In the Wake of War
The ‘War Syndrome’

World War II and Polish Society

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More than seventy years now separate us from the outbreak of World War II. To date, the most important trend in debates about the war’s consequences for Central Europe has been to focus on the interconnections between the social, political and economic changes occurring during the war, on the one hand, and the origins of the communist bloc in that part of Europe on the other.¹ This approach is too narrow: it fails to take account of the importance of the psycho-social consequences of the war, which extended far beyond the political dimension.

Arthur Marwick distinguished two sociological approaches to the consequences of war in the twentieth century.² The first focuses on changes to class structures brought about by the participation of previously unprivileged groups in the war effort. According to this approach, war provides an opportunity for building new solidarity, for socialization, and, in the case of Poland, for social self-organization within the framework of the underground state. Such underground institutions are usually described as having preserved the nation by opposing the occupier and strengthening national identity. Polish society thus emerges as a community united in struggle, sacrifice and shared suffering. The majority of Polish publications about World War II, memoir literature and scholarly literature alike, seem to follow precisely this path. In addition, this path also provides the standard model for commemorating the war.

The second sociological approach to war in the twentieth century sees it as an event akin in certain respects to a natural disaster, whose consequences were generally the same for all people who found themselves at the epicentre. From this perspective World War II should be interpreted

as a multidimensional catastrophe of an elemental nature. Unfortunately, in my opinion, this approach fails to recognize sufficiently the specific sociological and psychological effects of this war in particular.\(^3\)

In this article, I shall attempt to provide a systematic account of these effects through an examination of the Polish case. My intention is not to demystify the Polish war experience; rather, I shall attempt to generalize this experience in sociological terms, focusing in particular on those phenomena which failed to find a place in the standard heroic schema. By necessity, the picture to be presented here will be incomplete; many issues – aspects linked with political life, for example – will have to remain in the shadows. And one more disclaimer: what interests me is the final effect, namely, the state of society in the year 1945. Thus, for example, I will not be considering here the consequences of the Red Army’s arrival onto Polish soil.

My analysis draws primarily on Piotr Sztompka’s sociology of trauma.\(^4\) Paraphrasing the title of Sztompka’s book, we might call the Polish war experience ‘the trauma of the great war’. This is a particular kind of ‘pathology of social subjectivity’\(^5\) formed as the result of a long-term, destructive traumatic experience – a collective experience of terror, shock and fear, of

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5 Ibid, p. 20.
disintegration and destruction. For Sztompka, trauma is connected with the experience of social change, especially when such change is sudden, violent, unexpected and relates to multiple spheres of life simultaneously. This kind of change entails the institutional disorganization of social and cultural life, affecting the personalities of people who live through it.\(^6\) Social disruption of this kind is wrought by wars, revolutions and violent modernization processes. The Poland of 1945 was without doubt a country utterly different from the Poland of August 1939. This was a country that had not only gone through great change, but was also standing on the brink of fresh changes linked with the communist seizure of power. The war played a role equivalent to the destructive phase of revolution.\(^7\) Psychologist Stefan Baley commented with regard to his research on Polish post-war youth that this generation’s ‘collective soul’ had been ‘infected by a war syndrome’.\(^8\) How deeply, then, did this infection penetrate the ‘collective soul’ of Poles, and what was the nature of the devastation it wrought? Or, to put it in more contemporary terms, what were the sources, symptoms and cultural consequences of the war trauma in Poland?

### Trauma Sources

The first and most important source of war-related psychological traumas was the omnipresence of death. The practices linked with the burial of those killed in the course of the war (the dead were very often buried a second time over, following exhumation) can be read as an attempt to overcome this trauma symbolically. Any attempt to recreate the Polish ‘post-war’ landscape would need to foreground collective exhumations and funeral processions, the latter sometimes with tens of thousands of participants.\(^9\) Death was everywhere; one could literally smell it through the strong stench of decay emanating from unburied bodies as early as spring 1945.\(^10\)

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7 See note 2.


10 One account tells us, for example, that: ‘the sanitary state of Kolobrzeg was terrible, the town streets were covered in spilt blood, on which whole swarms of flies were nesting. In Zabrow near Kolobrzeg I found a store with barrels of insecticide, we sprinkled this powder over the streets,'
In Warsaw there were fears of a cholera outbreak, and with good cause: a plague of mice and rats did in fact break out in the same year, lasting into the next.11 Even today the final number of the war’s victims is unknown. The results of pioneering research conducted by psychologists affiliated with the State Institute of Mental Health in Warsaw on the psychological effects of the war among children and young people provide a rough idea of the scale of death. Over 5,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 23 were examined as part of this study in June and July 1945. The sample of 1,500 questionnaires completed by students from Warsaw, Kraków and Lublin, indicates that 73.2 per cent of the respondents had lost a loved one, or several loved ones, in tragic circumstances. There were also cases in which seven, eight or even thirteen family members had been lost.12

Soon after the war, the Bureau for War Compensation placed the total number of victims at around 6 million.13 Paradoxically, however, this figure is at once too high and too low. Too high, because today we know that the number of victims of, for example, Auschwitz, or the Warsaw Uprising, is smaller than previously supposed. The most recent estimates indicate that wartime demographic losses of Polish and Jewish inhabitants of pre-war Poland were in the order of approximately 5 million (including 2.9 million

the flies began to disappear – at the end there were none left, a great relief. The corpses were another plague, it was an unusually hot summer and decomposition of bodies came on quickly. One had to cover one’s nose when walking through the streets – the stench of corpses was so strong’ (‘Wspomnienia Stefana Lipickiego, prezydenta miasta Kołobrzeg w okresie 1 VI – 31 VIII 1945’, in Hieronim Kroczynski, Powojenny Kołobrzeg 1945-1950. Wybór źródeł (Kołobrzeg: Wydawnictwo Reda Kazimierz Ratajczyk, 2004), p. 100).

11 On 17 September 1945 in an article entitled ‘Rat Plague in Kielecki Voivodeship’, Dziennik Powszechny reported that: ‘The Provincial Health Department has recently been alarmed by a great plague of mice and rats in destroyed districts. There are localities on the so-called bridgehead where mice have literally eaten up all the mowed wheat, leaving the shredded sheaves. Meanwhile rats are multiplying in great numbers in bunkers and mud huts inhabited by people who have lost their homes to fire, spreading disease and fear among the local population. Unless the plague of rats is brought to an end, we must expect unpleasant reports of biting of babies and children by rats.’

12 Maria Kaczyńska, ‘Psychiczne skutki wojny wśród dzieci i młodzieży’, Zdrowie Psychiczne, 1 (1946), p. 54. Thirty-six per cent of respondents had lost one person close to them; 24 per cent had lost two; 16 per cent – three; 12 per cent – four; 5 per cent – five; and 2 per cent – six.

13 The Bureau initially estimated biological losses at 4.8 million (not counting the reduced number of births – around 1.25 million), but by order of Jakub Berman this number was adjusted upwards to 6 million (Mateusz Gniazdowski, “Ustalić liczbę zabitych na 6 milionów”. Dyrektywa Jakuba Bermana, dla Biura Odszkodowań Wojennych przy Prezydium Rady Ministrów, Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny, 1 (2008), pp. 99-113.
However, even after this correction, the figure is still too low, since in the final calculation it fails to take into account the Belorussian, German and Ukrainian citizens of the Second Republic who died as a result of World War II. If, then, we take into consideration the entire 35-million-strong population of Poland in August 1939, we can make the tentative hypothesis that as many as 7 million may not have survived to the end of the war. If we add all those who survived but were displaced somewhere outside Poland (and who later remained in the West or the East), then the population of Poland shrinks by around one-quarter, or nearly 9 million, in comparison to the pre-war period. No other European country sustained such heavy losses.

While no social group survived the war intact, relatively speaking it was the intelligentsia that suffered the most serious losses. The political, intellectual and cultural elite of Polish society was decimated. It has been estimated that 37.5 per cent of university-educated people and around 30 per cent of secondary-educated people in the Second Republic perished. To consider this from another angle: if we also take into account the group of high officials, the officers’ corps, and the free professions, who left the country in 1939, in most cases never to return, then Polish society in 1945, when the population was just under 24 million, may have included between 60,000 and 70,000 university graduates and no more than 300,000 high-school graduates. In other words, this period saw the demise (in wartime migrations and exterminations, on the battlefields) of the Polish elite: educated, opinion-making, official Poland, made up of those who held dear the values and symbols of the Second Republic. In these circumstances, the post-war mobilization of institutions vital for social life and for the economy must have entailed severe difficulties. The cadres revolution of the period was not only imposed from above; it was dictated by circumstances. Only the intelligentsia was capable of giving a name to the post-war reality, of conceptualizing it, of putting a swift end to the cultural chaos and confusion, and of playing a guiding role in the post-war reconstruction.

Left alone on the battleground was the majority of the population – poor, uneducated, resentful, brimming over with anxiety and trauma, more closely connected to the Church, conservative, traditional, living mostly in villages and small towns. It was in this Poland that Polish communists...
placed their modernizing hopes, and it was first and foremost from this group that the communist system recruited its functionaries. But the revolution from above also had its own particular base: the marginalized and the ‘superfluous’. The revolution gave them a chance for advancement, to utilize their energy and channel it against survivors of the pre-war elite who might have been inclined to resist communism.

