INTRODUCTION

Poles, Jews, and Communists

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—Karl Marx (1963: 15)

History is the most dangerous product evolved from the chemistry of intellect. . . . It causes dreams, it intoxicates whole peoples, gives them false memories, quickens their reflexes, keeps their old wounds open, foments them in their repose, leads them into delusion either of grandeur or persecution, and makes nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable and vain.

History will justify anything. It teaches precisely nothing, for it contains everything and furnishes examples of anything.[1]

—Paul Valéry (1962: 114)

On 26 January 2018—one day before an anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz—the Polish parliament, the Sejm, passed an amendment to the Criminal Code criminalizing the defamation of the Polish nation. According to this amendment, the defamation involved any mention or suggestion that Poles participated in the Holocaust (Sierakowski 2018). Immediately after the passing of the law, the Polish premier, Mateusz Morawiecki, turned his attention to three groups of people: first, he met with the Righteous Among

Nations—Poles who were honored by the Yad Vashem Memorial for saving their Jewish neighbors during the war (*Wiadomości dziennik* 2018). Second, on a visit to Munich, he placed a wreath on the commemorative stone of the anti-communist unit of the National Armed Forces, a unit that collaborated with Nazi armies and left Poland with them in the face of the Red Army advance (*Wiadomości gazeta* 2018).[2] Last, on the same visit in Munich, in conversation with the children of Holocaust survivors—the third group—he spoke of "Jewish perpetrators" (Noack 2018; Wieliński 2018).

In the understandable outcry over the law and the subsequent antics of the premier, two issues escaped general notice. When the antidefamation law was debated and voted on in the Sejm, it was opposed by five deputies. More specifically, 279 deputies hailing from the ruling party and their acolytes voted yes, 130 deputies from the opposition abstained, and 46 deputies were absent. In other words, 5 deputies out of 460 *actively* objected to the law as presented (Uhlig 2018).

Second, Polish political and media elites narrated the ongoing events in different ways, but they all advanced the same interpretive frame. This frame saw the passing of the law, the premier's actions, and the subsequent international outcry as a crisis in Polish-Jewish relations. More specifically, it cast the events as a conflict between Poland and Israel.[3] The politicians and commentators alike were preoccupied with Poland's image in the fight with Israel—some claimed to defend it, others saw it as being besmirched—but they all agreed that Poland had a great and heroic history, which appeared to be under attack.

These much-abbreviated but emblematic events offer a snapshot demonstration of a political space structured and constricted by memory. In such a space elites of all stripes politicize the past—that is, they use and manipulate it for present-day political payoffs, and they channel the political conversation into identitarian frames—that is, they turn it into a fight between nations, or *kinds* of people. In this book, I explain this generalized preoccupation with the past—or more specifically for the story at hand, with the communist past—and its connection to national identity construction. Communism, by the way, was not referenced directly in the events recounted above, but, as I will show in the chapters to come, *it* was why Nazi collaborators came to be venerated, and *it* was why the Jewish people came to be called perpetrators. To be clear, *Weaponizing the Past* is not a book of history in which I examine whether Jewish people were guilty of crimes against the Poles; rather, *Weaponizing the Past* is a book about memory in which I explain why, how, and to what effect Polish contemporary elites narrate the Jewish people as having perpetrated crimes in the past.[4] To be clear again, I take the broad, active, and multifaceted participation of Poles in the Holocaust as an established historical fact, and I examine how this established fact is treated and used by

Polish political classes. I also show that my straightforward confirmation of this fact reveals my political identity in Poland, in the same straightforward way that a declaration of being pro-life or pro-choice reveals party affiliation, and a vision of national belonging, in America.[5]

In empirical terms, I follow and analyze the articulations of contemporary antisemitism as I examine the present-day stories of Polish and Jewish imbrications with communism. In theoretical terms, I explore the reasons, mechanisms, and stakes of politicizing the past as I track their effects on democracy and national belonging.

