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Kate Korycki’s *Weaponizing the Past: Collective Memory and Jews, Poles, and Communists in Twenty-First Century Poland* offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Polish Geschichtspolitik—an account of the country’s collective memory battles in the early twenty-first century. The book belongs to a relatively new strand of memory studies and consistently adheres to its paradigm. It is not concerned with the past nor with the relationship of collective memories to the past but begins with an epistemic rupture with historiography proper. Narratives, discourses, and representations are synchronically related, juxtaposed, or intertwined. They are also thoroughly politicized; their stake is present political power. Mnemonic plots provide for both political identities and political legitimacy of competing political camps or larger ideological blocks. The author argues that, in all likelihood, political divisions in Poland are articulated most strongly, if not primarily, by adhesion to a set of political values. Or political values need to be narrated into the realm of national memory rather than conceptualized or projected into the future of existing society.

Korycki applies a largely Bourdieusian framework: the struggle takes place within the subsection of the political field where the primary resource (and weapon) is mnemonic capital—a variant of symbolic capital. Quite obviously this field is not deliberative but governed by symbolic violence where the ultimate, albeit probably unachievable, end is delegitimization of a political opponent. Korycki states that “the transition winner has access to mnemonic capital because it has won a moral victory over the past and is on the ‘right’ side of history. The actor uses this capital to fashion its political identity and mobilize voters” (p. 27).

While such a general framework of the political field of memory may apply to many countries, Korycki quite brilliantly decodes the specificity of
the main themes organizing Polish mnemonic order as well as the main actors competing in symbolic-political struggles. The author identifies three major collective actors within the political field (the Patriots, the Managers, and the Liberals) and one minor, but not unimportant, actor (the Objectors). The Patriots are Catholic and nationalist right and can be identified with the United Right in power between 2015 and 2023 and its predecessors and offshoots. The Managers stand for the Civic Platform (in power between 2007 and 2015) and its predecessors and offshoots. The Managers and Patriots are both descendants of the anti-Communist Solidarność movement from the 1980s. The Liberals stand for post-Communists, powerful before 2005 and gradually weakening since then. The Liberals descend from the former ruling Communist Party. The Objectors, on the other hand, group together all those who explicitly refuse to participate in the mnemonic identity game; their agenda is “not so much to tell their own story but to interpret and disrupt the stories of others” (p. 61). The Objectors never held political power nor really aspired to; they are heterogenous and reactive and find themselves on the borders of legitimate discourse. They renounce any heritage regardless of their individual political biographies.

Korycki argues that these political camps gain legitimacy not through policy agendas but primarily through mnemonic narratives. Such narratives determine and justify the content of political manifestos but usually do not require sharp differences in terms of concrete policies. It is the vision of the past that yields political antagonism, allowing to treat political adversaries as “treasonous, irrational, or authoritarian” (p. 12).

Being antagonistic, the competing narratives of memory form quite a solid symbolic structure. Two recurring and structuring themes are “Communism” and “Jews.” The struggle for their ever fluid meaning determines both belonging to a community and the meaning of history itself. The Patriots generally advocate a local version of a Judeo-Communism theme. The presence of “Jews” in the illegal prewar Communist Party of Poland (CCP) and postwar ruling Polish Workers’ Party (PWP) serves as a pretext for presenting Communism not only as politically imposed but also as ethnically alien. And, more important, it allows for a symbolic exoneration of Polish antisemitism and antisemitic violence. On the one hand, antisemitism is considered absent or marginal; on the other, acts of antisemitic violence during and around the time of the Holocaust (allegedly notoriously exaggerated by “Jewish circles”) should be understood as a reaction to Jewish collaboration with Communists or as self-defense. Moral superiority of Poles over Jews is zealously and profusely celebrated in commemorations for “the righteous”—Poles, rescuers of Jews during the war (p. 116). Communism is an absolute and external evil and, morally and politically, equals Nazism. According to this narrative, Poles were victims of both genocidal totalitarianisms, while Jews suffered at the hands of only one. The “competition of suffering” with Jews is the game played far beyond the ranks of the Patriot camp (p. 53). “Thus, Poles were to be exterminated, and Jews were—balance. Poles murdered Jews, but Jews liked Soviets who killed Poles—balance. Poles betrayed and robbed Jews, but all authorities condemned it—balance. The discursively emerging equilibrium hides the inequality of positions and fates, as it assigns the Holocaust to an accident of timing” (p. 82).

