was possible, after 1948 the country felt the full brunt of Stalinism, with its political oppression and social changes. Stalin died in 1953. Finally, in 1956, with the revelations of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union came the thaw. In Poland it spelled the end of Stalinism and the ascension to power of Władysław Gomułka in 1956. For the first time since 1948 some political manoeuvre was possible.

The liberal intelligentsia, effectively discouraged from political activity before 1956, now welcomed the greater degree of freedom. Its members understood, however, not only the limited scope of this liberty, but also its fragility and susceptibility to change. Their fears were soon confirmed. As a result, many members of this group took a neo-positivist stance, in the particular Polish meaning of positivism. It went back to the 19th century, translating into a resignation from military and political opposition against the powers occupying Poland, and instead focusing on the nation's social, economic, and cultural growth. The degree of freedom after 1956 seemed wide enough for these purposes. Thus, any political initiatives were met with distrust, and were often considered provocations, due to a strong belief in the omnipotence of Security Service forces.

The neo-positivist stance gradually became standard for all non-Marxist groups. But it too had its traps. On the one hand, it did help Polish culture and development, on the other, it gave an alibi for cowardice and opportunism. How much help could you accept from the authorities for a project that you considered useful for society? Who was using whom in such a setting? How was one to plan a career without breaching the unwritten rules of decency? The answers to these questions were not easy, and were vehemently discussed.

In 1956 direct oppression of the Catholic Church ended as well. Gomułka agreed to a symbolic representation of the Catholics in the Sejm. They formed two factions.

The “Pax” Society, originating from pre-war nationalist groups, preached nationalistic and antisemitic slogans, which got them close to some factions in the Communist Party. The Church hierarchy considered “Pax” to be a communist diversion against the Church. On the other hand, “Znak” represented a liberal secular viewpoint, and co-operated with the Episcopate, headed by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, released from Stalinist prison.

There were other paths to be taken. Many Poles entering adulthood in the early 1950s were fascinated and truly moved by communist ideology (even if many others engaged on behalf of the regime because of opportunism) [Świda-Ziemia, 2010, pp. 85–134]. For them the exposition of Stalin’s crimes in 1956 was a true shock. Some became cynical, while others sought expiation, often through efforts to reform the communist system and make it more democratic. The latter formed the most militant group of reform-supporters in October 1956. With the abandonment of reforms by Gomułka, they became disillusioned, while in turn the new leader started fighting them as “revisionists”. For some time, this group was under the mistaken impression that reforms could be initiated from inside the Party. This idea stood behind the famous open letter by Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, sent to the Party members in 1964 [Kuroń, Modzelewski, 1966]. Instead of a meaningful discussion, it provoked a wave of repressions, and both of its authors served time in prison.

In March, 1968 the revisionists, whom the Party propaganda now dubbed the “commandos”, were at the heart of the student rebellion. As a result of these events, the consecutive repressions, the wave of antisemitic propaganda, and Poland’s participation in the Warsaw Pact military intervention in Czechoslovakia, the former revisionists broke away from Marxism. From an in-system opposition, they transformed into an anti-system one, putting democracy at the centre of their system of values.

The appearance of the former revisionists on the side of the opposition changed the rules of the game. The commandos did not take the neo-positivist stance. They engaged in politics, and thanks to their better preparation, soon dominated the anti-system discourse.

However, the opposition was not united. Both the liberal intelligentsia, and the Catholic Church, remembered the revisionists’ recent pro-regime past. For the people with no relation to Marxism, the events of 1968 often seemed little more than a communist gang war. The Catholics remembered that the commandos did not support the Church in 1966. Students did not forget the workers’ lack of support in 1968, and they in turn kept in mind the intelligentsia’s inactivity in December 1970. Time and understanding were needed for the forging of a unified anti-communist opposition.

Bridges between these various groups were built during the seemingly stable early years of Edward Gierek’s rule, which began in 1970. In 1974 in his series of

Świętokrzyskie Sermons Wyszyński stressed the importance put by the Church on human rights. Two years later the leader of the commandos Adam Michnik showed the stance of the secular left towards the Church in his book “The Church, the Left, and Dialogue”. The Catholic priest Józef Tischner replied with his own book “The Shape of the Polish Dialogue”. A framework for common action appeared in 1975, with the campaign of protest letters against the planned amendments to the constitution³. The liberal, Catholic, and post-Marxist groups found common ground. Finally, an organised opposition emerged after the workers’ protests of 1976, including the Worker’s Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR)⁴.

