Acta Poloniae Historica
128, 2023
PL ISSN 0001–6829

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# 'COAT THIEVES' AND BANDITS? BELARUSIAN COUNTER-MEMORY OF THE 'CURSED SOLDIERS'*

**Abstract**

In the article, we analyse attitudes of representatives of the Belarusian minority in Poland towards the armed anti-communist underground operating in the Podlasie region after 1944 (the so-called 'cursed soldiers'). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with various Belarusian actors, as well as on observations made during field research in the Podlasie region in June 2021, we are able to illustrate a clash between official commemorative practices and the local and communicative memory of the Belarusians. We analyse the role played by the collective memory of the underground among the Belarusian minority in Podlasie against the backdrop of the hegemonic politics of memory that glorifies the 'cursed soldiers' as national heroes. The analysis of counter-hegemonic memory accounts and their relation to dominant narratives uncovers the emotions generated by the hegemonic politics of memory among representatives of the Belarusian minority, who generally regard it as depreciating their experience and evoking a sense of endangerment. We show that

* The research presented in this article was supported by the Polish National Science Centre under research grant no. UMO-2019/33/B/HS6/00124.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/APH.2023.128.03

Belarusian memory is perceived as incompatible with the ideological assumptions of the hegemonic Polish memory; therefore, we want to give voice to the marginalised representatives of the Belarusian minority. However, the Belarusian minority should not be perceived as a homogenous group – our analysis points to the fact that various actors various actors negotiate the hegemonic politics of memory in various ways when faced with the pressure of assimilation.

**Keywords:** Belarusian minority in Poland, counter-memory, cursed soldiers

## INTRODUCTION

The article investigates the attitudes of the Belarusian minority towards the armed anti-communist underground operating in the Podlasie region after 1944. We analyse how the 'cursed soldiers' serve as 'figures of memory'[1] for our Belarusian interviewees, who construct a counter-hegemonic memory in relation to the official politics of memory commemorating the armed underground. Our research is based on thirty semi-structured interviews, conducted between May 2021 and June 2022 with persons identifying as Belarusians, advocating on behalf of the Belarusian minority, or working in various institutions of memory or culture. These sources are supplemented with data acquired through participant observation conducted during a research trip to Podlasie in June and July 2021. The principle of maximal diversity regarding relevant social categories – i.e. age, gender, profession, education, residence (village, town, city) – was followed during the recruitment of interviewees. Interviewees agreed to participate in the research under the condition of anonymity and confidentiality; thus, any data that could lead to their identification is erased. Anonymity and confidentiality were of special importance to them – many feared that negative comments on the underground could bring harm to them or their relatives.

## DOMINANT MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORY

Our main theoretical assumption is that dominant national identities are often formed on the basis of common representations of the past created by nation-states, still the leading actors in the field of politics

[1] Hereinafter quoted after the Polish edition of Jan Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, transl. Anna Kryczyńska-Pham (Warszawa, 2008), 67–8.

of memory. Dominant representations of the past function not only as sources of legitimisation of power but also as tools for shaping identities. Representations of the past propagated by the ruling elites often mobilise essentialist identity discourses.[2] Due to this fact, national meta-narratives can serve as effective instruments of stabilizing and naturalizing relations of power, for instance, by presenting these relationships as traditions deeply rooted in the past.[3] Such a dominant national memory relies on two complementary moments: de-differentiation, or universalisation of the experience of one particular group; and differentiation, or the ascription of citizens to various groups distributed hierarchically within an existing national unity.

In the spirit of critical social research, we focus not on dominant narratives, which only contextualise our analyses, but first and foremost on the marginalised memory of excluded groups. We postulate a fair distribution of memory, which should amplify local identities and politics of memory. Minority groups have limited access to the public sphere, and their experiences of suffering and victimhood are not always seen as legitimate and worthy of public recognition. Therefore, we focus on analysing Belarusian narratives on the armed underground and their relations to the dominant nationalist and conservative politics of memory. We argue that the heroic vision of the armed anti-communist underground that bravely fought both Nazi and Soviet occupiers clashes with how the 'cursed soldiers' are remembered in those areas of the Podlasie region that are inhabited by Belarusians. The experiences of the Belarusian minority lead them to both question the hegemonic vision of the past and create radically divergent interpretations of not only the underground but also the past more broadly.

By negotiating or deconstructing the nationalist and conservative politics of memory, our interviewees actualise the minority 'counter-memory',[4] a vision of the past that is deemed 'false' and/

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[2] Ruth Wodak (ed.), *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht's War of Annihilation* (London, 2008); Ana Maria Alonso, 'The Politics of Space, Time, and Substance: State Formation, Nationalism, and Ethnicity', *Annual Anthropological Review*, 29 (1994), 379–405.

[3] Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, 1995).

