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**LOSS, FATALISM AND CHOICE:
THE MORAL COMPONENT IN THE NARRATIVES
OF POLISH DISSIDENT HISTORIANS IN THE 1980S.
THE CASES OF KRYSZYNA KERSTEN
AND JERZY HOLZER**

Abstract

This article discusses the moral dimension of history writing in the opposition milieu during the last decade of the Polish People's Republic (PRL). It focuses on the works of two dissident historians who dealt with untold or contested aspects of Polish contemporary history: Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer. First, the essay describes the narratives about the values and experiences shared in the PRL context by people belonging simultaneously to the intelligentsia, opposition dissidence, and academia (professional historians), with a special emphasis on the discovery and search for the truth under positivistic premises. Secondly, it analyses the counterfactual questions posed by Kersten and Holzer in their best-seller underground books about post-war politics and the trade union Solidarity's legal period, respectively. The reflections that these two scholars developed about *pasts-that-didn't-take-place* provided a complementary ethical component to their discourses concerning decision-making processes and Polish society's political agency. The idea of losing, the ultimate inevitability of defeat, and the way that defeat was faced in two different moments of Poland's recent history are tackled by Kersten and Holzer with an educational goal: to explain to readers that, however minute the range of choice is, ethics, together with remembrance, plays an important role in social consciousness and empowerment, and hence can make a crucial difference in the long run.

Keywords: opposition in the Polish People's Republic, 1980s, history writing, ethics, Krystyna Kersten, Jerzy Holzer

I INTRODUCTION

During the period of the Polish People's Republic (PRL),¹ history writing became one of the multiple means through which the political opposition manifested itself. Many historical narratives coming from opposition circles in Poland expressed a strong commitment to a set of values that, according to their authors, were being undermined by the communist regime. The most usual and conspicuous way for oppositionists to convey their ethical pledge in this field was by writing about past events that were excluded from the official version of national history, or interpreted differently. However, some historians went beyond the thematic choice and posed counterfactual questions to delve into the moral parameters of the recent processes and decisions concerning Polish society. This complementary and less known aspect of historical practice in an opposition context can be found in some of the works of Krystyna Kersten (1931–2008) and Jerzy Holzer (1930–2015), two scholars who researched sensitive episodes in modern Polish history.

Kersten's and Holzer's professional ethics, understood as their attachment to the ideas of truth, impartiality, factualness and historical rigour, combine at some points of their discourses with what could be considered as 'para-historical' inquiries and considerations related to memory and collective identity. Ultimately, such a blend refers to the primal dilemma about the role of history writing, and therefore of historians themselves. In the nineteenth century, the Rankean school established that historical research should base itself exclusively on academic premises, whereas the idealist-romantic school posited that it should also take into account the needs and demands of the non-academic communities that historians also belonged to. For the latter historiographical tradition, the duty of historians was to teach society 'national' values (freedom, independence, patriotism); while for the former it was to combat myths in history writing from a scientific and objectivist standpoint. Despite their apparent opposition, both concepts of the discipline of history co-exist and interact frequently in everyday historical practice.²

¹ The acronym for the Polish name *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* is used throughout this text.

² Joanna Wawrzyniak, 'History and Memory: The Social Frames of Contemporary Polish Historiography', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 103 (2011), 134–9; Rafał Stobiecki,

This article explores that interaction in the above-mentioned cases, with the aim of contributing to the debate about the involvement/detachment of historians in/from their present-day circumstances and concerns. If, as some suggest, history could be considered ‘a branch of ethics’,³ can ethics be broadly defined as a dual loyalty, namely to the internal code of an academic discipline and to one’s community (be it country, nation, or society)? Is it possible to analyse the past in the most unbiased way, and at the same time provide a moral reflection about failures, lost opportunities, and *pasts-that-didn’t-take-place*? In the context of 1980s Poland, these questions acquired a greater magnitude due to the convergence of three profiles, the boundaries of which are sometimes hard to distinguish, i.e. that of professional historian, intellectual, and political dissident.

II

VICTIMS, INTELLECTUALS AND DISSIDENT HISTORIANS

According to Walter Benjamin, only actual or potential victims of history can have access, in moments of serious peril, to the knowledge and recollection of the *past-that-didn’t-take-place*; that is to say, a past frustrated due to violence, crime and repression. But later, the ‘defeated’ of the past can be somehow ‘avenged’ through *remembrance*, a particular kind of memory that interprets thwarted projects of history not as mere ‘side effects’ of progress, but as unending injustices. Those ‘defeated’ who acquire historical consciousness and want to break with the empty time-*continuum* imposed on a given population by the ‘winners’ of an historical struggle must try to build a new present out of the ruins of unsuccessful pasts. To do so, a “tiger’s leap into the past” (Ger.: *der Tigersprung ins Vergangene*) must be performed. This involves raising society’s historical awareness by appropriating and bringing to the present the ‘current’ and ‘unresolved’ aspects of a contentious or ‘wiped out’ past. Such encounters – between a past considered insignificant by the ‘winners’ and a subject in need (i.e. today’s

Historiografia PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna... ale skomplikowana. Studia i szkice (Warszawa, 2007), 300–6.

³ Bo Stråth, ‘Introduction. Myth, Memory and History in the Construction of Community’, in *idem* (ed.), *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community. Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond* (Brussels, 2000), 30–1.

victims) – produces a dual redemptive process. On one hand, past outrages and sufferings are given a different sense and meaning; on the other, the present is seen under a new light. The previously empty time-*continuum* transforms into now-time (Ger.: *Jetztzeit*), a time in which everything is undecided and hence still possible. Thanks to this, reality is better understood and new possibilities are discovered within it. It is ultimately a political and hermeneutical revolution, deeply rooted in ethical parameters; one that contributes to restore a society's political agency, and is therefore focused on changing things in present time.⁴ I suggest here that such an operation was carried out by the opposition intelligentsia in the Polish People's Republic during the 1970s and 1980s. The examples I analyse concern, not by chance, two historians: Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer.

Polish intelligentsia-oppositionists were predominantly a privileged social stratum and belonged to movements opposing the communist government. Therefore, they had little to do with the outcasts, the *Lumpenproletariat*, or historical materialists that Walter Benjamin referred to in his 'Theses on the Concept of History'. However, they can be regarded as 'twofold victims' from another angle.

Like in many other countries, historical tradition in Poland is largely based on tragedy, specifically on the memory of the fallen and stifled uprisings (especially November 1830, January 1863, the Warsaw Uprising, and the revolts of PRL times), together with unsuccessful reform attempts (like the 3 May 1791 Constitution, or 1956). This includes the PRL regime's *białe plamy* (blank spots): episodes of Polish twentieth-century history that the communist authorities either denied or refused to discuss, and were therefore a kind of official *taboo*, such as the period of the Second Republic (1918–39), the conflicts between the Poles and the Russians, the Katyń woods massacre (April–May

⁴ Here I base myself on the Spanish philosopher Reyes Mate's study and interpretation of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Concept of History': Reyes Mate, *Medianoche en la historia. Comentarios a las tesis de Walter Benjamin 'Sobre el concepto de historia'* (Madrid, 2006), also available in French: *Minuit dans l'histoire: commentaires des thèses de Walter Benjamin 'Sur le concept d'histoire'*, ([Paris], 2009), and in Michael Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: aviso de incendio. Una lectura de las tesis 'Sobre el concepto de la historia'* (Buenos Aires, 2003). As to the English term *remembrance*, it is my own choice. In his work, Benjamin used the German and French words *Eingedenken* and *souvenance*, and Mate chose the concept *recordación* in Spanish. See Mate, *Medianoche*, 237.

