

Maciej Górny, Hans Henning Hahn,  
Kornelia Kończal, Robert Traba

POLISH-GERMAN REALMS OF MEMORY:  
A NEW PARADIGM?

I

The last dozen-or-so years saw realms of memory becoming one of the most readily evoked concepts in the Western-European social sciences and humanities. The seven-volume *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984–92),<sup>1</sup> edited by Pierre Nora, kicked off an international ‘career’ for this research category. Nora sought to create a symbolic topography of France, conceived as an inventory of the French memorial legacy, so as to save it thereby from oblivion. The initial intent Nora formulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s promoted the realm of memory to a ‘saviour’ of the nation or, at least, of memory about the nation; a dozen-or-so years later, the venture’s initiator admitted that the social and political (ab)uses of his research concept came out as a considerable astonishment to himself; it was with distaste that Nora outright spoke of a ‘commemorative mania’ that overwhelmed France at the time.<sup>2</sup>

The *lieu de mémoire* concept was further developed by Hagen Schulze and Étienne François in their *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, published in 2001.<sup>3</sup> While referring this paradigmatic notion to the German history – that is, to a different reality and, thereby, a different concept of nation – they approached it in a less normative manner, focusing instead on analysing diversities and discontinuities. The

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984–92, 2nd edn Paris, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, ‘Les lieux de mémoire. L’entretien de Pierre Nora avec Jean-Maurice Montremy (A voix nue: grands entretiens d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, 5)’, *Antenne 2*, 14 Nov. 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (eds.), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols. (Munich, 2001).

German project was thus not exclusively about a research into the national identity; selected aspects of memory relations between the Germans and their neighbours were taken into account.<sup>4</sup> Moritz Csáky, an Austrian culture expert, emphasises, in turn (including in this volume of *Acta Poloniae Historica*) a transnational character of Central-European realms of memory. He speaks against ascribing to collective memory of exclusively national connotations, pointing out to trans-local polyvalences of *lieu de memoire*.<sup>5</sup> Such ‘blasting’ of the national framework in researching realms of memory has also become the focus for a Luxembourgian group of scholars.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘Polish-German realms of memory’ attempts at applying Nora’s category in a new way. The project draws upon the experiences of later-date research undertakings concerning European cultures of memory, introducing a hitherto-absent element in them: the embedment in history of the bilateral relations.

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive comparison of the projects of Nora and François/Schulze, see Constance Carcenac-Lecomte, ‘Auf den Spuren des kollektiven Gedächtnis. Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede zwischen den *Lieux de mémoire* und den *Deutschen Erinnerungsorten*’, in Jan Motte and Rainer Ohliger (eds.), *Geschichte und Gedächtnis in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft. Migration zwischen historischer Rekonstruktion und Erinnerungspolitik* (Essen, 2004), 121–30. For transnational aspects of *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, see Włodzimierz Borodziej, ‘Deutsche Erinnerungsorte – Transnationale Gedächtnisorte’, *sehpunkte*, 3 (2003), no.12; <<http://www.sehpunkte.de/2003/12/4627.html>> [Accessed 20 July 2012].

<sup>5</sup> Among the many publications presenting Csáky’s theses, special attention is deserved by his most recent book: Moritz Csáky, *Das Gedächtnis der Städte. Kulturelle Verflechtungen – Wien und die urbanen Milieus in Zentraleuropa* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 2010); also, see *idem*, ‘Geschichte und Gedächtnis. Erinnerung und Erinnerungsstrategien im narrativen historischen Verfahren. Das Beispiel Zentraleuropas’, in Alojz Ivanišević, Andreas Kappeler, Walter Lukan and Arnold Suppan (eds.), *Klio ohne Fesseln? Historiographie im östlichen Europa nach dem Zusammenbruch des Kommunismus* (Osthefte. Sonderband, 16, Vienna and Frankfurt a.M., 2002), 61–80.

