Political myth: the political uses of history, tradition and memory

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NOTE

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Appendix 1

The Katyn Massacre as Collective Memory
The Katyn Massacre as Collective Memory

The shifting political connotations associated with the Katyn Massacre as an essential component of Polish collective memory provides an excellent case study to illustrate the theoretical analysis of modern collective memory developed in chapter 3. Conflicting Polish memories of the execution of Polish officers at Katyn Forest in 1940 are illustrative of the way selective representations of the past are collectively constructed by communities to underpin their legitimacy or delegitimate their opponents. An analysis of the ‘politics of memory’ that focuses on Katyn provides an excellent example for illustrating the concept of collective memory. It is a good example because Katyn dramatically illustrates the ‘lifecycle’ of a collective memory from its inception as a counter or subordinate memory through to it becoming the dominant memory before slipping into history. The historical event, around which rival collective memories are constructed, is the execution of approximately 23,000 members of Poland’s officer corps at Katyn, Miednoye and Kharkov in April 1940. These officers were captured following the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland in September 1939 and interned by Soviet authorities. When mass graves were discovered by German forces in April 1943, the Soviet Union denied all knowledge of the massacre and appointed its own commission of inquiry in 1943, which labeled the Katyn massacre a Nazi war crime. This verdict, although officially accepted by

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the Allies and the post-war Polish government was never really accepted by the Polish people. 'Official history' suppressed memory of Katyn, but could not stop the gradual emergence of a rival collective memory. The official state record was not supplanted until April 1990 when President Gorbachev formally admitted Soviet responsibility for the massacres. Therefore, from 1943 to 1990 there were two rival memories of the Katyn Massacre. The official dominant memory enforced by the Polish government insisted that the massacre was a Nazi war crime. The claim was directly challenged by an unofficial subordinate memory, which insisted that the massacre was carried out by the Soviet Union. What was at stake in the conflict between the two rival memories was the legitimacy of the Polish United Workers' Party whose founding myth was based on its close collaboration with the Soviet Union in the liberation of Poland. Because control over the memory of Katyn had the potential to legitimate or delegitimate the Party, an analysis of the politics of the memory of Katyn gives a clear insight into the way collective memory is constructed and sustained.

A dominant legitimating memory must suppress subordinate memories that have a delegitimizing potential. During a commemorative ceremony at Katyn in June

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2 For a detailed account of investigations in the Katyn massacre see Swianiewicz, S. 'Katyn : Historical Background', Survey, Vol. 24, No. 4, (109), Autumn 1979, pp. 188 - 198.

3 While memory of Katyn was suppressed in Poland, its memory was kept alive by émigré communities who erected memorials to the victims of Katyn. For example when President Aleksander Kwansniewski laid flowers at the Katyn Memorial in New Jersey in 1996, he "thanked the expatriate Poles for keeping alive the truth about Katyn." Polish Radio 1, Warsaw, 19 July 1996, BBC Monitoring Service : Central Europe and the Balkans, 20 July, 1996. (Reuters)

4 Referred to as the Party through the remainder of this introduction.
1995, the Polish President, Lech Walesa stated, "that throughout the years of the conspiracy of silence surrounding the Katyn crime the Poles had always heard its 'silent cry.'" One source of this 'conspiracy of silence' was the World War II Allied Governments themselves. Despite knowledge to the contrary, the British and United States' Governments suppressed the truth about Katyn in the interests of wartime diplomacy. At the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1946, the Soviet indictments against Germany were quietly dropped without explanation. A comprehensive investigation was carried out by the 'Select Committee to Investigate the Katyn Forest Massacre' of the United States Congress during 1951-52, but its recommendation that the matter be pursued went no further. A 'conspiracy of silence' endured until the declassification of World War II documents in 1995.

