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The writing of the “political” history of Communism in Poland

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Looking at the development of the historiography of Communism and the changes within the field of contemporary history in Poland after 1989, this paper examines the historical narrative of the Communist regime (Polish People’s Republic, PRL). What are the big questions, the main historiographical tendencies, but also the gaps and controversies? This paper is part of my PhD dissertation, dedicated to the sociology of Polish historians working on the recent past (1939-1989). It questions the autonomy of history writing vis-à-vis the political field. Indeed, the writing of the PRL's history is an object of political struggles. The first Polish historians to write about the PRL are also witnesses of the period they are writing about as they lived in the communist state. Most of them (Kersten, Paczkowski, Holzer, Friszke) took a more or less active part in the Solidarity movement and published in the underground press and publishing houses. Hence, the PRL's history has been marked by its political goals (at first, to delegitimize the communist regime by shedding light on its lies and crimes): writing about the PRL was not only to research the past. It was also to use it in current politics. In a sense, there is some continuity between the PRL and the post-1989 period regarding the political goals assigned to contemporary history: the production of a normative historical narrative aiming at serving political causes, which are various: the legitimization of the political power, the state, the nation or a given political camp. Hence, today's historiographical controversies regarding the assessment of the PRL and the political transition (with the Round Table Agreements of 1989) can be regarded as an extension (under other forms) of political struggles inherited from the PRL. Today's hardliners supporting the totalitarian paradigm in history (Zaryn, Kurtyka, Gontarczyk, Dudek) are also the closest to right-wing and nationalist parties (Law and Justice¹) and newspapers (*Gazeta Polska*, *Rzeczpospolita*); whereas historians challenging the totalitarian paradigm by promoting a social history of the PRL (Kula, Friszke, Machcewicz) defend more nuanced interpretations, are closer to post-Solidarity liberals² and publish in *Polityka* or *Gazeta Wyborcza*³.

In the first part, I will show how a group of specialists working on Communist Poland emerged during the late 1980s. In the context of political regime change, the writing of that history has been marked by its political dimension. The dominant narrative refers to the basic elements of the totalitarian paradigm, opposing “state” and “society”. In order to develop its main features, I examine a sample of syntheses published by academic historians between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

The 2000s have seen a growing social and political interest for the recent past. Whereas in the 1990s, despite a series of controversies which took place in the media, history

¹ Kurtyka was appointed as head of the Institute of National Remembrance in 2005 when Poland was ruled by the Kaczynski twins. Zaryn supported the election of Lech and then Jaroslaw Kaczynski at the presidency.

² Machcewicz is an adviser of Prime minister Donald Tusk (Civic Platform, PO).

³ *Polityka* is the former weekly of the Communist Party. *Gazeta Wyborcza* was founded in 1989 by members of the Solidarity movement (Michnik). They both defend the legacy of the Round Table Agreements (compromise between the Communist Party and the opposition).

was not on the political agenda; it has become a useful tool of current politics in the context of the EU accession process⁴. Moreover, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) strongly supported the idea of “historical policy” as it came to power in 2005. Yet, the idea of institutionalizing state policy about the past had made a decisive step by the end of the 1990s, when the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) was created. In order to illustrate the most recent developments of historiography, I propose in the second part a comparison between two editorial series of monographs dedicated to the PRL's history. Up to today, the dominant narrative focuses on the darkest sides of the regime (political repression) and emphasizes resistance of the Polish society against ideology.

/1/ Writing the history of Communism in Poland after 1989

Back to the PRL

Contemporary history, especially that of the war and the post-war period, was the most sensitive in terms of legitimization of the communist state and Party. It was essential for the Party to avoid historical events which could damage the image of the Soviet Union, such as the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919-1920, the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939, or the Katyn massacre of spring 1940, as Poland was now part of the Soviet bloc. Not less essential was the need for Polish communists to present themselves as Polish nationals and not as Stalin's puppets who came into power thanks to the presence of the red army on Polish soil. This is why censorship and political control over the “milieu” of historians were the strongest concerning contemporary history⁵. Hence, academic historians were reluctant to conduct research on the recent past, fearing political repression. This reluctance was also partly due to the academic *habitus*, as many historians considered the recent past to be unsuitable for scientific research.

On the contrary, communist authorities were urging the writing of a new contemporary history of Poland, which could legitimate the Party as the only true defender of the Polish nation during the 20th century. Such narrative was closer to political propaganda than scientific research (especially during the Stalinist period). As a result, it was the Party which was the main producer of contemporary history. Its Department of History kept the Party archives and hired activists in charge of preparing brochures and propaganda works. Regarding academic history, the new frames of interpretation were defined already at the Otwock conference (1951-1952), during which the historian “milieu” officially adopted Marxism-Leninism as the only “true” scientific methodology. The 2nd Polish Republic (during the interwar period) was to be disqualified as a fascist regime acting against the interests of the Polish people. The same was to be said about the Polish government in exile in London during World War II and the Home Army (AK) fighting the German occupant. Only the Polish Worker's Party (PPR) created on Stalin's orders in 1942 and its armed forces were to be presented as truly Polish and to personify the national resistance during the antifascist fight. Facts and events which were uncomfortable to Moscow became the so called “blank spots” of history: they disappeared from the national narrative or were rewritten.