<sup>6</sup> Sonja Kmec, Benoît Majerus, Michel Margue and Pit Péporté (eds.), *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg. Usages du passé et construction nationale/Erinnerungsorte in Luxemburg. Umgang mit der Vergangenheit und Konstruktion der Nation* (Luxembourg, 2007; 2nd edn 2008); *idem* (eds.), *Dépasser le cadre national des “lieux de mémoire”. Innovations méthodologiques, approches comparatives, lectures transnationales/Nationale Erinnerungsorte hinterfragt. Methodologische Innovationen, vergleichende Annäherungen, transnationale Lektüren* (Comparatisme et Société, 9, Brussels and New York, 2009).

PAN), in cooperation with the Institute of History, Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg. The final outcome has resulted from cooperation of almost 130 authors from Poland, Germany, France, Czech Republic, and Italy. The publication is composed of nine volumes (four in Polish and five in German). The first three volumes of both language versions present some 100 Polish-German realms of memory. Volume 4 contains essays on theoretical and methodological aspects of research into memory cultures. Volume 5, under preparation, in cooperation with the Deutsches Polen-Institut in Darmstadt, which is due to be released in German only, will comprise texts of Polish sociologists, historians and philosophers from the recent several dozen years, dealing with issues such as social memory and identity. This will provide the German reader with a first opportunity to get acquainted with the Polish tradition of afterthought on the collective memory problems and memory studies.

The individual parts are not issued in an ordered sequence. The first to appear was a volume on the Polish and German *parallel* realms of memory (vol. 3 in our series). Volumes 1 and 2, not published yet, comprise essays on *shared* and *separate* Polish-German *lieux de mémoire*. The first three volumes are targeted at broad reading circles in Poland and Germany. We should like to reach not only for experts in the history of Polish-German relations but also, for those readers who have by this far remained uninterested in the history and culture of the neighbour, as without reciprocal knowledge of history, the culture and mentality of both societies would not be completely comprehensible.

This article is a short introduction to the methodological foundation for our project. What it moreover does is illustrate certain aspects of this foundation's practical application.

## II

The exploration of realms of memory is an extension of the research on collective memory. The notion was first introduced in the scholarly discourse in 1925 by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Central to the discussion that eventuated around his concept was the question whether collective memory is the memory of a group, or, a memory within the group. Pierre Nora resolved this issue by rejecting (the) memory of (a) group as a literal concept. He maintained that no spirit

of collectivity or community, no 'objective spirit' is conceivable at all: only a concrete society, with its signs and symbols, is thinkable. Members of the society, even though they have not made personal acquaintances with one another, can communicate within their common reminiscences with use of symbols and rituals, and thus have a shared collective memory that gets materialised, as it were, in these signs. His understanding of 'realm of memory' was metaphorical, since *lieux de mémoire* may refer to topographically definable places or venues, but also, to figures or characters, events and occurrences, processes, and other historical phenomena.

Considerations of this kind enable one to speak, in practice, about (a) culture of memory, that is, a system of the collective memory of a society or social group. 'System' means, in this context, the manner in which the society organises and combines various elements – realms of memory included – and ways of remembering. Memory is a phenomenon that 'acts' historically while not identifying with history as something that has 'really' occurred.

Collective memory is inexistent *as such*. It is an artefact, a product that is discursively generated every day anew. The same is true for identity. Collective memory and identity are products of discourses and as such are subject to incessant transformation, and so ought not to be approached essentialistically. Identity is a label, of a sort, that adheres to anything considered important from the standpoint of a sense of membership with a community. Similarly to collective constructions of memory, collective identities are variable, and multifariously interconnected. Historian finds it difficult to identify in this flood of discursive, variable and negotiable phenomena so-called hard facts, that is to say, material and symbolic historical phenomena, with various meanings becoming deposited within them as time goes on. It is the tension between the so-called reality and idea or conception that makes the scholarly research into these phenomena so attractive. One of the tools serving the purpose is the concept of *realms of memory*: it is in them, namely, that collective identities concentrate and get condensed.

