

**Illiberal Memory: How the Far Right is  
Rewriting History in Post-socialist Poland**

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## **Illiberal Memory: How the Far Right is Rewriting History in Post-socialist Poland**

In the Fall of 2015, the Law and Justice Party (PIS) took power in Poland and began undermining the pillars of Polish liberal democracy. The Western press quickly became obsessed with the question: how is it that economically vibrant Poland, the success story of post-socialist transition, has turned its back on European liberal values? The question is daunting, and I can only offer part of the explanation here. In this paper I trace an overlooked current in Polish post-socialist culture: the revival of extreme nationalism rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic Messianism and the practice of ‘martyrology’ by the far-right press. I examine the historical myths pushed by Paweł Lisicki’s magazines *Historia Do Rzeczy* and *Uważam Rze Historia* and discuss how they have prepared a neo-nationalist counter-hegemony in Polish public discourse. I lend particular focus to how the relationship between Poland and Europe/the West are mythologized, and conclude with a psychoanalytically inflected discourse theory of how these myths function to legitimize the ideology of PIS. In the addendum I revisit the deep roots of Polish Messianism and the Martyrological practice and reflect on their revival in the far right press as part of a wider cultural development in the post-Socialist order.

### **Mnemomachia**

In 1989 a process that the historian Andrzej Nowak dubbed *mnemomachia* began in Poland.<sup>1</sup> He refers to the ‘clash of memory’ which erupted in the conditions of relaxed censorship and free markets brought on by the transformation of the Party-State and the end of USSR oversight. The general dynamics of collective memory described by Yael Zerubavel in *Recovered*

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<sup>1</sup> Nowak, Andrzej. *Strachy I Lachy: Przemiany Polskiej Pamięci 1982-2012*. (Krakow: Biały Kruk, 2012) pp. 317.

*Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* are germane to the Polish case after 1989. Zerubavel synthesizes the insights of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault to propose that when a society constitutes itself or goes through a period of transition, a master-commemorative narrative of its past leading up to that transition emerges. Its claim to universality is always necessarily based on an exclusion of the memory of less privileged groups. Inevitably, these groups' counter-memories undermine the master-narrative's hegemony.<sup>2</sup> Post-socialist Poland's *mnemomachia* followed a complicated version of this dynamic.

If we can speak of a master-commemorative narrative of Polish history after 1989, it was formulated in 2004 with the opening of the late Lech Kaczyński's pet project, the Warsaw Uprising Museum. For some memory-studies scholars, the Museum signaled the final departure from the Communist state-sponsored narrative of the uprising and a clear articulation of a *post*-Socialist perspective.<sup>3</sup> In the state-socialist period the uprising was officially dismissed as an insignificant outburst by Polish fascist thugs and lunatics. In the Museum, the annihilation of Warsaw was commemorated as a pivotal moment in the development of the nation and an expression of its eternal sacrosanct struggle against tyrannies. It was simultaneously counter-memory to the Communist interpretation, a national master-narrative, and counter-memory to the 'European' hegemonic narrative of WWII and the Holocaust which stresses non-nationalist collective remembrance.<sup>4</sup> The national narrative's hegemony was highly unstable. Even the graphic novels

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<sup>2</sup> Zerubavel, Yael. 'The Dynamics of Collective Remembering' in *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and The Making of Israeli National Tradition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) pp. 7.

<sup>3</sup> John Radzilowski, "Remembrance and Recovery: The Museum of the Warsaw Rising and the Memory of World War II in Post-Communist Poland" in *The Public Historian* Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 2009), pp. 143-158. Jacek Zygmunt Sawicki, *Bitwa o prawdę: historia zmagañ o pamieć Powstania Warszawskiego 1944-1989* (Warszawa: DiG, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Kucia, Marek. "The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe" in *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*. Volume 30 Number 1 February 2016 97–119 © 2015 Sage Publications

sponsored by the Museum seemed to produce interpretations of the Rising that undermined the ideology of a sacrosanct national struggle.<sup>5</sup> In 2007 Kaczyński failed to give lustration powers to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN,) and then lost an election. Under the Tusk government the Ministry of Education was taken over by Katarzyna Hall, who in 2008 enacted reforms to the high-school history curriculum aimed at erasing Kaczyński's master-narrative from the minds of youth. Hall's reforms have been interpreted as a gesture toward shifting Polish collective consciousness in the direction of the European hegemonic narrative.<sup>6</sup> The reforms were protested with hunger strikes by academic historians led by the head of Jagiellonian University's Department of History Andrzej Nowak in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Since 2010, the far-right press (to which Nowak frequently contributes) has been actively producing a new counter-memory to combat the post-2008 state-sponsored hegemonic (European) narrative. After being fired from *Rzeczpospolita* (Poland's most read daily newspaper at the time), the journalist Paweł Lisicki started a weekly opinion magazine called 'Uważam Rze.' The magazine regularly featured articles about recent and distant Polish history that invariably instrumentalised the past to criticize the centrist liberal and EU-friendly government. Soon after, Lisicki introduced the specialized historical monthly 'Uważam Rze Historia (URH).' Both periodicals were surprising successes in terms of circulation, but Lisicki's radical-nationalist rants online about the Smolensk tragedy found him fired again in 2013. His entire editorial team quit URH and joined their leader in founding the weekly *Do Rzeczy* (DR) which also produced a monthly called *Historia Do Rzeczy* (HDR). Though they represent what we might call extreme far-right discourse, Lisicki's magazines have consistently scored close to the top circulation statistics in Poland. Below I analyze representative texts of the monthlies and

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<sup>5</sup> Peter De Bruyn, "Patriotism of Tomorrow? The Commemoration and Popularization of the Warsaw Rising Through Comics" in *SLOVO*, Vol. 22 No. 2, Autumn, 2010, pp. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Nowak, Andrzej. *Strachy I Lachy: Przemiany Polskiej Pamięci 1982-2012*. (Krakow: Biały Kruk, 2012) pp. 317.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

develop a taxonomy of the myths they produce. The historian John Connelly describes the Polish debate on history as a conflict between ‘myth and antimyth.’<sup>8</sup> The dichotomy is based on form, not content. In other words, this is not a value judgment on which versions of history are factually correct/have backing in archival or archeological proof and therefore have a legitimate claim to truth as opposed to those which do not. Rather myth in Poland is *that* history which highlights the ‘national virtues’ and the Polish victim narrative. Antimyth represents the views on history which are more critical of Poland’s national historical narrative, bring to light injustices perpetrated by Poles, and generally do not see Poland as consistently victimized by the rest of Europe.

