

## The phenomenon of banished soldiers in Polish schools as an example of the politics of memory

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- The new core curriculum for teaching history in Polish schools is an example of the implementation of the politics of memory.
- The primary purpose of teaching history at schools has become to stir up patriotic emotions.
- This goal is to be reached by promoting distinguished Polish figures, presented as morally impeccable heroes.
- Patriotism is linked to war, the image of which is simplified and trivialised.
- The promotion of a black and white vision of history is a threat to Polish democracy.

**Purpose:** The article intends to analyse the manner in which banished soldiers are presented in the new history curriculum at schools in Poland as an example of the politics of memory.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The analysis is a case study of the phenomenon of banished soldiers in the Polish public discourse. It includes the following issues: the history of banished soldiers, the core history curriculum after the education reform in Poland, its objectives and goals (with particular emphasis on banished soldiers), the manner of presenting the banished soldiers in educational, public and social environments in Poland today, the impact of new historical politics on the Polish society and democracy.

**Findings:** The manner of presenting the issue of banished soldiers in the core curriculum for teaching history in Polish schools exemplifies the efforts to introduce a new political paradigm into the educational context. The primary purposes of teaching history at schools have become to stir up patriotic emotions and strengthen bonds with the Polish nation. These goals are to be reached by promoting distinguished figures in the country. However, any controversies related to the "heroes" are deliberately ignored, which is especially evident in the case of banished soldiers. Patriotism is identified with a black and white vision of history that emphasizes the good acts of "Poles" and the cruel acts of "others". The simplified vision of history, which expressly ignores controversies and is reluctant to discuss dilemmas, is a real threat to the future of Polish democracy.

**Keywords:** banished soldiers, Polish educational system, history at schools, politics of memory



“The Polish school will teach real history, which makes a clear difference between a traitor and a hero” -  
President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda

The work on the “Strategy for the Polish Politics of Memory” began in November 2015 under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda (Kancelaria Prezydenta, 2015). The concept of the politics of memory has rather conservative associations in Poland and is understood as “the conscious action of the political class aimed at shaping the scope and character of collective historical memory” (Wolff-Powęska, 2007). Dariusz Gawin, a historian of ideas, described the objectives of the politics of memory even more vividly, defining it as “the use that the democratic (and possibly undemocratic) society makes of their own interpretations of past events to achieve current political goals” (Gawin, 2005).

The main goal of the new politics of memory introduced in Poland by the government of the Law and Justice Party (in Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość: PiS), which has been consistently implemented ever since they won the election in 2015, is to emphasize what Poles can be proud of. This corresponds to the longing that a part of society expresses for unambiguously positive historical figures with which they could identify. Soldiers of the anti-communist underground during the post-war years, known as the banished soldiers, were promoted to the rank of such positive historical figures. In the new history curriculum in schools they are presented indiscriminately as morally impeccable heroes and an example of Polish patriotism. And, although these figures were in fact controversial, any controversies are expressly ignored in public discourse.

The article intends to analyse the manner of presenting the figures of banished soldiers in the new history curriculum at schools as an example of the politics of memory implemented by the Law and Justice party. The article will analyse the reasons, manifestations and consequences of this policy in relation to social awareness and democracy in Poland. A brief history of banished soldiers in Poland follows the introduction. The text then describes the origins of the independence movement established after the 2nd World War in Poland and the actions of the banished soldiers, taking into account the social and political background of the post-war period in Poland. Another point to analyse was the revival of the debate on the banished soldiers in the 1990s, after the transition to democracy in Poland. Contemporary examples illustrate the controversies surrounding this subject, which are present in media opposing the current government.

The next part of the text analyses the new core history curriculum in public schools in Poland, introduced together with the education reform by the PiS government in the 2017/2018 school year. Changes in the core curriculum depict a change in the political paradigm and the introduction of the politics of memory to schools. The issue of the banished soldiers is central in the analysis of the objectives for teaching history after the reform, as well as any controversies that have arisen around them.

The third part of the article presents examples of events, situations and contexts in which the banished soldiers are found in Polish education, in addition to the more general social environment - media and popular culture. My analysis is focused on how the way banished

soldiers are presented becomes a part of the new politics of memory and how the creators of this paradigm intend to shape the way Polish patriots think and act.

The last part of the article lists the most important conclusion summing up all of the analyses. It presents the threats to democracy resulting from the introduction of a new paradigm of politics of memory into the Polish education system and social space.

## 1 The Banished Soldiers

In 2011, the Polish parliament introduced a new public holiday by way of legislative act: the National Day of Remembrance of the Banished Soldiers [Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Żołnierzy Wyklętych]. The preamble of the act stipulates that the holiday has been established "to honour the Banished Soldiers - heroes of the anti-communist underground movement, who defended the independent existence of the Polish State, in an armed struggle for the right to self-determination and the realization of democratic aspirations of Polish society, and otherwise opposed Soviet aggression and force imposed on the communist regime" (Ustawa, 2011).

