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Beyond “Making Poland Great Again.” Nostalgia in Polish Populist and Non-populist Discourses¹

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Nostalgia can be triggered not only by personal recollections but also by exposure to narratives or images evoking desirable pasts, more or less fictional, and inducing feelings of longing for them. We analyze the institutional and semiotic machinery involved in the cultural construction of nostalgia in Poland and its role in generating sentiments that predispose people to support populist—particularly right-wing populist—ideology. While various political options use semiotic vehicles of nostalgia designed to engender nostalgic sentiments, we argue that there are systematic differences of content and form between politically useful invocations of nostalgia, related to the ideology of their proponents. We further posit that right-wing populist nostalgia invokes not only national greatness but also national innocence. We also identify specific features of such nostalgic discourses. The empirical material for our four cases ranges from textual and film narratives, through images and performances, to large-scale exhibitions and museal projects. To analyze their content and determine the form of politicization we build upon the conceptual apparatus developed by Svetlana Boym (reflective versus restorative nostalgia), Jan Assmann (communicative versus cultural memory), and Northrop Frye (low mimetic versus high mimetic narrative forms). The analysis relies on Geertzian “thick description” and the extended case study method.

KEYWORDS: collective memory; Holocaust; ideology; nostalgia; right-wing populism; Solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

Politicians routinely concoct images of the past to procure legitimacy for their power. Such images may not be totally different from historical accounts produced by professionals, but they are drawn with different objectives in mind. Their goal is not to approximate what happened, how, and why, while remaining sensitive to the possibility of several ways of retelling the past (Bell 2003:77–78), but to procure the best possible and monolithic justification for the proponents' claim to power. Right-wing populists are no different, although they seem to be particularly adept at spinning mythical visions of the past, suffused with symbolism whose aim is to promulgate the idea of radical polarization within culture and society. Such a strategy helps them to stoke up the fires of the culture war—including in the domain of collective memory, where they usually play the role of mnemonic warriors (Kubik and Bernhard 2014).⁴

This phenomenon has been noted and analyzed in the growing literature on the cultural dimensions of populism's rise, particularly in the works that deal with the intersection of the politics of collective memory and populism (Manucci 2020, 2022; Riedel 2022). To analyze the way populist actors define "the people," the researcher needs to revisit the literature on the formation of collective identities, and thus also on collective memory (Bull 2016; Manucci 2022:452) whose creation and maintenance is seen as an essential component of collective identity building (Assmann 1995; Hoskins 2013). As Riedel notes, "in (populist) politics, memory manipulation most often refers to bringing historical justice by contemporary means, and it correlates very strongly with identity politics ('we' versus 'they')" (2022:203).

Nostalgia, a specific mnemonic phenomenon, is a state of mind engendered by a specific way of relating to the past. Nostalgic invocations of the past are saturated with a powerful emotion, a bittersweet longing. One yearns for a past moment or period—however purely imaginary it may be—and attempts to dwell in it. The invoked past must be perceived as in some respect "better" than the present. At times, the goal of such a recollection is not just a melancholic "return" to a "golden age," but the resurrection of some aspects of the past and motivating the nostalgic subjects to take action in the present and/or the future (Pickering and Keightley 2006).

Although the link between populism and nationalism is vigorously debated (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Brubaker 2020; Pappas 2018; Rydgren 2017), there is a consensus that in right-wing populism "the people" are almost always defined in nativist or nationalist categories (Mudde and Kalwasser 2017), which imply that nation building is often based on a nostalgic foundation. Such varieties of nostalgia are usually related to collective, rather than individual, memories, or common beliefs about the past, particularly the past exemplifying national greatness. In the manner that is obviously colored by specific national contexts, right-wing populists devise images of the time when the nation—conceived as a pristine and unadulterated

⁴ "Mnemonic warriors tend to espouse a single, unidirectional, mythological vision of time. . . . The present is constructed as permeated by the 'spirit' of the past, and if this spirit is defective, the foundations of the polity are corrupted. . . . The alternative visions of the past – by definition, 'distorted' – need to be delegitimized or destroyed" (2014:13).

entity—was in a “truer” state of being, truer to its essence and thus also better prepared to face various challenges.

