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# Negative Memory: Communism and the Perpetrators

Anna Artwińska

# Memory of PRL

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Kraj ludzi tak niewinnych,  
że nie mogą być zbawieni. [...]  
Kraj bez żądła, spowiedź  
bez grzechów śmiertelnych

Country of men so innocent,  
they cannot find salvation. [...]  
Country without a sting, confession  
without mortal sins

Adam Zagajewski

**T**here are two distinguishable modes of discussing about the perpetrators of the communist regime which have been dominating debates taking place in Poland for the past twenty odd years. In anti-communist texts, stress falls on the necessity of legal and moral judgment on the perpetrators' actions, calling them criminals, or – quoting Tadeusz M. Płużański's book – “beasts, murderers of Poles.”<sup>1</sup> Such texts emphasise the opposing

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1 Tadeusz M. Płużański, *Bestie: mordercy Polaków (Reporterskie śledztwo o ludziach, którzy w czasach komunizmu mordowali polskich patriotów, za co nigdy nie zostali ukarani)* (Warszawa: Biblioteka Wolności, 2012). Theses on “sovietization” and “colonizing” are repeatedly mentioned in the works of some researchers referencing post-colonial theories, which seems to constitute an absolute lack of understanding in the potential of that theory, as well as being merely a mechanical application of Edward Said's thesis on post-colonialism as a “travelling theory.”

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sides: there are true “Polish patriots” on the one hand – those who had nothing to do with the “criminal regime” – and on the other, there are the above mentioned “murderers,” who, “hired by Moscow,” methodically “kept destroying Poland and the Poles.” The ideology and rhetoric of those narratives have been subjects of debates, analyses, or criticism many times already, and there is no need to focus on them again. Discourses which demand a more balanced depiction of reality in the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL) constitute the second model. They oppose victimisation tendencies, and attempt to show the complexity of the past fifty years, and what is more – especially during last couple of years – highlight its positive aspects, especially noticeable when juxtaposed with capitalism and liberalism. In both models, as I assert in this text, there is no reflection on the issue of perpetration, no reflection that tries to include the memory of perpetrators in Polish practices of remembrance. Such reflection would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the past, involving not only the trauma of victims, but also the trauma of the perpetrators,<sup>2</sup> as well as the not-uncommon crossover and overlapping of both those roles. Although the evident lack of such reflection in anti-communist narratives is not surprising (after all this is not exclusively a Polish phenomenon),<sup>3</sup> it is interesting to notice its absence in liberal, or leftist, nar-

2 Bernhard Giesen, who worked on the question of the “trauma of perpetrators” in the context of fascist crimes, coined that phrase (*Tätertrauma*). The important aspect of his work seems to be a postulate for the “figure of perpetrators not to be discussed solely within the framework of moral and legal discourses of guilt and responsibility of individual individuals, but to try to incorporate it within the realm of collective memory instead.” “Collective trauma” understood in that way becomes a broader term, being a point of reference also for those Germans, who either could have been (and are aware of that), or – in case of later generations – inherited that trauma. See Bernhard Giesen “Die Tätertrauma der Deutschen. Eine Einleitung,” in *Tätertrauma. Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs*, ed. Bernhard Giesen, Christop Schneider, (Konstanz: Uv, 2004), 11-53; Bernhard Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 112-154. I employ two terms in my work, the initial meanings of which refer to studies on fascism: “trauma of the perpetrators” (*Tätertrauma*) and “negative memory” (*negative Erinnerung*). It does not mean that I want to similarly model the discourse about perpetrators in PRL after the discourse on the Second World War, or to compare the regimes of fascism and communism. I have employed those terms because of their semantic capability, and believing that they can help better describe and understand the Polish experience as well. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Anja Tippner for pointing my attention to that entire area of research, as well as for many inspiring conversations.

3 Also in reference to GDR, one could point to works written from the anticommunist vantage points, and with interventionist ambitions, concentrating on the necessity of a “just” evaluation of the past. See Hubertus Knabe, *Die Täter sind unter uns: über das Schönreden der SED-Diktatur* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2007).

ratives. It becomes particularly interesting if one were to take into consideration that those circles – in the case of historical events outside the PRL period – stress a need to revise myths about Polish bravery and to start a debate about subjects such as Polish anti-Semitism, post-war forced resettlement of the German population living on territories of Poland, or Polish-Ukrainian relations.<sup>4</sup> Reasons for such state of affairs, however, are not difficult to name: debate about communism and its perpetrators will remain impossible as long as it is believed that in order to have a conversation, the People's Republic of Poland has to be recognized as a dictatorship, a period of oppression and repression. The true question is: is that really necessary?