These historical figures are described in the act as national heroes. Polish historians and Polish society do not share this unambiguously positive opinion. In recent years, the subject of the banished soldiers sort of reached myth status, arousing a number of controversies. Doubt is already aroused by the very definition of their name: by whom and when would they have been banished? In order to find a reply to this question, we must understand what Poland was like after the end of Second World War in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the complex circumstances of the country after the system transformation in the 1990s until today.

In January 1945, when the pre-war territory of Poland was partially occupied by the Germans, and partly by the Soviets, the last commander of the Home Army, General Leopold Okulicki dissolved the Polish armed forces, at the same time encouraging soldiers to continue working "in the spirit of regaining full independence of the state and protecting the Polish people against total destruction" (Biuletyn Informacyjny, 1945). Post-war Poland, remaining under the control of the Soviet authority, was, in the opinion of general Okulicki and many of his contemporaries, not the independent country the Poles fought for during Second World War "We do not want to fight the Soviets, but we will never agree to a life other than one in a completely sovereign and socially righteous independent Polish State," Okulicki explained in his order, and he called on the soldiers to: "Try to guide your nation and fulfil the undertaking to bring back the independent Polish State. In this action each of you is a commander for yourself" (ibid.).

The order of general Okulicki had been interpreted in different ways by the members of the Home Army. Part of them began their work in everyday life, as civilians. Some decided to continue the armed struggle against the Soviets, joining newly formed organizations, such as "Freedom and Independence" [Wolność i Niezawisłość] (Żaryn, 2015). The last leaders of this organization were murdered in November 1947. From then on, the armed activity of the anti-communist underground in Poland was purely arbitrary and spontaneous. Partisans attacked policing and security units, and also fought against partisan communist fighters (Dobrowolski,

2017). Attacks were also directed against civilians, especially national minorities - Jews or Ukrainians who were accused of collaboration with the Soviets. This part of the activity of the banished soldiers is an element that raises controversies. The Institute of National Remembrance [Instytut Pamięci Narodowej: IPN] attributes the retaliatory actions carried out in 1945 and 1946 in Polesie to the category of genocide (IPN, 2005). Some of the partisans carried out plundering activities, attacking villages and murdering civilians, including the elderly, women and children (Sobolewski, 2017; Jurszo, 2017b).

Partisan activities within the context of the struggle against Soviet forces were carried out in Poland until 1953. The last member of the post-war armed struggle died eighteen years after the war in 1963 (Krajewski, & Łabuszewski, 2017). At the time of the People's Republic of Poland, the subject of post-war guerrilla activities was not openly discussed. It was revived in the 1990s, after the transition to democracy in Poland.

The first time the name banished soldiers was used was in 1993. It was introduced by members of the Republican League, who invented it for the title for the exhibition dedicated to the anti-communist underground (Wąsowski, 2011). Over the following years this name has been popularized and commonly used, for instance in the titles of books, articles, films, and theatrical performances (incl. Ślaski, 1995; Żebrowski, & Wąsowski, 1999; IPN, 2007). The term "banished" was to refer to the ruling elites of Poland after 1989, who were accused of failing to restore the memory of the soldiers of the post-war underground communist (Wąsowski, 2011).

In recent years, however, this expression has become obsolete. The current state authorities, associated with the Law and Justice party, intensively support the memory of the banished soldiers, creating a myth around them. There are ceremonial burials of anti-communist underground soldiers, the authorities plan to open two museums, streets, city squares and public schools are named after the soldiers who are a part of the "banished" group, state treasury companies organize knowledge competitions about guerrillas who fought in communist Poland, and television and film productions devoted to the subject of the "banished" are publicly funded - this is how a strong historical cult is built (Majmurek, 2017).

Many circles are speaking out against the creation of this myth. The left-wing "Razem" party, which is not represented in Parliament, notes that the group of soldiers glorified by the authorities includes murderers of civilians (Radio ZET, 2017). Right-wing party leader, Paweł Kukiz, also asks for a reflection on whom we call the real heroes (Jurszo, 2017a). Historians are divided: some support activities that unequivocally glorify the banished soldiers, others call for a critical analysis and reflection (Szewczyk, 2017).

In September 2017, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a paper expressing critical views about the PiS government, published an "Open Letter to President Andrzej Duda," written by Stanisław Aronson, a Home Army soldier who, in the post-war period belonged to the NIE organization which had been qualified as "banished" in the contemporary interpretation. In his letter, Aronson speaks strongly against the cult of banished soldiers. Relying on his own experiences from the time of the end of the war and post-war, he claims that there is a "story created around the "banished" which is nothing but a lie" (Aronson, 2017).



"This imaginary group started to include very diverse units, organizations and divisions, operating locally, in separation, without command, strategy or tactics (...) Certainly, after 1944-1945 the forest divisions included a whole plethora of partisan fighters: authentic patriots, who decided to undertake activities in armed combat, the soldiers of the Underground who escaped to the forests in fear of being imprisoned, deported or killed, also the young ones who treated the life in the forest as the only possible option and were not able to live in any other way and at the end there were also criminals and ruthless bandits. Mr President (...) I have the right and duty to speak firmly against the cult of the "banished soldiers". A fictitious version of history is being created to the detriment of the magnificent tradition of the Polish Underground State and the Home Army. Unfortunately, my statements and opinions are negatively received by the current authorities, who are creating a myth for their own benefit, leaving the truth and freedom of speech behind. The truth stands in the way of the politics practiced by the government and the alternative facts created to support this politics. They forget that an alternative history is nothing but a lie" (ibid.).

