



**POLSKI UNIWERSYTET NA OBCZYŹNIE**  
THE POLISH UNIVERSITY ABROAD  
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## **Twentieth Century Polish History Seminar**

**Convenors: Prof. Michael Fleming, Prof. Mikołaj Kunicki and Dr Wojciech Rappak**

The seminar series on twentieth century Polish history was initiated at PUNO in 2013. It provides a forum for scholars and the wider public to engage with new historical scholarship. Scholars from a range of British and Polish universities have presented research in progress and discussed their recent publications. Details of previous seminars can be found at <https://puno.ac.uk/struktura-puno/zaklad-wspolczesnej-kultury-brytyjskiej-seminaria/>

The seminar is open to the public and is especially useful for students reading MA or PhD degrees in history or cognate disciplines. The seminar is conducted in English. This academic year the seminar will take place online, beginning at 6.30pm. Those wishing to participate should contact the convenor prior to each seminar: [michael.fleming@puno.ac.uk](mailto:michael.fleming@puno.ac.uk)

### **Programme for the 2024/2025 academic year**

30 October 2024      Prof, Mikołaj Kunicki. PUNO,

#### **The Cinema of *Good Change*: The Populist Politics of History and Memory on Polish Movie Screens, 2015-2023**

This paper examines politics of history and memory in Polish cinema during the rule of the Law and Justice party from 2015 to 2023. First, it explores feature films that glorified the mythologised community of the 'Accursed Soldiers' who fought the communist government after World War II, their supposed descendants, victims of the 2010 Smolensk air crash, and the Polish Righteous who sheltered Jews. Second, it analyses a drama series produced by Polish state TV, *Krucjata. Prawo serii* (*Crusade. Great deeds will come*, Łukasz Ostalski and Wojciech Tomczyk, 2022-23), which addressed the alleged consequences of unfinished decommunization and lustration. I argue that these film narratives constituted part of a large project, which sought to forge illiberal and ethno-confessional national identity based on nationalism, social conservatism, and Roman Catholicism and new elites. These 'patriotic' movies rewrite national past endorsing a "politics of assertion" (Assmann, 2020) which projects positive national self-images centred on heroism and martyrdom. The drama authored by Tomczyk targets post-communist and liberal elites, always portrayed as nationally, socially, and culturally suspect and imagines the work of "the deep state."

**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 Polish University Abroad (PUNO) in London 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.

13 November 2024 Dr Jim Bjork, King's College London

### **Migration Status as Ethnicity: Natives, Migrants and Refugees in Postwar Poland**

Poland famously became 'ethnically homogeneous' during and immediately after the Second World War, as its previous minority populations were either killed during the Nazi occupation, forced to emigrate, and left outside of Poland's post-1945 frontiers. And yet, across the western half of the country, subsequent discussions of the remaining, ostensibly homogeneous population routinely used what seemed suspiciously like an ethnic grid to analyse it. People were most often assigned one of three categories depending on their background, specifically their migration status: native, settler, or refugee. As in other contexts with such terms have structured public debates about community cohesion, these labels came with a host of stereotypes, both negative and positive. In this talk, I will be examining how this kind of ethnic grid was used in discussion of postwar social integration. Who was meant to integrate whom in this process of integration?

**Jim Bjork** is Professor of Modern European History at King's College London. He received his PhD at the University of Chicago and worked at various American universities before moving to the UK in 2005. His research interests focus on the interplay between religion and nationality in Poland and Germany. Jim's first monograph was *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland*. His current project examines migration and internal diversity within Catholic communities in Poland after the Second World War. Articles related to this current research have recently been published in the *Journal of Modern History*, *German History*, *Central European History* and various edited collections.

15 January 2025 Dr Michał Przeperski, Polish History Museum, Warsaw

### **Wild, Wild East: Transformation of People and Mentality in Poland, 1986-1993.**

Today everything is obvious: the dictatorial system collapsed, so the things are exactly as they should have been from the very beginning. But Poles in 1986 were not aware that they were living in the final stages of communism. The story of a great change is full of myths and simplifications but after more than 30 years it is finally worth showing that the final years of the Polish People's Republic were not so grey at all, as much as the early 1990s were not so colourful. The processes which were labelled as 'transformation' are more than a mere political change negotiated at the Round Table in the early weeks of 1989. It is time to challenge popular opinions with actual data and sociological research from to draw collective portrayals of the groups that were absent in the big picture of 'the transformation'. Of pivotal importance is what was happening on Polish streets and in Polish homes. *Wild, Wild East* is a journey to an exotic and fascinating country that Poland was at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

**Michał Przeperski** holds PhD in history. He works at the Polish History Museum in Warsaw as the spokesperson and in the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He specialises in the history of 20th-century Central Europe. He is the author of *Mieczysław F. Rakowski. A Political biography* (2021) and *The Unbearable Burden of Brotherhood: Polish-Czech conflicts in the 20th Century* (2016).

5 February 2025      Dr Ewa Ochman, History Department, School of Arts, Languages & Cultures, The University of Manchester

**Public Responses to the Renaming of Commemorative Street Names in Post-communist Poland: Daily Lives, Experiences of Change and Sense of Place.**

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe did not bring about widespread destruction of the material heritage of communist dictatorships in the region. In fact, given that on the whole public acceptance of the regime change has been high, the process of de-commemoration has been more contested than anticipated. This paper focuses on the process of de-commemoration after the fall of communism in Poland. It examines urban residents' responses to the renaming of streets, paying close attention to the practices and discursive strategies they adopted to resist change. Investigating these responses provides a means of understanding the multifaceted aspects of the contested nature of de-commemoration and sheds light on the ways in which the top-down remaking of urban streetscapes affected local residents. It also enables us to better understand the nature of the post-communist transition in the region and provides insights into the everyday conflicts that underlie symbolic change.

**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.

16 April 2024      Prof Piotr Osęka (Institute of Political Studies of Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)

**"You were not supposed to ask that question". Autobiographical memory of agents of the communist security apparatus in Poland.**

Oral history has in recent years become one of the basic tools in the study of social history or the history of the anti-communist opposition. At the same time, this methodology is practically absent in the narrative on the functioning of the security apparatus. The presentation will be aimed at filling this gap. I'm going to present findings from anonymous biographical interviews with former secret police agents. I have conducted several dozens of interviews with former high-ranking officers of the Security Service; the political police in communist Poland. These were hours-long talks, focused on their career paths; I asked about the motives that drove them

to join the service; the investigative method they employed; their daily routine, and details of the police job. Almost all my interviewees were involved in cracking down on the dissident movement in the '70s and '80s, the policing activity usually associated with intimidations, blackmails, beatings, and even assassinations. The paper will focus on presenting the main narrative strategies used by former officers in making sense of their biographies - professionalization, determinism, and denial.

**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.