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Patterns of the Historiography of the Polish People's Republic before and after 1989

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Abstract:

Memory politics in contemporary Poland has often been described as a limitation to historians' freedom of research. Against this backdrop, this article explores how historians of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) have been contributing to memory politics in the context of the democratic transition. It argues that the dissidence of the 1980s has paved the way to the post-1989 historiographical renewal, by favoring the development of an anti-communist historiography that ultimately facilitated the advent of the historical policy (*polityka historyczna*) of the 2000s. After 1989, the Polish historiography of the PRL was extensively reshaped on the basis of the dissident historiography of the 1980s. The main protagonists of the 1990s were largely drawn from the ranks of dissent, and many of them saw their scholarship as an extension of their past anti-communist engagement. Additionally, political changes turned the legacy of the old regime into a central issue of post-communist politics. History was called upon as a policy tool at the service of the democratic transition, whether it involved criminalizing the communist regime or maintaining the collective memory of the dictatorship.

This conception of history resulted in the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) at the end of the 1990s, but also in the affirmation of a historical policy justified by the need to redress the wrongs of the memory politics conducted in communist Poland. Contemporary history in the post-1989 years was thus far from free of politicization, even if it took different forms.

On 10 December 2016, a meeting of Polish historians – mainly specialists of the twentieth century – was held at the University of Warsaw.¹ Its purpose was to discuss issues related to the government's historical policy (*polityka historyczna*), such as the removal of the direction of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, or changes in the Institute of National Remembrance's (IPN) staff. The discussions that took place on that day reflect the deep divisions among the *milieu* (*środowisko*) regarding the memory politics of the Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) government since 2015.² Some perceive this policy as a political instrumentalization of the past, reminiscent of the official history of the Polish People's Republic (PRL, 1944-1989). Others, however, see it as just a correction of post-communist memory politics, on the grounds that the latter was too soft on the old regime's legacy. Heated debates about the adoption of the infamous "Holocaust law" in 2018,³ as well as the univocal and strongly anti-communist narrative of the PRL,⁴ have been widely commented upon.

Divisions among the *milieu* of Polish historians and the question of the autonomy of research *vis-à-vis* the political power are of course nothing new and certainly not uniquely Polish issues.⁵ In this article, I argue that cleavages about the writing of the PRL's history already emerged before 1989 and strengthened in the wake of the democratic transition. Also, Polish historians have not only been victims of the political uses of the past: many of them took an active part in

debates about how to address the communist past, hence contributing to memory politics. I argue that the development of a historiography marked by an anti-communist tone paved the way for the creation of the IPN and the conservative historical policy of the 2000s. By conservative, I mean the political camp associated with PiS, which ruled Poland between 2005 and 2007, and has again since 2015. This is not to say that the left and liberal camps did not partake in any form of memory politics. While in power, the liberal Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) undertook the creation of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, with the aim of presenting Polish history in a comparative perspective.⁶ In this paper, I focus on the divisions among the field of history rather than on the cleavages in the political field, even though the former might be to some extent shaped by the latter.

Indeed, in many respects, the Polish debates about the past in the post-communist period seem to be a continuation, under new forms, of political struggles that began before 1989. The political scene is no longer characterized by an opposition between the former communists and the former dissidents as was the case in the post-1989 years, but since 2005, between the supporters and the opponents of the Round Table Agreements and of a political transition organized with the consent of the ruling communist power.⁷ The fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, and later in the Soviet Union, marked a political caesura that was not without incidence on the profession of historian. Writing about the communist period now meant writing about a bygone era with clearly defined chronological limits, one that became a legitimate field of research. Moreover, the transition from one political regime to another resulted in a situation of uncertainty⁸ that offered opportunities to redefine the scope of the discipline, its methods, objects of study and interpretations.

In the 1990s, contemporary history was in fact largely reconstructed on the basis of the dissident historiography of the 1980s. Hence, the confrontation between official history – also called communist or Marxist, even though the official historiography of the 1970s and 1980s had little to do with Marxism – on the one hand, and dissident history on the other, did not completely disappear after 1989. The main protagonists of the 1990s were largely drawn from the ranks of the dissidents, and many of them saw their activity as historians as an extension of their past anti-communist commitment. Additionally, the change of political regime turned the legacy of the old regime into a central issue of post-communist politics. History was mobilized as a policy tool at the service of the democratic transition, whether it involved criminalizing the communist regime or maintaining the collective memory of the dictatorship. This conception of history as a policy tool resulted in the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) on 18 December 1998, but also in the affirmation of a historical policy justified by the need to redress the wrongs of the memory politics conducted by communist Poland.⁹ Contemporary history in the post-1989 era was thus far from devoid of political pressure, even if that pressure took different forms.

This article is hence dedicated to the historiographical developments of the 1980s and 1990s, which predated the establishment of the IPN and the advent of historical policy. It focuses on the historiography of communism in Poland and its autonomy (or lack thereof) from political constraints. It intends to contribute to a wider research question on the relationship between academia and politics, drawing on the analytical framework proposed by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and developed in the sociology of knowledge.¹⁰ Such an analytical framework allows us to go beyond the somewhat simplistic assumption that "politics affect historiography", by inquiring about how historians have been dealing concretely with the (over)politicization of their work, in the context of an authoritarian regime and, later, in the

wake of a regime change. In both contexts, their expertise was solicited for political purposes such as the legitimization/delegitimization of the communist rule, of the democratic opposition, or of the post-communist political changes.