The opposition worked under the guarantees of the Helsinki Accords. It was legal, but used conspiratorial methods. It acted within the law, but strived to change the legal and constitutional system. People joined the opposition under their own names, which exposed them to repressions. Longer penal sentences were rare, but detention, the prohibition of trips abroad and the possibility of losing one’s job were to be expected. Several thousand people constituted the thus defined opposition, and several hundred of those served as its “professional” core, choosing political activity over a relatively normal life within the system.

The emergence of a functional opposition made the choices harder for neo-positivists. One could still sustain this stance, but the boundary conditions of one’s decisions changed. Now, notwithstanding the fondness or admiration for members of the opposition, one had to decide whether one would benefit the country more as a worker, or an activist. Moreover, it became even more apparent that the decision to abstain from politics could be motivated (perhaps even unconsciously) by fear and opportunism.

So far we have concentrated on the politically active people, who drew the attention of both contemporary observers and would-be historians. As a rule, however, active people form a minority, with much of the population remaining apolitical. In the years of Stalinism the margin for this type of behaviour was slim, but as early as in the middle of the 1950s the youth rebelled against the official, strict social ceremonies. This generation, dubbed the “moral opposition” [Świda-Ziemia, 2010, pp. 135–223], was resistant to ideology, showed allergic reactions to official newspeak (“mowa-trawa”),

³ With the changes, the constitution would now explicitly include a provision for an alliance with the USSR, and civic rights would depend on fulfilling one’s obligations. Following the protests the authorities made the last provision less stringent, but Parliament passed the changes in 1976, with by one vote abstaining – Stanisław Stomma, MP from the “Znak” faction.

⁴ KOR was created in 1976. In 1977 the right-wing part of the opposition created the Movement for Defence of Human and Civic Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela, ROPCiO). In 1979 the Confederation of Independent Poland (Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej, KPN) came into being. Cf. A. Friszke [1994; 1996, p. 120].

and had an acute sense of humour. Its members sought a sense of belonging in groups of their closest friends. Knowing that this annoyed the authorities, they demonstrated their pro-American and pro-Western stance through fashion, hairdos and music taste.

The authorities called them “bikiniarze” and tried to hinder their activities, but did not decide to start open repressions. In the years of Gomułka’s rule, during the so-called “Small Stabilisation”, the apolitical stance and withdrawal into private life became the norm. Humour played an ever-growing role in the contacts with the official reality. In a way, after the dreadful years of Stalinism, the PPR became progressively more funny. The Polish culture from this period showcases this change, with cult movies such as Marek Piwowski’s “Rejs” of 1970 and the consecutive films by Stanisław Bareja, as well as many excellent satirical shows. This gave Poland the nickname of the “merriest hut in the communist camp”. The government slowly started losing the grip over people’s (or at least the intelligentsia’s) minds to the satirists. The authorities tried to control these processes, but did not attempt to stop them, considering them a safety valve.

The communist system provided an upward social mobility through education and by dismantling the pre-war social order. This mobility helped much of the PPR intelligentsia. For some time the argument that its members owed this to the regime, and that in a free market economy, this would not have been possible, held sway over their imagination. As the political system changed, the new intelligentsia became more prone to question the idea that their social advancement produced a debt to be repaid by resigning from basic civil rights.

The authorities, understanding that they could not count on mass support, concentrated on deepening the society’s atomisation. People’s reluctance to engage in public matters was strengthened by an instilled belief in the omniscience and omnipotence of the Security Service. People who believed it, were prone to see provocation in everything. Moreover, until 1980, it had commonly been assumed that communism would not fall within the lifetime of the then living generation. As a result, if emigration was not an option, one should find a niche where normal life was possible without breaching the limits of decency.

A breakthrough came with the election of John Paul II as the Pope, and with his first pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979. The Pope brought thousands of people out in the streets – they were able to see their own power, and understood that they could organise themselves independent of the authorities. This bore fruit the following year, when in the many-million-strong Solidarity labour union was born over a short period.