In our earlier work on cultural mechanisms of populist mobilization (Kotwas and Kubik 2019), we noticed that right-wing populists use a broad range of mnemonic tools to garner support, but they also stoke nostalgia. We note, along with several scholars, that other, often non-populist political actors also develop and propagate different nostalgic discourses designed to procure legitimacy for themselves. Yet, the literature on the subject seems to be dominated by framing of nostalgic politics as something that operates on the fringes of “reasonable political discourse” (Kenny 2017:258) and is stylistically homogeneous. We hypothesize to the contrary that there are several types of politically expedient construals of nostalgia—and there is no single paradigm populist or non-populist actors follow. Thus, the question is not if nostalgia is politicized but how. In this study we ask what are the features of nostalgia-inducing cultural mechanisms *specific* to right wing populism? To provide an answer we build a comparison between examples of populist and non-populist nostalgic mnemonic regimes and consider which cultural construals of collective nostalgia show elective affinity with right-wing populist ideology.

A NOTE ON THE METHOD

As survey data indicates Poles attach high significance to history as a factor constituting their national identity (Wysocki 2018) and most of them are convinced that their nation suffered in the past much more than other nations (Sitnicka 2019). This suggests that cultural entrepreneurs can play on nostalgic themes that invoke both national greatness and suffering without fear of being rejected or ignored. Although such themes are most often used by right-wing populists, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the cultural strategies they employ to engender nostalgia, we constructed a comparative study to look at a varied set of socio-cultural constructions of nostalgia proposed by different political actors. To conduct such a study, we introduce the concept of *semiotic vehicles of nostalgia* (SVNs); propose a preliminary typology of such vehicles; and offer an analysis of the relationships between such vehicles, nostalgic themes they embrace, and ideological frames imposed on the content they promote. We also adopt an ideational definition of populism to facilitate our analysis of the affinity between types of nostalgic discourses and right-wing populism.

Our approach is founded on the assumption that the intersection of culture and politics needs to be studied in a context-sensitive manner if the goal is the reconstruction of mechanisms that drive this relationship. This means focusing on at least some details of the circumstances in which “nostalgic performances” were staged in social practice. The method of extended case study seems to be most suited for such a task (Aronoff and Kubik 2013:49–57) and we followed Alexander and Smith’s admonition that “detailed, thick description tends to be the most persuasive in cultural studies; one must fight against the tendency (tempting in comparative work) for interpretation to engage in a broad brushstroke portrayal of general

themes” (1993:161), as well as the directives of Geertzian method of thick description (1973). Occasionally, we reconstructed layers of meaning in images, relying on the directives of iconographic analysis (Panofsky 1955).

Since the meanings of nostalgia-inducing discourses are delivered via a variety of institutional and semiotic vehicles, our principal interpretive technique is to read the meaning off various artifacts; only occasionally did we observe symbolic action. The multiple vehicles we scrutinize include: a film, a book of interviews, two large museal-commemorative projects and their visual and textual narratives, an iconic image and its cultural and pop-cultural reiterations, as well as several public statements and performances. The empirical material was collected during our research trips to Gdańsk and Warsaw in 2017, 2018, and 2019, by means of participant observation, informal conversations and interviews, and via extensive manual web scraping. Given the space limitation of a journal article, we provide only rudimentary and condensed interpretations of each vehicle and its content.

We assumed that nostalgia is not reserved for populists only. Politicians and cultural entrepreneurs of all ideological stripes can produce nostalgia-inducing performances or narratives, so right-wing populist nostalgia can be brought into sharp relief by comparison with nostalgia cultivated by non-populist actors. Second, nostalgia that emerges in situations of collective remembering can be politicized to various degrees. It can be instrumentalized or—in extreme cases—manufactured by political entrepreneurs. Finally, since we wanted to learn more about the link between nostalgia and myth, we needed to juxtapose the cases of nostalgia production in which we suspected high levels of myth-making with those in which “realism” prevailed.

Four case studies, all drawn from Poland, constitute the project’s empirical base. Driven by the logic of purposive sampling, we searched for specific collective memories in which nostalgia was detectable. Ultimately, we selected: the rise and impact of the Solidarity movement, the Polish “golden age” symbolized by the winged hussar, and the discourse on the Polish complicity in the Holocaust. In selecting these cases we ascertained that they share two features: the nostalgia we detected in them was collective and the evoked past was politically significant. To achieve the desired diversity, we chose cases characterized by different types of ideological framing, levels of politicization, and levels of mimetization.

CONCEPTS AND THEORY

What Is Nostalgia?