The second source of trauma was poverty. In 1939 many German officers, convinced of their cultural superiority, took amateur photographs of ‘exotic’ East European poverty. But the landscape they left in their wake as they fled Polish soil in panic in 1944 and 1945, often plundering right up to the very last moment, was incomparably bleaker. Poland belongs alongside Germany and the Soviet Union in terms of the scale of economic destruction suffered during the war. In 1945 the Polish national income dropped as low as 38.2 per cent of the 1938 level, and this had a strong impact on the everyday life of the population. Several million people lost their property, their jobs, their sole sources of income. In the lead-up to the 1946 harvest, people were talking about the spectre of famine hanging over the country. But it was not only food that was lacking. In the course of six years of war, hundreds of thousands of families had lost even the most basic belongings. As Stanislaw Szwalbe, then deputy leader of the Homeland National Council, recounted, ‘There are families whose members don’t own a single pair of shoes and when they want to go out they borrow them from neighbors. There are cases when there is a single pair of shoes and three shirts for seven people.’ It is not surprising that after the war it was precisely clothing, shoes and lard that were the goods most commonly targeted by thieves. Two consequences of poverty are the concentration of all the individual’s cognitive processes on survival and the blunting of sensitivity to everything external to bare existence. In such circumstances, human beings become more egotistical, less sensitive to the suffering of others, and hence quick to behave

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18 *Dziennik Powszechny*, 14 February 1946.
aggressively. It was the material deprivation of large groups of the population that lay at the root of the wartime and post-war assaults, the murders of Jews, the looting, the banditry. Poverty also propelled the post-war migrations from the lands of central Poland to the ‘Recovered Territories’.

The third source of trauma was the consequences of the wartime deportations and displacements. In those territories incorporated into the Reich these processes began as early as autumn 1939. From this point until the end of the war, the Germans exiled over 860,000 people, the majority of whom were from Wielkopolska and the Łódź region. In the territory of the Generalgouvernement 280,000 Poles were forced to leave their homes, and 500,000 were forced to leave the capital after the failure of the Warsaw Uprising. In total, 1,650,000 people underwent forced exile during the German Occupation. In addition, over 2 million Polish citizens were sent to Germany as forced labourers. Although deportations carried out in the territories annexed by the Soviet Union comprised around 300,000 Polish citizens, the trauma connected with the journey and the stay in the place of exile was probably more painful and the sense of being cut off, isolated and lost more intense than in the case of the German deportations. However, the social consequences of both sets of deportations and displacements were similar: the severing of middle-class bonds (professional, local, personal) and family bonds (in the case of forced labourers and POWs), and the disintegration or disappearance of entire groups and communities.

The fourth source of trauma is connected with the collapse of social, political, and cultural institutions. In the Poland of 1945, not only had the pre-war elites disappeared, but so too had the pre-war structures: authentic, recognizable and familiar organizations, associations and institutions, which – as was the case in the West – could take immediate measures to combat anarchy. The war brought about the almost complete disorganization of social life; it ripped apart the existing networks and structures.

21 Ibid., pp. 251, 255.
22 One should also add to this number: forced conscriptions into the Red Army and construction battalions, prisoners of the Gulag, people who were resettled out of the border zone, and so on. Altogether around 600,000 to 800,000 people may have been forced to leave their places of residence; see further, inter alia: Stanisław Ciesielski, Grzegorz Hryciuk and Aleksander Srebrakowski, *Masowe deportacje ludności w Związku Radzieckim* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2002). On the theme of the course and consequences of ethnic cleansing in this region of Europe, see Philip Ther and Ane Siljak, eds, *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
The first traumatic blow connected with the collapse of institutions came with the annihilation of the state in 1939. There is only one word which captures adequately the psychological experiences of this period: shock. ‘That is’, as Kazimerz Wyka has written, ‘the most violent, unprepared, unexpected political, social and moral shock. A shock which spread across all dimensions of collective life, across all the assertions upon which behaviour and predictions still relied on 31 August, on 1 September.’ The collapse of the country diminished social control, and was one of the causes of what was to be the greatest panic in Polish social history. Reminiscences of the September trauma can be found easily in war diaries, post-war memoirs, and works of literature. But the annihilation of the institutional world did not end in September 1939. Later, by order of the occupying authorities, a ban was placed on the activities of nearly all institutions and organizations in the territories occupied by the Third Reich and of the majority of those located in the Soviet zone. The latter – such as institutions of higher education, theatres, schools – were also shut down after the German invasion of the USSR. The Central Welfare Council and the Polish Red Cross were essentially the only organizations whose activities were sanctioned by the Germans.

The response to the German policy of disorganization and atomization of Polish society, a measure aimed at restoring its ‘social health’, was the re-creation of its most important institutions in the form of underground state structures. Various underground institutions were created in this fashion: schools, a judiciary, and various forms of social assistance. There were functioning political parties, and a powerful upsurge of publishing activities did its best to meet the demand for information, and even for entertainment. New bonds, a new solidarity, were created in conspiratorial conditions. For Jan Strzelecki, ‘The form of our existence was the group, held together by a bond best described by the concept of brotherhood. This existence, lived in a state of constant threat, with the consciousness that we were walking along a knife’s edge, that every meeting brought the final parting closer, opened up the meaning of the word “community” for us.’ Thousands of communities of this kind created a social movement, operating in conspiratorial conditions, which was without historical precedent; a movement which strengthened Poles’ faith in themselves and their hopes of a final victory, as well as providing a sense of community and shared subjectivity. Although the decisive majority of the population was not

23 K. Wyka, op. cit., p. 81.
formally sworn in, this movement nevertheless possessed social legitimacy and people felt as though they were a part of it. But popular support is not the whole story. The underground movement also employed sanctions for betrayal and banditry, creating a system for controlling behaviour and attitudes. While giving full due to the movement’s achievements, however, it must be observed that underground bonds and organizations were not capable of fully replacing the ‘normal’, stable functioning of society and state.

The second traumatic blow was dealt with the annihilation of this world of underground institutions. The defeat of the Warsaw Uprising had a strong detrimental effect here, serving to weaken the majority of forms of underground social self-organization, which had been so crucial for sustaining social subjectivity during the Occupation. With the collapse of the underground the conspiratorial ethos disappeared and an institutional vacuum emerged that lasted until the formation of the Polish People’s Party. In 1945 there were no independent authorities or power centres, whether symbolic, local, judicial or economic. Not only did many pre-war political parties fail to resume operations, but so too did professional unions, business federations, local associations and clubs. Almost instantaneously, especially in Malopolska, the Polish People’s Party exploded, its ranks swelling rapidly to nearly a million members. Many organizations and associations operating in 1945-1948 were later liquidated as the mono-organizational system was put in place. However, it would appear that the ‘sociological vacuum’ described by Stefan Nowak in 1979 – that is, the disappearance of middle-range bonds and cooperations – was not a creation of the communist system. This should rather be understood as a legacy of the war and the Occupation and as a factor which played a significant role in facilitating the communist seizure of power. In the immediate post-war period, the deficit of institutions meant a lack of social control, which resulted in chaos and anarchy.

26 Exceptions included the Union of Polish Teachers, the Polish Western Union, the Maritime League, the Association for Friends of Children, veterans’ organizations, Poland-wide scientific associations, and scouts’ organizations, all of which were resurrected relatively quickly.
28 J.T. Gross (The Social Consequences of War…) and Bradley E. Abrams (op. cit.) have drawn attention to the Polish and Jewish bourgeoisie’s disappearance as a result of the war (a development viewed as positive from the communist perspective). Neither of these authors, however, has commented upon the significance of the destruction of middle-range bonds.
On the post-war landscape, the Catholic Church was essentially the only Poland-wide institution that still possessed moral authority. The Church, too, sustained great losses, both in human and material terms, numbered in destroyed churches, care homes, hospitals, archives, libraries. Yet despite all this, the numbers of the Church’s adherents remained steady. Metaphorically speaking, one might say that organizationally and institutionally post-war Poland looked something like Cologne after the Allied carpet bombings: an almost intact cathedral left standing in the midst of a vast sea of rubble.

The fifth traumatic factor to be examined here is the deformation of the old hierarchy of stratification. The war rendered meaningless the previous hierarchies and stereotypes of social roles. Many hitherto privileged groups experienced economic degradation during the war: directors of state companies, owners of large and medium-sized enterprises seized on the territories occupied by the Third Reich by the Main Trusteeship East. In the Polish Eastern Borderlands, the property of the middle and upper classes was also liable to seizure by the ‘worker-peasant regime’. In the name of the ‘Aryanization’ of the economy, in the former case, and of historical justice in the latter, thousands of people suddenly lost their footing and fell off the property ladder, sometimes losing overnight positions which families had held for generations. The old privileges, knowledge and offices ceased to be meaningful, especially in the face of shortages of potatoes and coal; more than this, they could even be targets for repression by the occupiers. As a result, the social structure flattened out and class antagonisms became less acute.

