
Justyna Tabaszewska

Polish Memory Revisited

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 1, S. 13–20

DOI:10.18318/td.2023.en.1.2 / ORCID: 0000-0001-9077-8817

What's new? Not much. We are still using
our extremely artificial rhetoric [...]¹

Marcin Świetlicki, *Nie dla Jana Polkowskiego*
[Not for Jan Polkowski]

This is yet another issue of *Teksty Drugie*, published in recent years, that is dedicated to the topic of Polish memory. The current volume comprises papers written in diverse circumstances and with different aims in mind: some were composed for the Polish-language 2016 special issue, titled *Polish Memory*, others are updated and revised versions of papers published throughout the last decade in *Teksty Drugie*, and, finally, several were prepared specifically for the current volume.

This journal persistently returns to the topic of collective and cultural memory for several reasons. One of them is that, paradoxically, there was very little change in the field of Polish politics of memory. Another one is that – as Marcin Świetlicki once put it when describing the specific poetic diction of the 1980s – the artificial rhetoric purporting that Polish memory is unavoidably stretched between either the position of victim or the position of victor has grown even louder in recent years.

Justyna Tabaszewska – Associate Professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, member of the editorial board of *Teksty Drugie*, co-editor of the new journal *Memory Studies Review*. Author of four books, including *Humanistyka służebna* [Servile humanities, 2022] and *Pamięć afektywna* [Affective memory, 2022], as well as articles published in such journals as *Memory Studies*, *Teksty Drugie*, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* and *Wielogłos*. Recipient of scholarships from the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) (2021) and NAWA – Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (the Bekker Program, Goethe University Frankfurt). Her interests include issues of affects and cultural memory. Email: justyna.tabaszewska@ibl.waw.pl.

1 Marcin Świetlicki, "Nie dla Jana Polkowskiego" [Not for Jan Polkowski], in *Zimne kraje 2* (Warszawa: Zebra, 1995).

This means that it is now more important than ever to critically respond to the narrow and politically charged framework of collective memory. And a lot has changed in the last dozen years in this regard: the number of critical studies of historical moments that are particularly painful for Polish memory has rapidly grown, as did the count of influential discussions regarding detailed case studies.² Theories and concepts systematizing collective memory have become not only more nuanced, but also garnered some unexpected public recognition, changing the topic of collective memory into a sphere of interest for the general audience.

In other words, political stagnation not only does not translate into calcification in research, but, paradoxically, provokes the further development of memory research, which has been flourishing for years (and not only in Poland) as one of the most dynamically expanding disciplines in the humanities.

This issue of *Teksty Drugie* approaches this development in a distinct manner – especially compared to previous volumes – by collecting papers that have been written over the course of seven years. What is particularly important, in my opinion, is that this is not so much the documentation of the development of research on collective memory in Poland, but rather of the Polish collective memory itself. This shift is crucial here, because we can already talk about the arrival of the fourth wave of memory studies, at least in the framework of global trends, that emphasizes such things as the role and functions of environmental memory, thinking of memory on a whole new scale (which was inspired by such theories as planetary memory³ or planetary age⁴), or expanding research on memory through the inclusion of non-human subjects (by actively posing the question of whether and how we can speak about the needs of non-humans).⁵ These changes are more opaque in the case of Polish memory studies, as the main research questions are still focused on the issues

2 See Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2022); Barbara Czarnecka, *Słabe ciała wojny. Biologie i biografie kobiet w obozach koncentracyjnych* [Weak bodies of war. Biologies and biographies of women in concentration camps] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2022); Roma Sendyka, Maria Kobielska, Jakub Muchowski and Aleksandra Szczepan, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 1* [Non-places of memory] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2021); Roma Sendyka, Aleksandra Janus, Karina Jarzyńska and Kinga Siewior, eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci 2* [Non-places of memory 2] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2021); Jan Borowicz, *Pamięć perwersyjna. Pozyccie polskiego świadka Zagłady* [Perverse memory. Perspectives of a Polish witness to the Holocaust] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2020).

3 Lucy Bond, Ben De Bruyn and Jessica Rapson, eds., *Planetary Memory in Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2018).

