



**The Politics of History and Memory in Poland in the 20th and 21st Century
– Between Continuity and Change.**

18 May 2024

An online conference organized by the European History Unit, Polish
University Abroad, London

The electoral defeat of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland in October 2023 ended the dominance of this political formation, which hugely invested in the historical and cultural legitimization of its rule. The reframing of the national past in a way that legitimized PiS's political project and privileged an ethnocentric and Catholic identity is a powerful example of the politicization of history and memory.

However, in its reliance on history, memory, and culture in the quest for the empowerment of new elites and the promotion of a particular form of national identity, Jarosław Kaczyński's party joined the procession of political forces and actors that have dominated Poland since 1918 and which have made selective and instrumental use of the past. In different periods, ideologically and politically driven projects have sought to provide an account of Polish contemporary history while simultaneously claiming that specific political movements embody national values and *the* true expression of Polishness. What were the similarities and differences in the way historical policy was conducted in the Second Republic, the Polish People's Republic, and the Third Republic? This main question will be addressed during an international conference on the politics of history and memory in Poland organised on the 18 May 2024 by the European History unit of Polish University Abroad in London. This online event aims to provide us with a better understanding of the problem of the contemporary politics of history and memory, presented in a broader historical perspective than existing analyses and studies.

To register, visit: <https://www.tickettailor.com/events/polishuniversityabroadpuno/1221922>



PROGRAMME

10:00 – 10:20: Opening of the conference (Prof. Włodzimierz Mier-Jędrzejowicz, Rector, Polish University Abroad)

10:20 – 11:05: What do we mean by politics of memory? (Prof. David Clarke, Cardiff University)

11:05 – 11:30: Q&A

COFFEE BREAK

PART I:

11:40 – 12:00: The politics of memory as a means of influencing society during the period of Sanacja rule after 1926 (Dr hab. Paweł Duber, Polish University Abroad)

12:00 – 12:20: Between Continuity and Rapture: On the Politics of History of Polish Exiles in the late 1980s (Dr Michał Przeperski, Institute of History of Polish Academy of Science)

12:20 – 12:40: Politics of History after 1945 (Dr hab. Maciej Górny, Institute of History of Polish Academy of Science)

12:40 – 13:10: Q&A

LUNCH BREAK: 13:10 – 14:00

PART II:

14:00 – 14:20: Commemorating of History in the Polish Parliament's Resolutions in Years 1989-2023: An Attempt at Analysis (Prof. Krzysztof Brzechczyn, Adam Mickiewicz University / Institute of National Remembrance)

14:20 – 14:40: A Beech Tree for the Righteous. On the Interplay between Local and Transnational Memory Politics (Dr. Zofia Wóycicka, University of Warsaw)

14:40 – 15:00: Poland Besieged. The Law and Justice Party and Its Politics of History (Prof. Paweł Machcewicz, Institute of Political Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences)

15:00 – 15:30: Q&A

COFFEE BREAK

15:45 – 16:45: Panel Discussion: Dr. Ewa Ochman (University of Manchester), Prof. Piotr Osęka (Institute of Political Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences), Prof. Paweł Machcewicz, Prof. David Clarke. Moderator: Prof. Mikołaj Kunicki

16:45 – 17:15: Q&A

17:15: End of the conference



NOTES ON SPEAKERS

Krzysztof Brzechczyn is a Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, Adam Mickiewicz University and works at the Poznań Branch of Institute of National Remembrance. He has recently authored *The Historical Distinctiveness of Central Europe: A Study in the Philosophy of History* (Peter Lang 2020) *Umysł solidarnościowy. Geneza i ewolucja myśli społeczno-politycznej „Solidarności” w latach 1980-1989* (The Solidarity Mind. The Genesis and Evolution of Social and Political Thought of the Solidarność in 1980-1989, IPN 2022) and edited: *New Developments in the Theory of the Historical Process. Polish Contributions to non-Marxian Historical Materialism* (Brill 2022), and *Non-Marxian Historical Materialism. Reconstructions and Comparisons* (Brill 2022). Research interests: current history, history of political thought, philosophy of history, political and social philosophy, theory of history.

David Clarke is Professor in Modern German Studies and Head of the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff. He has published extensively on the politics and culture of memory in Europe, and has been a researcher on two Horizon2020 projects with a focus on historical memory. His book *Constructions of Victimhood: Remembering the Victims of State Socialism in Germany* was published in 2019.