The village, too, underwent a structural revolution. Its feudal world order, resting on three pillars – lord, reeve (wójt) and pastor – was turned to rubble. In the Eastern Borderlands the extermination of the land-owning gentry had already taken place in 1939. In the other territories the agony dragged on until 1945. During the war the manor lost its significance as a centre of social order in the village, while its inhabitants were repressed under the German policy of exterminating Polish elites. The village was divided in its attitudes towards these changes. For older people, the fall of our feudal

29 For more, see C. Madajczyk, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 515-595.
lord’ was often a frightening experience. On the other hand, after the war, the ‘return of the lords’ was feared by young people and landless people who had received land under the agricultural reform. For these latter groups, the annihilation of the manor could mean the restoration of social justice and the removal of social barriers. Their fears, worked through symbolically, would later become the fundamental source of legitimization of the new post-war social order.

Another bastion of the Polish village – wójt and soltys (the mayor and the village headman) – also lost its significance, albeit for different reasons. As functionaries of the German administrative apparatus, on the one hand, and as representatives of local society vis-à-vis the occupying authorities on the other, these figures had to manoeuvre constantly between the strict execution of orders of those authorities (which meant acting against the interests of the group), and deceiving the occupier in the name of the interests of the population (which might provoke repressions). Many local village leaders overstepped the border between unavoidable cooperation and collaboration, antagonizing the villagers, and losing any real influence over them. Several hundred people were killed under sentences passed by underground courts. The number of those sentenced for collaboration after the war is unknown.

The institutions of the wójt and soltys were not the only sources of stability in the pre-war Polish village, however. Even before the war, the traditional hierarchies and arrangements had begun to undergo transformation in favour of more modern structures. A variety of village leaders had emerged: social activists, politicians, teachers, forest rangers. During the Occupation it was these people who often became the leaders of the various defensive formations set up in the villages – above all, in the Peasant Battalions – and the collective solidarity of village society became visibly stronger as the war progressed. The war increased the importance of the village: it became the hotbed of conspiracy and the partisan war, and above all, it meant salvation for starving towns – the village had food. On the other hand, it was precisely in the village that the effects of the policy of disintegration and the destruction of social bonds were most visible. The majority of denouncers and informers came from ‘the people’. Many peasant leaders, who might

32 C. Madajczyk, Polityka III Rzeszy..., p. 194; C. Łuczak, Polityka ludnościowa..., p. 511.
have been capable of leading the post-war reconstruction, of providing centres of social stabilization, perished or were deported by the occupiers. To describe the situation in sociological terms, we might say that in many rural regions the traditional community of the Gemeinschaft type collapsed, while the embryonic modern ‘society’ or Gesellschaft was in large measure killed off. As a consequence, there ensued destabilization and loosening of the system of power and social control in the village, and it is here that we must seek the causes of the post-war chaos, anomie, plagues of reprisals and score-settling.

Trauma Symptoms

Symptoms of war trauma could take several forms, but it is possible to pinpoint three symptoms which were emblematic. The most important of these is the all-pervasiveness of fear during the war. This fear guided people; it determined their behaviour and attitudes. One of the exceptional things about this war was the fact that the dominion of fear was not limited to soldiers, who lived with fear constantly, but spilled over and spread through the whole civilian population, especially in Eastern Europe. For Poles, the six years of war were a period of almost permanent threat.

In his Introduction to the Physiology of Fear, the literary critic Henryk Vogler, who was born in 1911, notes: ‘Wherever I look at the past of our generation and our class. [...] I encounter traces of fear. Even the most learned botanist knows fewer varieties of native flora than we knew species of that native emotion.’ Each of the aforementioned sources of trauma was associated with its own specific fear and anxiety. But there was one which must be singled out as the most important: the fear of death, and after that, anxiety about the fate of loved ones, fear of arrest, of torture, of breaking down under interrogation. People lived in a state of enormous tension during the Occupation. Anybody might have ‘something on their conscience’ in the eyes of the occupier. In addition, the Germans did not adhere to any legal regulations. They were unpredictable. Most often the method they used for enforcing obedience was blind, meaningless violence,

34 Others, such as feelings of guilt and humiliation, are beyond the scope of this article.
35 As Tomasz Szarota has pointed out, Polish society was living in conditions of constant psychological stress. T. Szarota, op. cit., p. 457.
and this engendered an atmosphere of fear. Intense repressions drove people into a state of collective psychosis, manifested in denial, fantasy and escapism, social atomization, waves of apocalyptic rumours.\(^{37}\) Public collective executions by shooting or hanging (or, on the territory incorporated into the Reich, by guillotine), made it seem as though history had swung back to barbarian times. In June and July 1945 in response to the question ‘Which event made the strongest impression on you?’, Polish youth answered ‘the Warsaw Uprising’ (22 per cent); arrests, their own or of someone close to them (16 per cent); shootings, hangings, or other kinds of executions (14 per cent); łapanki, the Polish term for Nazi round-ups of people as hostages or with the aim of deporting them as forced labourers (11 per cent).\(^ {38}\) The ‘great fear’ – this is how we might, following Julian Stryjkowski, name the time of Soviet rule in the Eastern Borderlands.

The years of German Occupation partially erased the memory of that dread. But only partially: a rich breeding-ground for fear still remained in place after the war. The words ‘Siberia’ and ‘the Soviets’, łapanka and deportation, Oświęcim and Majdanek, the Gestapo and the NKVD – these became the most important icons of Polish fear. They were words pronounced with dread; they were symbols of the national martyrdom. The war’s end did not liberate people from the tyranny of fear; it did not automatically bring their fear to an end. Instead, the fear metamorphosed into a less concrete, sometimes unspoken fear, whose sources people were not always capable of identifying or articulating at the time. This fear must be added to the long list of consequences of the war which played a major role in the process of forming Polish post-war consciousness and anxiety disorders.

There is no doubt that by 1945, Poles were psychologically shattered, but it is difficult to quantify the baggage of fear which they brought away from those six years. Post-war estimates place the number of psychologically damaged people left behind by the war at 60,000.\(^ {39}\) If today’s tools from the fields of psychiatry and psychology had been available at the time, however, then it is quite possible that the number of people diagnosed with ‘war syndrome’ would have been considerably larger. The symptoms of this syndrome were varied, and might include emotional instability,

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38 M. Kaczyńska, Psychiczne skutki..., p. 55.

nervous strain, severe depression and anxiety. Long-term fear can also give rise to conformism, social apathy and passivity. In June 1945 underground activists described the post-war psychological condition of residents of Wielkopolska as follows: ‘The psychological condition of the local population [...] is [characterized by] a lingering fear, and passivity. [...] Inner rebirth has yet to take place, well-being has yet to take shape. Poles are lacking in self-esteem, they are depressed and apathetic, and concerned only with everyday material difficulties. Rousing them from the torpor is no easy matter.’ Observations of this kind serve to undermine the myth of mass enthusiasm in post-war Poland.

It was not only members of the underground who took an interest in the contemporary psychological state of the Polish people. Soon after the war a group of Polish psychologists headed by Stefan Baley, Stefan Batawia, Maria Kaczynska, and Maria Zebrowska undertook major research investigating the psychological consequences of the war. Several decades later, after the experiences of the Vietnam War, their American colleagues diagnosed a specific category of disorders, so-called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, whose most frequent symptoms are depression, panic attacks, phobias, psychosomatic disorders, and substance abuse. Polish psychologists had observed precisely the same symptoms – known at the time as the ‘war syndrome’ – in their patients after World War II. Symptoms included compulsions and anxiety disorders of various kinds, which might be triggered by the wail of a factory siren, for example, or the roar of a plane engine.

States of emotional brokenness were most visible among children, especially Jewish children. This is how The Girl in the Red Coat, Roma Ligocka, remembered the first post-war lessons in a Jewish school in Kraków:

40 Raport o sytuacji na Ziemiach Zachodnich. Wielkopolska (od 15 V do 15 VI 1945), AAN, Delegatura Rządu, 202/III-36, k. 171.
41 Unfortunately, Stalinism prevented the completion of these studies, and the research material was partially dispersed before it had been fully processed or exploited. The researchers did succeed, however, in publishing several articles on the basis of these studies in the 1940s.
43 The Warsaw journalist Jadwiga Krawczynska, for example, notes that ‘To this day the sound of a diving plane triggers a very unpleasant sensation for me, and I’m not the only one. How difficult it was to stand these continuous vibrations of air and whistlings in the years immediately following the war and occupation! So many terrible memories from September 1939 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, day and night air-raids.’ Jadwiga Krawczyńska, Zapiski dziennikarki warszawskiej 1939-1947 (Warsaw: PIW, 1971), p. 304.
An excruciatingly tense atmosphere rules here. Not a minute passes without someone beginning to cry. Children and teachers cry at any opportunity. Everyone is highly strung, almost hysterical.44