### **Myth/Antimyth, Messianism, and Martyrology**

In an earlier version of this paper,<sup>9</sup> I conducted a quantitative analysis of how Europe and the West are *articulated* to the subject position of the Polish nation. The concept of articulation is borrowed from the political theorists’ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory. For them discourse is the totality of *articulations* structuring a field where political identity is contested. Articulation is defined as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.’<sup>10</sup> In the URH and HDR discourses, every time the West or Europe is mentioned, a relation to Poland is implied or established. Nine varieties of relation were counted, six that Connelly would describe as *mythic* and three *antimythic*. The antimythic relations are straightforward; they are those contexts where Poland is described as belonging to or representing Europe, or where Europe is situated as the core/centre of civilizational

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<sup>8</sup> Connelly, John. *Mity i Kontrmity: przyczynek do dyskusji o polskiej tożsamości historycznej*. in Remembrance and Justice (Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość), issue: 2 (8) / 2005, pages: 377-386

<sup>9</sup> The unpublished results were presented at *Warsaw 11<sup>th</sup> Annual East European Conference* at the University of Warsaw in 2013. The paper *The European Community and Its Enemies* is forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Laclau, Ernesto & Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* New York: Verso, 2000. Pp. 111.

influence upon Poland. The six mythic relations either describe Europe as barbaric compared to Poland (see below); decadent compared to Poland; a ‘graveyard’ where Polish emigres went to die; a core/centre of colonial violence; or a variation of the myths of ‘Bulwark’ and ‘Betrayal,’ which I develop in detail below. The results of counting the frequency of these articulations in articles about the ‘topic of the month’ from the first issue of URH through the August 2014 issue of HDR were as follows:

**Quantitative Analysis: Articulation of Europe to Poland**

<i>Mythic</i>	<i>Antimythic</i>
Betrayal: 69	Civilizational Core: 15
Bulwark: 28	Including Poland: 12
Colonial Core: 22	Poland As West: 1
Graveyard: 13	
Decadent: 9	
Barbaric: 7	
<b>Total: 146</b>	<b>Total: 28</b>

Three crucial mythic narratives emerge from these articulations. The myth of ‘Bulwark’ refers to the notion that Poland’s historical role was to defend Christian Europe from invasions by Mongols, Ottomans, and Bolsheviks.<sup>11</sup> Utopian myths refer to those interpretations which cast the First and Second Commonwealths as pinnacles of European civilization (democracy and Christianity) that outshone Western Europe.<sup>12</sup> These myths prepare the claim that the West owes Poland a historical ‘debt.’ Their function in nationalist ideology is chiefly to foreground the most prevalent myth – of the West’s betrayal. These are the crucial narratives which function to underwrite PIS ideology and the turn away from Western liberalism they advocate. As I will

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<sup>11</sup> A. Nowak & M. Rosalak, ‘400 Lat oddechu’ URH 06.12.2012, Agnieszka Rybak, ‘W Oczach Ciagle ten Blask’ HDR 24.04.2013

<sup>12</sup> A. Nowak & M. Rosalak, ‘400 Lat oddechu’ URH 06.12.2012, Piotr Zychowicz, ‘Wielki blef Becka’ URH 13.09.2012

discuss further below, they are ultimately rooted in the tradition of Romantic Messianism – a stream in the Polish national tradition that imagined Poland as the ‘Christ of Nations’ and proposed that Poles are measured by their will to sacrifice for the collective.<sup>13</sup> Martyrology refers to the practice of remembering and revering those ‘heroes’ who lived up to the messianic call (or more often died for it).

### **The Myths of Utopia and Bulwark in Nowak’s Oeuvre**

Appearing in the July 2012 edition of URH entitled ‘The Eastern Lands: Lost Greatness,’ Nowak’s article *400 Lat Oddechu* advances a unique and highly provocative articulation of Europe within the conservative-liberal discourse. In a talk with Andrzej Rosalak, Nowak discusses whether or not the Rus’ lands constituting the medieval and early modern First Commonwealth’s eastern periphery were ‘necessary’ for the historical development of Poland.<sup>14</sup> The signifier ‘Europe’ appears twelve times. In the first instance, it is related to the processes conceived under the concept *Drang nach Osten*, which according to Nowak was driving the historical narratives of both France and Germany (neither of which existed under those names during the period in question). Immediately, Nowak argues that by contrast to France and Germany, Polish occupation and colonization of its eastern peripheries was initiated by an act of dynastic union, not conquest. Nowak situates the beginnings of ‘civilizational contact’ between Poles and Ruthenians in 1147. In this article, civilizational contacts are reduced to peaceful intermarriage between the Piast and Rurykowycz clans. Nowak proceeds to mention that in this period ‘Europe’ was deliberating plans for a crusade in Palestine. At this point a clear distinction is laid out between historic Poland and

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<sup>13</sup> For more detailed meditations on Polish messianism and martyrology see *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism* by A. Walicki and *Beyond Martyrdom* by Brian Porter Szucs.

<sup>14</sup> A. Nowak & M. Rosalak, ‘400 Lat oddechu’ URH 06.12.2012

Europe, with the former representing a gentle diplomatic policy toward its eastern margins and the latter an aggressive, violent collective of military adventurers.

The conversation jumps forward four centuries and the interviewer deepens the distinction. Rosalak advances the point: '[I]n 1573, we had the Warsaw Confederation which in contrast to a Europe ravaged by religious wars introduced religious tolerance.' Nowak agrees, and highlights that the equal status of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was something 'truly unique on the European scale.' How can this discourse be characterized? Europe is related to historic violence and religious bigotry in contrast to a peaceful and tolerant Poland. Thus is problematized the notion that Poland is primarily tied to Europe by Christian tradition. The reader may conclude that Polish Christianity is more peaceful and more tolerant (essentially more Christian) than 'European' Christianity. The tension between inferiority and superiority complexes favours moral superiority in this articulation, and it is made stronger by the introduction of a classic *antemurale*-articulation made by the interviewer. In asking what the Eastern borderlands gained from Polish civilization, he reminds the reader that Poland's historic mission was the defense of Europe against Turks, Tartars, Muscovite tyranny and finally twentieth-century Bolshevism. The identity of Europe thus becomes highly fluid in this article; it starts as a barbaric (as compared to Poland) nest of warmongering and bigotry to a site of weakness requiring protection from the strength of Poland. The shift occurs with the use of an antimythical articulation of 'Western Europe.' Nowak situates it as a source of certain legal traditions which were transmitted from Krakow to Kiev. Medieval Krakow is described as a site where Eastern and Western cultures mixed. Nowak adds the caveat that in the process of mixing, the tradition of 'republican freedom' was added to Western culture. Herein the myth of Polish pre-Lockean republicanism is advanced. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau submits that bricks falling

happens independently, but whether or not their specificity as objects is constructed as natural phenomena or the wrath of God depends on the structuring of a discursive field. The myth of the First Commonwealth's republicanism should be understood through the lens of Laclau's metaphor.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not the 'golden freedoms' of the Polish gentry are understood as a manifestation of a uniquely Polish philosophy of liberty or the institutionalised privilege of an exclusive aristocratic fraternity to exploit other social strata depends on who is discussing their history. Nowak is clearly backing the latter reading. Thus the second pillar (beside Christianity) of commonality between Poland and Europe (that is democratic tradition) is flipped upside-down (it becomes an idea 'added' by Poland), and the antimythic view of Europe as civilizational core is effectively consumed by the mythic construction. Nowak moves this even further in his conclusion where the past is made into a lesson for the present:

The long adventures of the I Commonwealth, a state of many peoples, cultures, and faiths created by the Unions of Krewo, Horodlo, and Lublin can surely contribute much to the Union to which we belong at present. How much unity, variety, how much freedom, how much necessary centralization of effort? These are contemporary questions which the experiences of the Polish Lithuanian state can illuminate with authority. One is however struck by a clear difference: the Polish Lithuanian Union was created by self-governance, Sejmiki, and a fabulous culture of free citizenry; the European Union on the other hand is built by a gigantic bureaucracy which works more visibly in neglect of citizens. The Polish Lithuanian Union survived 400 years. I am pondering: how lasting will the bureaucratic construction be?

Thus the nodal point Christianity ceases to function as a logic of equivalence between Poland and the West or Europe. Furthermore, historic Poland becomes a civilizational core from which contemporary Europe (now playing the role of a periphery) should draw lessons on how to govern itself. Similarly, in Nowak's timeline, 'Europe' was barbaric in the past, then made more civilized by Polish ideas, and finally, now it should read Polish history as a way to improve its contemporary situation. In the present public debate this functions ideologically to cast Europe as

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<sup>15</sup> Laclau, 123.

the metropole of false progress and a threat to Polish spiritual identity; if Europe was historically less Christian and less democratic than Poland, why should Poland accept the European Union's directives on how to be democratic and how much influence the Catholic Church should have in public debate?

It has been mentioned above that Europe is rarely articulated as including Poland. Rarer still is the articulation of the West suggesting membership of Poland within it. As a matter of fact, this occurs only once in the entirety of the analyzed material. The March 2014 issue of HDR, released at the height of tensions between Russia and Europe over the Ukraine crisis, is provocatively titled 'Moskwa Nasza' / 'Moscow is ours!' The issue's Topic of the Month is the early seventeenth-century dynastic conflict between the First RP and Muscovy. As Putin's little green men quietly occupied the Crimean Peninsula, Lisicki's monthly opted to reminisce on the occupation of Moscow by the Poles and Lithuanians in 1610. The symbolic value and emotional charge of the incident for both Poles and Russians is significant to say the least. In the Russian consciousness it is a great historical embarrassment and the lowest point of the *Smutnoe Vremye*. In the Polish consciousness it represents the failure of the First RP to reach its full potential and become the dominant empire of the region and possibly the continent. Probably no incident inspires more 'what-if history' than the 1610 war. The subtitle of an article entitled 'Could we have beaten Russia?' reads 'The Polish-Russian border conflict developed into a conflict between cultures – those of the East and West.'

Upon reading the title, one might expect the author to describe how Poland represented Western values of citizenship and freedom in a centuries-long clash with Eastern tyranny represented by Muscovy. This does not happen and Nowak opts for an even more reductionist approach. The characterization of 'east-west conflict' is simplified into a timeline of border

disputes between medieval Polish and Rus' princes, which later intensified through religious divisions along the lines of Catholic-Orthodox within the First RP. The narrative of conflict essentially ends in the seventeenth century, when Nowak concludes that historians who see the 1610 occupation of Moscow by Polish troops as a great wasted opportunity of history are wrong. To Nowak, a dynastic union between the First Commonwealth and Muscovy was impossible because the King was a Catholic and the Tsar had to be Orthodox. How does Nowak's reduction of the east-west (Poland-Russia) conflict to a Catholic-Orthodox conflict function in defining the identities of Poland and the West? It is suggested that Poland is Western only in the sense that it belongs to Western Christianity. In discourse theory terms, Christianity is the only nodal point on which Poland and the West are constructed within a chain of equivalence. Furthermore, this is the single instance where 'West' is articulated as including Poland (this articulation goes beyond inclusion, it casts Poland as *representing* the West). One is left with the impression that Poland is only ever identified as Western (as a Bulwark) in the context of its relation to Russia, establishing the notion of historic debt.

### **The Myth of Betrayal**

The article 'Wielopolski's Loneliness' from the final issue of URH can be read as the exemplar of the myth of betrayal. Betrayal began with Europe's failure to understand Poland. The piece is Piotr Zychowicz's apology for one of the most dubious political figures in Polish nineteenth-century history. The margrave Wielopolski, who was responsible for gaining important concessions for the Polish Congress Kingdom from the Tsar, was widely hated and branded a traitor by his contemporaries. The seismic disconnect between the minds of Europe and Poland is established early in the piece when Zychowicz writes:

If we were to try and explain the reasons for this hatred to a person from the West, we would have substantial trouble. Our efforts would be in vain, no matter how long we perorate, the foreigner would scratch his head and open his arms in resignation. Truly it is difficult to understand the Polish soul.<sup>16</sup>

The disconnect is deepened as Zychowicz argues that Wielopolski's political wisdom was based on a 'realist' approach to international politics; that is, he was able to predict that the West would remain indifferent if the Poles should revolt against the Tsar. Europe and the West never understood the 'Polish soul' and as a result never felt obligated to help Poland. A dominant theme in the URH-HDR discourse is that the salient tragedies of Polish political history (the 1830 and 1863 insurrections, WWII, and Yalta) are overwhelmingly explained through this heavily reductionist lens without probing the precise exigencies of international relations relevant to the situation.

This myth underwent a significant evolution in the September 2013 issue of HDR, when the memory of state socialism was added to the mix. The topic of the month called 'A Murderer not an Idol' is aimed at reconstituting the image of Che Guevara from international leftist cult hero to ordinary mass murderer. The most salient piece here is the interview entitled 'The Self-delusion of the West.' In discussing the 'myth of Che' in Western Europe and the United States, Maciej Rosalak and Andrzej Tolczyk try to tease out why Guevara and other Communist figureheads are glorified despite the more dubious aspects of their biographies. Their dilemma is how countries with deep traditions of liberalism and Christianity are able to accept communist theory and practice into the mainstream cultural matrix. The subtitle reads 'Soviet lies were sewn with such thick thread that it was easy to undermine them, yet the more insolently the Soviets lied, the more they were believed.' In other words, the West is charged with a fetishist disavowal regarding the crimes

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<sup>16</sup> Piotr Zychowicz, 'Samotność Wielopolskiego' URH 02.09.2013

of totalitarian communism in Poland and the world in general. The Slovene psychoanalytic philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes the mechanism of fetishist disavowal as following the logic: “I know very well that things are the way I see them/that this person is a corrupt weakling, but I nonetheless treat him respectfully, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks, it is the Law itself which speaks through him.”<sup>17</sup> This is how, according to Tolczyk, the West thinks about Guevara and the bloodiest Communist dictators. The ‘western liberal leftists’ are fully aware of the dark side of the heroes of socialist revolution, but they choose to ignore the body counts and glorify their emancipatory missions. In the immediate postwar era, they argue, Western Europe surged ahead of the Soviet bloc economically, treating it as an easy market for surplus goods, and in their euphoria also developing an idealized image of life across the Iron Curtain. According to Rosalak and Tolczyk, literature plays a key role in the disavowal. They debate whether Sartre, Shaw, and Hemingway were ‘useful idiots’ or if they truly understood and believed in Marxism. In any case, to the discussants their books represent an idealization of socialist struggle that glossed over what they believe to be its teleological destiny: totalitarian genocide.