No writer has contributed to our understanding of nostalgia more than Svetlana Boym. Her rich analyses of the phenomenon are based on two analytical moves. First, she reflects on the roots of the word itself:

The word “nostalgia” comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning “return home” and *algia* “longing.” I would define it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. (2007:7)

Nostalgia is thus a mental return to a “home”—a place that offers comfort though it may be fully or partially fictional (minimally or completely unrelated to the actual past), creatively imagined, and idealized. The second element of the construct is “longing,” a specific emotion that has two features. Firstly, it is directed toward this imagined “home” and permeated by an awareness of its inaccessibility. Secondly, it is a positive feeling, although, as Kenny notes, other feelings, such as disorientation, disgruntlement, and wistfulness, may also be at play (2017:261).

Boym’s dissection makes nostalgia’s two opposites immediately clear. It is either focusing our mind on a different “sector” of time—the future or the present—or dwelling on a negative emotion toward the past. This realization prompts us toward another important observation. While a negative attitude toward the past is anti-nostalgic, a negative attitude toward the present often functions as nostalgia’s complement and in practice its enhancer. In the first case, it is the past that is inferior to the present, thus it better be forgotten; in the second case, the present is inferior to the past, thus the invocation of some version of the past becomes imperative.

In the second move, Boym distinguishes between the restorative and reflective nostalgia:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. These distinctions are not absolute binaries, and one can surely make a more refined mapping of the grey areas on the outskirts of imaginary homelands [...]. *Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition* [emphasis ours]. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (2007:13)

Her distinction plays an important role in our analysis and the construction of our preliminary typology of nostalgias. We suspect that reflective nostalgia tends to be constructed in low mimetic genres of representation, while restorative nostalgia is more frequently narrated or visualized in high mimetic genres, including myths.

Nostalgia as a Variety of Collective Memory. Semiotic Vehicles of Nostalgia

Nostalgia, like other psycho-cultural phenomena, for example memory, is located in both individual minds and in public culture. We are not interested in the psychological dimension of nostalgia, although, ultimately, a nostalgic episode or process has to play out in an individual psyche (Routledge et al. 2012; Wildschut et al. 2021). We focus on the socio-semiotic phenomenon of creating, maintaining, or challenging a nostalgic mood, constructed through the application of tools of representation, ranging from sounds, through words to pictures. From a constructivist perspective—which we adopt here—collective nostalgia is a product of semiotic practices occurring at various levels of social organization, from local communities to nation states, and designed to evoke the feeling of nostalgia in an individual. When some actors of the public domain, such as politicians, promulgate narratives about the past that are designed to engender nostalgic moods, they may enhance the proclivity to accept these narratives’ key ideological message in their audience. In other words, nostalgia can be used as an ideological weapon designed to legitimize

its creators' power or to delegitimize the power of their adversaries (see also Karakaya and Baer 2019).

Following Olick, we distinguish collected and collective memory. The former is “the aggregated individual memories of members of a group” (1999:338), while the latter refers to “public discourses about the past as wholes or to narratives and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities” (1999:345). Accordingly, we distinguish between aggregately understood *nostalgic mood* which can be diagnosed only by studying one individual at a time and *semiotic vehicles of nostalgia* (SVNs)—including storytelling, conversations among friends, musical pieces, paintings, poems, rituals, public performances, political speeches—that evoke nostalgia in the minds of individuals.

To grasp the nature of relevant processes, we also work with an influential distinction, introduced by Jan Assmann, between three levels of memory: inner, communicative, and cultural. At the inner level, “memory is a matter of our neuromental system. This is our personal memory, the only form of memory that had been recognized as such until the 1920s” (2008:109). The next two levels are collective. What Assmann calls *communicative memory* is “a matter of communication and social interaction” (2008:109). It is a form of social memory that is developed in direct interaction between individuals exchanging narratives on the past. *Cultural memory* is different because its transmission does not require direct contact between individuals; it is mediated by various semiotic vehicles accessible to individuals who may have never interacted with each other and who have never personally experienced the “remembered” phenomena. As Assmann puts it:

Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent. They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. (2008:110–111)

Focusing on contexts in which collective moods are formed, we draw inspiration from Assmann's work on communicative and cultural memory and propose a distinction between *communicative* and *cultural vehicles of nostalgia*. Bell (2003) introduces a similar distinction between collective memory and mythscape and argues that while the formulation and dissemination of the former has more features of a bottom-up, “organic” social process, the top-down, “official” processes are involved in the production of what we call *nostalgic mythscapes*. For us, *communicative vehicles of nostalgia* are forms of direct social interactions that generate and transmit feelings of longing for a specific moment in the past, usually related to common experiences of a group of people. On the other hand, *cultural vehicles of nostalgia* are identifiable components of public discourse that induce a longing for some “past,” not necessarily built on specific individual recollections of the past they purport to reference. These distinctions are useful, we posit, in identifying and analyzing mechanisms of politically relevant cultural strategies of nostalgia generation and maintenance.