A tendency to weepiness and increased irritability was also observed among non-Jewish children. The war trauma manifested itself in their stories and drawings: ‘Fearfulness, timidity, mistrust of strangers’, Stefan Baley wrote, ‘this is often a chronic reaction to war atrocities experienced by a small child’.45 In response to a question asked of Polish young people in 1945, ‘Have you observed nervous disturbances in yourself, or in anyone close to you?’, 64.7 per cent answered in the affirmative; 31 per cent had had personal experiences of nervous disturbances; and 69 per cent had observed such disturbances among people close to them. For many people the passage of time did not bring liberation from the tyranny of fear. Memoirs and diaries recorded during the time of the Polish People’s Republic and also works of literature, films and fine arts bear witness to the enduring nature of war trauma at the individual level. One memoirist used the term ‘ruins disease’ (choroba ruin) to characterize this post-traumatic stress disorder. She continued to suffer from this disorder for ‘entire years’ after the war.46

Psychologists have uncovered layers of war fear that date back long before 1945. ‘Concentration camp syndrome’ (‘KZ-syndrome’) was diagnosed on the basis of studies examining the state of health of former German concentration camp prisoners and their families.47 In the early 1960s, only one-third of the former camp prisoners examined as part of the study failed to exhibit signs of severe impairment of mental functioning. Studies conducted almost thirty years after their liberation have shown

44 Roma Ligocka, Dziewczyna w czerwonym płaszczyku (Kraków: Znak, 2001), p. 137.
45 See further on this subject: S. Baley, op. cit., p. 13.
46 ‘I remember not only the first moments of my return to Warsaw, when I was choked with tears at the sight of the abused, shattered, burnt-out city. For many days later I walked through the streets weeping, no longer ashamed of the tears flooding my eyes. When I passed the former houses of people I used to know, who were no longer alive, or had been driven away, it brought back memories of the merciless occupiers and I couldn’t stop sobbing. This lasted for a long time, a very long time, for entire years. The symptoms of breakdown occurred with varying intensity, while nervous shocks used to come on unexpectedly. After the occupation, for example, I couldn’t bear the sound of young people laughing loudly – as for me, I stopped not only laughing but even smiling. This was completely at odds with my usual disposition and temperament. I was irritated when anyone spoke loudly, I knew that it was unfair, but I looked round angrily when I heard laughter in the street.’ J. Krawczyńska, op. cit., p. 304.
47 Antoni Kępiński, Rytm życia, chapter KZ-syndrom (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000).
that symptoms of KZ-syndrome remained constant to varying degrees in all those examined.\footnote{For the most recent survey of research, see Ewa Jackowska, \textit{Psychiczne następstwa...}, pp. 61-84.} Psychologists have also found symptoms of fear, depression and interpersonal problems among people who went through the Gehenna of the Soviet deportations. Ewa Jackowska, who conducted her research in the late 1990s, found that sixty-six out of the hundred ‘Siberians’ she examined suffered from unpleasant recurring memories or flashbacks, while thirty-three suffered from nightmares linked with the deportations. In spite of the fact that over fifty years had passed since the deportation, thirty victims continued to exhibit clear post-traumatic stress symptoms, manifested in phobic reactions (fear of starvation and war, anxiety) and neurotic personality traits (feelings of inferiority, timidity, distrust).\footnote{E. Jackowska, op. cit., pp. 327, 328.}

The second symptom of war trauma (strongly correlated with the first) was aggression. An increase in the level of aggression in interpersonal relations was one of the most important consequences of the war, which created a huge potential for violence and a readiness to use violence in situations of the slightest conflict. There is no doubt that even before 1939 people were reaching for violence as a matter of course and in an exceptionally brutal way during the workers’ strikes and the political and racial conflicts.\footnote{Tomasz Marszałkowski, \textit{Zamieszki, ekscesy i demonstracje w Krakowie 1918-1939} (Kraków: Arcana, 2006).} But this type of violence was universalized as a result of the war. ‘Village get-togethers invariably ended in fights’, recalled one village teacher.\footnote{Wieś polska..., vol. 1, p. 421.} His colleagues, surveyed in 1946, reported an increased tendency to fighting among their pupils.\footnote{S. Baley, \textit{Psychiczne wpływy...}, p. 21.} The use of force as a means of settling conflicts had to some extent become normal behaviour. The almost universal possession of firearms, especially in the village, was an important contributing factor. But in order for people to grow accustomed to reaching for the gun, they needed a new model of social behaviour whereby conflicts were waged for the highest stakes and aimed at the physical annihilation of the enemy. According to militia statistics, over 8,411 murders were committed in Poland in 1945. Yet this figure is much too low.\footnote{In subsequent years the number of registered homicides decreased. In 1946 the militia registered 7,146 homicides; in 1947, 2,812; in 1948, 1,345; and in 1949, 1,068. \textit{Przestępstwa zameldowane Policji w latach 1924-1938 oraz przestępstwa zameldowane Milicji Obywatelskiej w latach 1945-1964} (Warsaw: KG MO, 1967), p. 33.} It is unlikely that it includes all
killings committed by the actual law-enforcement agencies (militiamen, UB and KBW functionaries, soldiers) or killings of Germans and Ukrainians.

Every armed conflict brings an increase in homicide rates in its wake. Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner, who have researched this issue, point to state legitimization of murder and devaluation of moral standards as the primary causes of this phenomenon: ‘The radical change which ensues during wartime in the customary prohibitions on murder, which operate during peace time, may in a certain manner have the effect of lowering the threshold for using [...] murder as a means of settling conflicts in everyday life.’54 But the moral corruption that occurs in wartime does not explain everything. In striving to understand these processes, we must also look to the emotional condition of Poles. In the opinion of some psychologists (such as Karen Horney) aggression and hostility are reactions to basic fear. Increased levels of individual and collective aggression can thus be viewed as trauma symptoms, as consequences of long-term experiences of terror and fear.

Archer and Gartner have proved statistically that wars leave behind a legacy in the form of increased homicide rates. However, they did not manage to establish a correlation between homicide rates and the nature of the war in question (small vs large, victory vs defeat, etc.). Furthermore, their research excluded Poland, Yugoslavia and the USSR – in a word, precisely those countries in which total war and partisan warfare were being waged simultaneously. One might risk the hypothesis that in Poland, the lowering of the threshold for resorting to murder was particularly dramatic because in this country the war was conducted with exceptional and atavistic brutality. And here we come to the next cause: as psychologists tell us, aggression fosters aggression.55 Contrary to pious predictions issued from the beginning of the war, a ‘purification’ effect, or collective catharsis, did not come to pass. On the contrary: the experience of observing hatred and German atrocities simply removed all obstacles to further violence. Incessant references in the underground press made to the cultural gulf dividing Poles from the barbarian ‘Szwaby’ (a colloquial pejorative term for

‘Germans’) notwithstanding, in some groups and milieus a process of the social learning of violence and brutality had been set in motion.

An example of one such ‘lesson’ is mentioned in Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’s wartime diaries. For young men, solving problems suddenly became easy: if someone in the neighbourhood was causing trouble, it was enough to have a gun – then one would have a quiet word with the person in private, and that would be the end of the matter. This young man discovered just how easy this could be when he observed German gendarmes shooting on the spot three Jews caught at the railway station, without hesitation. The effects of this ‘school of violence’ can also be seen at the level of collective behaviours. It would appear, for example, that the extermination of the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne was carried out in accordance with a model or script based on earlier atrocities, such as the burning alive of 700 to 800 Jews in a Bialostok synagogue, perpetrated by Germans in late June 1941.

The response to the occupiers’ violence was an escalation of violence on the Polish side. Together with drunkenness, aggression became a part of the wartime way of life, of a specific set of norms and behaviours, which included, in addition to those already mentioned, disregard for human life, cynicism, and a narrowing of chronological perspective to days or even hours. Those who had passed through ‘the forest’, one memoirist pointed out, ‘mostly ceased to value human life, they had grown accustomed to a light and free life, to moonshine liquor etc.’ The blade of aggression was also turned against members of their own national group. As a consequence, the passage of years brought an increasing brutalization of social life, manifested in rising rates of crime, brawling, and horrible murders. The post-war cases of torture inflicted upon opponents of both warring camps would probably not have occurred had it not been for the earlier upsurge of aggression unleashed by the war. The idea of ‘pacifying’ some village or small town, even after Berlin had been taken, would probably not have occurred to commanders, had they not been witness to such practices during the war.

It seems that the process of internalization of aggression developed with particular intensity on the territory of the Generalgouvernement (henceforth the GG) and Wolyn, where the Germans put on a show of cruelty for

57 Wieś polska..., vol. 4, p. 105.
58 For an example of such ‘security’ operations after May 1945, see Wojewódzki Urząd Informacji i Propagandy w Rzeszowie do Ministerstwa Informacji i Propagandy w Warszawie (15 May 1946), k. 35.
the civilian population comparable only to (and more drawn-out than) the atrocities committed in Yugoslavia and the USSR. The significance of this experience becomes clear if we compare the ‘morale’ of the Polish First Army soldiers, most of whom came from the Borderlands, with the behaviour of those men who formed the Polish Second Army, mobilized on the territory previously belonging to the GG. Having examined hundreds of reports produced by the Military Information Directorate and by political-education officers, I can risk the hypothesis that soldiers from central Poland manifested cruelty towards German POWs and civilians more often. They were also more likely to appear before field-courts martial for attacking their fellow countrymen.