[4] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977).

or 'insignificant' by the dominant structures of memory. However, despite being part of a marginalised group, our interviewees construct and transmit alternative conceptions of the past, which change the structure of social memory, whether gradually or radically. They could attain political and cultural emancipation if their historical narratives were to achieve equal status with the perspective formulated within the dominant discourse. In contrast to the hegemonic politics of memory, our interviewees do not aspire to a monopoly on historical truth but rather to public recognition and legitimisation of their memory; thus, some can be perceived as outcasts of memory.[5] Although their understanding of the past originates within communicative memory, it gradually becomes a part of the Belarusian cultural memory (more real, normative, persistent, and formative) that forms the basis of group identity.[6] However, those who co-shape Belarussian counter-memory hope that by addressing topics that are marginalised and excluded by the dominant discourse (their vision of the past, especially their memory of the anti-communist underground), they can consolidate the identity of the minority group, as well as influence – to a certain degree – the memory of the majority group.

## THE MEMORY POLITICS: FROM BANDITS TO THE CURSED SOLDIERS

The focus of our analyses is Podlasie, traditionally a culturally, ethnically, religiously, and nationally varied region. While it has sustained complicated processes of nationalisation, historians generally agree that the former Białystok Voivodeship, especially territories to the south of Bielsk Podlaski county, has had a significant Belarusian population. It is estimated that after the Second World War, Bielsk Podlaski county had 191,000 inhabitants, with Poles comprising 55 per cent (105,000) and Belarusians 45 per cent (86,000) of the population. Belarusians were the majority in some of the communes. Poles identified the Orthodox denomination with the Belarusian nationality and the peasant social class, while Catholics were perceived as ethnically Polish and, at least in part, of noble origin. Both communities treated each other with mutual distrust, or even hostility, due to long-lasting

[5] *Ibid.*, 207.
[6] Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa*, 67–8.

national, religious, and class antagonisms. In the post-war years, after the Polish border was moved further west, Soviet authorities enacted a population exchange – those identified as Belarusians had to leave the territories of the 'new Poland', while Polish migrants from the Soviet Union (USSR) were brought in to take their place.

The armed anti-communist underground was a resistance movement against the communists that began in 1944. After Soviet troops entered pre-war Polish territory, the USSR installed the communist-dominated Polish Committee of National Liberation [Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, PKWN].[7] The communists did not enjoy much support from the Polish society, which, in the rigged parliamentary elections of 1947, voted overwhelmingly for the Polish People's Party. However, there was also a more militant underground, which foresaw the break-out of a war between the West and the USSR. The armed underground originated mainly from the Polish underground state operating under Nazi occupation, which at its peak numbered about half a million people, with the Home Army accounting for up to 380,000, according to various estimates.[8] In early 1945, the Home Army was dissolved, as the High Command considered the armed struggle against the USSR impossible. The underground Resistance Movement Without War and Sabotage 'Freedom and Independence' [Ruch Oporu bez Wojny i Dywersji "Wolność i Niezawisłość"] was established to produce propaganda and intelligence. Its goal was to confine the armed struggle, which proved to be difficult to achieve because its authorities had limited control over the partisan units, and some groups, such as National Armed Forces [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ], did not recognise its authority. The armed underground was fragmented, uncontrollable, and beset by internal conflicts. Podlasie, due to its high forest cover, low population density, and peripheral location with respect to the main centres of power, was one of the main areas of underground activity – its actions sparked heated debates to this

[7] In December 1944, the PKWN was replaced by the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland [Tymczasowy Rząd Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej], and then, in June 1945, by the Provisional Government of National Unity [Tymczasowy Rząd Jedności Narodowej] – both to different degree dominated by the Polish Workers Party [Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR] and its satellites.

[8] Andrzej Leon Sowa, *Kto wydał wyrok na miasto. Plany operacyjne ZWZ-AK (1940–1944) i sposoby ich realizacji* (Warszawa, 2016), 116–20.

day. Although partisans had some local support, at the same time, they exploited the villagers: they looted food and clothing and killed people suspected of collaboration with the communists. Some partisans held anti-Semitic views and killed Jews whom they associated with communism and conducted ethnic cleansing in the borderlands. One of the most controversial figures among these fighters is Romuald 'Bury' Rajs, whose troops burned five Belarusian villages to the ground: Zanie, Zaleszany, Kończowizna, Szpaki, and Wólka Wygonowska. His soldiers killed 79 people in total, among them children, women, and the elderly. Their victims also included 30 wagon-drivers murdered in the vicinity of the village of Puchały Stare.[9] Historians have established beyond doubt that 'Bury' was responsible for crimes against civilians, although right-wing historians tried to justify these crimes by framing them as a struggle against collaborators. However, the testimony of 'Bury', confirmed by the findings of an investigation conducted by the Institute of National Remembrance [Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN] between 2002 and 2005, indicates that the eradication of those villages was meant to force the Belarusians to move to the USSR, as members of the anti-communist underground intended to create a uninational, Catholic Poland.[10]