There is one more important conception that we believe can greatly enhance our analytical tool kit. As Bell observes, cultural entrepreneurs working on shaping people's images of the past and attempting to induce targeted nostalgia, also for

political reasons, use narratives that range from almost “realistic” accounts of events to grand mythological stories (2003). To deal with this important aspect of nostalgia production we reach for a tool proposed by Northrop Frye. Better known for his classical typology of literary genres, his book also provides an insightful set of observations on what might be called *levels or intensities of mimetization*, whose highest concentration is observed in *myth*. While fleshing out the features of the four basic narrative forms, Frye observed that myths are full of extraordinary events and characters possessing superhuman powers. Other types of narratives have a mixed character and although they may include extraordinary events or superhuman beings, their actions are carried out “within the order of nature” (1957:50). This is often the narrative tone of some forms of drama, particularly tragedy, and national epics. Frye calls these narratives *high mimetic*. At the other extreme, there are low mimetic narratives, considered by most people to be realistic rather than mythical, for example realistic fiction, irony, or satire (1957:34). We apply his terminology to a broader range of cultural productions, also those that are designed to evoke nostalgia, and place them on a continuum of what we call *mimeticism*, ranging from low to high.⁵

Semiotic vehicles of nostalgia like all media of intersubjective expression and communication are expected to vary on the two continua proposed by Assmann and Frye: (1) from communicative to cultural methods of nostalgia construction (Assmann) and (2) from low to high mimeticism of nostalgic representations (Frye). Each concrete semiotic vehicle of reflective or restorative nostalgia (SVN) can be placed on each of these continua, whose extremes constitute ideal types of the studied phenomena. At one end we expect to find varieties of SVNs that are communicative (in Assmann’s terms) and characterized by a low level of Frye’s mimeticism. This will be, for example, an evening when a group of friends reminisce nostalgically about some past common experience, recalling in vigorous friendly banter events that actually happened to them. At the opposite end, we find SVNs that are cultural (in Assmann’s sense) and reproduced via grand narratives, gripping images or entrancing performances, pitched at a high mimetic level, as is the case of official state ceremonies designed to generate or enhance nostalgic attachment to some

Table I. Types of semiotic vehicles of nostalgia (SVNs)

| Author | Semiotic vehicles of nostalgia | | | |
|---------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Assmann | Communicative memory | | Cultural memory | |
| Frye | Low mimetic | High mimetic | Low mimetic | High mimetic Bell’s mythscape |

⁵ “Our survey of fictional modes has also shown us that the mimetic tendency itself, the tendency to verisimilitude and accuracy of description, is one of two poles of literature. At the other pole is something that seems to be connected both with Aristotle’s word *mythos* and with the usual meaning of *myth*. That is, it is a tendency to tell a story which is in origin a story about characters who can do anything, and only gradually becomes attracted towards a tendency to tell a plausible or credible story” (Frye 1957:51).

mythologized moments of national glory. These ideal types are schematically presented in Table I.

Equipped with these tools we elaborate on the understanding of populism we adopt in this study and examine elective affinity between specific semiotic vehicles of nostalgia and types of politics, in particular right-wing populism.

What Is Populism?

We rely on the most influential definition of populism and approach it as a type of ideology. It is useful to distinguish its two basic forms: *thin* and *thick*. For a given ideological statement, political program, or discourse to be classified as populist, it needs to satisfy four conditions. Thick variants of populism have one additional element. Following Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), we assume that in thin populism all four features listed below need to be present in conjunction, at least in trace amounts:

1. *Vertical polarization* that sets “the people” against “the elites,” which are seen as separate and mutually exclusive groups or categories of people.
2. The dominant mode of interaction between these two groups is *antagonism*.
3. A *Manichean* valorization of this antagonism (i.e., *fundamentalist moralizing or mythologization*), which assumes that the essential feature of social reality is the struggle of the forces of good and evil and that any conflict or tension between these two groups is an instance of that fundamental struggle.⁶
4. Politics should be the expression of *volonté générale* (*general will*).

