# Negotiating the Nation's Official Past: The Politics of Commemoration of WWII in Communist Poland

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## Abstract

Why was the Holocaust absent in the official representation of WWII in communist Poland? The paper discusses this question from the perspective of politics of commemoration and argues that the answer must be made relative to the dominant features of the three phases in the communist period in Poland. In the first phase there dominated an internationalist image of WWII with no place for national differentiations. In the second and third phases, the state, in need of legitimacy, negotiated with the society the official memory of the past. Hence the paper shows that the absence of the Holocaust was motivated by the nationalist tendencies in the state's attempts to secure its legitimacy. In this way the paper opposes the simplistic answers often encountered in public discourse which either absolve the society from having any influence on the official image, or explain the absence of the Holocaust by reference to the inherent Polish anti-Semitism.

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# *NEGOTIATING THE NATION'S OFFICIAL PAST*

## *The Politics of Commemoration of WWII in Communist Poland*[1]

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## Introduction

Recently, academic literature, as well as public debates, has become saturated with the subject of memory. Difficult and complicated war memories are at the heart of this literature and debates. One can even speak of a certain obsession with war guilt and trauma, which all over the western world have suddenly gained enormous significance. Poland is not an exception. The country has been shaken by the publicly revealed story of the mass murder of Jews committed by Poles during the Second World War in a small town Jedwabne in Eastern Poland.[3] Although the facts seem uncontestable, enormous media coverage has been given to the question whether Poles, also the victims of the war, were capable of such a crime. Politicians, scholars, intellectuals, the Catholic Church authorities are all divided in their opinions. The results of social surveys indicate that 'ordinary' people are likewise in disagreement. The important aspect of the debate has

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[1] The paper is a part of requirements of TCDS fellowship at the New School University which I was kindly awarded in the fall of 2001. I would very much like to stress that although the fall of 2001 was a sad and difficult time for New York, I was given a chance to work in a friendly and helpful environment. Therefore, I would like to take the opportunity and give my thanks to the fellowship's sponsors and organizers, especially to Elżbieta Matynia, TCDS's director, and Timo Lyyra, Codrina Rada, and Karolina Szmagalska, its staff members. I am very grateful to Prof. Vera Zolberg and Dr. Irena Grudzińska-Gross who commented on the earlier versions of my work and provided me with valuable suggestions. I am also deeply indebted to all the critical comments I received from Elizabeth Bachner and Juan Marco Vaggione, my co-fellows.
This paper is a part of a larger enterprise, i.e. my Ph.D. dissertation, in which I intend to examine the impact of the politics of commemoration of WWII on creating national communality in communist Poland.

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[3] The public debate started in 2000 with the publication of Jan T. Gross's book, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*. Sejny: Pogranicze. The book was later translated into English (Gross 2001). The author describes how the Jewish inhabitants of the town were slaughtered by their Polish neighbors in 1941. In the concluding part, Gross calls for a new Polish historiography of the Nazi occupation, one which would include the extent of the Polish crimes on Jews. The uniqueness of Gross's book does not lie in the fact that it was the first publication in Poland referring to the Polish participation in the Holocaust. However, it was the first academic publication which evoked wide public response. So far the public attention was several times stirred up by indications of Poles' impassive attitude to the extermination of Jews. In the light of Gross's book, Poles are not only passive bystanders, but also active persecutors.

been that it also instigated the general discussion on Polish-Jewish relations, shaking or enforcing the existing stereotypes.

The debate which has started in Poland provokes some questions. First, why is Poland *currently* revising the black-and-white schema of its history's interpretation; why do the war victims cease to be perceived as solely national victims *now*; why *at this and not any other time*, is the domestic face of war crime perpetrators being revealed? This is the question of the specificity of a historical moment. Second, why *is it necessary to remind* the Poles that they were not the only victims of the Second World War, and, moreover, that they sometimes acted as persecutors? The paper concentrates on the latter issue and examines the creation of official memory of WWII in communist Poland in which the Jews rarely appeared as openly recognized victims.

This absence is striking for at least three reasons. The first one is related to the history of WWII, of which the Jews together with the Roma were the primary victims, in the sense that Nazi policies aimed at their total annihilation. The death camps for the Jews from all over Europe, and for Polish Jews, were created on the occupied territories of Poland. Next, Jews had been present in Poland for centuries, and, although often treated as "strangers", they were a visible and undeniable part of social, cultural, and economic life. When Poland lost its large minority, she lost an important part of her pre-war world. Finally, the creation of official images of WWII was an important feature of the politics of national states in Europe, including the politics of communist authorities (Judt 2000, Weiner 2001). Thus, the question is – if there was something like the creation of the official war memory in Poland - why were Jews absent in this memory, although from the historical perspective they were undeniable victims of the war and their loss seriously affected the social fabric of the Polish society?

The paper examines the issue from the perspective of the politics of commemoration. While dealing with this politics it is impossible to go beyond the fact that for over forty years Poland was governed by non-democratically elected communist elite. Intuitively, one could argue that in a politically defenseless society, the ruling elite might invent whatever it wants and even forbid the subjects to keep their own diaries (Orwell 1949). Therefore, the historical responsibility for the striking omission of the

Holocaust would be attributed to the elite who - for whatever purposes – invented the story of WWII without Jews. This paper however argues that in the reality of communist Poland the society also had an influence over the creation of war representations. It claims that from 1956 onward, the politics of commemoration of WWII was a subject of negotiation between the state and the society, primarily because the state was in constant search of support. Nevertheless, the paper also rejects the simplistic answer that only manifestation of anti-Semitism– both on behalf of the ruling elite and the society - was the comfortable base of this negotiation. Although, anti-Semitism played an undeniably important role, especially in the so-called March campaign of 1968 (when on the wave of anti-Semitic slogans, Poles of Jewish origins were driven out from the country), there were also other factors operative in evicting the Holocaust from the official memory. These were, primarily, the internationalist ideology and, secondly, the process of creating of national community. The paper treats the issue of the lack of acknowledgment of the Holocaust as a thread of a larger story – i.e. the politics of commemoration of WWII in general. It shows that this politics and its outcomes were by no means constant and the motivations behind evicting the Holocaust from the official memory might have been very different depending on political circumstances.

