

The Third Occupation: Polish Memory, Victimhood, and Populism

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Mayor of Gdansk, Poland, Paweł Adamowicz, was standing on an outdoor stage while hosting a charity event when a man jumped onto the stage and stabbed him. The next day, January 14, Adamowicz was declared dead. Thousands gathered in the main square of Gdansk to mourn Adamowicz and protest the hate speech they felt was responsible for his death.¹ Adamowicz was a popular and liberal politician who had been in office for 20 years. He was responsible for opening the city to refugees, protesting hate and xenophobia that he saw coming from the right-wing government, and even started to become more vocal about LGBTQ+ issues.²

Adamowicz faced criticism and backlash from the right for his politics, he was routinely attacked in the media and on social media, as well as by the government, led by the ruling, far-right Law and Justice party (PiS). Government officials said that “he was serving German, not Polish, interests,”³ which is a dog whistle in Poland meaning that Adamowicz is anti-Polish and working the European Union. A rightwing youth movement, the All-Polish Youth, released “public death certificates” for pro-European politicians in 2017. Adamowicz’s read that his cause of death was “liberalism,

¹ Christian Davies, “‘Hatred Is Becoming More Visible’: Shocked Gdańsk Mourns Slain Mayor,” *The Guardian*, January 15, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/15/gdansk-polish-city-mourning-mayor-pawel-adamowicz-stabbing>.

² Davies.

³ Piotr Buras, “The Killing of Gdańsk’s Mayor Is the Tragic Result of Hate Speech | Piotr Buras,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/17/gdansk-mayor-pawel-adamowicz-killing-poland>.

multiculturalism, stupidity.”⁴ Even on the day Adamowicz’s death was announced, a far-right politician on a right-wing media outlet called him a “traitor to the nation.”⁵

Adamowicz’s death is emblematic of the political climate in Poland in 2020. Far-right populism and nationalism is on the rise and those who speak out against it are considered anti-Polish or agents of the West’s efforts to subvert Polish identity and values. This effort has been led by the Law and Justice party, the leaders of which have positioned themselves as the true voice of the Polish people. PiS is in the vein of many of the other right-wing populism parties in Europe which tend to be Eurosceptic, if not anti-EU, as well as xenophobic and hostile to immigrants and refugees.

However, PiS’ strategy for gaining power in Poland is somewhat different than some of the other far-right parties in Europe. Much of PiS’ strategy for gaining domestic power has focused on memory politics, particularly around the Second World War and the Holocaust. The party’s populist approach to memory politics has garnered international attention and resulted in domestic battles over museums, censorship laws, and how to talk about Poland’s role in the Second World War.

PiS’ narrative focuses solely on Polish victimhood during the Second World War and denying any culpability for the massive murder of Jews during the Holocaust, on a group or individual level. This debate came to a head in 2001 around the town of Jedwabne where in 1941, the Polish citizens murdered their Jewish neighbors just days after the Nazi army arrived. The Polish government launched an investigation into the pogrom but how involved the Nazis were, how much free-will the Poles had, and how much guilt this should carry is still hotly debated. This victimhood narrative can also be

⁴ Davies, ““Hatred Is Becoming More Visible.””

⁵ Davies.

seen surrounding and underpinning the 2018 law dubbed the “Polish Death Camp Ban” or the “Holocaust Law” which banned and criminalized the use of the words “Polish Death Camp” as to many Poles it implies that the death camps were Polish in origin and not Nazi death camps on occupied Polish soil.

PiS uses their populist memory politics to paint themselves as the sole protectors of Polish history, memory, and identity against internal and external enemies that would like to denigrate the Poles and Polish memory. PiS has accused “the West” as well as the EU of trying to erase Polish values. They have also accused former leaders, like Lech Wałęsa, the first President of Poland after 1989, and Donald Tusk, the former Prime Minister, leader of the opposition party, and former President of the European Council, of selling Poland and Poles out to the West. These people and organizations are characterized as a threat to Poland and PiS’ message is that Law and Justice is the only one who can protect Poland from them. PiS’ narrative of Polish identity is centered around Catholicism, ethnic Polish identity, and the vague term of “Polish Values” which is never defined but certainly does not include Jews, immigrants, or those with more liberal values.

Memory politics is not new in Poland. Since the Second World War, the Soviets used it, and the post-Soviet Polish governments have had varying levels of commitment to memorialization and to admissions of guilt verses insistence on innocence. Civic Platform, a center-right party and the main opposition to PiS which was founded and chaired by Donald Tusk, was certainly no stranger to memory politics and advancing memorialization of Poland during World War II. However, PiS has made Polish memory politic particularly divisive and they have become very aggressive with their memory politics. Previous governments would simply react to something they found offensive but PiS has made it

impossible to argue for Polish guilt with laws like the “Holocaust Law” and even memorial or museum they create is centered around the idea of Polish victimhood.

This thesis will explore how and why PiS is using memory politics in 21st century Poland. To do so, I will build a theoretical framework based on the literature on the politics of memory, populism, and nationalism. As a whole, I will be looking at these things as they relate to Poland and the world after the end of the Cold War. This theoretical framework will help us understand how and why PiS is acting the way it is and begin to understand what their place is in the current broader surge of populist parties. First, I will look at the politics of memory where I will draw heavily from Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard’s theory of mnemonic actors and regimes but also Jelena Subotić’s work on the subject. Then I will explore some current work on populism and nationalism, particularly as it relates to the recent increase in far-right parties. In the second chapter, I will go over some of the history of memory politics of Poland since 1945 and the controversy over Jan T. Gross, his book *Neighbors*, and how his views have shifted throughout his career. In the third chapter, I will look at what PiS is doing with their memory politics. In particular, I will look at two museums that have been in the public debate since PiS came to power: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and The Museum of Second World War. I will also look at the Holocaust Law and PiS’ narrative that Polish memory and identity is being attacked from external forces as well. Finally, I will look at the current battle between the EU and PiS over Poland’s courts and how PiS’ populist memory politics play into that fight.

The literature review in this thesis will look at politics of memory and populism and national in the post-Soviet context. It is by no means exhaustive as the literature on

these subjects are extensive. Instead, I will be looking at literature that focuses on memory politics and populism in the Eastern and Central Europe/post-Soviet context to build a theoretical framework with which to analyze what PiS is doing. The literature on memory politics will focus on a theoretical framework for Polish memory politics as well as current discusses of memory in Poland. The literature on populism and national will work to build definitions and lay out the context in Eastern and Central Europe.

Review of the Literature

The Politics of Memory

Memory politics and national identity are often closely linked. To quote Irena Grudzińska-Gross:

In historical politics, select historical events are used as symbols of an unchangeable national identify. It is a simplified history, mythical and therefore ahistorical, because it does not contain unique facts, a complicated reality, nuance. It requires emotional acceptance, not analysis and revision. It is backed by a “we” community, and that community must be identical with the nation. National community has an aura of sacrum, so any criticism of that community seems to be an act of hostility. That nation is protected by a taboo-like deference.⁶

I quote Grudzińska-Gross at length because she presents clear explanation of what happens when memory politics and national identity mix. This is exactly what has happened in Poland with the nation being protected with “taboo-like deference” and

⁶ Irena Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice,” in *Poland and Polin: New Interpretations in Polish-Jewish Studies*, Eastern European Culture, Politics and Societies, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: New York : Peter Lang Edition, 2016).

criticisms being treated like an attack. Poland is probably particularly susceptible to this transition because their historical myths comes from World War II, a much contested “historical battlefield.”⁷

I will come back to Grudzińska-Gross as she has plenty more to say about Polish memory politics. For now, I will move to building a theoretical framework on memory politics. This will rely heavily on Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard’s mnemonic actors and mnemonic regimes which help explain behavior of political actors when dealing with the politics of memory.

Kubik and Bernhard’s theory of the politics of memory has two components: mnemonic actors and mnemonic regimes. Mnemonic actors are political actors (parties, organizations, individuals etc.) that construct a certain discourse about the past in order to gain political power. Similarly, mnemonic regimes are “a set of cultural and institutional practices...designed to publicly commemorate and/or remember a single event, a...interrelated set of events, or a distinguished past process.”⁸ All of this easily refers back to Poland’s 20th century. Kubik and Bernhard are particularly interested in official memory regimes which are memory regimes which involve major participation from state institutions and political actors.⁹ I’ve found Kubik and Bernhard’s theory to be the most useful because the very language they use to define the actors and regimes is the same language they use is used by those actors. This is particularly true when defining mnemonic warriors, which I would define PiS as. The four mnemonic actors are: warriors, pluralists, abnegators, and prospectives. Mnemonic warriors are never given the

⁷ Grudzińska-Gross.

⁸ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism : The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ Bernhard and Kubik.

title of populists, but their memory politics is very populist in nature. Mnemonic warriors see themselves, or portray themselves, as “the proprietors of the “true” vision of the past” while any other version of history is “distorted” and needs “to be delegitimized or destroyed.”¹⁰ On the other end of the spectrum are the mnemonic pluralists who believe that different narratives of history can coexist and that “others *are entitled* to their own visions.”¹¹ This does not mean that they will not argue about the past but pluralists are fine with people having their own idea of history. Mnemonic abnegators choose not to engage in memory politics for whatever reason. Finally, Mnemonic prospectives believe that history is a riddle that can be solved to bring about a better future. They attempt to mobilize society to work together in the “struggle” for an ideal future.¹²

The leaders of PiS are clearly acting as mnemonic warriors by espousing “a single, unidirectional, mythologized vision of time”¹³ that best suits their needs. PiS and their leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, have decided that the “true” narrative is one of Polish victimhood with no room to allow for Polish guilt. Kaczyński said as much in a television interview on December 11, 2015, “This habit of denouncing Poland to foreigners. In Poland there is a fatal tradition of national treason. And this is precisely tied to that. It is sort of in the genes of some people, the worst sort of Poles.”¹⁴ According to Kaczyński, there are people who are spreading a false narrative that needs to be dealt with.