There were several reasons for the mass character of the Solidarity movement. One was the return of moral values to the political sphere. Another – the newly-instilled

feeling of power of the population, which made people think that the fall of communism was possible within a reasonable time frame. Finally, convinced that the regime could not oppress everyone, people stopped being so concerned with the identity of the Security Service agents in their company. This broke the barrier of fear.

This mood could only be sustained for a limited time. Signs of disintegration could be seen in the opposition already in the last months before the introduction of Martial Law in December 1981 by the communists headed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. This event stabilised the opposition, but greatly reduced its numbers, pushing millions of Solidarity supporters back into apathy. Laughter became a common reaction to the absurdity and hopelessness of the situation. This can be evidenced in the growth in prominence of “Pomarańczowa alternatywa” (“The Orange Alternative”), a Wrocław-based artist group headed by the self-proclaimed major Waldermar Frydrych. It organised happenings ridiculing militia forces and official decorum [Frydrych, 2002].

The return of Solidarity to the political stage and its victory in the 1989 election was made viable by the change in the political sentiment following the ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev to power. Another important factor was the conviction held by the Polish communist leaders that the system had exceeded its growth potential. Solidarity itself – despite the victory – was merely a shadow of its earlier power.

Paths of memory

Reconciliation

The change in the political system in Poland came about without a bloodshed, through agreement and evolution. For most Poles and the great majority of international commentators it was a reason for pride. From the very beginning, however, some considered the compromise a rotten one, and would have preferred a more evident turning point, something to delineate the PPR and the new free Poland at both the symbolic and moral level. More radical commentators would have perhaps preferred a “blood bath”, although these views were not openly expressed in public [Nijakowski, 2008, p. 206]. The peaceful nature of the changes and the loyalty exhibited by the erstwhile members of the PZPR to the new government did indeed blur the distinction and did not help clear the past events.

The Round Table compromise resulted in the partially free elections held on June 4, 1989. The representatives of the previous regime still controlled some offices: Wojciech Jaruzelski took the office of president, while in Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s

cabinet the Ministries of National Defence and Internal Affairs were under the rule of two regime Generals: Florian Siwicki and Czesław Kiszczak. In his September address, Tadeusz Mazowiecki uttered a phrase, which would long be used against him. He said that the past should be cut off by a “thick line” (“gruba kreska”). While he wanted to convey the need to concentrate on the current affairs and his dislike for collective responsibility, his opponents claimed that his goal was a general amnesty, at the very least at a moral level.

In January 1990 the PZPR self-dissolved. In the aftermath two parties were born: the Social Democratic Union of the Republic of Poland (Polska Unia Socjaldemokratyczna) of Tadeusz Fiszbach, and the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (Socjaldemokracja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, SdRP) of Aleksander Kwaśniewski. While Fiszbach’s party proved ephemeral, the SdRP had a long future ahead of it, forming the backbone of the left-wing block Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, SLD). Moreover, SdRP did not deny its continuity with the PZPR, including the latter’s assets.

The government soon began to dismantle non-democratic institutions, such as the Religion Office (Urząd do Spraw Wyznań), censorship, and the Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa). If the employees of the latter wanted to work in the newly-formed State Security Office (Urząd Ochrony Państwa), they had to pass verification tests, which included judging their personal engagement in human rights violations and the actions taken against the opposition. Throughout the spring and summer of 1990 the government received signals that Security Service documents were being destroyed, despite the orders from General Kiszczak, head of the Security Service. In July 1990 the two communist generals resigned and were replaced with the politicians from the democratic opposition.

Following the change in power, tensions grew in the post-Solidarity camp. It was Wałęsa who recommended Mazowiecki to be appointed to the position of the prime minister, but soon his role was marginalised. During the spring of 1990 those unhappy with the changes (particularly with the relatively slow speed of their introduction) supported the head of Solidarity. They called for new presidential elections, in which Wałęsa would act as the favourite. Jaruzelski did not raise objections and declared his willingness to resign. The tension between Wałęsa and the government grew. Consequently, Mazowiecki decided to run for the office as well. A rift in the post-Solidarity camp occurred during the campaign, called the “High War” (*wojna na górze*). The supporters of introducing changes faster, headed by the twin Kaczyński brothers, Jarosław and Lech, formed the Centre Agreement (Porozumienie Centrum, PC), while Mazowiecki’s followers created the Citizen’s Movement for Democratic Action (Ruch Obywatelski Akcja Demokratyczna, ROAD), which eventually transformed

into the Democratic Union (Unia Demokratyczna) and ultimately the Freedom Union (Unia Wolności, UW).