The perception of 'Bury' represents the most straightforward case of a more complex issue – the image of the armed anti-communist underground in the local memory and its relationship to the official remembrance of the so-called Cursed Soldiers [*żołnierze wyklęci*]. The very notion of 'cursed soldiers' appeared in the public discourse in the 1990s within far-right milieus and represented uncompromising anti-communism. This symbol was aimed not only against the People's Republic of Poland but also the post-1989 Third Republic since part of the right perceived it as a continuation of the communist system: the result of a 'betrayal' on the part of the liberal opposition which made a deal with the communists. The anti-systemic right developed a cult of the anti-communist underground, initially on the margins

[9] Jerzy Kulak, *Rozstrzelany oddział* (Warszawa, 2004).

[10] 'Informacja o ustaleniach końcowych śledztwa S 28/02/Zi w sprawie pozbawienia życia 79 osób – mieszkańców powiatu Bielsk Podlaski w tym 30 osób tzw. furmanów w lesie koło Puchał Starych, dokonanych w okresie od dnia 29 stycznia 1946r. do dnia 2 lutego 1946', https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/dla-mediow/komunikaty/9989-,Informacja-o-ustaleniach-koncowych-sledztwa-S-2802Zi-w-sprawie-pozbawienia-zycia.html [Accessed: 10 June 2023].

of the Polish political discourse. However, due to the activities of the IPN, especially after the appointment of the conservative and right--leaning Janusz Kurtyka as its president and, paradoxically, owing to the support it received from parties of the centre, the cult has been incorporated into mainstream politics. The politics of commemoration of the 'cursed soldiers' has expanded after 2015, when the national-conservative Law and Justice [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS] party won the elections. From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, it seems that PiS transformed the 'cursed soldiers' into a cardinal symbol of their politics of memory, which forms the basis of their ideological project of a moral regeneration of the Polish nation. Since 2015, the institutionalisation and popularisation of the memory of the 'cursed soldiers' has visibly escalated, with previously protracted processes abruptly accelerating and deepening.

Successive heads of the IPN, the leading institution in Poland responsible for implementing the politics of memory, which combines research, educational, and prosecuting functions, have often declared that cultivating the memory of 'cursed soldiers' as national heroes was their priority. The present head of the Institute compared the partisans to apostles or secular saints. IPN cooperates with various right-wing foundations and with public schools in organising diverse educational activities, such as, for example, pupils' competitions. At the same time, PiS and institutions dominated by the party, among them the public media, extend the 'cursed soldiers' mythology into popular culture by, for example, providing a platform for nationalist rappers whose works promote the myth.[11] Poland's right-wing government also finances new institutions whose purpose is to promote the 'cursed soldiers' – such as the Museum of the Cursed Soldiers in Ostrołęka or the Museum of the Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic in Warsaw. Public companies sponsor lectures, historical reconstructions, musical concerts, theatre plays, film festivals, and sports competitions devoted to the memory of the 'cursed soldiers'. The government continuously erects new monuments to the 'cursed soldiers', which are solemnly unveiled by politicians and the Catholic clergy. For example, in September 2022, in Mielec, a six-metre-high monument devoted to the 'cursed soldiers', believed to be Poland's

[11] For a broader description of this phenomenon, see Piotr Majewski, *Rap w służbie narodu. Nacjonalizm i kultura popularna* (Warszawa, 2021).

highest monument, was unveiled. Cities and towns governed by PiS change street names and school patrons to commemorate local partisans. This intensification of the politics of memory foregrounding the 'cursed soldiers' is seen in many examples.

The institutionalisation of the cult of the 'cursed soldiers' was accompanied by the process of the 'thickening' of this symbol: PiS began to assign a whole set of meanings to this figure under its ideology.[12] From a straightforward symbol of uncompromising anti--communism, the 'cursed soldiers' came to stand in for a complex narrative and a plethora of meanings defined according to an all--or-nothing principle – for the 'true' Poles, they represent a specific conservative, nationalist, mythical, and symbolic constellation which has to be accepted in its entirety. The 'cursed soldiers' symbolise the struggle for Polish national independence; they have been inscribed into the canon of Polish history as insurgents in yet another Polish national uprising (dated 1944–63). They represent a narrowly perceived Polishness identified with Catholicism, treated as the basis of national identity within the ideology of PiS. In the hegemonic politics of memory, the 'cursed soldiers' function as an explicit and unequivocal embodiment of the Polish nation, thus marking the boundary between us, the 'true' Polish anti-communists, Catholics, traditionalists, etc., who support PiS as the sole inheritor of the tradition of the struggle for independence, and the internal and external enemies. At the same time, the 'cursed soldiers' provide a symbolic representation of the fate of the Polish nation that suffered under two equivalent totalitarianisms, German and Soviet. (The belief that the latter was even worse appears on the margins of this discourse.) The official politics of memory, following in the footsteps of the Polish People's Republic, is also marked by a victim rivalry and search for martyrdom and tends to equalise the fates of the Jews and the Poles during the Second World War. It sometimes even suggests that the Poles suffered more than the Jews, as they were murdered also after the war, a notion supposedly proven by the tragic fate of the 'cursed soldiers'. At the same time, the anti-Semitic stereotype of Judeo--Bolshevism is also present within this discourse in a more or less