As a result of PiS’ involvement, the memory regime, that is an organized way of remembering an issue or event, in Poland is fractured. That is not to say that the memory

¹⁰ Bernhard and Kubik.

¹¹ Bernhard and Kubik.

¹² Bernhard and Kubik.

¹³ Bernhard and Kubik.

¹⁴ “PiS in Their Own Words,” *Brian Porter-Szűcs* (blog), February 5, 2016, <http://porterszucs.pl/2016/02/05/pis-in-their-own-words/>.

regime was not fractured before but with PiS acting as mnemonic warriors, there is no chance the regime can be pillarized or unified by Kubik and Bernhard's definition.¹⁵ A pillarized memory regime is one where other opinion are tolerated while a unified regime is one where there is little conflict over memory.¹⁶

Jelena Subotić writes about the state narratives in the Balkans surrounding the human rights violations during the Yugoslav Wars. For Subotić, a dominant state narrative, much like an official memory regime is about creating an "usable past" that political elites can "use to justify their present."¹⁷ Put simply Subotić found that

At their most basic level, dominant state narratives serve to paint the reality of a polity, to delineate the boundaries of what is possible, what is desirable, what is true, and indeed, what is real. Narratives did not simply constrain elites' political actions for fear of backlash-they made only some policies seem acceptable.¹⁸

This definition is also very fitting and similar to Kubik and Bernhard's but brings out the idea that political elites like PiS are working to control the domestic political. V.P.

Gagnon said much the same thing in his piece on Serbia during the Yugoslav Wars.

Gagnon writes that leaders incite ethnic conflict when they want to make ethnic identity that most salient identity. This restructured domestic politics in terms of ethnic cleavages and means elites can hold onto power better.¹⁹ While Gagnon is talking about violent ethnic conflict, he argues the sort of ethnic nationalist rhetoric Milošević was using is not about ethnicity but about political rhetoric and behavior to maintain domestic power. I

¹⁵ Bernhard and Kubik, *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*.

¹⁶ Bernhard and Kubik.

¹⁷ Jelena Subotić, "Stories States Tell: Identity, Narrative, and Human Rights in the Balkans," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 2 (2013): 306–26, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.72.2.0306>.

¹⁸ Subotić.

¹⁹ V. P. Gagnon, "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539081>.

would argue that PiS is doing much the same thing in Poland and it includes more than ethnic and memory politics, all their populist rhetoric is about controlling domestic politics more than an actual true belief in something. PiS wants to discredit anyone who opposes them. Be it the European Union, progressives in their own country, historians and academics, or former leaders like Donald Tusk and Lech Walesa. PiS wants to be the ‘true voice’ of the people of Poland and they have found an avenue for that in memory politics.

Grudzińska-Gross discusses the idea of a pedagogy of shame versus one of pride. PiS has accused others, particularly Civic Platform (PO), of this pedagogy of shame.²⁰ The idea is that Poles are being taught shame and that as a nation Poland have been repeatedly humiliated. PiS wants to restore “the pride of the Poles.”²¹ This is what Grudzińska-Gross was talking about in her quote above. By taking an ahistorical myth of Polish suffering, past and present, and linking it with the national community PiS has makes the Nation sacred and “any criticism...[seem] to be an act of hostility.”²² Myths are based in emotions and are inherently difficult if not impossible to disprove as they are, Grudzińska-Gross says, directly opposed to facts.²³ This works in PiS’ favor because any questioning of the myth becomes an attack on the nation and they become the stalwart defender.

PiS has no problem calling out the people they believe to be questioning their myth. I refer back to the December 2015 TV interview by Kaczyński where he said, “in

²⁰ Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice.”

²¹ Grudzińska-Gross.

²² Grudzińska-Gross.

²³ Grudzińska-Gross.

Poland there is a fatal tradition of national treason.”²⁴ Treason is a strong word, a word usually reserved for criminals. PiS has made questioning the myth a crime and not just metaphorically. With the Holocaust Law, questioning the myth is now an actual crime against the state as well as the nation.

Populism

PiS is a far-right populist party and their populism to part of the foundation of their memory politics. Populism, for all that has been thrown around in the last few years, is simply a political ideology that pits the “us” versus the “them.” More specifically Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser define populism “as a thin-centered ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”²⁵ In addition, populism is inherently anti-pluralist, there is only one people, one general will, and one correct direction for the country.²⁶ Populism can also be attached to or assimilated with other ideologies which is how often, especially in Europe, populism seems very tied into nationalism.

The terms “the people” and “the elites” are both vague because they are a construct and therefore can be just about anyone. “The people” and “the elites” are usually separated by some combination of “politics power, socioeconomic status, and nationality.”²⁷ This means that “the elites” can be from any walk of life and are usually

²⁴ “PiS in Their Own Words.”

²⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁶ Wolfgang Palaver, “Populism and Religion: On the Politics of Fear,” *Dialog* 58, no. 1 (March 2019): 22–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12450>.

²⁷ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*.

considered to be actively working against “the people.” Sometimes “the elites” are working with outsiders e.g. anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.²⁸ Populism also often requires a charismatic leader, someone who claims to speak for the will of “the people” and is the only true voice. These leaders are often “strong men” and stand for the defense of “the people” from an enemy that they have created.

Populism is importantly not just something that happens internally to a state. The global order and external happenings matter greatly to what happens in a populist regime and “the people” and, more often, “the elite” can be transnational.²⁹ Also, possibly most important to the case of Poland, is the populist “rejection of a particular view of global order, often referred to as global arrogance.”³⁰ We often see this in terms of the US’ hegemony in the world order but we also see it in Poland with the EU. PiS spent a decent amount of time addressing the EU and rejecting “all actions aimed at cultural unification.”³¹ They express concern about the cultural diversity of Europe being overshadowed by the “hegemony of one state” as well as the “cultural aggression” of political correctness.³² For the case of Poland and PiS, populism shows us PiS’ ideology which informs both their rhetoric and their memory politics. PiS has created an “us versus them” narrative that frames the Polish people as “the pure people” and has situated that narrative in their memory politics.

Kubik and Bernhard give us a framework of memory politics that shows how actors (individuals, parties, etc.) create and use historical narratives to gain political

²⁸ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser.

²⁹ Shabnam J Holliday, “Populism, the International and Methodological Nationalism: Global Order and the Iran–Israel Nexus,” *Political Studies* 68, no. 1 (February 2020): 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718817476>.

³⁰ Holliday.

³¹ “PiS in Their Own Words.”

³² “PiS in Their Own Words.”

power. The ideology of populism shows us what shape that narrative will take. With this theoretical background, I will first look at the history of memory politics in Poland starting in the Soviet period (post-1946) and then in the 2000s before PiS gained their majority in 2015. This will help laying out the ways in which what PiS is doing is different from what has come before. Polish memory politics have often revolved around the same memory veins but PiS has tapped into those veins more aggressively than anyone before. I will then look at how PiS is using memory politics differently and what that means for Poland.

Chapter 2

Polish Memory Politics before PiS

Post-1945

The debate over Polish guilt and victimhood has been going on since the end of the Second World War. The point of this chapter is to trace that debate through communism and the early days of the Third Republic. This is again not an exhaustive account of the Polish post-war but instead traces the changing nature of the victimhood narrative in Poland and the state's role. Michael Steinlauf's book *Bondage to the Dead* and Ewa Ochman's article on Lanzmann's *Shoah* will be particularly useful for this. By tracing this thread of victimhood in Poland through history, we can see how PiS has behaved differently. Their narrative is not new, but their aggressive methods are.

In the immediate post war period, Poland was directly controlled by the Soviets as the Red Army was stationed all over Poland. It was because of this that Poland was unable to deal with the traumatic events of the war and instead had the Soviet narrative forces upon them. A common piece of Stalinist propaganda was that 'all the victims of German killing policies were "Soviet citizens"' and that the greatest number of victims were Russians.³³ This line was used in 1942 and shaped Soviet history thereafter as it fed well into Stalin's framing of the Great Patriotic War. It also helped the Allies' propaganda in general, as Roosevelt and Churchill had already said they were going to war to free the occupied countries, not the Jews in particular.³⁴ From here, Poland's people and their leaders work to find the optimal narrative about the Holocaust and the Second World War. The Poles viewed the Soviets as invaders and occupiers and because

³³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

³⁴ Snyder.

of the stereotypes of Judeo-Communism³⁵ and *Żydokomuna*³⁶ the otherness of Jews increased. Michael Steinlauf refers to a “victimization competition” with Poles insisting that they suffered as much as the Jews in the first decade of Soviet Poland.³⁷

In 1956, Władysław Gomułka took over as head of the Polish Communist Party and he allowed for more intellectual freedom and opened up the ‘Jewish Question’³⁸ again. One narrative that became popular in this time is about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Poles were depicted as being in constant solidarity with the Jews and the suffering of Poles and Jews were equal and comparable.³⁹ This narrative is a sympathetic one, as the Polish nation had too been deeply victimized and Undoubtedly felt guilt for the events of the Holocaust. However, this is deliberate compression of the history into one narrative of joint victimization which we know is not true. What followed in the late 1960s was a string of anti-Zionist campaigns and the erasure of Jews from Polish history books. Instead, the story was that the Nazis had a policy to exterminate Poles as a whole and the role of the Jews was removed.⁴⁰ This a version of the Soviet narrative that Germans were just killing Soviet citizens. However, no Germans were just killing Poles and many of them happened to be Jews.