Tolczyk argues that the same fetishist disavowal is observable in Europe’s dealings with China in the present: ‘I think Europe does not link the two. Terror and cultural revolution are one subject and the present economy is another. It is a very comfortable stance, because it is possible to denounce the murders perpetrated by Mao and simultaneously be happy with our present trade relationship.’

In the opening paragraphs, it is made clear that the guilt lies with Europe more than the United States. Tolczyk explains that in America, the myth is only a commercial game. Furthermore, it is a product of ignorance of the true history of communism inherent to the

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<sup>17</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. WITH OR WITHOUT PASSION: What's Wrong with Fundamentalism? - Part I

American higher education system. Europe is a different case. The myth is spread by the '68 generation who regarded Che as a martyr of the fight against capitalism. There is a true nostalgia for communism in Europe because, according to Tolczyk, the protesters of '68 are now handling the reins of state in France and Germany. This position is cemented when Tolczyk argues that the 'leftist-liberal intellectuals' are like Marx, not interested in truth, only power.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Production of *Ressentiment* and How this Helps PIS**

In a study of how British tabloids produce the emotion 'rage,' Yuen Chang and Jason Glynos suggest that psychoanalytically inflected discourse theory can help understand the affective dimension of ideology in press media. Specifically, emotional charges produced in discourse can be efficiently understood through the Lacanian concept 'theft of enjoyment.' Chang and Glynos claim "our sense of being is procured to a large extent by imagining how another being (an Other) enjoys. In other words, the Other and the Other's enjoyment function as key reference points in establishing the parameters of our own enjoyment. And insofar as the Other's enjoyment is premised on the subtraction by the Other of our own rightful enjoyment, this tends to generate a powerful affective response."<sup>19</sup> I propose that the theft of enjoyment is the key thread running through the narrative of Poland's relation to Europe in the neo-martyrological narrative.

Thinking back to Tolczyk's discussion of the Guevara myth, Europe is cast as having enjoyed economic growth, stability, high standards of living, and relative freedom during the postwar period. Furthermore, it enjoyed socialism through welfare state institutions and enchantment with Communist heroes. Europe's enjoyment of this time is tied to a subtraction from

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<sup>19</sup> Wei Yuan Chang & Jason Glynos, *Ideology and Politics in the Popular Press: The Case of the 2009 UK MPs' Expenses Scandal* in "Discourse Theory And Critical Media Politics", eds. Sean Phelan & Lincoln Dahlberg. London: Palgrave, 2011.

Poland's enjoyment of both the postwar period and socialism. In the URH-HDR narrative, it is established that due to the sacrifices made by the underground state and Home Army during WWII, compounded with the centuries-long role as bulwark, Poland should have rightfully enjoyed the postwar period at least as much as if not more than Europe. Of course, most will agree that Poland did not enjoy the postwar period or socialism. By consistently highlighting the West and Europe's ignorance and abandonment of Poland during conflicts with Russia and Germany, the discourse makes this enjoyment appear stolen. The theft is magnified by tying the economic prosperity of Western Europe in the '50s, '60s, and '70s to unequal trade with the Soviet bloc and Europe's fetishist disavowal of the crimes of totalitarian communism. Thus is produced the emotion *ressentiment* – a combination of self-pity, jealousy, and anger directed at the Other. The generation which lived for forty years in the economy of scarcity engineered by Poland's Communist regime is the prime target of this rhetoric, but youth who have experienced less than prosperity in their experience of being Poles in the EU are susceptible to *ressentiment* as well. The emotion is perfectly crystallized in a poignant fragment of Rafal Ziemkiewicz's book *Such a Beautiful Suicide* published in a 2014 issue of *Do Rzeczy Weekly*:

I cannot resist the thought that if it were possible to look at an alternative thread of history, I would give a lot to look at all those bloated Euro-wiseasses who lecture us at every turn and usher us to operate their self-serving machinery, to see how they would look today, if Tukhachevsky had gotten through Warsaw in 1920. It's not even about the European Katyns, the camps where their politicians, officers and professors would be exterminated together with anyone who was not ready to collaborate and anyone who had the misfortune of acquiring any sort of higher education or wealth. It's not even about observing the Sartres and Grasses and other tricky idiots bowing before the collective fearful not to toe the party line and assuring through self-criticism that despite their past mistakes they sincerely love the Party and are dedicated to the workers' cause. I would simply like to see how they understand 'social justice' and the prosperity that comes with it. I would like them to stand all day in line, like my mother, trying to hunt down a piece of wretched meat to make soup with. I would like to look at the self-assured Germans killing each other over the only morning shipment of beer available in the land whose flavour and aroma is that of horse piss. I want to see the French crying tears of joy when their local store receives once a week cheese looking like blocks of TNT. I would like to see the British satisfying their alcoholism with People's Whiskey that stinks of carbide and preceding a hangover the size of Kilimanjaro. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I think that if they could imagine this life at least aesthetically, they would avoid many insolent and despicable behaviours.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rafal Ziemkiewicz, 'Jakie Piekne Samobojstwo' in *Do Rzeczy* 07.05.2014

How is *ressentiment* relevant to the present political outcome? The ideology of PIS relies on how it articulates its actions to the grand scheme of Polish history. Brian Porter-Szucs has brilliantly summarized their grand scheme of events since the 1980s:

Working with collaborators highly placed within the Solidarity movement—mostly members of the intelligentsia, who never did have a genuine bond with the Polish people—the communists staged the so-called “Round Table Talks” of 1989. The arrangement that came out of these negotiations enabled the old state apparatus to seize the nation’s wealth in the name of “privatization,” allowing the creation of what seemed on the surface to be a democracy. But it was not a true democracy, because it was manipulated by unseen forces in league with foreign interests. These morally bankrupt people ensured that the state would remain weak, allowing private interests from the one side and international forces from the other to keep the Polish nation powerless and poor. Since Pope John Paul II endorsed Poland’s entrance to the European Union, that must have been a good thing. Nonetheless, the corrupt elites running Poland allowed Brussels to continue the assault on the nation, undermining Polish morality by pushing alien values like gay rights and feminism. (...) From those dark times, Jarosław Kaczyński led the movement of genuine Polish patriots gradually back to power, finally triumphing in 2015 by putting PiS loyalists in the offices of president and prime minister. Now the old elite that had been holding Poland back for so many decades can finally be destroyed, and the pseudo-revolution of 1989 can be replaced with a genuine revolution that will return Poland’s greatness.<sup>21</sup>