1940), or anything related to the communist rule or takeover of power. The result of this was that since the nineteenth century, up to and including the PRL period, many Poles shared a bitter sense of loss. They perceived themselves as 'defeated' and the Polish nation as the 'victim' of a history that, in many cases, had been imposed on them from abroad.⁵

The architect of these historical discourses of loss was the intelligentsia, who since the 1800s became not only a myth-creator, but a myth itself. Modern myths are cognitive constructions that legitimize political actions in historical times and express trans-historical values that are used as a guide by a given group. They contribute to providing people with an identity and a sense of belonging to what is perceived as a supra-historical and durable community, for example a nation. Myths console, unite, and mobilize because they supply an integral vision of the past, the present, and the future in collective terms. Along these lines, in the nineteenth century Polish intellectuals self-appointed themselves as the spokespersons of moral values and national interests. In a restricted and classic Eastern European sense, the status of intellectuality involved maintaining critical attitudes towards political power, a certain social prestige, and, above all, being society's conscience and voice in public.⁶ Thus, on one hand the Polish intelligentsia-oppositionists could be the representatives

⁵ Ewa Domańska, '(Re)creative Myths and Constructed History: The Case of Poland', in Stråth (ed.), *Myth and Memory*, 249–62; Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 'The Complex of an Unwanted Child: The Meanings of Europe in Polish Discourse', in Mikael af Malmberg and Bo Stråth (eds.), *The Meaning of Europe. Variety and Contention within and among Nations* (Oxford and New York, 2002), 215–41; Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *The Wheel of Polish Fortune. Myths in Polish Collective Consciousness during the First Years of Solidarity* (Lund, 1992).

⁶ Jolanta Babiuch-Luxmoore, *Portrety i autoportrety inteligencji polskiej* (Warszawa, 1989); Barbara Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit* (Warszawa, 2006); Jan Iversen, 'Myth in the Writing of European History', in Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.), *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2010), 452–79; Leszek Kołakowski, *Obecność mitu* (Paris, 1972); Törnquist-Plewa, *The Wheel of Polish Fortune*; Denis Sdvižkov, 'The Intelligentsia: From a Global Phenomenon to a Peripheral One, and Vice Versa', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 103 (2011), 85–9; Henryk Domański (ed.), *Inteligencja w Polsce. Specjaliści, twórcy, klerkowie, klasa średnia?* (Warszawa, 2008); Jerzy Mikułowski-Pomorski (ed.), *Inteligencja. Między tradycją a wyzwaniami współczesności* (Kraków, 2005); Aleksandra Garlicka and Jerzy Jedlicki (eds.), *Inteligencja polska XIX i XX wieku: materiały z wystawy i sesji naukowej* (Warszawa, 1997).

of the 'nation-victim', while on the other hand they could be victims themselves, because their socio-political commitments implied acting in dangerous circumstances, exposing themselves to failures and even some kind of repression. The latter included deportations to Siberia, executions, death sentences, jail, dismissals, beatings, threats, etc.; not to mention emigration, one of the most important consequences of defeat in the country up until the 1980s.⁷

Furthermore, intelligentsia-oppositionists who were historians or wrote about history had much more to do with the heterodox Marxist historian Benjamin imagined than might be thought in the first place. Somebody with a good knowledge of the past is superior to the powerful in a way. That person can more easily tell who is distorting history on purpose, and hence has a clearer perspective of the oppressive system his or her society is immersed in. In the Polish case, this might partly explain why there were a significant number of opposition activists in academic organs, such as the Warsaw University's Historical Institute. On a different but equally meaningful scale, historical and memory matters spurred considerable interest among the Polish population in general, and opposition movements like Solidarity in particular, in the 1970s and 1980s. These decades became a kind of 'golden age' for the dissemination of alternative historical narratives. The PRL authorities' version of events was challenged by commemorations and through underground channels, especially the 'second circulation' publishing houses (Pol.: *drugi obiegi*). The most contested issues had to do with twentieth-century history and recent affairs, from the post-Second World War geopolitical arrangements to the different protests and crises which took place and continued to take place under communist rule in the country. After the downfall of the communist system, part of those formerly oppositionist narratives became official historical discourses in the new democratic period. Similarly, their architects moved from opposition groups under the risk of repression

⁷ Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980* (London, 1994); Barbara Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe. Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (Budapest and New York, 2003); Rafał Stobiecki, *Klio na wygnaniu. Z dziejów polskiej historiografii na uchodźstwie w Wielkiej Brytanii po 1945 r.* (Poznań, 2005); Janine R. Wedel (ed.), *The Unplanned Society. Poland During and After Communism* (New York, 1992); Eduardo González Calleja, *La violencia en la política: perspectivas teóricas sobre el empleo deliberado de la fuerza en los conflictos de poder* (Madrid, 2008).

to a public and professional life in which they could speak their minds freely.⁸

The term 'dissidence' (Lat.: *dissidentia*) expresses a separation from a common doctrine or belief. This means that such a doctrine had to be professed before being rejected, and that any ensuing criticism of it would come from a former 'insider'. Therefore, dissidents are a specific kind of oppositionists because of their particular origin. In the context of communist Poland, I apply the concept 'dissident historians' to professional historians who were former supporters and members of the Polish United Workers' Party (Pol.: *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, PZPR) and later joined movements opposing the PRL system. Many of them remained faithful to their left-wing ideals during their entire lives. Among these broadly understood revisionists were academics like Tadeusz Łepkowski (1927–89), Bronisław Geremek (1932–2008), Karol Modzelewski (n. 1937), Jerzy Jedlicki (1930–2018), and the subjects of this study, Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer.

Krystyna Kersten belonged to the communist Union of Polish Youth (*Związek Młodzieży Polskiej*, ZMP) between 1948 and 1956. Next, she joined the PZPR. Until the 1960s, she defended socialist and Marxist ideals in her works, and believed that history writing could contribute to their implementation in society. Later, she rejected the use of history as a tool to legitimize the communist government's propaganda. Her works of those times fit into the category of revisionist historiography. In 1968 she left the PZPR to protest against the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia, as did some of her

⁸ Mate, *Medianoche*, 120, my trans.; Magdalena Mikołajczyk, *Jak się pisało o historii...: problemy polityczne powojennej Polski w publikacjach drugiego obiegu lat siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych* (Kraków, 1998); Marcin Meller, 'Rola myślenia o historii w ruchu *Solidarność* w latach 1980–1', in Marcin Kula (ed.), *Solidarność w ruchu 1980–1981* (Warszawa, 2000), 219–66; Bronisław Baczek, 'La Pologne de Solidarité: une mémoire explosive', in Bronisław Baczek, *Les imaginaires sociaux. Mémoires et espoirs collectifs* (Paris, 1984), 185–239; Paweł Sowiński, *Zakazana książka. Uczestnicy drugiego obiegu 1977–1989* (Warszawa, 2011); Jan Olszák, *Revolucja powielaczy. Niezależny ruch wydawniczy w Polsce 1976–1989* (Warszawa, 2015); Krzysztof Łabędź, *Wydawnictwa historyczne drugiego obiegu w Polsce. Materiały do bibliografii adnotowanej za lata 1980–1987* (Warszawa, 1989); Michael H. Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland. Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics, 1976-1980* (New York, 1993), 194–5; Wawrzyniak, 'History and Memory', 134; Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 356–7.

fellow colleagues (e.g. Bronisław Geremek, Tadeusz Łepkowski).⁹ On the other hand, Jerzy Holzer did not quit the PZPR officially until 1979. However, he was less engaged in its ideology and political activity than Kersten. According to his own account, he accepted Marxism out of pragmatism rather than deep ideological conviction, and following the repression of the 1956 workers' protests considered himself a neo-positivist rather than a revisionist. Owing to his family environment during his childhood, he felt closer to the postulates of the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS). In fact, over the PRL decades he published many works about the history of Polish socialism and some of its main figures, either in 'first circulation' (Pol.: *pierwszy obieg*), i.e. officially and hence subject to censorship, like his Ph.D. dissertation, or underground through *drugi obieg*.¹⁰

Beginning in the second half of the 1970s, when oppositionist activity took off in Poland with the founding of the Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR), Kersten and Holzer embarked on independent scholarly initiatives together with other critical intellectuals. They both joined an independent scientific seminar of modern Polish history, which lasted until 1989. They exchanged views with colleagues such as Andrzej Paczkowski, Adam Michnik, or Anna Radziwiłł. Kersten took part as well in the Flying University (Pol.: *Uniwersytet Latający*), and later in the Association of Scientific Courses (*Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych*, TKN),¹¹ which was co-founded by her husband Adam Kersten, where critical intellectuals such as Jerzy Jedlicki, Jacek Kuroń, Władysław Bartoszewski, or Bohdan Cywiński gave lectures and discussed freely about their fields of expertise in gatherings hosted in private homes, including

⁹ Zbigniew Romek, 'Krystyna Kersten', in Jan Skórzyński, Paweł Sowiński and Małgorzata Strasz (eds.), *Opozycja PRL. Słownik biograficzny*, ii (Warszawa, 2002); Ewa Brudzyńska, 'Krystyna Kersten', in *Encyklopedia Solidarności* <http://www.encysol.pl/wiki/Krystyna_Kersten> [Accessed: 10 Aug. 2017].