### Perpetrators as Research Subject

I am interested in a research angle that does not focus on debates concerning worldviews and is not concerned with adding yet another voice to the discussion about the PRL, or another way of coming to terms with the past. My interest in the question of perpetrators does not come from any need to deliver more arguments condemning the PRL and its regime; it is not about breaking the current paradigm either, or about proving that not everything within the communist regime was evil, as such debates tend to take on an ideological tone.<sup>5</sup> In appreciating the efforts of those who attempt to resist the process of demonizing the People's Republic of Poland (which, in and of itself, is extremely important), I propose undertaking a debate focused on the perpetrators. On the one hand, it would allow for a more complete picture of the past century, creating a context crucial for discourses focused on victims. On the other hand, it would aim to show that not only victims, but the perpetrators as well, should indeed be objects of our attention. It would not be, as proponents

4 A point to the fact that it is easier to accept harm done to the "other:" other ethnically, culturally or in terms of nationality. See Sławomir Sierakowski "Chcemy innej historii," in *Wołyń 1943-2008: pojednanie* (Collection of articles published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*), (Warszawa: Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej, 2008).

5 It is hard not to agree with Ewa Charkiewicz, who pointed out that the debates about PRL taking shape in the course of systemic transformation were purposefully headed towards becoming "corrupted," so that liberal authorities could be legitimized easier. The goal of my text is not, however, to debate the image of PRL, painted from the perspective of the opposing, anticommunist, or liberal side. I am trying to reflect on whether it is possible to describe that period, without a pre-determined agenda to either denounce it, or "reclaim" it, along with a positive memory of the communism. See Ewa Charkiewicz, "Od komunizmu do neoliberalizmu: technologie transformacji," trans. Ewa Majewska, in *Zniewolony umysł 2. Neoliberalizm i jego krytyki*, ed. Ewa Majewska and Janek Sowa (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2007), 24.

of the “politics of memory” would like, for the purposes of seeking “justice,” but rather to avoid “causing harm to society.”<sup>6</sup> Determining one’s guilt, or innocence, in respect to one’s past is not within the scope of scholars researching literature or culture. All they are capable of is influencing public discourse, and deciding not so much about actual knowledge, but rather about memory, particularly in a context where memory stops being a function of recollections, and becomes an object of the politics of memory. By casting my vote for having perpetrators become a new subject of study in the humanities, I am presuming that one should make an effort to overcome divisions, which hinders memory that is inclusive of both perspectives – that of victims and of the oppressors. The key question, however, is how we understand the label of being a “perpetrator,” as well as who falls into that category. What is more, since the public discourse is dominated by a tendency to treat communist perpetrators in the same manner as fascist criminals, the very adequacy of that category in respect to communism in Poland is problematic (thus marginalising the experiences of both victims and witnesses of the epoch). In my essay, the category of perpetrator is employed when violence is involved: not exclusively physical violence, but psychological, material and institutional violence as well. Hence, the category is not limited to those who literally had blood on their hands, nor does it automatically include all of the most important operatives of the regime or representatives of the regime’s government, nor the communist party. A communist perpetrator does not have to be a beneficiary of the system. On the contrary: perpetrators can be found among clergy, or men of the opposition movement,<sup>7</sup> or even among the victims. Everywhere, where regular people, “normal” citizens – out of their free will or coerced, with more or less conviction, more or less successfully – decide to employ violence,

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6 Kazimierz Wóycicki formulated the concept in a debate on “Taboo in historical and literary research.” It comes from the following statement: “But let us take a look at a far more difficult taboo: taboo of a conversation about one’s past as an informant of the Security Services. I want to make it clear: conversations on the subject – because pointing a finger at somebody for being a TW (Secret Informant) for many is not a taboo – can be scandalous for a lot of people. Very few talk about it. Is it not harmful to us, as a society, to be so overpowered by a taboo? To such an extent, that there are those who would like to reveal lists of agents, not even knowing what that would entail. On the other hand, there are those who think that it is outrageous and that it cannot be done, and – in any case – all those documents lie,” in *Zapisywanie historii: literaturoznawstwo i historiografia*, ed. Włodzimierz Bolecki, Jan Madejski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2010), 433-434.

7 There is not much said about the violence, use of which has been accepted in some circles of the “Solidarity” movement. And even though these were extraordinary situations, the question of legitimizing violence and employing it to mobilize people most certainly deserves to be noticed separately.

