



**HAL**  
open science

## **When Will Post-Communism End? History Policy, Historians, and Polish Democracy**

Valentin Behr

► **To cite this version:**

Valentin Behr. When Will Post-Communism End? History Policy, Historians, and Polish Democracy. *Klio Polska. Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Historiografii Polskiej*, 2025, 17, pp.87-111. <10.12775/kliopl.2025.04>. <halshs-05519484>

**HAL Id: halshs-05519484**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05519484v1>**

Submitted on 19 Feb 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 - Attribution - International License

*Valentin Behr*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6735-8793>

CNRS research fellow

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

## When Will Post-Communism End? History Policy, Historians, and Polish Democracy

**Abstract:** This article contributes to the discussion about the developments and transformations of the post-communist Polish historiography by offering a perspective derived from the sociology of knowledge. Adopting analytical lenses inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, it focuses on the social and institutional conditions of historical research. Struggles in the Polish field of history cannot be explained solely by the politicization of historians and/or their work, nor by purely scholarly controversies. These two dimensions are closely intertwined and determined by an institutional framework that has dramatically changed as a result of both history policy and broader reforms of academia in the post-communist context. In fifteen years (2000–2015), history policy has radically transformed the conditions of production and dissemination of contemporary history. The illiberal period (2015–2023) and its effects in the field of history thus appear as the product of a longer-term process of reconfiguration of the relationship between the political and bureaucratic fields, on the one hand, and the field of history, on the other. Crucially, historians have themselves contributed to limiting the autonomy of history, as the relationships between fields are shaped by efficient actors, historians-bureaucrats who contribute to history policy-making.

**Zarys treści:** Artykuł ten stanowi wkład w dyskusję na temat rozwoju i przemian postkomunistycznej historiografii polskiej, oferując perspektywę wywodzącą się z socjologii wiedzy. Przyjmując perspektywę analityczną inspirowaną socjologią Pierre'a Bourdieu, autor skupia się na społecznych i instytucjonalnych uwarunkowaniach badań historycznych. Walki w polskiej historiografii nie da się wyjaśniać wyłącznie polityzującą historyków i/lub ich pracy ani też kontrowersjami czysto naukowymi. Te dwa wymiary są ze sobą ściśle powiązane i determinowane przez ramy instytucjonalne, które uległy radykalnej zmianie w wyniku zarówno polityki historycznej, jak i szerszych reform środowiska akademickiego w kontekście postkomunistycznym. W ciągu piętnastu lat (2000–2015) polityka historyczna radykalnie zmieniła warunki tworzenia i rozpowszechniania historii współczesnej. Okres rządów PIS-u (2015–2023) i jego skutki w dziedzinie historii wydają się zatem wynikiem długotrwałego procesu rekonfiguracji relacji między polami politycznym i biurokratycznym z jednej strony a polem historii z drugiej. Co istotne, sami historycy przyczynili się do ograniczenia autonomii historii, ponieważ relacje między polami są kształtowane przez skutecznych aktorów, historyków-biurokratów, którzy przyczyniają się do kształtowania polityki historycznej.

**Keywords:** Polish historiography, field theory, Pierre Bourdieu, Institute of National Remembrance, Poland

**Słowa kluczowe:** historiografia polska, socjologia wiedzy, Pierre Bourdieu, pole naukowe, polityka historyczna, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej



The election of Karol Nawrocki as president of the Republic of Poland, on 1 June 2025, may be seen as another example of the politicization of history in the Polish context. Since his election, Nawrocki has reiterated, on the occasion of the commemorations of 1 September 2025, the demand for German war reparations following World War II, already expressed by the Law and Justice (PiS) party when it was in government (such claims for war reparations had previously been made by the Polish parliament in the context of Poland joining the European Union). On 10 July 2025, the anniversary of the 1943 Volynia massacres, he demanded that Ukraine exhume all of the victims' bodies.

Crucially, Nawrocki's political success also testifies to the importance of institutions of production of historical knowledge that have expanded dramatically since the early 2000s, at the crossroads between academia, state authorities, politics, and memory activism. Though Nawrocki, a beginner in politics, could appear as a surprising choice to run for president, he had behind himself an already long career as an administrator and public historian of sorts, as head of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk (2017–2021), and then *Prezes* (president) of the Institute of National Remembrance (2021–2025).

Hence, the candidate backed by the PiS party already had a certain record of public activities. The "citizen-candidate", as he was described by another public historian, Andrzej Nowak – who chaired the team of advisers to the previous PiS-backed president, Andrzej Duda, on matters of history policy – was thus far from an ordinary citizen.

Far from anecdotal, I argue that the social, professional, and political trajectories of characters such as Nawrocki, Nowak, and others deserve to be studied as empirical cases illuminating broader changes in the Polish field of history, namely the advent of history policy.

The Polish phrase "*polityka historyczna*", often conflated with memory politics, has been covered in numerous publications. It is most often understood in an extensive way, as any form of politicization of the past by state authorities, political parties, or historians themselves.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the political scientist Rafał Chwedoruk incorporates major disputes among historians over the interpretation of the past, ideological conflicts between political parties, and claims justified by past events within the realm of "*polityka historyczna*".<sup>2</sup> In his comparative study of Poland, Germany, and Russia, the sociologist Michał Łuczewski describes memory politics as a key dimension of "moral capital" in an international field of confrontation between national narratives.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sławomir M. Nowinowski, Jan Pomorski, and Rafał Stobiecki (eds), *Pamięć i polityka historyczna: doświadczenia Polski i jej sąsiadów* (Łódź, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Rafał Chwedoruk, *Polityka historyczna* (Warszawa, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Michał Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności* (Warszawa, 2017).

Although these works highlight the overlap between history and memory, they rarely address the conditions under which history is produced and the potential divisions within the field of history. On the contrary, sociologists like Joanna Wawrzyniak point out the role of historians, among other “social agents who attempt to make the memory of [the Polish People’s Republic] happen and to fulfil social functions”<sup>4</sup> Wawrzyniak also rightly points to Polish specificities in this regard. While the politicization of historians’ work is a worldwide phenomenon, “in Poland it has a unique feature due to the political context in which historical scholarship operated, from the non-existence of the Polish state in the nineteenth century to the country’s subjugation to Soviet influence after 1945. Hence, the voices about the specific mission of historians, who shall not only be researchers of the past but also society’s educators in national values such as independence, freedom, motherland, patriotism, and even uniquely Polish spirituality”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, a significant amount of academic literature has already been devoted to historians’ role in memory politics.<sup>6</sup> Post-communist Europe and its experience of two totalitarianisms (Nazism and Communism) provide a fertile ground for the study of the interactions between history, memory, and politics,<sup>7</sup> with Poland at the forefront.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, there has been little study of the social and political role of historians themselves, i.e., on historians’ contribution to the instrumentalization of history, for purposes other than pure production and diffusion of knowledge.

I thus consider history policy in a narrower sense than memory politics, i.e., as a space of struggles over the legitimate production of an official historical narrative. History policy is the way in which state authorities organize scientific research, through the allocation of public funding, the creation of research and education institutions, or even the restriction of pluralism in legitimate interpretations.

History policy can thus be studied as a form of public policy. However, it is also necessary to consider historians’ public engagement as intellectuals. This

---

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Wawrzyniak, ‘History and Memory: the Social Frames of Contemporary Polish Historiography’, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 103 (2011), 132.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–135.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Claire Lavabre and Dominique Damamme, ‘Les historiens dans l’espace public’, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 39, no. 1 (2000), 5–21; Jean-Clément Martin, ‘Histoire, mémoire et oubli pour un autre régime d’historicité’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 4, no. 47 (2000), 783–804.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolay Koposov, *Memory laws, memory wars: the politics of the past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, 2018); Maria Mälksoo, ‘The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 15, no. 4 (2009), 653–680; Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (eds), *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games* (Basingstoke, 2013); Tony Judt, ‘The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe’, *Daedalus*, 121, no. 4 (1992), 83–118.