On the same day *Gazeta Wyborcza* published the Open Letter to the President, Andrzej Duda remarked that the soldiers of the national underground belonged to the most valuable fighters for the liberation of Poland against the power and terror of both occupants in a letter to the participants of a celebration at the Warsaw Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He thanked all, who are contributing to the restoration of the soldiers' reputation. He emphasized that any actions showing the merits of the Polish underground movement increase the awareness of the young generation, who recognize in these soldiers the "followers of the best Polish patriotic traditions and depositories of our national identity, [which] helps in establishing ethos and actively involving citizens to act for the benefit of an independent homeland" (Polityka, 2017).

Two letters written by Stanisław Aronson to President Duda regarding the cult of the banished soldiers remained unanswered.

## 2 Teaching of history in the Polish schools - the new paradigm

One of the most important pre-election promises of PiS concerned fixing the way history was taught, which - according to members of this party - was wrong, harmful and based on the so-called pedagogy of shame (Mrozowski, Lorenc, & Staniszewski, 2017). On April 30, 2016, President Andrzej Duda explained on the publicly funded cable History station "TVP Historia" that the education of the previous era was a completely "irrational action", which was aimed at taking away from Poles the things they should be proud of. "The others should be ashamed," said Duda, clearly emphasizing the distinctness of "our" history and the history of "others".

The government established after the 2015 Parliamentary Election acted very quickly to change the Polish education system and introduce new public school core curricula for the 2017/2018 school year. The former core curricula were developed in the years 2007/2008, and they were gradually becoming a part of the teaching syllabus from 2009 to 2016, as the process of change was long and subject to many consultations. The PiS government has carried out an education reform at an express pace, crucially changing the paradigm of history teaching.



The President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, described the benefits of introducing changes to the history curriculum in the following way: „The Polish school will teach real history, which makes a clear difference between a traitor and a hero” (Duda 2016). This approach to teaching history has been reflected in the core curriculum established by the PiS government.

The new core curriculum is focused on shaping and developing a patriotic attitude. In the commentary on the core curriculum for primary schools issued by the Ministry of National Education, the educational objective has been formulated as follows: “The core of changes within the new core curriculum, in the context of teaching history, is the emphasis on the educational, patriotic and emotional aspect that will influence the creation of national consciousness and historical identity” (MEN, 2017a, p. 26). If an objective is formulated in this manner, teaching history becomes a part of an educational plan for society. The content delivered to the students during history lessons must forge their pride in the achievements of their ancestors with a clear message that emphasizes who deserves this pride and who does not. An analysis of the educational objectives in the context of teaching history according to the new core curriculum, as compared to the former one, shows the introduction of a number of new elements that put the patriotic and emotional aspects of education at the forefront. Moreover, the objective of education is: “Stimulating the development of love for homeland through respect, attachment to tradition and history of own nation, its achievements, culture as well as the mother tongue. (...) Forming the ties with the motherland (...) consolidating the sense of dignity and national pride (MEN, 2017b, p. 1). The new core curriculum repeats some of the objectives formulated in the old curriculum, e.g.: “Becoming familiar with the important events from the history of the Polish nation as well as general history in order to be able to critically refer to the past, to better understand the present and responsibly build the future. (...) Developing historical thinking in addition to moral and aesthetic sensitivity. (...) Teaching (...) the skills (...) to formulate and express own opinions in a critical way” (ibid.). The above-mentioned historical approach and critical view of actually formulating one's own opinions seem to be understood differently in the idea of the creators of the core curriculum than by the creators of the previous basic principle.

The former core curriculum aimed at developing the ability to think critically, according to the opinion of Prof. Jolanta Choińska-Mika, who was the coordinator of work on the past core curriculum. The teacher's role was to present cause-and-effect relationships, different historical perspectives as well as the ups and down of historical events (obtained from an interview conducted on 11/09/2017). The teacher had to follow the principles governing the profession of a historian, know their limitations and avoiding simple explanations of historical events. The facts were to be presented to the students in historical contexts, depicting all the complexities in the political and military as well as social, cultural and economic fields. Based on this, the students were to learn how to draw conclusions and formulate their opinions.

The emphasis of teaching in the new core curriculum is for students to acquire facts and the political and military aspect of history. The creators of the new core curriculum claimed that it was necessary to expand the curriculum by additional facts so that “the students, both in primary as well as secondary school (...) will know more about the mechanisms governing the past, and thus will understand the present better” (PAP, 2017). It remains debatable whether providing students with an additional number of facts is the best method to understand

historical mechanisms. In the opinion of the creators of the old curriculum, the important part consisted in presenting the events from different perspectives and subjecting them to an in-depth reflection (opinions obtained from the interviews conducted).