¹⁰ Jerzy Holzer, 'Nie przeżyłem rewizjonizmu', in Magdalena Bajer, *Bliźny po ukąszeniu* (Warszawa, 2005), 53–8, 61–2; *idem*, *Historyk w trybach historii. Wspomnienia* (Kraków, 2013), 139. Holzer's works on PPS: *idem*, *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna w latach 1917–1919* (Warszawa, 1962); *PPS: szkic dziejów* (Warszawa, 1977); pseud. Ignacy Wilczek, 'Mieczysław Niedziałkowski', *PPN*, 22 (Sept. 1978); 'Feliks Perl', *PPN* (March 1979); pseud. Waclaw Pański, 'Z dziejów PPS', *Krytyka. Kwartalnik Polityczny*, iv (1979); *Agonia PPS: socjaliści polscy w sojuszu z PPR 1944–1948* (Warszawa, 1981).

¹¹ Ryszard Terlecki, *Uniwersytet latający i Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych, 1977–1981* (Kraków, 2000).

the Kerstens' flat. At the same time, between 1976 and 1979 Holzer began to collaborate with KOR, Radio Free Europe and Polish independence Agreement (Pol: *Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe*, PPN). The latter, founded by Zdzisław Najder, was an early oppositionist organization that aimed openly for a fully independent and democratic Poland and elaborated different analytical works for this purpose. Its collaborators included Władysław Bartoszewski, Aleksander Gieysztor, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Leszek Kołakowski, Marcin Król, Jan Józef Lipski, and Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Both Kersten and Holzer became members of Solidarity at the time it was founded in 1980. They both collaborated regularly in underground and émigré media, like the publishing houses *Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza*, *Most*, *Krąg* and *Aneks*, or journals like KOR's *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, *Zapis*, *Głos*, *Tygodnik Solidarność*, *Krytyka*, *Zeszyty Edukacji Narodowej*, *Zeszyty Problemowe "Myśl niezależna"*, etc.

As critical intellectuals in a dictatorial context, Kersten and Holzer were both faced with the lack of freedom of expression and the fact of being under police surveillance. Nonetheless, their oppositionist experiences differed with respect to other forms of repression that they suffered first-hand, according to their degree of political involvement. While Kersten focused on independent scientific research, Holzer combined it with a more intense and varied political activity, first in KOR and PPN (he became its coordinator after Najder left Poland) and later in TKN and Solidarity (e.g. co-founding the Solidarity branch at Warsaw University). He therefore also had closer links, alongside old friendships, with the leaders and advisers of these groups (e.g. Jacek Kuroń, Bronisław Geremek, Adam Michnik). As a result, Holzer was imprisoned for four months after the implementation of the Martial Law.¹²

In the personal memoirs and reflections of the Polish dissident intelligentsia, there is a fairly widespread discourse about what made its members change their political views during communist times. This shared narrative speaks about an unwavering loyalty to values that have been traditionally connected to the mythical image of the intelligentsia,

¹² Romek, 'Krystyna Kersten'; Brudzyńska, 'Krystyna Kersten'; Paweł Sowiński, 'Jerzy Holzer', in Jan Skórzyński, Paweł Sowiński and Małgorzata Strasz (eds.), *Opozycja PRL. Słownik biograficzny*, i (Warszawa, 2000); Paweł Sowiński, 'Jerzy Holzer', in *Encyklopedia Solidarności* <http://www.encysol.pl/wiki/Jerzy_Holzer> [Accessed: 10 Aug. 2017].

such as freedom, justice or equality, but most particularly to the search for truth. Some argued that these unchanged ideals led to shifting political positions, as intellectuals tended to support the ideologies or parties that seemed closer to fulfilling such ideals.¹³ Hence, what could have been described by officialdom as becoming a political renegade was justified as an act of ethical coherence by intellectuals. In this sense, left-wing intellectuals in the post-war context had a much tougher job, because they faced the dilemma of remaining faithful either to the truth or to the communist 'revolution'.¹⁴

In the specific case of historians, the dissidence discourse is enriched by a powerful element of professional ethics. Even though Polish historiography remained in essence quite classic methodologically and thematically speaking during PRL times,¹⁵ if there was ever a period and a field in which censorship, distortions and rash changes were attempted in history faculties, it was during the Stalinist times and concerned twentieth-century national history. Most of the above-mentioned Polish dissident historians belonged to a generation that attended university in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Between 1949 and 1954, both Kersten and Holzer studied history at Warsaw University, and then began working in the Historical Institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Warsaw University, respectively. As students, they had been taught that historical research should be unbiased, thorough, myth-free, realistic, and down-to-earth. They had been told to be critical. However, through their own personal experiences when they approached modern and recent

¹³ Tadeusz Łepkowski, *Mysli o historii Polski i Polaków* (Warszawa, 1983), 34–5.

¹⁴ Krystyna Kersten, 'Polskiego inteligenta – życie po śmierci', in Aleksandra Garlicka and Jerzy Jedlicki (eds.), *Inteligencja polska XIX i XX wieku. Materiały z wystawy i sesji naukowej* (Warszawa, 1997), 172, 177–8; Krystyna Kersten, 'Bezdomny intelektualista w poszukiwaniu ratunku', in *eadem*, *Pisma rozproszone*, ed. by Tomasz Szarota and Dariusz Libionka (Toruń, 2005 [1990]), 18–25.

¹⁵ Maciej Górny, *Przed wszystkim ma być naród. Marksistowskie historiografie w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* (Warszawa, 2007) and *idem*, 'From the Splendid Past into the Unknown Future: Historical Studies in Poland after 1989', in Sorin Antohi, Peter Apor and Balázs Trencsényi (eds.), *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Budapest and New York, 2007), 101–72; Andrzej F. Grabski, *Zarys historii historiografii polskiej* (Poznań, 2000), 198–247; Rafał Stobiecki, 'Between Continuity and Discontinuity: A few comments on the post-war development of Polish historical research', *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung*, 1 (2001), 214–29.

history, they soon became aware of the contradiction between theory and practice.

Jerzy Holzer, for instance, had found Marxism initially appealing because of its seemingly universal character. Due to his interest in political history, he attended communist historian Żanna Kormanowa's seminar at Warsaw University. "[Kormanowa] taught us really well how to analyse sources," he recalled, "but afterwards, after such a thorough analysis, she tried to build totally fantastic ideological interpretations – beyond source material. Despite our complete engagement, we already perceived the absurdity of such behaviour back then." After insisting so much on objectivity, history was being manipulated and used as a political weapon by the communist authorities, leaving hardly any room for criticism. Holzer also recalled that he researched Polish socialism in order to give the PPS its place back in history, and tell the truth about it by combating its previous falsifications by the authorities.¹⁶ On the other hand, Krystyna Kersten described her own experience of discovery as follows:

I was educated in an anti-uprising tradition that was slightly positivistic, perhaps with a shadow of National Democracy ideology. Westerplatte, the charge of the [Polish] cavalry against the [Nazi] tanks, the Polish habit of 'biting off more than it can chew' – these were 'deadly sins' for me, and it was time to put an end to them. Virtue, i.e. realism, required the acceptance of facts and existing within reality, just as it is. It was the attitude of quite a significant part of the *inteligencja* after 1945... It was the bridge across which crowds of people came to collaborate with the power established by the communists. And I remember my astonishment when, after joining OMTUR¹⁷ – that was in 1947 – I discovered in my first readings that the tradition of the labour movement contained, to my surprise, similar values to those of national uprisings, that it was just another bias about struggles, resistance, sacrifice for a cause, etc.