my category becomes valid. I understand the question of perpetration as an issue of cooperation, as an active, or passive, support of a regime that employs violence in order to achieve its goals. In that sense, the issue is not limited to totalitarian regimes only, even though there is a clear difference between its variants, degrees, its reach, consequences, etc. Secondly, I employ this term in its broader meaning, moving away from the perpetrators *sensu stricto*, and denoting those whose perpetration was mediated and passed on as trauma from generation to generation. The mediated trauma of perpetrators, and all of the issues surrounding it, such as, for example, artistic means of representation, do not appear often in the Polish humanities. That is why I find it relevant to speak about that category in terms of a missing link in Poland's collective identity. The question of that heritage concerns representatives of later generations as well, who are often affected by the legacy of perpetrators, as well as those who – even though they remember the PRL regime only obscurely or not at all – cannot escape the question of how they function in such a reality. Discourse on perpetrators, as I see it, should not be an overarching one: the goal is to point people's attention to questions that have remained taboo, or have been described solely from an external perspective. Researching those questions is a symbolic act of repentance which is not aiming to confirm some thesis of guilt or Hegelian "bite." Nor is it an act of "chasing a scapegoat."<sup>8</sup> Its goal is to show that the system – undoubtedly having some good qualities as well – was a result of many individuals interacting with each other, multiple constellations, and that a lot depended on the moves, manoeuvres and decisions made by specific people. More and more often in research done on the Holocaust, there are theses about the necessity to develop a global, cosmopolitan memory of the tragedy, as that seems to be a way to make the problem no longer exclusively German, but a part of European memory.<sup>9</sup> Following the same logic, and referencing Polish circumstances (including all necessary differences), it might be worthwhile to assume that the question of communism and its perpetrators cannot be discussed solely in a historical context, or the context of guilt and search for justice. It cannot be limited to the level of singular biographies of people directly involved in the politics of those times. The good fortune of being born later, or having been part of the opposition is not an obstacle, in my opinion, to undertaking the challenge of presenting the past, while simultaneously attempting to depoliticize memory.

8 Teresa Walas, *Zrozumieć swój czas. Kultura polska po komunizmie – rekonesans* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 87.

9 Due to the European memory, it is possible to make Holocaust a "global lesson," aiming to minimize suffering in the future. See Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: der Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

First, a readiness to hear the narrative of perpetrators is crucial and necessary, and only later does one need to look out for the fact that oftentimes the roles of perpetrators and victims overlap, and that Polish history does not lack moments in which victims turned into perpetrators and *vice versa*. Historians often highlight those kinds of intersections in their work. Concerning taboo subject matter in PRL research, Jerzy Eisler notices that:

[...] the least researched, if at all, [are] the themes of relationships between the Security Services (SB) and Workers' Defense Committee (KOR), questions of potential collaboration between some of the KOR members and communist party members...<sup>10</sup>

When debating from retrospect, it is important to realize that we cannot claim any certainty as far as roles go. We need to have enough imagination to realize that being a perpetrator is not limited to making decisions involving opening fire on protesting workers: someone had to type that decision out on a typewriter, copy it and send it along, or at least not do anything to prevent it from happening. One should also keep in mind that very often, in most cases in fact, decisions made by the perpetrators did not involve momentous and dramatic events, but pertained to ordinary, everyday matters of life. Hence, these were not always decisions, which decided someone's fate.<sup>11</sup> We should try to understand and explain motives of particular actors involved in past events; motives, which oftentimes are much more complicated than they appear from the perspective of all those who deem it necessary to bring those actors to "justice," preferably through the judicial system. The term, "negative memory,"<sup>12</sup> in the title of my essay does not automatically refer to facts from PRL history which involved acts of physical violence. It involves a reflection over acts of psychological violence,

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10 Jerzy Eisler, "Narracje o PRL. Jak się opowiada o historii najnowszej?," in *Zapisywanie historii*. In that context see also Marcin Zaremba's *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944-1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012). The author, by uncovering the dark side of the Polish history, and specifically that period immediately after the war, attempts to explain and understand motives and reasons that pushed "normal Poles" to theft, crime, or ethnic violence.

11 When researching discourses of perpetrators in the context of the PRL, we most certainly should take a closer look at the dynamics of the period itself, and its particular, vastly different phases (in the context of perpetrators, the Stalinist period should be treated separately), which would go beyond the scope of this essay.

12 Taken from Reinhart Koselleck, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses," in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Norbert Frei and Volkhard Knigge (München: C.H. Beck, 2002), 27.

abuse of power, mechanisms of externalization, compensation, or distortion of facts and experiences as well.<sup>13</sup> One could doubt, of course, if the term “perpetrator” is appropriate, for example, in the case of a communist party member in a town of several thousands, who tried to fulfil his duties, believing that the communist revolution must have its price. When I use that term, it is not due to an absence of a substitute (potentially as fitting), but rather because it makes the task of pointing out the overemphasis on victimhood easier, as well as the instrumentalisation of the term “victim” in debates taking place in Poland after 1989. If there are so many victims of the past regime among us, there just must be something about those perpetrators after all.