The coordinator of the team preparing the new core curriculum for teaching history, Prof. Włodzimierz Suleja, thinks that the most important change consists in reformulating our perspective of history, especially domestic history, so that the students will feel emotional about it (PAP, 2017). "The essence of change consists (...) in the fact that we exhibit more - especially when it comes to primary schools - of what we refer to as the homeland topic, the history of the Polish fatherland, where we place the emphasis on knowing this history better across a thousand years' period" (ibid.), explains Suleja. Primary school pupils will only learn about the history of Poland, the first classes in history in the fourth grade will be based on getting to know the biographies of selected historical figures, while learning in the 5th-8th grades will consist of a chronological account of political and military history. The introduction of history through the presentation of historical figures is a very traditional method, dating from the nineteenth century. "In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with that. We want this first contact with history to be made through characters (...) who in fact significantly affected the history of Poland (...). This may, although I do not say that it must, build an emotional relationship between a very young person and history" (ibid.), Suleja argues.

The choice of figures through which a young person is to learn about Polish history is controversial. The formula of teaching history with the use of the pantheon of outstanding figures has been criticized, among others, by the Academic Council of the University of Warsaw Institute of History: "History is not a collection of patriotic episodes or a gallery of heroes. Ignoring controversial and negatively judged figures distorts the image of history" (Uchwała, 2017) - the academics stated as part of the public consultation of the base project. "It is regrettable that the new core curriculum gave up cultivating the attitudes that are so important for contemporary society, such as involvement in civic activities, social sensitivity, tolerance for different opinions, behaviours, customs and beliefs, opposition to discrimination, maintaining ties with the local, national, but also European and global communities. They are not only missing in the education objectives of history teaching, but also in teaching civics" - historians wrote in the resolution. The way in which the lives of important Poles are described is criticized as being infantile and is comparable to religious texts describing the lives of saints. The lives of soldiers are particularly glorified, which is deemed by some teachers as uneducational and contrary to the principle of upbringing in the spirit of peace. Soldiers are represented as heroes, and their biographies - as models to follow for fourth-graders. One of the textbooks even contains a picture of children dressed as soldiers with arms in hand, which is at least controversial in a pedagogical sense. In addition, the photo has an incorrect description. The information states that the children are "banished soldiers", although the children are holding a "Czata 49" coat of arms. This unit fought in the Warsaw Uprising" (Zubik, 2017).

The expression "banished soldiers" shows up in the new core curriculum for teaching history in grade schools as an effect of education in grade 8: "The student describes the attitudes of Poles towards the new authorities with particular emphasis on armed resistance (the unbroken [banished] soldiers)" (MEN, 2017a, p. 21). Moreover, among the figures of major importance to the formation of Polish cultural identity to be learned by grade four students,



are the “banished soldiers”: Witold Pilecki and Danuta Siedzikówna “Inka” (ibid., p. 12) The curriculum does not suggest a discussion on who is to be a part of the banished soldiers group, or how these figures should be placed in the complex historical and social circumstances of post-war times. The banished soldiers are presented as crystal clear, gaining the status of national heroes, with no additional reflection on who they really were.

Introducing the banished soldiers theme into the core curriculum in such an indiscriminate way is the consequence of the adopted paradigm. The objective of teaching history is not to reflect on the past, pondering the ups and downs of the Polish old times, but shaping national pride and love for the Polish homeland. Although the general teaching objectives state that students are to develop cognitive criticism, in practice many sections of the curriculum present a simplified vision of Polish history. Difficult subjects such as anti-Semitism in Poland were excluded from the core curriculum. For example, in the context of the attitudes adapted by Polish society towards the Holocaust, only heroic attitudes are referenced. At the same time, negative attitudes of Polish society toward the Jewish population, that even supported the extermination of Jews, are expressly ignored. In February 2018 Andrzej Duda signed legislation penalizing suggestions of complicity by Poland in the Nazi Holocaust on its soil during World War Two.

By minimizing the idea of social and community work and, at the same time, glorifying the lives of soldiers, the curriculum clearly interprets the concept of patriotism. Patriots are the people who fight for their country and are ready to sacrifice their lives for it. As an example, the fight of civilians in the Warsaw Uprising is presented and attributed an uncontested opinion. This armed struggle began in August 1, 1944 killed approx 150,000 civilians, including the most politically and socially active youth of the Polish capital, the forefront of the Polish resistance movement (Davies, 2004). Children also fought and died in the uprising. After 63 days of fighting, Warsaw surrendered and was defeated in the political, military and material dimension. Polish tradition treats the memory of the Warsaw Uprising as an evidence of national heroism and patriotism. In an educational dimension, it is an example of a tragic historical event, which can be used as a basis for discussing different aspects of an armed conflict and the fatal decisions that were made by the young generation. What did the word courage mean in those days? What social costs did the Poles bear in the Uprising? Was the decision to start the armed conflict the right one?