¹⁶ Holzer, 'Nie przeżyłem rewizjonizmu', 59–60, my trans., also 63–4; *idem*, *Historyk w trybach historii*, 120–59. Similar experiences are recalled by Jerzy Jedlicki, 'Nie marksizm mnie uwiódł' and Karol Modzelewski, 'Żyję w historii', both in Bajer, *Blizny po ukąszeniu*, 83–5 and 125–6 respectively and Bronisław Geremek, *La rupture. La Pologne du communisme à la démocratie* (Paris, 1991), 108; Georges Duby and Bronisław Geremek, *Passions communes. Entretiens avec Philippe Sainteny* (Paris, 1992), 15.

¹⁷ Organizacja Młodzieży Towarzystwa Uniwersytetu Robotniczego (OMTUR) was a socialist student organization linked to the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), which existed between 1926 and 1936. It was reactivated in 1944 and joined the communist organization Union of Polish Youth (*Związek Młodzieży Polskiej*, ZMP) in 1948.

We obviously realized (I prefer to speak about myself, or maybe about myself and [my husband] Adam Kersten¹⁸) that we were taking part in a process of transformation of social consciousness; even more, being still communists back then, we identified ourselves with this process. However, we did not understand – I am talking about the 1950s and 1960s – that such an operation threatened the patient with mortal danger. More or less since the beginning of the 1960s the debate about historical values was introduced in the ongoing political struggle. The situation became extraordinarily complicated. Part of the sphere of power began to bid with the Church, attempting, against its own ideological tradition, to take over nationalist watchwords.

History became a political instrument. In a sense it always is – it is that history written *ad usum Delphini*. But in our Polish confusion, the reprehensible intentions of politicians and the praiseworthy aspiration to tell the truth on the part of historians, journalists, and writers were interwoven – it was a malicious manipulation and vehement inclination to correct the falsehoods of history, making use of the possibilities given by power, especially censorship.¹⁹

The narrative pattern of these reminiscences is linked to a shared perception of what an intellectual should be. First there was a personal encounter with the truth, and hence with the communist regime's dark side, flaws, and manipulation attempts. Secondly, there was a feeling of bewilderment, so that intellectuals eventually broke away from their previous political beliefs and trust in the communist system, but did not abandon their ethical convictions. Rather than considering themselves fully conscious actors while remaining close to communism, dissidents saw themselves as victims of communist education, deception, disappointment or their own youthful ingenuity. Nevertheless, this was sometimes mixed with a certain degree of guilt for having supported the dictatorship. The process of 'credulity and deceit'; 'realization through personal and professional experience'; 'disorientation and/or disagreement'; and rupture was regarded by those who experienced it, or who adjusted their richer and divergent experiences

¹⁸ Adam Kersten (1930–83) was a Polish historian who specialized in Polish Early Modern History.

¹⁹ Krystyna Kersten, 'Społeczeństwo i historia', in *eadem*, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem: Polska 1944–1956* (London, 1993), 172–9 <http://kerstens.org/fundacja/Krystyna/badania/KK_Spoleczenstwo1.shtml> [Accessed: 13 Aug., 2017]. Similarly in: Karol Modzelewski, *Zajeżdżimy kobyłę historii. Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźca* (Warszawa, 2013), 66–72.

to this standardized model, as an important landmark or even a turning point in their biographies. In spite of the fact that, in the dissidents' view, their 'essence' or innermost collective and individual identity – connected to values and attitudes – had remained practically intact, now their previously sterile efforts were being channelled in a new direction and towards a new project.

To learn that official historical narratives failed to tell the truth and that historiographical practice was used as a political tool caused a 'moral outrage',²⁰ similar to that felt towards the PRL's repressive waves in 1968 and the 1970s. It changed the way intellectuals addressed not just history and its sources, but public life in general. Hence their insistence in demanding the truth from authorities while trying to spread the truth themselves and tell what had not been told before, both through their research and writings and from an oppositionist point of view. In this situation, ethics became both history and politics. This process was carried out by intelligentsia in three different ways: by elaborating a counter-history that did not aim to be detached and tended toward oversimplifications; by choosing impartiality and applying a 'scientific method' (i.e. analysis of source materials, references, etc.); or by dealing with a topic in a broader and freer way in essays or op-ed articles.²¹

Overall, Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer resorted to the second route. They constitute especially interesting cases, because while other dissident historians worked on transversal topics, distant historical periods, or other regions, in the 1980s these two scholars directly researched and specifically contested socio-political aspects of Polish contemporary history. As a result, their scientific publications became simultaneously among the best and most compelling oppositionist statements.

The two main works by Kersten that are analysed here deal with the origins of the Polish communist system and the Yalta Conference. She had given public lectures and written articles and shorter books about both these topics before, especially during Solidarity's legal period, as well as after the establishment of the Martial Law.²² Thus

²⁰ This expression is used by Bernhard in *The Origins of Democratization*, 77.

²¹ Andrzej F. Grabski, *Zarys historii historiografii*, 240–2; Zbigniew Romek, *Cenzura a nauka historyczna w Polsce 1944–1970* (Warszawa, 2010), 299–325.

²² For instance, *Historia polityczna Polski 1944–1956* (Warszawa, 1982), intended to be published openly in *Tygodnik Solidarność*, and finally issued underground

it may be said that these later texts were an extensive and more mature version of her previous research. On one hand, Kersten wrote *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943–1948* [The Birth of the System of Power. Poland 1943–1948] in response to a proposal of the Polish émigré library and publishing house Libella. The monograph was published in Poland for the first time in 1985 in the underground publishing house Krąg, and abroad in Libella one year later. It was awarded the Solidarity Cultural Prize and became an underground best-seller, leading to the issuance of two extra underground editions, in 1987 and 1988.²³ On the other hand, *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie* [Yalta from the Polish perspective] was published in 1989.²⁴ Though it concerned approximately the same period of Polish history as *Narodziny systemu władzy*, it was more focused on international relations and foreign affairs.²⁵

Jerzy Holzer wished to discuss Solidarity's legal period because, according to him, he had been conscious of its fragility and ephemeral character from the start, and he wanted to record what actually happened during those sixteen months. He wrote *Solidarność 1980–1981. Geneza i historia* [Solidarity 1980–1981. Genesis and history] when he was released from prison, between 1982 and 1983.²⁶ After being arrested, his relatives managed to hide the material about Solidarity he had previously gathered in the archives of Warsaw University. Though he resorted to that material for the book, he decided to write it without footnotes. He was conscious that this diminished its scientific value, but didn't want the authorities to trace his sources. A typewritten copy was smuggled to the West by Władysław Bartoszewski. Not much later, three other copies crossed the border too. As a result, the work was published abroad in Jerzy Giedroyc's émigré publishing house Instytut Literacki, and by Krąg in Poland. In addition, the work was translated into German and broadcast by Radio Free Europe, which increased its dissemination. Similarly as in the case of Kersten's *Narodziny systemu*, Holzer's *Solidarność* became very popular. It earned

because of the illegalization of *Solidarność* on 13 Dec. 1981. For examples for the Yalta Conference, see: Jan Bujnowski (pseud.), 'Czy Polskę sprzedano w Jaltcie?', *Krytyka. Kwartalnik Polityczny*, xix/xx (1985); *Polska – probierz porozumień jaltańskich* (Warszawa, 1987).

²³ Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943–1948* (Warszawa, 1987).

²⁴ *Eadem*, *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie* (London and Warszawa, 1989).

²⁵ Romek, 'Krystyna Kersten'; Brudzyńska, 'Krystyna Kersten'.