The paper is not innovative in the sense of adding anything particularly new to the existing knowledge on the content of war representations in communist Poland. This subject has been already studied both from the perspective of the Holocaust memory (Cała 2000, Steinlauf 1997, Young 1993, Irwin-Zarecka 1989) and from the perspective of the Polish memory (Szacka 2000, Kula 2000, Trąba 2000, Sawisz 1990, Szpociński 1989, Bębenek 1981). Several times I quote the materials which are the results of my own research, but they do not affect the existing interpretations. I also do not attempt to give the overall picture of war representations in communist Poland, as this task would go much beyond the scope of the paper. Rather, the main purpose of the paper has to do with conceptualization of the politics of commemoration in communist Poland and is threefold. First, to grasp the reasons and dynamics of the change of the officially created war memory; second, to show that certain aspects of war memory were negotiated with the society; and third, to argue that the lack of acknowledgment of the Holocaust was also an aspect of this negotiation process in the later phases of communism.

The paper breaks into three parts. In the first part I discuss the main concepts which I find useful in thinking on the politics of commemoration of WWII in Poland: collective memory, legitimatization, and the structure of decision making. In the second part, I give a brief historical outline of the post-war situation and I present three distinct periods of communism which affected the extent of negotiation between the state and the society as far as the representations of the war were concerned. Special attention is paid to the representations of WWII in the March propaganda of 1968. This propaganda describes well the shift from communist to nationally oriented legitimizing rhetoric of the state (Zaremba 2001). Finally, in the concluding part, I summarize these three distinct periods as to their contribution to evicting of the Holocaust from the official representations.

## Instrumentalization or negotiation?
## Collective memory, legitimization, and the politics of commemoration

Why should one interest oneself with the official representations of the past? The shortest answer could probably run: because other people care about them. A broader answer lies in the ideologies of nation states, which, through commemorative rhetoric, impose certain truth-claims on the past. According to this rhetoric, the past has something to offer to the present. The official representations try to overcome different memories and build one in the name of a nation; but they neither have to represent the past's true version nor its image shared by some groups within society. They are open to reformulation, disagreement and change (e.g. Sawisz 1990, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991, Zolberg 1998). While all these general statements about the nature of commemoration in nation states are already widely known, it is by no means obvious what makes the official representations come out and change in the historical reality of a given country (Olick 1998). Therefore, the purpose of inquiry into one country (i.e. Poland) is to provide insight into such a reality.

The subject of memory in social and historical studies has recently gained enormous coverage. The term "social" or "collective" memory, first coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1950), may refer, in the contemporary literature, to at least three different

dimensions. First, it may refer to the fact that individual memory is socially organized and socially mediated. Second, it may be understood as the shared image of the past held by individuals who did not necessarily experience the past but learned about it from somewhere. Third, it may refer to the socially produced artifacts that are the memory repositories (museums, films, monuments, word coinages, place names, text books, etc.) (Schudson 1995). These three understandings are different, and indeed they raise controversies among scholars. Especially, the second and third usages of the term provoke disagreements. When, for instance, Pierre Nora talks about memory, he defines it as "what remains of the past in the lived reality of groups, or what these groups make of the past" (Le Goff 1992, 95). Some authors think that this understanding of the term is too general and prefer to concentrate on the actual, "living" memory or attempts to commemorate events undertaken by those sets of individuals who can actually remember these events (Winter and Sivan, ed. 2000). Others try to avoid the problem by admitting that their use of the term is only metaphorical, in fact interchangeable with the notion of tradition (Szpociński 1989, Szacka 1990).

The purpose of the present paper is not to clarify the semantic controversies within the field. The distinction presented above is analytically useful, even though one could probably think of a better term than "social memory". The main focus of the paper is on the third use of the term. The main interest is how the official images of the past - a specific type of artifacts enjoying the formal recognition of the state[4] -were created in the reality of communist Poland, and why artifacts produced in different periods had different contents. I usually refer to these artifacts as representations of the past, but the level of analysis here is not "shared images of the past held by individuals", but the images encoded in different types of texts. The process of creation of these artifacts I label as the politics of commemoration.

The literature on collective memory has already provided us with some macro-level answers to the question what makes the image of the past change. As Olick and

[4] What is and what is not an official representation may depend on the context. Usually, the state's representatives speeches, textbooks, monuments, street names are treated as the official representations. As far as the communist period is concerned the analytical enterprise is facilitated by the restriction over the freedom of speech, so in most of the publications, and especially in the press, one can find the official representations of the past.

Robbins observe, a powerful line of explanation is so-called presentism, which runs through most of the sociological literature on memory. This approach "documents ... how groups use the past for present purposes, and that the past is a particularly useful resource for expressing interests" (Olick and Robbins 1998, 128). Within presentism, they distinguish two main lines of argumentation: instrumental and meaning dimension of memory. The former sees images of the past as direct manipulation for particular purposes; Eric Hobsbawm's work is the most prominent example here (Hobsbawm and Ranger, ed. 1983, Hobsbawm 1990). The latter "sees selective memory as an inevitable consequence of the fact that we interpret the world...on the basis of our own experience and within cultural framework" (e.g. Mead 1959, Mannheim 1969).

In this paper, I want to follow the first line of argumentation, although I am aware that the meaning dimension is equally important and might be very well interrelated or reciprocal with the instrumental dimension. For instance, the instrumental use of the past may affect our cultural framework; moreover, those who manipulate the past also live in a particular cultural framework and inevitably draw on it. As far as the Polish case is concerned, the issues of generation turn (even within the elite itself) or the anti-Semitic component of the culture have much power in explaining the change and content of the official representations of WWII. Therefore, the question of evicting the Holocaust could be examined from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. However, we do not have enough data to examine all the cultural aspects of the formation of the representations of the war in Poland. In turn, these aspects would need to be problematized to a large extent in order to avoid too simple answers, such as, for instance, that – functioning sometimes in the Western public discourse - of the inherent Polish anti-Semitism materialized in pre-war persecution of Jews, intensified during the war period, and having its last word during the post-war persecution and forced expulsion of the remnants of the Polish Jewry from the country in 1968. This answer takes *pars pro toto*, overlooks political conditions in which statements on the past were made, and does not pay attention to any complementary cultural factors.