These are the questions that could have been discussed with the young people during history lessons, but the new curriculum and textbooks based on it do not encourage discussion. Everything is clear, simple and indisputable. War patriotism and not the patriotism of peace is presented as a valuable action. Polish heroism is being promoted without, however, showing the complexity of the war and the dramatic choices it requires. There is no incentive to reflect on the historical choices of Poles. For example, with reference to the Warsaw Uprising, students are to assess the attitudes of the Allies and the Soviet Union towards Poles without considering the sensibility of the Uprising in itself (MEN, 2017a, p. 20). Therefore, only the “others” are subjected to critical assessment, and not “us”.

Another example of the current approach to war issues is the dispute over the Museum of the Second World War opened in 2017. The museum has been criticized by historians and journalists who support the current government’s politics of memory as “not Polish enough”,



because the Polish experience of war has been presented in terms of universal and personalistic categories. The reviews commissioned by the Minister of Culture present allegations that no positive aspects of the war are presented, such as “tempering a man”. “We do admit to have been showing the Second World War in terms of great evil and enormous suffering. We focused on the millions of murdered, persecuted and suffering civilians. We regard this as our moral duty and are convinced that a museum rejecting such a perspective would deform the real image of war and betray its purpose (...)” (Newsweek, 2016a), the members of the museum council replied.

In a similar, simplistic manner, the new curriculum and textbooks prepared on its basis present the history of the years after the war. The times after the war are vastly complex, with the people who are trying to find a new place in life after the German occupation, and in the textbooks they did not even make the background for the struggle between the communists and the *banished soldiers*” (Zubik, 2017). The new core curriculum consolidates the myth of the heroic banished soldiers, introducing a simplistic historical narrative permeating into other spheres of the social and cultural life of contemporary Poland.

### 3 Banished soldiers in the social consciousness of contemporary Poland

For many years people in Poland have been creating a myth of the Warsaw Uprising as an admirable and heroic action. In the recent years yet another myth was born and raised - the myth of the banished soldiers. It is difficult to point to the exact origins of this myth - whether it occurred in the circle of the Law and Justice Party or historians from the Institute of National Remembrance, or it was perhaps triggered by the journalists of the right-wing media. The members of these three groups have been eager to discuss the banished soldiers theme in recent years, it was debated on many occasions, often with a load of emotions, accompanied by patriotic or heroic slogans, sacrifice for the homeland and national martyrdom. This approach reproduces the 19th century vision of the Polish history with martyrdom at its centre (Topolski, Molik, & Makowski, 1991). This myth promotes emphasising the periods of oppression by hostile nations, the martyrdom of Polish patriots, ready to give up their life for the independence of their homeland. The new core curriculum for history teaching returns to this paradigm, emphasising the military and insurgent themes in the history of Poland.

"After more than 70 years of no war experiences in our part of Europe, war becomes a romantic image, the prototype of which is of course the Warsaw Uprising. And on the other hand, the banished soldiers are also becoming part of a myth. We see the comeback of the romantic nineteenth-century image of the conflict, where war is something noble, something that integrates the nation, a reason for its participants to be proud and glorious and eternally famous, which has nothing to do with reality. We are not able to get rid of this unfortunate Polish romanticism” (Średziński, 2016), Prof. Wojciech Burszta, the Polish anthropologist of culture concludes about the changes in the paradigm.

It is not only the core curriculum that presents Polish history in this manner. Many circles in Poland cultivate and popularize the vision of history solely embracing political conflict and military themes. Later on in this chapter I will present examples of circumstances, events and situations based on a vision of history supporting the myth of the banished soldiers.



For the purposes of this article it was impossible to carry out studies on how the teaching on the banished soldiers has been delivered on the basis of the new core curriculum. The article was being written in autumn of 2017, the first months after the Polish education reform. However, even before the reform was introduced, educational campaigns concerning the banished soldiers had been performed or planned in many schools.

Many educational events are hosted as part of the National Day of Remembrance of the Banished Soldiers. Schools or museums often hold special classes devoted to the topic of the “banished” (an example of a museum lesson: <http://dulag121.pl/2017/02/lekcje-dotyczace-zolnierzy-wykletych/>).

The subject of the banished soldiers is introduced to the young people via various means of communication. The Passionart Association in cooperation with the Krakow branch of the Institute of National Remembrance prepared a Historical Educational Program. “The program is aimed at promoting history of Poland among middle and high school students by combining classical music with modern artistic means of expression (...)” (<http://passionart.org.pl/historyczny-program-educacyjny-2/>). One of the three topics of the program were the banished soldiers. Classical music was accompanied by patriotic rap music. “Thus, the classical music meets history and the forms of expression preferred by the young to speak, sing and play about the heroism and perseverance of the Unbreakable” (ibid.).

A secondary school in Milanówek near Warsaw decided to open a class with a national-mathematical profile. The program includes shooting, field trips and tours in the footsteps of the banished soldiers. “Opening a class with the national and mathematical profile is a response to the current situation in Poland and abroad - and I mean first of all the situation in Ukraine, and the matters related to refugees, which remain a concern to the young people - The headmaster of the school explained” (Newsweek, 2016b). History at the school in Milanówek will be taught with emphasis on the most recent times and the theme of the banished soldiers.