Examining the interactions between the political field and the field of history, this article is divided into six sections. The first recalls the reconfigurations of contemporary history in the aftermath of the Second World War. The next three sections discuss the anti-communist dissidence of the 1980s as the core of the historiographical renewal, in the sense that it raised new questions about the political autonomy of historical scholarship. This is examined through the juxtaposition of two contrasting examples of historians writing about the PRL in the 1980s: Krystyna Kersten and Wojciech Roszkowski. The final two sections analyze how the history of the communist period was reconfigured after 1989 on the basis of dissident historiography and contributed to the criminalization of the communist past, which was at the same time demanded in the political field.

The reconfigurations of contemporary history after 1945

In Communist Poland, the history of the Second World War and of the PRL has been characterized by the major role played by semi-academic research institutes in charge of the production of an effectively official history. These institutes were attached to the state institutions or to the Communist Party already since 1945: the Party's Department of History, the Institute of Military History (Ministry of Defense), and the Commission for the Prosecution of German Crimes in Poland (Ministry of Justice). Researchers employed by these institutions were mainly "militant historians", i.e. professional activists or military personnel who had been trained by Party schools and the Party's propaganda department. Although they pursued careers

as historians after the war, they rarely held academic qualifications or positions in academic teaching and research.¹¹ Hence, these research institutes formed the heteronomous pole of historical production.

Examples of militant historians

Celina Bobińska (1913-1997) was the daughter of communist activists who had settled in the Soviet Union in 1918. She studied in Moscow, where she later worked as a teacher (1937-1940). In 1945 she obtained a PhD in history and returned to Poland. She taught at the Central School of the Polish Workers' Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza*, PPR), before taking over the chair of Polish History at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, where she was appointed professor in 1954.

Leon Grosfeld (1911-1987) joined the Communist Party of Poland (*Komunistyczna Partia Polski*, KPP) in 1929. He studied law at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, then at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów, where he graduated in 1934. In the Soviet Union from 1939 onwards, he served in the Polish army reconstituted in the USSR and became a political officer. Back in Poland after the war, he was a military intelligence officer (1946-1950) and a member of the PPR, then of the Polish United Workers' Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, PZPR). In 1950, he was appointed head of the Chair of Polish History at the Institute for the Training of Research Staff (*Instytut Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych*) of the Party, before taking over the direction of this institute in 1952. He obtained a PhD in 1951 at the Faculty of Law of the University of Warsaw and was appointed professor in 1954. From 1953 to 1981 he was a researcher at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences, where he served twice as a deputy director (1953-1957 and 1961-1968).

At the Otwock conference (December 1950-January 1951), Polish historians officially adopted Marxism-Leninism as their “sole scientific methodology”. Still, they managed to reach a compromise of sorts with the communist authorities: the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences (IH PAN) was led by medieval historians trained before 1939, like the institute’s first director, Tadeusz Manteuffel.¹² A man of noble background and a reserve officer in the pre-war Polish Army, who had lost his hand during the Polish-Bolshevik war, Manteuffel enjoyed a real symbolic authority in the field of history after 1945. He never belonged to the PZPR, which was not successful in attracting academic historians: in 1950, only seven history professors (out of fifty-four) were members of the Party.¹³ Hence, the Sovietization of Polish academia left room for a genuine – albeit restricted by censorship – autonomy in the field of history.¹⁴ This was especially true when research dealt with earlier periods, like medieval or modern history. In contemporary history however, the political constraint translated into the erection of an ideological canon glorifying the PZPR and the USSR for their decisive role in the “anti-fascist fight”, while the Sovietization of Poland was presented as a return to independence and democracy. This strong politicization of contemporary history partly explains the lack of interest in this period on the part of academic historians but it was not the only reason: contemporary history, perceived as having little academic legitimacy due to insecure access to archival sources, was of little interest to historians on both sides of the Iron Curtain in the wake of the Second World War.¹⁵ Medieval and modern history were privileged also due to the strong influence of the *École des Annales* in Europe. Prominent Polish scholars of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Witold Kula, Aleksander Gieysztor, and Marian Małowist, maintained close contacts with their French colleagues even across the Iron Curtain.¹⁶

In 1956, destalinization was a turning point that led to a relative autonomization of the social sciences in general and of history in particular. Academic historians’ criticisms of the

overpoliticization of their discipline, especially in contemporary history, led to the creation of new historical institutes within the IH PAN. In 1961, the first research team on the history of the PRL was established, under the name of Commission for the History of People's Poland, later Department of Research on the History of People's Poland (*Zakład Badań nad Historią Polski Ludowej*). Its director, Franciszek Ryszka, was a historian of Nazi Germany. The department's staff was limited to only six researchers, working mainly on economic or social history issues such as employment or immigration. These research topics were least likely to be censored and the only ones about in which there was an academic consensus on the fact that the available sources (archives, testimonies) were sufficient. Among the members of that research team were Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota, who were to become prominent historians of the Polish People's Republic, though Szarota's work dealt mainly with the Second World War.

New journals devoted to contemporary history were created and published by the IH PAN between the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁷ Research in contemporary history was thus given editorial outlets with academic ambitions, where previously semi-academic institutions had essentially replaced scholarly journals. The Second World War and the communist period nonetheless appear as the weakest links of twentieth century Polish historiography between the end of the 1950s and the end of the 1970s, with an editorial production (in terms of volumes and journals) that is much scarcer than that of earlier historical periods.

Semi-academic research institutes remained key actors through the Party's History Department, the Party's Higher School of Social Sciences and the Institute of Military History. Contemporary history was characterized by the great diversity of its authors. Alongside historians, like Kersten and Szarota, there were academics from other disciplines, but also

amateur historians such as witnesses and veterans. In this respect, research in contemporary history appears to have been less professionalized and more politicized than research on previous periods for which the political stakes were lower and the witnesses had long disappeared.