4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2021).

5 Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Mówić w imieniu biotycznej wspólnoty" [Speaking on behalf of the biotic community], *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2018).

of national memory (the subject of the second wave of memory studies) and the ways in which it enters into dialogue with transnational memory (which – through categories such as multidirectional memory,⁶ dialogical memory,⁷ or implied subjects⁸ – set the perspective of the third wave of memory studies).

However, it is difficult to categorize deep immersion in national memory as a disadvantage or backwardness, because the vast majority of texts included here more or less overtly call for certain activist actions regarding Polish collective memory and point to those areas that require immediate intervention. Importantly, the time span between this issue and the 2016 issue (and the ones following it, in which articles on Polish memory were published periodically, such as the issue on the environmental history of the Holocaust, the volume regarding establishing witnesses, the special issue on historical museums, and the issue on the memory of the future)⁹ allows us to trace certain shifts and decentralizations. In the current volume there are visibly more papers concerning local memories – the ones situated outside mainstream politics of memory – and there are slightly fewer papers that undertake the sensitive task of redefining Polish memory of the Holocaust. This is a significant change, showing that although there is still a lot to be done at the level of politics of memory, the development of world-class scientific research has accelerated, while simultaneously broadening the scope of its subject matter, as evidenced by a number of highly interesting publications that have appeared in recent years. Some of them were in a way “announced” by articles previously published in *Teksty Drugie*.¹⁰ Despite of this, the question of whether everything is going in the right direction remains open. When writing about research on the Holocaust and anti-Semitism conducted in Poland, it would be difficult not to recall the disturbing context of some political actions taken in recent years, including the plain attack on Prof. Barbara Engelking, head of the Center for Holocaust Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the co-author of the publication *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland*,¹¹ among many others. The

6 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009).

7 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

8 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subjects. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019).

9 See *Tekty Drugie* 2 (2017), 3 (2018), 4 (2020), 3 (2022).

10 See, e.g., Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Bracia miesiące. Studia z antropologii historycznej Polski 1939–1945* [Brother months. Studies in the historical anthropology of Poland 1939–1945] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2021); Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania* [Non-places of memory – an attempt at recognition] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2021).

11 See Engelking and Grabowski, *Night without End*.

attempt to interfere with the freedom of scientific research and to force the conduct of research that would support only predetermined theses met with strong opposition of the academic community (a letter issued by the Scientific Council of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, defending both Prof. Engelking and the freedom of scientific research was signed by several thousand scientists from all over Poland); however, it is difficult to predict whether the propensity for control and restriction will become more or less severe in the future.

I turn to this case not only to sketch the political context of memory studies and its involvement in current historical politics (regardless of the intentions of specific scientists), but also to show that in this discipline nothing is a given, as a seemingly stabilized field of enquiry can be weaponized at any time. In other words: an event (or multiple events) that slowly changed its status from hot to cold¹² and inched its way towards cultural memory may suddenly revert to the sphere of communicative memory and trigger strong affective responses.

This feature of memory contributes to the fact that subsequent waves in memory studies are – and probably always will be – cumulative. The rise of the third – transnational, or fourth – environmental, wave of memory studies does not change the fact that it is still worth examining the framework of national memories. This is partly due to their dynamic nature that allows them to oscillate between creating broader, transnational (and perhaps even posthuman) frameworks of memory and entrenching themselves in thinking about collective memory as feasible solely for the purpose of building national identity. They can also – and this is most likely the case of Polish memory – embrace the tension between these two opposites.

The Recurring Shock

In my opinion the disproportion between the increasingly bold and interesting directions of scientific research on Polish collective memory, and the increasingly conservative Polish historical policy, is invigorating the development of memory studies in Poland. Although the end of the memory boom has been predicted and proclaimed for years, it is difficult to see any signs of this in the case of Polish collective memory, which seems to grow ever more involved with matters of quite distant past, like the memory of Second World War, with each passing year.