### Victims and Polish Victimology

What is striking in reference to the People’s Republic of Poland is the asymmetry of Polish memory. In short, one could state that most of it is inhabited by victims. Within that group, according to its Latin root, we can distinguish two categories.<sup>14</sup> The first one is that of “martyrs and heroes by choice” (Lat. *sacrificium*). In our case those would be activists, demonstrators and members of the opposition movement. Myths of romantic struggle and veteran glory become revisited in stories concerned with that group. The second group, however, is composed of passive and powerless subjects exposed to violence (Lat. *victima*), a group to which most of Polish society becomes assigned in anti-communist narratives. Romantic loftiness of heroism, struggle and sacrifice finds its continuation in narratives of the PRL as an epoch of collective protest of citizens against the regime and the party. That tendency is particularly well illustrated by places of memory: plaques, exhibits, museums and monuments.<sup>15</sup> Inscriptions and religious symbols that inscribe victims into the context of Christian suffering predominate. (As a side note, many of

13 Aleida Assmann, “Pięć strategii wypierania ze świadomości,” trans. Artur Pełka, in *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa: współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (Kraków: Universitas, 2009).

14 On etymological and semantic contexts of the word “victim” see Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), 73–74.

15 In 2006 there was an addition made to the text on the Monument Commemorating Victims of June 1956 in Poznań. The original “For freedom, law and bread” has been expanded with “and for God.” Pace of creating monuments for victims of communism seems proportional to the pace of changing names of the streets, or monuments, dedicated to memory of PRL.

See Marcin Kula, “Wobec świadectw przeszłości,” in *Zapisywanie historii*, 363–389.



the Russian monuments – on the other hand – prevent the remembrance of both victims and history. Oftentimes, they look as if they are commemorating a natural disaster or a plane crash).<sup>16</sup> If we were to keep it simple, one could say that a bi-polar vision of Polish history becomes legitimated in the collective memory: on one side, there are “them” – “agents of the communist regime,” “pawns of Moscow” – the source of all evil, and on the other side, there is Polish society, clean and spotless, a victim of the system of repression that was forced on it. Depersonalization and generalization pertain to both groups in this case: all perpetrators are evil, and all victims are agents of good. In a less dogmatic version, the story about entanglement and the particularities of those days, which cannot be understood from our contemporary perspective, are endlessly repeated. This second version can be observed in testimonies given by writers, who explain their reasons for joining the communist party, or their support for the regime. The category of perpetrators functions in many debates – if at all – primarily through the more simplistic view: killers of father Popiełuszko, Gen. Jaruzelski, or those who shot at miners from the Wujek Mine. Perpetrators in the background are less often discussed, often reduced to several stereotypes and simplified notions, and not granted any research merit. One faces some difficulty already at the level of language – no one is certain what kind of semantics should be employed. The term “perpetrator,” is often used as a synonym of the term “executioner.” Andrzej Romanowski states:

Since I’ve been hearing a phrase “executioners of martial law” for months now, I find it difficult not to connect it with a book recently displayed in bookstores, entitled *Executioners from Katyń*. However, since we use the same word to describe members of the NKVD and ZOMO [trans. Motorized Reserves of the Citizens’ Militia], it’s difficult not to perceive language of our public discourse as a language of hate.<sup>17</sup>

These are all correct observations. Nonetheless, not a lot can be accomplished by simply being outraged at hate speech. In my opinion, Poland lacks a centrifugal perspective, a look from within that would strive to understand, not damn or assume that the problem simply does not exist. On the one hand, we stumble upon the idea of the “thick line,”<sup>18</sup> while on the other, the “politics

16 Arsenij Roginskij, “Fragmentierte Erinnerung. Stalin und Stalinismus im heutigen Russland,” *Osteuropa* 1 (2009): 41.

17 Andrzej Romanowski, *Rozkosze lustracji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 169.

18 Editor’s note: “Thick line” refers to a policy of former Polish prime minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki to avoid punishing people for crimes committed by the communist regime. “We

of memory.” I am far from condemning either the former or the latter, but for some reason I find it difficult to image how an exhibition entitled *Twarze łódzkiej bezpieki* [*Faces of Łódź’s Security Services*] or a movie entitled *Jak zginął Popiełuszko* [*Death of Popiełuszko*]<sup>19</sup> could change our attitudes towards the problem at hand. Knowledge limited to photographic evidence does not explain anything, or provide any context. And the same is true for all the founding myths of the “new” Poland that has been built from the ground up. I believe that instead of debating the regime and its terror, it would be wise to start a conversation about people, who for example signed off on documents for the “one-way trip” of many Polish citizens in March of 1968, without necessarily having any pretences to making the memory of them the only and the most important recollection of communism.

Idealizing the role of victims in narratives about communism is interesting also because that very notion can evoke rather negative connotations outside of that specific context: the so-called “victims of transformation” are presented as people who are guilty of their own poor circumstances, and not as resourceful. Victims of household and sexual abuse can count on very little help from the government as well. Yet, victims of the communist regime are treated differently. In their case, most typically, they are assigned positive attributes. That does not, of course, exclude excesses. Idealizing by default, in the end, targets the very victims by enclosing them in a hermetic formula, and taking away their individual features. The anti-communist perspective is focused not so much on actual victims – people with diverse, complex biographies – but

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split away the history of our recent past with a thick line. We will be responsible only for what we have done to help extract Poland from her current predicament, from now on.”