Given the methodological difficulties, the paper puts aside the problem of changes of the cultural framework which might have in turn affected the changes of the official representations of the past. Its main stress is on the political mechanisms, which is

justified by the fact that the ruling elite of the communist period dominated over the creation of these representations. Nevertheless, the paper tries to overcome a simplistic approach in which the official representations would be only the outcome of the coercive will of the narrow party's apparatus. In awareness of the important changes which took place in the structure of decision making of the regime, the paper argues that these changes also affected the content of the official representations of WWII. An important aspect of these changes was the appearance of a certain level of freedom for expressing demands from the society and, therefore, some space for negotiations between the state – represented by the communist elite – and the society.

In this respect, it is necessary to examine the concepts of the legitimization of power and instrumentalization of the past; first because they are interrelated in the literature; second, because it is often assumed that the important changes which were taking place in the communist period were caused by the fact that the regime was in search of legitimacy. The concept of legitimacy is understood here in the Weberian sense: as a common belief among subjects that a certain type of domination is justified. While Weber's concept is useful, it is necessary to go beyond his three pure types of legitimate order (legal, charismatic, and traditional). Neither any one of them nor their combination is suitable enough to understand the justification of domination in communist regimes. Indeed, while in communism one can find certain aspects of legal, charismatic and traditional legitimization, one can also see far more. For instance, Leslie Holmes, summarizing the existing literature on the issue, enumerated ten models of legitimization. Beside the three Weberian types, he considered goal-rational (teleological), eudaemonic (conducive to happiness), official nationalist, new traditional, and external (based on a formal recognition, informal support, or the existence of an external role model) attempts to built legitimacy (Holmes 1997). Certain ways of legitimization were preferred depending on the circumstances. Although none of them let the communist regime achieve the stage of full legitimacy, some of them were more successful than others in convincing people to the regime.

The nationalist rhetoric of legitimization was a very important tool in the hands of the communist authorities in Poland, which looks paradoxical when one examines the communist ideology which initially argued against the existence of nation states

(Zaremba 2001). The politics of commemoration of WWII was one of the aspects of the nationalist legitimization in Poland. However, the politics of commemoration was not necessarily tied to nationalist rhetoric. The politics of commemoration of WWII was also important within the internationalist ideology, where not a nation but a working class or large unidentified masses were the main point of reference. The question which follows is that of the circumstances in which the nationalist aspects of representations of WWII were taking the place of the internationalist ones. And in this respect one must think over the very concept of instrumentalization of the past as related to legitimization of power, i.e. distorting and manipulating of the past on purpose, undertaken by the ruling elites. The main problem is whether any attempts to establish national legitimacy on the basis of the past might be narrowed down only to the instrumentalization of this past, especially when the past was actually experienced by the subjects.

A purely manipulative use of the past as a means to maintain power relations was proposed by Hobsbawm. While in fact national states are composed of competing different groups of interests based on economic, ethnic, race, religious, gender or language cleavages, myths of common roots are being invented for the purpose of legitimacy. What follows from Hobsbawm's account is that the official images are in fact no-man's land, and they only suppress true collective identities. Intuitively, Hobsbawm's perspective would be especially applicable to communist regimes, where the decision making process was not democratic. However, if the legitimacy is to be a strategic end, the issue is how the past is being distorted in the process of legitimization. First, we can assume that if the state's authorities care about gaining support of the society (or a part of society) on the basis of the past, they should make it as much plausible to as many target groups as possible. Therefore, they should narrate in such a way that would be appealing to everyone they want to compromise. This assumption is not yet conflicting with Hobsbawmian mythmaking account.

Second, if the literature on collective memory makes any sense, then there is no *tabula rasa* situation, especially in the case when the past to which the state's authorities refer was actually experienced, as in the case of WWII in Poland. Something important in the past had really happened and people's memories are already organized around these events (although they might perceive them very differently). In other words, it is not that

the state's authorities need to invent the story, but rather they need to reinvent it on the basis of many existing accounts of the events. Collective memories of groups may not be static, but they are still powerful enough to be either skeptical or appreciative about some kinds of narrativization. Therefore, the official image to be successful must serve the interests of the ruling elite without at the same time contradicting the memories of different groups.

The final issue to touch upon is that of decision-makers. The official representations of the past, as any other policies, are outcomes of political decisions which are not necessarily made only by the ruling elite. Contrary to Hobsbawm's account, the literature provides us with telling examples which show that representations are not only the products of the ruling elite's narrow interests. Commemorative practices might equally well be results of social differentiation, discontent or compromise (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Different groups might be interested in officializing a particular image of the past to gain for instance direct benefits or to cope with grief and trauma (Winter and Sivan, ed. 2000). Therefore, a partial answer to the question why the official past change lies also in the structure of decision making and in determining who, in the given circumstances, is eligible to make decisions. Although the structure of decision making in the communist Poland was not democratic, it was not only hierarchical either..

In this paper, I distinguish three distinct models for the Polish communism: the strong state vs. the atomized society, the interest group state, and the weakening state vs. the strengthening society. Similar typology was used for analyzing the structure of economic decision making (Rychard 1995), but it seems to correspond well with other dimensions of political decisions. These three models correspond more or less with the historical periodization from the late forties to 1956, from 1956 to the late seventies, and from the late seventies to the collapse of the regime, and are followed by the establishment of democracy. In the later part of the paper I show that the attempts at gaining legitimacy on the basis of representations of WWII were especially important in the two later periods of communism. I argue that in these periods the official images created in the earliest phase were to a large extent negotiated with the society.