It appears that despite the passing of time this event is far from being closed or worked through. Recent political pressure shows that for Polish national identity, the defending of the black and white image of society's involvement in the events of 1939–1945 is extremely important and politically burdened (the unequivocally and exclusively positive attitude of Poles in the face of the Holocaust is to be an

¹² See Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*.

argument for Poland's special position on the international arena). At the same time, maintaining this image is, by definition, impossible without radical interference with the scope of memory studies: Second World War and the Holocaust are events researched well enough for us to know the spectrum of behavior of the Polish society,¹³ including the not unblemished image of Polish involvement in the war atrocities. This complicated situation undoubtedly contributes to the phenomenon that I have previously described as the process of the looping of Polish memory: the work of memory, consisting in, for example, transforming communicative memory into cultural memory, or functional memory into memory storage, is disturbed and the memory of a specific event begins to function in both such spheres simultaneously. Moreover, the memory of Second World War shapes the memory framework of the political transformation of 1989 as much as it itself is shaped by that event (accompanied by the possible futures that the transformation unlocked).¹⁴

The looping of the memory of Second World War and the time of transformation is clearly visible in Polish politics of memory: the year 1989 is sometimes interpreted as the "true end" of Second World War and the date of regaining full independence (which, in turn, links the memory framework of the 1989 breakthrough with the memory of the end of First World War, transferring the expectations of the year 1918 on to 1989), and sometimes is perceived as a somewhat fake, deficient breakthrough, which needs to be "completed" through some other political change. Despite the existence of these contradictory frameworks of memory, the period of political transformation in the 1990s is significantly less researched than Second World War, and, most likely, the study of this period will be the next step in the development of memory studies in Poland. One can even speculate with a high degree of confidence that in the light of recent political events (especially the Russian attack on Ukraine), the memory of the political transformation will be of interest not only to researchers of national memory, but also to scientists interested in the broader framework of Central and Eastern European memory.¹⁵ This direction of the development of memory studies – that is, the search for frameworks of memory that are broader than national but at the same time narrower than global – will most likely become a vital part of new trends in memory research.

13 See Lech Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci. Esej socjologiczny* [Polish politics of memory. Sociological essay] (Warszawa: WAIp, 2008); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

14 Justyna Tabaszewska, *Pamięć afektywna. Dynamika polskiej pamięci po roku 1989* [Affective memory. Dynamics of Polish memory after 1989] (Toruń: Wyd. UMK, 2022).

15 See previous attempts to create a framework for European memory: Konrad Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., *Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

The next stages in the development of memory research will therefore provoke the emergence of new challenges: the character of some of them will be cumulative (after all, there is more and more to remember, and the perspectives from which memory of specific events is reconstructed only grow in number), but the nature of others will be structural. More and more attention in memory studies is (and will be) paid to previously marginalized phenomena: from the non-human subjects of memory, through environmental and planetary memory, to research on broadly understood temporality and the function of the future in defining memory.¹⁶ At the same time, recent years have further added some complex memory nodes: from the pandemic, through the climate crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Each of these events already affects the current framework of collective memory, and their impact will be, in all probability, fundamental. What is more, it is difficult to expect that the events defining the present will not influence how the past is remembered and how it is enacted in the present. The first symptoms of this change are already visible in the fourth wave of memory studies: the reorientation towards the environment and the discovery of supra-human scales of memory are certainly related to the sense that the climate catastrophe, although extended in time, is already happening¹⁷ and will shape both our future and the memory of the past. The climate and ecological catastrophe is also at least partly responsible for the increasingly clear formulation of the question of how to reconcile human understanding of time, memory, and agency with the long duration of ecosystems.

Furthermore, it is becoming evident that concepts such as planetary memory or slow memory will gradually replace categories related to what, in my opinion, can be described as collective episodic memory (a type of memory that focuses on specific events such as wars or genocides). In the case of collective episodic memory the timeline is constructed from one event to another, and what is between them is perceived as context rather than as an object of interest in its own right. In the case of Polish memory of the twentieth century, a punctual structure is clearly visible: from First World War, through the regaining of independence, Second World War and the loss of independence, to regaining political independence anew in 1989. In such a case, what comes “in-between” or “after,” is not yet treated as an autonomous and complex process, which should be researched with at least an equal level of interest as any of the great events mentioned above. This punctual way of constructing memory has clear disadvantages: one is the already mentioned tendency to create memory loops, another – even more serious – is the difficulty in

16 Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby and Anthony Rowland, eds., *The Future of Memory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

17 Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm. Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

building a framework of collective memory for processual events. This is probably why natural or nature-related events, such as the climate crisis, are more difficult to frame within the methodology of memory studies. However, the need to deal with processual events and to capture them in narrative forms is now becoming more and more pressing, so the transformation of collective episodic memory into a new model of memory is inevitable.