<sup>8</sup> Paweł Skibiński, Tomasz Wiścicki, and Michał Wysocki (eds), *Historycy i politycy: polityka pamięci w III RP* (Warszawa, 2011).

is particularly pertinent in the Polish context, where the intelligentsia, as a social group, has historically played a key role in public life and politics.<sup>9</sup> The peculiar role of historians in Polish public life has already been underlined by authors such as Daniel Beauvois.<sup>10</sup> In the post-communist period, history policy has been underpinned by the democratic principle that historical knowledge of the so-called totalitarian past (1939–1989) would contribute to the establishment of a democratic and independent Poland. In this respect, history policy has been implicitly oriented towards the present and future, as a means of defining the contours of a free, independent, and democratic Poland.<sup>11</sup>

In this text, post-communism is therefore not understood as a historical period with clear boundaries, but rather as a moral imperative and a reference to a dictatorial past that has implications for politics and policy. This is particularly evident in the discussion of the role of historical knowledge and historians in an independent and democratic Poland.<sup>12</sup>

This article thus intends to contribute to the discussion about the developments and transformations of Polish historiography after 1989, by offering a perspective derived from the sociology of knowledge, rather than from the study of historiography *per se*. Adopting analytical lenses inspired by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, it focuses on the social and institutional conditions of historical research, i.e., on the context and framework in which it develops.<sup>13</sup>

This article is of a synthetic nature and draws on previously published works.<sup>14</sup> It is based on doctoral and postdoctoral researches devoted to the study of the field of contemporary history in Poland, relying on a variety of sources and combining two lines of inquiry: first, the sociology of historians, based on hand-coded prosopographical databases and qualitative interviews; second, content analysis of

---

<sup>9</sup> Rafał Smoczyński and Tomasz Zarycki, *Totem inteligencji. Arystokracja, szlachta i ziemiaństwo w polskiej przestrzeni społecznej* (Warszawa, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Beauvois, 'Être historien en Pologne: les mythes, l'amnésie et la "vérité"', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 38, no. 3 (1991), 353–386.

<sup>11</sup> Marcin Kula, 'Mówiąc o wczoraj, myślimy o dziś. Historia we współczesnym dyskursie politycznym w Polsce', in id., *Naród, historia i... dużo kłopotów* (Kraków, 2011), 207–222.

<sup>12</sup> On the trajectory of anticommunism in Poland, see Valentin Behr, 'From Anticommunism to Antiliberalism. Polish Conservative Intellectuals' Involvement in the Transnational Circulation of Ideas', in Elżbieta Hałas and Nicolas Masłowski (eds), *Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe* (Peter Lang, 2021), 241–259.

<sup>13</sup> Tomasz Zarycki (ed.), *Polskie nauki społeczne w kontekście relacji władzy i zależności międzynarodowych* (Warszawa, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Especially: Valentin Behr, 'How Historians Got Involved in Memory Politics: Patterns of the Historiography of the Polish People's Republic before and after 1989', *East European Politics and Societies*, 36, no. 3 (2022), 970–991; id., 'Politique historique et tournant autoritaire en Pologne', in Maya Collombon and Lilian Mathieu (eds), *Dynamiques des tournants autoritaires* (Vulaines-sur-Seine, 2021), 117–140; Valentin Behr, *Powojenna historiografia polska jako pole walki. Studium z socjologii wiedzy i polityki* (Warszawa, 2021).

historiographical production, based on the quantitative and qualitative study of several corpuses of scholarly journals, monographs, as well as the bibliographical database Bibliografia Historii Polskiej.

In this article, I seek to demonstrate that struggles in the Polish field of history, especially about the legitimate interpretation of the 1939–1989 period, cannot be explained solely by the politicization of historians and/or their work, nor by purely scholarly controversies. These two dimensions are closely intertwined and, to a large extent, determined by an institutional framework that has dramatically changed as a result of both history policy and broader reforms of academia in the post-communist context.

In spite of these institutional changes, I argue that there is much continuity in the way the political role of history and of historians is conceived of in Poland. This continuity can be explained by the peculiar role that history has played in nation-building processes, not only in Poland,<sup>15</sup> and by the normative role assigned to history in the peculiar context of the post-communist transition.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. After a methodological section, the next three sections follow a chronological order. In each one of them, I shall sketch the institutional framework of history production, the main developments of historiography and historiographical controversies, and historians' public engagement.

### A Sociology of the Field of History

The concept of field, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to “differentiated social spheres who have their own rules of the game and particular interests”.<sup>16</sup> Far from a mere metaphor, it is a theoretical and methodological tool to construct a relational and topographical approach to the empirical study of differentiated spheres of activity, which result from the division of labor. Among the research inspired by this framework, the most relevant for the purpose of this article is the one revolving around the relationship between knowledge and politics, which has inspired to a great extent the work that I have been conducting in the field of Polish history. They include the works of Frédéric Lebaron (on French economists<sup>17</sup>), Gisèle Sapiro (on French writers<sup>18</sup>), and Louis Pinto (on the French

---

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds), *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Field’, *Politika*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.politika.io/en/article/field> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Frédéric Lebaron, *La croyance économique: les économistes entre science et politique* (Paris, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Gisèle Sapiro, *The French Writers' War, 1940–1953* (Durham, 2014).

intellectual field<sup>19</sup>). Such analytical lenses, however, are not confined to the French context. The works of Tomasz Zarycki and Tomasz Warczok, among others, have demonstrated their relevance for the study of the Polish intelligentsia and social sciences.<sup>20</sup>

Bourdieu's contribution to the sociology of knowledge invites us to consider science as a social field, i.e., a system of positions, defined by the possession of an array of resources, and position takings, often determined by the positions held in this field. The field is also a field of struggles, in which social agents compete for positions, resources, and the very definition of the stakes that matter in the field.

In the field of science, Bourdieu identifies two types of scientific capital that can be accumulated throughout an academic career: "Pure" scientific capital, which is acquired through recognition of a scholar's scientific achievements, such as peer-reviewed publications, scientific awards and peer recognition; and "institutional" scientific capital, which is acquired through participation in various scientific committees and councils, as well as through positions of scientific management.<sup>21</sup>

Bourdieu's field sociology is also useful for understanding the relationships between specialized fields, which may compete within a broader field of power. In this structure, some fields (such as politics or economics) may dominate others (such as science).<sup>22</sup> However, relations between fields are not merely vertical. They are also horizontal or intersectoral. The trade-off between fields can take the form of symbolic transactions through which differentiated sectors recognize each other.<sup>23</sup>

In our case, we can consider the field of history, on the one hand, and the political and bureaucratic fields, on the other, as interacting rather than as diametrically opposed. The political uses of the past result from these interactions or transactions, and are not merely being imposed "from above" by an omnipotent power. Such a perspective invites us to consider the role of historians as potential contributors to the political instrumentalization of the past, whether as public intellectuals or as policy-makers, as we shall see.

---

<sup>19</sup> Louis Pinto, *Sociologie des intellectuels* (Paris, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Tomasz Zarycki, Rafał Smoczyński, and Tomasz Warczok, 'The Roots of Polish Culture-Centered Politics: Toward a Non-Purely Cultural Model of Cultural Domination in Central and Eastern Europe', *East European Politics and Societies*, 31, no. 2 (2017), 360–381; Tomasz Warczok and Tomasz Zarycki, 'Bourdieu recontextualized: Redefinitions of western critical thought in the periphery', *Current Sociology*, 62, no. 3 (2014), 334–351; eid., *Gra peryferyjna. Polska politologia w globalnym polu nauk społecznych* (Warszawa, 2016); Zarycki (ed.), *Polskie nauki społeczne*.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les usages sociaux de la science. Pour une sociologie clinique du champ scientifique* (Versailles, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Zarycki (ed.), *Polskie nauki społeczne*.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Dobry, *The Sociology of Political Crisis* (London, 2025).

## The 1990s: History in the Context of Democratic Transition

The years following 1989 witnessed a genuine change in the institutional conditions of historical scholarship, with censorship being suppressed and official ideology abandoned. The first pieces of legislation adopted by the Mazowiecki government, notably a 1990 act on higher education and research, aimed to restore institutional autonomy for universities and the Academy of Sciences (PAN), and to guarantee academic freedoms, which had been undermined under communist rule.<sup>24</sup>

The development of contemporary history benefited from the opening of archives of the most recent past, particularly the archives of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), which were transferred to the state archives (Archiwum Akt Nowych) following the party's dissolution in January 1990. The historiography of World War II and of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) could thus flourish in a new, free, and autonomous context.