In our representation, realms of memory may include 'real-historical' as well as imagined historic(al) phenomena: topographical places and historical events, (imaginary or real) characters/figures, artefacts, symbols. A realms-of-memory researcher is interested in the *past-as-present-in-the-present*, as a factor shaping the processes of constituting and stabilising of identities. In studying realms of memory, subject

to analysis is not a culture of memory existing here and now – but a *history* of cultures of memory instead. When researching realms of memory, one should therefore historicise the memory; or, speaking more precisely, historicise the process of collective memorising and forgetting. A description of realms of memory would not suffice. To recognise the meaning and significance of individual *lieux de mémoire* for the identity of a given group requires their being analysed for the functions they perform.

A bilateral profile of our undertaking refers to the concept of history of mutual influences, or relational history (*Beziehungsgeschichte*), as formulated in 1970s and methodologically justified by Klaus Zernack. A few dozen years before the extremely popular *histoire croisée* emerged, Zernack emphasised the importance of the category of mutual influences in the history of Germany and its eastern neighbours, Poland and Russia. This German historian formulated a still valid, and inspiring, question:

Is not the stubbornness with which the history of mutual influences between the two European nations, Poles and Germans, exerts an impact on their ongoing mutual relations, a sufficient reason to historically conceptualise the history of their mutual relations as a unique influential factor?<sup>7</sup>

Zernack expressed a sceptical attitude toward the attempts, made with a flourish, at constructing purely national histories. His objections also extended to an excessive arbitrariness in selecting some, whilst neglecting other, objects for comparative studies and those related to the history of cultural transfer. These postulates seem of special relevance for studying and researching of cultures of memory, since Zernack has highlighted elements of transfer not only in the border areas but at the very centre of a community's identity. The relationality of history he refers to consists in permanent consideration of a comparative context and transfer. In research of cultures of memory, such 'openness' of national histories correlates with the original Pierre Nora's concept as redefined in Germany, Austria and Luxembourg.

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<sup>7</sup> Klaus Zernack, 'Tysiąc lat dziejów stosunków niemiecko-polskich jako obszar problemowy badań historycznych oraz postulat badawczy', in Henryk Olszewski (ed.), *Niemcy – Polska: Z dziejów trudnego dialogu historiograficznego*, trans. Łukasz Musiał (Poznań, 2006), 67.

Dealing with Polish-German realms of memory: what does it mean, in practice? To state that a number of realms of memory that function in the national discursive community are also identifiable for another community (albeit not necessarily bearing the same content, and not necessarily of equal importance from the standpoint of collective memory) is to utter a truism. It is only in few cases that an actually shared site of memory is meant, one where not only the object of remembering but also the remembered (and forgotten) contents are congruous. The general assumption should rather be that what we normally deal with in such cases is separate realms of memory where a single object is meant but differently anchored in both memory cultures. This is true not only for, e.g., battles as sites of memory – the events that are perforce remembered differently by the descendants of the inimical parties. Auschwitz is the most emphatic and explicit example from the twentieth-century history. There is probably no European nation for which Auschwitz would not be a site of memory; yet, this particular *lieu de mémoire*, commonly present in (and outside of) Europe is included by each community within its own memory in its own way, conditional upon its current identity demand.

It would be impossible to indicate which of the mutually neighbouring national societies within Europe have the highest number of shared and separate realms of memory. Bearing in mind the geographical and cultural overlapping of the Polish and German histories, it could be speculated that they would be ranked high in a 'rating' of this sort. The very fact that the one third of the present-day territory of Poland is formed of former provinces of German states makes it legitimate to suppose that the Polish and German memory cultures have much in common with each other. Hence, studying the memories of both societies comes out as a natural consequence of the historical conditions and determinants, and a present-day need to better cognise and understand one's 'own' history.