How do the mythic interpretations advanced in URH and HDR play into this scheme? Tolczyk’s piece is exemplary again. By telling his readers that former communist idealists are in power all over Europe, Tolczyk does a number of things. He articulates the myth of betrayal to socialist memory, creating an extratemporal chain of equivalence linking every identity structuring the outer horizon of the subject position that is Poland. This includes Russia, Europe, and any of Poland’s own elites who identify as leftwing. Brussels is a refurbished Moscow and its agents run Warsaw. PIS is needed to break the chain. If the *ressentiment* produced by the neo-martyrological interpretation of history in URH and HDR was a significant factor in mobilising support for PIS in 2015 is a very difficult question demanding large scale sociological research. There is no clear answer, but certainly this mythic narrative is in total ideological lockstep with the way PIS legitimizes its authoritarian gestures. Through the discursive production of *ressentiment* it has

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<sup>21</sup> Porter-Szucs, Brian. *Lech Walesa and The Politics of History*. <http://porterszucs.pl/2016/02/22/lech-walesa-and-the-politics-of-history/>

radically intensified the emotional charges carried by the public discussion of Poland's recent and distant history. The emotional charge is not produced *ex nihilo*, the myths are powerful because they have deep cultural and intellectual roots.

### **Addendum**

This paper began with the suggestion that Polish Messianism and martyrology were being *revived* by Lisicki's projects. These phenomena have deep intellectual and cultural histories which are bound up dialectically. To reflect on them is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of neo-nationalist thought, and a step toward deconstructing their ideological edifice.

The inception of Polish Messianism was based on a misreading of the Graf August Von Cieszkowski's radical interpretation of GWF Hegel's *Philosophy of History* by the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. Cieszkowski was a Poznanian aristocrat who participated in the failed November Insurrection in 1830. After he witnessed the Tsar's troops sack Warsaw, Cieszkowski decided to move to Berlin and study under Hegel.<sup>22</sup> The would-be mentor perished unexpectedly before the pupil arrived, however, so the Graf studied Hegelianism under Karl Ludwig Michelet. He earned the sobriquet 'The Youngest Old Hegelian' by producing the *Prolegomenon Zur Historiozofie* (1836, henceforth the Prolegomenon) while still an undergraduate at Berlin University. The typical Old Hegelian interpreted the master's Jenenser System toward religiously and politically conservative agendas, but Cieszkowski's Prolegomenon was an attempt to radically transcend it, and now it is celebrated as the first turn to praxis in the Hegelian tradition, predating Marx' eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.<sup>23</sup> Cieszkowski's definition of praxis (generally understood as

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<sup>22</sup> Andre Liebich, "Cieszkowski: Praxis and Messianism" in *Selected Writings of August Cieszkowski*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Avineri, Shlomo. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) p. 126., Lawrence S. Stepelovich. "Making Hegel into a Better Hegelian: August Von Cieszkowski." In *Journal of*

the movement of philosophy from speculative interpretation to social action) was precise and idiosyncratic.

Cieszkowski proposed that Hegel had brought humanity to the brink of understanding how it should make its future but stopped short by only describing how Geist had evolved from existing in-itself to existing for-itself in the Philosophy of History. Yet, in the Phenomenology of Spirit it was written that the subject could achieve a third, mediated stage of being: out-of-itself.<sup>24</sup> For Cieszkowski, the way for humanity to bring Geist to the crucial third stage, the moment of Geist's *aufhebung* was a practice he learned from Claude Henri de Saint Simon and Charles Fourier – associationism. In his system, the act of forming associations is called *Der Tat* – the deed; it is the only kind of act that is more than a fact. It is *praxis* – the sublation of thought and action, that is, action conscious of the laws of the Dialectic in history and therefore consciously making the future.<sup>25</sup> Cieszkowski spent his life founding associations on his estates in Prussian Poland where intellectuals, peasants, workers, and gentry shared labor and exchanged knowledge. He believed that these social experiments would render social divisions and state power superfluous and eventually reveal the form of the future organic society.

Throughout Cieszkowski's oeuvre, a constellation or force-field unfolds in which the signifiers work (*praca*), deed (*czyn / der Tat*), labor (*praca*), act (*czyn*), and action (*akcja*), and praxis itself can be substituted albeit with a potential for substantial slippage in meaning. Praxis is both centered as a master-signifier and de-stabilized as a unit-idea by the field. Though the preferred mode of praxis is very precisely defined in the latter writings of the Count, this slippage

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the History of Philosophy. Vol. 25 Issue 2. 1987, p263-273., Kolakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism*. (New York : W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) pp. 73.

<sup>24</sup> August von Cieszkowski, "Prolegomenon Zur Historiozofie" in *Selected Writings of August Cieszkowski*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

had very concrete consequences when his thought was interpreted by Mickiewicz. For Mickiewicz, the ‘deed’ meant a break with speculation (as it did for Cieszkowski) and the *separation* of action from thought (not the sublation of their opposition.)<sup>26</sup> Mickiewicz’s deed would push humanity into the future, but in a different temporal structure. Where Cieszkowski imagined a gradual unfolding of the future through *der Tat*, Mickiewicz’s deed was the movement toward a Catholic Millenarian Eschaton. He trumpeted a ‘*czyn bohaterki*’ (heroic deed) which married his undialectical notion of praxis to the sacralization of the nation. The ‘heroic deed’ boiled down to conspiracy and violence against the nation’s enemies and sacrifice for the nation. For the German intellectual historian Andre Liebich, this interpretation meant “increase in fervor, millenarian imagery and apocalyptic violence, eventually degenerating into an obsessive national cult.”<sup>27</sup> Brian Porter-Szucs noticed that in this period a Pole was defined by his ‘acts’ and ‘deeds’ rather than by a territory (because the Pole had no territory). To be a Pole meant to be a revolutionary hero, and thus the nation was enacted, not embodied by the subject.<sup>28</sup> But the notion of revolutionary heroism was older than Mickiewicz’s philosophy, it was born in the first act of martyrology.

### **Pregnant Death: The Polish Hero Born through Burial**

The first recorded act of the martyrological practice occurred in the early nineteenth century, when Polish national poets retroactively made martyrs and heroes of the military leaders Poniatowski and Kosciuszko. It was also an early instance of *mnemomachia*. The Congress of Vienna transformed the Napoleonic satellite called the Grand Duchy of Warsaw into the Congress Kingdom of Poland ruled by the Tsar Aleksander I. The Tsar bargained hard for the title with the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>27</sup> Liebich, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Porter, Brian. *When Nationalism Began To Hate*. ( New York : Oxford University Press, 2000.) p. 16.

