

WARSAW STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY 2

Zofia Wóycicka

Arrested Mourning

Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland,
1944-1950



PETER LANG
EDITION

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, after protracted efforts, the Carmelite Order was granted permission by the Polish authorities to establish a convent in one of the buildings of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. This decision sparked protest among Jewish groups. Two conferences were convened in Geneva, attended by representatives of the Catholic Church and Jewish organisations in Poland and abroad, during which it was agreed that the Carmelite nuns would be moved to a soon-to-be-established Centre for Dialogue and Prayer located at a certain distance from the Memorial Museum. In the years to follow, however, no progress was made on this matter. Meanwhile, the events of 1989—the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the opening of borders, and the Round Table talks between Solidarity and Poland’s Communist government—led to an escalation of the dispute. In mid-July 1989, barely a few weeks after Poland’s first free elections, the American Rabbi Avi Weiss and a group of his supporters scaled the walls of the Carmelite convent to protest against the continued presence of the nuns within the perimeter of the camp. Weiss and his colleagues were forcibly removed from the site by local workers. To prevent further conflict, the Vatican confirmed the existing arrangements concerning the construction of the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer and the relocation of the Carmelite nuns, which eventually took place in 1993.

The dispute did not end there, however. In June 1998, a group of Polish nationalists occupied the former courtyard of the Carmelite convent and put up several crosses. The purpose of this action was to protest against the authorities’ plan to remove the huge cross that had been erected on the site in 1989 and which originated from an altar at which Pope John Paul II had celebrated Mass during his first visit to Poland in 1979. Although both the Polish government and the Catholic Church distanced themselves from the protest, neither had the courage to intervene. It was not until several months later, in May 1999, that all the crosses, whose number had in the meantime risen to 300, were moved to a nearby Franciscan monastery. The “Papal cross”, however, remained in its original location.

Although Polish–Jewish relations continue to be tainted by conflict, the kind of dispute that took place over Auschwitz in the 1990s would seem unthinkable nowadays. In the past decade, Polish notions about the history of Auschwitz have undergone a significant transformation. Public opinion research shows that an increasing number of Poles see Auschwitz as a place primarily associated with the Holocaust. In 1995, 47 per cent of respondents regarded Auschwitz as a “place of Polish martyrdom” above all else, while only eight per cent considered it to be

“primarily a place where Jews were exterminated”.¹ Research conducted in 2010 showed that, for the first time, more people saw Auschwitz primarily as a place where Jews were exterminated (47.4 per cent) than as a place of Polish martyrdom (39.2 per cent).² Yet, despite these changes, there are still major differences between Poland, Israel, Germany, and other West European countries in the way the history and significance of Auschwitz is understood and, more broadly, in how the events of the Second World War are interpreted.

In 1999/2000, when the final act in the dispute over the Auschwitz crosses was being played out, I was on an academic scholarship at the University of Jena, where I attended Professor Lutz Niethammer’s seminar on memory of the Second World War. It fell to me to explain to my fellow participants the background of the conflict that was taking place in Poland. The more I immersed myself in the topic, the more apparent it became that the dispute could not be explained solely in terms of Polish nationalism and anti-Semitism, although these factors certainly played a significant role. At the root of this “conflict of memory” lay genuine differences in the wartime experience and the impossibility of communicating and comparing that experience across the Iron Curtain. To understand the essence of the dispute, it was above all necessary to analyse the circumstances under which memory of the Second World War evolved during the Communist period. But it would not be enough simply to recreate the official historical policy of the Polish authorities. Even in a totalitarian or authoritarian state, which the People’s Republic undoubtedly was, historical memory is never formed exclusively from the top down. The key questions seemed to be: what were the mechanisms that shaped the public image of the past during the Communist period? Was that image negotiable, and if it was, how did the disputes and negotiations proceed? Who participated in them and on what terms, and who was excluded and how?

The subject of this book, therefore, is the process by which “**social memory**” of the Second World War took shape in Poland. In my study, I rely on a theory developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by British scholars associated with the Popular Memory Group, among them Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson. Analysis of the oral history testimonies they collected led Johnson and Dawson to conclude that there exist two types of social memory: “**popular memory**” and “**dominant memory**”. They define popular memory as individual recollections and representations of the past that are mainly transmitted through everyday life, in conversations with friends and family. Dominant memory, on the other hand, consists of those narratives that find expression in the public realm and thus shape social representations of the past; it is created by the “**historical apparatus**”,

1 Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*, Kraków 2005, p. 292.