³⁵ The stereotype that all Communists are Jews or that all Jews are Communists.

³⁶ The narrative that Jews were trying to import Soviet Communism to Poland. This was used as propaganda by the Nazis.

³⁷ Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse University Press, 1997).

³⁸ The Jewish Question can be defined a few different ways and can either be used to imply that Jews are disloyal to their country or to accuse someone of anti-Semitism. Ewa Ochman defines the Jewish Question in the Polish context as “the concern for Poland’s image aboard in the context of Polish-Jewish relations” and denial of Polish anti-Semitism. From: Ewa Ochman, “The Search for Legitimacy in Post-Martial Law Poland: The Case of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah,” *Cold War History* 6, no. 4 (November 2006): 501–26.

³⁹ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*.

⁴⁰ Steinlauf.

The 1970s brought an opening of intellectual thought in Poland, particularly for Catholic intellectuals, along with increased clashes with the government after a clash in 1970 left an unknown number of workers dead at shipyards in northern Poland. While ‘the Jewish Question’ was largely ignored in both public and private conversation the Catholic Church in Poland, intellectuals, and conservative movements started to reconnect to their past. At the same time, those Catholic intellectuals and other movements started to hold classes and talks on history and culture, particularly around Jews in Poland. It was here that Poles of Jewish descent and those close to them began to rediscover Jewish identity that had been lost.⁴¹ This was important because this younger generation of Polish Jews had been cut off from Jewish religion, culture, and tradition⁴² which they were now rediscovering along with ethnic Poles who also wanted to reconnect to a past that had been stripped by both the Nazis and the Soviets.

The 1980s in Poland famously brought Solidarity and large social change. While Solidarity started largely as a worker’s movement, they worked to open Polish society and public discourse. The opening of public discourse included a frank discussion about the victimization of Jews during the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations. Solidarity publications called for people to remember the systemic murder of the Jews in Poland alongside remembering crimes committed against the Poles. General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law in December of 1981 and began a repressive campaign against the labor union. Martial law was lifted in 1983.

The most important development from the 1980s was the 1985 release of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* in Paris. The film portrayed Polish bystanders as complicit and

⁴¹ Steinlauf.

⁴² Steinlauf.

deeply anti-Semitic, much of this anti-Semitism was attributed to the Catholic Church. Poles took great offense to the film and the Polish government admonished the French government officials who attended the screening. The anti-French campaign that began in the Polish press stated that the film was made to distract from France's past of collaboration with the Nazis, their own role in the murder of Jews, and the raise of the anti-Semitic right in France.⁴³

In a speech on May 1, Labor Day in Communist Poland, Jaruzelski said:

Different forces are trying today to distort history, insult Poland. Some honour SS-murders. Others throw at our nation a hideous slander which is to conceal shameful pages of their own past. Aim is one and the same: to rehabilitate the executioner and to humiliate his victims. The imperialism of today can afford only such morality.⁴⁴

This is where we see the beginning of an official narrative about Western Europe imposing a narrative about Polish guilt and ignoring or belittling Polish victimhood. The official Polish press wrote that "Western Europe [planned] to re-write the history of the Second World War"⁴⁵ to shift responsibility from the Germans to the Soviet countries. Jaruzelski's use of the word 'imperialism' is telling here, it invokes the feeling of occupation, a common narrative that PiS uses.

Jaruzelski's goal was to build legitimacy for his regime. As Ochman points out, the economy in Poland had not improved either during martial law or once it was lifted

⁴³ Ewa Ochman, "The Search for Legitimacy in Post-Martial Law Poland: The Case of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," *Cold War History* 6, no. 4 (November 2006): 501–26.

⁴⁴ Ochman.

⁴⁵ Ochman.

and Solidarity was going in popularity.⁴⁶ What this early discussion around *Shoah* was meant to do was intensify an outside threat or ‘siege mentality’⁴⁷ to bolster support for the regime.

By August 1985 some people in Poland had actually seen the film and the Minister of Press Jerzy Urban wrote a piece under a pen name that, while still critical of the film, said that the sections of the film that pertained to Poland should be screen in Poland to open a debate about Poland’s past. He also argued that the Catholic Church had been stoking anti-Semitic sentiment for a long time.⁴⁸ This attack was calculated because the Catholic Church was an ally of Solidarity.⁴⁹

On October 30, 1985 sections of *Shoah* were shown on Polish television along with a debate about the film. Most of the debate participants were affiliated with the government and while they criticized Lanzmann’s choice of interviews and filming locations, as well as the Catholic Church, they did try to address Polish anti-Semitism.⁵⁰

According to Ochman, we do not have enough data to know if the government’s anti-*Shoah* campaign was successful in turning the public’s opinion of the film. What this campaign did was help build that ‘siege mentality.’ The idea that the Polish nation, Polish virtue, and Polish values is under attack was as useful to Jaruzelski as it is to Kaczynski.

1989 brought the end of communism in Poland and 1990 brought the first free and fair election for President. The opening of society led to more studies and discussions of Polish-Jewish history. While anti-Semitic political parties and candidates did not take off

⁴⁶ Ochman.

⁴⁷ Ochman.

⁴⁸ Ochman.

⁴⁹ Ochman.

⁵⁰ Ochman.

like they did elsewhere in Europe, Poles had the second highest levels of anti-Semitism in Europe.⁵¹ People generally acknowledged that Poles disliked Jews but drew the line at calling Poles anti-Semitic.⁵² Commemoration of sites and dates from World War II increased in the 1990s as well, now that the government actively supported them instead of them being an act of resistance. Events and memorials commemorated both Jewish and Polish victims, but the Polish public seemed to draw a line at admitting wrongdoing or having their victimhood overshadowed. In 1991, President Lech Wałęsa added the words “Please forgive us” to his speech in front of the Israeli parliament which caused outrage.⁵³ And in the lead up to the Warsaw Uprising anniversary in 1994, an article was published that claimed Poles killed Jews during the Uprising. The responses were about people wanting to acknowledge Polish victimhood as well and even Polish victimhood at the hands of Jews who made up the Soviet secret police until the anti-Semitic purges of the 1950s.⁵⁴

Memory Politics After 2000

During Poland’s transition in the 1990s, Grudzińska-Gross says that “normalcy was the keyword.”⁵⁵ This shift to normalcy helped Poland get admitted into the European Union in 2004 however it was also around this time that the projected image of Poland started to change. Poland “became a country of suffering” and the “politics of normalcy became the politics of trauma.”⁵⁶ The reasons for this shift is not the point of this paper so I will not spend too much time on it but it is worth mentioning that PiS first came in

⁵¹ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*.

⁵² Steinlauf.

⁵³ Steinlauf.

⁵⁴ Steinlauf.

⁵⁵ Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice.”

⁵⁶ Grudzińska-Gross.

power in 2005 as part of a coalition and had only been founded four years prior. As we know from Kubik and Bernhard, the existence of a memory warrior in a system demands a fractured regime.

Grudzińska-Gross attributes much of this shift to a new generation of historians who had not experienced the violence of the war or the years immediately after but were products of a new, monolithic Poland which was “a country of one ethnicity, one language, and one religion.”⁵⁷ The post-2004 approach to the history of Poland was one that was full of pride which explains the emphasis on Polish heroes like Jan Karski and Irena Sendler. Both these individuals were undoubtable heroes but the circumstances around Karski’s prominence is particularly interesting. Jan Karski was a Polish Army officer who after escaping for a Soviet POW camp (narrowing missing being murdered at Katyn), settled in Warsaw and began working for the Polish resistance, later called the Home Army (AK). Karski risked his life multiple times to relay information to the Polish government-in-exile. Most famously he is credited as the man who told the West about the Holocaust after he traveled to London to speak to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1943. Karski told FDR about the situation in Poland and tried to raise the alarm about the Warsaw Ghetto and the extermination camps, having visited them both. FDR and Churchill were famously not taking part in the war to help the Jews and did little or nothing to stop the Holocaust.⁵⁸

Karski, however, for all his heroics, was not the first to tell the West of the extermination of the Jews. Since the beginning of the war, many people, including many

⁵⁷ Grudzińska-Gross.

⁵⁸ Karski wrote a memoir about his life during the War. It is a good depiction of life for a Pole in occupied Poland and the efforts of the AK and Karski himself. Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State* (Simon Publications, 2001).

Jewish organizations had been setting off the alarm about Hitler's plans for the Jews.⁵⁹ Grudzińska-Gross quotes Polish historical Adam Puławski at length when he says that "after June 22, 1941 the world was regularly informed about the extermination of Jews... Each of the couriers and emissaries knew what was going on in the Warsaw ghetto."⁶⁰ The narrative around Karski's report to the West is a myth in that Karski's role is overblown. Again, Karski is without a doubt a hero but his legacy is being used as "a historical weapon" to further two defensive myths of Poland.⁶¹ The two myths are that Poles didn't know about the Shoah and that it was happening out of the way and normal Poles had no idea what was being done to the Jews. The second myth is that the Poles did as much as they could to help the Jews, but nothing could be done.