In this difficult context, it was almost impossible to write the history of the Communist regime without facing censorship. Nonetheless, historians from the laboratory of history of People's Poland (*Pracownia Historii Polski Ludowej*) in the Institute of History of

⁴ Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer, eds., *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe, Memory Games*, Palgrave, Mac Millan, 2013.

⁵ Zbigniew Romek, *Cenzura a nauka historyczna w Polsce 1944-1970*, Warsaw, Neriton, 2010.

the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) managed to publish a few works in the 1970s. These works were focused on social and economic changes (demography, migrations, agriculture) and not on political themes. They were dedicated to the first period of the PRL, that of the late 1940s and late 1950s. Yet, works on political history could hardly be published, even for historians who were Party members⁶.

The growing opposition to the Communist regime, especially during the 1980s, went along with a growing interest for contemporary history within Polish society. The Solidarity movement referred to history in order to delegitimize the regime and underground publications (*samizdat*) competed with the official narrative. The main goal was to fill in the “blank spots”. This context of social and political demand for history, combined with the possibility to escape censorship via underground publications or Polish publishing houses in London and Paris, offered possibilities to publish the first uncensored historical works dedicated to contemporary history. Academic historians interested in political history and associated with Solidarity therefore published works which paved the way for the post-war historiography of the PRL⁷. This renewal of historiography was closely linked with the political situation. Hence, it was marked by the will to shed light on the “lies” and “crimes” of the Communist regime. Indeed, writing the political history of the PRL during the 1980s was also a means for academic historians to get involved in politics.

Wojciech Roszkowski's synthesis, first published in 1983 under the pseudonym of Andrzej Albert, is the first attempt to renew and to systematize the narrative of the PRL⁸. Published thanks to a Polish publishing house in England, it aimed at fulfilling the gaps of the official historical narrative. In his foreword, the authors explicitly announces his intention to provide new interpretations of the recent past, free from the marxist-leninist paradigm of “class struggle”. He presents his book, which is more than a thousand pages long, as an “encyclopedia” rather than a synthesis, and presents himself as follows: “The author is not a nationalist, [...], nor a communist or a socialist, [...] nor a marxist. [...] He is a christian.” Then, he presents himself as a “Polish patriot”, arguing that “nationhood is one of the essential social links”. Thus, Roszkowski reactivates a tradition of christian and national values dating back to the 19th century, when there was no independent Polish state and Polish nationalism developed through the romantic literature (Mickiewicz and others). Writing a new history of the recent past, uncensored by the communist authorities, Roszkowski includes the recent past in the national narrative of permanent struggles for freedom against the “two enemies” (Germany and Russia), thus facilitating the comparison between Nazism and Communism⁹.

Published in 1984 – also via the underground networks – Krystyna Kersten's book about the origins of the communist regime also has the ambivalent status of a book filling the gaps in the official narrative while serving political purposes at the same time¹⁰. In her preface, she defends the idea that history serves critical and autonomous political thought. In her view, the book was made to “inform” the public about events which could not be researched in the previous period, rather than to “interpret” these events.

⁶ For a summary of early works on the PRL see Andrzej Friszke, “Spor o PRL w III Rzeczypospolitej (1989-2001)”, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, n°1, 2002, p. 9-28.

⁷ See for example Andrzej Albert (Wojciech Roszkowski), *Najnowsza historia Polski 1918-1980* (first edition 1983, several reeditions); Andrzej Andrzejewski (Andrzej Paczkowski), *Gomulka i inni. Dokumenty z archiwum KC 1948-1982*, Warsaw, Krag, 1986; Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. 1943-1948* (first edition 1984).

⁸ Andrzej Albert (Wojciech Roszkowski), *Najnowsza historia Polski 1918-1980*.

⁹ Interestingly, Roszkowski was elected as Member of the European Parliament in 2004 on PiS lists and supported the election of Lech Kaczyński in 2005.

¹⁰ Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. 1943-1948*.

After 1989, these historians, as well as others associated with Solidarity, occupy top positions in the field of contemporary history, with positions as department chairs and heads of laboratories.

Krystyna Kersten (1931-2008) studied history at the University of Warsaw. She was a member of the Polish Communist Party (PZPR) from 1956 to 1968 (she resigned from the Party after the events in Czechoslovakia). As a historian, she worked at the Polish Academy of Sciences (laboratory of history of People’s Poland), researching the postwar period (her first works were dedicated to the repatriation of Poles after World War II). She obtained the title of professor in 1990.

Wojciech Roszkowski (born in 1947) studied and worked during the PRL at the Main School of Planning and Statistics (SGPiS) where he was a member of the chair of economic history. In 1990 he began to work also at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (he was its director between 1994 and 2000) and was elected Prorector of the Warsaw School of Economics (new name of the SGPiS).

Andrzej Paczkowski (born in 1938) studied history at the University of Warsaw. He then became a researcher at the Institute of Literary studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His first researches were dedicated to the history of the Polish press during the Second Republic. During the 1980s he published works on political history of the Stalinist period in the dissident networks. In 1990 he joined the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, where he became the director of the laboratory of contemporary history.