The causes of the rising levels of aggression are also to be found in the very nature of partisan warfare itself. Partisans (with the exception of soldiers who took part in the Warsaw Uprising) did not enjoy the same rights as POWs and therefore were usually executed by the regular units. As for the partisans, generally speaking they did not take prisoners, if only because they had nowhere to hold them. Furthermore, in contrast to civilians, underground soldiers engaging in aggressive behaviour were positively rewarded; such soldiers were decorated and treated as heroes. An exemplary case is that of ‘Wildcat I’ (Żbik I), one of the Home Army’s diversionary soldiers in the Rzeszowski region. He had several hundred death sentences on his record. There is no doubt that he was brave, disciplined and comradely; he was also vicious and ruthless. He was one of only four men in a unit of several hundred to receive the Cross of Valour for bravery. As a reward for killing a comrade who had been accused of collaboration, he was transferred to a diversionary unit. His memoirs are a study in wartime perversion, contempt for human life, aggression and sadism. We can also interpret them as one of many symptoms of anomie, of the decline during the Occupation of norms hitherto in force, and of the destabilization of social relationships.

The third symptom of war trauma, and simultaneously a strategy for coping with this trauma, was alcoholism. Alcohol turns up only rarely in post-war photographs, yet it too was a consequence of the war which served to shape the ‘post-war’ climate. Alcohol – usually moonshine – was drunk

60 It must be emphasized that the majority of underground commanders tried to eliminate this type of behaviour, to prevent the formation of groups of ‘professionals’ (professional killers). However, the collapse of the underground structures caused by the failure of the Warsaw Uprising made it increasingly difficult to keep subordinates under control (L. Gondek, op. cit., p. 145 and elsewhere).
on a mass scale in cities. In the village it ceased to be limited to feast days, and the domain of the tavern became an important element of everyday village life. Before the war, it would have been scandalous for a woman to drink; but now women began drinking, along with young people and even children. Studies conducted after the war in Lublin on a group of children aged 7 to 15 indicate that out of 1,000 respondents only 264 had never tasted vodka; 474 drank ‘occasionally’ and 279 constantly. The questionnaire also showed that in 90 per cent of cases it was parents who played the role of ‘suppliers’ of alcohol. There were villages in which moonshine was being produced in almost every peasant hut. A farmer from the outskirts of Augustow recalled that ‘[w]hen the blood was flowing at the front, the vodka was flowing in our houses’.

Alcohol was the primary catalyst of post-war anti-Semitic riots. Many participants of the Kraków pogrom of August 1945 were under the influence of alcohol at the time. The anti-Semitic disturbances at Zdunska Wola in November 1945, and in Kraków in March 1946, were sparked by drunk war invalids. Intoxicated soldiers and functionaries of the MO, UB and KBW were the perpetrators of many similar incidents. The ringleader of the 1946 Kielce pogrom was a drunkard. Another of the participants, later sentenced to death, confessed that before joining the mob: ‘I went home and there I drank a quarter of vodka and had a bite to eat.’ It is possible to hypothesize further that many post-war murders, too, both political and criminal, were not committed by sober people. Acts of brutality and attempts to lose oneself in drunkenness often went hand-in-hand at the time.

Moralists accused the Germans of encouraging alcoholism, and it is true that they did often pay people with alcohol. During the war people also drank because of alcohol’s high calorific value and because it was useful for fighting off hunger pangs. But it was the therapeutic value of alcohol that was most important. Drinking was a tried and tested means of cheering oneself up in moments of despair and calamity. ‘In confrontation with

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61 Data from *Dziennik Powszechny*, 14 March 1946. The newspaper did not indicate by whom and when these studies had been conducted, but further confirmation of these findings can be found in H. Dreszerowa and J. Handelsman, ‘Alkoholizm u młodzieży szkolnej’, *Zdrowie psychiczne*, 2–4 (1948), pp. 112-118. The latter shows, among other things, that in the course of the war, the number of children drinking alcohol on a frequent basis doubled, while the number of teetotallers fell by 10 per cent.

62 *Więś polska...*, vol. 4, pp. 11, 12.

bitterness and a sense of hopelessness vodka gave moments of solace and – most importantly – forgetting; it relieved frustration, alleviated tension and resentful thoughts.\textsuperscript{64} Alcohol made people feel powerful; it calmed the conscience; it seemed to mitigate fear.

The Cultural Consequences of Trauma

The ‘trauma of the great war’ also had its impact on culture, affecting both of culture’s component spheres: the normative sphere (comprising values, norms, rules, principles) and the cognitive sphere (of convictions, beliefs, opinions). It was in this field that the changes were probably both the most far-reaching and long-lasting. The war had called into question the most important values; pre-war strategies and ways of acting had lost their meaning. The collapse of the old world brought cultural upheaval in its wake, and ‘the unreality of the Occupation’ forced people to seek out new strategies of acting, new ways of coping with the trauma. In 1943 Pitirim Sorokin wrote: ‘Calamities generate two opposite movements in different sections of the population: one is a trend toward unreligiosity and demoralization; the other is a trend toward extreme religious, spiritual, and moral exaltation.’\textsuperscript{65} The Occupation gave rise to a similar situation, which can be represented most simply by employing three pairs of complementary oppositions. Sorokin indicated the first of these pairs: on the one hand, the increase of religiosity and popularization of magical thinking, possibly accompanied by a raising of moral standards; and on the other hand, a withdrawal from the Church on the part of some believers and a process leading to the atrophy of moral bonds and to anomie. The second pair is related to the family bond, which was both strengthened and weakened. Finally, the third pair concerns the strengthening of the national bond and of supra-class solidarity, the flipside of which was an exclusive definition of the national category ‘we’ and a deepening (or at least the continuation of the existing levels) of anti-Semitism. These dichotomies cannot be categorized as unequivocally ‘good’ or ‘bad’. An increase of religiosity might well be highly correlated with antipathy towards Jews, for example, while the strengthening of the family bond might result in ‘family-centrism’ and indifference towards others.

\textsuperscript{65} P. Sorokin, op. cit., p. 161.
To a certain degree, the increase of religiosity of a large part of Polish society was an obvious and predictable reaction to the fear and terror of the Occupation. In addition, everyday participation in ritual was also an opportunity for people to come together. In this sense religion acted as a substitute for other sources of bonds and social activities, which had been blocked off by the occupiers. As early as autumn 1939, Polish churches were filled as never before: ‘People prayed fervently, churches were saturated with exultation and hope.’66 During the periods of intense żapanki, when people were afraid to go out onto the streets, collective prayers were held in small courtyard chapels. The bond with the Church was strengthened (in spite of Primate August Hlond’s flight from the country), and after the war this bond was manifested in mass participation in religious rites.67 In turn, anti-clerical views, which were quite prevalent in the pre-war peasant movement, weakened noticeably. This was attributable to the shared fates of nation and Church, equally persecuted during the Occupation, and also to the deterioration of the Church’s economic position in the village.

The spread of magical thinking, together with prophecies and predictions, especially those heralding the longed-for defeat of ‘the Soviets’ and the Third Reich, should also be listed among people’s reactions to the trauma. The collapse of the state, uncertainty, lack of information – all of this combined created fertile ground for the flourishing of magic, which, as Bronisław Malinowski once asserted, can be understood as a kind of ritualization of human optimism, an agent of increasing man’s faith in the victory of hope over fear.68 The anthropologist’s contention is supported by the observations of Karolina Lanckoronska, who spent several months in Soviet-occupied Lwow:

Since there was no good news, the most magnificent prophecies rained down, passed on by word of mouth, or even worse, transcribed many times over, hidden away in apartments. [...] The struggle with prophecies was difficult, for people used them as drugs, which, as we know, are a difficult thing for anyone to give up.69

66 K. Wyka, op. cit., p. 231.
68 Bronisław Malinowski, Mit, magia, religia (Warsaw: PWN, 1990), p. 444.
The end of the war did not liberate Poles from their addiction to magical thinking. Everywhere people were repeating prophecies linked to the date when conflict was supposed to break out between East and West. Messianic predictions served as a means of rediscovering a source of hope and faith in the future and of making sense of the current situation, which otherwise seemed miserable and uncertain. Similarly magical in its nature was the myth of ritual murder, supposedly perpetrated by Jews on Christian children, rumours of which spread like wildfire from spring 1945. The persistent repetition of this myth can be interpreted in a similar way: on the one hand, as a mark of civilizational regression, brought on by the war; and on the other, as a reflection of the human need to explain the world – in this case, to explain a world for which there could be no explanation.\(^70\)