Within Poland, the 'conspiracy of silence' was maintained by The Polish United Workers' Party. The Party actively suppressed all memories of World War II that conflicted with any of its claim to legitimacy. The Party's claim to legitimacy was based on its leadership of the patriotic war of liberation and its close association

6 A declassified World War II Special Operations Executive (SOE) document spelt this out quite clearly. "Any other view would have been most distasteful to the public since it could be inferred that we are allied to a power guilty of the same sort of atrocities as Germany." The Times, June 10, 1995. (Reuters) Following the crisis in relations with Moscow following the German discovery of the mass graves in April 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill were also anxious to appease Stalin and ensure Soviet support for the war against Germany and later Japan.
8 An insight into 'official' thinking at the time can be gained from a declassified British Foreign Office official commenting on the Congressional committee. "Whatever the truth of the massacre, and whatever the committee's ultimate conclusions, it is difficult to see what is to be gained by raking up the past in this way." The Guardian, June 25, 1993. (Reuters)
with the Soviet Union. However, the weakness of the Party's attempts to legitimate itself through its association with the liberation of Poland had been undermined by Soviet actions in Poland during World War II and served to reinforce traditional anti-Russian feelings. Polish experiences of the Soviet occupation of 1939-1941, the Katyn massacres, Soviet acquiescence in the quelling of the Warsaw Uprising, and the general behaviour of Soviet troops during the liberation of Poland had a serious delegitimizing effect on the Party. For this reason the Party attempted to eliminate all subordinate and potentially delegitimizing memories.

The suppression of memories associated with Katyn must be understood also within the broader context of Soviet deportations and the abortive Warsaw Uprising. Following its invasion, the Red Army had taken 230,000 Polish prisoners of war, of whom only 82,000 survived. During the occupation that followed the invasion, all potential intellectual and military opposition was 'cleansed' from the Soviet zone and between 1.6 and 1.8 million Poles were transported to 'corrective labour camps' within the Soviet Union. Over half a million of those transported were dead by the time the amnesty was announced in 1941, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet Union continued the policy of transportation in 1944-1945. During the liberation, Soviet armies 'reoccupied' their former zone and recommenced the 'cleansing' campaign interrupted in 1941.\(^9\) Elsewhere in Poland the

\(^9\) For example KOR stated that "from the Vilna area and the Lvov district more than 30,000 soldiers of the Home Army were deported, and even today, the fate of most of them remains unknown". From a Declaration of the Social Self-Defence Committee [KOR], 17th September 1979, on the Fortieth
‘liberation’ was as savage as the German occupation and the Party’s attempts to mythologise the war of liberation as a joint venture of the Soviet and patriotic Polish armies lacked credibility from the start.

The Party’s wartime founding myth was also undermined by the emergence of memories centred on the Warsaw Uprising. Like Katyn, the Warsaw Uprising had deep roots within Poland’s existing national myth. It fell within the tradition of Polish insurrectionary nationalism which was betrayed by both East and West. The betrayal, however, ensured the initial political success of the Party, for with the destruction of Warsaw went the main source of political opposition. The Party had always been equivocal about the uprising. It had been forced to support dubious Soviet policy during the period while it also needed to identify somehow with what was the single most important Polish act of patriotic resistance during World War II. In addition, it had an interest in concealing the fact that the failure of the uprising brought the destruction of its political opponents and ensured the Party’s political survival. Also, because of the Soviet Union’s alleged complicity in the destruction of the Polish Home Army [AK] the Party had to discredit and disparage the efforts made by the AK to liberate Warsaw. The Party was aware of the potential symbolic significance of the Warsaw Uprising for its own legitimacy from the very beginning. For example, when the Party learnt that the émigré Minister of Defence had ordered official mourning in remembrance of the uprising for October 1944, a counter memorial

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Anniversary of the USSR’s attack on Poland. Reprinted in Survey, Vol. 24, No.4, (109), Autumn 1979, p.78. The figure of 30,000 missing is KOR’s.
service was very quickly organised. Following the war, official Polish propaganda, official historiography, and school textbooks derided the uprising as, "a treason to national interests, a criminal attempt by the Polish bourgeoisie to exploit the rising against the USSR and revolutionary changes in Poland." Ex-members of the AK were persecuted during the Stalinist years, and were not rehabilitated until the 1960's, when their patriotic, if misguided motives for belonging to this organisation were finally acknowledged.