Antisemitism and exclusionary nationalist rhetoric and violence are on the rise globally. Their increased intensity and frequency are usually seen as a result of the assent to power and growing legitimacy of new right-wing populist leaders, who mobilize voters and organize their resentments with nostalgic appeals to long-gone folk nirvanas. In this telling, right-wing populism, exclusionary frames and collective memory of some imaginary past are empirically and conceptually entwined. My account does not challenge this view but complicates it. It shows that all dominant parties in Poland played with memory for political ends, and even though each one narrated and condemned communism differently, they all ended up conflating it with Jewishness. In doing so, they gained sharp political identities and polarized the political discourse; they also elevated a narrowly ethnic vision of the national community. Antisemitic tropes in Poland, therefore, even if they appear to be more directly visible in the rhetoric (and actions) of the current rulers, have a continuity and universality. They were used by liberal and neoliberal parties, and this trend need not end if the current ruler leaves office. This suggests that even if right-wing populism relies on memory narratives, not all memory narratives, even if they advance exclusionary imaginaries, need to be classified as populist.[6] (I return to this theme more fully in my conclusion, in which I tie the insights from the Polish case to the present-day theorizing on the right-wing populist turn.)

To repeat, all the major political parties, which have held power in Poland since 1989, condemned communism, and all of them conflated it with Jewishness. But why did they bother with the past at all? Why did they dress their identities in costumes borrowed from history—to paraphrase the opening quote—and why did they not simply and directly discuss taxes and hospitals? The expectation that political parties establish their identities by dealing with mundane policy issues originates in stable regimes, and in a discipline reluctant to see identities as imagined, constructed, and changing, often through narratives, or what Rogers Smith called "ethically constitutive stories" (2003: 59).[7] There is no reason to suspect that democratic regimes in the process of forming—emerging from transition, or conflict, or some other dramatic past—will simply turn toward the future and "move on," or that they will

follow models formed elsewhere, or that they will not engage in their own "muddling through." There is also no reason to suspect that they will not use resources available to them or, more precisely, that they will not invent and invest in new resources, ripe for the picking in their contexts.

The context I have in mind is an end of a protracted conflict, in which no clear winner emerges (as in Northern Ireland, for instance), or a normative collapse of a regime, in which the adversaries—the compromised ruler and its dissident opponent—negotiate their way to the new order, in which both are legitimate political players in the emerging democracy (as in the end of apartheid in South Africa, or slavery in the United States, or indeed communism in Eastern Europe). In the context of such *transplacements*, to use Samuel Huntington's term (1991: 113),[8] the transition lacks purity, as its losers emerge standing and its winners get to power by negotiation. As I will show, the degree of legitimacy of the old ruler and the purity of the new one will become the subject of a political struggle and will implicate narration and judgment of the past. In other words, it will open up the past as a political resource in the present.

In short, in weaving my tale, I will show how Polish elites engage the narratives of the past and implicate two conceptual fields. First, I will argue that they structure political competition through a political resource I call *mnemonic capital*. That is, they gain political identities and appear distinct from one another by narrating the past and judging the past. In a clear breach of expectations of scholars studying political parties, local actors compete fiercely, but they do not use platforms to do so. Instead of platforms, they use differentiated stories of the pre-transition past. Second, I will show that in weaving the stories of the past, the parties circulate particular imaginaries of national belonging. That is, they reinvent the nation (Wodak et al. 2009). Contrary, again, to mainstream literatures on the topic, which see nations as historical and static—invented in their generality about two hundred years ago, implemented in their particularity and plurality since then, and simply persisting by the force of their normativity (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1972; Tamir 2019)—political elites in Poland demonstrate active engagement with (re)shaping the nation, or who is "we" to what "them" (Brubaker 2009). "They," in Poland, are narrated as hostile and ethnically coded, and "they" are narrated in stories of the past. As my account will show, however, even though "they" are narrated in the past, the way "they" are imagined both shapes and constricts the notions of the present-day "we."