Religious extremism may have led to a rise in moral standards. But a strong case can be made for arguing that the duality of values that was characteristic of People’s Poland was in fact a phenomenon that emerged earlier, during the war. This dimorphism was expressed in a basic duality of moral attitudes and values: standards were high when it came to dealing with the closest circle of family and friends and lowered with regard to the external world. This duality was the basis for the wartime schizophrenia or, as Kazimierz Wyka has written, for the wartime ‘make-believe life’, a phrase which he used to describe the deep rupture obtaining between reality and the normative system.\(^71\) Although moral injunctions learned from parents (‘because you mustn’t’) were still in operation, the war often left people with no choice: one had to steal and to kill in order to survive. It is undoubtedly the case that thousands of the citizens of the Second Republic displayed attachment to the pre-war set of rules and norms, passing the highest test of heroism, sacrifice and empathy towards others. The majority, however, passed over into a moral ‘grey zone’, oscillating from selective depreciation of certain values (‘because one has to live somehow’) to complete atrophy of the moral bond, an absence of obligations tying one to other people, and the rise of extreme egotism. In the opinion of Piotr Sztompka there are three possible manifestations of such atrophy: a) a culture of cynicism, characterized by widespread suspiciousness, distrust, attribution of the basest motives to others; b) a culture of manipulation, whereby the trust and naivete of other people is abused through deception and lies; and c)

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\(^71\) Kazimierz Wyka, Życie na niby (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984).
a culture of indifference, when extreme self-interestedness, egotism, and indifference towards the suffering of others become socially accepted.\textsuperscript{72}

The war proved to be a breeding ground for all three of these types of cultures, and the wartime way of life was their combined result. The culture of cynicism was a type of defensive strategy aimed at reducing trouble. An individual may respond to fear by struggling against or fleeing the threat and by adopting an attitude of deep distrust towards this world. This strategy was essential in a situation of constant threat, but it also proved to be functional after the war. And it came at a cost: growing social atomization and a lack of desire for any engagement. The passivity, apathy and suspiciousness of the ‘local population’ was a common theme and lament of reports produced by representatives of ‘the people’s regime’.

The war also functioned as a school for the culture of manipulation. Deception and lies were actively encouraged, especially when it came to contacts with Germans. A report of the Government Representation from late April–early May 1942 tells us that

\begin{quote}

Amongst a series of social phenomena of an increasingly acute nature, which have been starting to build up recently in the country, we must include a disturbing increase in moral corruption in many spheres of society [...] certain symptoms of which must for the moment be tolerated out of necessity, and often even fomented.
\end{quote}

The most striking decline of moral standards concerned the ethos of work and ethics in barter, which unexpectedly proved to be second nature for Poles. The authors of the report cited above further pointed out:

\begin{quote}

Illicit barter, supported by necessity by the consumer and encouraged by the liberation organizations as society’s only salvation from starvation, is however mostly tantamount to profiteering [and] indifferent to poverty, hunger and the ever greater material impoverishment of compatriots.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

The culture of manipulation was also manifest in the form of corruption. Bribes paid to Germans helped everyday life to run smoothly, and they also saved the lives of many members of the underground. However, in

\textsuperscript{72} P. Sztompka, \textit{Socjologia analiza społeczeństwa} (Kraków: Znak, 2002), p. 188.
addition to being widespread in the German administrative apparatus, bribes quickly also became the norm in interactions between Poles and yet another symptom of social disintegration.

Like the two types of cultures described above, the culture of indifference also proved essential since it guaranteed the preservation of mental health. But the problem was that it led to an exclusivity of the moral bond – to a limiting of the field of human solidarity to one's most immediate circle. The most visible indicators of the demise of the moral bond were the universalization of antisocial activities and the increase in crime. The war left behind a tendency towards anomie and deviant behaviours. Actions which, before the war, would have been considered crimes in the eyes of society, began to be treated as the norm and even as something worthy of pride. Over half (60.6 per cent) of a sample of 1,500 young people responded affirmatively to the question ‘Did you commit thefts, deceptions, lies etc. in relation to Germans?’ Maria Kaczynska, the author of a report on this research, observes that ‘Although only 10 per cent of young people assert clearly that thefts and deception in relation to Germans had a negative influence on their characters, we must nevertheless assume that wherever there were such cases and for whatever cause they occurred, they must have left negative traces in the psyches of those who committed them.’ Teachers also surveyed in 1946 observed among their pupils a lack of respect for other people's property, an interest in guns, a lack of morality, drunkenness, and a tendency to brawling. By the force of events, young people, in whom the pre-war values were only weakly inculcated, were the most vulnerable to pathologies. And the problem was not limited to young people. Observing the results of the war for the older generation, Maria Kaczynska predicted that

If we take into consideration the fact that nearly the entire adult society committed these acts in relation to the occupiers and that a lack of respect for other people's property was already strongly developed in our psyche (probably as a result of lack of freedom and corruption by the oppressors), then one must suppose that now, after the war, lack of honesty in relation to other people's property will become catastrophic for our national, social and private life.

75 M. Kaczyńska, op. cit., p. 62.
77 M. Kaczyńska, op. cit., p. 62.
Although the militia statistics do not reflect this definitively,\textsuperscript{78} in reality criminality grew by leaps and bounds, especially among juveniles. After having observed the extermination of the Jews, Poles ceased to view the appropriation of the victims’ belongings as a crime. The post-war weakness of those institutions responsible for maintaining social order fostered impunity. If only in this respect, the processes leading to anomie did not break off with the end of the war. They maintained momentum and were entrenched by the post-war migrations.

Observers were already noting the resultant pathology of the moral bond during the war itself, a pathology that intensified immediately after the war ended. The contemporary press contains commentary on the imperative to struggle against what we might call today ‘moral corruption’, and the Church too often made pronouncements on this theme. For example, the Bishop of Lomza Stanislaw Lukomski, whose 1940-1944 sermons have been researched by Jan Zaryn, observed a deep change in the behaviour of worshippers. Among the new pathologies of social life, the bishop listed excessive submission to the occupier by women, lack of respect for other people’s property, the spread of crime, and, as a consequence, immunity to the sight of death.\textsuperscript{79} A decline of ‘private and public decency’ was noted by the Polish episcopate in the 1946 Lent pastoral letter.\textsuperscript{80} Trauma emerges only when this type of phenomena is experienced and perceived as a problem requiring treatment. ‘The most visible sign of trauma’, writes Sztompka, ‘is the fact that people talk about it and want to remedy it somehow’.\textsuperscript{81}

The aforementioned phenomena – first and foremost the culture of cynicism, indifference, and also the increase of crime and deviant behaviours – corresponded strongly with the processes to which the institution of the family was exposed. The transformations to which the family was subjected do not lend themselves to easy evaluation. Without doubt, a ‘closing of the

\textsuperscript{78} According to militia data, 265,962 crimes were committed in 1945, including 26,471 robberies, 10,073 cases of bodily harm and 121,729 thefts. In 1946, 239,954 crimes were recorded, and in 1947, 227,175. Researchers have argued, on the basis of State Police data on crime in the Second Republic, that these numbers are significantly underestimated. Piotr Majer, ‘Zapomniana formacja. MO w walce z przestępczością kryminalną w pierwszych latach powojennych’, Gazeta Policyjna, 4 (2004).


\textsuperscript{80} ‘Panowanie Ducha Bożego w Polsce. Wielkopostny list pasterski Episkopatu’, Wiadomości diecezjalne – organ urzędowy Częstochowskiej Kurii Diecezjalnej, Częstochowa (May 1946), p. 35.

\textsuperscript{81} P. Sztompka, Trauma…, pp. 36, 37.
ranks’ effect had set in. This is explicable only partly in terms of population ‘congestion’ caused by resettlements carried out by the occupiers and the destruction of homes. Incomparably more important was the experience of living in conditions of constant threat posed by, first, the policy of the occupiers, and second, extremely rapid impoverishment. Banal as it may sound, in the face of the war catastrophe the family became an oasis of security: it enabled survival and provided a space for psychological respite. Its significance grew particularly in the economic sphere. According to 61.6 per cent of young people surveyed in 1945, the war brought about an increase in family solidarity. One 20-year-old young man, for example, recalled that ‘Seeing my mother’s concern for my fate, that nothing should happen to me in those times of łapanki, executions and other dangers, I had to love my mother even more’.82

The family’s interests became the most important, and as such they set the framework for people’s actions. Not everybody belonged to the ‘generation of Columbuses’, those young men you fought heroically in the Home Army. In circumstances of everyday threat (posed not only by łapanki and pacifications, but also by starvation, typhus and tuberculosis), the decisive majority of people were incapable of acting for the benefit of the broader community or even of particular individuals like, for example, Jews in need of help. The diaries of those who survived the concentration camps and the Gulag speak of apathy and insensibility to the suffering of others. The culture of indifference was also present behind the barbed wire, although not, it stands to reason, in all groups and milieus. It seems that the degree of impoverishment played the decisive role here. A widow raising a child alone in a town or a father of a family of five in the village had to focus all efforts on survival. This kind of extended individualism or egotism, labelled ‘family-centrism’ by sociologists,83 led to a limiting of the social space in which individuals moved, and it therefore exerted a disintegrative effect. Even before the war, social solidarity had not been a a strong point of the poor Polish village; after the war was over, ‘family egotism’ became the dominant strategy, especially in heavily impoverished regions.