A bilateral approach to studying cultures of memory may come across a (deserved) criticism already at this point: Poland and Germany are, namely, phenomena that are neither timeless nor suspended in a vacuum. Various parts of them (or, individuals identifying, or not, with the Polish or German cultural community) formed, in various periods, part of various circles of influence. The field of contexts and viewpoints calling for being taken into consideration is, therefore, enormous. Just to name one of them: Maciej Janowski has noticed that

the history of the Central-Eastern Europe has a potential to it that enables to do justice not only to the largest communities inhabiting the region but also to its numerous minorities that have never developed a state of their own, or even a historiography.<sup>8</sup> Assuming that Poland and Germany are the dominant entities of memory may lead to overshadowing those groups which not fully, or not at all, tend to identify with the categories of 'Poles' or 'Germans' – while actually being part of their history, and memory.

We are not in a position to reject these objections, or to declare that 'Polish-German realms of memory' are free of a Polish-German bias. We are aware of the limitations of our project, and shall endeavour to draw practical conclusion from this awareness. For us, (a) nation is not something given *a priori*; it does not form an indisputably binding 'framework' but just a potential option. Nation is thus neither our desiderate nor construction whereto we would like to add our contribution or reconstruct its symbolical unity – but rather, a reality which we subject to analysis. The descriptions 'Polish' and 'German' appearing in the project's name have, *de facto*, the status of mental shortcuts extending to national as well as pre- or post-national, regional and trans-border anchorages of the sites of memory under study.

Our underlying assumption is that there are two societies in the Central Europe, among others, which use two languages very different from each other (i.e. Polish and German), not only to communicate within their respective groups but also in order to 'envision' and 'represent' themselves, with use of these languages, as two different nations. Within each of these groups, the understanding what a nation has been, and still is, shaped in a variety of ways. An additional aspect making the defining of a national identity even more complicated is the presence of Jews: in spite of their religious and social-and-cultural otherness, a considerable share of them identified themselves with the Polish or German nation. In the course of the project, our aim was to consider those diversities, in the analyses of individual realms of memory, rather than approaching (national) societies as monolithic entities. Hence, we are not seeking only to identify the

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<sup>8</sup> Maciej Janowski, 'Pitfalls and Opportunities: The Concept of East Central Europe as a Tool of Historical Analysis', *European Review of History*, vi, 1 (1999), 91–100; here, 95.

identities societies-nations as a whole, but also – or, at times, in the first place – numerous partial identities: religious, confessional, ethnical, regional, local, class-/estate-related, social, gender, ideological/worldview-related, and generational. These aspects are present in the texts in a varied scope, relative to the subject-matter and the author's method of work.

Rosa Luxemburg (Róża Luksemburg) serves as a good example of 'open-ended' Polish-German realm of memory (i.e. one that carries varied contents, not limited to national). Born in Zamość, this Jewess, a leading theoretician of social-democracy in Poland and Germany, is a figure around which the identity of most varied groups focuses. Murdered in January 1919, this 'martyr' of the German workers' movement was initially made an object of cult by the communists. As Stalinisation progressed, this character's symbolic significance was declining, up to deeming 'Luxemburgism' a theoretical fault. In 1950s, both the Polish and the East-German ruling party were forced to condemn this communist activist; still, they did it in two different ways. In the GDR, attempts at defending her were made at the top authorities' level. As Wilhelm Pieck himself argued, Rosa Luxemburg had apparently altered her views by the late 1918 to the extent that 'in the last, turbulent period of her life she herself became a militant against what we today call Luxemburgism'.<sup>9</sup> One would in vain look for any similar attempts at defending this revolutionary in the Stalinist period in Poland. In this case, the 'extinction' of the realm of memory was supported by the fact that Luxemburg's attitude toward the postulate of regained independence for Poland was critical. Neither in the People's Republic of Poland nor in the GDR was her activity among the Jewish social-democrats highlighted. The reason was, partly, an overt or subcutaneous anti-Semitism, present in the right-wing environment as well as within the communist party, which was apparent particularly in the Polish discussions around Luxemburg since 1960s. A dislike toward this Jewish communist (who moreover happened to be a woman that meddled in the great politics) was expressed in a protest wave that tumbled across the Federal Republic of Germany once the Deutsche Bundespost launched a post-stamp featuring an effigy of R. Luxemburg.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Pieck, 'Vorwort', in Rosa Luxemburg, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1951), 15.



