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## Disagreements in remembering, contradictions in commemoration. Main narrative trends in conflict of memories in Poland after 1989

Although the subject of differences in memories, contradicting narratives about the past and the various contents and forms of commemoration have already been discussed in the social sciences and humanities (see among others: Białous, 2017; Kapralski, 2001: 35-58; Keyes, 2018; Pomian, 1992; Niedźwiedziecki, 2016; Szpociński, 2013; Spałek, 2020; Wylegała, 2014), the subject of the conflict of memories in Poland after 1989 has not been developed so far, which means that reflections relating to this issue should be considered as an important part of research on individual and collective memory. Thus, the purpose of this article is, firstly, to present how the concept of conflict of memories can be understood (referring to Poland after 1989), and secondly – to show what are the main directions of narratives in this conflict, formulated within the framework of several areas fundamental to Polish public discourse. It was also not without significance to discover what types of narratives each of the narrative trends about a particular past event construct. This made it possible to formulate conclusions concerning the shape of the featured conflict, its course and potential for permanence<sup>1</sup>.

### What are the characteristics of individual and collective memory?

The question of the features of two dimensions of memory – individual and collective – should be recognized as a necessary prelude to defining the conflict of memories. Importantly, six basic characteristics of memory can be distinguished (on this subject, see in more detail Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 13-70):

1. There are two ways of constructing memory contents: on the one hand, it is the individual's own experience, and on the other, participation in a given culture; in this second instance, there is an aspect of transmitting experiences and knowledge across generational boundaries, based on external media and institutions such as texts, paintings, sculptures, monuments, architecture, landscape, as well as holidays,

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<sup>1</sup> The article presents the research results, the full version of which can be found in the author's monograph entitled *Konflikt pamięci. Polska po przemianach systemowych 1989 roku (The Conflict of Memories. Poland after the Systemic Transformation of 1989)* from 2022 (see: Ratke-Majewska, 2022).

customs and rituals (here it is worth noting the concept of cultural memory of Aleida Assmann, German researcher in literary and cultural studies) (Assmann, 2013: 39; 54-56; 74-75).

2. Not everything is remembered (here, in turn, it is necessary to recall, among other approaches, the claim of German Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, who took the position that what is stored in the community's memory is only what this society is able to reproduce thanks to its current frames, so only selected events remain in the memory of the community) (Assmann, 2008: 54-71).
3. The dynamics of memory is formed by the interaction not only of the processes of remembering and forgetting, but also of memory errors. Every content of memory is burdened with the interpretation of its author, as well as its recipient (it is worth adding that an extensive study of memory errors was led by American psychologist, Daniel Lawrence Schacter) (Schacter, 2003: 14-212).
4. The memory of the collective (omnipresent in the order of daily life) interacts with individual memory. And conversely, individual memory interacts with the memory of the collective. In other words, a person's memories are formed as a result of his or her membership in a particular community, to which this person owes his or her perception; and at the same time the individual affects transformations of the community's memory, making this memory a dynamic construction (at this point it is worth mentioning, among others, the considerations of French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, British sociologist, Paul Connerton, and Polish sociologist Barbara Szacka) (Connerton, 2012: 32-92; Halbwachs, 1969; Szacka, 2006: 19-31).
5. It is memory that can be shaped – this conclusion can be drawn from all theoretical approaches to the interrelationship between memory and history. This is because each of the approaches discovers one fundamental common feature, saying that memory can be shaped first and foremost, while history, due to its characteristics – especially its striving for objectivity and universality – shows a lower susceptibility to shaping. And by virtue of the fact that memory can be shaped (and at the same time has social functions), it has such a strong potential for political use (Assmann, 2008: 58-60; Assmann, 2009: 127-139; Connerton, 2012: 52-60; Halbwachs, 1969: 55-57; Le Goff, 2007: 25-26; Nora, 2001: 37-39).
6. Memory is narrative in nature, and narratives are both its expression and its construction (regardless of the form of expression and source, the contents of memory are conveyed and constructed through narratives, as narratives are rendered through words, things, objects, and places). It is worth adding that this feature also strongly determines the potential of memory for political use (Assmann, 2013: 48-49; Halbwachs, 1969: 55-57; Le Goff, 2007: 25-26; Szpociński, 2011: 11-12).