Changes within the field and assessments of the PRL after 1989

Interpretations of the past formerly promoted by the Communist Party are no longer valued in the field after 1989. Attempts to defend the historical legacy of the regime among academic historians are rare and quickly disqualified. A telling example is the controversy opposing Antoni Czubinski, a former member of the Communist Party, and Jerzy Eisler¹¹. Both published a synthesis of the PRL in 1992^{12,13}, defending strongly opposing views. Eisler’s book is typical of the post-Solidarity historiography, criticizing the Communist regime and emphasizing its lies and crimes. It presents itself as an attempt to provide the reader with an uncensored narrative. On the other side, Czubinski tries to defend the PRL and the legacy of the “left” in recent history. Interestingly, the controversy was more about politics than history, with both historians accusing each other of defending their own biography and political choices during the 1980s. Eisler reproaches Czubinski for minimizing the dark chapters of the regime’s history, such as the trials against AK soldiers, the repression of the demonstrators in Poznan in 1956, the declaration of martial law in 1981, and so on. His argumentation illustrates how the main interpretations changed after 1989. What was formerly dissident history challenging official history has become the dominant narrative for the Communist period. Dissident historians are no longer writing under pseudonyms in underground publications. They now hold top positions in the academic field, whereas former Party historians are marginalized. A new generation of historians (Eisler was born in 1952) is replacing an older one (Czubinski was born in 1928). It is no longer possible to write the history of the People’s Republic without taking into account the dissident literature. Eisler therefore reproaches Czubinski for neglecting the underground and “émigré” historiography of the 1980s. According to him, Czubinski’s book was written using “the outrageous language of propaganda brochures of the PZPR”. Whereas in Czubinski’s eyes, the post-Solidarity historians are defending a “winner’s history”, negating any positive role played by the Polish left: “according to him [Eisler], only him and his political camp can be right”. Czubinski’s

¹¹ See *Wiadomosci Historyczne*, n° 1 and 2, 1994.

¹² Jerzy Eisler, *Zarys dziejow politycznych Polski 1944-1989*, Warsaw, BGW, 1992.

¹³ Antoni Czubinski, *Dzieje najnowsze Polski. Polska Ludowa 1944-1989*, Poznan, WAW, 1992.

syntheses are an almost unique example of defence of a “left-wing” interpretation of the communist period, explicitly directed against the dissident narratives.

Antoni Czubinski (1928-2003) studied history at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan where he made all his academic career (he became professor in 1968). He was also a member of the editing committee of the PZPR magazine *Z pola walki*, which published articles about the history of communist parties. During the PRL he mainly researched the interwar period and started to write about the history of the PRL in the 1980s.

Jerzy Eisler (born in 1952) was a member of the PZPR between 1977 and 1981. As a historian at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences, he firstly researched collaboration in France during World War II. In 1993 he defended his habilitation dissertation about the events of March 1968 in Warsaw. He obtained the title of professor in 2002.

Thus, if the post-1989 period has seen the publication of many historical books dedicated to the PRL, its literary production has not always represented a significant scientific innovation. In fact, the published books, quickly written, not always based on archives which were slowly opened, were above all made to rebuild the memory of the PRL and to take part in the current political debates. For historians, writing about the PRL was also a means to engage in politics. It can be seen as an extension of the conflict between official history and dissident history inherited from the PRL. In any case, assessing the PRL also means assessing the post-1989 political scene. Important figures in recent history are also current political actors, as they became politicians, journalists or public intellectuals.

New research centres dedicated to the post-1945 history were created after 1989, especially at the Academy of Sciences. A laboratory of Polish history after 1945 (directed by Tomasz Szarota) is created within the Institute of History, and a laboratory of contemporary political history (directed by Andrzej Paczkowski) is created within the Institute of Political Studies. Besides, the pioneers of PRL’s history (Paczkowski, Kersten, Szarota, Roszkowski, but also Marcin Kula with his school of social history) supported younger historians who defend PhD dissertations about the PRL in the 1990s and produced major works: Andrzej Friszke (1994, supervisor: Tomasz Szarota), Pawel Machcewicz (1993, Marcin Kula), Jan Zaryn (1996, Krystyna Kersten), among others. Older historians, who did not necessarily research the PRL also benefited from the situation. Włodzimierz Borodziej defended his habilitation dissertation about Poland in international relations after 1945 in 1991. The same goes for Jerzy Eisler with a 1993 dissertation dedicated to the protests of March 1968, or for Marcin Kula who until 1989 mainly researched Latin America.

New research questions emerged as archives were slowly opened. The history of the communist regime enjoyed a large audience in the mass media, which was looking for scoops. During the 1990s, historical research about the PRL focuses on three main questions¹⁴: the totalitarian nature of the regime; the degree of its autonomy with regards to the Soviet Union; its ability to modernize. Research was mainly focused on the pre-1956 and post-1980 periods and tends to highlight the resistance to the Communist state. The dominant paradigm of the 1990s is that of totalitarianism – “society” opposes the “state”. The history of the People’s Republic is above all an indictment of Communism and its crimes. According to the most radical interpretations, represented, among academic historians, by Tomasz Strzembosz, Poles were oppressed and forced to submit to a foreign power throughout the entire period of the PRL. Such views are shared by right-wing parties emerging out of Solidarity (such as Law and Justice) and defended in the Krakow journal “Arcana”, led by Andrzej Nowak. But

¹⁴ Michel Christian and Emmanuel Droit, “Ecrire l’histoire du communisme : l’histoire sociale de la RDA et de la Pologne communiste en Allemagne, en Pologne et en France”, *Genèse*, vol. 4, n° 61, p. 118-133.

neither Strzembosz¹⁵ nor Nowak¹⁶ are specialists of the PRL's history. Indeed, the debate over the Communist past is widely taking place in the press (*publicystyka*) rather than in scientific journals. The field of contemporary history encapsulates not only academic historians but also journalists, intellectuals and politicians.