Paweł Duber is a historian. He graduated from the University of Silesia in Poland. He has worked in many cultural and academic institutions, including the University of Warsaw, the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, the Józef Piłsudski Museum and Nottingham Trent University. He is currently a lecturer at the Institute of European Culture of Polish University Abroad in London. He received his PhD in 2009, and the advanced PhD (habilitation) in 2015 from the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. His interests include the following research areas: the history of Poland, Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century, Polish political and military emigration after 1939, the history of diplomacy and international relations, cultural diplomacy, diplomatic culture, and politics of memory. He is an author and co-author of several books and dozens of scholarly articles. He has recently submitted for publication a biography of Polish diplomat Titus Komarnicki and a book with a selection of his articles on Polish-Swiss relations in the 20th century.

Maciej Górny is a Professor and the deputy director at the Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research interests are East Central Europe in the 19th and 20th century, history of historiography, discourses on race and the First World War. His latest publications include *Drawing Fatherlands: Geographers and Borders in Inter-war Europe* (Brill 2022, Polish ed. 2017, German ed. 2019) *Science Embattled: Eastern European Intellectuals and the Great War* (Brill 2019, Polish ed. 2014, Russian ed. 2021) and *Forgotten Wars: Central and Eastern Europe, 1912-1916* (together with Włodzimierz Borodziej, CUP 2021, German ed. 2018, Polish ed. 2014). Between 2014 and 2019 he was editor-in-chief of *Acta Poloniae Historica* (www.aph-ihpan.edu.pl)

Mikołaj Kunicki is a historian and film scholar. He received his PhD in History from Stanford University. Kunicki taught history at the University of Oxford, University of Notre Dame, and



UC Berkeley and lectured on media and communication studies at the University of Wrocław. From 2013 to 2016 he was the director of Programme on Modern Poland in St Antony's College. Kunicki is head of the European History Unit at PUNO and an Adjunct Professor of Cinema in Ithaca College London Center. His research concentrates on communism, nationalism, authoritarianism and their relationships with film and television. He is the author of *Between the Brown and the Red: Nationalism, Catholicism and Communism in Twentieth Century Poland* (Ohio University Press, 2012) as well as articles and chapters on Polish and European history, cinema, nationalism and contemporary politics.

Ewa Ochman is a Senior Lecturer in East European Studies in the Department of History at the University of Manchester and a member of the Centre for the Cultural History of War. She is the author of *Post-communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities* and has published on issues relating to Polish politics of memory, difficult heritage, and state-sponsored history after 1989 in *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Memory Studies*, *History and Memory*, *Nationalities Papers*, *East European Politics and Societies*, and *Cold War History*. She is currently working on a book-length study of the history of post-communist de-commemoration in Poland.

Piotr Osęka is a historian, professor at the Institute of Political Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences. He has published several books and numerous articles on the history of communist Poland, totalitarian propaganda, prosopography, and the anthropology of secret police— both in academic journals and Polish broadsheets. His recent publications include “‘Secret Services Are Meant To Serve’: State Violence in the Autobiographic Memory of Secret Police Officers in Communist Poland’ in *East European Politics and Societies* (online) and ‘The Elites of Solidarity: Prosopography of Delegates for the First National Congress of Solidarity’ in *East European Politics and Societies*, 35(4), 1195–1216.

Michał Przeperski is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of the History of Science of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Spokesman of the Museum of Polish History. He specializes in the history of Central Europe in the 20th. He is the author of, among other titles, the following books: *Nieznośny ciężar braterstwa. Konfikty polsko-czeskie w XX wieku* [The Unbearable Burden of Brotherhood: Polish-Czech Conflicts in the 20th Century] (2016) and *Mieczysław F. Rakowski. Biografia polityczna* [Mieczysław F. Rakowski: A Political Biography] (2021).

Paweł Machcewicz is a historian, professor at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. From 2008 to 2017, he was the founding director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. He has taught at the Warsaw University and the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and was director of research and education at the Institute of National Remembrance in 2000-2006. He edited and co-authored the publication *Wokół Jedwabnego (Jedwabne and Beyond, 2002)* about the massacre of Jews in Jedwabne in 1941 committed by their Polish neighbours (the German edition: *Der Beginn der Vernichtung. Zum Mord an den Juden in Jedwabne und Umgebung in Sommer 1941. Neue*



Forschungsergebnisse polnischer Historiker, Fibre, Osnabrück: 2004). His other books include: *Rebellious Satellite. Poland 1956* (Woodrow Wilson Center-Stanford University Press, Washington DC-Stanford, 2009); *Poland's War on Radio Free Europe 1950-1989* (Woodrow Wilson Center-Stanford University Press, Washington DC-Stanford, 2014); *The War That Never Ends. The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk* (De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2019).