The primary school in Skawina near Kraków showed a performance in tribute of the “banished”. In spring 2017 the Polish internet was in for a shock - a photo of an eleven year old shooting children in the back of their heads taken during the performance was everywhere.



Source: [krakow.wyborcza.pl](http://krakow.wyborcza.pl)

Journalists who published the photos reported the course of the school play and the interrogation scene. "The scene was performed in absolute silence. Four boys playing secret police agents entered the stage one by one. They simulated a blow to the face, a silent scream. Finally the boy who performed the execution approached the rest. The execution itself lasted 30 seconds" (Kopeć, 2017).

The photos of the execution published on the internet caused some internet users to feel indignation. It was pointed out that playing scenes of cruelty and murder can be dangerous to the emotional development of children. Other internet users had different opinions, claiming that children play war anyway, and so are used to shooting each other.

Teachers from the school in Skawina expressed a similar approach. They did not see anything wrong in the performance, and did not expect it to be controversial. "It is indeed a difficult subject, but we prepared students for it during history classes. Only the fifth and sixth grade students took part in the performance as they already have the ability to think in an abstract manner and understand the meaning of staged events" (ibid.), the headmistress of the school explained to the journalists. According to the information obtained from the headmistress, the parents had been informed about the content of the performance and did not raise any objections.

There were numerous comments online pointing out the harmful effect of the black and white vision of history describing the lives of the banished soldiers. "Did the children playing the role of the 'banished' also murder militia officers and civilians?" (ibid.) said one of the online comments. The authors of the performance, teachers from Skawina, did not respond to these accusations. The statement issued by the headmistress proves that in her opinion the banished soldiers are unambiguously positive figures. Asked to comments on the scene of the execution, she said: "This is only one scene that did not even last three minutes, while the entire show was 40 minutes long, during which we concentrated on the good, that is the presentation of the 'banished soldiers'" (ibid.).

Perhaps the parents did not raise any objections to the content of the show because they were convinced that the banished soldiers theme was a valuable topic to present to the children. Skawina lies in the Małopolska province, the region of Poland predominantly inhabited by people with conservative views. Many of them support the politics of memory promoted by the PiS party.

People across Poland make incessant attempts to spread the story of the banished soldiers in Polish schools. Fundacja Dobrych Mediów [the Good Media Foundation], whose mission is to build a significant Catholic media network in Poland (FDM, 2017), inaugurated the project "Banished to the schools" in 2016. A part of the campaign included creating mobile exhibitions of twelve figures of the banished soldiers. Exhibits are sent to the schools who are interested in popularizing the banished and prepare special lessons on the subject. Another idea to revive the theme of the soldiers was producing a catalogue with their profiles. The media partner explained the rationale for this project in the following way: "At present young people are increasingly interested in the fate of the Banished Soldiers. They however do not have an opportunity to learn more about the inspiring lives of the Polish heroes during their history lessons at school" (Pasim, 2016). This rationale is followed by a call to financially support the

campaign: "We believe that with your support we will help the young Polish generation on the brink of adulthood learn more about this important period of Polish history! Let us save our Heroes from oblivion. It is to them that we owe our independence! " (ibid.). Donations may be transferred into the Foundations account. The organizers informed they need PLN 75,000 PLN to carry out the project and 70% of the amount is still missing.

"Red is Bad", the partner of the campaign, and provider of promotional materials such as campaign logo lanyards, is a company selling patriotic clothing and gadgets. The products offered by the company are dominated by military themes and the Red is Bad print



Source: <http://pewex.pl/pictures>

manifesting hostility towards communism. The clothing is also available in baby and child sizes. "Red Is Bad offers a line of patriotic rompers for babies. Each of them has been made in Poland. Designed in a moderate manner, they reflect the views of the parents, and accentuate Polish background. Subtle toned clothing with an embroidered Polish flag make an ideal combination to welcome baby Poles. Patriotic clothing for babies available in size 56 and larger!" (<https://redisbad.pl/odziez-dziecieca/pajacyki>) - this is the way the store promotes its products. You can also get clothes with banished soldiers themes.

"Red Is Bad" is not only a brand of patriotic clothing, but also a foundation financially supporting the living banished soldiers and combatants of World War II (<http://fundacja.redisbad.pl/foundation>). The foundation collects money mainly via the social media and gets numerous donations, which proves how important this issue has become to many Poles. The "Red is Bad" brand organizes many social and educational campaigns (<https://www.redisbad.pl/nasze-akcje>). Their products are donated to children in orphanages. "Red is Bad" supports and co-hosts events intended to pay tribute to the banished soldiers. The foundation is lobbying for calling streets and city buildings by the names of the "banished" and have monuments put up for them. Football games, runs and other sports events are hosted under the names of the banished soldiers. The foundation also sponsors awards in the contest on the knowledge about banished soldiers organized among schools. Many schools organize the "Banished" weeks on regular basis and the foundation provides patriotic clothing and gadgets for the students. The "Red Is Bad" campaigns are regularly updated on their website and their number is impressive.