The attempt by the Party to construct a dominant memory that placed itself at the centre of Poland's wartime experiences was compromised by the historical reality of those experiences, maintained by the resilience of counter-memories. To compensate for the lack of authenticity of its own memory, the Party relied on tight censorship to suppress memory of Katyn. The following extract, 'Part 21 of Section IX from the Black Book of Polish Censorship - Instructions For Censors', is indicative of the lengths taken to suppress memory of Katyn.

In evaluating materials on the subject of the death of Polish officers in Katyn, the following criteria should be followed:
(a) No attempts to charge the Soviet Union with the responsibility for the death of the Polish officers in the Katyn forests should be permitted.
(b) In scientific writing, memoirs, and biographies, formulations such as the following may be permitted: 'shot by the Nazis in Katyn', 'died in Katyn'. If phrases such as 'fell in Katyn' are used with a date of death, the date may be given only as coming after July 1941.

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(c) The term 'prisoners of war' should be stricken with references to Polish soldiers and officers interned by the Red Army in September 1939. The correct term is 'interned' ....
(d) Necrologies, obituaries, announcements of religious services announced for the intention of the victims of Katyn and information concerning other forms of paying respect to their memory may be permitted only with the approval of the GUKPPiW leadership. 

In addition, official censorship followed Soviet guidelines on how the Katyn massacre was to be dealt with. In a confidential note [Jan 14, 1975], the Deputy Director of the Central Office for Control of Press, Publications and Performances stated:

With reference to Note No. 21/IX concerning the death of Polish officers at Katyn, the following principles have been adopted in accordance with relevant statements in both the Great Soviet Encyclopedia and the communiqué issued by a Special Commission appointed by Soviet authorities in 1943. The note goes on to outline the correct interpretation of the incident to keep it within the official Soviet version. The note does suggest, however, that restrictions had been slightly modified.

The Censor's Office has, hitherto, insisted upon the elimination of all information naming Katyn as the place where Polish officers died during the Second World War. The guidelines now in force establish both the limits of information and the type of publications in which it can appear.

At the same time, the Censor's office felt it necessary to stress the undesirability of an exhaustive treatment of the Katyn affair. Through such methods the Party successfully suppressed memory of Katyn in Poland until the fortieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in 1979. Memory of Katyn had been suppressed, but not eliminated.

14 ibid, p. 195
The attempt by the Party to construct a dominant memory based on Poland’s wartime experiences illustrates the limits of manipulating and manufacturing a collective memory that is fundamentally contested. However, as the Bosnian War demonstrated, there are no limits to the annihilation of memory if a regime ‘ethically cleanses’ its opponents and destroys all traces of their cultural heritage. In addition to the Party’s failure to align its World War II memories with those of the people as a whole, the Party also failed to identify itself with Poland’s powerful national memory. National memory was closely associated with Poland’s Catholic Church and coalesced around such key reference points as Poland’s foundation in 966, the martyrdom of St. Stanislaus, the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, the ‘croisade