Hence, the main historiographical controversies regarding the Communist regime are to be found in the *publicystyka*. A good summary of debates from the 1990s can be found in the book *Spor o PRL* (“Struggle about the PRL”)¹⁷, which is made of articles published in the Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* between May 1994 and November 1995. These articles, mainly written by historians researching the PRL (Kersten, Paczkowski, Friszke, Kula, Holzer, Roszkowski) were part of a discussion initiated by the victory of the post-communist party Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) in the 1993 legislative elections. As a result of these elections, Aleksander Kwasniewski, a former member of the PZPR and Minister of Sport during the PRL, became Prime Minister. This was perceived as a major defeat of the post-Solidarity camp and proof of the failure of the negotiated transition by the most radical political actors)¹⁸. Hence the discussion about the PRL legacy initiated by the Catholic weekly. The discussion was mainly about periodization, the specificities of the PRL concerning Poland's long-term history and the sense of the 1956 changes.

Interestingly, the totalitarian interpretations were not expressed by academic historians but by journalists. They tended to be defended by Jerzy Turowicz, the editor of *Tygodnik Powszechny* since 1945¹⁹, and Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, a former AK soldier who immigrated to England after the war and became a radio journalist (BBC, Radio Free Europe). In his introduction to the debate, Turowicz argues that it is the political situation of the mid-1990s that necessitates an evaluation of the PRL, as the most recent elections have seen the victory of the post-communist camp. He also considers that recalling the memory of the PRL and its dictatorial nature should prevent any attempt of its political “rehabilitation”. That kind of argument is very often to be found in the discourses of right-wing post-Solidarity parties. This is accompanied by the call for “decommunization” (*dekomunizacja*), which in Turowicz's words means “above all the rebuilding of democracy and the rule of law” and of course lustration²⁰ of the former communist leaders. Another classic thesis of the anti-communist interpretation is that of the “foreign” nature of the PRL. According to this interpretation, Polish communists were just Soviet agents acting against the interests of the Polish nation. Hence, the Popular Army (*Wojsko Ludowe*) and the Security Services are to be considered as organs of the Soviet Union, preventing the rebuilding of an independent Polish state. In this respect, the “totalitarian” interpretation of the PRL's history relies on a double opposition: between “society” and “state”, but also between “national” (i.e. people acting in favour of national independence) and “foreign” (i.e. people serving the sovietization of the country).

Among historians researching the PRL period the totalitarian interpretation is more nuanced. Most of them consider the first decade of the PRL, the so called “Stalinist period” (when Boleslaw Bierut was first secretary of the PZPR) as the worst period in terms of communist oppression. Periodization is important as the post-1956 period is considered as

¹⁵ Tomasz Strzembosz (1930-2004) worked at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences and at the Catholic University of Lublin. His research works focused on the Polish armed resistance against the Soviet occupation (1939-1941). His was an anticommunist activist, first in the Scouting movement, than in the Solidarity movement.

¹⁶ Andrzej Nowak (born in 1960) is a professor of history at the Jagellon University in Cracow. He researches mainly the political history of Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th century. He was a member of the Solidarity movement in the 1980's and supported the elections of Lech and then Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

¹⁷ *Spor o PRL*, Cracow, Znak, 1996.

¹⁸ Aleksander Smolar, “Les aventures de la décommunisation”, *Critique internationale*, vol. 5, n° 5, p. 155-166.

¹⁹ With a three-year interruption between 1953 and 1956 when he was removed as he refused to publish Stalin's necrology.

²⁰ Lustration is a procedure of vetting former communist *apparatchiks* from political and public offices.

being relatively more peaceful. In *Tygodnik Powszechny's* debate, Wojciech Roszkowski expresses similar views than Turowicz and Nowak-Jeziorański, treating the "system" as a whole: "there are better or worse periods, but there are above all better or worse systems. The political system of the PRL was one of the worst possible ones. It was based on the dictatorship of a small group of professional revolutionaries, subjected to the Kremlin and realizing its plans via a centralized party apparatus and coercive forces".

Arguing in favour of a social history of the PRL, Marcin Kula opposes the totalitarian interpretations which he considers insufficiently nuanced. He defends research methods inspired by the social sciences and especially sociology²¹, but also new research objects: daily life, political institutions, cultural history, the history of mentalities, and so on. This scientific framing leads him to criticize the main theses of the totalitarian paradigm, such as the opposition between state and society, in which the attitudes of social groups serving the system and benefitting from it is not researched. In other words, the sociology of political elites, civil servants, police officers or trade-union leaders is lacking in the political history of the PRL. But Kula especially underlines the need to research daily life in the context of authoritarianism. He is therefore very close to the demand for a social history of power in communist regimes defended by Western historians such as Sandrine Kott and Thomas Lindenberg²²: "One says that the PRL was a "totalitarian" system. Indeed, it was surely not democratic. Nonetheless totalitarianism in which thousands of people went legally abroad, in which at least the intellectual elite is up to date with the literature published in the world, in which in wide areas of the social life there is no generalized fear... is rather not totalitarian. I would risk saying more: Poland was the first place to resist communism not because here it was bad, but because here it was relatively not bad."