Besides, the history of Polish communism was partly written by historians who were at the same time Party apparatchiks, hence actors and witnesses of that history. An example is Henryk Jabłoński (1909-2003), who obtained his PhD at the University of Warsaw in 1934. A member of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), he joined the PZPR after the war and was a member of its Central Committee (1948-1981). A professor at the University of Warsaw (1950), he held many academic responsibilities within the Academy of Sciences and was minister in charge of Higher Education and Research between 1965 and 1972.

Hence, the PZPR was itself one of the main producers and a careful supervisor of the history of the PRL. It is therefore no surprise that until the late 1970s, the historiography was marred by many “blank spots” (*białe plamy*), corresponding to issues that could not be raised due to censorship: the Soviet invasion of September 1939; the Katyn massacre of 1940 and, of course, the Soviet terror from 1944 onwards. Historians thus practiced a form of self-censorship, actively avoiding taboo topics if not willing to produce an outright politically commissioned history.¹⁸ This situation began to change only at the end of the 1970s, when the development of dissident organizations made it possible to publish and circulate uncensored books and periodicals, via underground networks (*drugi obieg wydawniczy*). Émigré publications also played a role in the unveiling of the “blank spots”, though very few émigré historians actually researched the PRL, due to a lack of sources. However, journals such as *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Historical Papers), published by the Paris-based *Kultura* magazine, provided another editorial

outlet for Polish dissident historians. Thus, the Party and state's monopoly on publishing was challenged and a dissident historiography could emerge.

Dissent as the core of historiographical renewal

In August 1980, the recognition of Solidarity as the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc was preceded by the protests of dissident intellectuals who opposed the Communist Party's dictatorship. In 1976, the Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR), which brought together academics, artists and writers was founded in Warsaw. Krystyna Kersten was, next to other historians such as Bronisław Geremek and Jerzy Holzer, an example of intellectuals who evolved from communist stances in the post-war period to dissent in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Geremek, Kersten returned her PZPR card in 1968, as a gesture of protest against the Soviet intervention in Prague. In 1975 she was, alongside Geremek and five other intellectuals, among the signatories of an open letter addressed to the then First Secretary of the PZPR, Edward Gierek, faulting him for not fulfilling the promises he had made after the workers' strikes of December 1970.

Maria Turlejska, a historian from the generation before Kersten, is an example of an even more radical ideological turn. Born in 1918, she was a PPR then PZPR activist who worked at the Party's Propaganda Department after the war, before joining the Party's History Department, of which she was the first director between 1947 and 1948. After obtaining her PhD in 1954, she moved to the University of Warsaw in 1960, where she became a professor in 1967. A staunch communist and a close friend of the former First Secretary Władysław Gomułka, she began adopting a more critical stance in the early 1970s. In 1972, her book *Record of the First Decade*,¹⁹ which covers the period 1945-1954, was removed from bookstore shelves and

destroyed, for its treatment of Polish-Soviet relations was considered “biased” by the censors. She was later assigned to the State Archives Department, a promotion that looked like a relegation to the margins of the academic world. Nevertheless, thanks to Gomułka, she had access to secret documents that allowed her to clandestinely publish a book on the military tribunals that convicted political opponents after the war.²⁰

The new political configuration emerging from the dissidence of intellectuals and of Solidarity changed the conditions for scholarship on contemporary history. The works of historians, hitherto largely limited by censorship, found new channels of expression particularly in the underground networks. Besides, the relative softening of the dictatorship permitted access to previously unreachable sources, such as Western or émigré publications, in university libraries.²¹

Dissent thus enabled the development of an alternative historiography. The years 1976-1989 marked a change in the political pressure exerted on the work of historians. While the rise of the opposition to the regime provided authors with uncensored editorial outlets, the demand for “true” history translated into a demand for history as a tool for political struggle. Although it was not of the same nature and did not involve the same means as the straightjacket of the official ideology, the demand for “true history” has also constituted a heteronomous constraint on the development of contemporary history. Where the democratic opposition was concerned, knowledge about the past was to serve as a way of delegitimizing the communist regime, showing how it had been established by force and with the support of a foreign power after the Second World War. Similarly, the opposition to the communist regime was described in the frame of a historical continuum of national struggle for independence. Accused of participating in the falsification of national history or incited to contribute to dissent, historians were

confronted with the production of an alternative history and were called upon to take sides. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by dissent to rejuvenate contemporary history was for them a means both to claim the necessity of autonomous knowledge and to get politically engaged, by adhering even implicitly to the dissident agenda. For dissident intellectuals, the point was also to reclaim an ideal, that of the intelligentsia as a social group who aspired to play a leading role in politics.²²

In the 1980s, the political and academic project to perk up the historiography of the contemporary period resulted in the clandestine publication of several works devoted to the history of the twentieth century by researchers who were simultaneously activists and supporters of the Solidarity movement. Krystyna Kersten described the new opportunities offered by these underground publications as follows: “I began publishing after 1956. My trouble with censorship began in the 1970s and ended in the 1980s, when I migrated to the second, uncensored circuit.”²³

While this process paved the way for the post-1989 historiographical renewal, the conditions under which it took place were not neutral in terms of defining the profession of historian. To shed light on the “blank spots” was necessarily to adopt a posture of unveiling the hidden. So how did scholars close to Solidarity deal with this constraint? The juxtaposition of two volumes published during the period 1980-1989 will provide some answers.