The key implication of Manicheism is that political opponents of populists, construed as champions of the forces of evil, become illegitimate or at least defective political actors, whose elimination from the public sphere needs to be rhetorically promoted and, if possible, realized in practice.

The idea of *volonté générale* helps to define and justify attempts to introduce in practice *popular sovereignty*, according to which the substance of majoritarian democracy trumps procedures of liberal democracy. Moreover, the latter are seen as a nuisance if not an obstacle to the exercise of people’s genuine will. This, in turn, opens a way toward the justification of authoritarianism as a form of rule. If democracy is understood as the rule of people constrained by the rule of law, “full” democracy is always liberal democracy (Müller 2016). Ergo, *authoritarianism* can be defined primarily as a strategy of power exercise that removes or minimizes the rule of law and the system of institutional checks and balances.

Populists need to define “the people” by means of providing additional ideological content—and when they offer such a definition populism *thickens*. In the case of right-wing populists, this can be achieved by providing a particular understanding of national identity usually derived from *nativism*. It serves to generate *horizontal polarization* whose essence is the juxtaposition of “good” and “bad” people (Brubaker 2020). But there are other cultural resources that may be employed in the

⁶ Structurally, this proposition is akin to the Marxist argument that—in essence—all observed social conflicts are merely epiphenomenal manifestations of the class conflict.

thickening of populism, for instance a religious discourse/idiom that contrasts the faithful with the infidels.

We expect that in empirical examples of nostalgic narratives, images, or discourses the salience and intensity of each element’s elaboration will vary, as some SVNs will contain themes that are congruent with “vertical polarization” while others with “Manicheism,” for example.

POPULISM AND NOSTALGIA

The link between populism, particularly its right-wing variety, and nostalgia is a subject of a growing body of literature. Our analysis is guided by these studies, but we also want to identify potential research gaps and propose some solutions.

Writing about populism from the perspective of political philosophy, Kenny observes that:

Politically orchestrated forms of nostalgia appear to be integral features of anti-establishment populism, and have helped project strong objections to liberal elites, and the policies of economic openness, tolerance and cultural diversity associated with them. (2017:258)

In this case, nostalgia is seen as an emotion co-occurring with an anti-elite sentiment that is directed against tolerance and diversity, both liberal values. Kenny points out that populists often construct their nostalgic narratives or imaginings in a highly mythologized and metaphorical idiom, for example when they employ the trope of “imagined natality” (Freeden 2017), a vision of the nation’s origins resembling the conception of primordialists (Bell 2003:67; Smith 1999:3–5). This is an important observation for it confirms the idea that the “home” nostalgia invokes may be totally invented and highly abstract.

Betz, in his panoramic overview of the rise of right-wing politics around the world, observes that:

What sets radical right-wing populist parties and movements apart is their deliberate elicitation of a panoply of emotions, such as anxiety, anger, rage and nostalgia. /.../ Radical right-wing populist narratives tend to evoke a nostalgic vision of “the good old days” when men were still men, women knew their subordinate place in society and foreigners stayed where they belonged, namely far away. (2021:8)

Radical right-wing nostalgia is characterized here in the most general terms, as yearning for a societal order that is conservative and exclusionary. In their study of the cultural message promulgated in the late 2010s by the Sweden Democrats party, Elgenius and Rydgren provide a detailed picture of nostalgia construction by a far-right actor. They show how cultural nostalgia can be built by simultaneously referencing the actual historical period of the 1950s, and a mythical, “pure” Sweden, captured in two evocative tropes of “golden age” and “people’s home.” Additionally, far-right actors tend to essentialize Swedishness by suggesting that “the Swedes are in effect ethnically prone to democracy and equality” (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019:591).

If evoking nostalgia for ethnic purity and “golden age” is useful for constructing “the people” of populism musing nostalgically about the nation’s authoritarian past creates a bridge to another key element of populism—its disregard for liberal-

democratic checks and balances. This aspect is extensively studied by Manucci, who investigates nostalgic invocations of authoritarian past (2022) and various ways of remembering fascism that are used by today's right-wing populists to support their claims to legitimate authority (2020).