## The making of the official past in Poland

War as a beginning

The war led Poland to demographic catastrophe and material destruction. The total number of the dead is estimated for 6 million, half of it being Jews. Poland lost its minorities – one third of the pre-war population: Jews in Holocaust, and two other largest communities, Germans and Ukrainians, in consequence of border shifts, population movements, and polonizing policies of the new authorities. The country's cultural and political elites were wiped out: either dead or in exile. The post-war landscape was full of former victims of concentration camps, soldiers, members of domestic resistance, POWs, repatriates, orphans, widows, and people suffering from illness and poverty. Managing of this landscape was a difficult task for the communist authorities – the new political elite not much welcome by the society. It was difficult not only because of economic hardships but also because of different war memories shared by different groups in society; the memories that all too often conflicted with the official version of the past.

During the war, Poland produced remarkably large anti-Nazi resistance in comparison with the rest of Europe, but it was not a united resistance. The largest organization was the Home Army backed by the Underground State with close links to the Polish government in exile in London - it had strong anti-Soviet connotations; others, smaller organizations ranged between those with communist and extreme right wing ideological affiliations. Not only members of domestic guerilla had different war experiences, the same applied to Polish soldiers who had been fighting abroad either aside the Western Allies or the Red Army. As the memory of heroic deeds was complicated, so was the memory of suffering.

The war, which in the eyes of the communists had been led by the Soviet Union against the Nazi Germany, in the eyes of a large part of society was also the war instigated by the Soviet Union, in the effect of which Polish citizens were murdered or sent to Gulags, the country lost its Eastern territories, and ultimately its independence, becoming one of the USSR's satellites. As far as the Nazi occupation is concerned, Germans were not interested in compromising any layer of the Polish society. In this

respect, Poland was unique in comparison with other European countries which at various times of the war were given an opportunity of collaboration. That fact led later gave to a proud national statement that only Poland produced „no Quislings". Although the measures taken against ethnic Poles were extremely harsh, which is well visible in the death toll; different layers of the society suffered differently, with Jews and Roma destined for total annihilation.

Therefore, the communists had to operate in a difficult situation, complicated to a large extent by their dependence to the Soviet Union, where blueprints of the official war stories were drafted for use in the USSR's satellites. Amir Weiner points out that in the Soviet Union itself, the myth of the Great Patriotic War was complementary to the myth of the Bolshevik Revolution, becoming even the primary narrative on the basis of which the relations between the state and society were shaped (the notion of a war traitor replacing the notion of a *kulak*, etc.) (Weiner 2001). The war was therefore not only a legacy but also a point of departure in legitimizing the texture of power relations in the post-war reality.

To summarize, if the nations are to be imagined communities where "violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own'" then the communists had to work hard to produce such a community (Anderson 1991, 206). WWII left an extremely complicated web of experiences to be remembered and difficult to be iconized in an unequivocal manner. It was difficult in Poland, where "everyone had their share of wartime family stories either to tell or listen to" (Gross 2000). It was made even more difficult by the versions of national community competing with the communist narrative, articulated by the Catholic Church strongly rooted in the society, and later by democratic opposition.

The strong state vs. the atomized society

In 1948, following three years of relative political freedom, the communists in Poland, as well as in other Central European countries, consolidated their power. The period which started in the late 1940s and ended in 1956 was the time of harsh stalinization, when individuals were defenseless against the state power, and the state aimed at changing the existing social fabric. The organization of the decision making was

hierarchical with its apex in Moscow; the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish communist party only translated the main directives. Obviously, the official images of the past were also created there.

The USSR had vested interest in inviting local populations to believe that they had been innocent victims of the German assault and full partners of liberation led by heroic Soviet Union, putting emphasis on few traitors, the label under which the authorities could sentence anyone they found inconvenient (Judt 2000). The war was presented as a necessary catharsis, or a break with the past capitalist stage, with the midst of war as the beginning of a bright future.

If one looks at the official representations of war heroes and war victims of that period, they referred mainly to a communist identity or to large, unidentified masses who were at the same martyrs of the war and would-be fighters for future happiness under communism. The persecutors were not only the Nazis, but also the whole "imperialist" and, by definition, "fascist" West, which still needed to be defeated. This is to be seen in the following excerpts from speeches by the leader of one of the satellite organizations of the communist party:

> Our slogans are: "Let's oppose the American and Nazi fascism", "Auschwitz, Treblinka, Ravesnbruck, Dachau, Majdanek – never again". May these slogans show us the aims of our daily toil and struggle! You ex-members of the Resistance, and you victims of fascism, patriots who have devoted your lives to freeing your peoples and countries from fascist barbarism do fight against remilitarization of Germany, against the growing war budgets! [5]
>
> The members of our Union, who only yesterday were fighting for the independence of our country, the political prisoners who had been through the gehenna of Auschwitz, Mauthaussen, Buchenwald and many other Nazi death camps asked me to tell you that the bonds of friendship tied in the Nazi camps and prisons during those terrible years of the war are today as strong as they were yesterday… Ex-members of the Resistance! Ex-prisoners saved from death in Nazi concentration camps by the heroic Soviet Army! Men, women and children! Do demand that those who resort to biological warfare face the judgement of nations! [6]

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[5] In speech of chairman of Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, Franciszek Jóźwiak: *Łączy nas wspólna walka o pokój przeciw amerykańsko-hitlerowskiemu faszyzmowi* [United in fighting for peace against the American and Nazi fascism] "Trybuna Ludu" Sep. 13, 1951 (my translation). This and other materials quoted in the text come from one collection of the Open Society Archives in Budapest: POL. 116-2. 300/50/1/1436, 1437, 1438.

[6] *Ibidem.*

These *victims of fascism* were rarely referred to as Jews. It was characteristic for the communist ideology of the period that although it considered the Nazi policies as racist and reactionary it did not like to name the target groups of those policies. The Jewish identity of the survivors was also rarely mentioned. For instance, when already in 1946 the government had decided to make some effort to fight anti-Semitism through the program of reeducation, it established the League to Combat Racism (Liga do Walki z Rasizmem).

The largest concentration camp in Poland, Auschwitz, from the very start was conceived to be the memorial of internationalist cast as far its victims were concerned; its barracks were converted into national pavilions with the stress on “progressive” martyrdom which had taken place there. The nearby death camp Birkenau, where over 1.5 million of Jews had been gassed, was not given any special recognition for a long time. The only important solely Jewish memorial was built in the acknowledgment of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, however it also stressed the revolutionary aspects of the struggle. In Nathan Rapoport’s monument, unveiled in 1948, the Uprising leader, Mordechaj Anielewicz “in his bare chest, tattered clothes, and rolled-up sleeves, clutching his grenade almost as a hammer... is unmistakably proletarian, marching forth as both worker and partisan to lead his fighters” (Young 1993, 174).