Zofia Wóycicka, PhD is a historian with almost ten years of experience working at museums. Currently she is assistant professor at the Sociological Faculty of the University of Warsaw where she is leading the National Science Centre (NCN) research project titled *Help Delivered to Jews during World War II and the Transnational Memory in Making*. Her publications include the monograph *Arrested Mourning. Memory of Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944-1950* (2013). She also (co-)authored numerous articles in edited volumes, handbooks and reviewed journals including *History & Memory* and *Holocaust Studies* and *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*. Among her most recent publications are a special issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica: Mnemonic War in Poland* (2023) edited together with Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska and Joanna Wawrzyniak and the collective volume *The Rescue Turn and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* co-edited with Natalia Aleksion and Raphael Utz (Wayne State University Press, 2024).

ABSTRACTS

Krzysztof Brzechczyn, Adam Mickiewicz University/ Institute of National Remembrance

Commemorating of History in the Polish Parliament's Resolutions in Years 1989-2023: An Attempt at Analysis

This paper offers a statistical analysis of the resolutions of Polish Parliament (Sejm) commemorating the most important events in history of Poland and the world. I analyze the contents of parliamentary resolutions according to periods in which commemorating events were happening (Middle Ages, 1505-1795, 1795-1918, 1918-1939, 1939-1945, 1945-1989 and after 1989). Another way of commemoration is proclamation of the "year of commemorations" devoted to particular persons or (rarely) events. I analyze their spheres of activity (politics, economy and culture) and the historical periods in which commemorated persons lived.

David Clarke, (Cardiff University)

What do we mean by politics of memory?

In the late 20th and early 21st century, it became common for discussions of our relationship to the past to be framed in terms of a perceived intensification of the importance of the past for the present, sometimes referred to as a 'memory boom'. Some historians have found this problematic, because it challenges assumptions about the pastness of the past as an object of historical study in the 'modern regime of historicity' (Hartog). Today it can seem that every public debate about the interpretation of history is really a presentist debate about 'collective memory' and the identities that such memory is supposed to bolster.



Under these circumstances, what does it mean to speak of the ‘the politics of memory’? It is frequently observed that history (in the guise of memory) is politicized, but what does that process entail? Who politicizes, and how? And who is responsible for the ‘administration of memory’ when memory becomes a matter of state policy? The task for academic researchers is to understand the politics of memory as a complex and multi-faceted process, whose outcomes in terms of shaping the perceptions and preferences of citizens are at best ambiguous.

However, underlying this project must be a recognition that the socially constructed nature of our relationship to the past has never been better understood by actors across the political spectrum. Right-populist political forces, of the Trump variety in particular, have learned this lesson well, to the extent that the politics of memory becomes ahistorical or even antihistorical: its purpose is the furtherance of ideological hegemony and nothing more. In light of these developments, and in light of the growing number of voices critical of the dominance of memory in contemporary society, can memory be saved from the politicians?

Paweł Duber (Polish University Abroad)

The politics of memory as a means of influencing society during the period of Sanacja rule after 1926

In this paper I discuss the Sanacja politics of memory pursued by this political camp after it seized power in the state in 1926 as a result of the coup d'état. I analyse official state ceremonies commemorating 19th-century national uprisings, as their conduct and accompanying speeches and press articles provide an opportunity to show the most salient features of this policy. Józef Piłsudski's adherents tried to convince the public that it was them who had managed to regain Poland's independence, thus completing the work initiated by the November and January insurgents. They therefore considered themselves their successors. They also stressed that, similarly to them, they had to wrestle with the indifference, and often even hostility, of the rest of society, but ultimately they were the ones to whom history had conceded that they were right. The policy they pursued was thus to unite society around Piłsudski, and to provide sufficient legitimacy for their rule.