The Managers do not officially embrace the Jewish-Communist connection but neither do they seek to undermine this hegemonic narrative. In fact, they strengthen it with the power of silence or, even worse, implicit nourishment. They are likely to describe Polish attitudes during the Holocaust in terms of indifference rather than profiteering. The Managers are fond of celebrating the Polish tradition of multiculturalism even in the cities that were thoroughly ethnically cleansed. Their anti-Communism stands firm even if they gladly
offer individual Communists forgiveness when they repent.

The Liberals’ narrative is symbolically subordinate and therefore primarily defensive. The Liberals accept the ideological condemnation of Communism but oppose its vilification in the local Polish context. Their unrestricted adherence to the rule of law, democratic principles, and civil rights is narratively complemented with the story of Polish Communism, which had very little “real Communism” in it. At least after the “destalinization” of 1956, the Liberals claim, the party-state was mostly preoccupied with social and cultural progress and national geopolitical interest, not ideology. Their memory is narrow in scope. Korycki notices that their explicit condemnations of anti-Semitism pair with silence on Polish-Jewish history. While this may be true in general, it is worth mentioning that it was Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Polish president and exemplary Liberal, who gave an “I ask for forgiveness” speech on the anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre of 1941. His address was largely at odds with the hegemonic Patriotic/Managerial narrative. One could argue that it was closer to the Objectors’ discourse, which Korycki admits.

The Objectors as an analytic category differ significantly from the other three groups. They lack strong identity because they rarely participate in the power game. They are heterogeneous and include Holocaust scholars and urban activists. Moreover, the Together Party (Razem), a small but dynamic force of the young Left, seems to espouse the mnemonic anti-Communist pact. Razem’s “Declaration on history” from 2015 carefully wiped out all historic figures of the Left loosely associated with Communism (like Ludwik Waryński and Rosa Luxemburg). While the Patriots believe that most Objectors are simply carrying out hidden Managerial agenda and ruthlessly chase them, the relationship between the Managers and the Objectors is complex. The Managers, for example, unequivocally denounce the Objectors as extremists, but some Objectors, like Jan Tomasz Gross and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, are still published in Gazeta Wyborcza, the Managers flagship journal.

Yet Korycki is not wrong about the Objectors. Many of them are anti-anti-Communist, while others are firmly unapologetic about Polish whitewashing of antisemitism. But what truly unites them is the mistrust of the mnemonic enterprise altogether. For them, “the deployment of mnemonic capital in general, and of anti-communism in particular, had two stakes: one disqualified egalitarian solutions to the market problem, the other snuck in essentialized, if not racial, notions of belonging” (p. 166). The Objectors effectively contest the rules of the field; they refuse to propose their own mythology and to recognize historical memory as a source of political legitimacy. The Objectors do not have a stake in the game other than overthrowing the board.

The book regrettably offers no genealogy of the Polish mnemonic field; it rather offers a dense cross-section of the immediate past. Another strategic omission is a comparative effort. Polish mnemonic politics are a member of an undoubtedly extended and probably diverse family that coexists with, confronts, and influences each other. On September 19, 2019, the European Parliament voted on the “On the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe” resolution, which largely drew on the central European mnemonic equation of Nazism and Communism. The very conservative Kremlin loudly protested the defamation of the Soviet Union. Central European mnemonic weapons vigorously seek new battlegrounds. Korycki’s volume will no doubt be of great use for those who investigate mnemonic fields from genealogical or comparative perspectives.
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