One must notice that other groups did not fare better than Jews in the official representations of that period. The propaganda was reluctant to admit the Polish identity of the martyrs of the war. The prominence was given to the resistance and the suffering of the communists, led in their fight by the heroic Soviet Union. Polish soldiers who had fought aside the Western Allies were often arrested upon their return to Poland. The most painful bone of contention with society was that of the official representation of the Home Army, which was announced to have been reactionary and fascist, and its former members were persecuted. The Warsaw Uprising – in effect of which the city had been completely destroyed by Germans and nearly 200.000 of its inhabitants had lost their lives, while the Red Army had waited patiently across the Vistula River – was considered to be the result of a fascist plot of both the Polish government in exile and the Home Army’s commanders. Obviously, no attempts were made to commemorate the Uprising, but already in 1945 a huge monument was dedicated to the Soviet “liberators” of

Warsaw. Needles to say, no references were made to the fact that for two first years of the Second World War Poland had suffered not only from the German but also from the Soviet occupation.

The way in which the war was commemorated in the first half of fifties followed a general blueprint designed in the Soviet Union for all the Central European countries. However, there are reasons to believe that the top communists of that period were personally attached to this version. Most of them had been in Moscow and saw the war from that perspective – with the gigantic military effort of the Soviet Union, the impression of which had been still fortified by war propaganda. Moreover, most of them were devoted internationalists and truly disliked any manifestations of nationalism. Some of them were of Jewish origin, but it was not their primary identity; they had replaced it already before or during WWII with the communist one.

Therefore, the lack of the recognition of the Jewish identity of war victims in that period should not be seen as a manifestation of some crude anti-Semitism on the top level, unless one would be willing to look for it in Kremlin. What was not given a political recognition from the very start was the participation of domestic population in the massacres committed on Jews during the war. There were trials of the so-called *szmalcownicy* (people who had denounced the Jews), with a trial of several inhabitants of Jedwabne, but they fell within the general narrative of innocent masses, and a few, by definition fascist, collaborators.

The interest group state

A major breakthrough in the structure of decision making process comes in 1956. From that time on, the strong state vs. atomized society model is being gradually replaced with another one, the model of interest groups. For instance, the satellite organizations of the communist party – created in the previous period for the transmission of the communist party's will - started a process of certain trade-offs with society. The reason of this change was the fact that the regime – represented now by less internationalist but more nationally oriented communists - started to look for legitimacy in society (Zaremba 2001). This structural change also affected the decision process concerning the representations of the war. This process is going to be illustrated by the example of the

Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację), a monopolistic veteran association created in communist Poland. Certainly it was not the only stakeholder of the official memory of the war at the time: others were for instance the Army, or the Scouts. However the UFFD is important, because one of its chairmen played a leading role in the March propaganda of 1968.

The UFFD was created at the beginning of the Stalinist period from eleven independent organization (mainly of communist origin), as a result of centralist ambitions of the state. Its main purpose was to gather officially recognized veterans of WWII and to provide help to some of its victims. Until 1956, the exclusion of the Home Army's members and those soldiers who had fought together with the Western Allies was the most visible omission. However, starting from the second half of the fifties and, especially, in the sixties, the UFFD opened its gates also to those former soldiers of non-communist origin who were willing to compromise with the regime. The price to be paid for the membership was to deny any connections with the anti-Soviet resistance both during the war and in the late 1940's.

During the meetings of the UFFD, the importance of the Home Army in the struggle against Nazi Germany was mentioned more and more often. In this respect, the order of enumerating organizations in the official speeches and articles is very telling: the names of the Home Army's members started frequently to appear even before the names of the members of the communist guerrilla, People's Army (Armia Ludowa), or the Peasants' Battalions (Bataliony Chłopskie). The image of the Warsaw Uprising was reshaped into the representation of an unfortunate struggle of the city inhabitants who had been seduced by their irresponsible leaders. Together with this trend of including the Home Army into the official rhetoric, there was also the trend of extending the definition of the veteran from the actual soldiers to the members of social organizations (so nonmilitary in character as nurses, for instance). At one point, even writers had the right to join the UFFD, as those who "fought" the Nazis with pens. More and more often the resistance against the Nazis during the war was being described as the resistance of the Polish people, not as the resistance of the communists only.

The UFFD's goals expanded in time. Broadly speaking, the organization was responsible for the patriotic education of society. It received state money for issuing monthly press and occasional publications. It was consulted on the occasions of erecting monuments, commemorative ceremonies, war movie making, war book writing, etc. At one point, the Historical Commission of the UFFD was created, whose main task was to gather materials and interpret the history of the war. The membership in the UFFD significantly increased.[7] Its meetings lost similarity to the Party meetings, notoriously stiff and boring, and they became informal, with vodka, sausages, bonfires, and recollections by the brothers in arms (Lesiakowski 1998).

As the number of memory stakeholders grew, so did the autonomy of their action. Obviously, there still were censors and topics officially strictly forbidden, such as the image of the Soviet Union as the war enemy, but the decision making process was much more complex and allowed for a certain level of freedom and lobbying. The question which I do not attempt to answer here is of motivations of the people who were joining the UFFD, whether they joined the Union only for the sake of short term benefits, such as combatant privileges, or for different reasons. The issue is that – whatever were their motivations – they entered the sphere in which they were in position to show their own initiative toward the state. They operated within "permitted and rewarded" public sphere (Matynia, n.d.).

In general, the official representations of the war victims gradually evolved in the same direction as the representations of the veterans. It was the national Polish identity extrapolated on all the six millions of the country's war casualties, even those gassed in the camps, who irrespective of their Polish citizenship, died in the death camps as Jews and only because their were Jews. In the official representations any distinction between the Nazis' treatment of ethnic Poles and Jews was rare. In the late 1960's some of the authors of the newly written encyclopaedia were sacked, because they differentiated between death camps and concentration camps. This was also the time of officially launched anti-Semitic propaganda.

