

Remembering and Forgetting

Abstract This chapter discusses the *non*-national and ethnically varied character of Poland–Lithuania and its diverse population that was actively forgotten during the nineteenth century by noble historians and their Polish nationalist successors during the century’s last third. They chose to remember only about these salient aspects of Poland–Lithuania on which the novel ideology of Polish ethnic nationalism was to be based. These aspects included Catholicism, the Polish language, and the overall culture of Poland–Lithuania’s nobility, however, carefully posed as the estate-neutral culture of the Polish nation.

Keywords Catholicism · Culture of Poland–Lithuania’s nobility
Forgetting the *non*-national · Polish ethnic nationalism
Polish language

The semantic and onomastic equation and the simultaneous conflation of the official names of Poland–Lithuania (‘First Republic’), interwar Poland (‘Second Republic’), communist Poland (‘People’s Republic’) and postcommunist Poland (‘Third Republic’) hinge on the hard-working word *rzecz(y)pospolita*. The term is not permitted to fall out of use, as it did in modern colloquial Polish, and continues to stubbornly feature in the four polities’ official names. It puts a symbolic equality sign among these states, proposing that (with the partial exception of communist Poland) each of them, beginning with the original *Rzeczpospolita*

of Poland–Lithuania, is a successive ‘reincarnation’ of the previous one. The entailed continuity of statehood and history underpins the current Polish national master narrative. This narrative’s main tenet of continuity remains the constant of ‘patriotic history’ as it was taught in Polish schools during the interwar period and in the communist decades, and is still taught after the fall of communism in 1989 (Jaskułowski and Surmiak 2017). Obviously, other events and interpretations of the ‘Polish’ past were variously emphasized (even falsified) or altogether removed from history textbooks, but this constant of continuity, of continuous—though at times fractured—‘Polish’ statehood has remained the fully accepted and espoused national axis of the Polish national master narrative.

However, this manner of telling the story excludes the history of various social, ethnic, linguistic or confessional groups, alongside the territories where they used to live, and which nowadays happen to be located outside Poland’s frontiers. These do not fit the master narrative or disrupt the cherished myth of continuity, and thus are—or even *have to be*—consigned to oblivion. A similar treatment was meted out to such groups and their histories in present-day Poland’s western and northern territories (or so-called *Ziemie Odzyskane*, meaning ‘Recovered Territories’) that mostly had never constituted part of Poland–Lithuania or interwar Poland and remained within the boundaries of Germany (and earlier, of Prussia) prior to 1945 (*Ziemie* 1947). In West Germany’s German language terminology, these territories east of the Oder–Neisse line drawn at the Potsdam Conference are known as the *deutsche Ostgebiete* (or German Eastern Territories).¹ In Polish literature, the less ideologized sobriquet *Ziemie Zachodnie i Północne* (Western and Northern Lands) began to appear in scholarly literature after 1956 (Fochler-Hauke and Kremling 1956; Męclewski 1960).

As in the case of every national master narrative (but especially in those developed for the sake of ethnolinguistic nation-states), Polish *national* history is composed as much of remembrance as of oblivion. In this essay, I offer a synoptic look at an element drawn from the ‘black matter’ of things forgotten, or better, willed out from the publically cultivated and shared Polish *national* memory. This which is forgotten does not become non-existent. In one way or another, the forgotten does

influence the remembered. The job of explaining the remembered is hard, and at times impossible, without a conscious effort to uncover at least a salient part of the forgotten. Then it can be usefully reincorporated into an explication of a process or an event that features prominently in the remembered. Forcing on a target audience ‘nationally correct’ interpretations of the past without recourse to the forgotten spawns paradoxes and blatant untruths. Jan Józef Lipski (1929–1991), a precursor and one of the foremost figures of the German–Polish reconciliation, once said of the forgotten: ‘We must tell all to each other [...]. Without this the burden of the past will not let us enter a common future’² (my own translation) (Lipski 1996 [1985]: 89–90).

The part of the forgotten Polish—or more correctly, Polish–Lithuanian—past which I focus on here may help to understand why the Lithuanians, the Belarusians, the Ukrainians or the Jews *refuse* to see Poland–Lithuania as a Poland. Like the Poles, these nations have a similar right to claim the Commonwealth as *their* polity, one of their former Lithuanias, Belaruses, Ukraines or Israels. Many Poles disagree, which is a knee-jerk reaction among ethnolinguistic nationalists enamored with the cherished ideal of a continual tradition of national statehood, couched in terms of language and ethnicity, which is at least one millennium old. For such staunch Polish nationalists, it is unthinkable that language and ethnicity might not have been of import for statehood formation, legitimation and maintenance as recently as a century or two ago. Unfortunately, they are cognitively unable to concede that a common past may yield different and separate, yet equally valid, presents.

I hope my essay may constitute a small corrective to this Polish national fallacy.

NOTES

1. Because from the West German perspective the ‘German Eastern Territories’ found themselves in postwar Poland (and in the Soviet Union in the case of Kaliningrad Region, that is, the former East Prussia), it was also popular in West Germany to refer to East Germany as ‘Central Germany’ (*Mitteldeutschland*) prior to 1972 (cf. Mampel 1968), when both the German states officially recognized each other (cf. Vertrag 1972).
2. *Musimy powiedzieć sobie wszystko [...]. Bez tego ciężar przeszłości nie pozwoli nam wejść we wspólną przyszłość* (in the Polish original).

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