15 ibid.
16 “For historic reason the foci of traditional political identification in Poland have been the nation, national culture and religion.” Rupnik, J. ‘Dissent in Poland, 1968 - 1978: The End of Revisionism and The Rebirth of The Civil Society,’ in Tokes, R.L. [Ed.] Opposition in Eastern Europe, The Macmillan Press, London, 1979, p. 80. The term nation therefore refers to Poland’s historical, cultural and religious heritage, and is sharply differentiated from the concept of state. For many intellectuals during the Solidarity period the nation also meant ‘civil society’. Pope John Paul II also reminded the crowd in his Czestochowa speech (1979) that the state should always be subordinate to the nation. Guardian Weekly, 17th June 1979.
18 The Ninth Centenary of the martyrdom of St Stanislaus was celebrated with the Pope’s triumphal trip to Poland in 1979. St Stanislaus had been executed for opposing authoritarian rule and came to symbolise the Church’s triumph over temporal power. St Stanislaus was fused with the drive for human rights and was therefore an important symbol of opposition. See Biernacki, A. Some Reflections on the Pope’s Pilgrimage to Poland’, The Polish Review, Vol.XXIV, No. 2, 1979, and Blazynski, G. Flashpoint Poland, Pergamon Press, New York, 1970.
19 One of the most important reference points in Poland’s political history, the monastery at Jasna Gora symbolised national resistance after the defeat of the Swedes in 1655. In thanks King John Casimir dedicated Poland to the Virgin Mary whose icon had been brought to the monastery in 1383. It was for the 600th anniversary of the presence of this icon that the Pope returned to Poland in June 1983. The ‘Black Madonna’ was adopted by Solidarity during the martial law period.
Appendix 1: The Katyn Massacre

permanente' tradion\textsuperscript{20}, the May Constitution of 1791\textsuperscript{21}, the Partitions period\textsuperscript{22}, Independence Day\textsuperscript{23}, and the various experiences of World War II. The Party's failure to legitimate itself adequately in terms of Poland's national memory stemmed from three factors: the Party's inability to wrest control of national memory from the Catholic Church; the Party's inability to maintain, communicate and make dominant its own memories; and the Party's close association with the Soviet Union. The close association between Church and 'nation' throughout Poland's history meant that many of the key reference points of national memory were identified with the Catholic Church. The failure of the Party to wrest control of national reference points from the Church and the opposition was an indication of its weak legitimacy. The public response to the Papal Tours of 1979 and 1983, and the massive use of religious symbolism during the Solidarity period were a testament to this failure.

In contrast to the failure of the Party to impose its memory or at least align it more closely with the nation, Poland's opposition movement was noted for its ability

\textsuperscript{20} Poland considered itself the bastion of Christendom against pagan neighbours; the Tartars of the Thirteenth Century and against the Turks, especially the Battle of Vienna in 1683. This crusading tradition was extended by the Church against atheistic Communism.

\textsuperscript{21} Traditionally Poland's Nation Day, but abandoned by the Party in 1945. The day commemorated the liberal constitution of 1791 which "proclaimed that all authority originated from the will of the nation." Wandycz, P.S. Soviet - Polish Relations, 1917 - 1921. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1969, p. 2. This day was illegally commemorated during the late 1979's and early 1980's.

\textsuperscript{22} Poland as a state ceased to exist between 1772 and 1918. "A Polish nation, Polish tradition and a Polish national consciousness", Narkiewicz, O.A. The Green Flag: Polish Populist Politics, 1867 - 1970, Croom Helm, London, 1976, p. 9, continued, largely nurtured by the Catholic Church. The Church was thus identified with the nation, rather than the state. See Jasinska-Kania \textit{op. cit.} There are historical parallels between the role performed by the Polish Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

\textsuperscript{23} This day was associated with Marshal Josef Piłsudski and commemorated Polish independence on 11th November 1918. Independence Day celebrations were proscribed by the Party in favour of November 7th, the anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. This became another contested anniversary until the Party participated in the ceremonies for the first time in 1981.
to wrest control of Poland’s history from the Party and use it to bolster its own legitimacy. By the second half of the 1970’s, “thousands of people commemorated anniversaries neglected or condemned by the state.”24 The principal organisation that re-focused attention on these neglected anniversaries was the Social Self-Defence Committee [KOR]. KOR eventually became the intellectual foundation of the Solidarity movement. Solidarity was conscious of the symbolic significance of Poland’s past and “rarely has one encountered a movement so strongly recalling a forbidden historical memory.”25 The memories recalling Poland’s past subjection to the Soviet Union were suppressed. Demands made by striking teachers in 1981 to be able to teach Polish history and literature and for students to have access to textbooks that told “the whole historical truth”26, were a direct threat to the legitimacy of the Party. So was the Church’s demand, issued during the Gdansk crisis, that students had “the right to learn the full national history and culture.”27 Opposition groups and the Church sought to underpin their legitimacy in Polish history. They were not so much concerned with historical truth or reality as with those episodes preserved as socially relevant in the collective memory of Polish society. Such episodes, usually tragic phases28, found their expression in imaginative literature rather than in objective history for, “in Polish tradition, the historical image has proved far more

convincing than the historical fact.”