[7] The UFFD's membership grew from 55 thousand in 1956 to 300 thousand in 1969 (and 764 thousand in 1984).

In the second half of the 1960's in the Ministry of the Internal Affaires, in the Army, and in other "strategic" institutions, people with Jewish names were laid-off. Historians still do not agree about the reasons of that purge, but they usually attribute it to Mieczysław Moczar, the Minister of Internal Affairs, who since the mid-sixties had also been the head of the UFFD. However, until March 1968 laying-off was kept hushed up and thus not clearly perceptible for the public opinion. Not earlier then in March 1968 did anti-Semitism become an openly wielded tool in the hands of the Party's officials. Before examining the war rhetoric of this propaganda it is necessary to introduce Mieczysław Moczar, who is believed to have been its main animator.

Mieczysław Moczar was one of the most controversial figures among Polish communists. The information on his participation in the anti-Fascist resistance is still very scarce. He was for some time one of the commanders of the People's Army in the eastern part of Poland, but historians are not certain if his main activity was fighting the Germans or the Home Army. Immediately after the war he started work for the State Security Office (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa), which prosecuted members of the anti-Soviet resistance. In the Stalinist period he fell out of the Party's grace. After 1956 Moczar managed to start a political career again, however he was never very close with Władyslaw Gomułka, the Party leader (Lesiakowski 1998). The post of the Minister of Internal Affairs was the top of his career. It is certain that being the head of the UFFD considerably enhanced his political position.

In the sixties he won popularity by stressing the role which *Polish* soldiers had played in the war, irrespective of their organizational or ideological affiliations. At the same time he created his own veteran legend. He published a book where his role in fighting Germans was significantly emphasized. He was the one who insisted on increasing the number of members of the UFFD, and cared for the material support they received. Thereby, he made not only his own legend, but also the legend of the whole Polish anti-German guerilla. Moczar stressed that everyone who had fought the Germans had the right to be rewarded; he even emphasized that some of the Polish ex-soldiers at that time in exile in the West should join the UFFD:

> No man who had fought against the invader, no matter whether in the army or in guerrilla units, and is now in need should be overlooked. We want to help him… materially and morally.[8]

The so-called March campaign of 1968 started after Warsaw students protested against abolishing performances of a play by Adam Mickiewicz (the most famous Polish romantic poet). The students were accused of having caused riots, and suddenly the Jewish origins of some of them were stressed. They were castigated as "Zionist", spies of the "imperialistic" West, and, most importantly from the perspective of the official propaganda which wanted to win society's support against the students, for being the children of the Jews, who were stereotypically conceived of as responsible for Stalinist terror in Poland.

There are several competing explanations of 1968's hysteria. One of them seems to be obvious: the war in the Middle East, and the Soviet-Union support for the Arab countries. However, it is not a good enough reason to explain everything happening that year in Poland, because the "anti-Zionist" propaganda did not only concern itself with the Jews living at that time in Israel (and that is why they were labeled as "Zionist", "Imperialist", or even "Fascists"), but was also directed against the Jewishness of the Party leaders in the fifties. Some of them were still at the top of the Party hierarchy. So there are also explanations that invoke either Moczar's willingness to get to the very top of the Party's structure, or the general drive of the middle-rank Party members (who were the loudest "Anti-Zionists" of that time) toward taking the place of Gomulka's people (Stola 2000, Kersten 1992, 143-171, Eisler 1991). It was Moczar himself who reproached these Jews in the State Security Office who were responsible for terror in the Stalinist period: quite a deep act of forgetting one's own past (Moczar had worked for that institution in the fifties).

For a part of the society, anti-Semitism, an important issue already in 1956 was not only a way of expressing anti-Jewish emotions, but was also a way of expressing anti-Soviet feelings (e.g. Machcewicz 1993). Jews and Russians were often conflated in public imagination – the thing that counted was that they were invaders. Moczar was

[8] Mieczyslaw Rakowski's interview with Mieczyslaw Moczar. "Polityka". Jan. 30, 1965 (translation of Radio Free Europe).

fully aware of these emotions, and skillfully played them up, while making public speeches:

> I have in mind coming of a group of politicians who, dressed up in officer's uniforms, accompanied heroic soldiers. Such people like Zambrowski, Radkiewicz, Berman [all of Jewish origin – J.W.] operated later on the presumption that this fact had given them the monopoly to rule, the knowledge of what was right and what was wrong for the Polish nation. [9]

As far as the commemorative rhetoric of WWII at that period is concerned, there was a peculiar irony of this campaign: in order to be "anti-Zionist", communists had finally to recognize Jews among the victims of the Nazi death camps. Their war argument – whose major task was to play on emotions of the Polish society - was built in the following way. Jews (i.e. "Zionists" in the official language) are currently cooperating with anti-Polish "imperialistic" and "fascist" propaganda of the West. They claim that Poles had collaborated with Nazis during the Second World War against Jews. However, this is obviously an "imperialistic" lie, because Polish people indeed had saved Jews during the war. They had saved them *from dying in the camps and ghettos*. Therefore, the Holocaust survivors are now very much ungrateful to Poles who had often risked or even sacrificed their lives in order to save Jews. In this respect, the anti-Semitic propaganda uncovered the existence of Jews in the camps.

This was also noticeable in the rhetoric of the UFFD, which had suddenly changed. One may have the impression that, during a few months that followed March, the WWII was mainly the story of saving Jews by Poles. Newspaper articles and radio programs were full of such stories as that of the Czackos family, who had saved a Jewish girl from the inevitable death in a gas chamber. In order to bring out the "correct" meaning of that fact, it was stressed that the brave Michał Czacko had been, before the war, a member of the Communist Party of Poland (Komunistyczna Partia Polski).[10] But on the wave of this propaganda also the ex-Home Army's soldiers became extremely important for the communists, because it was mostly the Home Army that really created methods of saving Jews during the war, and provided help during Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. One of the members of the UFFD emphasized in a radio broadcast:

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[9] Interview with Mieczysław Moczar. Radio Warszawa I. April 12, 1968 (my translation).