On the other hand, this political theoretician has become a source of inspiration for revisionists, in Poland as well as East Germany, and, in the West too. This fact clearly irritated the communist-party management teams in the Eastern Bloc. To what extent this was legitimate is shown by one of the last 'discoveries' related to her prior to the fall of communism. On 17 January 1988, as a token of protest against the policy of the German communist party, the SED, GDR dissidents produced banners featuring the famous phrase of R. Luxemburg: 'Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks differently'. Their manifestation was quickly crushed by the militia, the protesters detained, and some expelled to West Germany. The communist-party monopoly on the memory of this female revolutionist had by then already spectacularly broken off even within the GDR. As a symbol in the combat for freedom of conscience, Rosa Luxemburg had appeared in West-German slogans of the 1968 student revolt. The idea of a 'third road' was associated with Luxemburg's theoretical output – a chance that the ideals of socialism could materialise in a form different than the one appearing behind the Iron Curtain. The disclosure an anti-systemic potential of this particular realm of memory has in effect broadened the spectrum of identity communities referring to it. From the late 1960s onward, they extended not only to communists in the west and east of Europe but also, non-communist radicals, human rights defenders, and, lastly, feminists.

Rosa Luxemburg (Róża Luksemburg) is obviously not the only Polish-German realm of memory that exceeds the frame of a national history, as a narrow concept. One deals with transboundary realms of memory in a number of instances, indeed. Approaching the Habsburgs, or the Battle of Tannenberg (in Polish: Grunwald) exclusively in a Polish-German context would be unsatisfactory and artificial. Hence, the reader will find in some of the texts paragraphs focused on histories of memory of neighbours other than Germans and Poles, and of identities other than just national.

While working on 'Polish-German realms of memory', we posed two questions to ourselves. The first was of a comparative nature: what are the existing similarities and differences in the processes of shaping of the Polish and German cultures of memory? The other question was about the processes of Polish-German reciprocal influences: when, where, and why a reference to Germany and German culture was of significance for the shaping and development of

cultures of memory in Poland? And, conversely: when, where, and why a reference to Poland and Polish culture had a bearing on the formation and development of culture of memory in Germany?

Answers to these questions were provided by our authors as they studied the shared, separate, and parallel realms of memory. Shared or common realms of memory suggest that the functions of realms of memory are almost identical or similar. Separate realms of memory share the same object of memory but differ as to the functions they perform in identity processes and, thereby, their role in the cultures of memory. In this area, they may overlap only partly, if at all.

The question naturally arises why the project has taken into account its specified, and not any other, shared, separate and parallel realms of memory? We have assumed as the crucial selection criteria their identity-related significance and the impact force of individual historical phenomena. We have selected those which, in relation to specified social groups – Poles and Germans, in a crude simplification – played an important part in identity processes. To set, with a mathematical precision, the borderline between the ‘important’ and ‘unimportant’ (or, ‘less important’) realms of memory; between the strongly-influencing ones and those whose impact is weaker, would obviously be an undeliverable task. Such ‘vagueness’ (and, ‘non-measurability’) is, however, nothing out of the ordinary in the humanities and social sciences. Beside this, it reflects the historicity of sites of memory, which are not stable, or invariable, identity constructions. Some of them ‘expire’ whilst others get ‘revived’ – sometimes, assuming forms other than previously, and in other social groups. It suffices to remind the figure of Rosa Luxemburg – initially, the ‘saint’ figure of the German communism, subsequently ‘anathematised’ in the Stalinist period and then ‘rediscovered’ in the West in the 1960s – each time, in a completely different ideological context.