This rift had much to do with paths taken in the PPR. The ROAD was dominated by the post-revisionist milieu, which had formed the left wing of the KOR. The memories of 1968 and its antisemitic campaign played a special role in their tradition. On the other hand, the PC was formed by the people who had rather taken the neo-positivist stance. They believed – often not without reason – that their background in the opposition had been much longer than that of the post-revisionists. They were annoyed by the preponderance of their opponents' views in the dominant PPR narrative. Even if not lured by antisemitism, they considered placing the events of 1968 at the heart of this narrative as excessive.

At the same time a growing number of new people laid claims to the opposition past. In parallel to the Second Polish Republic, they might be dubbed the “Fourth Brigade”⁵. In 1990 these bogus veterans were already noticeable. For them, it was easier to “join” the neo-positivist tradition of the PC than that of their political opponents. Soon the role of the “Fourth Brigade” in veteran conflicts grew [Kula, 2006, p. 46].

As a result of the “High War”, the game of settling the PPR past would not simply be played between the post-communists and the former oppositionists. Now two factions of the post-Solidarity camp were poised to wage war on each other. Wałęsa won the presidential election. Mazowiecki's defeat was so severe, that in the second round it was Stanisław Tymiński, a mysterious newcomer from Canada, who challenged Wałęsa, rather than the prime minister. Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz represented the post-communist camp and managed to secure a mere 9% of the total vote.

Having won the election, Wałęsa decided not to rely on those who had helped him. He turned to his opponents from the ROAD and to the left under the slogan of “strengthening the left leg”. While it was a rational step to take from the point of view of the head of state, this frustrated his erstwhile allies, and after a few months Wałęsa and the PC fell apart.

At the end of 1991 the first fully democratic parliamentary election took place. While the Democratic Union won the majority of the total vote, its opponents formed a broad coalition under the leadership of the PC, and Wałęsa was reluctantly forced to assign Jan Olszewski the task to form a government.

Under the short rule of Olszewski (December 1991 – June 1992) some issues related to the years of the PPR came to the forefront, in particular the idea of

⁵ The narrative of the Second Polish Republic particularly treasured veterans from the Polish Legions. Soon the number of the self-proclaimed legionaries swelled. Historically only three brigades existed in the Legions. Hence those that tried to “join” the formation after it had been disbanded were ironically called the “Fourth Brigade”.

de-communisation – under which the members of the PZPR would not be allowed to engage in political activity. In the end it was argued that such a solution, reflecting collective responsibility, would be difficult to reconcile with human rights. By far the greatest conflict arose on the topic of lustration [Grzelak, 2005] – in effect the making of the Security Service’s archives public.

Lustration – the First Battle

In May, 1992 the Parliament ordered the Minister of Internal Affairs Antoni Macierewicz to reveal the Ministry’s information concerning the politicians holding the highest posts. Macierewicz’s preparations proceeded at the same time as the vote of no confidence for the government proposed by Wałęsa, giving the entire affair additional drama. On June 2, 1992 Macierewicz released a list of 64 politicians, but from the outset it raised doubts. It was not obvious whether the list enumerated Security Service agents, or just people on whom the Ministry had data, either agents or their victims. Moreover, another list appeared, this one containing not only the name of Lech Wałęsa, but also Leszek Moczulski, a virulent anti-communist. In the heated atmosphere, Olszewski’s government collapsed. It comes as no surprise that the post-Communist left was against the release of the materials in question, but a significant part of the post-Solidarity camp took the same position [Opalińska, 2012, pp. 142–146].

The first battle for lustration ended with the defeat of its proponents and for a time discredited the very idea. Its post-Solidarity opponents argued that the release of the Security Service materials would hurt the former opposition more than it would hurt post-Communists. Moreover, they pointed out that uncritical confidence in the contents of the Security Service files turned erstwhile agents into true arbiters of the new post-Solidarity elite.