While these works identify various links between nostalgia and populism, we want to cast our analytical net broadly to see if and how non-populist forms of politics are also linked to nostalgia. Several researchers show that politically relevant evocations of nostalgia are employed not only by actors representing the right, particularly far right. Kenny analyzes the uses of nostalgic arguments by Tony Blair and concludes that “arguments that are pitched in resolutely ‘progressivist’ terms appear to be as likely to harness nostalgic affects from the imagined past as those that are conservative in character” (2017:261). Özyürek (2006) demonstrates the existence of liberal nostalgia for Atatürk's secular republic in present-day Turkey increasingly dominated by Islamists. The literature on socialist or post-socialist nostalgia is sizable and documents nostalgic recalling of social protections and comradeship under state socialism (Asavei 2020; Todorova and Gille 2012). It is thus clear that nostalgia is associated with various political and ideological options and—as Kenny shows—is not always a negative phenomenon or merely a “pathological by-product of a populist era” (2017:260).

The definition of right-wing populism we use to verify this hypothesis generates five specific expectations. First, we expect a vision of the past (more or less invented) when the society was clearly divided into the “people” and the “elite.” “The people” are expected to be portrayed as “pure,” virtuous, and as blameless as possible. Second, a vision of the past in which the relationship between these two sets or groups is portrayed as antagonistic. This may be expressed, for example, in the propagation of an image of a powerful “elite” enemy, such as a threatening foreign power. Third, the language in which that past will tend to be portrayed is expected to be highly saturated with a Manichean vision of the apocalyptic struggle between good and evil. Specifically, we expect invocations of “our” military or political exploits in which good “us” confronted and prevailed over evil “them.” Fourth, there is an expectation of the nostalgic recalling of the situation when “people's” *volonté générale* was expressed in an unconstrained manner, often in an authoritarian setting. Finally, we expect a picture of the past in which pure “we” were unambiguously separated from and juxtaposed to “aliens” who need to be repulsed.

FOUR TYPES OF NOSTALGIA: CASES AND ANALYSIS

Solidarity was one of the most remarkable social movements in history and one of the causes of East European state socialism's collapse. Its formation in Poland in 1980 and the subsequent 9-year struggle for democracy and freedom have become generation-shaping events. Their recollections have entered many streams of individual and collective memory, cultivated in a broad range of social settings, ranging from family gatherings to grand national-level celebrations. The concepts of solidarity and “Solidarity” have a tremendous nostalgic potential, as it seems only natural that those involved are prone to recollect in nostalgic tones extraordinary times

when their unity not only prevailed over many divisions, but also contributed to a momentous political change. Such nostalgia should intensify in the situations of conflict or uncertainty, although its articulation is expected to depend heavily on the ideological frames various actors try to impose on the practice of collective remembering.

Despite its tremendous historical significance, ceremonial commemorations of the movement have not become a unifying foundation of a new, post-communist social, and political order. The chief reason is that at the national level, no uniform and broadly accepted vision of Solidarity was formed, and the memory field that emerged around the movement has quickly split contributing to the intensifying polarization of the whole Polish political culture (Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Kubik 2015). As the memory of Solidarity became inseparable from several consecutive events and processes, such as the Round Table Talks in 1988–89 and the reforms of the early 1990s, the movement’s mnemonic potential tends to be appreciated only by those who perceive the overall outcome of Polish democratic transition positively.

In this situation, the cultural construction of nostalgia for Solidarity has also become fragmented, and some of its various semiotic vehicles have lined up with the increasingly deep division within the Polish public culture and the institutions of its reproduction. This process that started almost immediately after the fall of communism intensified in 2015 when the increasingly right-wing populist formation led by Jarosław Kaczyński and his party, Law and Justice (PiS), ascended to power. In the narratives of this formation Solidarity’s memory is blemished by the trope of betrayal at the 1989 Round Table, presented as a corrupt deal with the communists.

These two ideologically discrepant types of nostalgia for Solidarity have been cultivated through many institutional and semiotic practices, but in this study, we examine only two cases and observe their political or ideological affiliations.

Nostalgia for Consequential Comradeship

After the imposition of Martial Law on December 13, 1981, and the de-legalization of Solidarity, the movement entered a phase of underground organizing, interspersed with occasional public protest eruptions. As the 1980s progressed, the communists, since 1985 reporting to a new reform-minded “boss” in the Kremlin, Gorbachev, started realizing that the political stalemate, economic decline, and cultural polarization were unsustainable. On the other hand, Solidarity was not going anywhere and its pressure on the authorities grew intense. In 1988, yet another wave of strikes and demonstrations engulfed the country.