[10] Radio Warszawa II. April 18, 1968 (my translation).

> Only in Poland had there been no Quislings. Only in Poland had the Resistance established an organization whose only aim was to give help to the Jews. [11]

It would be unwise to underestimate the role of this structure, called the Organization for Providing Help to the Jews (Organizacja Pomocy Żydom "Żegota"). Indeed, it was a unique military organization in Eastern Europe, with its sole purpose to save Jews. However, on the wave of "Anti-Zionist" propaganda the role of the "Żegota" was often exaggerated.

Sometimes the propaganda went beyond accusing Jews of mere ungratefulness to contemporary Poles. It stressed their role in the maintenance of ghettos, as in the following excerpt from Moczar's speech, in which he refers to the current situation in Israel:

> the country on the territory of which there had been established, already before June 1967, ghettos for Arabs. Incidentally, those ghettos were organized also by those who had been functionaries in the ghettos created by the Nazis in our towns. [12]

This quotation is interesting, because it plays down the notion of a Jew as a victim, which was awkward for communists for two reasons. First, this notion clashed with the established view of the communist or the Pole as the major target of the Nazi campaign, and in this respect was taking away part of the war memory (suffering in the camps), which now had to be shared with the Jews. Second, Jews as victims could not be easily accommodated in the public opinion that had a fresher memory of Jews as perpetrators of Stalinist crimes. Moczar escaped this double problem by turning the Jews into constant persecutors. Thus, in Moczar's words, persecution was not only the characteristic feature of the contemporary Israeli state's policy against Arabs, but had always been an inherent attitude of the Jews, who were even policemen in ghettos.

After a few months the "Anti-Zionist" hysteria dwindled, and also Mieczysław Moczar slowly disappeared from the political scene. What is however important is that the anti-Semitic stereotypes functioning in the society appeared on the very political surface of the war commemorative rhetoric. It was the period which cannot be seen only from the instrumental perspective of creation of war images. The rhetoric of the campaign was not taken from the social vacuum. It was drawing from the concepts of

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[11] Prof. Dr. Jan Zygmunt Jakubowski speaking. Radio Warszawa I. May 6, 1968 (my translation).

[12] Interview with Mieczysław Moczar. Radio Warszawa I. May 12, 1968 (my translation).

*żydokomuna* (Jewish communists), Jewish conspiracy and Jews as parasites on the body of the Polish nation, all well established already before the WWII. The people who reframed this rhetoric for their present purposes already rejected the communist ideology, although they often paid lip service to it. The frightening element of the campaign was that its instigators were mainly former members of the domestic guerilla resistance – the people who had been in the country during the war and witnessed the Holocaust. No historical studies exist which would link their war biographies with their position in the March campaign but – judging from many accounts of crimes committed by various guerrilla troops on Jews - it could be an important subject for inquiry.

Even putting aside March propaganda, the commemorative rhetoric of the 1960s shows how different it was from that of the 1950s. In my opinion, it also points to the fact that the official images were to a certain extent negotiated with society in two interrelated ways. First, in the sense that channels for the articulation of interests were now in-built in the state structures. Second, in the sense of the content of these images in which the "progressive" martyrdom was replaced with national martyrdom both in the dimension of suffering and of heroic resistance. A socially more acceptable image of the Home Army was created, Soviet soldiers were less frequently mentioned, and the notion of victim was attributed to Poles not to the communists. Assuming that the role of both the images and the process of their production was to enhance the state's national legitimacy in the eyes of the society, there are no reasons to wonder why Polish collaboration with Germans was not mentioned, the Holocaust was not given special recognition, and Jews themselves were either neglected or presented as the (sometimes ungrateful) beneficiaries of the Polish help. The following quotation from the official guide to memorial sites of the WWII describes the spirit of these times very well:

> During the Second World War, Poland suffered the highest death toll among all the countries at war. More than 6 millions victims – men, women, children - tormented, murdered by the Nazis, gassed in the chambers and burned in the crematories of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibór, Bełżec, Chełmn, Fort VII in Poznań, Gross Rosen, Działdów, Stutthof and in thousands of other death camps, shot in the streets of cities and towns – this is the price which had been paid by the nation for its fondness of the motherland and freedom...[13]

The weakening state vs. strengthening society

The last model of Polish communism was not characterized by any significant change of the structure of decision making within the state itself– the interest group model was still in place - but by a change in the organizational capacities of the society. A peculiar feature of this period was that for the first time the society created structures of organization autonomous from the state. In the late seventies and eighties, the communists lost the monopoly over the public ways of articulating the representations of the national past. In that period, images alternative to the official version were for the first time articulated not only at the private level (a family or circle of friends), but they were also produced in great numbers at the civil society level, through various underground publications, self-educational initiatives, illegal manifestations, etc. These images were not necessarily coherent, on the contrary they were often competing – and related to the conceptions of national community imagined differently by the secular wing of the so-called democratic opposition and by its right wing, which was close to the Catholic Church (Touraine 1983). The common characteristic of that time, especially visible in the Solidarity period, was the wide spread of various commemorative events of largely national nature (Baczko 1994, 194-297).

Therefore, the specificity of this period did not lie in the structure of decision making, which was more or less the same as in the previous period, although perhaps the Army, especially after the imposition of the Marshall Law, had particularly important voice. The specificity mainly lay in the influence of the alternative images over the content of the official representations, although the authors of these alternative representations did not enter the official decision process; in fact they were often persecuted. Moreover, the democratic opposition often perceived the state's efforts as instrumental and manipulative. Therefore, the negotiation process was less of the physical nature of an actual contact – as in the previous period when different interest groups were compromised within "the permitted and rewarded" public sphere. In that

[13] Wieczorek, J. 1964. *Przewodnik po upamiętnionych miejscach walk i męczeństwa lat wojny 1939-1945*, Warszawa, p. 5. Quotation after Trąba 2000, 60 (my translation).

period one could observe a particular competition between the state and various organized groups of society in the creation of national mythology (Irwin-Zarecka 1989).