- 19 The exhibition has been opened on January 23, 2007. In the information booklet we read: “Exhibit *Faces of Łódź’s Security Services* portrays 45 operatives, all of whom were holding high positions in Łódź’s security apparatus throughout its time of operations. In the panels, besides the photograph of an individual, there are characteristics of each operative: their service record, as well as excerpts from the documents, which allow to describe that individual’s attitude during breakthrough moments, pieces concerning his work in the Security Service, views, as well as personal life. Featured are individuals such as Gen. Div. Mieczysław Moczar, who helped create the communist repression apparatus in Łódź in the 1940s, or Cpt. Grzegorz Piotrowski, killer of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. [...] The exhibition is accompanied by workshops addressed to above-primary level school-teachers. Workshops will cover issues surrounding operations of communist apparatus of repression in the Łódź area, and the surrounding region. [...] Workshops are designed to help teachers with preparing lessons dedicated to the modern history. There is a possibility of repeating particular workshops, depending on the demand.” Accessed January 1, 2013, [http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/pl/2/4397/Wystawa\\_Twarze\\_lodzkiej\\_bezpieki\\_Lodz\\_23\\_stycznia\\_2007\\_r.html](http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/pl/2/4397/Wystawa_Twarze_lodzkiej_bezpieki_Lodz_23_stycznia_2007_r.html)

rather on upholding a certain image, or an idea, of the perfect sacrifice. On the website of “We Remember” foundation it reads:

The fundamental goal of this foundation is to bring back the social memory of people who, in the second half of the 1940s, and at the beginning of the 1950s of the twentieth century took to arms in order to fight the communist regime. The goal is to bring back the memory of people who sacrificed their life plans, warmth of home, professional ambitions, and – finally – their very lives on the altar of freedom. They have sacrificed everything that is most precious in this earthly, immediate life. They refused to exist under the yoke of communism – the worst, institutionalized enemy of freedom known to man. Those were people who in the times of the regime’s greatest triumph gave everything they could, when standing up for values such as freedom and independence could cost one’s life. They were the avant-garde in the fight against the communist imprisonment of Poland. [...] Today, there is nothing we can do for them. Today, all we can do is remember them – THE CURSED SOLDIERS. We can remember, and as we remember, we should recall their struggle and sacrifice, and defend their choices from quacks who see the post-war history of Poland, up to the fall of communism, as a sum of actions undertaken for the sake of liberty by members of the communist party, who later left, or were expelled, as well as of those who remained in the party ranks up to its end.<sup>20</sup>

In the recollection of communism as an “institutionalized enemy of freedom,” as well as of its martyrs, there is no room for shades of grey. All victims are pure and noble, and the goal they served justified the means: including violence. What is more, the perspective of a victim is “cognitively privileged”: the assumption that individuals, or oppressed groups, have true knowledge of the oppression and reasons for it is accepted and repeated.<sup>21</sup> Małgorzata Czermińska posed a question: “How [do we] move between the Scylla of demythologizing the absolute innocence of the sacrifice, and the Charybdis

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20 Accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.pamietamy.pl/> It is worthwhile to read those declarations in the context of a book entitled *Egzekutor* by Stefan Dąbmski, whose narrator – a former soldier of the Underground Army – talks about the dangers of deriving satisfaction from killing, about murders he committed during his duty in the army – not only of Germans, but also his own colleagues – in order to achieve certain profits, and better his circumstances.

21 Ewa Domańska, „O poznawczym uprzywilejowaniu ofiary (Uwagi metodologiczne),” in *(Nie)obecność: pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, ed. Hanna Gosk, Bożena Karwowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Elipsa, 2008), 19–22.

of granting victims the cognitive privilege?”<sup>22</sup> In addition, is the account of perpetrators truly unable to contribute anything of value to our understanding? By analysing the rhetoric and arguments of those promoting the trial of Wojciech Jaruzelski, Jerzy Jedlicki concluded that the “eruption of their noble anger” was as strong as it was precisely because Jaruzelski dared to publish books and authorize interviews, in which he defended his positions as well as his memory, while admitting mistakes. Instead, they believed he should have removed himself – disappeared somewhere in Russia – and stopped making it hard for social stereotypes to function.<sup>23</sup> One can spot two problems with this particular example: firstly, the lack of faith in the cognitive value of the perpetrators’ perspective. Let us recall that Jaruzelski has been accused of being a member of an organized criminal group. Secondly, we can see attempts to instrumentalise victims and their experiences. While the trauma of victims can be passed from generation to generation without question – which has been confirmed by psychological, philosophical and medical studies – it does not mean that everyone who feels outrage and “noble anger” on account of Jaruzelski’s martial law, becomes a representative of victims by default. That type of appropriation leads to distortions between the traumatic memory of the actual victims – who often do not speak with their own voice – and the heroic memory of the “cognitive” ones. As a result, there are tales of victimhood that are being created and perpetuated, in which the memory of innocence and bravery becomes activated among generations of people who do not personally remember the martial law period from their own experience. Protests by those who do not subscribe to those types of narratives are based primarily on attempts to reinstate a more positive memory of the PRL – whether through statistics, which show for example that most of Polish society had been for the introduction of martial law, or by pointing to clearly positive aspects of the pro-social policies of the communist regime. Such attempts help to break the monopoly of memory that is through and through anti-communist and has a strong media presence. However, those working to establish a more balanced perspective lack enough focus on difficult and controversial events from the history of the People’s Republic of Poland, thereby giving the field away to those participants of the debate who use arguments that exclude dialogue, while employing the language of hate when speaking about perpetrators.