²⁶ Jerzy Holzer, *Solidarność 1980–1981. Geneza i historia* (Warszawa, 1990 [1984]).

its author broader recognition and is still considered an indispensable work about the independent self-governing trade union. Krąg issued around ten thousand copies of the book, and other underground publishing houses sold non-authorized volumes as well.²⁷

When describing Krystyna Kersten's career and merits as a historian, some authors highlight her commitment to impartiality and rationality (as in fact she herself did), as well as her search for the truth – despite how painful, uncomfortable, many-sided or disappointing it may have been. She wanted to provide readers with 'raw material' (Pol.: *surowiec*) and recount things from the beginning 'as they really were', or as impartially as possible, instead of providing a mere counter-narrative of the official version of the PRL authorities.²⁸ Her detailed analyses of the perceptions, ideological divisions and different interests at stake in Poland in the 1940s established an outstanding precedent for further research into that period, and are unanimously praised.²⁹

Similarly, Jerzy Holzer enjoyed an enduring and fruitful career devoted to the political and social history of the twentieth century, with a special focus on Poland and Germany.³⁰ He recalled in an interview that the beginning of his estrangement from official Marxist ideology in the mid-1950s had implied "... a return to a kind of, I would say, basic research, to analyses based on the truthful gathering of material."³¹ His lessons on Polish and World History at Warsaw University's Institute of History in the 1970s are remembered as a space for free thought and scientific honesty.³²

²⁷ *Idem*, 'Nie przeżyłem rewizjonizmu', 67; Holzer, *Historyk w trybach historii*, 231–4.

²⁸ Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy*, 7–9.

²⁹ Romek, *Cenzura a nauka historyczna*, 313–25; Grabski, *Zarys historii historiografii*, 241–2. For additional details, see: Romek, 'Krystyna Kersten'; Tomasz Szarota and Dariusz Libionka, 'Od wydawców', in Kersten, *Pisma rozproszone*, 5; Andrzej Friszke, *Polska. Losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989* (Warszawa, 2003).

³⁰ E.g. Jerzy Holzer, *Polska Partia Socjalistyczna w latach 1917–1919* (Warszawa, 1962); *idem*, *Kryzys polityczny w Niemczech, 1928–1930: partie i masy* (Warszawa, 1970); *idem*, *Mozaika polityczna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warszawa, 1974); *idem* (with Michał Tymowski and Jan Kieniewicz), *Historia Polski* (Paris, 1986); Jerzy Holzer, *Europa wojen 1914–1945* (Warszawa, 2008); *idem*, *Europa zimnej wojny* (Kraków, 2012), and others.

³¹ Holzer, 'Nie przeżyłem rewizjonizmu', 62, my trans.

³² Jan Skórzyński, 'Jerzy Holzer (24 VIII 1930 – 14 I 2015)', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, cxxiii, 1 (2016), 203–10; 'Wstęp' and 'Z biografii Profesora Jerzego Holzera', in

However, in the main works that Kersten developed in the 1980s, as well as in Holzer's *Solidarność*, there is a feature that has little to do with sticking to hard facts. In delving into recent history, both Kersten and Holzer asked themselves whether things could have turned out otherwise for the Poles at different points in the past, and if so, who had had the power to change the course of events. They made, thus, a didactic reflection about feasible alternatives, or *pasts-that-didn't-take-place*.

III

KRYSTYNA KERSTEN'S RIGHTFUL 'TEMPTATION' AND THE SOVIET UNION. BETWEEN POWERLESSNESS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF POWER

In the preface to her book *Narodziny systemu władzy*, Krystyna Kersten wrote that the aim of her research was to show the reasons and conditions in which the decision-making processes concerning Poland took place between 1943–8, and pointed out that she did not wish to assess the actual choices, just evidence their consequences. Nevertheless, she then added that to judge these decisions would require the formulation of alternatives. For instance, if Stanisław Mikołajczyk³³ had reached an agreement earlier, perhaps the establishment of communist power could have been avoided, or the other way around: if he had not reached it at all, the communists would not have managed to stabilize their government. And what if social resistance had been greater, or lesser...? Such examples, Kersten said, could go on endlessly, and she preferred to leave them up to her readers' judgment.³⁴

Thus, Kersten was perfectly aware of the doubts and *what if* questions many Poles had in mind, including herself. This may be appreciated even more in her subsequent works, where she explained

Katarzyna Karaskiewicz (ed.), *Polska – Niemcy – Europa. Księga jubileuszowa z okazji siedemdziesiątej rocznicy urodzin Profesora Jerzego Holzera* (Warszawa, 2000), 11–16; Sowiński, 'Jerzy Holzer'; Holzer, *Historyk w trybach historii*, 228–34.

³³ Member and later leader of the Polish People's Party (*Stronnictwo Ludowe*) in the interwar period, Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile during World War II and Deputy Prime Minister in postwar times, before the Communist Party took complete political control of Poland.

³⁴ Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy*, 8–9.

herself more explicitly. For instance, in *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie* she argued that, despite historians trying to avoid speculations, these could be found within any historical narrative, insofar as it was not a mere descriptive chronicle. Any assessment of the activities of historical subjects, any use of epithets or consideration of past words and deeds in the light of the results they yielded, implicitly included *what ifs*.³⁵ To ignore them would not make them vanish: the *pasts-that-didn't-take-place* are embedded in the historical narrative of a failure or defeat. It is an understandable and even rightful 'temptation'. The fact that Kersten admitted that she could not help asking herself similar questions speaks of her integrity and commitment to remain as truthful as possible, and perhaps also about her personal background: her father, Gniezno's regional public prosecutor Edmund Gołowski, had been murdered in Katyń. The need to reflect about what went wrong, find out who had had the power to change things and carry out feasible and fairer alternatives, drew Kersten much closer to Benjamin's hermeneutical proposals than what might have been initially expected, given her acknowledged preference for facts and information over interpretation in history writing. But, as Reyes Mate and Michael Löwy remarked, the orthodoxy of fully aware historian-victims cannot be the same as the 'orthodoxy' of historian-winners: other pasts were actually possible.³⁶

In her research into the Yalta Conference (February 1945) and the establishment of communist power in Poland in the mid-1940s, as well as in the first preface she wrote under a pseudonym for the journalist Teresa Torańska's underground book *Oni [Them]* (1985),³⁷ Krystyna Kersten wondered, for instance, whether it would have been possible to prevent Stalin from reaching his goals in Poland during the last phase of the Second World War. Could that have been achieved by the United States? Or by different policies of Polish political leaders? Would wiser representatives, the lack of a Polish communist group willing to follow Moscow's plans, and a stronger resistance on the part of Polish society have made a difference? And

³⁵ Kersten, *Jalta*, 242.

³⁶ Mate, *Medianoche*, 231; Löwy, *Walter Benjamin*, 183.

³⁷ A collection of Teresa Torańska's interviews (1980–1981) with former Communist leaders who left the Party or had problems within it, but were not part of dissidence or opposition. An abridged English version is: *eadem*, 'Them'. *Stalin's Polish Puppets* (New York, 1987).

in such cases, were the alternatives ‘better’ for Poland, in terms of its independence, than what happened – to become an ally of the USSR, but simultaneously a sovereign and democratic state able to develop economically and culturally (i.e. closer to Finland’s situation)? Or were they ‘worse’ – for example to have become the seventeenth republic of the USSR? Kersten went as far as posing her doubts, but could not provide a hundred per cent solid and reliable ‘prediction’ (or rather *post-diction*?) of the *past-that-didn’t-take-place*,³⁸ though she made a clear bet in Benjamin’s line.

In her aim to refute the widespread Polish perception of the Yalta Conference (i.e. that Poland was betrayed and ‘sold out’ by the West to the Soviet Union), Krystyna Kersten asked herself yet another ‘provocative’ question, as she called it: “Was Poland lost at Yalta?” In order to try to answer this, she liked to provide a general overview of the course of events and circumstances, based on the available sources of the time, but without the ‘chains’ of Polish stereotypes, despite assuming a Polish perspective.³⁹ To use a psychoanalytic analogy, Kersten wished to sit Polish society on a couch, track down the roots of its trauma and unease, talk it out of its biased interpretations, and make it approach the past in a different way in order to break those chains and enable it to advance. This would apparently suit the classic self-perception of a ‘demythologizing-historian’ in pursuit of the truth, which is considered to be part of a liberation process.⁴⁰ However, the truth can be never complete, and is not always comforting. What’s even more alarming, it can get dangerously close, in the eyes of a ‘demythologizing-historian’, to other myths that were also supposed to be dismantled. Kersten came up with the following inferences from her own inquiries:

To start with, Stalin followed a policy of *faits accomplis*. In their early expansionist plans, the USSR’s leaders already viewed the Second World War as an imperialist struggle; hence, the goal was to acquire

³⁸ Krystyna Kersten [pseud. Jan Bujnowski], ‘W oczach komunistów. Słowo wstępne’, in Teresa Torąńska, *Oni* (Warszawa, [1986]), 21–2; Kersten, *Jalta*, 242.

