The Politics of memory: Nationalism, Russophobia, and Katyn in Post-Communist Poland

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Introduction
The Katyn Massacre was a series of mass executions of Polish nationals conducted by the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKWD), the Soviet secret police, during April and May 1940. Ordered by Lavrenty Beria and approved by Joseph Stalin, the killings targeted Polish military officers, intellectuals, doctors, and other professionals in an effort to “decapitate” the Polish state. Mass unmarked graves, discovered by Nazis in the Eastern front, immediately drew the attention of the international community which demanded an extensive investigation. Throughout World War II, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union engaged in extensive Katyn propaganda campaigns, blaming one another for the atrocity. Not until 1990 did the Soviet government admit the country’s role in the murders. Despite Poland’s radical political, economic, and social transformations from the end of the Second World War, through its Communist period, and into the present day, ‘Katyn’ has remained a consistent symbol in Polish collective memory. The longevity and significance of ‘Katyn’ as a symbol can be traced to the extensive covers, controversies, and state-sponsored censorship associated with the atrocity. Today, ‘Katyn’ has transformed into a historical symbol of Polish nationalism, conjuring up patriotic images of martyrdom, resistance, and, ultimately, victory of memory.

Research Questions
• What does Polish national identity look like after the collapse of Communism? How has it changed over time?
• How has the issue of Katyn impacted Polish-Russian relations since the dissolution of the USSR?
• What role does Katyn play in promoting the narrative of Polish martyrdom, and how has this narrative been perpetuated by political elites? How has this shaped the social and political climate within Poland?
• What common rhetorical devices, themes, or visualizations are used to conjure images of Polish national solidarity? How does Katyn contribute to these?
• Is the term ‘Katyn’ truly an all-encompassing term of crimes committed against the Polish state? In what ways would the 2010 Smolensk Air Disaster fit into this narrative?

Katyn in Polish National Identity
“...all of us...are bound together by an invisible chain, of which one of the final links is Katyn.” —Andrzej Czyrkiewicz

What did Poland’s postwar national identity look like?
• Largely ethnocentrically and religiously homogeneous
• Surviving traumatized by the experience of war
• Continuation of anti-Semitic attitudes
• Committed to Catholicism despite Communist rule
• Hostile attitudes towards neighbors to the East and West (Germany and the Soviet Union)

What function did Katyn serve in the construction of this identity?
• As a unifying symbol of Polish martyrdom, patriotism, and suffering
• As a tangible means to resistance to Communist domination
• As an unresolved issue in Polish-Soviet (later Polish-Russian) relations

Political Mobilization of Historical Memory
Poland’s Democratic Transition (1990-1995)

“He who puts out his hand to stop the wheel of history will have his fingers crushed”—Lech Wałęsa

Lech Wałęsa, despite his success as leader of Solidarność, represented a continuation of Poland’s old ways, characterized by political backwardness, economic stagnation, and social conservatism. As the 1990s progressed, Poles shifted their attention away from historical nostalgia, instead focusing on their country’s opportunities for the future. Having entered office on a platform primarily based on his role in Poland’s democratic transition, Wałęsa witnessed his own political career sputter out almost as quickly as it had started.


“We have understood that bad service is done to the nation by those who are impelling to remance the past.” —Aleksander Kwaśniewski

Although Kwaśniewski’s decade-long tenure as President of Poland resulted in numerous successes, his administration’s course of liberalization failed to reconcile more conservative visions of Polish national identity, resulting in sociopolitical backlash. While a liberalized Poland enjoyed a “return to Europe,” not all Poles experienced the expected benefits of the rapid economic, social, and political transformations taking place. Kwaśniewski had tried (and failed) to reconcile a critical aspect of Polish national identity—its historical memory.

Nationalist Populism and the Rise of Memory Politics (2005-2010)

 Forgiveness is necessary, but forgiveness after admitting guilt and administering proper punishment. This is what we need.” —Jarosław Kaczyński

Under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński, the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice (PIS) Party came onto a national stage towards the conclusion of Kwaśniewski’s second term. PIS pledged a rejuvenation of Polish identity, an increase in national security, and a specific focus on the “politics of memory” it deemed to have been forgotten. The 2010 Smolensk Air Disaster, which claimed the lives of President Lech Kaczyński and most of his cabinet as they traveled to a commemoration ceremony at Katyn, used memory as a means of consolidating nationalist, anti-Russian sentiments.

Conclusion
The collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to present an opportunity for both Poland and the newly-independent Russian Federation to redefine their respective national identities and work towards a form of gradual cooperation. Katyn served as a major inhibitor of this process as it remained as an element of Polish collective memory and national identity. Collective historical memory as a phenomenon serves both as a cultural tradition from which to draw from and as a malleable tool to serve specific political ends goals. Therefore, despite moderate successes to repair relations, Polish political leaders have utilized Katyn as a symbol to assure fervent nationalist sentiment, unite large sections of its population, and promote animosity towards its Russia.

Key References

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