This dramatic change in the institutional framework, as well as strong social and political demands for unveiling the "blank spots" in Polish history, made the history of Poland under the two so-called totalitarian regimes (1939–1989) more attractive. This was partly true for the history of the PRL, and contemporary historians became more prominent in the discipline, while their domain of specialization had been rather disregarded during the PRL, when the profession was dominated by medieval historians.<sup>25</sup>

After 1989, the historiography of the PRL was nourished by historians with a background of companions of the dissidence movement, Solidarity in particular. Krystyna Kersten, Andrzej Friszke, and Andrzej Paczkowski are the most often cited specialists of the history of the PRL in a survey conducted in the milieu of contemporary historians at the initiative of the journal *Polska 1944/45–1989*, published in 2008.<sup>26</sup> According to my own calculations, 19 of the 29 survey respondents mentioned Kersten as a "scientific authority", while 18 and 15 respondents respectively named Paczkowski and Friszke.<sup>27</sup> With nuances, they personify a dominant trend in the post-communist historiography of the PRL, which can be characterized as political history, focused on the study of either the state and party authorities, or opposition to them. It gave birth to the first historical studies of the PRL uncontrolled by the communist regime, published already before 1989, via underground or *émigré* journals and publishing houses.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Marek Kwiek, 'Academe in transition: Transformations in the Polish academic profession', *Higher Education*, 45, no. 4 (2003), 455–476.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Krystyna Kersten's account: ead., *Pisma rozproszone*, ed. Tomasz Szarota and Dariusz Libionka (Toruń, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> *Polska 1944/45–1989*, 8 (2008).

<sup>27</sup> See Behr, *Powojenna historiografia polska*, 268.

<sup>28</sup> Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy, Polska 1943–1948* (Warszawa, 1984).

In the years following 1989, this historiographical trend developed around key research questions regarding the characterization of the former regime (was it totalitarian, or not?), periodization (how to account for PRL post-deStalinization?), the extent of resistance and collaboration in Polish society, among others.<sup>29</sup> It also provided the first synthetic accounts, which both paved the way for further research and nourished history education.<sup>30</sup>

Without denying the inner diversity of this political history of the PRL, I argue that it favored a “totalitarian” reading of the history of Poland between 1944 and 1989, with a main opposition between state authorities and a more or less resistant society. This interpretation of the communist past in Poland became paradoxically dominant at a moment when it was demonetized in Western historiographies.<sup>31</sup> It was also characterized by a fairly positivist approach to history-writing, focused on the description of newly accessible documents in an effort to write a “true” history of the authoritarian past, sometimes at the cost of theoretical reflection and/or interdisciplinary dialogue.<sup>32</sup>

Next to this dominant trend of the post-communist Polish historiography of the PRL, and at another pole of the field of history, was the social history of communism. It can be considered as an alternative historiographical school,<sup>33</sup> to the extent that it was more inclined to mobilize the theoretical and methodological tools of other disciplines in the social sciences, like sociology, anthropology and psychology, and focused on the study of “ordinary” social groups (peasantry, workers, and later women). The works of Dariusz Jarosz, Marcin Kula, and the numerous MA students and PhDs they trained, often published in the ‘W krainie PRL’ series by the Trio publishing house, are good examples of this historiographical stream.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Andrzej Friszke, ‘Jakim państwem była Polska po 1956 roku?’, *Więź*, 2 (1996), 131–146; id., ‘Spór o PRL w III Rzeczypospolitej (1989–2001)’, *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 1 (2002), 9–28; Marta Fik (ed.), *Spór o PRL* (Kraków, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski* (Warszawa, 2005); Jerzy Eisler, *Zarys dziejów politycznych Polski, 1944–1989* (Warszawa, 1992); Andrzej Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989* (Warszawa, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Valentin Behr, Muriel Blaive, Anenoma Constantin, Laure Neumayer, and Máté Zombory, ‘An anti-communist Consensus: The Black Book of Communism in Pan-European Perspective’, *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2, no. 2–3 (2020), 55–88; 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.

<sup>32</sup> Rafał Stobiecki, ‘Reaktualizacja mitu historii “prawdziwej” w historiografii polskiej po 1989 r.’, *Pamiętnik XVI Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków we Wrocławiu* (Toruń, 2002), 11–23. See also Wawrzyniak, *History and Memory*.

<sup>33</sup> Rafał Stobiecki, ‘W poszukiwaniu szkół historiografii dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku’, in Marcin Kruszyński, Sławomir Łukasiewicz, Mariusz Mazur, Sławomir Poleszak, and Piotr Witek (eds), *Klio na wolności. Historiografia dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku* (Lublin, 2016), 185–195.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance: Marcin Kula, *Komunizm i po komunizmie* (Warszawa, 2006); Dariusz Jarosz, ‘Post-1989 historiography’s distorted image of the relation between authorities and society

It produced an image of the PRL far from the totalitarian frame of interpretation, rather emphasizing the various arrangements of daily life under authoritarian rule, in a vein reminiscent of the German social history of communism, with which it maintained a fruitful dialogue.<sup>35</sup>

The opposition between the political and the social history of the PRL shall not be exaggerated. First, there are several examples of historical studies combining the two perspectives, to some extent.<sup>36</sup> Second, the milieu (*środowisko*) of contemporary historians was and remains relatively small, hence a high degree of familiarity among its members. For instance, Andrzej Paczkowski was, next to Kula, among the initiators of the “W krainie PRL” series. However, the two research perspectives nourished two opposite readings of the history of the PRL, as shown by a comparison between the monographs published by the “W krainie PRL” series, on the one hand, and the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), on the other (see the next section).

What is important is the strong link between the development of historiography and the public debate in the 1990s already, in the context of a changing society and democratic transition. Historical research was far from confined into scholarly circles, as it was echoed (and sometimes, simply took place) in the press (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Życie*) and in intellectual journals (*Arka/Arcana*, *Znak*, *Więź*).

In the publishing industry, professional historians had to compete with non-professional authors. Based on the *Bibliografia Historii Polskiej*, I estimated that only half of the authors of books about the history of the PRL published between 1990 and 2001 were academic historians. The remainder came from outside academia, primarily comprising writers, journalists, and politicians, many of whom had participated in the events they described.<sup>37</sup>

Post-communist historiography was not written in a vacuum, but drew on dissident, underground historiography. In this regard, a certain continuity can be noted between the underground publications of the 1980s (authored by Krystyna Kersten, Andrzej Friszke, Andrzej Paczkowski, and others like Jerzy Eisler, for instance) and the post-1989 ones. This continuity favored the expression of

---

in Poland during the period from 1944 to 1989’, *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2, no. 45 (2014), 215–240; Marcin Zaremba and Błażej Brzostek, ‘Polska 1956–1976: w poszukiwaniu paradygmatu’, *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 10, no. 2 (2006), 25–37.

<sup>35</sup> Sandrine Kott, Marcin Kula, and Thomas Lindenberg (eds), *Socjalizm w życiu powszednim. Dyktatura a społeczeństwo w NRD i PRL* (Warszawa, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2001); Stanisław Jankowiak, Agnieszka Rogulska, and Paweł Machcewicz, *Zranione miasto: Poznań w czerwcu 1956 roku* (Poznań, 2003); Łukasz Kamiński, *Polacy wobec nowej rzeczywistości 1944–1948: Formy pozainstytucjonalnego, żywiołowego oporu społecznego* (Toruń, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> See Behr, *Powojenna historiografia polska*, 273.

anti-communist stances and the uses of historical expertise at the service of the democratic transition and transitional justice. To put it differently, there were strong affinities between the “true” history paradigm and the political demand for reparation and indictment of the former regime.