The proponents of lustration were mostly found among right-wing politicians, many of whom thought they had missed the advancement opportunities following the change of regime. Another source of proponents was the “Fourth Brigade”. The latter, who had little (or indeed nothing) to do with the pre-1989 opposition, had never been the subject of interest of the Security Service. Thus they were free to attack true veterans, perhaps hoping to take their positions, or even a part of their legend. One particularly damaging aspect of this process was the attack on Lech Wałęsa, alleged to be a Security Service agent “Bolek”. The belated zeal of the “Fourth Brigade” was accurately evidenced in the saying “I wasn’t so PRO (Communist) before, to now have to be so ANTI (Communist)”.

The proponents of lustration did indeed consider the Security Service files unconditionally trustworthy, arguing that the Secret Service “would not have lied

to itself". From their point of view, a signature placed on any document represented sound evidence of one's co-operation with the Security Service. This included the so called "departure instructions", signed by everyone going abroad on business, or declarations of loyalty (pledges of adherence to the Constitutions), which people were asked to sign at various occasions. In the 1980s signing the latter might have been considered an act of opportunism, but it was never treated as an obligation to co-operate with the regime. Now this changed.

Perhaps the most telling point is that the attack was directed not at the perpetrators, the former Security Service agents, but at their victims, the people they preyed upon. The erstwhile oppositionists, defending their good name in court, were at times forced to call upon the Security agents who had worked on their cases. Thus the agents once again were given free reign to determine their former victims' fates. Macierewicz's action undermined the position of the entire post-Solidarity camp.

Interlude

In 1993–1997 Poland was ruled by the coalition of the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the agrarian Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL). The coalition included people from the PPR's power structures. Their ascension to power was possible due to a surge in the anti-Solidarity sentiment⁶. The fall of communism brought about a rapid rise in unemployment, and the fall of many enterprises. This caused a form of nostalgia for the previous system in many suddenly bereft of support. This sentiment was fuelled by naïve attacks of the right on the entire heritage of the PPR. Many people treated them as attacks on their own memory and their own achievements⁷. On a symbolic plane, this fight took place in Warsaw, where some called for the demolition of the gargantuan Palace of Culture. Built in the 1950s, at first it was indeed a symbol of Soviet domination, but over time citizens of the capital got used to its peculiar style and started to treat it as the emblem of their city. The post-communists ridiculed this destructive zeal. It was no coincidence that Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who successfully ran for president in 1995, did so under the tag "Vote for (our) future". Thanks to their electoral success, the post-communists suppressed any legal attempts to address the memory of the previous period.

⁶ On views on Solidarity, see B. Szacka [2006, pp. 187–205].

⁷ Studies have shown that the natural fondness to the memories of youth and the need for meaning in one's biography are insufficient to explain this tendency, and argue that the worse a person's contemporary situation, the higher the chance for this type of nostalgia; M. Ziółkowski [2001, p. 16]; Brocki [2001, pp. 26–33]; Kałwa, Klich-Kluczevska [2001, pp. 57–64].

General Jaruzelski fought his own battle for a place in the history of the nation [Nijakowski, 2008, pp. 207–208]. On many occasions he would apologise and take responsibility for the consequences of martial law. At the same time, however, he defended his decision, as the choice of the lesser evil. To the despair of right-wing politicians, about half of the public opinion were willing to agree with that position, in the sense that a Soviet military intervention would have indeed been the “greater evil”. Jaruzelski, however, was unable to let go of the communist-style Aesopian language, and described this “greater evil” as civil strife. Significantly fewer people agreed with such an assessment.

In 1997 in Jachranka near Warsaw both historians and protagonists of the events of 1981 held a conference. During its proceedings, Soviet leaders declared that in 1981 they were not planning to intervene in Poland, and that Jaruzelski in fact asked them for help during the preparations for martial law. This complicated the General’s position, even if the Russians’ claims were not to be taken at face value. He remained a divisive figure, and the subject to heated public debate, culminating with his death in 2014.

Another touchstone of the attitudes towards the PPR was the case of Colonel Ryszard Kukliński. As an officer of the Polish General Staff he started working for the CIA in 1972. In 1981 he warned the Americans about the plans for martial law, and was forced to flee Poland and go to the West. In Poland he was sentenced to death. Rehabilitated in the 1990s, he came back. For the right he was a hero and “the first Polish officer in NATO”. For many officers, however, he remained a traitor, and an oath breaker. After his death in 2004, he was buried in the Warsaw military cemetery in a place of honour. The Colonel was also the protagonist of a feature film by Władysław Pasikowski *Jack Strong* of 2014. It was well received and enhanced the positive legend of Kukliński [Kukliński, 1987; Weiser, 2009].