[12] Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, 'Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland', *East European Politics and Societies*, xxxiii, 2 (2019), 435–71.

concealed manner. It functions as an element of a broader strategy of externalisation, which perceives communism as an ideology alien to the Polish nation and embraced by 'others' – national minorities (Jews, Slovaks, Belarusians), outcasts from the Polish nation, as well as by external actors, such as the USSR. At the same time, the right--wing discourse justifies crimes the armed anti-communist resistance committed against Jews, Slovaks, and Belarusians or even denies that they ever took place.[13]

## BELARUSIAN COUNTER-MEMORY

The Podlasie region can be seen as a 'borderland of memories', where different experiences and interpretations of the past bring about conflicted communities of memory. One of the interviewees refers to such varied and conflicting memories of the Second World War and the 'cursed soldiers' in the following terms:

> […] one of my first experiences, when I turned eighteen, in the town of Milejczyce. During a conversation, an elderly man starts talking about the war and says that it began in 1945. "What are you saying…", I replied, "it started in 1939!" "We never noticed anything then…", he responded. "There were some Germans, later the Soviets, we lived normally, without any significant changes. The war began in 1945, my son …, when neighbours [Catholic Poles] from Pokaniew began to come by. First they came with threats, then they stole, and ultimately they killed us. [Bielsk Podlaski, interview 4]

The hegemonic politics of memory portrays partisans as unambiguous national heroes, but the interviewee recalls a sense of endangerment. Interestingly, the quote shows that some Belarusians perceived anti-communist partisans as a greater threat than the Soviets or the Germans. The sense of threat was reinforced by the fact that Polish neighbours from the surrounding villages joined the underground and

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[13] Krzysztof Jaskułowski and Piotr Majewski, 'Populist in Form, Nationalist in Content? Law and Justice, Nationalism and Memory Politics', *European Politics and Society* (2022) (online first edition, DOI: 10.1080/23745118.2022.2058752); Kornelia Kończal, 'The Invention of the "Cursed Soldiers" and Its Opponents: Post-War Partisan Struggle in Contemporary Poland', *East European Politics and Societies*, xxxiv, 1 (2020), 67–95.

looted and murdered their Belarusian neighbours. According to many respondents, contemporary national-conservative memory politics evokes strong negative emotions among the Belarusian minority, especially a sense of fear. For this reason, among others, the Belarusian counter-hegemonic memory is a defensive memory. Contrary to the hegemonic memory, it focuses on accounts of wrongdoings, showcasing the victims' perspective. Some interviewees, especially those who come from families treated to violence at the hands of the underground, claim that if it were not for the politics of memory centred around the 'cursed soldiers', they would not have raised publicly the topic of crimes committed by the underground:

> […] as a group comprised then [in the 1980s and 1990s] of young Belarusian activists and historians, we had no intention of promoting our historical memory of wrongdoings. We wanted to integrate with the Poles, but we were forced to remember anyway. [Białystok, interview 7]

Some of our interviewees emphasise that the blind affirmation of the 'cursed soldiers' within the hegemonic memory leads the counter-hegemonic memory to view the underground as exclusively harmful to the Belarusians. As a result, members of the underground and their actions that could have been otherwise perceived as neutral or even positive are repressed from Belarusian memory. In other words, the glorification of the 'cursed soldiers' *en bloc*, including figures such as 'Bury', leads to a kind of counter-reaction: Belarusians perceive the commemoration of post-communist partisans negatively, even if the specific figures involved are uncontroversial. The hegemonically glorified memory of Romuald 'Bury' Rajs is of particular significance in this regard: "I can't see 'Bury' as a hero, and I even think that such historical figures had done much disservice to the true 'cursed soldiers'. His actions reflect on those who had not behaved in such a way, who had not murdered civilians and children" [Białystok, interview 2].