This trend is already visible in certain articles published in this volume, which track the evolution of memory taking place within the frames of national memory. By identifying the numerous aberrations in the work of Polish collective memory, expressed either through forgetting about some important processes or attaching excessive importance to others, scholars such as Adam Lipszyc, Marek Zaleski, Andrzej Leder or Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, among others, clearly show how complex and paradoxical memory work actually is. Its non-linearity, as well as entanglement in political influences and current politics of history have been noticed for a long time, but currently the level of complexity of memory frames goes beyond what was expected even a few years back. This is shown with great clarity in papers by Tomasz Rakowski and Karolina Koprowska, focusing on the discovery of new perspectives of remembering, and by Ryszard Nycz and Przemysław Czapliński, who focus on the changes in the structure of collective memory.

For now, it is still too early to assess what impact the events of the last few years will have on this slow evolution in the functioning of memory frameworks. We do not know yet whether the COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered discontinuously, as a "break in normality," whether it will become one of the defining moments of the twenty-first century, or whether it will slowly fade into oblivion, as was the case with the Spanish flu pandemic which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Similarly, we do not know how the war in Ukraine will be remembered in the future: as a political distortion of limited scope or maybe as the defining moment of a broader geopolitical change in Central and Eastern Europe. However, each of the mentioned events constitutes a significant shock to both national and transnational frameworks of memory, thus ensuring that research on collective memory will not run out of material in the near future. Nevertheless, it is still worth asking the question of whether grappling with collective memory still makes sense in a much less stable world (and part of Europe), than was envisaged only a few years ago?

I am returning here to the question that was posed in slightly different words some years back by Gavriel Rosenfeld,¹⁸ who referred to the impact that the events of September 11, 2001 should have on memory studies. The thinker pointed out that in the face of the threat of terrorism, we should focus much more on the future than on the past. Although Rosenfeld's question aroused a strong response among memory

18 Gavriel Rosenfeld, "A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing?" *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (1) (2009).

researchers – and it was rather negative, pointing to the fact that preparing for the future requires detailed knowledge of the past¹⁹ – it is worth recalling it now for at least two reasons. Firstly, because contrary to Rosenfeld's predictions, memory studies did not lose their momentum after 9/11, although questions of their purpose are even more relevant now than they were when Rosenfeld posed them. Secondly, because orientation towards the future in memory studies is now an increasingly apparent trend, and one directly resonating with his doubts. Typically, the relationship between the past, present, future, and memory is explained in this context by reference to the ideas of Reinhart Koselleck,²⁰ who pointed out that our present is shaped equally by references to the past and the future. While the past is the realm of experience which gives shape to our experience of the present, the future is the horizon of imagination which, on the one hand, is defined by contemporary perceptions of the sphere of possibility, but, on the other hand – through this conceptual backward projection to the present actually influences what will happen in the future.

This means – in Koselleck's terms – that the less stable the horizon of our imaginations is, the less stable not only the future, but also the past become. Destabilization of ideas about the future affects the present, which in turn affects how and why the past is remembered. Therefore, when making cautious predictions about the future, we can assume that in the coming years we will see further waves and phases in memory studies rather than a slow disintegration of discourse.

Translated by Rafał Pawluk

Abstract

Justyna Tabaszewska

INSTITUTE OF LITERARY RESEARCH OF THE POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (WARSAW)

Polish Memory Revisited

An introduction to the new (2023) special issue of *Teksty Drugie* on Polish collective memory.

Keywords:

collective memory, Polish memory, cultural memory, forgetting

19 Cf. Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17 (4) (2011): 4–18.

20 Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).