French, British, and Austrians in Vienna, but he also needed to perform his kingship in front of the Poles in Warsaw. This first performance was a clumsy and dangerous dance with the dead.

Aleksander's first gesture toward defeated Poland was to let the armies that had fought for Napoleon return home with honor; that is with their standards, weapons and the remains of their dead commander-in-chief, Prince Józef Poniatowski. Poniatowski had been a Marshal of France and he drowned himself after the Battle of the Nations in 1813. For over a year the corpse remained in limbo in a cellar of the Augustinian brethren in Leipzig. His family's appeals for the remains' release were refused by the Tsar, who had greater plans for them.<sup>29</sup> Germane here are the insights of Robert Hertz on the intermediary period between death and the burial of royalty: "As long as the temporary burial of the corpse lasts, the deceased continues to belong more or less exclusively to the world he has just left (...) During the whole of this period the deceased is looked upon as having not yet completely ended his earthly existence (...) his successor cannot be named until the corpse has had its final burial; for until that burial the deceased is not truly dead, he is simply 'asleep in his own house.'"<sup>30</sup> Aleksander wanted to end Poniatowski's earthly existence with very precise timing. The burial should be a prelude to his coronation and a covenant with his subjects-to-be. It should be made clear that Poland was no longer Poniatowski's House. The dead Marshal was therefore kept in limbo until 1814, when Aleksander was sure the Congress would award him the Kingdom.

In the words of the historian Andrzej Kijowski, the Tsar 'had no intention to subjugate Poland, but to take all of her, together with all her traditions and honor.'<sup>31</sup> In Aleksander's own

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<sup>29</sup> Andrzej Kijowski (1979) "Krypta Sw. Leonarda" in Kijowski, Andrzej. *Rachunek Naszych Slabosci*. Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 2009. pp. 150.

<sup>30</sup> Hertz, Robert. (1907) *Death and The Right Hand*. Aberdeen : University Press, 1960. Trans. Rodney & Claudia Needham. pp. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Kijowski, 152.

words to an Austrian deputy, ‘treating the Poles as I do now, I will turn them into Russians and they will still think they are Polish.’<sup>32</sup> To give a Marshal of France an elaborate state funeral in his own domain would be at once an act of forgiveness and a reminder that he had buried the Revolution. As the Poles began their funeral march from Leipzig, Russian generals stationed in the Congress Kingdom attended mass dedicated to Poniatowski in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Warsaw. When the urn arrived, Aleksander charged his field-marshal Barclay De Tolly with organizing proceedings in the city. Russian battalions lined the outskirts and the Polish legions gathered within, firing salutes every thirty minutes from six in the morning. The coffin was covered with the purple coronation cloak of Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of the First Commonwealth and the Prince’s ancestor. His royal standard was also placed beside the catafalque, making clear the other subtext; this was also a funeral for Polish sovereignty. Kijowski draws on an ‘eye-witness account’ of the ceremonies to judge that the officially sanctioned cult of Poniatowski was saturated in ‘propaganda comparable to that of the USSR.’<sup>33</sup> The prayers said over his ashes alluded to the mercy of the Tsar and the evil of Bonaparte. Particularly soaked in Tsarist rhetoric was the poet Kazimierz Brodzinski’s elegy during mass. Because he performed what he believed to be his duty, Poniatowski’s fame was untainted by ‘him who sprayed the blood of brothers across the globe.’ This was of course a reference to Napoleon, and the insinuation was that the Poles and Russians had been brothers before the Revolution. The elegy had the Poles ‘turn their hopes to the North, where it smiled to them from their new Master’s womb.’<sup>34</sup>

Robert Hertz theorizes that the final ceremony’s object is to, among others, ‘free the living from the obligations of mourning.’<sup>35</sup> The living in this case could not digest the final ceremony or

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 155, 157.

<sup>35</sup> Hertz, 54

accept the liberation from mourning. Even Adam Czartoryski, who had worked closely with Aleksander to consolidate the new order, marked the day of the mass in his diary with Poniatowski's supposed last words: "better to die with honor than live in shame."<sup>36</sup> Four years later, in his capacity as Bishop of Krakow, the clearly haunted Czartoryski arranged for the Prince to be reburied again. The urn was transported to the holiest of holies in Poland; the Crypt of St. Leonard in the catacombs under the Wawel Castle in Krakow. Poniatowski was to rest in finality beside the famous warrior-King Sobieski. Hertz elaborates that during the final burial 'the living mark the end of one period and the beginning of another; they abolish a sinister past and give the deceased a new and glorified body with which to enter worthily the company of his ancestors.'<sup>37</sup> In discussing the reburial of Nagy in 1989, Istvan Rev builds on Hertz and suggests the living feel a duty to properly reclaim and integrate the dead as a dead member of society.<sup>38</sup> In his mercy, the Tsar had integrated Poniatowski as a dead member of his empire. The Prince's surviving officers together with the Polish poets and elites could not countenance this. By moving his remains to Krakow they hoped to reclaim him as a member of the Polish nation. An unofficial cult of Poniatowski emerged in forbidden poetry and literature, transforming his career of incessant blunder and eventual suicide into an epic of valor and final martyrdom. Kijowski remarks that in this cult 'was born the stereotype of the Polish tragic hero whose love for Fatherland leads him into error and eventual annihilation by geopolitics. Therein was also born the traditional opposition between honor and reason, idealism and realism.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kijowski, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Hertz, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Rev, Istvan. *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. pp. 34.

<sup>39</sup> Kijowski, 161.

In 1818 Tadeusz Kosciuszko died in Switzerland and the Tsar immediately arranged for his body to be interred at the Crypt of St. Leonard. His appointed speaker for the ceremony was the priest Lancucki. After thanking God for putting Aleksander on the sacred throne of the Jagiellons, he reintegrated Kosciuszko into imperial society:

Kosciuszko embraced the throne of the Monarch, the awakener of the Polish nation; he laid at his feet the whole weight of the tragedy and orphaning of the Fatherland. He trusted the Monarch that under his sceptre she would be happy, and as if no longer in need of life, passed into eternity on October 15.<sup>40</sup>

In 1814 Kosciuszko outright refused to cooperate with the Tsar, even though Aleksander had invited him to Vienna with Czartoryski. For the empire to claim the leader of the first Polish revolt against Russia (1794) as a sympathizer was a barefaced lie and the inspiration for another hero-cult. This burial had given neither the dead nor the living any peace. The officers of the new, more repressive Tsar Nicholas's Polish Army in Warsaw began to conspire,<sup>41</sup> and at their meetings they swore secrecy on a crucifix and Kosciuszko's portrait. When no crucifixes were available the portrait sufficed. His myth was a combination of Christ and Cincinnatus. The soldiers spoke of Kosciuszko the peaceful farmer who only went to war when it was unavoidable and who also inspired Revolutionary soldiers to great virtue and fortitude with miracles and a saintly lifestyle. When their November Insurrection broke out in 1830, 'patriots' were obligated to wear the 'Kosciuszko hat.' The allusion to the Frigian Cap functioned to articulate their war to the French revolution as well as to claim continuity with the Kosciuszko Uprising. In 1831, a new biography of Poniatowski was published in Warsaw in which victories over Russia in 1792, 1809, and 1812 were vividly recounted.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kijowski, 162.