In pursuing this dual line of inquiry, and in heeding Bernhard and Kubik's call for more explicit theorizing of memory in politics (2014), I draw on, adapt, and braid three distinct scholarly literatures spanning political science, sociology, and collective memory studies. In the process, I formulate an interdisciplinary *politicized memory framework*, a framework that explains

why political parties engage the past, what work it does for them, and how it affects democracy and national belonging. Since my home discipline of political science approaches past-related issues—legacies, commemorative rituals, and transitional justice practices—as singular events that need explaining, and since it looks to political and institutional arrangements of the polity as a source of that explanation, I reached to collective memory studies and to Bourdieusian forms-of-capital analysis to illuminate an inverse relationship, one in which the stories about the past told in the present by political actors affected the electoral game and reshaped the notions of present-day nation. Political science, in other words, supplied the puzzle and questions animating the book, sociology provided theoretical insights that explained the puzzle, and collective memory studies gave me the apparatus to articulate a constructivist approach to political identity of political parties, and a constructivist approach to nation-making as done by the political parties. Together, the three fields allowed me to show empirically and explain how Poles are imagined—that is, made or created—into a narrowly ethnic nation, and how the turn to the past and condemnation of communism are inimically entwined with the contemporary production of antisemitism.

Plan of Work

Multiple audiences may reach for this book, and for different reasons, and to ease their entry into the text I divided it into three parts: part I is devoted to theoretical reflection; part II offers a deep reading and reinterpretation of the Polish contemporary political sphere; and the conclusion specifies my Poland-inspired and memory-related theoretical contributions to the most recent writing on right-wing populism.

   More specifically, part I introduces the theoretical language I develop to intertwine the insights of three disciplines, and it also explains my framework. It comprises two chapters: the first presents the theoretical preoccupations of the book, deals with questions and gaps in extant literatures, and explores the power of mnemonic capital in post-regime transition settings as it introduces the collective memory field to political scientists and political sociologists. It answers the questions, "Why do elites weaponize and politicize the past (or reach for mnemonic capital)?" and "What effects does this weaponization produce?" Very deliberately, to make the theory generalizable to other settings, the Polish case with its narratives of communism and Polish and Jewish imbrications makes almost no appearance here, and when it does, it is only in passing. In chapter 2, I introduce the Polish actors of the drama, constituted according to my theory, and I present the main themes of their narrations of the past. In doing so I demonstrate their mild programmatic differentiation

and their efforts to achieve relational, sticky, and memory-derived identities. The chapter compares them across the political spectrum, first concentrating on differences of narrated themes—to show their productivity in creating political identities; and later concentrating on the similarity of themes—to show their productivity in shaping the notions of the national "we." It is here that I specify how, despite the differences among the narratives of the past, and despite their explicit avowals to the contrary, the main parties in Poland conflate communism with Jewishness, and how, in so doing, they retrieve a narrowly understood and ethnically derived vision of the polity. In other words, I show how memory constricts progressive and inclusionary politics in Poland.

This chapter, although empirical, localizes and historicizes my theory, or it retells the theory with stories. I place it in the theoretical part I precisely for this exemplifying effect, but also because I return to theoretical reflection at the chapter's very end. I do this to explore the inductively derived concept of *mnemonic procedure*, which helps me demonstrate how turning to narrate and judge the past creates structuring effects on the polity. Chapter 2, therefore, provides a bridge between the theoretical propositions of chapter 1 and the empirical case explored in depth in part II.

In part II, I trace the stories of the past seventy years, as told by Polish political actors in the present. I use and employ deep interpretative analysis of party platforms, party historical narratives, and 150 semistructured interviews with politicians—ranging from former presidents and sitting MPs to leaders of anarchist urban social movements—as well as parties' intellectual milieus, mostly in the media, think tanks, and academia. I subject my data to two sets of *comparisons*: as mentioned, in chapter 2, I compare platforms, strategies, and stories *across* party lines; and in chapters 3–6, I compare the "what" with the "how" of the presentation *within* each party's narrative. In making both comparisons, I identify the assumptions, meanings, and effects of the political language; that is, I decode or translate that language. If the theoretical part I allows me to answer *why* questions, the deep ethnography of one political space carried out in part II permits me to explore the *how* and *to what effect* questions; that is, the mechanisms by which the past enters and structures the politics of the post-transition polity.