Trajectories of dissident historians: Krystyna Kersten and Wojciech Roszkowski

Both published by *Krag* (the Circle), an underground publishing house founded by members of the KOR, the works of Krystyna Kersten and Wojciech Roszkowski have left a deep mark on

the historiography of the PRL and have been republished on numerous occasions. Krystyna Kersten's volume *The Birth of the Power System* is cited to this day.²⁴ Kersten herself has been considered as one of the leading figures of scholarship on the PRL. As for Roszkowski, between 1983 and 1987 he published a history of Poland in four volumes entitled *Contemporary History of Poland (1918-1980)* under the pseudonym Andrzej Albert.²⁵ Its editorial success earned the author a considerable reputation as a popularizer and he also co-authored a series of school textbooks with Anna Radziwiłł, a history teacher involved in the Solidarity movement.

Here I will focus on these two books and authors as they are excellent examples of two different attitudes vis-à-vis the politicization of history in the context of dissent – in a nutshell, one who took advantage of the uncensored editorial outlets to publish a scholarly work intended to uphold high academic standards and exemplify “neutral” history writing (Kersten), versus one who used history to join the political struggle and take sides with the anti-communist- patriotic camp (Roszkowski). Crucially, the opposition between official historiography and dissident historiography should not be reified, as this might result in masking the internal heterogeneity of these two categories. As I will show, there are considerable differences between the two authors’ approaches to the history of the PRL. It is worth emphasizing these differences as the opposition between the scientific posture and the patriotic posture persisted after 1989 and structured the historiographic quarrels of the post-communist period, exacerbated by historical policy. Ultimately, juxtaposing the cases of Kersten and Roszkowski is meant here to show the ways in which dissent constituted a key moment for the redefinition of the autonomy of the field of history vis-à-vis the political field – in other words, for the redefinition of historians’ attitudes vis-à-vis political constraints.

The two books under study are of two different kinds, one being an academic monograph and the other meant for the general public. They are of interest here not only for their lasting success, but also for the remarkable differences between the two authors in terms of generations, professional careers and practices of historical scholarship. Kersten, born in 1931, belongs to the generation that experienced the modernization process that went along with the Sovietization of Poland after 1945 and became attracted to the communist ideology before renouncing it when hopes for reforms evaporated after 1968. On the contrary, Roszkowski was born in 1947 and grew up with a PRL that had already lost most of its appeal to young intellectuals. Hence, he never embraced the communist ideology. Although both were university historians and took sides with the Solidarity movement, they occupied different positions in the field of history, which explain the differences between their narratives.

Kersten was born in 1931 in a family of the Polish intelligentsia, whose views were far removed from nationalism.²⁶ She and her husband, Adam Kersten – himself a historian – were involved in the communist movement. While she was a Party member and researcher at the IH PAN, Kersten’s work was fully in line with the Party ideology. Her first articles, published in the mid-1950s, discussed “The Hostile Aspirations of German Reactionary Historiography²⁷ and described *Past and Present* as “The Progressive Journal of English Historians”.²⁸ Her research work initially focused on the study of post-World War II population displacements in the context of the changing borders of the Polish state. In the 1960s she published a monograph on the Polish Committee for National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, PKWN), the pro-Soviet government established in 1944, in which she endorsed the Party’s official narrative, taking the side of the communists against the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) and the Polish government in exile in London.²⁹ Just like Kersten, most academic historians working on the contemporary period were at that time Party members, but they

significantly differed from the militant historians of the immediate post-war period in that they had studied history and embraced genuine academic careers.

In the mid-1970s, after she had returned her Party card, Kersten was tired of censorship and of the difficulties of accessing Party records. She momentarily considered abandoning her project of writing a political history of post-war Poland and to work on the seventeenth century, a period less subjected to censorship.³⁰ Yet, the 1980s gave a new impetus to her scholarship, as she took full advantage of the publication opportunities offered by the dissidence movement: most of her publications now appeared in *Tygodnik Solidarność* (Solidarity's weekly) or in clandestine journals.

However, she did not hesitate to take positions that ran counter to the dominant ideas within dissent, as her first article in *Tygodnik Solidarność*, devoted to the Kielce pogrom in 1946, shows.³¹ This post-war pogrom had been widely exploited by communist propaganda, which attributed it to the "bandits" of the anti-communist resistance. Kersten was one of the first to nuance both this interpretation and the thesis, widespread in dissent and still defended in nationalist circles today, of a pogrom orchestrated by the communist security services. She emphasized the strength of anti-Semitic feelings within Polish society, a theme addressed only by a handful of authors in the context of dissent.

For Kersten, dissent also coincided with the organization of an "independent seminar" devoted to the origins of the PRL. From the 1970s onwards, she attended underground meetings that brought together scholars interested in contemporary history, such as Andrzej Paczkowski, Maria Turlejska, Anna Radziwiłł and Jerzy Holzer – who authored one of the very first studies on the Solidarity movement³² - as well as prominent figures of dissent like Adam Michnik.

Kersten was thus part of a group of researchers with ties to dissent who shared an early interest in the political history of communist Poland. After 1983, the same group was involved in the activities of the Archives of Solidarity Association (*Archiwum Solidarności*), which aimed to collect and publish documents about the Solidarity movement. Given the context, the line between scholarly work and political involvement was very thin.³³ Nonetheless, thanks to these meetings Kersten was able to benefit from her peers' views on her research work, and her volume was edited before publication.³⁴ Hence, one could argue that in Kersten's case, dissent was a means to regain autonomy from the political power, although in effect this implied siding with the anti-communist agenda. A retreat from the official academic life hence appeared as a way to avoid the overpoliticization of scholarly work.