It is the historical image based on national memory that, when combined with tradition and commemoration, made up Poland’s political myth. A knowledge of Polish history therefore, is not sufficient, for "recognising a nation’s myths about its past may be more useful for an understanding of present-day attitudes than knowing the actual facts behind those myths.”

The Party recognised such insufficiency and tried to reframe Poland’s political myth in order to underpin its own legitimacy.

During the legitimation crisis of the 1980’s, the opposition contested the Party’s own foundation myth by openly challenging official memories of the Katyn Massacre and the Warsaw Uprising. Commemoration of the Katyn Massacre was used to symbolise the suffering of Poland under Soviet occupation, and the betrayal of the Warsaw Uprising symbolised Poland’s dashed hopes of achieving genuine post-war independence. Both reference points in Poland’s wartime experience tapped powerful anti-Soviet sentiments in the national consciousness. One effect of the open commemoration of the victims of Katyn and of the Warsaw Uprising in the late 1970’s, was to challenge not only the Party’s monopoly over memory, but to undermine its founding myth by reminding the population of the Party’s actual dependence and subservience to the Soviet Union immediately after World War II.

The challenge can be seen in the way the opposition contested key reference points

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from Poland’s wartime experiences to undermine the Party’s legitimacy. For example, in September 1979, the Social Self-Defence Committee [KOR] issued a declaration to mark the Fortieth Anniversary of the Soviet attack on Poland. The declaration was a direct challenge to the Party’s legitimacy because, by detailing Soviet ‘crimes’ against Poland, KOR was, by implication, charging the Party with complicity with them. The first crime according to KOR, was the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that led to the subsequent military attack on Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union. The Pact led to the effective re-partitioning of Poland.

The credibility of the Party over the Katyn massacres became one aspect of KOR’s campaign to delegitimate the Party through the manipulation of this particular repressed memory. The KOR declaration of 1979, directly implicated the Party with complicity in covering up the crime. KOR declared,

The Government of the Polish Peoples’ Republic did not want and still does not want to bring to light the matter of Katyn and other Soviet crimes; on the contrary it tries in every way to make it impossible to reach the truth.\(^{31}\)

KOR directly challenged the Party to reveal the truth about Katyn on the occasion of the Fortieth Anniversary of the massacre, and linked commemoration of the anniversary with the ‘national will’.

We call on our own people here and in exile to celebrate with dignity the sad anniversary of Katyn .... At the same time we are warning authorities of the Polish Peoples’ Republic that the repression of the firm and natural will of the nation to perpetuate the memory of the Katyn crime would only meet with the contempt of the people.\(^{32}\)

\(^{31}\) KOR Declaration, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

KOR leader Jacek Kuron and some of his associates were detained on suspicion of attending a commemorative church service, but the Party was not able to stop an open-air commemorative service in Warsaw held on All Soul's Day, November 1980, for the victims of Katyn. Forty years after the event Katyn had once again become a focus for Poland's political opposition. The delegitimating effect of the Party being in some way implicated with the Katyn massacre continued throughout the 1980's.

A joint Soviet-Polish Commission was created to ease pressure on the Party but with few results. On March 22, 1988 Pravda stated in a report on the joint commission,

> Of course ... people would like to see the earliest possible resolution of the most urgent issues. But we must be realists. It will take time to investigate the complicated web of events and facts pertaining to this or that gap in the history of the two countries' relations. We must study all documents scrupulously and adhere exactly to historical truth.

In a reference to the removal of the 'gaps' from the agenda of the commission, the Pravda article went on to say, “then what will Western propaganda and the domestic opponents of socialist Poland do without these very 'gaps', which they have used more than once to heat up public sentiment and then bask in the resulting warmth.”