Perhaps most importantly, these years saw the search for the proper narrative style for descriptions of the previous regime. Gradually a mocking, grotesque style became the mainstream, fuelled by, among other things, fondly remembered movies, including those made by Bareja. This convention did not fit the years of Stalinism, but in the 1990s relatively few witnesses remembered this dark period. The right-wing orthodox group was indignant at this mocking approach, as they considered it to partially reflect disrespect for the system’s victims. Arguably, it was more a matter of personal taste and sensitivity rather than of real differences in politics⁸.

⁸ On dilemmas of the mocking approach, see L. Kołakowski [1996, pp. 146–158]. On the contemporary state of this narrative style: K. Stańczak-Wislicz [2013, pp. 151–154].

Lustration – the Second Battle

The return to power of the post-Solidarity parties in the form of a coalition between Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność (AWS) and Unia Wolności (UW) in 1997 meant that the issue of PPR past would re-enter the political stage. The new coalition addressed three issues: de-communisation, lustration, and granting people access to the archives of the old regime's apparatus of oppression.

The draft of a de-communisation bill of June 1998 stipulated that for 10 years PZPR members would not be allowed to hold public offices. It gained little support not only of the UW, but also of some AWS MPs. As a result, the idea of de-communisation fell through for good: in the coming years returning to this issue seemed pointless, since a growing number of those that would be affected approached the age of retirement.

The first Polish lustration law was passed in 1997, in the period preceding the election, when the combined forces of the opposition together with some votes of the PSL were enough to defeat the SLD. In June 1998, the law was amended and the lustration process was launched. The Court of Appeal in Warsaw was authorised to examine the lustration declarations of people holding public offices. The rules stipulated that such individuals were to declare whether they collaborated with the Security Service of the PPR. Admitting to such co-operation was morally reprehensible, but there were no penalties. These only applied to those that committed the so called "lustration falsehood". Those declarations were then subject to verification by the Public Interest Ombudsman (Rzecznik Interesu Publicznego), Bogusław Nizieński. This verification was to be based on archival data [Opalińska, 2012, pp. 160–163]. The individuals submitting the declarations had no access to the archives themselves. In this situation, Security Service agents often played the role of arbiters, and the court was more likely to believe them, than their erstwhile victims.

December 1998 saw the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) [Dudek, 2011], initially headed by Professor Leon Kieres. To pass the relevant bill, the Parliament successfully overturned President Kwaśniewski's veto. The Institute was to oversee all the archival sources connected with the previous regime's oppressive apparatus, now gathered in one place. Over time, it would also launch lustration proceedings. The Institute was supposed to combine research, education, and investigation activities, the latter carried out by its prosecution department.

In the years 2001–2005 the SLD got back to power. This period showcased an erosion of the influence of the powerful daily "Gazeta Wyborcza" and its chief editor, Adam Michnik. Its milieu was a pillar of the movement for the reconciliation with

the past. Michnik, one of the heroes of the opposition, after 1989 grew to become a moral authority for the liberal part of the post-Solidarity camp, while at the same time drawing dislike from the right-wing faction. He ostentatiously blurred the old political dividing lines. His apogee came in the years 2001–2003, when he “awarded post-communists with moral certificates”, and together with President Kwaśniewski and Prime Minister Leszek Miller (both post-communists) formed an informal triumvirate. As Miller later stated: “Kwaśniewski and myself, we had the real political power. Michnik ruled the people’s minds in opinion-forming circles”⁹.

In 2002, the Rywin scandal broke out, ruining the reputation of the left wing, and undermining Michnik’s position. Lew Rywin, a Polish film producer, approached Michnik with a corruption proposal. Michnik himself was the victim and taped the proposal, but delayed informing the police, instead carrying out his own journalist investigation. As a result, he did not come through the scandal unscathed.