Similarly to Kula, most of the specialists of political history writing in the 1990s (who lived in the PRL) are reluctant to use the concept of "totalitarianism". This is the case regarding Krystyna Kersten, Jerzy Holzer, Jerzy Eisler, and Andrzej Friszke. Holzer compares Poland's situation vis-à-vis the Soviet Union after 1956 as being similar to the situation of satellite states of the 3rd Reich. Eisler sees elements of "partnership" between Poland and the Soviet Union after 1956. Friszke speaks of the PRL as an "autonomous part of the Soviet empire". He also does not hesitate to mention positive achievements of the PRL in regard to Poland's long-term history, such as the "modernization" of the country which was poorly industrialized before World War II, the consequent change of the social structure (two thirds of the population were peasants before the war), the development of culture, science and education, as well as the "democratization of society" with the reduction of social barriers. It is necessary to recall these historians' experiences of the PRL to understand their positioning. Kersten, Holzer and Eisler were members of the PZPR before joining Solidarity. Kula's parents were members of the Association of Marxist historians in the late 1940s. Their own experiences of the PRL lead them to adopt more nuanced interpretations of the communist period. On the other hand, Wojciech Roszkowski and Tomasz Strzembosz were not members of the PZPR and took an active part in the anticommunist opposition.

Paradoxically, the return to power of former communists following the SLD's electoral victories in 1993, 1995, 2000 and 2001 did not lead to strong attempts to "rehabilitate" the former regime. As was already mentioned concerning Czubinski, pro-PZPR interpretations were quickly disqualified after 1989. Attempts to defend Communist Party decisions came from SLD politicians rather than from academic historians. Indeed, the defence of the PRL legacy was and still partly is a tool of legitimization for the SLD, as it is still associated with

²¹ He himself holds a degree in both sociology and history (PhD in history). In addition, his father (Witold Kula) was a historian and his mother (Nina Assorodobraj) a sociologist.

²² Sandrine Kott, "Pour une histoire sociale du pouvoir en Europe communiste", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 2, n° 49, 2002, p. 5-23. Sandrine Kott, Marcin Kula, Thomas Lindenberg, eds., *Socjalizm w zyciu powszednim*, Trio, 2006.

the former regime. Hence the publication in 2000 of a book edited by Mieczysław F. Rakowski, a former editor of the then Communist weekly *Polityka*, Prime Minister and last First Secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR. Among the authors are two former First Secretaries of the PZPR, seven former members of its Politburo and four ministers, i.e. members of the highest PRL establishment, and not researchers²³.

Attempts to produce a narrative common to both former communists and dissidents were very rare and met with strong criticism from both sides. It again came from the journalistic and political fields rather than from the world of academics. Adam Michnik, a graduate in history and an intellectual involved in the Solidarity movement, who since 1989 was the editor of the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, founded that same year, is the key figure in this respect. Michnik tried to build such a common narrative by conducting several interviews with former PRL statesmen, such as Wojciech Jaruzelski (Prime Minister from 1981 to 1985 and head of state from 1985 to 1990) and Czesław Kiszczak (Minister of Internal Affairs, 1981-1990). This attempt was a failure due to these men's role in the passing of martial law in December 1981, which remains controversial to this day.

Kersten, Roszkowski, Paczkowski and so on undoubtedly belong to the “pioneer” generation of academic historians researching the Polish communist past. They paved the way for future research on the PRL as early as the late 1980s. Research on that period has been accelerating during the 2000s, when the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) was founded and the archives of the Communist Security Apparatus were opened.

The Institute of National Remembrance

The Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*, IPN) was created in 1998. It is in charge of preserving the archives of the former Communist security apparatus (mainly the political police) but its activities encapsulate research and education, prosecution of the Communist and Nazi crimes committed “against the Polish nation” and lustration. Its creation was clearly motivated by the political will of the post-Solidarity right-wing parties to condemn the “Totalitarian regimes” and to criminalize the Polish People’s Republic²⁴. The preamble of the Act on the IPN states that:

“Bearing in mind:

- the remembrance of the enormity of the number of victims, the losses and damages suffered by the Polish people during World War II and after it ended,
- the patriotic tradition of the struggle of the Polish people against the occupiers, the Nazism and communism,
- the actions of the citizens for the sake of the independence of the Polish State and in defence of freedom and human dignity,
- the obligation to prosecute the crimes against peace and humanity and war crimes,
- as well as the obligation of our state to compensate all the aggrieved by a state which violated human rights, as an expression of our belief that no unlawful action by the state against the citizens can be guarded as classified or left to oblivion – the following shall apply:²⁵”

The IPN employs around 200 historians (as many as the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences). It publishes around 200 publications each year, including vulgarization periodicals and scientific journals²⁶.