<sup>22</sup> Małgorzata Czeremińska, “O dwuznaczności sytuacji ofiary,” in *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością: polski dyskurs postzależnościowy – konteksty i perspektywy badawcze* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Jerzy Jedlicki “Wstyd,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 14, 2008.

## Perpetrators and Victims in Literature

According to Przemysław Czapliński, a “portrait of the innocent Pole: living in the reality of PRL, but making no contact with the state apparatus”<sup>24</sup> began emerging in the second half of the 1990s. He takes the year 1996 as a symbolic date of its beginnings, since it was the year when the media erupted in outrage over Wisława Szymborska, questioning her credentials to win the Nobel Prize in poetry as she had once written socialist realist poems. Czapliński lists a series of books published in the last decade or so, where the narrative about Poles as victims of the communist regime is further explored: *Madame* by Antoni Libera, *Węzeł* by Józef Ratajczak, *Sól i pieprz* by Ryszard Bugajski, *Jest* by Dawid Bienkowski, and many more. Joanna Derkaczew has also turned her attention to the issue by analysing TV plays from the 2007/2008 season, such as *Ziarno zroszone krwią* about the tragic fate of the Home Army (AK), *Stygmatyczka* telling the story of sister Wanda Boniszewska’s murder, or *Afera mięsna* about the execution of Stanisław Wawrzecki.<sup>25</sup> The PRL, presented as a criminal, authoritarian regime, is embodied in those plays by its official representatives – operatives holding official positions, who take perverse satisfaction from persecuting the pure and noble Polish nation. Not a single author, or director, attempted to take a closer, more thorough look and followed an assumption that turning one’s attention to perpetrators is morally questionable. Attention is reserved for the victims. What is more, a common thread in all of those novels is that perpetrators are a group negligible in size. As a result, we are faced with a paradox: since society in the PRL was a collective victim, where do the “ex-agents,” “ex-commies,” who appear so often in books about Poland’s transition period, come from? Where does the “network” come from, since the paradigm of “Polishness” during the PRL regime has been embodied by cavalry captain Witold Pilecki? Stefan Chwin has appealed many times for a more critical approach towards the past. He writes in *Dziennik dla dorosłych*:

1) Is there a single novel in Polish literature about what Polish soldiers did in Czechoslovakia in 1968? As far as I know, there is no such novel. I haven’t seen a single TV show, or play, or feature film for that matter, about Polish soldiers who in 1968 took away the freedom from Czechs and Slovaks. From the perspective of Polish culture it doesn’t exist. But

24 Przemysław Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany: późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie naracje* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2009), 123; see also Przemysław Czapliński, “Końce historii,” in *Teraźniejszość i pamięć przeszłości. Rozumienie historii w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, ed. Hanna Gosk, Andrzej Zieniewicz (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2006).

25 Joanna Derkaczew, “Teatr TV historyczny,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 205, 2007. Quote after: Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany*, 139.

when it comes to Katyń, the Warsaw Uprising, Captain Pilecki – go ahead! Make movies, paint the paintings, and write your novels! But what about Hradec Králové?<sup>26</sup>

2) It was not Jaruzelski who introduced martial law. He merely started the machinery, which worked flawlessly. Martial law was introduced by tens of thousands of regular Polish army men – boys from Gdańsk, Rawa Mazowiecka, Wrzeszcz, Kutno or Elbląg. They were ship builders, locksmiths, farmers, miners, and tram operators – all wearing winter uniforms of the People's Republic of Poland army. It was them, not General Jaruzelski, or Security Service members, who enforced martial law. Boys from Wejherowo, Oliwa, Sopot, Nowy Targ and Gorzów Wielkopolski were the ones who pacified factories that went on strikes, rammed gates of steel mills and shipyards with their tanks, and terrorized entire cities with their sheer presence. They were the authors of martial law.<sup>27</sup>