Wojciech Roszkowski occupied a different position from Kersten in the field of history. Born in Warsaw in 1947, he graduated in international trade at the *Szkoła Główna Planowania i Statystyki* (SGPiS), the main training school for economists and statisticians. In 1978, he received a PhD in economics from SGPiS, where he researched the economic policy of the Polish Second Republic (1918-1939). He was then tenured as professor at SGPiS. The bulk of his academic career thus took place at a university that was rather peripheral to the field of history. In 1990, he joined the Institute of Political Studies of the Academy of Sciences (ISP PAN) as head of the research team on Central and Eastern Europe. His bibliography does not include any monographs on the political history of twentieth century Poland, let alone of communist Poland. He published almost only textbooks and syntheses, rarely drawing on primary sources. In fact, Roszkowski was almost unknown in the small world of contemporary history scholarship until he revealed himself as the author of *Contemporary History of Poland*.³⁵

His political background was also very different from Kersten's: never a member of the PZPR, he participated between 1978 and 1981 in the activities of the *Polish Independence Agreement* (*Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe*, PPN), a group of intellectuals that advocated for complete independence from the USSR. He joined Solidarity in 1980. In the preface to his book, he described himself as a "Christian" and a "Polish patriot".³⁶ After 1989, he publicly supported several political parties and candidates of the conservative right and was a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2009 after being elected with the support of the Law and Justice party. As a MEP, he strongly advocated for including communist crimes in European memory policy.³⁷

The conditions in which Roszkowski wrote his own book were also quite different. *Contemporary history of Poland* did not benefit from any real editing work. The volume was the work of one man from start to finish. In fact, Roszkowski indicated that the book was sent to print without proofreading, both for its initial clandestine editions and for its first reprint (*Polonia Book Fund*). It was not until the 1991 reprint by the *Puls* publishing house that the text went through a basic editing process.³⁸

Dealing with the political constraint in the context of dissent

These biographical differences result in two significantly different history books. Both in *The Birth of the Power System* and in her later writings, Kersten reflected on the profession of historian of the contemporary period and made no secret of her hesitations. The tone of her writing contrasts with that of many other dissident texts of the 1980s, such as Roszkowski's book, which adopted a much more assertive stance in the name of "historical truth" at a time when political pressure on historians was exacerbated. Kersten strove to maintain a form of

ethics of the autonomous scholar, while being aware of the specificity of historical research as she was working on a period of history in which she had herself been involved. Rejecting an interpretative paradigm that would divide the world into “them” (the communists) and “us” (the dissidents), which she believed was becoming dominant within dissent, she refused to replace one “propaganda” with another, striving to find “words and expressions free of ideological and political content, words that reflect reality in the best possible way”.³⁹ In doing so, she argued that it was a duty for historians to go against readers’ expectations by adopting a dispassionate academic writing style. In other words, Kersten remained a strong advocate of the autonomy of the field of history, even though she was well aware that her work contributed to delegitimizing the official history of the PRL.

Roszkowski's *Contemporary History of Poland* was a huge synthesis counting over a thousand pages, divided into four parts. The last two, devoted to the history of the PRL, were the most important and took up more than half of the total (586 pages). This made it one of the very first uncensored publications to address the history of the PRL. In the preface, Roszkowski wrote about the ideological struggle against the communist rule. He denounced censorship and “class interpretations of economic, social and cultural phenomena”.⁴⁰ Like Kersten, he questioned the “meaning of writing history” and although he claimed to be committed to the practice of neutral history, he considered it “practically unattainable”. In fact, his political preferences appear quite clearly in his writing.

The book's main thesis consists in presenting Poland as a victim of “two enemies” in the twentieth century, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Symbolizing the agreement between Poland's hereditary foes, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact is presented as the latest partition of Poland, with Hitler and Stalin symbolizing the continuity of the policy of the German and

Russian imperialist powers. The pages devoted to the Second World War give little space to the Holocaust, which is placed on the same level as the fate of the non-Jewish Polish population:⁴¹ the term “extermination” of the Polish population is used several times, without underlining the specificity of the fate of the Jews. While Roszkowski writes (p. 370) that the Holocaust constitutes a “specific chapter” in the history of the conflict, his discussion of it is limited to three paragraphs. The attitude of the non-Jewish Polish population during the Holocaust is also presented in a favorable light. According to him, “large segments of [Polish] society” adopted a “heroic attitude of assistance to the Jews”, despite the fact that the occupier punished such assistance by death.⁴² The positions of Kersten and Roszkowski on this particular theme diverge significantly.

The section on the Polish communists gives the clearest picture of the author's political preferences. The opinions expressed here are very explicit: if the Party ranks grew rapidly after the war, it was primarily because it skirted typical communist slogans and instead promoted a popular and patriotic program. The Party leadership is described as a group of people “with a mentality formed by the practice of the Soviet system”, with a “cynical relationship to truth, reality and human dignity, motivated by an appetite for power, hatred, and fear, whose diabolical efficiency was based on lies, provocation, and blackmail”.⁴³

But Kersten’s and Roszkowski's books differ in fact more in form than in content. Kersten includes lengthy developments on the Katyń massacre and the Warsaw Uprising, but her writing remains analytical and avoids lyricism, whereas an emphasis on martyrdom and heroism characterizes Roszkowski's narrative. What distinguished the two authors was a posture, while their description and general interpretation of the facts were, after all, quite similar.