This was an acknowledgement of the effect the continuing Katyn controversy was having on the Party. However, it was not until June 1988 that a tentative admission was made “promoting the affair from one of German guilt to becoming a 'blank spot'

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35 Ibid.
in history" Part of the 'blank spot was filled in by Mikhail Gorbachev on April 13th, 1990, the 47th anniversary of the German announcement of finding mass graves at Katyn. Gorbachev admitted that Polish officers had been executed by Soviet authorities, but he put the blame on the NKVD. In handing over selected documents to Poland's President Wojciech Jaruzelski, Gorbachev acknowledged Soviet responsibility but retained key documents indicating responsibility. The subsequent release of further documents must be seen in the context of the August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union. Following the coup, President Yeltsin transferred the former Communist Party and KGB archives to the 'Russian Centre for the Study and Preservation of Documents of Recent History', which was open to the public. At the same time selected releases of damaging documents, such as those on Katyn, were used to discredit the Communist Party. In October 1992, the Katyn execution order signed by Stalin and implicating the Politburo was handed over to President Lech Walesa. The release of the execution order, which had been found in Gorbachev's personal archives, was used by Yeltsin to discredit his opponent. In September 1994 Russian historians agreed to amend Russian textbooks to include the Soviet Union's attack on Poland in September 1939 and the massacre at Katyn. However, despite the gradual transition of Katyn from repressed memory to history, the memory of Katyn was still contested within Russia itself. For example, Vladimir

Zhirinovski accused the Polish government of stirring up conflict with Russia over Katyn\(^{40}\) when Poland objected to the circulation of a book in the Duma, 'The Katyn Detective Story', that claimed the massacre had been carried out by Germans.\(^{41}\) However, by this time Katyn had ceased to be a memory that divided Poles; instead it had become a unifying memory validated by history.

A symbol of the unifying role was the opening of Katyn as a *memory site* to both Russians and Poles. The exhumation of the mass graves provided Poland with its 'sacred relics'; the bones of the victims of Katyn. The cemetery at Katyn became a national shrine; a *theatre of memory* where leaders could ritually reaffirm the memory of Katyn as a national memory. The new status as a memory site was acknowledged by the Russian Premier Victor Chernomyrdin who in a symbolic gesture laid a wreath at the Katyn Cross in September 1994. “Chernomyrdin stressed that a monument to commemorate all the victims of Katyn should be built to educate future generations.”\(^{42}\) The importance of Katyn as a national memory site was emphasised in June 1995 when the foundation stone for this monument was laid in the presence of President Lech Walesa, Cardinal Jozef Glemp and Prime Minister Jozef Oleksy\(^{43}\). In April 1996, President Aleksander Kwasniewski laid a wreath at Katyn and suggested that Katyn in future would become a pilgrimage site. “I think many people,
young people included, will come here to understand the evil of the past and to look for what is good in the future. It is important that this place should be not only a wound but a memory.” Kwasniewski was implying that the ‘wound’ of Katyn had divided Poles and divided Poles from Russians and that the division could be healed with the dedication of the Katyn Monument. With Katyn being assigned to an official memory site, Katyn now took its place as another reference point in Polish national memory.

The politics of the memory of Katyn has been used to illustrate the concept of collective memory because it indicates the potential that memory has to legitimate or delegitimate a political community. Katyn is a dramatic illustration of this process for the Polish United Worker’ Party. The consequence of losing control over the memory of Katyn was the undermining of its foundation myth and the weakening of its legitimacy. What such an example also demonstrates is that the struggle to control the memory of Katyn was not about a historical past but about the present.

43 ITAR-TAS news Agency (World Service), Moscow, 4 June, 1995 (Reuters), BBC Monitoring Service: Former USSR, 6 June, 1995.
44 PAP News Agency, Warsaw, 8 April, 1996 (Reuters), BBC Summary of World Broadcasts.