The strengthening of family bonds was accompanied by an opposing tendency, whereby such bonds were weakened or even broken altogether. Husbands and fathers were fighting and dying at the front and languishing

82 M. Kaczyńska, op. cit., pp. 63-64.
in POW camps, concentration camps, prisons and forced-labour settlements.\textsuperscript{84} Their absence accelerated the process of the emancipation of women and young people. Difficult living conditions forced young people to acquire independent means of survival, and this had its influence on their relations with their parents. A new generation of young people had appeared – a generation with no memory of the pre-war years.\textsuperscript{85} The bonds between the old and young generations had weakened, especially in the village and among the urban proletariat. Teachers asked in 1946 about the influence of the war on the psyches of their pupils listed a ‘slackening of discipline’ in second place (66 per cent of responses).\textsuperscript{86} The lack of fathers destabilized the age-old patriarchal model of child-raising, which in turn deepened the phenomenon of the weakening of social norms. Many of those who survived had distorted notions of good and evil, out of which emerged post-war violence and certain of the pathologies of Stalinism. A changing of the guard did indeed take place, but it is dubious whether this change was for the better.\textsuperscript{87}

The third set of cultural consequences of the war trauma in Poland concerned the question of nationality. Describing a world consumed by war could to all intents and purposes be achieved only through the use of ethnic categories. Identifications with class or milieu moved into the background; belonging to the national community was what counted.\textsuperscript{88} It was upon this belonging, in large measure, that survival in this war depended. The national consciousness of all Poles was strengthened. For confirmation, we need only look at wartime Polish poetry, which exploded with national content during this period. But it was in the village that the growth of national consciousness was most visible. In September 1939 the Germans

\textsuperscript{84} The first aggregate census, conducted in February 1946, found a huge deficit of men – 2.3 million less men than women. For every 100 men, there were 121.5 women (in the old lands \[i.e.\] pre-1939) the ratio was 100:117.8, and in the western and northern regions 100:137.1). The sex ratio was more distorted in towns (130.8) than in villages (117.4) (\textit{Rocznik Statystyczny 1947}, p. 19).

\textsuperscript{85} K. Wyka, op. cit., p. 128.

\textsuperscript{86} S. Baley, op. cit., p. 31.

\textsuperscript{87} My diagnosis differs from that of Czesław Madajczyk, who has argued that the Occupation fostered a changing of the guard: ‘Many of those who survived were able quickly to undertake difficult and responsible tasks in the public life of post-war Poland’. C. Madajczyk, \textit{Polityka III Rzeszy…}, vol. 2, p. 100.

\textsuperscript{88} Krystyna Kersten has written on this theme in many of her works, e.g. ‘Ruchliwość w Polsce po II wojnie światowej jako element przeobrażeń społecznych i kształtowania postaw’, in K. Kersten, \textit{Pisma rozproszone}, selected by Tomasz Szarota and Dariusz Libionka (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005), p. 178. See also: Antonina Kłoskowska, \textit{Kultury narodowe u korzeni} (Warsaw: PWN, 1996), pp. 299-321.
had been welcomed in some regions of the country with ‘bread and salt’. One peasant memoirist living in Kielecczyzna observed that ‘[t]he occupation made us politically aware, we learned the meaning of freedom, Fatherland, politics’. But this deepening and sharpening of national identification came at a cost.

First and foremost, Polishness overshadowed and dominated all other identities. Polishness proved to be exceptionally invasive. The accelerated and forced ‘patriotic education’ was exceptionally lacking in positive content; often it amounted to nothing more than a basic us-versus-them, friend-versus-enemy opposition. One used to call this kind of consciousness anachronistic or ‘tribal’. It dictated a readiness to sacrifice, demanded an idealization of the national past and at the same time brought into being a siege mentality. The war forced a division of the world into ‘ours’ (Poles, the Allies) and ‘outsiders’ (Germans, Ukrainians, ‘Soviets’); it aroused a feeling of community through intensification of a sense of alienation and antagonism with regard to outsiders. The war laid the foundations for a deep anti-German aversion and an extremely negative image of Germans which endured for many years. As the military actions drew to an end, there was a widespread desire in Polish society to exact vengeance for ‘the wrongs done to us’. Similar throbbings of hatred, based on fear and strong aversion, were also characteristic of Polish attitudes towards Ukrainians. A Polish-Belarusian conflict flared up in Białostocczyzna.

89 For example, see the account in Wieś polska..., vol. 2, p. 24.
91 Wieś polska..., vol. 2, p. 70.
94 Dane z inspekcji inspektora Wydziału Organizacyjnego – o stanie moralnym, politycznym i organizacyjnym w mieście Białystok, 19 September 1944, AAN, Polski “Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, sygnatura I/73, k. 11.
The extermination of the Jewish population also influenced the shape of the Polish national community. As Krystyna Kersten has pointed out many times, the consequences of the Holocaust were deep and wide. The division of society into, on the one hand, those who were earmarked for immediate execution (that is, the Jews) and, on the other, those whose suspended sentence allowed them to live a (in comparison) more normal existence under occupation (that is, the Poles), did not pass without consequence. The war strengthened the national consciousness of Poles, but it also left deep fissures in the form of national phobias, traumas and prejudices. The circumstances of the Occupation did not serve to promote openness towards other ethnic groups or a rejection or stigmatization of anti-Semitism; and this was bound to form to some degree a xenophobic national community. The formation of a national identification and the strengthening of national bonds could – just like deepened religiosity – also be reflected in attitudes towards Jews.

The war and Occupation revealed a whole palette or spectrum of behaviours and attitudes of Poles towards Jews, ranging from altruistic, heroic and selfless help\(^{95}\) to self-interested help, and from simple indifference and viewing Jews as foreign (a position which initially did not necessarily preclude Christian impulses of the heart) to openly hostile behaviour – denouncing Jews, handing them over to the authorities and even murdering them. It was not only anti-Semitism that lurked behind the latter behaviours. Motives for violent action against Jews were ambivalent: anti-Semitism, fear, anomie, ‘family-centrism’, material reasons. That said, it is difficult to dispute the paradoxical fact that in some milieus (such as in nationalistic circles) the Holocaust failed to lead to the discrediting of anti-Semitic discourse.\(^{96}\) In other milieus anti-Semitic views, on the contrary, were actually strengthened. In the underground it was observed that ‘the venom of the reptilian press has been imbibed by young people’, who were ‘convinced that the Germans had saved Poland from the oppression of


the Jews’.97 Stefan Grot Rowecki in a famous report from September 1941 pointed out that in the Homeland, ‘antisemitism is a widespread attitude’.98

The fact that anti-Semitism was reinforced, or at least preserved at previous levels, must be explained through a combination of several factors, a broader discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article.99 I consider the most important of these factors to be the universal rise in the level of nationalist sentiments in the years 1939-1945, the fundamental expansion of the inter-ethnic distance separating Poles from all ‘others’. East European nationalism has always been highly correlated with anti-Semitism and there are no grounds to suppose that things might be otherwise during the war or immediately after its end. Laying the blame on the war does not resolve the matter. It must be recalled that even before 1939, aversion to Jews was practically universal in Polish society, that anti-Semitism was on the rise since the mid-1920s, and that the wartime crest was in fact the continuation of an earlier gathering wave. Anti-Semitism was touched off by the deep material deprivation and frustration of a huge mass of the population – consequences of the drastic collapse of the economy at the beginning of the 1930s. Incidentally, it is quite possible that, if not for World War II, it is precisely the Great Depression that would would occupy the position of the most prominent and important traumatic event in the consciousness and collective memory of Poles.

The models of political culture flowing in from Germany, imitated mainly by Polish extreme-right nationalists, also had an influence on the growth of anti-Semitic views and attitudes. It seems that the influence of Nazi propaganda grew even more during the Occupation, especially in its initial phase, when the ‘invincible Third Reich’ still had the power to impress. The question of reception of propaganda is always a problematic one, but it is nevertheless possible to assume that its most successful targets were first and foremost simple, uneducated people, who occupied the lowest income

brackets before the war, harboured authoritarian tendencies, and rejoiced at the fact that Hitler was ‘sorting out the Jews’.100

The strengthening of anti-Semitism was possible because the voices of condemnation were not sufficiently audible. On the one hand, the problem lay without doubt in the anti-Semitism of a section of the Polish elites, evidence of which can be found by reading the underground press, the overall tenor of which was anti-Semitic.101 On the other hand, any empathy for the exterminated Jews, expressed via the Home Army’s ‘Information Bulletin’ and communist bulletins, did not speak to the masses of uneducated, poor, pre-war ‘superfluous’ people. One hears many complaints nowadays about the catastrophic state of reading, yet sixty years ago, under the Occupation, the situation must have been incomparably worse.102 Let us also recall that one faced the death penalty for possessing a radio and that in any case, even before 1939, few people owned radios in villages or working-class districts. Only a loud and forceful public protest would have been capable of reducing hostile feelings and negative stereotypes, but in the conditions of the German Occupation such voices had no chance of reaching those

102 According to Andrzej Paczkowski, at around the end of the interwar period, households receiving the daily press numbered around 2.5 million, i.e. at least 5 to 7.5 million readers. There was huge diversity, both regionally, and linguistically-ethnically. For example, in the regions the majority of the Belorussian press was barely read at all, while among Germans the numbers of readers were far above the average (A. Paczkowski, Prasa Polska w latach 1918-1939 (Warsaw: PWN, 1980), pp. 412-443). As far as press readership during the Occupation (in the GG) is concerned, so far nobody has risked a quantitative estimate regarding the conspiratorial press. The numbers of editions are given only occasionally and only in relation to individual titles. For example, the maximum one-off circulation of the BiP KG AK Biuletyn Informacyjny amounted to 50,000 copies (Jerzy Jarowiecki, Jerzy Myśliński and Andrzej Notkowski, Prasa polska w latach 1939-1945 (Warsaw: PWN, 1980), p. 49). Andrzej Paczkowski estimates that at its peak, that is in the first half of 1944, several hundred thousand copies (in all categories – dailies, weeklies, etc.) may have been published. However, this could just as well mean 400,000-500,000 as much as 700,000-800,000 copies (A. Paczkowski, private correspondence with author). The press was circulated from hand to hand, so the number of actual readers must have been much higher. It is dubious, however, that in the period of intensified extermination of the Jews, i.e. in the years 1942-1943, the readership would have exceeded one million.
who needed to hear them. If certain anti-Semitic views and behaviours failed to be stigmatized, then in a situation of a lack of social control, they became a social fact.