On April 26, 1988, a strike was announced in one of the strongholds of Solidarity, the gigantic Lenin steelworks in Nowa Huta, near Kraków. It was pacified by the riot police during the night of May 5, 1988, but it reenergized the workers who continued clandestine union activities in preparation of their re-entrance into the public sphere. This happened on November 21, 1988, when protests across the country peaked again and the communist government started preparing for negotiations.

In 2017, a team of researchers from the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University, led by Beata Kowalska started a 2-year project to find answers to several questions, including: “What is ‘Solidarity’ for us today?” and “What has been left from the movement that expressed the hope of millions of people?” As Kowalska noted they “were collectively discovering ‘Solidarity’ for themselves” (2020:9). For them, “. . . it was not just a historical trip, but an expedition to find community, solidarity and dreams about democracy and self-governance. It was an attempt to find a fountain that would fortify our actions here and now” (Lipczak 2020).

We approach the two products of the project as semiotic vehicles of nostalgia. The first is a book *Nowa Huta 1988. Migawki z utopii* [Nowa Huta 1988. Snapshots from utopia] (Kowalska et al. 2020) that offers a comprehensive reconstruction of the 1988 strike, documents workers’ reminiscences, and provides students’ interpretive reflections on what they had learned from their interaction with the workers and how this knowledge could be used in their own mobilizing 30 years later. The second product of the project, a documentary film, *Strike 88. No freedom without solidarity*, probably due to its powerful imagery, is a compelling SVN. The participants of the 1988 events reconstruct the strike’s history, their actions, the police brutality, subsequent underground organizational work, and the ultimate success. They reflect on both the effects the strike had on their lives and the way they remember it.

What is recalled with a strong nostalgic undertone is the sense of profound solidarity that the workers, their families, and supporters experienced during their struggle against the unwanted system, particularly during the strike. One of the workers recalls how Catholic masses conducted by priests around the steelworks “kept people’s spirits up. This was really needed. Those people, some of whom perhaps did not even believe in God, were all united; they were a family, a tight-knit group. *This is rare* [emphasis ours]” (Hajdarowicz 2018, 26:57). Another worker’s recollection has a clearly nostalgic tone: “When ‘Solidarity’ arrived, it was like a narcotic, it gained total control over me. From the very beginning I believed that it was a phenomenal idea, that it was exactly what we had been waiting for. Not only us, Poles, but I believe people in general need solidarity” (Kowalska et al. 2020:11). The emotional intensity of these recollections indicates not only the awareness of the strikes’ importance, but also nostalgia for the time when comradeship engendered among the workers a sense of their collective importance and personal self-worth.

The content of remembering provoked by the interview situation, recorded and discussed in the book and the film, entails the elements of both reflective and restorative nostalgia. The former is clearly dominant in the communicative memory of reminiscing workers, who are keen to travel back in time to the period when they experienced uncommonly intense comradeship and managed to be consequential as a revolutionary force. The latter appears more in the attitudes of the students, who explicitly express hope to learn from workers’ strike know-how and draw strength from spiritual energy that permeated the Solidarity mobilization. Close to the end of the film, a student shares a thought: “I think solidarity is the most important political idea that can change the world because it includes in itself the struggle for equality and freedom” (Hajdarowicz 2018, 25:03). For the young sociologists, the

memory of Solidarity is important as a foundation of a participatory and democratic political culture that is increasingly missing in the country they live in and about which they are nostalgically reminded through their interactions with the former workers. If those who read the book or watch the film become nostalgic, this effect is achieved through cultural, not communicative, experience. Moreover, when an interview with reminiscing participants—a communicative SVN—is presented by means of a cultural SVN, such as a film or book, nostalgia is more likely to be ideologized or politicized by those who never participated in the recalled events (Lipczak 2020).

Nostalgia for the Time Poles Offered the World a Universal Model

The idea of creating a museum of the movement in Gdańsk, its birthplace, emerged in March 1998 and after many years of planning and constructing the European Solidarity Center was finally opened to the public in 2014. It is a large and multi-functional cultural institution—a “modern agora,” as its organizers often emphasize—designed to celebrate, analyze, and promote the legacy of this massive social movement that should become “an important part of Europe’s founding myths” and “a source of inspiration and hope for those who don’t live in open and democratic societies” (ECS n.d.). Sponsored and supported by several local and national politicians belonging to the broadly understood liberal segment of the Polish political field, the Center defines its mission as the promotion of universal civil rights, tolerance, openness, and non-violent ways of solving societal and political conflicts.