We can only speculate whether a book about what Polish soldiers did in Czechoslovakia will ever be written. However, the problem of “perpetrators” is an empty space for Polish culture, an unspecified space at best. An initial reconnaissance inevitably raises suspicions that perpetrators are most often presented as people from the outside, not members of the community. They are not specific, individual people, but merely a type. What often takes place is what Czapliński describes as the “depersonalization of the system”: many authors seem to have no doubts as far as where to place the pronoun “we,” and where to place “them.” The most glaring example of ideologising the PRL, evoked in almost every paper on the subject, is *Madame* by Antoni Libera. The novel operates on a dichotomy between faceless, merciless communism, and the rest of the Polish populace. *Madame* has been a subject of many analyses,<sup>28</sup> and I evoke it here as an example of certain tendencies. Another strategy often found in literature is to demonize operatives, or – a contrary approach – to diminish their role, ridicule, or parody them, etc. Rarely do we find any attention paid to the crossing of roles between perpetrator and

26 Stefan Chwin, *Dziennik dla dorosłych* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Tytuł, 2008), 277. Chwin's remark is particularly interesting, if we were to take into account that there is an upsurge of “tales from the PRL” in Polish literature, and that the introduction of the martial law has many literary representations as well.

27 Ibid., 319.

28 See Przemysław Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany*; Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę: literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2004); Dariusz Nowacki “Widokówki z tamtego świata,” *Znak* 542 (2000).

victim, the interchangeability and permeation between the two. Yesterday's perpetrators (from the pages of literature) rarely become victims, and vice versa. Some novels, *Haszyszopenki* by Jarosław Maślanka for example, have tried to show the interplay between the worlds of perpetrators and victims. Maślanka's novel takes place during martial law and tells a story of Maksymilian, son of a "troublemaker from Solidarność," his coming of age and friendship with Wronek, the son of a "fat cat from the local police force." However, when it comes to recreating the world under communism, such novels do not break free of stereotypes and hardened opinions. At this point, it would be wise to point out that critical literature, broadly speaking, is not greatly vested in the question of perpetrators – even when they do focus on taboo subjects as well as omissions or gaps in Polish narratives of the past century.<sup>29</sup> Opposition and dissident literature which present the problem of perpetrators in yet another constellation – cannot become a point of reference either. Lack of (critical) references to these representations is more or less symptomatic.

However, an attempt to revise the paradigm described by Czapliński can be observed in literary and film works from the past several years. In a novel entitled *Bambino* by Inga Iwasiów, there is a character named Janek, born as a bastard child in 1940, in a village outside of Poznań. He begins his career in post-war Szczecin. In due time, he climbs up the party ladder. He does not spend too much time wondering about the moral aspects of his work: "There's no point in sweating too much about it... the job being not ok. And what is it supposed to be? Do they interrogate, do they coerce? Did anyone see anything? Anyone?"<sup>30</sup> Janek is not just a party official, but also a husband, father, and friend. The narrator does not demonize, nor does she try to justify or excuse his actions: Janek's story is presented in a way that does not exclude understanding of his circumstances. Most of his decisions are an end result of his attempts to make his life better than that of his parents. It is interesting to see that he is an integral part of the local community. This perpetrator is not an executioner; he is one of many citizens who engaged in building the People's Republic of Poland. When in 1968, Stefan, a Jew from Janek's circle, is forced to leave Poland, we know that Janek, even though he does not make the decision to expel Jews from Poland, also does not try to oppose it, thereby supporting it with small gestures and seemingly irrelevant actions. Along with Stefan, Szczecin is deserted by many Poles of Jewish descent. We know from

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29 I refer to a book entitled *(Nie)obecność. Pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*. See also *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. German Ritz, Jochen-Ulrich Peters (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 1996).

30 Inga Iwasiów, *Bambino* (Warszawa: Świat Książki – Bertelsmann Media, 2008), 138.

history that there were many people affected that way in Szczecin, as well as in other cities. What is interesting in Inga Iwasiów's narrative is the fact that both perpetrators and victims have faces and biographies, and are part of the same community. Even though *Bambino* is not a tale about a perpetrator (Janek is not even its main protagonist), the author tries to understand his motives and decisions, and present them in a believable way. The perpetrator, in this case, belongs to us, not to them, and is an integral part of community. Many of the biographical novels written in recent years constitute an important voice in that context, tying it in with a question of how to tell a story from a biographical perspective, in which – referring back to Foucault – the focus is not on searching for the essentialist beginning (*Ursprung*), but for the origin (*Herkunft*).<sup>31</sup> Within family histories, both the past, as well as its continuations, are shaped during the process of reflection on one's own origins, which often turn out to be different from officially formulated versions provided by institutions guarding the "collective memory." Ewa Kuryluk in her *Goldi* (2004), and *Frascati* (2009) tried to deal with the image of a father-communist. Another interesting example would be Aleksandra Domańska's novel *Ulica cioci Oli. Dziejów jednej rewolucjonistki* [*Aunt Ola's Street. History of a Certain Revolutionary*] (2013). In the novel, a granddaughter tries to understand the motives of her communist grandmother.