Thus, historians of the PRL contributed to the indictment of the former regime, often based on strong normative principles, in order to help establish a democratic Poland. Historians’ political engagement is visible in the public debate of the time, notably about the issue of lustration, i.e., the vetting of secret informers of the former security services from public positions,<sup>38</sup> but not from academia, where, though delegitimized, historians who were sympathizers of the communist regime generally remained in position. Hence, historical knowledge tended to serve the purposes of transitional justice and democracy-building. In a debate held in the conservative *Arka* magazine already in 1990, Andrzej Paczkowski considered history as a cure for a society “infected” by totalitarianism.<sup>39</sup> These were not only words, as Paczkowski also contributed to the works of a parliamentary commission inquiring into the legality of martial law (1991–1993), and was then consulted as a historical expert when the act establishing the IPN (passed in December 1998) was under preparation. He was later elected (together with Andrzej Friszke) to sit in the *Kolegium* (advisory board) of the newly established IPN, of which he was a member from 1999 to 2016. Paczkowski also contributed to a comparative research agenda regarding ways of dealing with dictatorial pasts.<sup>40</sup>

In the post-communist context, writing about the history of communist Poland, but also about the Polish fight for liberty and independence undertaken following the German invasion of September 1939, was conceived of as a means to build a national and democratic political community, epitomized in the Preamble to the Act establishing the IPN. Similarly, the institutes of national memory that were established in other post-communist countries, like Hungary or the Czech Republic, shared “a worldview in which scholarship is at the service of the polity or the nation.”<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary history thus became part and parcel of political projects and of a political contest, the stakes of which were the definition of the contours of democratic Poland and of its polity. Decommunization, the place of former communists in the new reality, but also the speed and depth of the transition to democracy, following the round table agreements of 1989 – which were quickly dismissed on the right of the political spectrum for being too soft on former

<sup>38</sup> Piotr Grzelak, *Wojna o lustrację* (Warszawa, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> ‘Koniec epoki’, *Arka*, 29 (1990).

<sup>40</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski (ed.), *Rozliczanie totalitarnej przeszłości: zbrodnie, kolaboracja i symbole przeszłości* (Warszawa, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Zoltán Dujisin, ‘How Illiberal Memory Regimes Paved the Way for the Erosion of Academic Autonomy – Lessons from Hungary’, *RevDem. The Review of Democracy*, 7 Aug. 2024, <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2024/08/07/illiberal-memory-regimes/> (accessed 12 Nov. 2025).

communists – the role of the Catholic church in the definition of the dominant values after the fall of Communism, all of these discussions were central to the first decade of post-Communism and implied that political stances were often justified with references to the past.<sup>42</sup> The conservative camp, strongly anti-communist, played a key role in this respect, not so much in politics, but in the intellectual realm, with the magazine *Arka/Arcana* at the forefront.<sup>43</sup> It gathered several historians, notably the prominent figure of Andrzej Nowak, who served as *Arcana*'s editor in chief (1994–2012), but also Ryszard Terlecki, who chaired the PiS group in the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish Parliament) from 2015 to 2023.

### The 2000s: History Policy and the Rise of Historians-Bureaucrats

The early 2000s mark a genuine change in the institutional conditions of production of historical research on the recent past, with the establishment of the IPN, for several reasons.

First, the transfer of the files of the former security services of the PRL, and the access to these invaluable sources (more than a hundred kilometers of documents) granted to researchers, made it possible to study the former regime in depth. Police and military archives, which often remain under embargo for dozens of years in most countries, were progressively made available, under strict conditions, roughly ten years after the fall of the communist regime in Poland. These documents allowed historians to research not only the functioning of the security apparatus, but also aspects of daily life in the PRL.<sup>44</sup>

Second, the establishment of the IPN, and particularly of its Public Education Office (BEP), initially headed by Paweł Machcewicz, provided employment and relatively favorable conditions for dozens of historians. It thus consolidated the nascent historiography of the most recent past, not only the PRL, but also World War II, as the Institute was in charge of dealing with the 1939–1989 period.

---

<sup>42</sup> The political instrumentalization of the past is, of course, not peculiar to Poland, nor to the post-communist context. See, for instance, Enzo Traverso, *Le passé, modes d'emploi: histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Volodymyr Sklokin, 'Towards an intellectual genealogy of the conservative turn in contemporary Poland: The case of *Arcana* magazine', in Tomasz Stryjek and Joanna Konieczna-Salamatin (eds), *The Politics of Memory in Poland and Ukraine. From Reconciliation to De-Conciliation* (Routledge, 2021); Valentin Behr, 'The Illiberalism(s) of Polish Conservative Intellectuals', in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Oxford, 2023).

<sup>44</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, 'Les archives de l'appareil de sécurité de la République populaire de Pologne en tant que source', *Genèses*, 52, no. 3 (2003), 58–79; Marcin Kula, 'Was ich aus den legendären "Mappen" erfahren möchte', in Agnès Bensussan, Dorota Dakowska, and Nicolas Beaupré (eds), *Die Überlieferung der Diktaturen* (Essen, 2004), 195–203.

Third, the Institute contributed to assigning a normative role to history and historians, a process that was already under way in the 1990s, as we have already noted. Indeed, the IPN brought together in the same institution not only tasks of historical research and education (merged in the aforementioned BEP), but also judicial matters, with the Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. This body, heir to a Commission established in the PRL already to prosecute German and Nazi crimes committed in Poland during World War II, was in charge of investigating and prosecuting German and communist crimes committed between 1939 and 1989. With its prosecutors counting on the expertise of IPN's historians, the risk of confusion between historical research, transitional justice and the building of an official national memory was high.<sup>45</sup> It became even higher when an amendment to the law, passed by the PiS-led majority in December 2006, established a Lustration Bureau within the IPN.

The establishment of the IPN thus resulted in some sort of historiographical boom, as the Institute quickly became not only the first employer of specialists of contemporary history in Poland, but also the main publishing house in the field, and an important funder of scholarly and educational events (conferences, seminars, training schools). According to data collected from the *Bibliografia Historii Polskiej*, the IPN was by far the main publisher of books on the history of World War II (135 titles, compared to 232 across the next four publishers) and the PRL (360 titles, compared to 220 across the next four publishers) between 2001 and 2010.<sup>46</sup>

This was made possible thanks to the institute's important budget, which was doubled under the first PiS-led government (2005–2007) and is still way higher than that of academic history institutes, at universities, or PAN. The strongly bureaucratic and hierarchical organization of the IPN, together with its decentralized regional branches – which are often key partners of local universities, museums, libraries and civil society organizations – also made it possible to achieve significant results in terms of research projects, while at the same time favoring a loose divide within the corporation, between “IPN historians” and the rest.<sup>47</sup>

Such a divide shall not be exaggerated. “IPN historians” are trained in academic institutions, and specialists of the recent past regularly meet at seminars and conferences, regardless of their institution of origin. It is true, however, that

<sup>45</sup> Dariusz Stola, ‘Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: A Ministry of Memory?’, in Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman (eds), *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* (Budapest, 2012), 45–58; Antoni Dudek, *Instytut: osobista historia IPN* (Warszawa, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> See Behr, *Powojenna historiografia polska*, 374.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, the discussions in: Andrzej Czyżewski, Sławomir M. Nowinowski, Rafał Stobiecki, and Joanna Żelazko (eds), *Bez taryfy ulgowej: Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej 2000–2010* (Łódź, 2012); ‘Polityka historyczna – za i przeciw’, *Mówią Wieki*, 8 (2006).

the peculiar organization of research work at the Institute has contributed to isolating “IPN historians” from their academic peers. Researchers employed at the IPN have the status of state officials, which implies respect for office hours, derogations to work away (in libraries or archives), and participation in research projects designed by the Institute’s management. All of this makes them less autonomous than academic historians. This, together with easy access to the files of the former security services, favored the tremendous rise of research on these services, ironically coined by some as “UBologia”, i.e., the discipline of studying the files of UB, the Security Office of the PRL.