Maciej Górny (Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences)

Politics of History after 1945

The politics of the post-1945 period presents a dynamic picture of almost constant change. Structurally, this period can be divided into phases of relative pluralism and centralism. The former can be located at the beginning of the postwar period, before Stalinism, near the end of the Polish People's Republic, and at every critical turn in the country's political history. These were also the moments when the party's (and thus the state's) politics of history lost its dominant position.

Beneath this general picture, however, a different kind of dynamic emerges when we look at what was meant and perceived as the official narrative of history. Throughout the postwar period, party-supported narratives varied between more and less nationalist, anti-German, or anti-Semitic. Emphasis on particular historical figures and events varied over time, which affected the institutions and channels through which the politics of history were disseminated. Even at a time when, according to Marxist-Leninist dogma, there could be only one



interpretation of all history, conflicts persisted over what that one and only interpretation should be. Thus, beyond most general geopolitically motivated rules in the Soviet bloc, nothing was forever in the realm of history.

Paweł Machcewicz (Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences)
Poland Besieged. The Law and Justice Party and Its Politics of History.

In 2005-2007 and in 2015-2023 Poland was ruled by the right-wing populist Law and Justice party. So called politics of history has become one of the pillars of its ideology and politics. Its function was to define the crucial lines of contemporary conflicts, distinguish “true” Poles who support the ruling party from the opponents who were labeled as “not Polish enough”, and often as outright enemies of the nation or even traitors serving foreign interests. The key historical narrative of the Law and Justice presented the glorious image of the Poland’s past as being constantly jeopardized by manifold attempts, undertaken by its cosmopolitan and corrupt elites and by external enemies, undermining the Polish martyrdom and heroism throughout history, especially during WWII and the Holocaust.

History is exploited also by other right wing nationalist and populist movements in Europe that tend to rely on nation’s historical victimhood and heroism, rejecting or silencing more controversial parts of the common past. Nevertheless, in Poland in history has been exploited as a political weapon in a more intense way than probably in any other European country. There may be at least two reasons for this. The first one is the Polish historical experience throughout the 18-20th centuries : the absence of the nation-state for an extended period of time (since 1795 when Poland was partitioned between its three neighbors until 1918 when the Polish state was resurrected), and foreign occupations or subservience to external powers (WW II and the Communist period) created conditions in which national identity was to a great extent based on history and tradition, and not on the identification with state institutions and procedures as in most countries of Western Europe. Hence the emotional power of history that can be used to shape contemporary political and ideological agendas and identities. The second fundamental reason may be a recent exposure to the supra-national structures (Poland joined the EU in 2004) with its political and cultural values which in many evoke incertitude and fears, prone to be exploited by anti-European and anti-modernist populists. In the time of rapid changes involving almost all aspects of life, the nation’s past is seen by many as the most solid bulwark.

Michał Przeperski, (Institute of History of Polish Academy of Science)
Between Continuity and Rapture: On the Politics of History of Polish Exiles in the late 1980s

At the end of the 1980s, representatives of the intellectual circles of Polish emigration carefully followed the political events in Poland. From the perspective of nearly half a century after the outbreak of World War II, however, it was becoming clear that the continuity of state and, above all, political traditions in Poland was to a large extent problematic. This paper is an attempt at reflecting on the imagined political and historical traditions presented by the representatives of Polish London, on their rooting in the political reality in Poland and on the role assigned to these traditions in the Polish politics of that period.



Zofia Wóycicka, (University of Warsaw)

A Beech Tree for the Righteous. On the Interplay between Local and Transnational Memory Politics

Since its establishment in the early 1960s, the award Righteous Among the Nations has become a brand-mark of Yad Vashem. However, in the recent decades we observe a tendency to universalize the concept of the Righteous by applying this term to a broad range of people, who can be considered as heroes and role-models due to their commitment and sacrifice to others also outside the context of the Holocaust. This development is driven by various local, national and transnational memory agents. The paper focuses specifically on the memory dynamics that evolved in the triangle Milan – Brussels – Warsaw. While the idea of the expanding the definition of the Righteous found also resonance in some other European countries and beyond, in Poland, it seems to have fallen on particularly fertile soil. Thus, starting in Jerusalem, I will follow the concept of the Righteous on its recent “travel” from Italy to Belgium and Poland and analyze the transformations and remediations it underwent along the way. I will also look at the different agents of memory that facilitated this voyage. This story will serve as a case study to examine how transnational memory is construed locally and vice versa.