Poland's post-transition memory politics is understandably complicated because this was the first time, they, like the other post-Soviet countries, were able to voice their own narrative to a wide audience.⁶² When Poland and the other seven post-Soviet countries to first join the EU did so in 2004 they had to "more overtly acknowledge the Holocaust" however the EU did not allow them to air their grievances from decades of Communism and the narratives that were suppressed at that time.⁶³ This narrative that they were able to share after 2004 was the Soviet Union did help defeat the Nazis and push them out of Central and Eastern Europe they did not bring liberation.⁶⁴ Instead, the Soviets brought another 40 years of occupation and oppression. This sentiment is still echoed by the Polish government today, like in this tweet from Polish Ministry of

⁵⁹ Grudzińska-Gross, "Polishness in Practice."

⁶⁰ Grudzińska-Gross.

⁶¹ Grudzińska-Gross.

⁶² George Soroka and Félix Krawatzek, "Nationalism, Democracy, and Memory Laws," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 13, 2019): 157–71, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0032>.

⁶³ Soroka and Krawatzek.

⁶⁴ Soroka and Krawatzek.

Foreign Affairs on the anniversary of the ‘liberation’ of Warsaw from the Nazis by the Red Army. In part the tweet read “Red Army liberated Warsaw from Nazi occupation but it didn’t mean liberty for Poland!” along with the hashtag #liberationWITHOUTfreedom.⁶⁵

FBI Director James Comey’s 2015 speech, six months before the Polish election that gave PiS their majority, is a prime example of Polish memory politics and historical narratives not just on the cusp of PiS’ power but PiS is not overly involved in this story. During Holocaust Remembrance Week, Director Comey gave a moving speech at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Annual Dinner. He talked about how the Holocaust left a lasting impression on him since childhood and how the question of “Why?” haunted him. In part Comey said:

I require every new FBI special agent and intelligence analyst go to the Museum. Naturally, I want them to learn about abuse of authority on a breathtaking scale. But I want them to confront something more painful and more dangerous: I want them to see humanity and what we are capable of...Good people helped murder millions. And that’s the most frightening lesson of all—that our very humanity made us capable—even susceptible—of surrendering our individual moral authority to the group, where it can be hijacked by evil. Of being cowed by those in power of convincing ourselves of nearly anything. In their minds, the murderers and accomplices of Germany, and Poland, and Hungary, and so many, many other places didn’t do something evil. They convinced themselves it was

⁶⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Twitter Post. January 17, 2020 3:03AM.
<https://twitter.com/PolandMFA/status/1218096518202306560>

the right thing to do, the thing they had to do. That's what people do. And that should truly frighten us.⁶⁶

This section of the speech caused an uproar in Poland. The President, Bronisław Komorowski said the words “were an insult to thousands of Poles who helped Jews” and the Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz said: “To those who are incapable of presenting the historical truth in an honest way, I want to say that Poland was not a perpetrator, but a victim of World War Two.”⁶⁷ Both these leaders are from the Civic Platform party, PiS’ center-right opposition. The objectionable phrase was of course “the murderers and accomplices of Germany, and Poland, and Hungary”⁶⁸ which many took to mean that Poles were responsible for the crimes of the Nazis and not that there were some Poles (like there were some Germans, Hungarians, Lithuanians, etc.) that were accomplices to the crimes.

The following day, directors from some of the largest history museums in Poland (Polin, Warsaw Rising, Museum of World War II, Polish History, and Auschwitz-Birkenau) signed a letter to Comey which Jan Grabowski called “condescending and dismissive.”⁶⁹

The letter invites Comey and other FBI agents to visit the museums in Poland to learn about “German terror in Central Europe” because “Americans should expand their

⁶⁶ James B. Comey, “Holocaust Remembrance Week: Refusing to Let Evil Hold the Field,” April 15, 2015, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/holocaust-remembrance-week-refusing-to-let-evil-hold-the-field>.

⁶⁷ Jan Grabowski, “The Holocaust as a Polish Problem,” in *Poland and Polin: New Interpretations in Polish-Jewish Studies*, vol. 10, Eastern European Culture, Politics and Societies (Peter Lang Edition, 2016), 17–28.

⁶⁸ Comey, “Holocaust Remembrance Week.”

⁶⁹ Grabowski, “Poland and Polin.”

knowledge and develop sensitivity in this regard.”⁷⁰ Grabowski criticized the letter as “embarrassing” and argued that the what Comey said “simply reflects the historical truth.”⁷¹

The reaction to Comey’s speech was widespread across Polish society and politics but clearly it was not spearheaded by PiS. Polish memory politics surrounds World War II has been going on since the war ended and some government have been worse than others but PiS is institutionalizing and operationalizing memory politics unlike any government before.

The Debate over Gross

The complicated relationship between Polish memory politics and the events of World War II might be best exemplified by the varied responses to Jan T. Gross and his work as an historian. The first, published in 1988, *Revolution from Abroad*, looks at the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland and how they attempted to remake society. The Soviet’s goal was the breakdown of Polish society and they did that rather effectively. Gross introduces the concept of a spoiler state meaning that the Soviets were working to spoil any social bonds that existed in these communities.⁷² They do this to make solidarity impossible and those resistance is impossible. Gross looks at the social controls used to forced Polish participation in the new regime and the violence used once the Soviets were in Poland.⁷³ The Soviet forced people to vote in their new elections and

⁷⁰ to James B. Comey, “Letter to the FBI Director James Comey - Warsaw, April 21, 2015,” April 21, 2015, Institute of National Remembrance, <https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/778,Letter-to-the-FBI-director-James-Comey-Warsaw-April-21-2015.html>.

⁷¹ Grabowski, “Poland and Polin.”

⁷² Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Expanded ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁷³ Gross.

worked to socialize the children in these communities with their new education policies. These were the ways the Soviets worked to impose their ideology on Eastern Poland and when that did not work, they use violence. The Soviet authorities incited ethnic violence between the ethnic Poles and the ethnic Ukrainians and Byelorussians that lived in the region, there were mass arrests and deportations to the interior of the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ It is hard to get accurate numbers but the high estimate Gross gives in 1.25-1.5 million people either were deported or moved willingly into the Soviet Union, some people were also drafted into the Red Army.⁷⁵ This 'spoiling' by the Soviets is particularly traumatic for Poland who for much of their history has been divided and ruled by outside imperial powers. It was only after World War I that Poland was able to build a state and become a democracy and that has been taken from them again in only a matter of weeks.

The second book is probably one of the most famous stories of Polish perpetrators during the Second World War. Gross' book, *Neighbors*, from 2001 which told the story of Jedwabne which was first occupied by the Red Army and then occupied by the Nazis in the summer of 1941. The town was populated by both Poles and Jews, and the Jewish population had welcomed the Red Army in Jedwabne when they had arrived in the town previously. Within days of the Nazis' arrival, the Polish population of Jedwabne participate in a pogrom of the Jewish population, tormenting and killing the Jewish population for a day before herding the rest into a local barn and setting it on fire, killing the 300 people inside. Only a handful of Jews survived and eventually left the town. Gross' argues that the actions of the Poles in Jedwabne were largely of their own doing,

⁷⁴ Gross.

⁷⁵ Gross.

and the Nazis were merely spectators.⁷⁶ Much of Gross' evidences is from a court case that happened after the war in Soviet-controlled Poland.⁷⁷

Neighbors caused a large debate in Poland and still is a contested subject.

Previously, the massacre in Jedwabne had been blamed solely on the Germans that had entered the town not long before the events on July 10, 1941.⁷⁸ However, Gross' book proved that the Polish citizens in the town were the ones to round up and kill their neighbors and the Germans had little to do with it. The then President of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, apologized for the massacre on behalf of the Polish people that year on the anniversary. The Instytut Pamięci Narodowej or the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) began excavating the site of the barn where about 300 Jewish citizens of the Jedwabne were killed in and started an inquiry into the event in 2001.⁷⁹ PiS, however, has left the blame for Jedwabne open. In July 2016, the Polish Education Minister for PiS said she that she was not convinced Poles were to blame at Jedwabne.⁸⁰

In 2006, Gross came out with another book, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, which discussed Polish anti-Semitism in the immediate post-war period. The most notable example of this being the Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946 where 42 Jewish Holocaust survivors were murdered and over 40 were injured.⁸¹ *Fear* also sparked debate

⁷⁶ Though he does state that the Nazis are ultimately responsible for the crime.

⁷⁷ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁷⁸ Barnard Osser, "Sixty Years on, Jedwabne Massacre Haunts Poland," *Agence France Presse*, March 14, 2001, Nexis Uni.

⁷⁹ "Poland Begins Exhumation at Barn, Site of 1941 Jedwabne Pogrom," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, May 24, 2001, Nexis Uni.

⁸⁰ Rick Noack, "Obama Once Referred to a 'Polish Death Camp.' In Poland, That Could Soon Be Punishable by 3 Years in Prison.; Polish Lawmakers and Politicians Have Reacted Angrily to the Use of the Term 'Polish Death Camps.," *Washington Post Blog* (blog), August 17, 2016.

⁸¹ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 2006).

but discusses continue to come back to Jedwabne, which seems to have made a more lasting effect of the Polish conciseness.

In 2016, President Andrzej Duda launched an “offensive” and publicly expressed that he was considering stripping Gross of his Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, a high honor in Poland which was awarded in 1996.⁸² This came after Gross asserted that Poles killed more Jews than Germans in World War II.⁸³ Duda's threat received massive backlash and he has yet to follow through but his willingness to speak publicly about it shows just how controversial Gross is and what he means for PiS' narrative.