Another peculiarity of the IPN is that from the onset, it hired historians with a strong anti-communist, and sometimes conservative, worldview. Again, this shall not be exaggerated, especially since the recruitment of researchers depended on management, and could differ from one office to another, or from one regional branch to another. Yet, infamous examples, such as Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, and, to name only the most well-known figures, also Jan Żaryn, have contributed to building the image of an IPN leaning to the right. The first two are the authors of the book *SB a Lech Wałęsa*, devoted to the former Solidarity leader and president of the Polish Republic’s past as a secret informer of the communist security services in the early 1970s.<sup>48</sup> Though based on historical evidence, the book, prefaced by the then *Prezes* of the IPN, Janusz Kurtyka, himself known for his anti-communist views, is written in a tone sometimes reminiscent of conspiracy theories, as if Wałęsa had been manipulated by the communist services during and after the round table agreements of 1989. Żaryn, for his part, holds views close to the interwar *Endecja*, i.e., the national-democratic party of Roman Dmowski, known for his strong nationalist and sometimes antisemitic discourse. A former collaborator of Kurtyka at the head of the IPN, he was elected senator with the support of the PiS party in 2015.

Beyond such individual examples, it must be noted that the historiographical production of the IPN, taken as a whole, reinforced the totalitarian paradigm, especially when it comes to the PRL (notwithstanding the publication of brilliant and recognized works by the Institute). A comparative study of the monographs devoted to the PRL, published by the IPN on the one hand, and by the TRIO “W krainie PRL” series, between the early 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s, shows a clear divide between a political history of the PRL, focused on the communist security apparatus and the oppression/resistance opposition (these topics account for up to 40% of IPN monographs, compared to just 4% for TRIO), and a social history more concerned with the daily life of social groups (28% of TRIO monographs, compared to just 1% of IPN’s) but

---

<sup>48</sup> Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, *SB a Lech Wałęsa: przyczynek do biografii* (Gdańsk, 2008).

also, interestingly, the official political life and the communist party (again 28%, compared to 8% for the IPN).<sup>49</sup>

The same study reveals that this opposition is also of a social nature, since the authors of these monographs occupy opposite positions in the field of history, with IPN authors being generally employed by the Institute (60%) and relatively less positioned in academia (8% working in universities or PAN, 18% working in both IPN and a university), while TRIO authors are either positioned in academia (55% working in universities or PAN) or employed in another field (i.e., not professional historians, 38%), and seldom employed at the IPN.

To summarize the main effects of the establishment of the IPN in the field of history, one can thus say that it contributed to the existence of a two-tier historiography of the PRL, but also of a two-tier path to the profession of historian. The latter has been reinforced with the neoliberal reforms of higher education and research in Poland, which have encouraged the development of private higher education, the funding of research projects rather than permanent funding directed to research institutes, and a growing competition between universities and researchers (using bibliometric tools, for instance).<sup>50</sup> In this regard, “IPN historians” have been relatively preserved from these changes and enjoy favorable conditions at the Institute.

Next to the historiography of the PRL, the 2000s also saw a dramatic change in the attention paid by Polish historians to the Holocaust, and more generally to World War II, which had been relatively neglected after 1989.<sup>51</sup> The trigger was, of course, the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Neighbors* in 2000, in which he describes the killing of the Jewish population of Jedwabne by the local Polish population.<sup>52</sup> The publication of the book triggered heated debates in Poland, including among historians.<sup>53</sup> Jedwabne, as a metonymy for dark pages in national history, thus became a symbolic object of contention in discussions devoted to the past. The nationalist camp, and the historians supporting it,

<sup>49</sup> 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.

<sup>50</sup> Kwiek, ‘Academe in transition’; Dorota Dakowska, ‘Between Competition Imperative and Europeanisation: The Case of Higher Education Reform in Poland’, *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, 69, no. 1 (2015), 129–141; ead., ‘Polish Higher Education and the Global Academic Competition: University Rankings in the Reform Debate’, in Tero Erkkilä (ed.), *Global University Rankings: Challenges for European Higher Education* (Basingstoke, 2013), 107–123.

<sup>51</sup> Tomasz Szarota, ‘Dokonania badawcze Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w zakresie historii II wojny światowej’, in Czyżewski, Nowinowski, Stobiecki, and Żelazko (eds), *Bez taryfy ulgowej*, 67–85.

<sup>52</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, 2004).

considered it to be an element of the “pedagogy of shame” (*pedagogika wstydu*) promoted by the so-called liberal-left. They advocated for a national narrative that should be relieved from such dark pages and promoted by the state authorities, notably by the IPN.<sup>54</sup> On the other side, some advocated for a more inclusive national narrative, which was also understood as more nuanced and critical of the national narrative.<sup>55</sup> Both, however, shared the normative assumption that history had a key role to play in the building of a free and democratic society. Key to that discussion was the role that institutions such as the IPN should play: should it work more as an academic research institute, or should it univocally promote some sort of official, state-sponsored narrative?

This discussion illustrated the “recurrent potential to erode academic autonomy in the name of the nation, and to thereby redefine the relationship between politics, citizens and expertise”, that lies within institutes of national memory.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the conservative intellectuals who inspired *polityka historyczna*, which became part of the PiS platform for the 2005 electoral campaign and saw the party win both the presidential and parliamentary elections, openly advocated promoting an official, unified state narrative. Most of them had held or were holding positions in institutions responsible for memory politics, such as the IPN, but also the Warsaw Uprising Museum and the Ministry of Culture.<sup>57</sup> The renewal of the IPN’s board, following the election, saw conservative historians like Kurtyka and Żaryn take a leading role in the Institute. This translated in a univocal approach to the issue of “Polish-Jewish” relations during World War II, emphasizing Polish help to the Jews, with the promotion of the figure of the “Righteous among the Nations”.

The IPN saw a significant increase in its resources under the PiS-led government (2005–2007): its budget was doubled, and the BEP became the most important research center in contemporary history, with about 200 historians employed.<sup>58</sup> Under Kurtyka’s leadership (2005–2010), it espoused the nationalist and anti-communist agenda favored by the promoters of *polityka historyczna*. Significantly, the electoral defeat of the PiS party in 2007 and the formation of the first Tusk government changed little in the activities of the IPN. As a state administration, the IPN’s leadership is fairly autonomous and can hardly be dismissed before the end of its term.

What is more important is that history policy, which had become officially advocated by the PiS-led government as *polityka historyczna*, was not dismissed after 2007. On the contrary, it became almost self-evident, beyond political divides,

<sup>54</sup> Andrzej Nowak, ‘Westerplatte czy Jedwabne’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 Aug. 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Paweł Machcewicz, ‘I Westerplatte i Jedwabne’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 9 Aug. 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Dujisin, ‘How Illiberal Memory Regimes’.

<sup>57</sup> Valentin Behr, ‘Genèse et usages d’une politique publique de l’histoire. La “politique historique” en Pologne’, *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 46, no. 3 (2015), 21–48.

<sup>58</sup> Nowadays, 180 historians are hired as researchers, according to my own count.

even though competing visions of the past exist. Not only was the existence of an institution like the IPN unquestioned, but it kept advancing its own agenda under the leadership of Łukasz Kamiński (2011–2016). It was then, for instance, that the IPN pushed for the so-called decommunization of public space. Crucially, the network of institutions dealing with history policy was enriched with museums (such as the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, initiated by the Tusk government under the leadership of Paweł Machcewicz) and other research institutes, such as the Pilecki Institute, established in 2017.

Such institutions have consolidated an official pole of history production, of which the IPN is the flagship. At this pole of the field of history, a new type of historian has emerged: the historian-bureaucrat. By this, I mean that historians are no strangers to these changes. On the contrary, they are made possible by the participation of historians, who contribute to the legitimization of such policies while gaining material and symbolic benefits.

Historians-bureaucrats are those historians who have benefited from the multiplication of public institutions in charge of history policy, by occupying positions of managers, advisers, and experts.

More precisely, historians-bureaucrats hold (often multiple) positions in a variety of scientific councils and boards, at the IPN, museums, cultural institutes, and ministries, positions which are often filled by appointment from ministers or parliament. They specialize in history-policy-making and are in a position to allocate funding, to distribute professional positions, and to promote certain narratives of the past via official channels.

At the crossroads between the scientific field and the bureaucratic field, historians-bureaucrats personify a hybridization of professional roles, accumulating a scientific capital of an institutional nature, to use Bourdieu's vocabulary. Their conception of history is sometimes less concerned with the autonomy of historical research and more focused on the establishment of a national canon. This leads to another confusion, between the scholar's personal views and the discourse of a state official.