Our selection of realms of memory is nowise completely free from incidence; still, we tried our best to restrict such randomness. Discursivity was crucial for this purpose. In spring 2007, invited experts representing various generations, scientific disciplines and research traditions commenced a discussion on the selection and method of studying Polish-German realms of memory. A draft list of ‘Polish-German realms of memory’ that emerged from this and several other discussions was posted on the CBH PAN website, becoming the subject of animated correspondence and exchange of thoughts between the

project team and potential authors, observers, and critics. The table of contents was, in effect, incessantly subject to verification within the project team and subject to discussion during all the six conferences at which our authors presented the concepts of their articles. The procedure was time-consuming but, we should believe, productive.

Based on these considerations and, to some extent, in consequence of the project's bilateral structure, a novel option for *parallel realms of memory* has been developed. What this key category refers to is completely dissimilar historical phenomena. Although real objects of remembering are indeed various, important analogies appear between them in respect of the functions they fulfil. The realms of memory that appear in a single society, and perform therein a specific function with respect to its identity and memory code, have been juxtaposed by us against their counterparts for another society, the functions they have in it being comparable. The juxtapositions we have selected are determined, in the first place, through comparability of the roles of individual realms of memory in constructing collective memories – Polish and German ones, to simplify it once again. Hence, a single article covers, e.g., two myths of a defensive battle: the victory of Germanic tribes over the Roman legions in the grand battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD, and, Duke Mieszko I's victory in a battle with Margrave Hodo's knights near Cedynia/Zehden in 972. Beethoven and Chopin appear as examples of a collective identification with the composer and his music; Goethe and Mickiewicz – as identification with the two national bards, and the significance of both poets in the constitution of a cultural canon. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – as exemplifications of a luminous past of the states of yore. A closer examination of these and other similar examples may confirm the similarities as well as disclose differences between them, along with the paths of Polish-German associations and transfers. The various ways of functioning of both cultures of memory in relation to dissimilar though comparable historical phenomena are demonstrated, e.g., by the essays whose subject-matter is betrayal or treason: one such study compares Wallenstein against Princes Janusz and Bogusław Radziwiłł; another one covers the Targowica Confederation alongside the stab-in-the-back myth (*Dolchstoßlegende*).

The Polish edition of 'Polish-German realms of memory' is concluded with volume 4, dealing with the methodology. The editors'

intent behind the texts therein contained was to reply to at least some of the questions occurring while reading the series' earlier volumes. It also invites to the project's 'backstage' where those interested can get to know the underlying pool of instruments applied and the reasons speaking in favour of such, rather than any other, depiction of the history of the mutual Polish-German influences. To complete the picture, a broader concept seemed indispensable to us as well, one that would exceed the limits of our elected historical current of studies on collective memory. This is why volume 4 comprises essays rooted in different methodological traditions and suggested different depictions of the issues we have tackled. We have particularly focused on emphasising the opportunities opened for research into collective memory by disciplines other than historiography, the dominant domain in our project.

The last question the said volume attempts at replying refers to future. If one should be tempted to draw a common conclusion out of the experts' multi-voiced discourse, it would claim that it is perhaps too early to prophesy an end of the collective memory paradigm or, outright, a decline of the interest in the past. Research of collective memory is continually under dynamic development, both methodology-wise and in terms of extending to (and constructing) new communities. It seems that a political significance of memory is not dwindling. Not only has it not ceased playing an important part in the 'backward-looking' Central-Eastern-European countries (to refer to their image frequently shown in West-European mass media) but reappears, with increasing frequency, where it seemingly ceased posing a problem. This phenomenon bodes well to future research – similarly to the conviction, repeatedly expressed hereinabove, that the appropriate way to tackle also the research into collective memory is an inventive history of mutual influences. It seems essential to us that this afterthought does not miss a view from a Polish-German perspective.

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projects in the history of Polish-German cultural and scholarly relations, are kindly requested to accept our warmest thanks.

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*trans. Tristan Korecki*