Such a perspective is shared by the vast majority of our interviewees, who point out that 'Bury's' actions amounted mainly to robbing, persecuting, and killing Belarusians, culminating in the 'inhumane' murder of wagon drivers and the burning of Belarusian villages to the ground. Within Belarusian narratives, 'Bury' functions as the paradigm of a partisan, characterised by our interviewees – according to their local and familial memory – as a 'coat thieves', 'thief', and 'bandit',

especially in the context of intergroup relations. However, it is worth noting that in public situations which involve out-group members, our respondents refer to the partisans as 'cursed soldiers', which testifies to their willingness to negotiate the signs that are transmitted to them through the hegemonic politics of memory:

> Formerly, they were referred to as "fur-coaters" – meaning those who steal fur coats. … In the village that I come from, they called them bands [*bandy*]. But nowadays, I have relations with different communities, so I don't call them bands, but simply "Bury's" people or cursed soldiers. Sometimes I use the phrase "'Bury's' band" when there are specific reasons for that. [Białystok, interview 5]

Our interviewees often share the conviction that the Polish state has traditionally conducted a policy of forced assimilation towards the Belarusians. From this perspective, Orthodox Belarusians have been perceived as, at best, 'second-class citizens', and at worst – as undesired aliens. Our respondents claim that many Belarusians distrust the Polish state, as well as Polish organisations or social movements. Thus, in the Belarusian memory, it is not only the anti-communist underground that has an entirely negative image, but also the Polish Underground State, the Home Army, those involved in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and even the Solidarity movement are seen as a threat:

> As a child, I didn't know what the Solidarity movement was about – I just knew that it was something horrible. Solidarity and also the Home Army – but the latter no longer existed, while the former was here. […] All those extremist Polish initiatives were threatening to us, as they were focused on preserving Polishness, preserving the Polish statehood, and, at the same time, opposing Belarusian and Orthodox identities. [Białystok, interview 8]

According to the respondents, the dominant attitude towards crimes committed by the 'cursed soldiers' against Belarusians has remained unchanged since 1945. It is inspired by the romantic auto-stereotype of the Poles, prevalent since the end of the nineteenth century: Poles as a nation of innocent victims, as the Messiah of nations, those who only acted justly toward other nations.[14] For our interviewees, the

[14] Krzysztof Jaskułowski, Piotr Majewski, and Adrianna Surmiak, *Teaching History, Celebrating Nationalism: History School Education in Poland* (New York, 2022).

intensification of the politics of remembrance focused on the 'cursed soldiers' is associated with the rise to power of PiS, which has merged it with the institutional apparatus of the state and its tools to impose, consolidate, and stabilise the hegemonic memory of the majority. Belarusians were victimised by the underground because of their nationality and faith. Our respondents believe that the underground wanted to fight not only the communist authorities but also the Orthodox population. For this reason, 'Bury' did not target the Soviet collaborators but those he considered undesirable in the Polish state due to their faith and nationality. Charges of "sympathising with the communist authorities" were only a pretext for ethnic cleansing, a fact repressed from the politics of memory:

> This is a suppression of the fact that Poles can do harm. I remember a journalist who … came here and heard about "Bury". He said to me, 'You claim that a Polish officer would murder women and children?'. I replied, 'Yes, any soldier can murder women and children, even a Polish one'. He countered, 'Maybe other soldiers can, but not Polish soldiers!!!' […] Simply put, Poles could not have murdered Jews […], Belarusians, and Ukrainians. No, Poles were always the victims. Polish soldiers – immaculate knights of the borderlands. [Białystok, interview 7]

The glorification of figures such as Romuald 'Bury' Rajs is thus perceived as deeply rooted in the Polish culture, which developed the colonial image of Poland as the bulwark of Catholicism, as well as the conviction that Eastern Orthodox Slavs are culturally inferior.[15] According to our interviewees, the current hegemonic politics of memory echoes those colonial narratives, also by accusing Eastern Slavs of collaborating with the enemies of Poland, especially with Russia in its various guises: "[…] it might stem from a centuries-old conviction the Poles have, that they are superior to Eastern Slavs. It is due to communism and the Soviet Union – evil comes from Russia. We are the West, a part of the Western civilisation". At the same time,

[15] Bogusław Bakuła, 'Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki)', *Teksty Drugie*, 6 (2006), 11–33; Daniel Beauvois, 'Mit "kresów wschodnich", czyli jak mu położyć kres', in Wojciech Wrzesiński (ed.), *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku* (Wrocław 1994), 93–105; Dariusz Skórczewski, 'Melancholia dyskursu kresoznawczego', *Porównania. Czasopismo poświęcone zagadnieniom komparatystyki literackiej*, xi (2012), 11.

interviewees noted that the hegemonic politics of memory accuses them of having pro-communist sympathies and suggests that their resistance to the commemoration of the 'cursed soldiers' is due to the fact that they are descendants of those who persecuted members of the anti-communist underground: "Their hostility is especially noticeable during any discussion about 'Bury'. Those who support him and the 'cursed soldiers' always say that they represent the healthy core, the unspoiled group, while the lot of you are rubbish, descendants of communists, descendants of criminals. [Białystok, interview 2]".