As I've said, Poland has a long history of memory politics surrounding the Second World War. The Communist party pushed all the blame on Nazi Germany which fit their narrative of being liberators and continued to inflame internal divisions in Poland. Even when faced with Lanzmann's *Shoah*, the government used it to solidify power at a time of great unrest. After 1989 and being admitted into the EU, Poland governments returned to memory politics and “rebranded.” This rebranding pushed Polish victimhood and gave room for government officials, historians, and other citizens to accuse others of anti-Polish sentiments. The letter responding to James Comey's speech is the prime example of this. The controversy around Jan Gross is also emblematic of the growing narrative around World War I. All of this is memory politics, but no government has been as active and as aggressive as PiS. And no government has tried to institutionalize their memory politics.

⁸² Jo Harper, “Poland Turns History into Diplomatic Weapon,” POLITICO, February 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/duda-poland-holocaust-history-walesa-gross/>.

⁸³ Harper.

Chapter 3

Politics of Memory: Enemies and Protectors

Poland is no stranger to memory politics and contested memories of the Holocaust and the dual occupations. However, what the Law and Justice party has done now is different from what any of the post-Soviet governments, or indeed the Soviet governments, have done before it. PiS has institutionalized their memory politics and worked it into their very campaign platform. PiS has also turned their memory politics outwards, in the sense that as much as it is a populist narrative it is also a nationalist narrative designed to create fear of “the other” outside of Poland, in addition to, and sometimes instead of, the other inside of Poland. For PiS, this conflict is between Poles (it can be assumed that PiS is only concerned with ethnic Poles) and the anti-Polish forces of the West, the European Union, and other outside countries and institutions (Germany, Russia, the United Nations, etc.). All of this is to create a more salient ethnic, Catholic Polish identity by perpetuating a narrative in which this identity is under attack from these outside forces and who need to be protected, much like they needed to be protected in 1939 but leaders then failed to do so.

In a statement about his signing of the controversial Polish Holocaust Law, Polish President Andrzej Duda stressed Jewish suffering during World War II but more than that he stressed Polish suffering as “the first country to be attacked.”⁸⁴ Not only were Poles

⁸⁴ “Statement by The President of The Republic of Poland On the Amendment of The Act on The Institute of National Remembrance,” accessed March 19, 2020, https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=1e29a71d-06d7-413b-aa26-e65c05975348&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A5RKJ-CXJ1-JCBF-S2XN-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=8058&pdteaserkey=sr0&pditab=allpods&pdworkfolderlocatorid=NOT_SAVE_D_IN_WORKFOLDER&ecomp=pp79k&earg=sr0&prid=0bcb13dc-6f06-4932-9e84-9ff07993a697.

the first attacked and the nation treated worst by the Nazis (aside from the Jews) but the Polish nation is still being attacked and “slandered.”⁸⁵ Duda’s speech is essentially PiS’ party line on the subject. He acknowledges that Jews suffered but quickly shifts to talk about Polish suffering, martyrdom, and heroics. Duda emphasizes Polish heroes like Jan Karski and notes that Poland “can claim the highest number of Righteous Among the Nations,”⁸⁶ a common defense in Poland when accused of being anti-Semitic or aiding in the Holocaust. Duda claims that this Holocaust Law is “essential to make sure that we as Poles, as the Polish state and the Polish nation should not be defamed and charged with complicity in the Holocaust.”⁸⁷

Duda seems to focus in on the accusation that Poles were involved in the Holocaust in a systematic way, that there was institutional cooperation and says that is false. In fact, it is false, as Duda and many other have pointed out, there was no Polish state with which the Nazis could have collaborated. However, the law also refers to the Polish nation which is more complicated. Of course, many Poles did collaborate with the Nazis and there was deep anti-Semitism in Polish society before, during, and after the Holocaust. There is nothing anti-Polish about discussing and acknowledging this complicated past. However, there is something deeply populist about trying to make it so. What PiS is doing with the Ban is creating a fractured and two-sided historical debate. Poles were either victims or abusers. This choice is very black and white and PiS wants people to pick a side so they can demonize the other side.

⁸⁵ “Statement by The President of The Republic of Poland On the Amendment of The Act on The Institute of National Remembrance.”

⁸⁶ “Statement by The President of The Republic of Poland On the Amendment of The Act on The Institute of National Remembrance.”

⁸⁷ “Statement by The President of The Republic of Poland On the Amendment of The Act on The Institute of National Remembrance.”

That is the basic goal of populism, to create an enemy and a people that need to be protected. With this memory politics, PiS has done well creating that enemy. The enemy is anyone who would minimize Polish suffer, attribute actions during the Holocaust to them, or overlook heroic Poles. World War II looms large in the Polish memory and the pain has fair from faded. PiS is exploiting that pain and memory to gain power in Poland and build a “new patriotism” that they have control over, all in the name of defending “the good name” of Poles.⁸⁸ This means alienating everyone else and PiS has shown us their willingness to do that through their actions surrounding the Polin and Second World War museums, the Holocaust Law, and their rhetoric about external enemies.

A Tale of Two Museums

Beginning in 1995, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw started to talk about the need for a museum on Polish Jews. The goal of the museum was to show not just the Holocaust but focus “on the 800 years of Jewish life in Poland which it obliterated”⁸⁹ because of it. The museum’s location was set to be the former location of the Warsaw Ghetto and the facing the memorial to the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The museum named the Museum of the History of Polish Jews or Polin which in Hebrew for both Poland and “rest here” which refers to the legend of the first Jews who arrived in Poland after fleeing Western Europe.⁹⁰ The Jewish connection to Poland was also something the

⁸⁸ Jörg Hackmann, “Defending the ‘Good Name’ of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 587–606, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2018.1528742>.

⁸⁹ “FEATURE: New Museum Aims to Bring Pre-Holocaust Jewish World to Life,” accessed March 6, 2020, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=3493d053-aae4-4de9-b70e-daab55048dfe&pdworkfolderid=23644554-41c6-46bc-b5c3-50a76a196110&eomp=pz9k&earg=23644554-41c6-46bc-b5c3-50a76a196110&prid=9a99d2ca-f528-47a9-b226-00af47719e91](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=3493d053-aae4-4de9-b70e-daab55048dfe&pdworkfolderid=23644554-41c6-46bc-b5c3-50a76a196110&eomp=pz9k&earg=23644554-41c6-46bc-b5c3-50a76a196110&prid=9a99d2ca-f528-47a9-b226-00af47719e91).

⁹⁰ A. J. Goldmann, “Polish Museum Set To Open Spectacular Window on Jewish Past,” *The Forward*, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://forward.com/news/world/173741/polish-museum-set-to-open-spectacular-window-on-je/>.

museum wanted to emphasize. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a NYU professor and consultant on the development of the permanent exhibit, said that she wanted to remind Poles of their history and that Poland was the one place in Europe that Jews often found sanctuary.⁹¹

The groundbreaking for the museum happened in 2007 with President Lech Kaczyński, who co-founded PiS with his twin brother Jarosław, in attendance. And on April 19, 2013 the museum opened on the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.⁹² In 2014, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin joined Polish President Bronisław Komorowski for the opening of the core exhibit.⁹³

Upon opening their core exhibit, the museum seemed to meet its goals. Poles learned about the 1,000 years of Jewish history in Poland and how it connects to their own history. The museum does not link the centuries before the Holocaust to the Holocaust itself to prevent visitors from seeing “this period as a run-up to the Holocaust.”⁹⁴ The museum is now an attempt “reclaim that pluralism” in Polish-Jewish history that was lost after the Holocaust and the Soviet era.⁹⁵ And it seems to have worked. People all over the world, Poles and Jews alike, discovered the nuisance of their

⁹¹ Goldmann.

⁹² Goldmann.

⁹³ Greer Fay Cashman, “Rivlin to Open Core Exhibit of Polish Jews Museum. \$110 Million Polin Museum, Built in Former Warsaw Ghetto, Explores Thousand-Year History of Community,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 27, 2014, Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5DGG-HMF1-JDKD-P08M-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁹⁴ Vanessa Gera, “1,000 Years of Polish Jewish Life the Subject of Modern New Narrative Museum in Warsaw; Museum Unveils Story of Rich Jewish Life in Poland,” *The Canadian Press*, October 27, 2014, Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5DFV-7VX1-JBVR-346M-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁹⁵ Gera.

history. Polish teachers started teaching about Jewish history and Jews began to rethink their perception of Polish guilt and anti-Semitism.

This would seem to be the ideal situation for a party that wants put forth a narrative that downplays or even erases Polish guilt. However, we know that PiS is a memory warrior and any attempt at pluralism is anathema to them and their vision. As a result, by 2019, the PiS Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, was in a very public feud with Polin director Dariusz Stola. Stola won the legal right to be reappointed as director in a competition that the museum and the Minister agreed, however, Gliński stalled the appointment for months.⁹⁶ Gliński accused Stola of “pursuing very aggressive politics”⁹⁷ and that that broke the statue of the museum. Stola, a prominent and well-respected historian who helped the museum win a number of awards, denied the claims though he did heavily criticize the 2018 “Polish Death Camp Ban,” along with many others.⁹⁸ Also in 2018, the museum put up a temporary exhibit on the anti-Zionist campaign under Communism in 1968. The exhibit drew to anti-Semitism in present-day Poland and the museum was attacked from the right-wing because of it.⁹⁹ Stola claims the reason that Gliński would not reappoint him was because he refused to give the government a portion of the 5 million Euro donation that Polin was getting from private donors. Gliński wanted the money for other projects related to Jewish culture and history in Poland. Specifically,

⁹⁶ Aleksandra Pawlicka, “Polish-Jewish Relations; Fighting for Polin,” *Newsweek Polska*, October 14, 2019, sec. POLICY; S. 20; Aug. 42, Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=569e6c17-718b-4c7b-b3ca-68e6b2d22169&pdworkfolderid=99183623-bdf6-49c0-841a-950cdbc04668&eomp=pz9k&earg=99183623-bdf6-49c0-841a-950cdbc04668&prid=8f2ff968-98b8-4623-8eff-967c3c30ccee>.