2 Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz w świadomości społecznej Polaków A.D. 2010*, survey conducted by TNS OBOP, 7-10 Jan. 2010.

which comprises a myriad of public institutions such as schools, public and private media, the civil service, as well as civic organisations and associations. The concepts of popular and dominant memory should be seen as Weberian “ideal types”; in reality, the boundaries between these two spheres remain fluid. Popular memory constantly strives to break through into the public realm and assume a dominant position. Defining the concept of dominant memory in greater detail, Johnson and Dawson write:

This term points to the power and pervasiveness of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the process of formal politics. But we do not mean to imply that conceptions of the past that acquire a dominance in the field of public representations are either monolithically installed or everywhere believed in. Not all the historical representations that win access to the public field are ‘dominant’. The field is crossed by competing constructions of the past, often at war with each other. Dominant memory is produced in the course of these struggles and is always open to contestation. We do want to insist, however, that there are real processes of domination in the historical field. Certain representations achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly; others are marginalized or excluded or reworked.³

Several historians interested in the changing memory of the First and Second World Wars in Europe, notably Jay Winter, Emmanuel Sivan, Pieter Lagrou, Amir Weiner, and Harold Marcuse, rely on similar assumptions.⁴ Their main focus is the role that “**agents of memory**”—in other words, organisations or institutions that actively seek to promote and consolidate a particular historical interpretation—play in the creation of dominant memory. All members of a given community, including intellectual elites, historians, writers, journalists, and artists, may participate in these negotiations, but the greatest importance is attributed to “**memory groups**” (*milieux de mémoire*). The basis for the emergence of a memory group is a community linked by shared historical experience and a conception of the past which is shaped by that experience; it very often also has common needs and interests. Such memory groups include, for instance, Polish former concentration camp prisoners, members of the Polish Home Army, and German expellees. Usually these groups have an institutionalised structure, although some

3 Popular Memory Group, “Popular memory: theory, politics, method” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds) *The Oral History Reader*, London–NY 1998, p. 76.

4 Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965*, Cambridge 2000; Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, “Setting the Framework” in idem (eds) *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2000; Jay Winter, “Forms of Kinship and Remembrance in the Aftermath of the Great War” in *ibid.*; Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Princeton 2000; Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau. The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933–2001*, Cambridge 2001.

may exist without their own organisation. For a memory group to exist, there must be communication within the given community and an ability to undertake joint action. Harold Marcuse explains the concept as follows:

The vague but popular term “collective memory” can be used to refer to a set of more specific images of and opinions about the past held by members of what I call a memory group. Such groups usually share common experiences and goals, as well as images of the past. Jewish Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe, German SS veterans and members of the French Resistance would be examples of memory groups. Other groups with common but unrelated historical experience, such as victims of forced sterilization, army deserters, or forced laborers, only become memory groups when they begin to share their memories. Individuals who accept the memories, values, and aspirations become part of a memory group; members who no longer share them, leave it.⁵

Memory groups are sometimes established along political lines. Thus, for instance, in post-war France there were two competing organisations of former concentration camp inmates and members of the resistance—the Gaullist *Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés de la Résistance* and the Communist-dominated *Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Résistants et Patriotes*. However, as Pieter Lagrou points out, these groups were founded not so much on shared political beliefs as on the common experience of their members. Memory groups may also have particular interests that do not necessarily accord with the views of the political parties to which their members feel an affinity. Aside from propagating their own image of the past, they usually have other goals, too, such as organising self-help campaigns or lobbying the authorities to gain various social privileges. Of course, the activities of memory groups are necessarily limited by the lifespan of the participants and witnesses to a given historical event. In time, these groups become fragmented as members die out and organisations cease to exist. What remains, in the words of Jay Winter, is a “national framework”, “a thin cover over a host of associative forms arduously constructed over years by thousands of people, mostly obscure”.⁶

Aside from memory groups, the aforementioned historians also point to other agents of memory, which include, principally, representatives of the central and local state administration. With wide-ranging powers and significant financial resources at their disposal, civil servants can influence public discourse by, for instance, punishing or granting amnesty to war criminals, setting school curricula, decreeing national holidays and awarding state decorations, financing the construction of museums and monuments, and distributing social privileges. Such activities may be collectively termed “**historical policy**” (*Geschichtspolitik*).

5 Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*, p. 14.

6 Winter, “Forms of Kinship and Remembrance”, p. 60.

Irrespective of whether historical policy is conducted by the government of a democratic state, or of an authoritarian or totalitarian one, its principal goals are usually the same: to legitimise authority and the existing social system and to strengthen group identity.