<sup>41</sup> Porter Szucs, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 170.

The burials and reburials of Kosciuszko and Poniatowski initially established what Zerubavel calls ‘master-commemorative-narratives’<sup>43</sup> of the Poles’ struggle for reconstituting the First Commonwealth. The master-narrative promoted by Aleksander’s minions at the burials announced the happy end of that struggle by entering the protection of Russia and severing links to the Revolution. The poets and soldiers who could not get peace from these ceremonies engaged in the production of a counter-memory designed to undermine the hegemony of the master-narrative<sup>44</sup> in tandem with planning a military insurrection against the Tsar. Their counter-memory hinged on the reimagining of these two failed leaders as Christ-like tragic heroes and martyrs.

So it is clear that martyrology is a very old cultural practice in Poland, one which has resurfaced through several channels. It has already been established that the notion of the Polish nation playing the role of savior, victim, and sacrifice in European history permeates the discourse of Lisicki’s magazines. The retroactive rendering of heroism is also a prevalent theme; in fact the question of who was a hero and who was a villain in history drives the vast majority of their interpretations. The meaning of heroism and villainy in this discourse can be gleaned from a brief reflection on their visual representation in the cover art. Poland’s Others (the Germans, Czechs, Russians) are frequently portrayed as grotesque, cartoonishly exaggerated villains by the illustrator Zajączkowski (see appendix I, II, III). Compelling insight may also be drawn from the representation of heroes. The very first issue of HDR was dedicated to remembering the *Żołnierze Wyklęci* (Exiled Soldiers) – leaders of the Polish resistance in WWII whose memory was ‘exiled’ from public discussion by the Communist ideologues before 1989 (see appendix V). But the most heroic representation is dedicated, somewhat surprisingly, not to any of the Exiled Soldiers or Piłsudski or any Pole for that matter. The most passionately celebrated historical figure in the entire

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<sup>43</sup> Zerubavel, Yael. *Recovered Roots*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. pp. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

series is General Franco (see appendix IV.) The issue dedicated to him is subtitled ‘Commie Slayer’ and in the featured articles he is called ‘Europe’s last Crusader.’<sup>45</sup> For the authors his heroic deeds were to outsmart Hitler, to save the Church in Spain from destruction, and to perpetrate merciless violence on the Left.<sup>46</sup> The cover art is a palimpsest of the major themes in HDR’s martyrology. The ever-hated international Left is represented by a red dragon impaled by Franco’s lance. Franco wears black armor which almost every Pole associates with the image of the 15<sup>th</sup> century crusader Zawisza Czarny in the very popular Jan Matejko painting *Bitwa Pod Grunwaldem*. Uccello’s *St. George and The Dragon* is also referenced here (see appendix VI). In that medieval painting, the eye of a storm lines up with the point of St. George’s lance, signaling divine intervention. The homage implies clearly that violence against communists is divinely sanctioned violence; it is the highest martyrological heroism.

But URH and HDR are part of a larger cultural movement toward martyrology. There is no great cult of Franco, but the Exiled Soldiers are being commemorated aggressively, for instance in the series of graphic novels *Wilcze Tropy (Wolf Tracks)* published by the IPN (see appendix VII). The series is dedicated to forgotten Polish generals, partisans, and conspirators killed by invading Nazis in the September Campaign or executed by the Soviets after ‘45. Sacrifice, betrayal, and the celebration of violence in service to the nation are dominant themes. They are drawn by the same artists who produce URH and HDR’s covers. IPN’s connection to the far right press suggests a major breakthrough in Polish memory politics toward a neo-nationalist hegemony. IPN is an institution of incredible power where memory politics is concerned – it not only houses the archives of the Communist secret police, but also possesses the Bureau of Public Education, which sends lecturers into public schools, publishes scholarship and stages exhibitions. Their

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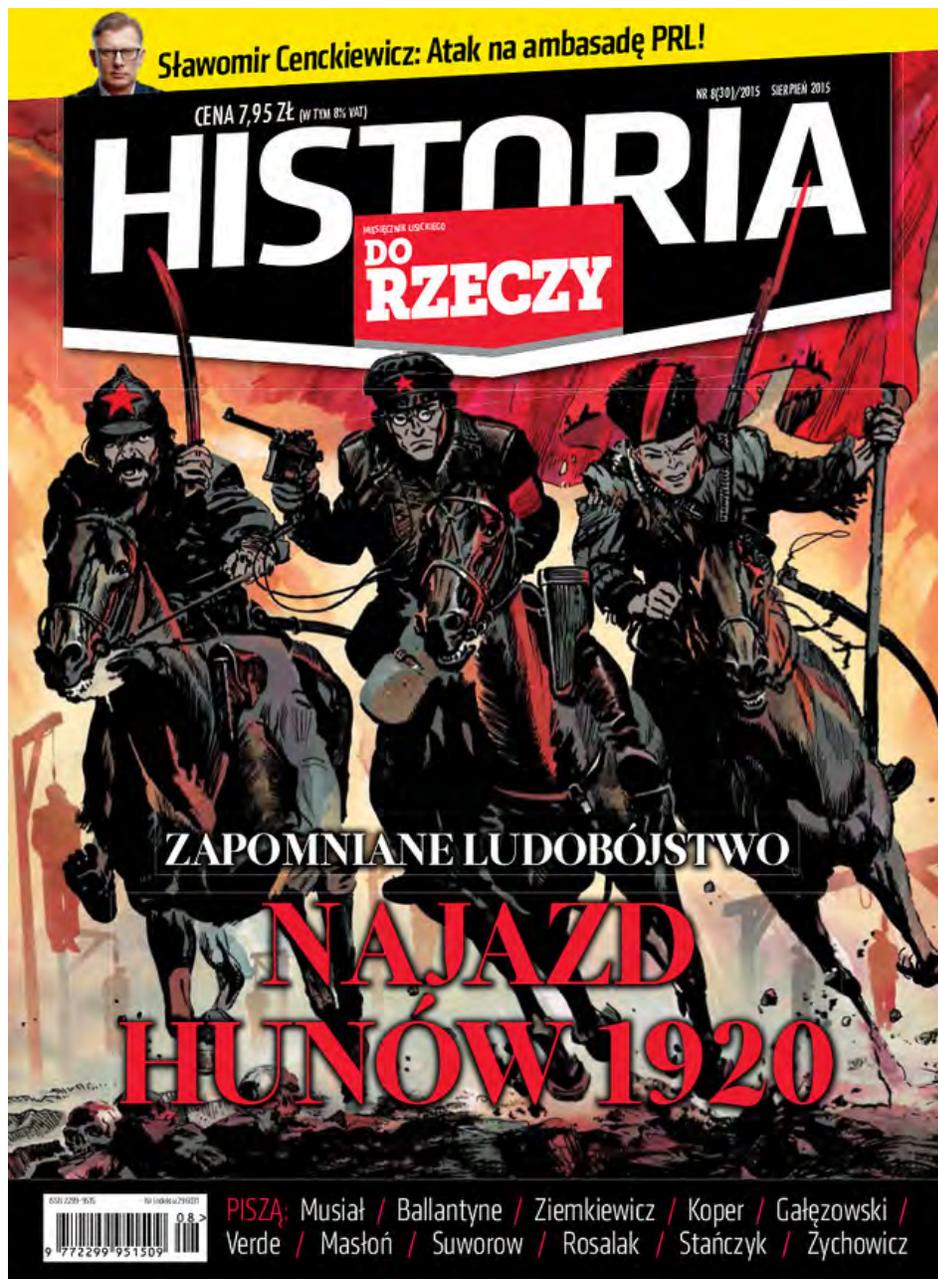
<sup>45</sup> Piotr Zychowicz, ‘Ostatni Krzyżowiec Europy’ HDR 01.09.2014