The scandal changed the political climate in Poland, strengthening the right wing and provoking a large anti-corruption movement. The right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość led by the Kaczyński twins secured both the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2005, contesting the political developments following the fall of Communism and championing the idea of the Fourth Polish Republic. The new Republic was supposed to be founded on the values of “truth” and “high morals”. The elections marked the beginning of a new approach to the politics of history (or the politics of memory), where the state mandated a new interpretation of the historical narratives in the areas of education and foreign affairs. This sparked many discussions – both about past events, and about ways of describing them.

Another scandal broke out in the early 2005, when the journalist Bronisław Wildstein published a large list of names he had smuggled out of the IPN [Opalińska, 2012, pp. 197–198]. The list was in truth a combined archival index of various files in the Warsaw IPN. Wildstein’s actions were a significant change. Until then lustration had only concerned people active on the political stage. Now thousands of private individuals were subject to accusation of co-operating with the communist oppression apparatus, sometimes only through the mere sharing of the same names as the people on the list. Wildstein and his supporters talked about the “enhancing morals”, but in reality their actions caused a lot of unwarranted damage. Moreover, as we mentioned above, in times of the PPR, engaging in politics required disregarding the actions of the Secret Security and not trying to identify agents in one’s milieu. Wildstein’s list changed this. His approach also challenged some cultural standards associated with Polish patriotism, such as the archetype of a wrongdoer, who later

⁹ Quoted from R. Krasowski [2014, p. 190].

repents. It was represented in Polish discourse by such 19th century literary figures as Jacek Soplica and Andrzej Kmicic¹⁰. In the mode of thinking of the lustration supporters there was no place for penance, and no actions could rectify one's former mistakes. This was the true posthumous victory of the Security Service.

The problem of lustration intensified in the fall of 2006, under the government of Jarosław Kaczyński. A new lustration bill envisaged making public all secret documents deposited in the IPN archives. The supporters of this approach argued that all the undisclosed files could be used to blackmail individuals. However, this involved the materials, which the Secret Security Service itself collected to blackmail the opponents of the regime, often pertaining to their private matters or health issues. Releasing them could be seen an act of pointless cruelty against the heroes of the former opposition.

Under the new bill, the people who had to submit declarations also involved journalists, lawyers, and academic teachers. This extended the scope of lustration from a small political elite to thousands of citizens, many of whom had nothing to do with politics. The procedure itself was considered humiliating for many, and even those that had undergone it under the previous regulations had to do it once again. As a result, some refused as an act of protest, even though they knew it meant resignation from their job. This included a Member of the European Parliament and a former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bronisław Geremek, as well as several journalists. While in 1992 many lustration supporters were recruited from the "Fourth Brigade", in 2007, due to the flow of time, they were often young people. Born after the year 1973, they did not have to undergo the procedure, and a mass purge in the higher echelons of society could open a path to advancement. Moreover, their memory of the previous regime was indirect, and they did not understand the context of the previous actions taken.

The showdown took place on May 11, 2007, when the new design of lustration was subject to the proceedings by the Constitutional Tribunal. On the night before, the IPN published the materials that discredited two judges of the Court, they were consequently excluded from the proceedings. Despite these scare tactics, the Court severely criticised the bill. The President of the Court, Jerzy Stępień, ended his many-hour-long conference with a rhetorical question: "Should everyone really know everything about everyone else?"; and dead silence fell amongst all the present.

¹⁰ Jacek Soplica, a character from the 19th century national epic "Pan Tadeusz" by Adam Mickiewicz, committed a crime in this youth, but did penance by working as a patriotic emissary as priest Robak. Andrzej Kmicic, the protagonist of "Potop" by Henryk Sienkiewicz from the late 19th century, underwent a similar transformation.

Conclusions

Kaczyński's defeat in the 2007 election and the fall of PiS's idea of the Fourth Polish Republic pushed the idea of addressing the PPR issues out of the mainstream of political life for a time. With the decreasing importance of post-communists, the balance of politics shifted: the post-communist/post-opposition divide stopped being the defining conflict on the political stage. The division between the two parties of the post-Solidarity descent became more important [Kaniowski, 2006, pp. 26–35]. One of the prizes was the right to veteran traditions and the right to shape the dominant narrative of the communist times. The “late veterans” tried to discredit the true veterans, hoping to take their place. On the other hand, the post-communists were too experienced politicians not to seize this opportunity to grant themselves a moral amnesty.

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