The above model describing the mechanisms by which collective memory is formed was developed mainly on the basis of research that concerns civil societies: Lagrou analyses the disputes over the interpretation of the Second World War in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France in the years 1945-1965; Marcuse attempts to reconstruct the history of the conflicts around the creation of the memorial museum in Dachau in West Germany; and Jay Winter explores the process by which representations of the First World War took shape in West European countries. The question arises, therefore, to what extent this theory can be applied to authoritarian or totalitarian states, where citizens have far fewer possibilities to organise themselves or to articulate their views and interests. As the Polish sociologist Barbara Szacka notes, "in non-democratic regimes, where the dominance of the state is all too evident and provokes resistance, memory of the past becomes a battleground for the legitimization or delegitimization of the system. Officially endorsed images of the past that strengthen the authorities' claims to legitimacy are rejected and alternative images that undermine those claims are created. A major gap develops between official memory and social memory".⁷ But is it really true that the USSR and other countries of the Eastern bloc were characterised by a total separation of "social memory" from "official memory"? Amir Weiner, the author of a monograph on the changing memory of the Second World War in the Ukrainian city of Vinnytsia, shows that in the Soviet Union, even under Stalin, there were various "memory groups" within the Communist Party—former Soviet partisans and Red Army veterans, for instance—all of which attempted to impose their own interpretation of the events of 1941-1945.

In the case of Communist Poland, it would seem that from the outset there were aspects of the events of 1939-1945 that were publicly taboo, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Katyń, and the fate of Polish citizens deported to the East. The communities affected by these events—Siberian deportees, families of the Katyń victims, displaced persons from the Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*) of the Second Polish Republic—had no possibility to organise themselves or to articulate their views and interests through the official channels. For this reason, to speak of an image of the past being negotiated by various agents of memory does not seem justified here. Nevertheless, it is also true to say that there were significant areas where such negotiation was permitted, at least during certain periods. One such area was the memory of Nazi concentration camps and death camps.

7 Barbara Szacka, "Pamięć zbiorowa i wojna", *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 2, 49 (2000), p. 16.

When deciding upon a timeframe for my study, I took up the idea put forward by the Polish historian Robert Traba that in 1944/45-1949 social memory of the Second World War had not yet been fully established or codified in Poland and found expression in numerous, often spontaneous and competing remembrance initiatives. Traba calls those years “a period of active memory”. He attributes this phenomenon first to the “direct proximity of the traumatic experiences of the war years, which caused a huge degree of emotional involvement on the part of society”, and second to the fact that “public debate on wartime remembrance had not yet been fully monopolised by the state”.⁸ It was not until the end of the 1940s, Traba argues, as Stalinism tightened its grip on social and cultural life, that historical policy in Poland came to be completely subordinated to the needs of Communist propaganda. The second half of the 1940s would appear, therefore, to be a particularly interesting period for analysis; it allows the historian on the one hand to reveal the polyphony of wartime memory under conditions of relative pluralism in Poland and on the other to reconstruct the process by which debate was gradually silenced as the totalitarian regime consolidated its power.

The year 1950 may be seen as the culminating point in the “Stalinsation” of historical memory in Poland. For it was then that two events occurred of symbolic importance to the development of Polish ideas about the Nazi death camps and concentration camps: in February 1950, Tadeusz Borowski wrote an article for *Odrodzenie* [Rebirth] in which he distanced himself from his Auschwitz stories, thus marking his entry into Socialist Realism⁹; and in November, on the orders of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, a new exhibition opened in the State Museum at Auschwitz which turned the camp into an instrument of Cold War propaganda.

This book consists of two parts. In part one, I discuss the groups and institutions which in the second half of the 1940s were most heavily involved in shaping the memory of Nazi concentration camps. I try to reconstruct the negotiations that took place within and between those groups and institutions on how the camp experience should be interpreted. In part two, I discuss how the notions embraced by those various agents of memory, and the conflicts and negotiations between them, were manifested in material forms of remembrance. I analyse the fate of former concentration camps and death camps, which, as genuine historical sites, cemeteries and remnants, with which many people’s personal memories were associated, naturally aspired to the title of “**sites of memory**” (*lieux de mémoire*, *Erinnerungsorte*). I refer here to the definition of sites of memory proposed by

8 Robert Traba, “Symbole pamięci: II wojna światowa w świadomości zbiorowej Polaków. Szkic do tematu” in idem *Kraina tysiąca granic. Szkice o historii i pamięci*, Olsztyn 2003, p. 181.

9 Tadeusz Borowski, “Rozmowy”, *Odrodzenie*, 19 Feb. 1950.

Maurice Halbwachs in his classic study of social memory, *La Topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte* (1941), rather than to the definition developed by the French scholar Pierre Nora in the 1980s. For Nora, sites of memory are not just topographical places but all the historical figures and events, all the concepts and symbols, that make up the identity of a given nation. In the case of France, he includes among sites of memory Joan of Arc, Vichy, the Marseillaise, 14 July, and the juxtaposition “Gaullists and Communists”.¹⁰ I understand the term “sites of memory” more literally—as topographical places which, on account of their history, are of major importance in developing a sense of identity among a given group of people. In my analysis, sites of memory are therefore treated as one of the fields where competing representations of the past and the competing interests of various social actors are manifested.

10 *Les lieux de mémoire*, edited by Pierre Nora, Vol. 1-3, Paris 1984-1992.