Question of roles of a victim and a perpetrator intersecting reappeared recently in the cinema. In Jan Kidawa-Błoński's *Różyczka* (2010), protagonist Roman Rożek, a Security Service operative (of Jewish decent)<sup>32</sup> becomes

31 See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Michel Foucault *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993) 139-166. Starting with Foucault's reflections on genealogy as a place of intersection between the body and history, U. Vedder, O. Parnes and S. Willer noted that such perspective leads to the "naturalisation of history," and the "historisation of nature." See Ohad Parnes, Ulrike Vedder and Stefan Willer, *Das Konzept der Generation. Eine Wissenschafts- und Kulturgeschichte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011). "Historisation" in case of the phenomenon I am interested in would stand for the reflection on historical experiences recorded on the body of a family; experiences which do not allow to be included into dominating interpretative schemes. They are often talked about within the second or third generation.

32 It is worthwhile to notice an important work by Joanna Wiszniewicz, entitled *Życie przecięte: opowieści pokolenia Marca* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2008), which includes conversations with Polish Jews born in post-war Poland. The author attempts to grasp the specifics and different aspects of the Jewish experience, as well as the transformation of their identity after March 1968. I believe it is important that many of Wiszniewicz's interlocutors touch upon the issue of perpetration: their own, that of their parents, friends or close ones, and do not settle for a status of victim. It is even more important, if we consider how difficult it is for the Poles to confront the tragedy of March



a victim of anti-Semitic bashing, which he helped create, and is ultimately forced to leave the country in 1968. Rożek's ex-fiancée, Różyczka (the movie's title), is also both a victim and a perpetrator. She agrees to become an agent and to spy on a certain esteemed professor, but later on – under the influence of emotions – refuses to cooperate and attempts to stop the spiral of denunciations against the alleged “front man.” *Różyczka* is not, by any means, an outstanding film. However, it is an important one from the perspective I am interested in. It turns one's attention to the ambiguity of both perpetrators and victims, while realistically presenting their motives. Rafael Lewandowski in *Kret* (2011) touches upon a similar problem. Protagonist Zygmunt Kowal, a legendary “Solidarność” activist, is discovered to be a collaborator with the Security Services who has passed on information about his colleagues because of his complicated family situation: it will provide his wife with an opportunity to undergo a much needed surgical procedure. However, the film is not about an attempt to explain particular decisions made by the title character *Kret*, which translates to “mole” in English. Equally important is what happens to his son, Paweł, an observer of the collapse of his father's heroic tale, and its subsequent transformation into an anti-myth. He experiences many contradictory feelings, contempt mixing with attempts to understand, a lack of faith mixing with a need to forget and repress. The trauma of the perpetrator becomes transposed on the next generation: faced with the truth about his father, Paweł becomes involved to a point where – in the last scene – he murders an ex-Security Service operative, who has been blackmailing his father. The tragedy shown through this example of a family exposes the dangers of maintaining a close mental bond with the role of victims, compounded by the repression of “negative memory.” As Tadeusz Sobolewski writes: “The Polish Family is our national secret. To talk about it openly after 1989 has been almost as dangerous as it was before that year. We do not have a language to discuss this “other Poland,” but old sins tie us to it, if not directly, than through our parents.”<sup>33</sup> It is worthwhile to notice that the character of the ex-agent is as ambiguous as the character of Kowal himself.

Those three examples I have provided above, were chosen most pragmatically in order to suggest certain tendencies and symptoms. When researching the problem in greater detail, one should design a systematic review of the attitudes of perpetrators and victims in texts of cultural significance, and point out similarities and differences, analysing the poetics and narrative

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1968 – after all, it was one of those situations where we most definitely were not victims in the first place.

33 Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Polska tajemnica,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 4, 2011, accessed October 2, 2014, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,10058495,Polska\\_tajemnica.html#ixzz2PsE1dG5O](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,10058495,Polska_tajemnica.html#ixzz2PsE1dG5O)

strategies of literary works. Fictional works, such as films, should become an important element analysing the discourse on perpetrators, alongside factual works, press debates, or media and cultural events. Literature and art can use their own tools to pass on something that does not appear in debates between historians, publicists, or literary critics. And let us not forget what Dariusz Nowacki once said: “If a writer wants to talk about “how it was,” without asking the question “who was I?,” he inevitably enters the barren territory of a – silly after all – dispute about the People’s Republic of Poland; a dispute identical in structure to current in-party quibbles, or to the latest map of ideological affinities. It is the worst trap of them all.”<sup>34</sup>

*Translation: Jan Pytalski*

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<sup>34</sup> Dariusz Nowacki, “Widokówki z tamtego świata.”