To trace the politicization of the past and its stakes, I anchored my inquiry in the 2015 Polish parliamentary election. By all accounts, the election was a watershed moment in the Polish post-transition trajectory. It brought to power the first majority government since transition, and a government now considered populist, ethno-nationalist, and displaying authoritarian tendencies (Bonikowski 2017). The 2015 election spelled out the end of one of the three major political blocks represented by the postcommunist successor party (the party continues to operate at the subnational and extranational

levels, and it may yet revive, but it has not done so as of this writing), and the election was emblematic of the political conversations that defined Polish politics since the transition. (It bears noting that the majority winner of the 2015 election repeated its feat by winning a second term in office in 2019, again as a majority. In the 2019 election, the past-related themes were present but muted, and the party concentrated its attacks on the invented "gender ideology" [Korycki 2022].)

In chapters 3–6, I delve into the actual stories, as told within the four stable camps of Polish politics—I call them the Patriots, the Managers, the Liberals, and the Objectors (I explain the monikers in chapter 2). This static presentation allows me to show the internal dynamics of the clusters' self-presentation, the narratives of the past, and the emergent views of belonging. Each chapter follows a parallel structure: the first section explores how the cluster (or its political parties) presents itself to the electorate and how it manages the political field; the second section analyzes how the cluster narrates the past; the third confronts the two preceding sections—that is, it compares within, and teases out, the emergent imaginary of belonging.

The conclusion of *Weaponizing the Past* explores the mechanisms of right-wing populist parties, based on the trends observed in Poland. It also proposes a causal account that explains their emergence. In other words, the conclusion reinterprets the Polish case as the case of a populist moment's prehistory. That causal story, or that prehistory, was not in itself the point of this book, so its articulation in the conclusion means to serve as an invitation, indeed a provocation, for more sustained research on the questions of why right-wing populism emerges and why it succeeds. In doing so, the concluding section spells out the contribution of memory studies to the field of populist studies.

Notes

Parts of this book rely on data and analysis contained in the following two articles: "Politicized memory in Poland: anti-communism and the Holocaust," published in the *Holocaust Studies* on March 31, 2019 (copyright Taylor & Francis), available online at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17504902.2019.1567669; as well as "Memory, Party Politics, and Post-Transition Space: the case of Poland," published in the *East European Politics and Societies, and Cultures,* Volume 31, Issue 3 (copyright Sage Journals). It is available online at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0888325417700263.

1. Despite the protest of historians debunking Valéry's view of history, his quote proves prescient in this work, which deals with politicization and manipulation of the past. For more, see Butterfield (1985), Trask (1985), and Lowenthal (2015).
2. Brygada Świętokrzyska, or the Holy Cross Mountain Brigade, left Poland with the Nazis escaping the Red Army.

3. The frame was replicated by most major news outlets regardless of ideological bent.

4. For a similar strategy attentive to the uses, longevity, and historical specificity of examined tropes, see Hanebrink (2018) and Olick (2016).

5. As always with categorical grids, these are not tight containers, and personal self-identifications are usually more complicated than the binary allows. I will trace four possible positions in Poland and two visions of national belonging.

6. Memory narratives are in no way inherently exclusionary: indeed, they may be instrumental in the formulation of challenges of the excluded—remembrance of slavery in the history of the United States may be one example (Hartman 2007), its reparations another (Coates 2014); they may contribute to the broadening of democratic debate, like the bottom-up organizing for a critical examination of the Nazi past in Germany (Wüstenberg 2017) or the Palestinian plight in Israel (Gutman 2017).

7. With the exception of those who study the politics of identity, or those who hail from the constructivist school in international relations, many in comparative political science treat identity as an independent variable to whatever dependent variables are being explored. This view and approach are inverted in this work.

8. His other types include a *replacement*, in which the opposition deposes and replaces the old regime, as happened in Romania; a *transformation*, in which the ruler liberalizes and democratizes without being compelled by the opposition, for instance in Hungary; and an *intervention*, where the old ruler is removed and delegitimized by an external force, for instance in postwar Germany (Huntington 1991: 113–14).