³⁹ Kersten, *Jalta*, 7–9, 15–16.

⁴⁰ Jerzy Topolski, ‘Historiografia jako tworzenie mitów i walka z nimi’, in *idem*, Witold Molka and Krzysztof Makowski (eds.), *Ideologie, poglądy, mity w dziejach Polski i Europy XIX i XX wieku* (Poznań, 1991), 243–54; Adam Schaff, *Histoire et vérité: essai sur l’objectivité de la connaissance historique* (Paris, 1971), Grabski, *Zarys historii historiografii*, 243–7.

military and political influence in different countries during and after their liberation from the Nazi troops, to put themselves in position to rise to power at the right time and carry out civil wars against national exploiters. Communists had become a political force to be taken into account in almost every liberated country by the end of the war. The result of the clashes between communists and non-communists in 1944–5 was not determined by internal factors, but by support coming from abroad. Finally, the communists did not form a government or build a new political regime beyond the Soviet military sphere, (i.e. Italy, France, Greece), but in Poland, the Achilles' heel of the area occupied by the Soviet Union's troops during the War.⁴¹

But even if Stalin had not found a communist group ready to adopt Moscow's guidelines in Poland, or had been unable to transform the USSR-sponsored Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, PKWN), which *de facto* controlled the liberated parts of the country since July 1944, into the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland (*Rząd Tymczasowy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, RTRP) right before the Yalta Conference (January 1945), Kersten argued that geopolitics would probably have had the last word anyway.⁴² Due to the priority given to military goals over political and economic factors during the War, and to the Western allies' decision in 1943 to limit the sphere of their military operations to Western Germany (except for Berlin), the Soviet dominion area in East Central Europe was to a large extent decided beforehand.⁴³ It was the incipient clash of two mentalities: not only was Stalin a hard negotiator, but also the representative of a system that did not respect any rules or human rights, neither within its borders nor abroad. Unlike the leaders of the U.S. and Great Britain, he did not have to take into account any public opinion or future elections. He understood the Red Army's occupation as his effective and permanent dominion over the region, and the Yalta Conference as its acknowledgment. Democracy was an empty word for him, but he was ready to make promises and pretend it mattered in front of his allies as a way to achieve his targets. Regarding Poland, Kersten believed that Stalin's plans of establishing a communist government in the country had taken

⁴¹ Kersten, *Jalta*, 23–31.

⁴² *Eadem* [pseud. Bujnowski], 'W oczach komunistów', 21.

⁴³ Kersten, *Jalta*, 17–26.

full shape by 1944. The only aspects still undecided were the specific way to act and the *tempo* of the process leading to the ‘construction of socialism’ – that is, of a country economically, ideologically, militarily and politically dependent on the USSR.⁴⁴

However, in Kersten’s *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie*, the opposite impression can be found as well. Apparently contradicting herself, the author considered that not everything was settled before Yalta, and that the Conference was a *crossroads* rather than a sentence for Poland. The Agreement was actually quite open, as it had to be in order to be accepted and signed by the three powers. If it had been literally interpreted and honestly put into practice, it would have meant the defeat of the Polish communists, since they would not have stood a chance of being in power after free, democratic elections. Nevertheless, Stalin managed to get his Western partners to *not* include in the Agreement a clause guaranteeing the allies’ supervision of the future elections, thus ensuring he would be able to use all means to achieve what he had in mind, regardless of what the Pact said.⁴⁵

Instead of focusing on the role played by the Western allies before and after Yalta, Kersten wondered whether a wiser policy on the part of the Polish political leaders could have changed something, or at least whether all means had been used to preserve the Polish State’s sovereignty and its existence as a nation. She claimed that the Poles in 1945 had mostly a negative and very critical opinion of all political actors of the time: they reproached the Polish government-in-exile for its lack of realism, the communists for their identification of the needs of the Polish State with Soviet interests, and Stanisław Mikołajczyk for his excessively appeasing position. However, she argued, given the situation of the country and its inhabitants, there could not have existed a single, common policy. Due to their irreconcilable aims (total submission *versus* total independence), the communists and the government-in-exile were incapable of negotiating. Besides, any government that was not under the USSR’s control in Poland in that context lacked viability, regardless of whether Polish communists considered the Soviet patronage a need or the logical expression of

⁴⁴ *Ibidem* 22–3, 34–5, 70–1; Kersten, *Narodziny*, 20–1; *eadem*, [pseud. Bujnowski], ‘W oczach komunistów’, 12–13, 15–16.

⁴⁵ Kersten, *Jalta*, 9–12, 69, 91–2, 97–8, 183–4, 244.

ideological bonds between Moscow and Warsaw. Taking into account present-day knowledge on the topic, Kersten considered that Polish non-communist politicians could not have prevented the inclusion of Poland in the USSR's sphere, nor the communists' rise to power; they could have only increased or diminished their costs or losses in the process.

But that was not so clear even by mid-1945, for there were still many open variables then. Bolesław Bierut's⁴⁶ suggestion to Mikołajczyk that he resign as Prime Minister of the 'reactionary' government-in-exile and join the 'democratic' (PKWN) side in October 1944 was a proposal for a betrayal rather than a commitment. However, there yet remained a meagre, narrow window left for authentic politics, and it was based precisely on the Yalta Agreements. Thus, Mikołajczyk returned to Poland in December 1944 and tried to make the most of this small, single chance in a last attempt to avoid a communist political monopoly in Poland, hoping to count on the support of the Western allies and on some concessions from the Polish communists when they finally realized they simply could not rule the country on their own due to their lack of internal support. But things turned out otherwise. Thus Kersten concluded it was not the absence of a political balance or pragmatism, but the way the international situation developed which determined beforehand the defeat of all those who tried to preserve the Polish nation's and State's existence without denying the reality, but who, simultaneously, never supported policies based on force or on the law of the strongest.⁴⁷ Contrary to what is generally thought, she asserted that not every defeat proves the defeated were wrong, or a deficiency in political realism. Besides the government-in-exile's position (refusal on principle) and complete communist control in Poland (unconditional submission), the USSR also counted back then on a willingness to acquire a reasonable, authentic commitment, as long as it did not conceal a humiliating capitulation.⁴⁸

Taking into account her discourse and the evidence, can it be asserted that, for Kersten, everything was settled by the second half

⁴⁶ Bierut was an NKVD agent and the leader of Polish Workers' Party since 1943. He was afterwards the first President of Communist Poland (1947–52).

⁴⁷ Kersten, *Jalta*, 30, 158, 242–4; also *eadem*, *Narodziny*, 224.

⁴⁸ *Eadem*, *Jalta*, 244.

of the Second World War? Could something else have been decided afterwards? And in such a case, by whom? In my view, the author's work is not so much a general attempt to dismantle recent historical myths as a personal statement and struggle, as well as a reminder to Polish society. While refuting the so-called 'myth of Yalta' with the help of her sources, Kersten was, ironically, very close to acknowledging fatalism in the form of geopolitical determinism; she even described present-day geopolitics as a 'curse' in the first Preface she wrote for Torańska's *Oni*.⁴⁹ Poland's unfortunate location between Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, and the fact it became their shared war booty, certainly contributed to perpetuate the classic Polish belief regarding their nation's previous situation between former Prussia/Germany and Russia. In the light of this unescapable condition, Kersten ended up recognizing the powerlessness of both the Polish political actors, despite their multiple positions and attempts, and of the Western allies,⁵⁰ whom she nevertheless questioned from the start and investigated thoroughly, in this and other essays, in order to understand them.