Examples of historians-bureaucrats include, among others and independently of their academic merits and political views: Paweł Machcewicz (born in 1966), director of the IPN's Public Education Office (2000–2006), director of the Museum of the Second World War (2008–2017) and, for that reason, adviser in Prime Minister Tusk's cabinet (2008–2014); Andrzej Nowak (born in 1960), member of the IPN's *Kolegium* (since 2016), adviser to Polish President Andrzej Duda (2015–2025) and then Karol Nawrocki (since 2025) on matters of history policy; Mateusz Szpytma (born in 1975), employed at the IPN since 2000, where he has been Janusz Kurtyka's secretary (2005–2010), then vice-president of the Institute (since 2016), but also director of the Markowa Ulma-Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews in World War II (since 2017), and a member of several councils

(Jewish historical Institute, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews); Jarosław Szarek (born in 1963), employed at the IPN since 2000, president of the Institute (2016–2021), and director of the Home Army Museum in Cracow (since 2023).

They are characterized by a hybrid career, with a significant experience in para-academic and state-sponsored institutions, which complements an academic career or, in some cases, is a mere alternative to it. In fact, besides Machcewicz and Nowak, historian-bureaucrats seldom enjoy a distinguished academic career. They play, however, a crucial role in allocating funding and positions, sometimes without peer review and peer control, and therefore play a key role in the discipline, in a context where academic competition has dramatically increased.

When PiS returned to power triumphally in 2015, winning both the parliamentary and presidential elections again, historicity policy was well-established and could rely on a network of institutions and professionalized personnel.

### **2015 Onwards: The Kinship between History Policy and Illiberalism**

If developments in the field of history do not strictly follow the political chronology, the “good change” (*dobra zmiana*) that the second PiS-led government (2015–2023) intended to conduct, quickly translated into the field of history. The way to further limitations to the autonomy of historical research had been paved by the previous rise of the heteronomous pole of historiographical production. However, the post-2015 period saw several genuine and harsh breaches not only to academic freedoms, but more broadly to the very idea of science as autonomous from political power. This came clearly in some discourses of government officials on matters of human and social sciences.<sup>59</sup> Yet, some changes illustrated how the functioning of history policy institutions was different from that of academic institutes, and could easily serve a political agenda aiming at promoting a peculiar interpretation of the past, including by silencing diverging views.

A telling example, which triggered protest from the academic community in both Poland and abroad, was the Minister of Culture’s decision to remove Paweł Machcewicz from the directorship of the Museum of the Second World War, and to replace him with Karol Nawrocki, a historian with far less academic credentials, but aligned with the conservative and nationalist camp’s vision of national history.

Some changes in the IPN staff, apparently individual and isolated, testify of a deeper process of takeover of history policy institutions by historians aligned with the PiS agenda. As noted by Dujisin, “the rise of National Memory Institutes

---

<sup>59</sup> See for instance Adam Leszczyński, ‘PiS “unarodowi” humanistykę na uniwersytetach?’, *Oko.press*, 17 Oct. 2020, <https://oko.press/pis-unarodowi-humanistykę-na-uniwersytetach> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025).

has actually helped normalize the erosion of autonomous, scholarly expertise in the name of an idealized national community”.<sup>60</sup> This became obvious after Jarosław Szarek replaced Łukasz Kamiński as head of the IPN in 2016, with the support of the ruling majority. One of Szarek’s first moves was to fire Krzysztof Persak, a historian employed at the IPN since 2000, who had served as Kamiński’s secretary (2011–2016). Persak was known for his work on the touchy issue of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II, especially the counter-inquiry conducted by the IPN following the publication of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors*, which had confirmed that the Jews of Jedwabne had been killed by Polish civilians.<sup>61</sup> Though well-established by historical scholarship, this fact is still contested by the nationalist camp, including by Szarek himself. Persak’s dismissal was not an isolated incident, as others followed, like Adam Puławski, another Holocaust scholar, employed at the IPN’s branch in Lublin from 2000 to 2018.

This was hardly surprising as the *Kolegium* of the IPN elected in 2016 was packed with historians and public figures known for their conservative and nationalist views on national history, who had all links with the PiS party, be it as party advisers or declared supporters.<sup>62</sup> They included Andrzej Nowak and Sławomir Cenckiewicz, among others.

The harshness of these changes is testified by the unprecedented reaction they triggered in the milieu of historians, which organized a Forum of scholars of contemporary history at the University of Warsaw on 10 December 2016. The Forum, to which also participated historians close to the ruling camp, like Andrzej Nowak, aimed at a public discussion on the relationship between historical research and politics, in the context of the removal of Machcewicz from the directorship of the Museum of the Second World War and the changes in the IPN’s staff. It issued a statement in favor of the autonomy of historiography and academia from political power.

This, however, did not prevent the adoption of an amendment to the Act on the IPN in 2018, which criminalized public speech attributing responsibility for the Holocaust to Poland or the Polish nation. In the context of official discourses questioning the works of scholars of the Holocaust, emanating from both government and IPN officials, the amendment was immediately perceived as a potential threat to historical research, even though it formally protected academic freedom.

In 2021, Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking were tried on other legal grounds, which confirmed that Holocaust historians could face public harassment in Poland. Grabowski and Engelking, the co-editors of a collective volume on

<sup>60</sup> Dujisin, ‘How Illiberal Memory Regimes’.

<sup>61</sup> Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego* (Warszawa, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Valentin Behr, ‘La politique publique de l’histoire et le “bon changement” en Pologne’, *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 51, no. 1 (2020), 73–103.

Polish-Jewish relations during World War II,<sup>63</sup> had faced numerous public attacks, particularly from the IPN management and staff. They finally won their appeal against the trial, which was brought by the Polish Anti-Defamation League, an NGO sponsored by the Ministry of Justice.

As with discussions about the communist past, debates about Polish-Jewish relations during World War II focus more on contemporary Poland than on the past itself. The question of the definition of the political community is at the heart of these debates: should it be based on nationhood, i.e., ethnic Poles? Or should it be based on citizenship, which is more inclusive?<sup>64</sup>

When Nawrocki replaced Szarek as head of the IPN in 2021, infringements on the autonomy of historical research did not slow down. In fact, other historians employed at the Institute were either fired or forced to resign, sometimes for dubious reasons (the IPN has since lost several court cases). A telling example is that of Sławomir Poleszak, whose letter of dismissal included the publication of a critical article about an alleged national hero — one of the “cursed soldiers” celebrated in official discourse — as one of the reasons for his dismissal. This hero had also killed Jewish civilians.<sup>65</sup>

And yet, these changes in the field of history, which took place in a broader context of democratic backsliding, did not result in any significant challenges to the independence of historical research. At a meso level, they rather took the form of a redistribution of positions and resources within the discipline. While the successive reforms of higher education and research had exacerbated the competition between researchers for the obtention of public funding, one of the main results of history policy has been to provide a safe harbor for the development of a patriotic history, which could flourish within para-academic institutions. In the illiberal context of Hungary, and to a lesser extent Poland, this non-academic sector was granted generous public support at the expense of academic institutions. This phenomenon is described by Andrea Pető as “polypore academia”.<sup>66</sup>

The reforms of higher education and research conducted under ministers Gowin and Czarnek indeed introduced changes favoring the heteronomous pole of historiographical production, for instance, when Gowin’s cabinet intervened to favor the journals published by the IPN in the official ranking that is used for the

---

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (eds), *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warszawa, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Valentin Behr, ‘Les discussions sur la Shoah en Pologne, miroir grossissant des polarisations du champ historien’, in Audrey Kichelewski, Judith Lyon-Caen, Jean-Charles Szurek, and Annette Wieviorka (eds), *Les Polonais et la Shoah. Une nouvelle école historique* (Paris, 2019), 275–290.

<sup>65</sup> Adam Leszczyński, ‘Historyk z IPN zwolniony za artykuł ujawniający, że sławny “wyklęty” prawdopodobnie zabijał Żydów’, *Oko.press*, 10 Nov. 2021, <https://oko.press/historyk-z-ipn-zwolniony-za-artykul-o-wyklętym> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025).