In seeking the causes of the increase in hostility towards Jews, one must also point to the contemporary psycho-social condition of the Polish national group. At least two factors came into play here. The first was the degradation of Poles in the socio-economic hierarchy to the position of *Untermenschen*. Some may have derived a sense of satisfaction or comfort from the fact that there was a minority group even more oppressed than them (i.e. the Jews). This made them feel secure in their limited superiority.\(^{103}\) The second factor was connected to the increase in collective fear and anxiety.\(^{104}\) These feelings are a psychological component of all nationalisms, including nationalism directed against Jews.\(^{105}\) There was also another way in which Polish fear was associated with Jews. All the residents of hideouts, including children, faced the death penalty as punishment for sheltering Jews. Jews could thus become carriers of a downright biological fear and anxiety. One might say that this was always the case historically, but in wartime the threat which Jews represented could reach a level which for some people was psychologically intolerable. In this situation, refusing to give help or denouncing Jews were means of warding off the source of threat and of reducing fear.

One final factor is that Poles and especially those living on the territory of the GG, as distinct from other Europeans, went through a ‘school of hatred’ not only in theory but also in practice: they witnessed and sometimes participated in the murders of their Jewish neighbours, and this could not fail to leave its trace in the consciousness of Polish observers of the Holocaust.


104 I agree with J.T. Gross, when he questions the mono-causal interpretation of the fear factor as the reason why Poles failed to give insufficient help, pointing out that this factor did not preclude the undertaking of, for example, conspiratorial activities. Gross forgets, however, that the decisive majority of the population was not engaged in any underground activity. And this lack of engagement can be explained by, among other things, conformism and fear, which were highly correlated with one another (J.T. Gross, ‘Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej...’, pp. 34-38).

105 Antoni Kępiński has written: ‘Maybe this [i.e. that the enemy is invisible] is why wars are becoming increasingly cruel and ruthless. This is why fear and aggression are vented mostly against innocent people, children, women, the elderly. In mortal fear of loss of one’s life, everything becomes hostile, not only people, but also nature, one destroys and burns everything that gets in one’s way, for fear of being destroyed oneself’ (A. Kępiński, Lęk (Warsaw: PZWL, 1977), p. 275).
This is a question of the consequences, as Michael C. Steinlauf puts it, of ‘the subjective nature of being a witness’. Answering this question, Steinlauf calls upon Robert Jay Lifton’s concept of ‘psychic numbing’ as ‘the essence of the trauma syndrome’. It may also be accompanied by anger, rage and aggression, whereby victims try to regain the strength to live.\(^{106}\) The concept of the ‘psychic numbing’ of witnesses would appear to fit well with the images of Poles running amok and murdering their Jewish neighbours in Jedwabne or Radzilow, or of Jewish policemen beating up fellow Jews on the ramp leading to the Umschlagplatz. The experiences of life in the GG could therefore have an impact not only on the level of aggression – as we saw earlier – but also on the expansion of the distance separating Poles from others.

An interesting observation was made in this connection by Lieutenant-Colonel Minecki, officer of the Chief Political-Education Directorate of the Polish Army. After the Kraków pogrom, in August 1945, Minecki drew attention to a characteristic difference in attitudes towards Jews: between soldiers coming from beyond the Bug River, and those from the GG. ‘For the former’, he wrote, ‘the antisemitic impulse is little known and often it is difficult for them to reconcile themselves to the fact that it could become a reason for bloody excesses. Many of them are joined by bonds of warm friendship and collegiality with their comrades-in-arms – Jews’. By the same token, ‘in soldiers coming from the G.G. there is hatred of the Jewish population, deeply powerfully inculcated by the occupier, [hatred] of the kind which is the cause of every social evil’.\(^{107}\) We find a similar observation, although not relating to the attitude towards Jews, in the work of Kazimierz Wyka. Wyka has also pointed to a difference between residents of the GG, forced labourers deprived ‘of the typical infections of the occupation’, and even Poles from the territories incorporated into the Reich. Perhaps the fact that they were not direct witnesses of the Holocaust explains why their distance from Jews was significantly smaller than that of their compatriots from central and eastern Poland. If this is indeed the case, then it would mean that the trauma of the experience of German Occupation on the territory of the GG may have had crucial significance for the formation of pathological attitudes and behaviours, and not only in the field of relations with non-Poles.

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Conclusion

‘Modern war is total not so much in the sense of weapons and destruction as in the sociological sense’, Kazimierz Wyka has written. It would be difficult to dispute the fact that a great number of Poles in the year 1945 were ‘infected by a war syndrome’, were sociologically broken and fearful, and had pathological value systems. It is certainly the case that similar social scenarios were characteristic of the majority of European countries, especially those previously occupied by the Third Reich. Everywhere the ending of military activities brought chaos and a sense of uncertainty. Millions were tormented by anxiety about the future. The post-war ‘migration of peoples’, looting, personal score-settling, the exacting of sometimes brutal vengeance against collaborators and Germans – none of this served to foster rapid stabilization. Violence and aggression, present in all spheres – civil war, inter-ethnic conflicts, state violence against the opposition – were endemic in many countries. In all Western countries the inter-generational bond was weakened, and so too in this way was the bond between past and present.

Once again, not only in Poland, a lengthening of inter-ethnic distance set in. In Czechoslovakia in 1945 the problem reached the point of mass pogroms and anti-German lynchings. Yugoslavians became witnesses to a bloody spectacle of ethnic cleansing. While it was only among Poles that anti-Semitic moods reached the pitch of collective psychosis, it should also be noted that it was not only on the Vistula River that hostile attitudes towards Jews were being registered during this period. The spectrum of behaviour was wide, ranging from unfriendly indifference to verbalized dislike and manifest hostility. In September 1946 in the capital of Soviet Ukraine, Kyiv, hostilities escalated to the point of an anti-Semitic pogrom. In Slovakia too events reached the point where synagogues and Jewish

108 K. Wyka, op. cit., p. 27.
cemeteries were desecrated. In September 1945, forty-nine people were wounded as a result of a pogrom in Velke Topolcany. Similar excesses were reported in several other localities. Pogroms and anti-Jewish excesses also took place in Hungary. Among American soldiers stationed in Germany, 22 per cent expressed the belief that the Germans were right to get rid of the Jews.

Let us repeat it once again: the war brought trauma, destabilization of social relationships, and impoverishment to many countries. Certainly, European Jews have experienced this in a special way, but right behind them in this sad ranking come the Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians – the other residents of the ‘bloodlands’ (Timothy Snyder). However, because of the especially traumatic course of the war and Occupation, these threats and the related social tensions were strongest in Poland. Probably no other nation apart from Germany was so psychologically shattered. Nowhere else was the elite so decimated or poverty so severe. There was probably no other country where the processes of social atomization and anomie were so far-reaching. Polish society was broken during this period as never before in its history. In fact, it resembled less a society than a kind of ‘social porridge’ – a mass of family communities with a tribal nature. Moreover, the consequences of this Trauma of the Great War were drawn out across time. The rebuilding of social bonds, normalization and stabilization, the processes of forgetting – all of these processes required time. The wartime way of life, based on the suspension of the customary, moral and legal norms during the Occupation, had taken root so deeply in the course of this period of almost six years that it endured long after the war’s end. Certain fears, traumas, habits and behaviours had entered the bloodstream of the national culture for the long term. Strictly speaking, they are still running through the system to this day, manifested in recurring ‘ethnic allergies’. The Czech philosopher Jan Patocka has written that ‘this war has not ended. Because it passed over into a specific state, which was neither war, nor peace’. Although this quotation refers to the period after World War I, it provides an equally fitting point on which to close my reflections here.

115 The experience of the residents of the western republics of the Soviet Union in particular was also traumatic; but in this case, victory brought a sense of pride, and helped to strengthen institutions. See further on the theme of post-war Soviet society: Amir Weiner, Making Sense of War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).