## **What is a conflict of memories?**

Taking into account the above considerations, the conflict of memories should be understood as a clash of different memories, the expression of which is the collision of various narratives of memory relating to the same thematic area concerning the past. Thus, in order to study the conflict of memories, attention must be paid to the narratives, as they are both an expression of memory and a tool for shaping it. The conflict can occur between individual and collective memories, between the memories of different communities (including between the memories of two nations about a single event, or between the memory of a national community and the memory of a local community that is part of that nation), as well as between the memories of various individual persons. Moreover, the very existence of particular narratives of memory is important, and the strength of their internalization is evidenced by the frequency of appearance and multiple replications in the society (see Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 68-70; cf.: Blackmore, 2002: 9-32; Dawkins, 1996).

It is worth adding that the conflict of memories can occur at any time and place. However, transferring the considerations to the Polish ground, it should be pointed out that the basis for the conflict of memories in Poland after 1989 was the narratives born still in the Polish People's Republic – on the one hand the official ones (sustained, controlled and pushed by the authorities), and on the other hand the oppositional ones (passed on in the second publishing circuit or spread in other types of independent actions). The indicated division lost the basis of its validity after the transition, but this does not mean that it disappeared. It is not that every Pole automatically rejected the official narratives of memory of the Polish People's Republic, recognizing them as external, oppressive, and symbolizing lies (as contrasted with the oppositional narratives intended to symbolize truth in such an approach). This was not how it happened.

Disputes in the area of memory have, therefore, not disappeared. And although new data emerged and a pluralism of commonly available accounts triumphed (relayed by the dynamically developing media, disseminated in the literature, discussed by researchers and invoked by politicians), this did not bring unity in the perception of Polish society's past. Significantly, new narratives of memory kept forming in place of the old ones, causing the conflict of memories in transitional and post-transitional Poland to keep gaining new manifestations (see Ratke-Majewska, 2022).

## **Areas of memory**

It should be noted that the conflict of memories in Poland after 1989 developed within the boundaries of specific areas. These areas reflect the issues of the past most relevant to Polish identity and society, the presence of which most clearly marked itself in the public space after 1989. Importantly, it is possible to distinguish five basic areas of

memory that were most often and most clearly evoked and discussed in the Polish community. These are:

1. The Warsaw Uprising (1944),
2. Poles towards Jews during the World War II,
3. The Polish wartime and postwar conspiracy,
4. Martial law in Poland (1981-1983),
5. The Round Table (1989).

It is within these areas of memory that the strongest expressions of the conflict of memories have been persisting (and dynamically transforming) in Polish society after 1989. They affect the whole society and are reflected by numerous narratives entering into disputes with each other of varying strength and intensity (see Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 89).

### **Types of narratives of memory involved in the conflict of memories**

The analysis of the extreme directions of telling the past in the indicated areas of memory should be preceded by a discussion of the types of narratives involved in the conflict of memories in Poland after 1989. This is because narratives of these three types come into conflicts with each other. They are as follows:

#### 1. Affirmative narratives

The first group is formed by narratives characterized by the fact that they capture stories oriented towards indicating positive aspects of past events and attitudes, expressing absolute approval for them. Such narratives focus on stoking national pride, while excluding negative elements.

#### 2. Critical narratives

Their characteristic feature is that they are oriented towards pointing out the negative aspects of events, past behaviours and actions, while expressing absolute disapproval of them. Thus, in depictions of this type, it is recognized that the smallest shameful element crosses out glory, and guilt excludes pride.

#### 3. Consensual narratives

These are multithreaded, pluralistic and least selective approaches of all, which capture stories about the past that present both positive and negative aspects of events, attitudes and characters, where pride does not exclude shame and shame does not cancel out pride. This makes them the most inclusive narratives (see Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 85-86).