⁹⁷ Stanley Bill, “Former Jewish Museum Director Steps down after Standoff with Polish Culture Ministry,” *Notes From Poland* (blog), February 11, 2020, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/02/11/former-jewish-museum-director-steps-down-after-standoff-with-polish-culture-ministry/>.

⁹⁸ Pawlicka, “Polish-Jewish Relations; Fighting for Polin.”

⁹⁹ Bill, “Former Jewish Museum Director Steps down after Standoff with Polish Culture Ministry.”

the Warsaw Ghetto museum which as of the February 2020 had no director or team to make the project happen.¹⁰⁰

Because of Gliński's refusal to reappoint Stola and the concern over the direction of the museum without him donors to the museum, mostly in the US and Israel, have withheld hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations,¹⁰¹ putting the museum at a standstill. Finally, in February 2020, Stola agreed to resign his candidacy for the position of director in order to stop the crisis. The museum was without a director for 10 months and Stola said that "Seeing the damage inflicted on the museum and the threat now facing it, I am prepared to accept conditions that would allow the crisis to be brought to an end." However, he emphasized his right to the position.¹⁰² The deputy director of the museum, Zygmunt Stępiński, was nominated by the same committee that nominated Stola and Gliński and appointed Stępiński at the end of February.¹⁰³

The fight over the Polin museum shines a light on the warrior aspect of PiS' memory warrior policy. Through sheer force of will, they were able to remove a man from a position of power who did not agree with them and create a precedent on how and when they will assert their will. Part of this story is that, Polin has a special place among Polish museums. Most museums in Poland are publicly owned and thus largely subject to the will of the government however, Polin is owned by a partnership of the public and private sector. The museum has three co-founders and received funding from all of them: The City of Warsaw, the national government, and Jewish Historical Institute, a private

¹⁰⁰ "POLIN, 5 Millions of Euro and Ministry of Culture - Interview with Dariusz Stola," February 25, 2020, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/he-fell-into-disfavour-with-the-ministry-of-culture-162291>.

¹⁰¹ Bill, "Former Jewish Museum Director Steps down after Standoff with Polish Culture Ministry."

¹⁰² Bill.

¹⁰³ "Jest Nowy Dyrektor Muzeum POLIN. Zygmunt Stępiński Odebrał Nominację," TVN Warszawa, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://tvn24.pl/tvnwarszawa/srodmiescie/warszawa-zygmunt-stepinski-nowym-dyrektorem-muzeum-historii-zydow-polskich-polin-4291892>.

organization that represents private donors.¹⁰⁴ As a result of this private funding, Polin has some safeguards against total government control but some museums in Poland, even though not initially controlled by the national government, have not been so lucky. One of those museums is the Second World War museum in Gdansk, which was the subject of controversy and a government takeover in 2017.

In 2007, then President Donald Tusk proposed a museum on the World War II to be built in Gdansk. Tusk wanted the museum to “show Poles' fight and suffering against a broad European background” and not “Poles' martyrdom, nor the museum commemorating the Polish army, but a place with a universal message, in which the events taking part in Poland would be only a part of a broader picture.”¹⁰⁵ The museum opened in late March of 2017 but it was not long before the PiS government began acting to have the museum merged with another, yet unbuilt one about the German invasion of Poland in 1939. PiS claims that the museum does not “does not give enough attention to the Polish perspective.”¹⁰⁶ A PiS councilman in Gdansk says that the tourists who visit “don't know who is behind the war and that the Polish people suffered.”¹⁰⁷ A Polish court cleared this merger on April 5th, 2017.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Vanessa Gera, “Impasse at Jewish Museum in Warsaw Approaches Turning Point; Impasse at Jewish Museum in Warsaw Approaches Turning Point,” *The Canadian Press*, February 12, 2020, Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=757f46f6-6399-4715-b6a4-019855a24616&pdworkfolderid=7f62a1e6-114d-49e4-b1fc-982f521e4761&ecomp=pz9k&earg=7f62a1e6-114d-49e4-b1fc-982f521e4761&prid=8f2ff968-98b8-4623-8eff-967c3c30ccee>.

¹⁰⁵ “World War II Museum to Show Poles against European Background,” *Polish Press Agency*, October 28, 2008, Nexis Uni.

¹⁰⁶ Joanna Berendt, “Court Clears Takeover of Poland’s New World War II Museum,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2017, sec. Art & Design, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/arts/design/poland-new-world-war-ii-museum-court-clears-takeover.html>.

¹⁰⁷ “Poland’s New World War II Museum Just Opened, But Maybe Not For Long,” NPR.org, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/04/04/521654034/polands-new-world-war-ii-museum-just-opened-but-maybe-not-for-long>.

¹⁰⁸ Berendt, “Court Clears Takeover of Poland’s New World War II Museum.”

Since the government takeover of the museum, the original director and top historian on 20th century Poland, Paweł Machcewicz, was fired and replaced by the government appointed Karol Nawrocki.¹⁰⁹ Since Nawrocki has taken over changes have been made to the exhibits to emphasize Polish heroism. For example, the foyer of the museum is covered in hundreds of photos of Jews who were killed during the Holocaust now includes a large photo of a Polish family that were executed for hiding Jews.¹¹⁰ Additionally, a display of the number of deaths by countries now includes the percentage by deaths, which emphasizes Polish suffering as they lost the largest percentage of their population.¹¹¹

Nawrocki said the original exhibits omitted “unquestionable Polish heroes” and that “It was only in the 1990s that we had the opportunity to talk truly and objectively about Polish history. After 50 years of two totalitarianisms we should be allowed to talk about our own history.”¹¹² It is a fair statement but these additions change the tone of the museum and Nawrocki seems to be imply that up until the changes to the museum, Poles having been able to talk about their history. Which simply is not true.

We can see that change of tone most sharply in the video at the end of the museum. Previously, the video includes images of the wars in Ukraine and Syria and talks about the horrors of war and the refugees created but these conflicts. Now, the video is a “computer-generated video of stylised, heroic Polish soldiers in combat,”¹¹³ a clear change to talking about heroics and martyrdom of the Poles.

¹⁰⁹ Shaun Walker, “WW2 Commemorations Expose Differences at Heart of Europe,” *The Guardian*, August 30, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/30/truth-is-a-casualty-80-years-after-start-of-second-world-war>.

¹¹⁰ Walker.

¹¹¹ Walker.

¹¹² Walker.

¹¹³ Walker.

The Second World War Museum in Gdansk is an example of PiS being mnemonic warriors and fighting against the more pluralist example of Tusk. Tusk's vision of the museum was "universal" and allowed for more than one interpretation of history. This is the very "pedagogy of shame" that Grudzińska-Gross talks about an PiS, this museum is part of certain Poles "denouncing Poland to foreigners,"¹¹⁴ a group to which Tusk no doubt belongs. The fact that Tusk when from Polish prime minister to President of the European Council also helps PiS push a narrative that Tusk has both betrayed the Polish people to the EU and the West. It also adds to the narrative that outside forces are trying to erase "Polish values" and Polish victimhood.

What the take of the museum in Gdansk really shows us is PiS' commitment to their mnemonic warrior politics. PiS is working hard to make memory a government institution, the museum is just one example of that. By taking control of the museum directly, the government under PiS can make it show the "true" version of history and position themselves firmly as the protectors of that history. Polish victimhood, martyrdom, and/or heroism cannot be denied if it is state policy.

The 2018 Holocaust Law

An even starker example of this institutional control, is the 2018 bill that was passed and made into law banning the use of the phrase "Polish death camp." First proposed in 2013 to response to President Obama using the phrase in a 2012 speech which caused outrage in Poland. The phrase is considered by PiS and many others to be "contrary to historical truth"¹¹⁵ and that is the why it should be a punishable offense. At

¹¹⁴ "PiS in Their Own Words."

¹¹⁵ "Poland Opposition Wants Jail for Use of Term 'Polish Death Camp,'" *Agence France Presse*, January 10, 2014, Nexis Uni.

the time, some in Poland felt that the allowing anyone, especially a world leader, to use what they considered to be an historical falsehood was damaging to the Polish people. The core purpose of the law was to protect the Polish people and the narrative of Polish victimhood.