²³ See Friszke, “Spor o PRL”, *art. cit.*

²⁴ About the history of the IPN see Dariusz Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: a ministry of memory?”, in Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman, eds., *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, CEU Press, 2005, p. 45-58; for a comparison with other post-communist countries see Georges Mink, “Les usages des institutes de la mémoire nationale dans les recompositions partisans (1989-2008)”, in Georges Mink and Pascal Bonnard, eds., *Le passé au présent*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2010, p. 171-184.

²⁵ See the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance: <http://ipn.gov.pl/en/about-the-institute/documents/institute-documents/the-act-on-the-institute-of-national-remembrance>

²⁶ About specificities of historical research at the IPN and its place in contemporary Polish historiography see Valentin Behr, “Historians militants ou historiens de bureau? Les producteurs du récit historique officiel à l’Institut de la mémoire nationale”, *Revue d’études comparatives est-ouest*, vol. 42, n° 4, p. 5-35.

/2/ “Male” history versus “female” history? Two ways of writing the history of Communism

In Poland, the 2000s have been a decade which has shown a growing interest in the past²⁷. Important historical controversies took place in the public debate (about martial law, the Round Table Agreements and Lech Walesa's past as a secret informant of the political police) and major commemorations (the 60th anniversary of the end of the war in 2005, the 20th anniversary of the Gdansk agreements in 2000) raised the question of the place of the Polish past in Europe's collective memory²⁸. Finally, the past became a tool of public policy at the initiative of the PiS government. These changes have not been without consequences for scientific research. The IPN is an essential tool of Polish historical policy. Within a decade, it has become the major publishing house for contemporary history. It employs mainly young historians who could not find a place in an impoverished public sector of higher education and research. It has also increased research funding and publishing resources. Nonetheless, the state funding allocated to historical research via the IPN above all benefits work emphasizing Polish martyrology. Hence, monographs published by the IPN are focused on the archives of the security apparatus, describing the darkest sides of the former regime.

Yet, there is another paradigm in the Polish historiography of the PRL represented by social history. This research trend is associated with the name of Marcin Kula, professor of contemporary history at the University of Warsaw, who, at the beginning of the 2000s, created the series “W krainie PRL” (“in PRL-land”) published by Trio Editions. Around 60 books were published before 2011, when the series stopped as the published books were not profitable. The comparison between the two series (IPN and Trio) is relevant as they were created more or less at the same time and represent two very different types of interpretation of the Polish communist past. Nevertheless, they represent two major series for PRL history, often quoted by academic historians. They summarize quite well the opposition between two ways of interpreting the PRL in contemporary Polish historiography. The IPN represents a kind of institutional history, enjoying state support and reflecting the dominant paths of contemporary historiography. On the other hand, the Trio series hosts more marginal books and represents a minor (though still recognized for its scientific quality) orientation in historiography. Its co-founders are Marcin Kula, Andrzej Paczkowski, Tomasz Szarota, Pawel Machcewicz and Marcin Zaremba (Machcewicz and Zaremba being Kula's former PhD students). Trio is generally identified as an alternative to the dominant narrative of the PRL, especially to the IPN narrative. Marcin Zaremba speaks about “male” history and “female” history. In his words, “male” history is political history, focused on communist repression and opposition of Polish society to the regime – in other words, the history of the PRL as seen through the totalitarian paradigm. Whereas “female” history is interested in social phenomena²⁹. This last approach is undoubtedly assumed by Kula and his “school” of social history, against the defenders of the totalitarian paradigm. The cleavage between two ways of interpreting the communist past is obvious when comparing the two editorial series. But it is also a social cleavage in terms of positions within the field of history.

²⁷ Pawel Machcewicz, *Spory o historie 2000-2011*, Cracow, Znak, 2012..

²⁸ Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer, eds., *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe*, op. cit.

²⁹ *Rzeczpospolita*, “Czym innym jest pamiec, czym innym historia”, 26 April 2008..

Two kinds of history

I conducted a statistical study on a sample of 161 monographs published by the IPN (107) and the Trio series (54). This sample comprises almost all monographs dedicated to the communist past published in the two series (until 2011 for Trio, until 2012 for the IPN). Collective publications have been excluded in order to facilitate the prosopography of authors presented in the next part.

Researched themes in IPN books reflect the institute's priorities as defined in the research projects of the Public Education Office. The couple “oppression”/“resistance” is omnipresent. The different social and political crises of the regime, the so-called “Polish months” (June and October 1956, March 1968, December 1970, as well as the Gdansk agreements of August 1980 and the martial law of December 1981) are among the main themes researched at the IPN, which took an active part in the commemoration of these events. Armed resistance by former AK groups opposing the sovietization process during the late 1940s is also a major theme of IPN publications. Works on economic or social aspects of the PRL's history are quite rare. This is not only due to the institute's priorities in terms of research. As the IPN does not only publish research works from its own employees but also works from outsiders³⁰, it can be considered as the result of its editorial policy.

Trio's books, on the contrary, mainly focus on daily life (factories, workers, leisure, and fashion), culture, and even historiography. Yet, this does not mean that social history neglects political themes. Trio also published works on the PZPR, political elites and political youth organizations. The two series are thus clearly distinguished: communist oppression and armed resistance against communism are not treated in Trio's books; daily life is rarely researched at the IPN. This reflects diverging views about the communist past. According to Marcin Zaremba, “It was not as if Poles lived from one protest to another – that is simply not true. The books published in Trio show that between these “Polish months”, [...] there was a sort of life: cultural, social, professional. People were buying flats, reading books, and we should also write about that”³¹.