Roszkowski invoked the “moral values” that guided his approach as a historian as a method of research, while other methods like Marxism were dismissed as competing value systems. Far from being an isolated case, such a normative conception of history writing can be found in many other underground publications. But Kersten refused to discuss the choices and decisions of the actors in the “drama” whose story she told. Rather, she was interested in their “motivations” and the “conditions under which they made their decisions”.⁴⁴ This stance translated into a willingness to give equal treatment to the different parties who were competing for power at the end of the war: “I am convinced that even among Party members, the dominant conviction was that despite the large number of victims, the ideal of a more just Poland was being pursued.”⁴⁵

Kersten went so far as to compare the crimes of the communists with those committed by the Polish nationalists at the end of the war. This posture of neutrality was made all the more conducive to attracting criticism from all sides by the fact that her own biography – as a communist activist who broke with the Party before joining Solidarity – lent itself to a political reading of her work. After its publication, her volume was accused by the nationalist camp of complacency towards the Polish communists, and by the communist and post-communist left of minimizing the role and achievements of the Party.⁴⁶

These two books, published thanks to the 1980s underground movement, reflect two attitudes towards the political constraint: one consisting in striving to stick to the agenda of an academic and objective history; the other in following a value system based on a conception of history as a tool of political struggle. These two attitudes were still to be found after 1989. This does not mean, however, that either one of these two approaches was more politicized than the other:

claiming to be a neutral and objective scholar is also a political stance. Kersten's biography is a clear demonstration of this, since she has constantly linked historical work and political engagement throughout her life. Rather, the two authors represent two different practices of historical scholarship, two ways of reacting to the political pressure on historians, informed by their previous trajectories and positions within the field. Since 1989, most contemporary history scholarship has oscillated between these two types and the issue of the autonomy of the field of history *vis-à-vis* the political field is far from resolved.

The legacy of dissident history after 1989

The political constraint on the work of contemporary historians did not fade after 1989. On the contrary, it evolved and assumed new forms, such as transitional justice in the context of the democratic transition. Indeed, telling the history of the PRL was perceived as a means to rally the civic community around democratic values. Addressing the authoritarian past was also considered as a democratic imperative and therefore issues such as decommunization and lustration became part of the public debate.⁴⁷ Ultimately, memory politics led to the establishment of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and to historical policy, i.e., to a new form of official history, though this time in a democratic context.

Historians took their share in the post-communist debates and contributed to the – at least symbolic – criminalization of the PRL as an authoritarian regime. Hence, historical scholarship on the PRL contributed to political debates about the legacy of the old regime. One of the main discussions about the PRL in the 1990s was organized by the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* after the electoral success of the post-communist party Democratic Left Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*).⁴⁸ It involved prominent historians such as Jerzy Eisler, Andrzej Friszke,

Krystyna Kersten, Marcin Kula, Andrzej Paczkowski and Wojciech Roszkowski, alongside other intellectuals. The main criticism of the post-communist transformation was voiced by intellectuals rather than by scholars, pointing at the absence of a strong decommunization policy after 1989 as a strategic mistake that favored the return to power of former communists. Under such circumstances, discussions about the PRL remained heavily politicized. Both phenomena, the criminalization of the communist past and the evolution of the historiography, were characterized by partially autonomous but interacting logics. Researching the past also meant taking a political stance, as the dissidents of the 1980s had done.

Notwithstanding the intentions of their authors, scholarly productions became part of political struggles over the legacy of the old regime and its place in national history. Historians sometimes took a direct part in these struggles, to which they contributed as experts, in the name of their legitimacy as scholars. Their scholarly positions were also translated into political positions by the actors of these debates. Writing the history of the PRL inevitably entailed taking part in political debates, especially considering that at the time historiographical battles were partly fought in the mass media – outside the field of history proper.

Nonetheless, the abolition of censorship and the opening of the archives of the old regime fundamentally changed the conditions for historical scholarship. The archives of the Party Central Committee and its various departments were transferred to the National Archives (*Archiwum Akt Nowych* in Warsaw) in 1990, after the Communist Party's self-dissolution. The records produced by the security services of the PRL have been available at the IPN since the early 2000s. The year 1989 thus witnessed an “archival revolution” that considerably expanded the possibilities for scholarship on this period.⁴⁹

However, that revolution was not made primarily for historians, but resulted from claims related to the fall of communist regimes. In Poland, the question of the preservation and availability of archives, at the heart of the debates generated by the IPN establishment,⁵⁰ was closely linked to that of lustration, i.e., the eviction of former communists from positions of power.

The political transition thus elicited interpretation struggles over the characterization of the old regime and of its successor. The new electoral competition involved protagonists who had been involved against each other in the political life of the PRL in the past.

As a result of the social and political demand for a historiographical renewal, in the 1990s contemporary history became more appealing to scholars and to the general public alike. More historians have devoted themselves to the history of the PRL after 1989. They have drawn inspiration from the pioneering historiography elaborated in dissent, as the former official historiography was promptly dismissed for failing to uphold academic standards after 1989.

In 2008, the journal *Polska 1944/45-1989* published the results of a survey conducted among the *milieu* of contemporary historians to identify the main scholars dealing with the history of the People's Republic of Poland.⁵¹ Topping the list were Krystyna Kersten, Andrzej Paczkowski and Andrzej Friszke, i.e., historians who published extensively in underground or émigré publications in the 1980s, sided with dissent and have published landmark monographs and syntheses since then.⁵² Paczkowski, born in 1938, was a close friend of many a dissident and played a minor though genuine role in underground activities.⁵³ The same goes for Friszke, born in 1956, who wrote his doctoral dissertation, defended in 1994, on the “pre-Solidarity” opposition from 1968 to 1980, drawing among other sources on biographical interviews he and Paczkowski conducted in the 1980s.⁵⁴

Then came historians with a similar trajectory like Jerzy Eisler (born in 1952) and Marcin Kula (born in 1943). Prior to 1989, both had researched mainly foreign countries – Vichy France for Eisler and Latin America for Kula – which was a common way for Polish historians to stay out of trouble with censorship. Nonetheless, Eisler published underground texts dealing with Polish contemporary history in the 1980s and Kula was involved in the activities of the Archives of Solidarity Association. In 1993, Eisler devoted his habilitation dissertation to the March 1968 demonstrations, of which he is now a renowned specialist.⁵⁵ Kula left the Polish Academy of Sciences for the University of Warsaw in 1990, where he trained many historians of the PRL, to the point that he is today considered as the founding father of a school of social history of communism.⁵⁶ Dissident engagement has thus been a resource that facilitated access to or progression in academic careers after 1989.