In Poland, the word “Polish” refers not to citizenship or the landmass of Poland but to the ethnic and national identity. The phrase “Polish death camp” is so controversial because it means death camps operated or belong to Poles and not death camps on Polish soil operated by the Nazis.¹¹⁶ Elisabeth Zerofsky wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* outlining some of the concerns Poles have about the phrase as well as the support and criticism for PiS. In Poland, there is concern that people will associate Nazi camps in Poland with Poles at least partly because of the norm around saying “Nazi” and not “German” when referring to the perpetrators of the war and the Holocaust.¹¹⁷ Similarly, despite the Polish government never collaborating with the Nazis unlike most other states and the Home Army being the largest resistance organization in Europe, directly after the liberation of Warsaw the Soviets killed Home Army soldiers and called them Fascists.¹¹⁸ One of Zerofsky’s interviewees, a historian, was quotes as saying “Even right after the war, Polish victim were identified as perpetrators.”¹¹⁹ I do not doubt this and I sympathize with the Poles, I am well aware of the unfair blame that Poles are subjected to. As a child, my father who was part of the US Army’s occupation of West German in the 1960s, would tell me about Poland. He said, even after professing to love the country,

¹¹⁶ Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice.”

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth Zerofsky, “Is Poland Retreating from Democracy?,” *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/30/is-poland-retreating-from-democracy>.

¹¹⁸ Zerofsky.

¹¹⁹ Zerofsky.

that “Poles happily killed Jews before, during, and after the War.” I grew up with this view of Poland and it is something I have had to unlearn. However, any amount of genuine anti-Polish sentiment does not excuse PiS’ bad faith nationalist push for control.

The law did not pass in 2014. However, once PiS came to power in 2015, the law was back on the table. In 2016, the new PiS government again pushed for the law, which this time, looked like it was going to pass.¹²⁰ 2015 and 2016 saw an increase in nationalist marches and support in Poland.¹²¹ 2016 was also the year that the Polish Education Minister under PiS she that she was not convinced Poles were to blame at Jedwabne.¹²² Some considered the law to be mainly symbolic and had no real teeth, but many historians feared the law would affect free speech.¹²³

The text of the law does incur criminal penalties, stating “Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich... shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years.”¹²⁴ If the statement is made unintentionally then there will be a fine or “restriction of liberty” though the law does make an exception for artists and academics.¹²⁵ That did not calm people and President Duda gave a statement before he signed the bill saying that he would send the law to the

¹²⁰ Noack, “Obama Once Referred to a ‘Polish Death Camp.’”

¹²¹ “Poland Just Passed a Holocaust Bill That Is Causing Outrage. Here’s What You Need to Know,” Time, accessed April 30, 2018, <http://time.com/5128341/poland-holocaust-law/>.

¹²² Noack, “Obama Once Referred to a ‘Polish Death Camp.’”

¹²³ Noack.

¹²⁴ T. O. I. staff, “Full Text of Poland’s Controversial Holocaust Legislation,” accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-polands-controversial-holocaust-legislation/>.

¹²⁵ staff.

Constitutional Tribunal for assess whether the law was a violation of freedom of speech.¹²⁶

The law received immediate backlash from Israel and the US as well as the EU, UN, international Holocaust organizations, and many others. The backlash in Israel caused right-wing groups in Poland to call for a protest outside the Israeli embassy in Warsaw over the “anti-Polish” remarks and sentiments expressed in the backlash.¹²⁷ A few months later, PiS recognized the diplomatic damage that was being done and walked back the law, removing criminal punishment for the those who violate the law.¹²⁸ This backtracking is frankly rather surprising and at the very least, I did not expect it in February 2018. Still, PiS made their point. They still have plenty of room to say they are the true defenders of the Polish people, Polish history, and Polish victimhood. Being forced to be walk back their law, PiS can argue that their victimhood is both current and historical and that enemies exist in Poland and outside it.

Even with the teeth removed from the ban, PiS has not backed down from their commitment to correcting what they see as historical inaccuracies. In November 2019, Netflix released a 5-part documentary called *The Devil Next Door* about the trail of John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian-American living in Cleveland who was accused of being “Ivan the Terrible” an infamous Nazi guard at Treblinka. The documentary follows Demjanjuk

¹²⁶ “Statement by The President of The Republic of Poland On the Amendment of The Act on The Institute of National Remembrance.”

¹²⁷ “Israeli Criticism Sparks Anti-Jewish Remarks in Polish Media,” AP NEWS, January 30, 2018, <https://apnews.com/32a38ea92b4247859ad2fad83eb99715>.

¹²⁸ Marc Santora, “Poland’s Holocaust Law Weakened After ‘Storm and Consternation,’” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2018, sec. World; Europe, Nexis Uni, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=8843a926-3fed-4162-8c3e-4a21a295ee84&pdworkfolderid=9d26230f-8a6b-4c13-9401-42d0d5931888&ecomp=pz9k&earg=9d26230f-8a6b-4c13-9401-42d0d5931888&prid=9c25ecbb-57c1-42e8-925e-e0573745608a](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=8843a926-3fed-4162-8c3e-4a21a295ee84&pdworkfolderid=9d26230f-8a6b-4c13-9401-42d0d5931888&ecomp=pz9k&earg=9d26230f-8a6b-4c13-9401-42d0d5931888&prid=9c25ecbb-57c1-42e8-925e-e0573745608a).

through his extradition to Israel, the trial, his conviction, and appeals. The documentary caused a stir, much like the case itself did in the 1980s, however, Poland took particular offense. While the narration of the documentary used the term “Nazi Death Camp” the map that Netflix chose to use showed Treblinka and Sobibor in modern day Polish borders.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki wrote a letter to the CEO of Netflix, Reed Hastings saying that “There is no comment or any explanation whatsoever that these sites (on the map) were German-operated” and that “As my country did not even exist at that time as an independent state, and millions of Poles were murdered at these sites, this element of “The Devil Next Door” is nothing short of rewriting history.”¹²⁹ Along with the letter from Morawiecki, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted out the map from the documentary and a map of Nazi occupied Poland, saying “@Netflix, stay true to historical facts!”¹³⁰

This is technically true. Poland was an occupied country and the land the camps were on was part of the German state at the time. However, the involvement of the Polish government trying to get an American media company to change its content is, to be perfectly honest, deeply strange and unprecedented. Plenty of countries have censored or blocked content but not tried to re-write it. Netflix made a statement after the letter and the tweet, saying that “We stand by the filmmakers of *The Devil Next Door*, their research and their work. To avoid any misunderstanding, in the coming days we will be adding text to

¹²⁹ “Poland Presses Netflix to Change Documentary about Nazi Death Camp Guard,” *EuroNews*, November 12, 2019, Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=cb1b1154-975b-444a-945f-3869edf67f2d&pdworkfolderid=cd18e5d5-1f12-47c5-8eaf-f4853762efe3&ecomp=pz9k&earg=cd18e5d5-1f12-47c5-8eaf-f4853762efe3&prid=90b61749-a524-4a8a-9165-22b467313ea1>.

¹³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Twitter Post. November 10, 2019, 1:10PM. <https://twitter.com/PolandMFA/status/1193591732795052033>

some of the maps featured in the series.”¹³¹ And as of March 2020, when watching the documentary, there is a text-box in the corner of the map that reads “German Camps in WWII Occupied Poland.”¹³² It is a small edit but simply that the edit was made at all is a surprise.

The Holocaust Law is a stark example and offensive approach to populist memory under PiS. The government could have simply continued to issue statements of commendations when a mistake is made, like after the 2012 incident with President Obama. They could have even made their complaint to Netflix without having the backing of the law. Still, PiS chose to put their international reputation on the line for this law. The Holocaust Law is not the only thing that PiS has put this international reputation on the line for. As populist, PiS has many enemies from which the Polish nation needs defending. Their external enemies have at times includes Russia, Germany, the EU, and “the West” and each of these enemies often have historical wrongs, historical inaccuracies, and wrongs against the modern Polish nation to answer for. However, the current effort by PiS to dismantle the independence of the judiciary is a different story all together. It means a real battle with the EU and shows us the power and scope that PiS wields and how they would like to use it.

¹³¹ Leah Simpson, “Netflix Agrees to Change The Devil Next Door Documentary after Polish PM Accused Filmmakers of ‘rewriting History’ by Showing Nazi Death Camps within Modern Poland’s Borders,” *MailOnline*, November 15, 2019, sec. News, Nexis Uni, [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=0c2cab3-ecc5-4891-9889-6f10345878bc&pdworkfolderid=dd79ee9a-2824-40af-975b-9bc059670c71&eomp=pz9k&earg=dd79ee9a-2824-40af-975b-9bc059670c71&priid=90b61749-a524-4a8a-9165-22b467313ea1](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=0c2cab3-ecc5-4891-9889-6f10345878bc&pdworkfolderid=dd79ee9a-2824-40af-975b-9bc059670c71&eomp=pz9k&earg=dd79ee9a-2824-40af-975b-9bc059670c71&priid=90b61749-a524-4a8a-9165-22b467313ea1).

¹³² This edit was only made to the first map, shown in Episode 1. The map in Episodes 3 and 5 which also show the camps in modern day Polish borders do not have a disclaimer.

External Enemies

PiS' memory politics is not just directed inwards, as Holliday shows us, but the international component to populism is important as well. For PiS, that means attacks on Polish memory and victimhood from abroad. For the most part, PiS has directed their attention to Germany and Russia, the two empires who have occupied Poland at various times. Germany too is the largest and more economically powerful country in the EU, making them the perfect embodiment of Polish oppression. The European Union also gets quite a bit of attention, they are the new supranational political body to which Poland has given some of its sovereignty. If this sounds a lot like the structure of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union and its satellites it is meant to. PiS often refers to the EU as "Brussels" (the capital of the EU) the same way the Soviet Union was referred to as "Moscow." This is part of PiS' general victimhood and occupation narrative that is an underlying factor in PiS' memory politics.