What's more, focusing on the social movements which took place under communist rule means politicizing behaviours which were not necessarily directed against the regime³². Drawing a straight line from 1956 to 1989, as if all protests were part of a continuum of resistance against the regime leading to its final collapse, as is often the presentation in IPN publications, is part of a reconstruction after the fact.

³⁰ For example, it offers many awards to young historians and allows them to publish their masters thesis or PhD dissertation.

³¹ *Rzeczpospolita*, “Czym innym jest pamiec, czym innym historia”, 26 April 2008.

³² Michel Christian and Emmanuel Droit, “Ecrire l’histoire du communisme”, *art. cit.*

Researched themes

Themes	IPN monographs	Trio monographs	Total
Crisis	11 (10%)	0	11 (7%)
Political opposition to Communism	14 (13%)	2 (4%)	16 (10%)
Communist oppression	29 (27%)	0	29 (18%)
Armed resistance against Communism	10 (9%)	0	10 (6%)
Political themes	9 (8%)	15 (28%)	24 (15%)
Economic themes	6 (6%)	3 (6%)	9 (6%)
Church	9 (8%)	3 (6%)	12 (7%)
Daily life	1 (1%)	15 (28%)	16 (10%)
Culture/media	6 (6%)	8 (15%)	14 (9%)
National minorities	9 (8%)	2 (4%)	11 (7%)
Historiography	0	3 (6%)	3 (2%)
Foreign countries ³³	0	3 (6%)	3 (2%)
Polish emigration	3 (3%)	0	3 (2%)
Total	107	54	161

Similarly, the cleavage between IPN and Trio is also reflected in the periods researched. Until today, Polish historiography has been more interested in the first (1944-1956) and last (1980s) decades of the PRL. These periods are also the most compatible with the totalitarian paradigm, as historians agree to qualify the “Stalinist” period as the most authoritarian one, and as the 1980s symbolize the decade of Solidarity confronting the communist power. Trio books seem to be exploring new moments of the PRL, as nine of them research the 1960s or 1970s, when Wladyslaw Gomulka and then Edward Gierek were First Secretaries of the PZPR. These decades are considered relatively more peaceful as they were periods of economic growth and improvement in the standard of living³⁴. Furthermore, half of Trio books explore one aspect of social life and its evolution throughout the whole period, whereas half of the IPN’s books deal with the so called “Stalinist” period.

Researched periods

Periods	IPN monographs	Trio monographs	Total
1944-1956	53 (50%)	12 (22%)	65 (40%)
Gomulka	3 (3%)	5 (9%)	8 (5%)
Gierek	0	4 (7%)	4 (2%)
1980s	17 (16%)	5 (9%)	22 (14%)
PRL	23 (21%)	27 (50%)	50 (31%)
crisis	11 (10%)	1 (2%)	12 (7%)
Total	107	54	161

³³ The IPN published several books dedicated to foreign countries, but I found no monograph about Communism in a foreign country.

³⁴ About the years 1956-1976 in the Polish historiography see the discussion in *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc*, n° 2 (10), 2006.

Paradoxically, the opening of Party and police archives has not been followed by significantly new interpretations of the Communist past. The Trio books are rather the exception as the dominant narrative remains quite close to the totalitarian paradigm. A possible explanation for this is the focus on state and legal institutions (the army, the police, and justice) rather than on the social functioning of power and domination (until today there were paradoxically very few works dedicated to the PZPR³⁵)³⁶. As John Connelly wrote, “Indeed the interesting thing about the newly available archives, even those of the top-secret police, is how little they have changed basic narratives we possess about the post-war period”³⁷. In fact, the role of the IPN as it was defined by state authorities is rather to gather material about the communist past and to popularize its history. In a way, it is supposed to reinforce national memory. Hence, scientific research is only one of its duties. However, due to the lack of state funding for historical research, competing narratives can hardly survive, as the cancelling of the Trio series shows.

Two kinds of historians

Diverging interpretations of the past can not only be explained by diverging political or scientific opinions vis-à-vis the evaluation of the communist past. Writing about cultural and intellectual fields, Pierre Bourdieu has shown that divergent positioning (“prises de positions”) is determined by different positions (“positions”) within the field³⁸. Indeed, the prosopography of authors published in the two aforementioned series shows clear differences between the two groups.

Looking at the university degree (as an indicator of the level of advancement in a scientific career) of the authors at the moment when they publish their monograph shows that both the IPN and Trio have promoted relatively young authors. 71% of IPN authors have a doctorate, almost 19% had not yet defended a PhD when they were published. Beginners are even more frequent among Trio's authors as more than 40% have only a masters degree (54% hold a doctorate). More advanced scholars (with the title of habilitation or professor) are rare, especially among Trio's authors.