### **Main narrative trends in the conflict of memories in Poland after 1989.**

#### **Extreme narratives appearing within the boundaries of the most significant areas of memory for Polish society**

Moving on to the main part of the topic, it should be pointed out that in each of the indicated areas of memory, there are two opposing directions of narrating the past – that

is, two extreme narratives (presenting depictions of the most expressive or most frequent events). Importantly, in their composition there are also narratives similar to them, the content of which makes it possible to assign them to a particular direction – and this is how the entire conducted study of the conflict of memories is presented.

### 1. The Warsaw Uprising (1944)

In the narratives operating in the social space that refer to this area of memory, it is possible to distinguish two opposing directions in describing past times:

- A. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: the Warsaw Uprising was necessary, and the sacrifice of the insurgents, their heroic struggle, was a politically, morally and socially justified act.

The sources of these narratives are second circuit publications and independent initiatives of oppositional circles in the Polish People's Republic. The political and anti-system potential of these works and initiatives were exhausted when the transition began, which is why for the first years since 1989 the subject of the Warsaw Uprising did not register any particular interest. However, the first changes occurred in connection with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Uprising. At that time, there were voices saying that the Warsaw Uprising was a victory in moral and spiritual terms, the fight was inevitable, it was Polish destiny, and the incident had a universal character. Significantly, the Soviet Union also began to be blamed for the course of the Uprising at that time (sometimes on a par with Germany). And while such a stance began to become publicly visible in 1994, it was significantly strengthened in 2004 with the construction of the Warsaw Uprising Museum. Since then, the Uprising began to be explicitly presented as a great act of independence (part of the continuity of the Polish independence movement – the earlier one, under the Partitions, and the later one, from the period of the Polish People's Republic). Since 2005, in turn, the Warsaw Uprising has become a flagship of the Law and Justice party's (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PIS) historical policy, a policy designed to restore Poles' national dignity in the present (by way of affirming this fragment of the past in the first place). It is worth mentioning that very quickly this direction of the Uprising narrative began to be identified with the widely understood right wing in Poland. In subsequent years, the direction was consistently sustained, although over time the strength of its expression weakened (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 114-132; see also among others: Duraczyński, 1995: 71-88; Fiedorczuk, 2022; Napiórkowski, 2016).

- B. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: the Uprising was a mistake, and the heroic sacrifice of the insurgents represented an unjustifiable loss.

On the surface, this narrative appears to be a repetition of the official depictions of the Polish People's Poland, but in reality, this is an oversimplification (if only due to the absence of ideological factors, such as the invocation of the argument of ineptitude, perfidy and amorality of the Polish government-in-exile, as representative of the possessing class). The Warsaw Uprising as an erroneous act was, therefore, analyzed different-

ly after 1989, based on new data and new approaches. Leading the discussions critical of the Uprising were two positions: one indicating that the event was primarily a political defeat, and the other that it was mainly a humanitarian failure (so also a moral and social one). As for the aspect of political defeat, here some emphasized the poor preparation and execution of the action (while it was necessary to fight), while others negated the very decision to launch the Uprising, based on wishes rather than real possibilities. In turn, within the boundaries of the second position (speaking of humanitarian failure), it was emphasized that the Uprising was a defeat, which firstly eliminated hundreds of thousands of Poles, secondly destroyed an important European urban centre, contributing to Poland's civilizational backwardness, and thirdly was a destructive intergenerational factor (due to the participation of young people), breaking the continuity of the transmission of Polish tradition and culture (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 132-143; see also among others: Łubieński, 2004; Dybicz, 2014; Zychowicz, 2013).

## 2. Poles towards Jews during World War II

In the narratives operating in the social space that refer to this area of memory, it is possible to distinguish two opposing directions in describing past times:

A. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: Poles were unique in their attitudes towards the Jewish population, as a widespread behaviour in Polish society during the World War II was to help Jews and save them from the Holocaust.