Among the next generation of historians, trained after 1989, the names of Antoni Dudek, Dariusz Jarosz, Paweł Machcewicz, Dariusz Stola and Marcin Zaremba are worth mentioning. Their doctoral dissertation topics reflect the new research possibilities offered to historians after 1989: the peasantry (Jarosz, 1990); the political crisis of 1956 (Machcewicz, 1993); State/Church relations (Dudek, 1994); political emigration (Stola, 1994); the uses of nationalism by the communist authorities (Zaremba, 2000).

Interestingly, virtually no communists or Party historians were cited in the 2008 survey, which reflects the extent to which the former official historiography has fallen out of favor. With the disappearance of the heteronomous pole of historical production, linked to the Party and the state, the dominant role in scholarship on contemporary history came to be played by academic institutes. Warsaw very much remained the main location for historical scholarship on the PRL,

with the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Historical Institute of the University of Warsaw. In the early 1990s, Paczkowski was tasked with creating a research team dedicated to contemporary political history (*Zakład Najnowszej Historii Politycznej*) within the newly created Institute of Political Studies of the Academy of Sciences (ISP PAN). The ISP PAN had been established to replace the former Institute of Socialist Countries, which was known for being a den of communist scholarship. Paczkowski refused to hire academics who had previously worked in that Institute and relied instead on his fellow comrade Andrzej Friszke, as well as on a generation of younger researchers trained after 1989, such as Machcewicz, Stola and Zaremba, almost all of whom were former students of Marcin Kula's.⁵⁷ Paczkowski's team has played a major role in renewing the historiography of the PRL and remains one of the country's leading research institutes to this day.

Jagiellonian University in Krakow is the *alma mater* of several contemporary historians such as Antoni Dudek, Ryszard Terlecki and Andrzej Nowak, who have actively taken part in historiographical debates about the PRL, epitomizing a more conservative – and anti-communist – approach. All of them have been strong advocates of lustration and have extensively published in *Arcana*, one of Poland's main conservative magazines, for which Nowak served as chief editor between 1994 and 2012. They have thus espoused political views that are close to the PiS: Terlecki is currently the head of the party caucus in the lower house of Parliament, while Nowak is a close advisor to the President of the Republic of Poland on matters of historical policy and national identity.

The post-1989 historiography of communism has been characterized by what Rafał Stobiecki calls “the re-actualization of the myth of true history”.⁵⁸ True history is understood in contrast to the past official history. It is an extension of the dissident history of the 1980s. In 1990,

already the conservative magazine *Arka* (the forefather of *Arcana*) invited a dozen historians and intellectuals to share their thoughts on the “end of an era”.⁵⁹ The editors framed it as a confrontation between official history and true history, that is, between “them” and “us”. The historians who contributed shared the idea that their profession involved to a duty to tell the historical truth. Adopting a medical metaphor, Paczkowski’s text described history as a “cure” for a society “infected by totalitarianism”.⁶⁰ This conception of history stems directly from the experience of dissent and from an approach to historical writing as the unveiling of “blank spots”.

The true story approach was well adjusted to the demands and questions of journalists and the general public after 1989: what really happened? Who is guilty? Who is an accomplice? Who fought for independence? A form of social pressure was then exerted on the historians of the PRL, for whom the temptation was great to vindicate what Kersten perceived as a common sense discourse on the “heroism, martyrdom and betrayal of the allies”, a danger she viewed as even greater than the political pressure exerted by those in power.⁶¹

Practically speaking, the true history approach resulted in an emphasis on archival work, as a reaction to the ideologization of the historical narrative in communist Poland.⁶² It was now assumed that sources would speak for themselves, which fed a somewhat naïve belief in the possibility of factual and objective historical knowledge. This positivist approach appears to be still embraced by many Polish historians of communism – arguably the majority. Advocates of a socio-historical approach, such as Marcin Kula, regularly criticize it.⁶³ 1989 also marked a shift back to political history and to the delegitimization of approaches emphasizing interdisciplinarity in the social sciences, now dismissed as remnants of Marxism-

Leninism insofar as economic and social history had been vigorously promoted in post-war Poland.

The predominance of political history was reflected in the popularity of the notion of totalitarianism to refer to the PRL, at least for the so-called Stalinist period, i.e. until 1956.⁶⁴ It became dominant in Polish historiography, as in many other former Soviet bloc countries, precisely at the time when it lost some of its heuristic value in Western historiography.⁶⁵ According to Dariusz Jarosz, another proponent of a social history of communism, the success of the totalitarian paradigm in Polish historiography is a result of the historians' inclinations to respond to the "social demand" for a clear-cut condemnation of the PRL.⁶⁶

The political role of historians

Personal compunction to "tell the historical truth" is akin to a "duty to remember", as if scholarship on the PRL was a means to shape collective memory, in order to vaccinate the Polish society against dictatorship and/or communism. Attempting to address the widest possible audience and to contribute to the public debate, the historian of the PRL helps turn knowledge into a political instrument.