Our respondents point to the fact that such beliefs are present not only in the narratives of extremist Polish nationalists, but also in official statements. President of Poland Andrzej Duda honoured 'Bury's' victims at the monument in Zaleszany, unveiled on 7 July 2021. The president paid homage to the victims by saying that this site is "marked by suffering, marked by death, it is here where people died, where innocent women and children died". However, he did not mention the perpetrators of this crime; what is more, as recalled by one of our interviewees, while conversing with other participants in the ceremony, he implied that some of the victims deserved their fate, as they collaborated with the communists:

> The president spent three hours in Zaleszany, listening to people […] Someone from the audience told him: "Mr. President, this glorification is inappropriate". But he replied, "Victims are victims, but I know that there were collaborators as well …". So he accepted this narrative, and I still can't believe it. It's not even anger; people really feel defenceless; they feel like second-class citizens. [Białystok, interview 6]

## ORTHODOX POLES AND BELARUSIAN IDENTITY DISPUTES

Almost all of our interviewees acknowledge the fact that the Belarusian minority in Poland is undergoing assimilation. They seem to agree that this is primarily due to a long-term policy of the Polish state, dating back at least to 1918.[16] According to them, one of the more negative effects of the dominant politics of memory is that some Belarusians

[16] Eugeniusz Mironowicz, 'Białorusini w Polsce 1919–2009', in Teresa Zaniewska (ed.), *Białorusini* (Warszawa, 2010), 9–28; Stanisław Mauersberg, *Szkolnictwo powszechne dla mniejszości narodowych w Polsce w latach 1918–1939* (Wrocław, 1968).

abandon their 'true' identity. Even if they maintain their Orthodox faith, they begin to define themselves as Poles. This assimilation is perceived as a reaction to the fact that the public discourse promotes the notion of Polish superiority and a negative image of the Eastern Slavic minorities. Thus, assimilation becomes a way out of the minority ghetto and a means to avoid social stigma and discrimination. This transgressive mimicry is often combined with the adoption of a radical extremist, nationalist version of Polishness, as Orthodox Christians are automatically stigmatised and constantly challenged to prove their loyalty:

> This nationalist ideology also seduces the Polonised Orthodox youth. For example, in National Hajnówka [a nationalist organisation], half of the youth were Orthodox …The organisers of the March for the "cursed soldiers" are Orthodox […] That's how this desire to become Polish works […] These young people try to prove […] that they are true and authentic Poles. [Hajnówka, interview 3]

The interviewee is referring to ethnic-authoritarian nationalist organisations – All-Polish Youth [Młodzież Wszechpolska] and National Radical Camp [Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny] – that organise an annual march in the memory of 'Bury'. The march passes through Hajnówka, a town inhabited by many Belarusians, and is regularly met with protests from Belarusian activists. According to the interviewee, the organisers of the march are largely assimilated neophytes of Polish nationalism who use it to demonstrate their new Polish identity. The adoption of a radically nationalistic ideology and the internalisation of the hegemonic historical narrative has become a peculiar identity-forming strategy that assumes the identification with the perpetrators of the pacifications of Belarusian villages. The political significance of identifying as 'Orthodox Poles' stems from the fact that such an identity partly nullifies the negative sentiments of the dominant group. Belarusians who 'should' perceive 'Bury's' actions from the perspective of the victims have changed their national allegiance to 'Polish', which enabled them to abandon their allegiance to the 'weak' and join the perpetrators, who are presented as "strong" heroes by the hegemonic politics of memory.

> They are trying to combine this with a kind of cult of Great Poland. Nationalists all over Poland sing about the great Catholic Poland, and these about a great Christian Poland. It is a kind of ethos – if you ask a young man if

> he wants to identify with the ethos of the strong or the ethos of the weak, the majority will choose the former, in my opinion. [Krynki, interview 2]

The interviewees believe that the fact that members of the Orthodox community are involved in establishing the cult of the anti-communist underground is dangerous because this also means the affirmation of the assimilationist politics of memory, founded upon the conviction that the Orthodox are not Belarusian but Polish. The denial of innocence of the victims of 'Bury's' troops is a cornerstone of this strategy, alongside the belief that Belarusian is an artificial identity that poses a threat to the majority:

> These are Orthodox nationalists. People such as Patryk Panasiuk, who is an ultra-right-wing politician affiliated with the Orthodox Church and the Law and Justice Party. His purpose is to convince as many Orthodox believers as possible that they are not Ukrainians or Belarusians, but Poles; and that what happened after the war occurred because people embraced the idea that they might be Ukrainians or Belarusians. That's why 'Bury' had to punish them. [Hajnówka, interview 2]