Here it was necessary to include both narratives noting the exceptionality of the attitudes of Poles, giving aid despite the existing anti-Semitism, and narratives proclaiming the (sometimes even boundless) uniqueness of Polish attitudes towards the Jewish population under German occupation as a result of the risk of incurring the death penalty for helping Jews. Alongside these narratives, there were also depictions that saw the exceptionality of Poles with regard to the Jewish people in the absence of anti-Semitism on Polish territory (or its marginal significance). It is worth adding that within this group of narratives numbers were often used, emphasizing the mass nature of aid (in some positions there were millions of Poles helping Jews under the occupation) (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 166-189; see also among others: Berendt, 2014: 37; *Biedni Polacy patrzą i ratują. Z Grzegorzem Berendtem, Markiem Wierzbickim i Janem Żarynem rozmawia Barbara Polak*, 2009).

B. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: Poles were not unique in their attitudes towards the Jewish people, as in addition to heroic attitudes there were also (in high prevalence) passivity, distancing and hostility.

This group included narratives that spoke of the multiplicity of attitudes of the Polish population towards Jews (including passivity, distancing and hostility) that prevailed over heroism. Passivity was usually indicated as the most common attitude in this context, although there were also positions according to which the anti-Semitic orientation in Poland was considered to be the main motivation for action, making hostility the basis

of Polish behaviour. An important variety of these approaches were those in which Poles were described – because of their anti-Semitism – as accomplices in the Holocaust (and these were the most radical stances) (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 189-202; see also among others: Janicka, 2015: 148- 226; Steinlauf, 1997; Żukowski, 2018).

### 3. The Polish wartime and postwar conspiracy

In the narratives operating in the social space that refer to this area of memory, it is possible to distinguish two opposing directions in describing past times:

A. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: the activity of the Polish wartime and postwar underground should be assessed uniformly as right, heroic, politically and socially justified, and expressing the will of the entire Polish nation.

Among the narratives of this direction, those that called the events from the period of building Polish statehood after the World War II an occupation against which an anti-communist uprising was carried out have risen to the top over time. The uprising thesis, moreover, began to be accompanied by the increasingly common phrase “cursed soldiers” (sometimes “unbroken soldiers” – that is, “soldiers of the anti-communist underground”). Its widespread use became clearly evident after the 2015 election victory of the Law and Justice party (when the next manifestation of this party’s historical policy focused on that very aspect – the subject of “cursed soldiers”, seen as the epitome of patriotism and heroic attitudes; therefore, this issue began to play the same role as the narratives about the Warsaw Uprising after 2004) (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 223-249; see also among others: Bafia, 2020; Łabuszewski, 2020: 89-120; Zalesiński, 2017).

B. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: activities undertaken by the underground of the war and postwar period cannot be treated as an expression of the equal will of the entire Polish nation and evaluated uniformly positively, because next to praiseworthy acts there were shameful deeds,

The second direction of narratives primarily included considerations of the diversity (and, thus, the inability to assess uniformly) of the wartime and postwar underground. Criticism of controversial underground formations and members also had a significant place (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 249-273; see also among others: Mazur, 2019; Dybicz, 2017; Wnuk, 2016).

### 4. Martial law in Poland (1981-1983)

In the narratives operating in the social space that refer to this area of memory, it is possible to distinguish two opposing directions in describing past times

A. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: martial law was a communist crime against the Polish people and the nascent democracy, as well as a national betrayal of those ruling the Polish People’s Republic, aimed at maintaining power.

Within the boundaries of this approach were a number of stances discussing martial law in the context of a crime – both in terms of its introduction, carried out in vio-

lation of the law, and from the perspective of various types of violations of human and civil rights, understood as criminal acts carried out against the Polish population by the authorities in the years 1981-1983. There were also considerations that crossed out the thesis of the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops or of Red Army itself, which the decision of State Council was supposed to block. These deliberations were often accompanied by suppositions that, in fact, the Polish People's Republics authorities induced martial law in order to keep themselves at the helm of government, inhibiting the process of democratization (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 290-315; see also among others: Kochanowski, 2008: A-16-A-17; Koj, 2011: 129-132; Koj, 2017: 28-36).

B. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: martial law was necessary and/or inevitable.

This refers to all narratives supporting the imposition of martial law (due to the variously understood state of emergency and the probability of intervention), most often while considering it as evil. Martial law, in the overwhelming number of narratives that speak of the rightness of its occurrence, was therefore, not a crystal clear and absolutely good thing. However, there were exceptions. In some statements, the defense of the martial law decision focused on highlighting the opposition's misdeeds, its lack of conciliation indicating its intention to grab power regardless of the consequences for the Polish society (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 315-335; see also among others: Puchała, 2011; Prekiel, 2015; Raina, 2019).

## 5. The Round Table (1989)

In the narratives operating in the social space that refer to this area of memory, it is possible to distinguish two opposing directions in describing past times:

A. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: The Round Table is a success of compromise solutions, being a victory for the nascent democracy.

The first direction of narratives referred positively to the Round Table negotiations and their results. Its supporters repeatedly took the position that the form of the Round Table talks and the arrangements made during that period, which initiated democratization in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe, were at least an optimal solution, if not a necessary one from the point of view of the strong social divisions existing at that time and the threat of open internal conflict (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 351-366; see also among others: Hofmann, Krzemiński, 2009; *Mazowiecki: Okrągły Stół był drogą do niepodległości*, 2009; *Rocznica obrad 'Okrągłego Stołu'*, 1999).

B. The direction of narratives after the transition of 1989: The Round Table was a mistake, a failure, an 'unfinished revolution' and a national betrayal.

Another of the currents of narrating the Round Table negotiations focused on their criticism. The most vivid representation of this narrative direction, in turn, became the "black legend" of the Round Table, which was a complete negation of the above-men-



tioned affirmative perception of the event. Proponents of this “black legend” took the position that leaders of the Polish People’s Republic gave up power in exchange for guarantees of security and a bright future in a post-communist reality. The creation of this narrative was influenced by the informal working meetings in Magdalenka that preceded the Round Table. The nature of these meetings caused them to be riddled with myths, telling of betrayals made during backroom negotiations (Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 367-384; see also among others: *Dwie legendy III RP*, 2007; *Stół bez kantów*, 2004: 4-32; Trembicka, 2019: 103-119).

## Conclusions

First and foremost, it should be pointed out that the conflict of memories has continued uninterruptedly in Poland since the beginning of the systemic changes in 1989. In fact, since the beginning of the regime transition, there has been no period without disputes over the areas of memory identified in the conducted research.

It is also worth noting that in the overall summary of the conflict of memories, affirmative narratives won when it came to the subject of the Warsaw Uprising, the Polish independence underground and the behaviours of Poles towards Jews during the World War II, but did not gain the upper hand in the sphere of the issues of martial law in 1981 and the Round Table (due to its social consequences).

Interestingly, the biggest losers in the conflict of memories were not the critical narratives. Instead, the biggest losers were the consensual narratives. Consensus in the sphere of memory construction, excluding by definition the victory of either of the extremes (affirmation or criticism), was both the least common and, it seems, the least desirable in the total comparison. And that is a pity. After all, consensual narratives would be able to resolve the conflict of memories in Poland if they became the stories most often created, reproduced and shared in the Polish community, and most strongly contributed to Polish national and political identity. However, there is no sign that this will happen at least in the near future (see Ratke-Majewska, 2022: 427-430).

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present how the concept of conflict of memories can be understood (referring to Poland after 1989), and to show what are the main directions of narratives in this conflict, formulated within the framework of several areas fundamental to Polish public discourse. It was also of great importance to discover what types of narratives construct each of the narrative trends about a particular past event. This made it possible to formulate conclusions concerning the shape of the featured conflict, its course and potential for permanence.

**Keywords:** conflict of memories; Poland after 1989; affirmative narratives; critical narratives; consensual narratives