In a synthesis of the history of the PRL published in 1994, Jerzy Eisler claims to have written a short "historical essay" aimed at "demystifying" the historiography of People's Poland.⁶⁷ As a corollary, the author's target audience is not professional historians, but primarily students and teachers. Antoni Dudek, a former member of the IPN's management, argues that he is responding to a "moral imperative" by researching communist Poland. Such stances sometimes

go hand in hand with a sense that nostalgia for the PRL is a disease inherited from the old regime, as if it exhibited the remnants of a genuine *homo sovieticus*:

“The fanatics of Gierek in Poland and Honecker in Germany form an irreformable group, living on selected memories and resistant to any rational argument. Their historical consciousness has been infected by nostalgia for the communist small stabilization⁶⁸ and therefore, they are incurable”.⁶⁹

Here history is conceived as a tool for rebuilding society's collective memory in order to erase the remnants of the old regime. However, the normative condemnation of the PRL easily leads to anti-communist stances. In the context of the post-1989 memory politics, characterized by heated discussions about how to deal with the communist past, historians were prone to publicly defending political views in the name of academic legitimacy.

Beyond their contributions to both historiography and public debates, historians have been able to benefit in many ways from the fall of the communist regime. In the early 1990s, their expertise was required to account for the communist dictatorship. Their work reached a wider and more diverse audience, including at international conferences generously funded by American and German foundations. In line with the imperative of justice and democratization, the type of historical narrative promoted in these instances emphasized the criminal dimension of the communist regime. Historical expertise was in particular required to support the policy tools of transitional justice. From 1991 onwards, Andrzej Paczkowski took part in a parliamentary commission inquiring into the legality of the martial law introduced by General Jaruzelski in 1981, which had led to the banning of Solidarity. That commission's work was ultimately suspended when the post-communist party won the 1993 parliamentary election. He

was also consulted when the law creating the IPN was drafted in the late 1990s. Paczkowski and Friszke were in fact elected by members of parliament on the newly created IPN board. Paczkowski is the only member to have sat on this board continuously from 1999 to 2016.

Combining historical research and education functions with lustration and prosecution of past crimes, the IPN has been at the center of many controversies since its creation in the late 1990s.⁷⁰ It has made a tremendous impact on the historiography of the PRL – with hundreds of publications each year – by hiring dozens of historians who in some cases have no ties to academia.⁷¹ Hence, a new pole of official production has emerged, again calling into question the autonomy of the field of history. A new generation of historians, most of them trained after 1989 and too young to have experienced life in the PRL first-hand, have developed a new historical paradigm focused on the study of the archives of the communist security apparatus,⁷² under the supervision of the previous generation of scholars, among which members of the IPN's management – Paczkowski, Friszke, Eisler, Machcewicz, Dudek – were recruited.

Public history has thus opened up new career and exposure opportunities to historians, now increasingly turned into policy experts. The generation trained after 1989 has fully benefited from this phenomenon, as illustrated by the aforementioned scholars.

Conclusion

The caesura of 1989 caesura must be put into perspective as far as the historiography of the PRL is concerned: in Poland, anti-communist interpretative frameworks were initiated during the dissident period, through underground publications, before they became dominant after 1989. The dissident origins of the historiography of communism in Poland thus partly

determined its post-1989 development. After the regime change, historians sympathetic to dissent, who occupied peripheral positions in the field of history before 1989, became dominant. In addition to their own political commitments, this evolution was favored by a shift in the hierarchy of legitimate topics, concomitant to the democratic transition. This shift favored the development of a political history of the PRL in line with the totalitarian paradigm and prompted many historians of the contemporary period to embrace narratives infused with moral and political connotations, compatible with the demand for the criminalization of the communist past that emerged in the political field.

The political will to “deal with the past”, which led to the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance at the end of the 1990s, followed by the establishment of a historical policy from the mid-2000s, strengthened the anti-communist historiographic trend that had grown from dissent. Since the 2000s, the new official pole of production of contemporary history around the IPN has become so prominent that the historiographic production is particularly susceptible to partaking in this historical policy: historians have themselves contributed to limiting the autonomy of the field of history.

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⁶⁵ Robert Brier, “Adam Michnik’s Understanding of Totalitarianism and the West European Left: A Historical and Transnational Approach to Dissident Political Thought,” *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 2 (2011): 197–218. However, a certain revival of the totalitarian paradigm can be observed in the works of political scientists researching the postcommunist transitions to democracy. See for example Juan José Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ “Jak pisać o komunizmie? Jak pisać o PRL-u?”, *Arcana*, no 9 (2000): 9.

⁶⁷ Jerzy Eisler, *Zarys Dziejów Politycznych Polski, 1944-1989* (Warsaw: Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza BGW, 1992).

⁶⁸ The term “small stabilization” (*Mała stabilizacja*) refers to the period of government of Gomułka, starting in 1956.

⁶⁹ “Jak pisać o komunizmie? Jak pisać o PRL-u?”, *Arcana*, no 9 (2000): 12–13.

⁷⁰ Georges Mink, “Institutions Of National Memory In Post-Communist Europe: From Transitional Justice To Political Uses Of Biographies (1989-2010),” in *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games*, ed. Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 155–71.

⁷¹ Valentin Behr, “Historical Policy-Making in Post-1989 Poland: A Sociological Approach to the Narratives of Communism,” *European Politics and Society* 18, no. 1 (2017): 81–95.

⁷² Rafał Stobiecki, “W Poszukiwaniu Szkół Historiografii Dziejów Najnowszych Po 1989 Roku,” in *Klio Na Wolności. Historiografia Dziejów Najnowszych Po 1989 Roku*, ed. Marcin Kruszyński, Sławomir Łukasiewicz, Mariusz Mazur, Sławomir Poleszak and Piotr Witek (Lublin: IPN, 2016), 185–95.