<sup>66</sup> Andrea Pető, ‘The Illiberal Polypore State and Its Science Policy’, in Ninna Mörrner (ed.), *The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space* (Flemingsberg, 2022), 33–41.

bibliometric evaluation of research outputs.<sup>67</sup> All in all, between 2015 and 2023, state authorities secured significant funding and a favorable environment for para-academic institutions of history policy, which, in return, provided a nationalist historical narrative aligned with the ruling party's needs while preserving a veneer of scientific neutrality.

In this respect, academic historians who, like Andrzej Nowak, sustain an established position in academia (he sits on the editorial boards of some of the main historical journals: *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, *Dzieje Najnowsze*, *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*) and endorse the PiS history policy, provide a key contribution to the legitimization of the heteronomous constraint. It makes it more acceptable so that it does not appear as an intolerable government intervention in scientific matters. Intertwined careers and professional sociability may explain the relative lack of corporatist reaction in defense of the autonomy of historical research. The Polish Historical Society (PTH), for instance, did not react to the dismissal of historians from the IPN. The profession's reaction to the public harassment of Holocaust scholars was also far from univocal.

One of the reasons for the relatively weak resistance of Polish historians to the heteronomous constraints may also lie in the general acceptance of history policy as a necessary evil. When PiS was defeated in the 2023 parliamentary election, and the Tusk government was formed, some isolated voices in the field of history had hoped for radical changes in the country's history policy, including the dismantlement of history policy institutions, with the IPN at the forefront.<sup>68</sup> They were quickly disappointed. Not only did the Tusk government keep the history policy infrastructure, but it also introduced changes in staff and management that gave credit to the idea that such institutions were meant to serve the ruling camp's policy. Jan Żaryn, who had established (in 2020) and headed the Roman Dmowski and Ignacy Jan Paderewski Institute for the Legacy of Polish National Thought, was dismissed, and the institute was renamed the Gabriel Narutowicz Institute of Political Thought. Ironically, Adam Leszczyński, a left-leaning historian whose documented critique of PiS history policy has been cited in this article, has headed this institute since 2024.

This example, among others, illustrates the continuation of the rationales of history policy: history at the service of the rulers. If history is a battlefield, it is also a battlefield for historians, who are directly involved on the ground when they take positions of historians-bureaucrats. They thus legitimize a conception of history as a peculiar discipline, which plays a central role in civic and patriotic

---

<sup>67</sup> Adam Leszczyński, 'Jak Gowin pomógł historykom z IPN. Wbrew ekspertom podniósł punktację ich czasopisma naukowego', 5 Sept. 2019, <https://oko.press/jak-gowin-pomogl-historykom-z-ipn> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025).

<sup>68</sup> Jan Grabowski, 'Imperium Pamięci Nacjonalistycznej. Co zrobić z IPN po odsunięciu PiS od władzy?', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19 Jan. 2019.

education. At the same time, the ruling coalition that came victorious of the 2023 elections did not provide any radical policy change regarding higher education and research, where public funding remains scarce.

Why is it that history deserves such special treatment from state authorities? Its key role in shaping collective and political imaginaries, of the nation, of otherness, but also in delimitating the scope of political possibilities, has always made history relevant to rulers, not only in Poland. But the developments of history policy in this country should make us wary of the rise of a dichotomy between high-quality historiography, on the one hand, and a state-sponsored patriotic national narrative, on the other.<sup>69</sup> As the latter has been heavily promoted via history policy institutions, we should also carefully scrutinize the relationship between knowledge production and illiberal discourses and regimes.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusion

In fifteen years (2000–2015), history policy has radically transformed the conditions of production and dissemination of contemporary history. The illiberal period (2015–2023) and its effects in the field of history thus appear as the product of a longer-term process of reconfiguration of the relationship between the political and bureaucratic fields, on the one hand, and the field of history, on the other. Its effects are therefore profound, and it is unlikely that a change in government, without a re-evaluation of the objectives and means of history policy, will be sufficient to remedy the situation.

Crucially, historians have themselves contributed to limiting the autonomy of the field of history, as the relationships between fields are shaped by efficient actors, in this case, historians-bureaucrats who contribute to history policy-making.

The research approach exposed in this article could be useful beyond the Polish case. The words of historians and researchers in general contribute (voluntarily or involuntarily, explicitly or implicitly) to discourses of political mobilization in the context of a rise in identity discourse that is far from being limited to Central Europe. Moreover, Central European identity discourses are also a mirror reflecting the blank spots in the dominant historical narratives in Western Europe.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Pieter Lagrou, 'De l'histoire du temps présent à l'histoire des autres', *Vingtième Siècle*, 118 (2013), 101–119.

<sup>70</sup> David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo, 'De-democratization and the Politics of Knowledge: Unpacking the Cultural Marxism Narrative', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28, no. 3 (2021), 556–578.

<sup>71</sup> Ferenc Laczó, 'Ignore and Reassign: Examining Germany's Memory Culture in Hungary's Dark Mirror', *New Fascism Syllabus*, 14 Nov. 2022, <https://newfascismsyllabus.com/contributions/ignore-and-reassign-examining-germanys-memory-culture-in-hungarys-dark-mirror/> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025).

## Bibliography

- D. Beauvois, 'Être historien en Pologne: les mythes, l'amnésie et la "vérité"', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 38, no. 3 (1991), 353–386
- V. Behr, 'La politique publique de l'histoire et le "bon changement" en Pologne', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 51, no. 1 (2020), 73–103
- V. Behr, 'Politique historique et tournant autoritaire en Pologne', in M. Collombon and L. Mathieu (eds), *Dynamiques des tournants autoritaires* (Vulaines-sur-Seine, 2021), 117–140
- V. Behr, *Powojenna historiografia polska jako pole walki. Studium z socjologii wiedzy i polityki* (Warszawa, 2021)
- V. Behr, M. Blaive, A. Constantin, L. Neumayer, and M. Zombory, 'An Anti-Communist Consensus: The Black Book of Communism in Pan-European Perspective', *Revue d'études Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2, no. 2–3 (2020), 55–88
- V. Behr, 'Genèse et usages d'une politique publique de l'histoire. La "politique historique" en Pologne', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 46, no. 3 (2015), 21–48
- V. 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
- V. Behr, 'Les discussions sur la Shoah en Pologne, miroir grossissant des polarisations du champ historien', in A. Kichelewski, J. Lyon-Caen, J.-Ch. Szurek, and A. Wiewiorka (eds), *Les Polonais et la Shoah. Une nouvelle école historique* (Paris, 2019), 275–290
- V. Behr, 'From Anticommunism to Antiliberalism. Polish Conservative Intellectuals' Involvement in the Transnational Circulation of Ideas', in E. Hałas and N. Masłowski (eds), *Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe* (Peter Lang, 2021), 241–259
- V. Behr, 'How Historians Got Involved in Memory Politics: Patterns of the Historiography of the Polish People's Republic before and after 1989', *East European Politics and Societies*, 36, no. 3 (2022), 970–991
- V. Behr, 'The Illiberalism(s) of Polish Conservative Intellectuals', in M. Laruelle (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Oxford, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.35>
- S. Berger and Ch. Lorenz (eds), *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010)
- P. Bourdieu, *Les usages sociaux de la science. Pour une sociologie clinique du champ scientifique* (Versailles, 1997)
- R. 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
- S. Cenckiewicz, and P. Gontarczyk, *SB a Lech Wałęsa: przyczynek do biografii* (Gdańsk, 2008)
- R. Chwedoruk, *Polityka historyczna* (Warszawa, 2018)
- A. Czyżewski, S.M. Nowinowski, R. Stobiecki, and J. Żelazko (eds), *Bez taryfy ulgowej: Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej 2000–2010* (Łódź, 2012)
- D. Dakowska, 'Polish Higher Education and the Global Academic Competition: University Rankings in the Reform Debate', in T. Erkkilä (ed.), *Global University Rankings: Challenges for European Higher Education* (Basingstoke, 2013)
- D. Dakowska, 'Between Competition Imperative and Europeanisation: The Case of Higher Education Reform in Poland', *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, 69, no. 1 (2015), 129–141, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9765-6>
- M. Dobry, *The Sociology of Political Crisis* (London, 2025)
- A. Dudek, *Instytut: osobista historia IPN* (Warszawa, 2011)
- Z. Dujisin, 'How Illiberal Memory Regimes Paved the Way for the Erosion of Academic Autonomy – Lessons from Hungary', *RevDem. The Review of Democracy*, 7 Aug. 2024, <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2024/08/07/illiberal-memory-regimes/>