"The Week of the Banished Soldiers" events are not only hosted by schools, but also by municipalities and towns. These events often include holy masses commemorating the "banished", concerts of patriotic music, marches through the streets of towns and cities, laying of wreaths at commemorative plaques and gravestones of the heroes, meeting members of the banished soldiers' families, art shows, talks and prayer meetings. Schoolchildren always participate in these events either by singing the national anthem, handing out flags or laying wreaths (see the example of the Banished Soldiers Week in Koło on the town's website: <http://kolo.naszemiasto.pl/artykul/iii-kolski-tydzien-zolnierzy-wykletych-program,3652014,artgal,t,id,tm.html>). The events do not mention any negative aspects the history of those times. All events have a commemorative character, emphasizing the heroism

of the “banished”. Their purpose is to arouse patriotic feelings, and a sense of belonging to the national community.

The number of this type of celebrations grows every year, and they are funded by both public and community organizations, such as the many foundations and associations supporting and promoting patriotic values and attitudes. For example the Polish Values Foundation (<http://www.polskiewartosci.pl/misja/>), which uses the “out of love for the homeland” slogan. The foundation, in cooperation with the Freedom and Democracy Foundation (<http://wid.org.pl/kim-jestesmy/>), has been since 2013 organizing a run dedicated to the memory of the banished soldiers - “Tropem Wilczym. Bieg Pamięci Żołnierzy Wyklętych”. Year by year the event gains more momentum as the event’s website states. “In 2017, approximately 60,000 participants from 281 cities took part in the Run: 229 partner cities, 6 foreign cities (Vilnius, London, New York, Chicago, Herdorf-Dermbach, Ingleburn), 41 cities (as part of garrison runs) and 5 military missions abroad (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bosnia and Herzegovina), where not only the Polish soldiers, but also by soldiers from the USA, Hungary, Denmark, Ukraine, etc. paid tribute to the banished. For the upcoming 6th edition of the Tropem Wilczym Run, which will take place on 4 March 2018, the organizers wish to involve over 280 cities, with around 70,000 runners. The project will include a traditional run for 1963 metres (reference to the year the last of the banished soldiers, Józef Franczak, aka Lalek, died)” (<http://www.polskiewartosci.pl/tropem-wilczym/>).

The cult of the “banished” is fostered on the Polish public television. Documentary programs, films and theatre shows focus on the banished theme. The message is clearly positive, and anybody who raises doubts about the moral purity of the “banished” is criticized. “After years of the communist propaganda calling the banished soldiers criminals and bandits, the struggle to restore their reputation continues. To this day, some still accuse them of crimes and criticize these who want to make them glorious - said a TVP anchor announcing the ‘Who is disturbed by the memory of the heroes’ show” (Jurszo, 2017b).

A journalist analysing television footage harshly criticizes the politics of memory pursued by the public media, which are subordinated to the PiS authorities. “TVP does not only ignore the facts, but also falsifies the inconvenient truth about the banished soldiers. It is ready to slander those who do not accept the manipulation of the past presenting the heroism of desperate struggles and erasing its pathologies. Those who do not wish to participate in the “religion of the banished” a new national cult” (ibid.).

The national and patriotic vision of history is surely an ideal image for the majority of the Independence March participants, who walked the streets of Warsaw on 11 November, 2017, on the 99th anniversary of Poland regaining its independence. This year, the March was dominated by the extreme right, and its organizers introduced the military style grouping. One of the journalists describes his experiences: “Men in orange vests, or the march protection guards, were loitering around the church. (...) They looked like civic militia. The situation looked like some kind of briefing. The “Officers” provided the “privates” with the guidelines. (...) Sheepskin coats worn over the uniform and fastened with a wide belt were popular. The banished... style” (Szczerek, 2017). Many participants of the March had the banished soldiers emblems attached to their jackets.



The photograph shows a boy, participant of the March, dressed up as a small insurgent. The boy holds a Polish flag in his hand and smiles for the picture. This is an example of how the national-patriotic politics of memory permeates the popular culture in Poland. Military, insurgent and soldier themes became trendy and popular, also among children, but missing the reflection on the drama of war and tragic choices of these times. War and struggle become a game with patriotic slogans. This seems to be particularly dangerous for children who quickly assimilate this kind of emotionally charged educational content.



Source: <http://thenowypolskishow.co.uk>

The banished soldiers theme seems to have been placed within the context of the march at a random, misguided attempt. There was a bizarre mixing of themes, contents and values, among which the xenophobic and racist content played a major role. "For example, you could see a dark-skinned man in a wheelchair, with emblems of banished soldiers attached to his jacket and people roaring behind his back: "refugees get the fuck out" (ibid.). The banished became a part of a mosaic of randomly matched elements, the ultimate result of which was, a combination of a national and patriotic, as well as racist and xenophobic content. The photograph below, showing participants of the March carrying a banner saying "Europe will be white or uninhabited" is an example of racist slurs present on the March.