The interviewees often point to the fact that two identity-forming and creative Belarusian milieus develop two different modes of auto-identification within the Belarusian minority and compete for cultural dominance within the community. The first one comprises those Belarusians 'memory outcasts' that gather around the Orthodox Church, who emphasise the role of religion as the keystone of the Belarusian identity; however, they do not reject the idea of a separate Belarusian nation in contemporary Poland. The second one, seemingly lesser in number and not as influential, underscores the role of nationality in the processes of constructing the Belarusian identity; it is also more likely to question the identity politics of the Orthodox Church. Both of these groups, regardless of the religiosity of our interviewees, perceive the 'cursed soldiers' and the politics of memory negatively. The disparity of attitudes between the two milieus, which generate two competing historical narratives in certain areas, is especially evident when it comes to views on the reasons why the 'cursed soldiers' murdered Belarusians, as well as the perceived identity of 'Bury's' victims. The proponents of cooperation with the Orthodox Church emphasise the faith of the victims and the fact that these crimes can be characterised as a religious purge:

> Witnesses recall that they ordered them to lay on the ground and asked if they were Catholic or Orthodox. Testimonies vary on the issue of segregation – some viewed Belarusians and the Orthodox as the same, but it generally was about denomination. Antoni, whose mother was shot by his side, was 11 years old, and he remembers the scene quite vividly. There was a Catholic holiday on the second day of February [Candlemas] and their neighbours warned them about the potential threat. Those Catholics were neighbours of Antoni. His mother heard gunshots, so her three children would go to other neighbours. The mother ordered them to dress up, take their Christening candle, an icon of Mary Mother of God, and go out. Those men started to come into the house with bundles of hay, saw the scene, and hesitated. So they asked, 'Orthodox or Catholic?'. She answered that they were Polish, so they asked the neighbour, who replied in the negative, so they shot the mother in front of her children. [Bielsk Podlaski, interview 3]

On the other hand, those who underscore the role of nationality in the processes of constructing the Belarusian identity, who also define themselves largely as Orthodox Christians, indicate that those victims were murdered not only because of their faith but also because of their nationality. According to them, crimes committed by 'Bury's' subordinates can also be perceived as a form of ethnic cleansing and physical elimination of political and ideological opponents. The Orthodox faith was directly linked with the Belarusian identity and with pro-communist sentiments.

Many proponents of the Orthodox Church's policy belong to an older generation of memory leaders and activists. Some of them have conservative views and emphasise their religiosity. They accept the idea of cooperation between the Orthodox Church and the Polish authorities. In their view, this cooperation helps finance the activities of the Orthodox Church and, to some extent, effectively cultivate the memory of 'Bury's' victims. The effectiveness of such a politics of memory is reportedly proven by the fact that between 2019 and 2020, the Council of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church officially declared the 79 people murdered by 'Bury's' troop as martyrs of the Chełm and Podlasie regions, as well as by the fact that the Orthodox hierarchy managed to organise a visit by President Andrzej Duda to Zaleszany, where he paid homage to those victims:

> The Orthodox Church is absolutely right in its conduct. It is predominantly thanks to the metropolitan bishop […] He did a great thing – under his rule, the Orthodox Church recognised these people as martyrs […] The

> Orthodox Church has the greatest capacity to preserve memory because we lack administrative structures […] The Orthodox Church possesses the strength of an institution. A long-established and capable institution that proved itself when Zaleszany became a place of worship. We have a monastery and a church; now we are going to have pilgrimages. [Białystok, interview 6]

In their opinion, the politics of counter-memory has to be subtle. Different Orthodox Belarusian actors have to take care first and foremost of the cultural survival of their minority group. They must remember that, if it was not for the state, especially its financial support, the Belarusian Orthodox identity would perish. That is why Belarusians and the Orthodox Church must act subversively and, where necessary, subordinate to the hegemonic culture:

> You know, you have to understand the situation – the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church has around 160–180 thousand congregants. It is a drop in the ocean of Polishness and Catholicism. Everyone understands that such a drop can't step out of line, as the functioning of this Church is, to a large extent, dependent on the state. [Białystok, interview 5]

The older generation of memory leaders and activists strive to cooperate with the Polish majority, especially with those in power, always having the interest of the minority group in mind. That is why they accept – or even support – the politics of the Orthodox Church also in issues that do not directly pertain to the continuity of the Belarusian national identity. Such a stance may be perceived by the Polish government as a sign of support for their policies. For example, they support the Polish authorities in denouncing the Istanbul Convention and in pursuing discriminatory policies against the LGBTQ+ communities. They joined in the condemnation of the Equality March organised in Białystok and co-organised a counter-manifestation on 20 July 2019, during which participants of the Equality March were attacked by football hooligans and radical nationalists.