But the author's main concern lies elsewhere. Unlike the supporters of the 'myth of Yalta', who categorically blamed the West for Poland's setbacks, an apparently obvious question underlies in Kersten's arguments: What about the USSR? It is at this point where her hesitation and a personal struggle becomes visible and can be appreciated. On one hand, the sources prove, and she in fact believed, that in the midst of the war the Soviet Union had already decided that Poland's future would be communist, or it simply would not be at all. On the other hand, however, the documents also show, and her democratic moral imperative told her, that Stalin had many chances to reconsider his decision and think about, for instance, 'Finlandization', and the last chance was probably the application of the Yalta Agreement, which is why she described it as a 'crossroads'. But *he didn't*. And she wanted to make that point especially clear.

But why? Did it really matter whether it was a question of fate or of free will? If it had been known or assumed back then that it was

⁴⁹ *Eadem* [pseud. Bujnowski], 'W oczach komunistów', 21.

⁵⁰ Besides the latter's different perception of the situation and the priority given to other goals.

the latter, would it have made any difference in practice? Probably not. However, it could make a crucial difference *today*, because it involves a change of perception, both of the past and of present times. By reminding and showing Polish society the repressed source of its trauma, namely that it was *Stalin* who first and foremost had the leading voice in negotiations after 1943, and that *he had a choice*, Kersten was dismantling an unstated, far more threatening determinism underlying the 'myth of Yalta': the perception of the Soviet Union as an implacable, pre-programmed automaton, or in other words as an irrational being that could not take responsibility for its instinctive, albeit brutal, actions. According to Kersten, nothing could be further from the truth: Soviet leaders, together with Polish communists, were conscious of the harm they would cause in the name of so-called 'progress', 'democracy' and the 'greater good', that is, in the name of their (only half-concealed) thirst for power, but did not care, or maybe even relished it. In this case, the truth was tough enough to face, but to de-humanize Soviet decision-makers and their Polish long arm meant actually doing them a favour, because it exempted them from any responsibility towards the defeated, the fallen and, ultimately, towards Polish society as a whole.

Hence it is not surprising that a stereotype that diverted people's attention from the most conflicted issue in the Polish recent past, and sought scapegoats or culprits elsewhere, would be very convenient for the communist authorities. It was thus fuelled for forty years by politicians, propagandists, pro-governmental historians and journalists, besides also being supported even by many opposition figures. A widespread 'myth', such as that concerning Yalta, was simultaneously both dangerous and harmless. It was dangerous, because it actively contributed to the establishment of a bitter, disappointed, conformist or resigned view of the country's history and, by extension, of its then-present times; and it was harmless precisely because it rendered the present time sterile, in the sense it would not help either oppositionists or Polish society to challenge communist rule and improve things. In other words, the present could not fully become *Jetztzeit*, because it was held prisoner by a paralyzing and incapacitating view of the past. Kersten was conscious of this when she remarked, in *Narodziny systemu władzy*, that she was thinking about the future despite writing a book about the past, and that history was needed not just as an ingredient for national survival, but also as part of a re-nascent

political thought. In her opinion, the comprehension of Poland's 'yesterday', in which the then-present was so enrooted, was essential to engage in rational planning for the future.⁵¹ Similarly, she dedicated *Jalta w polskiej perspektywie* "to all those who seek knowledge about the past in order to think about the future", and considered that the problems she posed should be seen as "a lesson in politics",⁵² which she regarded as "the art of the possible", as a democratic will to negotiate that takes existing circumstances into account, a midway path between unrealistic far-out demands and a surrender equivalent to giving up intangibles, a way to combat immoral "anti-politics" founded in totalitarian intransigence.

It was about not taking for granted that things had to turn out as they finally did. It was about identifying those ultimately responsible for the frustrated opportunities, unfulfilled commitments and past crimes, with a view to exercising the moral right to claim justice and demand a better future, where there would be no room left for such outrages. Finally, it was about not allowing the 'winner' to get his way and eventually succeed in his hermeneutic goal, because if he achieved that, the real deep wounds of Polish society would never be healed. That was, to put it in Václav Havel's words, "the power of the powerless".

Kersten's approach is a warning about the peril of accepting deceit, whether out of pain and resentment or out of indoctrination, and yielding subsequently to oblivion. Rather than a final soothing rest, to promote such a reinterpretation of history can make a society's experience a productive combination of unrest and relief based on action and remembrance, not only of the defeated, but also of what the opponent-"winner" could be capable of if given the chance. The inevitability of certain "given" facts, such as geographic location, must be assumed, but not those dependent on human will. No one should be exempted from that moral imperative.

⁵¹ Kersten, *Narodziny*, 10.

⁵² *Eadem*, *Jalta*, 8-9, 16, 244.

IV
ANOTHER POLISH VERSION OF THE POWER
OF THE POWERLESS: JERZY HOLZER ON SOLIDARITY
AND MARTIAL LAW

“I hereby announce that today the Military Council of National Salvation⁵³ was established ... and it declared, today at midnight, martial law over the entire country.” These words were solemnly delivered by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Prime Minister and PZPR’s First Secretary, on the television sets at 6 a.m. on 13 December 1981. Thus began the Martial Law period in Poland (13 Dec. 1981 – 22 July 1983). It entailed closed borders, the disconnection and tapping of telephone communications, the militarization of the most prominent industries, a curfew from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., curtailment of freedoms, the closing of some schools of various types and levels, a tighter censorship, the internment of thousands of oppositionists, and dozens of killings. From then on, a maimed and dwindled Solidarity movement would have to try to carry on with its activity in the underground. What had led to that situation? Was Solidarity’s ‘Carnival’ definitively over?

In his work about the Trade Union Solidarity, Jerzy Holzer perceived two problematic sources prior to the events of 13 December: one coming from PRL authorities, the other from Solidarity members and supporters. On one hand, he pointed out that from the beginning of the August 1980 strikes the government had striven to play them down and carried out campaigns to discredit the whole initiative, a process that did not come to a halt with the Gdańsk Agreements and the formation of Solidarity. Hence, the fact that communist authorities were ill-disposed to negotiate and yield on some points was sufficiently clear, all the more so when its pro-reform nucleus lost the internal battle against the pro-Soviet one, which occurred by the Summer of 1981. On the other hand, in the year and three months previous to the military coup, Solidarity developed and radicalized, especially among grassroots activists. The Union’s power became overrated (even more so if one bears in mind its

⁵³ The Military Council of National Salvation (Pol.: *Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*, WRON) was the military supra-constitutional organ formed to administer People’s Republic of Poland during the Martial Law period. The acronym of this Junta in Polish is very similar to the word ‘crow’ (*wrona*), which gave rise to all kinds of jokes and double-meaning allusions.

relatively low international impact), while the communist apparatus was underestimated. Solidarity's representatives and the National Commission were accused of being far too moderate in their aims and were egged on to put more pressure on the government. Some intellectuals, like Bronisław Geremek, already sensed back then that the authorities actually wanted the movement to get carried away by extreme, demagogic, nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies, because that would provide them with an excellent pretext to ban it. According to Tadeusz Łepkowski, the government was planning from the start to dissolve the Union sooner or later, and its preparations for this intensified beginning in February 1981. Time was on its side: Solidarity was starting to lose support from ordinary people, the clashes between its leaders increased, as did governmental provocations, and Polish society grew tired of the daily economic difficulties.⁵⁴

In his Conclusion to *Solidarność 1980–1981. Geneza i historia*, Jerzy Holzer ventured an early interpretation and assessment of the positions of both the PRL government and Solidarity before the coup. The author allowed himself to wonder whether there had been any alternatives for oppositionists, or anything either or both sides could have done to avoid the tragic ending.⁵⁵ In the first place, the Polish communist regime was at a low ebb in 1980–1. Unlike in previous protests and crises, on this occasion it hardly tried to interfere in the course of events. The PZPR had weakened and its cadres were discouraged; this was partly an indirect consequence of it losing a great deal of the people's trust and of its own growing reticence to carry out even minimal reforms. In the second place, Polish society had never been so prepared to take part in the events ensuing from workers' strikes; opposition groups formed a few years earlier played a fundamental role in this context. The new movement decided to demand and foster reforms without resorting to violence. In addition, given Poland's delicate dependent situation, and bearing in mind the results of former national and international attempts to introduce changes within the communist bloc, the promoters of the Gdańsk shipyards' strike and Solidarity chose to self-limit their goals and forms of activity. Once an agreement was reached, all sides

⁵⁴ Holzer, *Solidarność*, 92–3, 268–71, 276–7; Tadeusz Łepkowski, *Mysli o historii Polski i Polaków* (Warszawa, 1983), 66–7.