University degree held by authors at the moment of publication

Degree	IPN authors	Trio authors	Total
Master	20 (19%)	22 (41%)	42 (26%)
Doctor	76 (71%)	29 (54%)	105 (65%)
Habilitation	5 (5%)	1 (2%)	6 (4%)
Professor	6 (6%)	2 (4%)	8 (5%)

³⁵ Recently, the IPN published jointly with the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a collective book dedicated to the PZPR: Dariusz Stola and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *PZPR jako machina władzy*, Warsaw, ISP PAN and IPN, 2012. Interestingly the editors of the volume are two former PhD students of Professor Marcin Kula. Among the contributors the team of ISP PAN is well represented (Stola, Friszke, Paczkowski, Oseka) and there are very few historians from the IPN.

³⁶ For a critical analysis of IPN publications see Andrzej Czyzewski (et al.), eds., *Bez taryfy ulgowej. Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny IPN 2000-2010*, Lodz, IPN, 2012.

³⁷ John Connelly, “*Historikerstreit* in Post-Socialist Poland and Czech Republic”, in Michael Minkenberg and Timm Beichtelt, eds., *Cultural Legacies in Post-Socialist Europe: The Role of the Various Pasts in the Current Transformation Process*, Frankfurter Institut für Transformationsstudien, 2003, p. 48-53.

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Paris, Minuit, 1984; and *Les règles de l'art*, Paris Seuil, 1992.

Total	107	54	161
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Monographs origins

Type of work	IPN monographs	Trio monographs	Total
Master thesis	7 (7%)	22 (41%)	29 (18%)
PhD dissertation	48 (45%)	26 (48%)	74 (46%)
Habilitation dissertation	14 (13%)	2 (4%)	16 (10%)
Other	38 (36%)	4 (7%)	42 (26%)
Total	107	54	161

This reflects the fact that monographs mainly originate from Master theses, PhDs or, more rarely, habilitation dissertations. Trio publishes almost only PhD dissertations (48%) and Masters theses (41%). The IPN also publishes many PhD dissertations (45%) but few Masters theses³⁹. Moreover, the IPN publishes a relatively important number of monographs which do not originate from academic dissertations but from the results of IPN's own research projects. Hence the overrepresentation of IPN themes such as communist oppression and resistance against Communism.

Finally, the cleavage between the two series is above all of an institutional nature. IPN authors are principally employed at the IPN (more than two thirds) and rarely in an academic institution (university or Academy of Sciences). On the contrary, 56% of Trio's authors are employed in academic institutions (mainly at universities). They are absent from the IPN and 38% do not hold any position as a professional historian (neither in the IPN or in an academic institution). This is the main difference between the two series. It reveals the weak position of social history in the Polish field of history. Trio's authors are mainly young historians originating in the big Warsaw academic institutions (40% graduated from the University of Warsaw or the Academy of Sciences) who manage to publish their masters thesis with the support of their university supervisors, but fail to obtain an academic position or even to defend a PhD, due to the lack of public funding. Thus, they do not work as professional historians but rather in the fields of media or public administration. The IPN's authors, on the other hand, originate from regional universities (Cracow, Poznan, Wroclaw ...) and have been hired at the IPN or in one of its local branches. Their job at the IPN provides them with quite good material conditions to write their PhD dissertation. In addition, this position permits them to take part in many research projects, conferences and collective publications, and thus to be quickly recognized as professional historians.

As a result, the dominant narrative of the communist period is challenged only on the margin. If obtaining an academic position is hard for everybody, the IPN offers an alternative. It allows a great number of contemporary history specialists to work as professional historians without being recruited in an academic institution. Under such conditions, the development of social history rests partly on students who due to their situation as outsiders can explore new research themes. Until recently, Trio offered them the possibility to publish their works. The cancellation of the series does not mean the end of the social history of Communism yet. First of all, there exist other historical series, such as University or Academy of Sciences presses. But also, the IPN has started to diversify its editorial offerings in recent years, following the election of new management.

³⁹ As the origin of many IPN monographs could not be determined they were counted in the “other” category, hence the small number of masters theses among IPN publications in the table.

Authors' professional positions

Place of work	IPN authors	Trio authors	Total
IPN	53 (60%)	2 (4%)	55 (40%)
IPN + academic position	16 (18%)	1 (2%)	17 (13%)
University	6 (7%)	18 (38%)	24 (18%)
Polish Academy of Sciences	1 (1%)	8 (17%)	9 (7%)
No academic or IPN position	13 (15%)	19 (38%)	32 (23%)
Total	89	48	137

The state of the Polish historiography of Communism reflects the structure of the field of history. The dominant narrative, still marked by the “totalitarian” opposition between “state” and “society”, seems to have been reinforced with the creation of the IPN. The social history of the PRL has developed with a new generation of historians in the 2000s. Yet, alternative narratives are hardly audible in the public debate, where speaking in favour of new comprehensive methodological approaches is sometimes interpreted as an attempt to defend the PRL regime⁴⁰. Indeed, the struggle for interpretation of the communist past is not only about science and history. It is also about politics. Writing the history of the PRL is also a means to take part in current political debates, as the frequent interventions of contemporary historians in the press (*publicystyka*) show. A study of the interpretations of the communist past provided in the Polish press (with the help of professional historians) could complete the general overview of the academic history presented in this paper.

⁴⁰ See for instance the recent controversy between Marcin Kula and the journalist Bronislaw Wildstein: <http://histmag.org/Wildstein-trafia-Kula-w-plot-8280>.