The conflict of memory within the Belarusian community is multidimensional – therefore, it is worth investigating it more thoroughly, as it is central to understanding the difference between the various policies of memory that Belarusians engage in. Firstly, representatives of the younger generation claim that the processes of assimilation of Belarusians are accelerated by the almost total

indifference of the Orthodox Church towards the issue of the national identification of its members. They claim that the lack of Belarusian identity – coupled with a strong sense of separation from the Polish Catholic majority – leads the Belarusian minority to become a solely religious minority, which is suggested by the popularity of the 'Orthodox Pole' auto-identification. The emergence of this identity category is, in their opinion, the result of a long-standing memory/identity politics of the Orthodox Church, which – being a religious organisation representing all Orthodox believers on the territory of the Polish state, thus also the Lemkos, Ukrainians, and Poles – does not support the national identity of the Belarusians specifically. One of the most common examples of such a politics of memory is that the Orthodox Church, which holds cultural hegemony over Orthodox believers, emphasises the religious identity of 'Bury's' victims, and not their ethnic origin or nationality. What is more, young Belarusians criticise not only the memory politics of the Orthodox Church but also its discriminatory discourse and the attitudes of activists connected with it. In their view, such attitudes support the assimilation of Belarusians, especially of subsequent young generations, as the Orthodox Church and its supporters employ a conservative and reactionary discourse that discourages the youth from the Orthodox faith and the Belarusian identity.

> Our colleagues from the Belarussian minority, all those important figures, are right-wing. They are more likely to support the Law and Justice party than to respect the various different manifestations of identity. Variety is always a virtue. This is sickening, and it's another disappointment. [Hajnówka, interview 3]

The Orthodox Church aligns with the anti-LGBTQ+ policies of the Polish authorities in the closest possible way, all the more so because the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church share a common axiology, ideology, and worldview with the right-wing coalition (2015–2023). Some of our interviewees believe that the proximity between the Orthodox Church and the discriminating authorities does not stem simply from a shared understanding, but has its roots also in calculable financial gains. The proponents of the Orthodox Church's policy approve of its economic far-sightedness, while critics castigate it as a means to financially safeguard the hierarchs:

> Last autumn, the Convent of Bishops issued a communique on the Istanbul Convention that was totally in line with the narrative of the hierarchs of the Catholic Church and the representatives of the current government […] I can confirm that it was connected with certain financial gains, as both the Orthodox Church and the minority organisations pursue various subsidies from the authorities all the time. Such an adaptation surely also serves this aim. [Hajnówka, interview 3]

At the same time, interviewees claim that the hierarchs and those Belarusian activists who back them either do not notice that they are politically exploited by PiS, or knowingly support the government they perceive as representing their interests and values. Such sentiments are especially clear when respondents comment on President Andrzej Duda's visit to Zaleszany, during which he paid 'homage' to the victims of 'Bury':

> I think that this is done only for show, to demonstrate a kind of external support for our community. Me and my friends are convinced that it is a performance to gain votes. My opinion of the Orthodox clergy is also very negative because they accept this situation. I believe the president comes from a party that is xenophobic, nationalist, and actively opposes Orthodox believers. [Białystok, interview 5]

According to the critics of the Orthodox Church, such minor and insincere gestures change nothing in the dominant politics of memory, which continues to glorify criminals and marginalise the suffering experienced by Belarusians. By cooperating with the government, the Orthodox Church indirectly legitimises this politics in expectation of financial benefits and to maintain its position as a church. Moreover, opponents of such cooperation believe that it hinders the efforts to create a Belarusian collective memory, which is essential in order to uphold an autonomous Belarusian national identity. Such a policy, they claim, leads to a gradual assimilation of the Belarusian population, which retains only its religious distinction. As a result, the Belarusian national minority is transforming into an Orthodox Polish population.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the article, we analysed the attitudes of the representatives of the Belarusian minority in Poland towards the armed anti-communist underground operating in the Podlasie region after 1944, especially

in the context of disputes over the figure of 'Bury'. Our aim was not to reconstruct historical events but to investigate the role played by the collective memory of the underground among the Belarusian minority in Podlasie against the backdrop of the hegemonic politics of memory that glorifies the 'cursed soldiers' as national heroes. We wanted not only to interpret the gathered interviews but also to give voice to the marginalised representatives of the Belarusian minority. The analysis of counter-hegemonic memory accounts and their relation to the dominant narratives showcases emotions generated by the hegemonic politics of memory among the representatives of the Belarusian minority, who generally regard it as depreciating their experience and evoking a sense of endangerment. However, the Belarusian minority should not be perceived as a homogenous group – our analysis points to the fact that various actors employ different modes of negotiating the hegemonic politics of memory when faced with the pressure of assimilation.

*proofreading Antoni Górny*

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