But like with the rest of Polish memory politics this is not new. Poland has felt judged and belittled by German, Russia, the US, and the rest of Europe for a long time. Zerofsky writes that "for hundreds of years, Poland's German and Russian neighbors had depicted Poland as backward and unenlightened, deserving of invasion."¹³³ Today, much of PiS' external memory politics revolves around the Second World War and the Soviet period. Most of the time they are accusing someone of accusing Poles of being perpetrators or denying Polish suffering e.g. the Netflix documentary or the speeches by President Obama or Director Comey. Some time, however, PiS is actively picking fights.

¹³³ Zerofsky, "Is Poland Retreating from Democracy?"

To start with an incidence of PiS picking a fight, the Polish PM Morawiecki raised the issue of German reparations to Poland with German media in August 2019, just before the world gathered to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning on WWII (when the Nazis invaded Poland).¹³⁴ Poland did suffer massive losses - six million citizens, villages and countryside burned, the city of Warsaw burned and destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising. The Polish government estimates the losses at \$850 billion at today's value and argues that the reparations that German paid to Poland through the Soviet Union were not enough.¹³⁵ As of August 2019, the issue had not been raised officially with the German government but the German government has said that the issue is "legally closed."¹³⁶ 2019 is not the first time the issue of reparations had been brought up under PiS. In 2017 the issue was raised but then PiS PM Beata Szydlo though many accused PiS of trying to stoke anti-German and anti-EU sentiment.¹³⁷

Reparations are not the only issue that Poland has with Germany. Morawiecki made a statement in a speech he gave on Holocaust Memorial Days in 2019, he said: "The Holocaust was not carried out by Nazis, but by Hitler's Germany."¹³⁸ Morawiecki argues a raising sentiment in Poland, that the Nazis and their crimes should be more closely associated with Germany. "Nazi crimes" are now more often than no called "German crimes" and the Nazi camps are referred to by their German names. For example, Auschwitz is the German name for the Polish town where the first camp was

¹³⁴ Adam Easton, "Poland Still Counts Losses from WW2 Invasion," *BBC News*, August 31, 2019, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49523932>.

¹³⁵ Easton.

¹³⁶ Easton.

¹³⁷ AP, *Poland Demands WWII Reparations from Germany* (AP), accessed April 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTnSHHmhn0k&ab_channel=APArchive.

¹³⁸ Raphael Ahren, "Remembering the Holocaust, Poland Blots out Any Mention of Its Complicity," accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/remembering-the-holocaust-poland-blots-out-any-mention-of-its-complicity/>.

located, Oświęcim. This is an understandable change as the Germans would have been calling it Auschwitz at the time, but it is also a recent one. Notably, in the 2015 letter to Director Comey, the museum directors used the phrase “German terror in Central Europe”¹³⁹ not Nazi.

In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin put Russia directly into the sights of PiS’ aggressive memory politics. This time with aggressive memory politics of his own and a blatant insult to Poland. In only a week, Putin mentioned Poland five times and blamed them for the start of World War II. He called the Polish ambassador to Nazi Germany “scum and an anti-Semite pig.”¹⁴⁰ Just hours later he brought it up in a meeting with parliamentary leaders which led to the Speaker of the Duma calling for Poland to apologize.¹⁴¹ PM Morawiecki was understandably furious and released a four page statement accusing Putin of “repeated lies.”¹⁴²

While this December 2019 incident is just the latest in Polish-Russian memory politics. Most of it revolves are the 1940 massacre of 22,000 Poles in the Katyn Forest. After the war, the Soviet Union blamed the crime on the Nazis as they were the ones to find the mass graves after they invaded the Soviet Union. However, in 1992, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian government released documents that showed Stalin signed off on the death of over 20,000 Polish citizens at Katyn, many of them high

¹³⁹ to Comey, “Letter to the FBI Director James Comey,” April 21, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Anne Applebaum, “Putin’s Big Lie,” *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/>.

¹⁴¹ Applebaum.

¹⁴² “Polish PM Furious at Putin Rewriting History of Second World War | Poland | *The Guardian*,” accessed February 13, 2020, <https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/30/polish-pm-furious-at-putin-rewriting-history-of-second-world-war>.

ranking officers in the Polish Army.¹⁴³ It was not until late 2010 that the Russian Duma (the lower house of the parliament) signed a declaration that Joseph Stalin and other Soviet officials were responsible for the crime at Katyn.¹⁴⁴

Katyn looms large in Poland, understandably so. It is both a horrible war crime and a perfect example of Poles being victimized purely because they were Polish. Katyn became even more tragic after the April 2010 Smolensk air disaster which killed Polish President and PiS co-founder Lech Kaczyński¹⁴⁵, his wife, and 94 others.¹⁴⁶ On April 10, 2010 the plane traveling from Warsaw to Smolensk carrying the Polish President, high ranking government officials, and representatives of the families of the victims of Katyn crashed in the forests near Smolensk, a small Russian city near the site of the Katyn massacre.¹⁴⁷ The crash was deemed an accident due to weather conditions and pilot error after an extensive investigation.¹⁴⁸ However, PiS never accepted those results and party members have been spreading conspiracy theories about crash for the last decade.¹⁴⁹ PiS and party leader Jarosław Kaczyński have said that the crash was a political assassination by the Russians¹⁵⁰ and that then Polish PM Donald Tusk, a member of the opposition party, mishandled the investigation or even covered up the real reason for the crash.¹⁵¹ In

¹⁴³ Celestine Bohlen, "Russian Files Show Stalin Ordered Massacre of 20,000 Poles in 1940," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1992, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/15/world/russian-files-show-stalin-ordered-massacre-of-20000-poles-in-1940.html>.

¹⁴⁴ "Duma Condemns Stalin over Katyn," *BBC News*, November 26, 2010, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11845315>.

¹⁴⁵ Twin brother to the current head of PiS Jarosław Kaczyński.

¹⁴⁶ Natalia Ojewska, "Poland Polarised on Plane Crash Anniversary," accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/04/2013410113411207111.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Ojewska.

¹⁴⁸ "Poland's Tusk Targeted over Plane Crash," *BBC News*, November 25, 2015, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34922787>.

¹⁴⁹ "Poland Remembers Smolensk Air Crash," *BBC News*, April 10, 2015, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32248962>.

¹⁵⁰ "Poland Remembers Smolensk Air Crash."

¹⁵¹ "Poland's Tusk Targeted over Plane Crash."

2015, once PiS came to power, they reopened the investigation into the crash and sued the Russian government for return of the wreckage in the European Court of Human Rights.¹⁵²

Katyn and Smolensk are inarguably a tragedy and it is easy to see how they play into PiS' narrative. Russia, a country which has occupied Poland at various points in their history, looms large in Europe as does Germany and the EU. Poland, a country who it seems has been occupied for most of its history, is stuck between two empires and feels threatened from all sides. PiS has used that to their advantage, turning fear into votes and pitting people against each other. Put simply, they are populists.

¹⁵² "Poland to Sue Russia over Withholding 2010 Plane Crash Wreckage," *Reuters*, November 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-russia-smolensk-idUSKCN0SZ2B920151110>.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

In this thesis I looked at how the governing party of Poland has used memory politics to secure power as a right-wing populist party. PiS has passed laws like the 2018 Holocaust Law and gained party control over powerful museums that did not depict Polish history as they would like. It is always important to keep in mind that Poland suffered in the 20th century, that has to be the backdrop to any discussion but that cannot sway a critique of what is being done with that history.

PiS is not the first to use memory politics in Poland, the Soviets did so frequently and there are times other governments in democratic Poland did so as well. But PiS has shown a willingness to go further and be more aggressive with their narrative. PiS has mixed populism with nationalism to depict ethnic Poles as a people whose culture, values, religion, country, and memory is under attack. This sets PiS up as the only defenders of Poles, defending them from forces both inside and outside the Polish state.

“Memory is a powerful tool,” George Soroka and Félix Krawatzek said in their paper on memory law, nationalism, and democracy.¹⁵³ The fight over memory politics and memory laws is also “closely tied to the resurgence of nationalism...and it has significant implications for the future of liberalism.”¹⁵⁴ And that is the end result that Poland is looking at. As PiS fights to gain more power they are moving away from their place in the early 2000s as a beacon of democratic transition in Eastern Europe and moving toward the semi-authoritarianism of Russia or Hungary. A style of government

¹⁵³ Soroka and Krawatzek, “Nationalism, Democracy, and Memory Laws.”

¹⁵⁴ Soroka and Krawatzek.

best defined by Fareed Zakaria as “illiberal democracies” that are a “mix of elections and authoritarianism.”¹⁵⁵ Memory politics just like populism and nationalism is dangerous for liberal democracy. It’s not clear if anything can be done as any attempt to thwart PiS or argue against them can and has been seen as an attack on the Polish nation.

PiS’ memory politics focuses on Polish victimhood and creating a national identity that they can claim to protect in exchange for political dominance. By creating an official memory regime complete with takeover of museums and passing restrictive memory laws, PiS has taken hold of the historical narrative and used it to further their populist policies. Poland is going to be a country to watch in the next five to ten years, like other countries in the region (Hungary and Russia for example), Poland is heading towards an illiberal democracy. The battle, internal and external, over Poland’s once lauded democracy may tell us what to expect in this age of populism.

¹⁵⁵ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003).

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[https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5DGG-HMF1-JDKD-P08M-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5DGG-HMF1-JDKD-P08M-00000-00&context=1516831).
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