Source: [m.newsweek.pl](http://m.newsweek.pl)

For many years, the extreme right-wing national movement has been participating in the marches, raising racist and xenophobic slurs and showing aggressive behaviour. So far, the authorities distanced themselves from these circles and condemned their behaviour. In 2017, the Independence March was praised by the ruling authorities as an expression of true patriotism of Poles. Thus patriotism was deemed to be simultaneously identified with banished soldiers and racist slurs.

## Conclusions

The manner of presenting the issue of banished soldiers in the core curriculum for teaching history in Polish schools is an example of the politics of memory implemented by the Law and Justice Party. The paradigm promoted by the Law and Justice authorities is based on the simplified vision of history. The objective of learning history is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of events and figures significant for the history of the country so that the students can understand the complexity of political or social circumstances in historical context. The new, express objective is to arouse patriotic emotions, cultivate love for homeland and strengthen bonds with the national community. This goal is to be reached by commemorating the distinguished figures in the country. The majority of the past heroes are soldiers, i.e. the people who are ready to shed blood and forsake lives for their homeland. The war and military rhetoric leads to associating patriotism with the times of war and not peace.

The banished soldiers are depicted as morally pure. The new curriculum ignores historians' controversies over the figures of the "banished," as well as evidenced crimes against civilians and other nations committed by the members of the banished group. Recalling these facts is treated as an anti-Polish and un-patriotic attitude by the supporters of the new paradigm. Patriotism is then identified with a black and white vision of history which emphasizes the good "our" heroes deserve and the cruelty the "others" i.e. other hostile nations commit. Any elements disrupting this image are unwelcome.

Simplified history, ignoring controversies and reluctant to discuss dilemmas has become the basis for teaching history in the new core curriculum. This is a real threat to Polish democracy for several reasons.

First of all, young people are delivered a historical vision based on incomplete information. Uncomfortable information, inconsistent with the political goals of the current government is not mentioned in the new core curriculum for teaching history. In a democratic state, citizens should have access to complete information to form an opinion on various topics. The new core curriculum for history teaching is not intended to support young people in independent thinking and drawing conclusions based on the access to complete information. The way facts are selected and presented leaves no room for conclusions and interpretations. The main goal is to arouse emotions, and not promote independent and critical thinking.

Secondly, democracy expects the citizens to be able to discuss matters, an ability nurtured at democratic schools. The new paradigm of civic education at the Polish school does not nurture the art of discussion and rational argumentation as it does not appeal to analytical thinking, but emotions.



Thirdly, the new paradigm for teaching history introduces a division into “us” and “others”, the former of whom are supposed to be good while the latter should at least have doubtful intentions. This manner of teaching history may impact the way young people think about other groups, nations or religions, even today. This paradigm of the politics of memory does not serve peaceful and democratic coexistence in a culturally diverse world.

The effects of the politics of memory introduced to schools are also seen in other areas of public life, such as the media, public space or popular culture. Political actions implemented in these areas have more to do with nationalism than democracy. Polish heroism is glorified. War is presented as a black and white phenomenon, missing any complexity. The simplified narrative seeks to minimize discussions. Emphasizing heroism and moral purity of figures, who fought with the “others”, the enemies of Poland, creates a sense of divisions extending to present times. Other nationalities, especially the ones with a history of war against Poland, are treated with distrust or even hostility. It is thus no surprise that during the Independence March glorification of the banished soldiers is heard against the background of racist slurs, expressing hostility towards refugees and worshippers of other faiths. Trivialisation of history in combination with consumer culture creates a socially dangerous element and a real threat to democracy.

The politics of memory has many functions for the governing party. Firstly, it is a means of political mobilization, in particular of right-wing political scene. Secondly, it is used as a method of reinforcing political cleavages and strengthening political legitimization of PiS. Thus, it is a way to acquire some moral superiority by the party. Political actions of PiS regarding the Constitutional Court are an example of the new interpretation of political morality, presented by the government. “The good of the nation is above the law. If the law conflicts with that good, then we’re not allowed to treat it as something that we can’t break,” said Kornel Morawiecki from the populist Kukiz movement, which votes together with Law and Justice on many issues. Jarosław Kaczyński as the leader of PiS said in many interviews that his party had a moral mandate to reshape the country. In 2015 Kaczyński called the Constitutional Court “the bastion of everything in Poland that is bad” (Cienski, 2015). From this moment on the process of dismantling of the Court has started. The politics of memory should help to legitimize current political actions. The banished soldiers are presented as moral heroes, although some of their actions were not legal. Law and Justice presents itself as an actor inheriting after “good anti-communist heroes”. Giving the Constitutional Court the label of a post-communist institution should legitimate handling against the rule of law. The governing party wants to be seen as the one with the moral right to take political actions for the fatherland, even against the law.

The phenomenon of banishes soldiers is a Polish case which could be also analysed as one example of a broader tendency of fostering nationalistic historic and citizenship education through the politics of memory. This tendency is currently existing in many countries, for instance Russia, Hungary or Turkey. Many states have nowadays their own traitors and heroes and build historical myths aiming at shaping specific attitudes towards both history and present day. As long as interpreting history is used to achieve current goals, it should be analyzed as the politics of memory: political action that can have a significant impact on societies and the future of democracy.



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