⁵⁵ Holzer, *Solidarność*, 351–5, also 302.

of the conflict described it as an 'engagement' (Solidarity, the Church, the government, the Communist Party...). For a considerable part of Polish society and its novel representatives, that engagement implied socio-economic and political transformations that would put an end to the communists' monopoly over public life. However, the governmental and Party authorities regarded it as something they had been forced to accept provisionally, until the right time came to return to the previous situation by regaining total dominion.

Holzer asked himself whether Solidarity could have increased its chances of success by adopting a more moderate position when defining the permissible limits of the engagement? Or conversely, by taking its adversary by surprise by a more radical behaviour, forcing it to make deeper transformations in the system? In his opinion, more moderation could have led to Solidarity's self-destruction without attaining any of its ultimate objectives. Besides, everything that had been achieved at first was soon hampered by authorities and thus looked temporary and endangered. As a result, the less willing the government showed itself to carry out a minimum of reforms (e.g. delays and problems in registering Solidarity, police repression in Bydgoszcz, attacks against the Union...), the more radical and demanding Solidarity became (demanding changes in the courts of justice, public prosecutors and the *milicja*,⁵⁶ its own space in the media...). On one hand, the Party and the government did not want changes to be permanent; on the other, the people supporting Solidarity mistrusted verbal promises and felt they had to ensure these changes by weakening their opponent and challenging it in all fields. For Holzer, the road of moderation was blocked, so the only possible option was to go radical.

Radicalization, however, was not a wise option either, because in order to make irreversible changes it was necessary to weaken the inner forces that sustained communist power (i.e. the army and the police). In doing so, Solidarity would have risked turning a bloodless revolution into a violent civil war. Both the majority of society and the Church were against this, so despite increasingly radical activities it was decided not to resort to physical confrontation. This was, to Holzer's mind, the result of society's ingrained aversion to a fratricidal war and a fear of both provoking a clash between a disarmed crowd

⁵⁶ The *milicja obywatelska* (MO) was the state police institution during PRL times.

and the army/*milicja*, and of the internationalization of the conflict through the Soviet Union's intervention.

Therefore, the room for manoeuvre of the opposition figures and society was narrow. It was true they had made many mistakes, but in Holzer's opinion most divisions and conflicts had been due to personal and group rivalries rather than to clashing perspectives about the present and the future, and even if lumped together, they only had a secondary influence on the course of events. Thus, in addition to specific variants, the general outline of Solidarity's revolution was defined by the international context, and in the face of such reality there were only two alternatives: to capitulate, or suffer an honourable defeat.

Nevertheless, in the author's view there never existed a real dilemma about this. The revolutionary process such as that which took place in Poland in the 1980s implied the will to not surrender voluntarily, even if it had offered an apparently better state of affairs in the short term than a situation finally imposed by force. Solidarity's leaders and advisers – and, in fact, Polish society – no longer believed that something could be achieved that way, as 1956 and 1970 experiences had taught them. To yield would only mean a significant loss of support for the movement and an eclipse of its power. It would have been perceived as contributing to the worsening of the crisis and being manipulated by the communist authorities, thus calling into question the very idea of independent trade unions.

Taking all this into consideration, Holzer reckoned that the lack of freedom caused by physical imprisonment was preferable to capitulation, because the latter was tantamount to a 'spiritual suicide'. It would be as if somebody fastened a slipknot round his neck hoping it wouldn't tighten itself. Most probably, he wrote, it would alternatively strangle and slacken, as it had done in the times of the former Presidents Gomułka and Gierek, turning finally into a kind of collar, the symbol of a humiliating submission. Society could only do better in the short term; in the long term the system would break its will and ability to resist. It would debase Poland's national consciousness.

Human decisions, based on principle, had become fixed and non-negotiable. Hence, Jerzy Holzer apparently reached a deterministic conclusion. Given the traditionally immovable stance of the communist authorities, and the opposition's reluctance to give in on this occasion, Polish society could only choose the 'lesser evil', and so Martial Law was implemented. But there were two changes in society's attitude that

made the difference in the end: one, that the margin of discretion of the Poles had increased since the formation of the communist regime; and two, that this time the oppositionists and protesters were unwilling to believe or accept governmental promises and threats in exchange for what would be surrender at the bottom, i.e. capitulation. Such an interpretation of what was taken to be a massive and fully conscious moral resolution set Solidarity apart from previous oppositional efforts. It was a different defeat from those which took place before. In this way, the sixteen months of the movement's existence out in the open could turn into a lasting ethical legacy, remaining in people's memory until it became a legend and instilled the necessary courage to carry on. In his work on Solidarity, Holzer was making his own contribution to the building of that heritage. The author acknowledged that many external and internal factors would define the fate of the Polish nation, but sooner or later the awareness of society would be decisive and, in that sense, the Poles' destiny still depended, as it did during August 1980 – December 1981, on themselves.

V CONCLUSIONS

The topics that critical historians chose to research in Poland in the 1980s conveyed their ethical commitment, both as academics and oppositionists. However, due to the conspicuousness of the thematic selections, other complementary strategies that were put into practice have gone more unnoticed. One example of this are the counterfactual questions posited by Kersten and Holzer and analysed in this article. They were raised by professional historians concerned about the search for the truth and impartiality. Counterfactualness and the striving for objectivity might be seen, respectively, as 'para-historical' and 'properly historical' procedures, but they actually interact in historical practice. Reflections about *pasts-that-didn't-take-place* provide an additional and different moral dimension to the works of professional historians like Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer. They speak about the complexity of history writing and its ultimate goals, especially in a dictatorial context in which contested versions of the past co-exist.

The Polish oppositionists' elaboration of a history of their recent times was a socio-political and hermeneutical counteraction, inspired

by positivistic premises. In the case of some dissident historians, this stemmed from a shared experience of discovery of the truth; that is to say, of the repressive and deceitful character of the PRL regime they had previously supported. Such an intellectual realization transcended the intelligentsia's professional sphere, and led to (or justified) a firmer oppositionist stance in order to prevent a similar distortion of the then-present times by the communist authorities in the future.

Despite writing about different historical periods, Jerzy Holzer's and Krystyna Kersten's texts are ultimately a documented chronicle of the Poles' loss of freedom and independence in modern times, and there are some clear parallels between them. First, within intellectual narratives in which the idea of losing weighs heavily, they both tackled the difference between defeat and surrender, a difference which they considered morally and spiritually vital for the nation/society. Secondly, they tried to determine whether things could have turned out otherwise, either in the postwar period or in 1980–1. The difference between their considerations lies precisely in the context chosen. In their view, whereas in the times of the Yalta Conference the power to make a decision was overwhelmingly in Stalin's hands, as the country was materially and mentally devastated, nearly forty years later Polish society and oppositionists had a slightly broader field of action and hence decided to take not the path less harmful path in the short term, but the more difficult in order to ensure a long-term survival. Therefore, between the periods depicted by the two historians a subtle shift in agency had taken place. The focus turned from the decisions of the powerful and their moral responsibility in the 1940s to the meagre, but morally relevant, range of choices of the 'powerless' in the 1980s. Thirdly, both these authors pointed out that many arrangements were beyond the control of non-communist Poles after 1944, to the point that the unwillingness of the USSR and PRL authorities to negotiate became in both cases an insurmountable obstacle. Everything had been settled beforehand and from on high, and there was little that could be done. However, *how* it was done and remembered was absolutely crucial.

The works written by Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Holzer in the 1980s pursued the broader educational goal of reconfiguring Polish society's view about recent past events as a means of changing the way it faced the present. In a situation of imminent loss, they claimed that choice,

however unlikely or minute, could be found even in the most hopeless and apparently fatalistic scenarios, and that such choice was laden with ethical connotations that could prove pivotal in the long run.

proofreading James Hartzell

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