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,

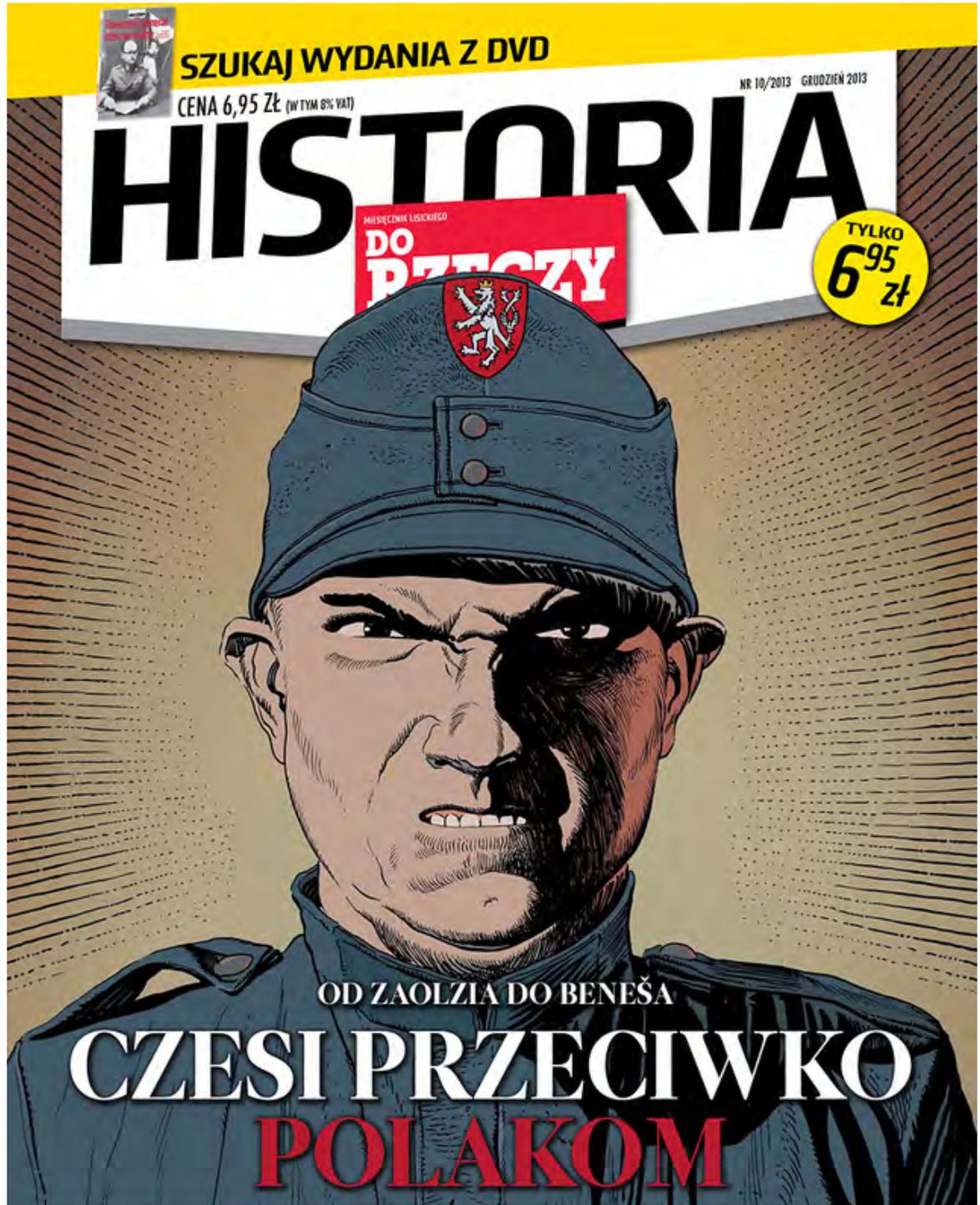
impact where the historical consciousness of youth especially is concerned is tremendous. Since 2014, membership in Polish paramilitary organizations has swollen radically to 80,000 (the regular army has 120,000.) Are these developments coincidental or connected? They do not have to be explicitly connected to be concerning. They feed one another dialectically. Wider promulgation of martyrological history for youth will potentially motivate more volunteers for the paramilitary, and more membership in the paramilitaries will create a larger market for martyrological history. As this paper has argued, these processes will serve to legitimize the authoritarian gestures of PIS. At present, Polish collective memory is radicalizing; it is becoming illiberal.

## Appendix

### I. 1920: Invasion of the Huns



II. Czechs Vs. Poles



PISZA: Cenckiewicz / Aly / Suworow / Ziemkiewicz / Patricelli / Kamiński  
/ książkę Sellasje / Koper / Ziółkowska-Boehm / Wildstein / Gałęzowski

III. Germans Raping Polish Women



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PISZA: Gmyz / Röger / Płużański / Rigg / Kochanski / Birstein / Gałęzowski / Suworow / Ziemkiewicz / Gluth-Nowowiejski / Koper / Jankowski / Wildstein

IV. General Franco: Commie Slayer





VI. St. George & The Dragon



VII. 'Wolf Tracks: Lupaszka'