- J. Eisler, *Zarys dziejów politycznych Polski, 1944–1989* (Warszawa, 1992)
- B. Engelking, and J. Grabowski (eds.), *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (Warszawa, 2018)
- M. Fik (ed.), *Spór o PRL* (Kraków, 1996)
- A. Friszke, 'Jakim państwem była Polska po 1956 roku?', *Więź*, 2 (1996), 131–146
- A. Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989* (Warszawa, 2003)
- A. Friszke, 'Spór o PRL w III Rzeczypospolitej (1989–2001)', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 1 (2002), 9–28
- J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000)
- P. Grzelak, *Wojna o lustrację* (Warszawa, 2005)
- S. Jankowiak, A. Rogulska, and P. Machcewicz, *Zranione miasto: Poznań w czerwcu 1956 roku* (Poznań, 2003)
- D. Jarosz, 'Post-1989 historiography's distorted image of the relation between authorities and society in Poland during the period from 1944 to 1989', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2, no. 45 (2014), 215–240
- T. Judt, 'The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe', *Daedalus*, 121, no. 4 (1992), 83–118
- Ł. Kaminski, *Polacy wobec nowej rzeczywistości 1944–1948: Formy pozainstytucjonalnego, żywiołowego oporu społecznego* (Toruń, 2000)
- K. Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy, Polska 1943–1948* (Warszawa, 1984)
- K. Kersten, *Pisma rozproszone*, ed. T. Szarota and D. Libionka (Toruń, 2006)
- N. Kaposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, 2018)
- S. Kott, M. Kula, and Th. Lindenberg (eds), *Socjalizm w życiu powszednim. Dyktatura a społeczeństwo w NRD i PRL* (Warszawa, 2006)
- M. Kula, 'Was ich aus den legendären "Mappen" erfahren möchte', in A. Bensussan, D. Dakowska, and N. Beaupré (eds), *Die Überlieferung der Diktaturen* (Essen, 2004), 195–203
- M. Kula, *Komunizm i po komunizmie* (Warszawa, 2006)
- M. Kula, 'Mówiąc o wczoraj, myślimy o dziś. Historia we współczesnym dyskursie politycznym w Polsce', in id., *Naród, historia i... dużo kłopotów* (Kraków, 2011), 207–222
- M. Kwiek, 'Academe in transition: Transformations in the Polish academic profession', *Higher Education*, 45, no. 4 (2003), 455–476
- P. Lagrou, 'De l'histoire du temps présent à l'histoire des autres', *Vingtième Siècle*, 118 (2013), 101–119
- M.-C. Lavabre and D. Damamme, 'Les historiens dans l'espace public', *Sociétés contemporaines*, 39, no. 1 (2000), 5–21
- F. Lebaron, *La croyance économique: les économistes entre science et politique* (Paris, 2000)
- M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności* (Warszawa, 2017)
- P. Machcewicz, and K. Persak (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego* (Warszawa, 2002)
- P. Machcewicz, 'I Westerplatte i Jedwabne', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 9 Aug. 2001
- M. Mälksoo, 'The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15, no. 4 (2009), 653–680
- J.-C. Martin, 'Histoire, mémoire et oubli pour un autre régime d'historicité', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 4, no. 47 (2000), 783–804
- G. Mink and L. Neumayer (eds), *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games* (Basingstoke, 2013)
- A. Nowak, 'Westerplatte czy Jedwabne', *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 Aug. 2001
- S.M. Nowinowski, J. Pomorski, and R. Stobiecki (eds), *Pamięć i polityka historyczna: doświadczenia Polski i jej sąsiadów* (Łódź, 2008)

- A. Paczkowski (ed.), *Rozliczanie totalitarnej przeszłości: zbrodnie, kolaboracja i symbole przeszłości* (Warszawa, 2017)
- A. Paczkowski, 'Les archives de l'appareil de sécurité de la République populaire de Pologne en tant que source', *Genèses*, 52, no. 3 (2003), 58–79
- A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski* (Warszawa, 2005)
- D. Paternotte, and M. Verloo, 'De-democratization and the Politics of Knowledge: Unpacking the Cultural Marxism Narrative', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28, no. 3 (2021), 556–578
- A. Pető, 'The Illiberal Polypore State and Its Science Policy', in N. Mörner (ed.), *The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space* (Flemingsberg, 2022)
- L. Pinto, *Sociologie des intellectuels* (Paris, 2021)
- A. Polonsky and J.B. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, 2004)
- G. Sapiro, *The French Writers' War, 1940–1953* (Durham, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395126>
- G. Sapiro, 'Field', *Politika*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.politika.io/en/article/field> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025)
- P. Skibiński, T. Wiścicki, and M. Wysocki (eds), *Historycy i politycy: polityka pamięci w III RP* (Warszawa, 2011)
- V. Sklokin, 'Towards an Intellectual Genealogy of the Conservative Turn in Contemporary Poland: The Case of Arcana Magazine', in T. Stryjek and J. Konieczna-Salamatin (eds), *The Politics of Memory in Poland and Ukraine. From Reconciliation to De-Conciliation* (Routledge, 2021)
- R. Smoczyński and T. Zarycki, *Totem inteligencji. Arystokracja, szlachta i ziemiaństwo w polskiej przestrzeni społecznej* (Warszawa, 2017)
- R. Stobiecki, 'Reaktualizacja mitu historii "prawdziwej" w historiografii polskiej po 1989 r', *Pamiętnik XVI Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków we Wrocławiu* (Toruń, 2002), 11–23
- R. Stobiecki, 'W poszukiwaniu szkół historiografii dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku', in M. Kruszyński, S. Łukasiewicz, M. Mazur, S. Poleszak, and P. Witek (eds), *Klio na wolności. Historiografia dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku* (Lublin, 2016), 185–195
- D. Stola, 'Poland's Institute of National Remembrance: A Ministry of Memory?', in A. Miller and M. Lipman (eds), *The Convolutions of Historical Politics* (Budapest, 2012)
- T. Szarota, 'Dokowania Badawcze Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Zakresie Historii II Wojny Światowej', in A. Czyżewski, S.M. Nowinowski, R. Stobiecki, and J. Żelazko (eds), *Bez taryfy ulgowej: Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej 2000–2010* (Łódź, 2012)
- E. Traverso, *Le passé, modes d'emploi: histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris, 2005)
- T. Warczok and T. Zarycki, 'Bourdieu recontextualized: Redefinitions of western critical thought in the periphery', *Current Sociology*, 62, no. 3 (2014), 334–351
- T. Warczok and T. Zarycki, *Gra peryferyjna. Polska politologia w globalnym polu nauk społecznych* (Warszawa, 2016)
- J. Wawrzyniak, 'History and Memory: the Social Frames of Contemporary Polish Historiography', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 103 (2011), 127–146
- M. Zaremba and B. Brzostek, 'Polska 1956–1976: w poszukiwaniu paradygmatu', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, 10, no. 2 (2006), 25–37
- M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2001)
- T. Zarycki (ed.), *Polskie nauki społeczne w kontekście relacji władzy i zależności międzynarodowych* (Warszawa, 2022)
- T. Zarycki, R. Smoczyński, and T. Warczok, 'The Roots of Polish Culture-Centered Politics: Toward a Non-Purely Cultural Model of Cultural Domination in Central and Eastern Europe', *East European Politics and Societies*, 31, no. 2 (2017), 360–381

**Valentin Behr** – PhD in political science from the University of Strasbourg (2017); CNRS research fellow at the CESSP – Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. His research topics include history and memory politics, the sociology of political elites, the sociology of intellectuals, and intellectual history. His latest publications include the book *Powojenna historiografia polska jako pole walki. Studium z socjologii wiedzy i polityki* (Warszawa, 2021). E-mail: valentin.behr@cnrs.fr