Finally the state actually abandoned the communist ideology – the process which had already started in the sixties. The main source of legitimization of those in power was the existence of the USSR - but no longer as the model; the authorities justified their stay in power as the only possible way the Polish society could have its own state; they were to be a necessary buffer between Moscow and the Polish nation (Walicki 1995). The commemoration of WWII was one of many ways of invoking the past for the purpose of national legitimacy. The main stake of the game in memory of WWII between the opposition and the state was the Soviet occupation, iconized in various *samizdats* in the representation of Katyń victims (i.e. Polish officers who had been murdered by the Soviets during the war in Katyń; generally during communism the official version maintained that the Nazis had committed the crime). At the end of the eighties, the authorities promised that they would reveal "the whole truth" about the crime. To give another example, when after introducing the Marshall Law, General Wojciech Jaruzelski (during the war a soldier of the Polish Army which was created in the USSR and operated with the Soviet Army) was accused of national treason by underground press, communist officials pointed to the fact that he had spent his youth in the Soviet labor camps (Kula 2000). In this rhetoric, from a communist/national militant he turned into a national martyr.

In this period one could also observe a slow revival of a very small Jewish community in Poland (Steinlauf 1997, Irwin-Zarecka 1989). Proving that the timing of this revival can also be studied in a much broader context than just the Polish one would require going much beyond the scope of the paper. Anyway, Jewish memories started to be visible within the public discourse, and were differently accommodated by the existing national mythologies. One example is that of the official ceremony organized at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument which was boycotted both by the democratic opposition and one of the Uprising's leaders, Marek Edelman, in protest against purely instrumental treatment of the Jewish past by the communists. Another example is that of the discussion launched by Jan Błoński's article "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto"

published in 1987 in “Tygodnik Powszechny” (a leftist catholic weekly of a non-communist origin). Public opinion was then stirred up by the charge that Poles had remained impassive in view of the extermination of Jews. Against Błoński’s article, many voices invoked the narrative so well articulated at the national level during the March campaign – of Poles as brave heroes helping the doomed.

Within the official rhetoric, the WWII ceased to be represented as a beginning of anything but rather as a breakthrough within the long history of Poland. Although already in the previous period, the pre-war history of Poland had been referred to not only as an anti-thesis of the present social context (as it was in the Stalinist epoch) but also as an organic whole with its continuation under communism, it was mainly directed against the Church - the stress was on the progressive (i.e. secular) clues of the Polish tradition. In the eighties, the history was less used for explanation; rather effort was made toward representing Polish history as characterized by the tradition of hospitality and peaceful coexistence of different groups under the Polish reign. In this narrative, Jews were always warmly welcome guests, brutally murdered by the Nazis during WWII. In this sense the state promoted the neutralized version of the Jewish memory.

From the perspective of commemoration of the Holocaust, the last period of the communist era in Poland was equivocal. Jewish memories did not gain any special recognition at the official level nor were they a target of some highly organized and efficient anti-Semitism. They were accommodated in different ways by different opinion circles of the society. The authorities of the Catholic Church were divided, some of them very anti-Semites in the traditional sense (Jews as the murderers of Christ, as parasites on the body of the catholic Polish nation, the war victims were primary Poles, etc),[14] some were not. Within the secular opposition, one could observe two tendencies: the exclusionist conception of the Polish ethnic nation which excluded the Jews for more or less similar reasons as the right wing of the Church, adding to charges against Jews the responsibility for the communism in Poland; and the inclusive conception of the civic nation where Jews were one among many historic inhabitants of the Polish land and the

[14] An example well known in the world: the controversy over the religious symbols in Auschwitz in which some of the Church authorities stressed that Auschwitz was mainly the place of the Polish and catholic martyrdom.

Polish state. The latter conception was obviously more open for reconciliation of the war representations. The state itself tried to neutralize the Jewish memory.

## Conclusions

The paper has tried to answer the question why the Holocaust (together with Polish participation in the Holocaust) was evicted from the official representations of the Second World War in Poland. In my opinion, at least part of the answer lies in the way the politics of commemoration of the war was structured. During the first, Stalinist period, a hierarchical organization of decision-making bodies prompted the repetition of the war images drafted in the USSR. In this period, no particular prominence was given to any national suffering. In the second phase – driven by search for support in society – the channels for articulation of interests were created whose role was to enable compromise of some groups in the society with the authorities. The result of this compromise was the construction of the common national ground with the representation of the Nazi occupation acceptable for the society. In the third phase, this construction had to reinforce itself against alternative constructions of national community, functioning in the public discourse.

In the first period, any specific recognition of Jewish martyrdom would go against the logic of communist ideology and the logic of the USSR as the main martyr of the war. In two latter phases, giving any prominence to the Jewish martyrdom would go against the logic of gaining the support of society. First, because the Jews did not constitute a large and distinct enough group to be an interesting partner for the authorities (the survivors and their descendents who decided to stay in Poland were usually assimilated). Second, it was not worth going against the anti-Semitic stereotypes in the society, when it was possible to win more playing up these stereotypes. Hence the paradox of March 1968 campaign which suddenly rediscovered the suffering of Jews during the war on the wave of anti-Semitic slogans.  Even though in the last phase there were some attempts of rewriting of the Jewish history into the official memory of Polish nation, they only managed to neutralize this history, in the sense that the Jewish martyrdom, although mentioned, did not achieve equal place to the Polish one, nor the myth of the innocent

Polish masses was shaken. The space for negotiation – created within the structures of the communist state – resulted in producing an exclusionist national narrative.

Therefore, when one wonders why the contemporary Poles experience so many difficulties in accepting the war story in which they are not the only martyrs and moreover in which they act as persecutors, one must take into account the communist variable. One must remember that school textbooks, official speeches, guides, often also war novels or movies which the authorities had had made to order rarely mentioned the Jews but concentrated on representing the Polish martyrdom. The groups in society which were ridden with anti-Semitism had their share in creating such images. However, equally important is the fact that the exclusionist national narrative was an outcome of a complicated process of compromise between different war stories and post-war conditions. The inclusion of the Jews would go against the logic of this process. The fact that this predominantly national war image has well established itself in the collective memory is a problem that is now being faced by the Polish society.

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