The main exhibition reconstructs the history of the movement, relying on multi-media presentations, hundreds of photographs, and reconstructions of actual spaces featuring around 1800 original artifacts. The story of Solidarity is presented chronologically, starting with its birth in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, through the imposition of martial law, the years of underground mobilizations, the Round Table negotiations with the communist authorities in 1988–89, the semi-free elections of June 1989, and the final success when in September 1989 the first non-communist government since the 1940s took power. In the last space, named after John Paul II, the visitor is invited to reflect on the universal meaning of the emancipatory social movements, while the faces of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Andriej Sacharow, Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, pope John Paul II, and Lech Wałęsa are scrolled on the wall.

A multi-media institution of this depth and breadth becomes a semiotic vehicle of nostalgia on a quite different scale than the type of nostalgia for Solidarity, or rather solidarity, analyzed in the previous case. It operates in the realm of cultural memory; the role of communicative memory is clearly subordinate. The nostalgia the Center seeks to evoke is not only reflective, limited to invocations of the time when in the heat of their common struggle against the state socialist system Poles experienced uncommon solidarity among themselves. This form of nostalgia for Solidarity is dominant in the book and film produced by the Kraków sociologists. The ECS’s aim is to generate predominantly restorative nostalgia—it proposes to see Sol-

idity as a prototype for the people struggling for human rights in the present and in the future.

The level of mimeticism, relatively low throughout the exhibition, becomes intense in the last, almost empty, room, deliberately designed to create a mythopoeic ambiance in which the spectator is invited to meditate on the legacy of the movement. The carefully crafted message, deliberately designed to transcend the national context, inscribes Solidarity in the tradition of non-violent revolutions and the universal struggle for human rights. As one of the key creators of the exhibition recalled, “The ECS proposes a mythologized narrative about the European history of freedom.”⁷ “Europe begins here” informs a placard on the main gate and one of the early brochures promoting the Center declares:

The ECS founders have the ambition to create a Central European agora, a meeting place for citizens who feel responsible for the development of democracy in Europe. We want to inspire debates on the condition of the open society, on the identity of democratic communities, on the problem of social justice; we want to answer the question of how to preserve equal chances for the citizens’ development in the free-market system. (ECS 2014)

But this message has not gone unchallenged. Soon after 2014, when the ECS was opened to the public, the culture war in Poland was in full swing. In this context, the universalistic interpretation of Solidarity promoted by the ECS clashed with the ideas of rightward leaning and nationalistic politicians and political formations. Paradoxically, the Solidarity Union, whose gradual drift to the right is thoroughly documented in the literature (Hayden 2020; Ost 2005), became one of such formations. As most right-wing formations, including the ruling party, PiS, adopted an ambivalent or at times hostile attitude toward the European Union they did not welcome nostalgic recollections of Solidarity as a carrier of the universal message of human dignity and justice, seamlessly resonating with the EU’s official principles (European Union 2012). Since 2004, the Solidarity trade union had been the legal owner of the building, known as the BHP Hall,⁸ where the August 1980 negotiations between Solidarity and the communist government had been conducted and concluded. The Union decided to turn this storied *lieux de mémoire* of the movement into a museum and conference center promoting its own interpretation of Solidarity.⁹ Physically, the two buildings are separated by a mere few hundred meters, but as semiotic vehicles of nostalgia they are worlds apart. The Hall can be rented for various events, but the choice of renters seems to reveal the sympathies of today’s Solidarity Union. On April 14, 2018, the National-Radical Camp (ONR) a radical right organization, classified by experts as fascist or neo-fascist (Dryjańska 2017), celebrated in Gdańsk the 84th anniversary of the founding of its pre-1939 namesake and ideological model. Following a march through the main streets of the city in a disciplined column characteristic of radical right demonstrations, the participants gathered in the BHP Hall for a conference. One of the movement’s leaders commented on the famous twenty-one postulates of the 1980 strike, whose copy is fea-

⁷ Dr. Jacek Kołtan, interviewed by the authors, January 28, 2022.

⁸ The acronym “BHP” stands for Occupational Health and Safety.

⁹ “A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora 1996:xvii).

tured in the Hall: “Despite what the media claim, the postulates indicate clearly that these people fought for their dignity and the future for themselves and their families, *not for some democratic platitudes* [emphasis ours]” (Gąsiorek 2018).

Solidarity provided a potentially attractive symbolic capital that could be used to generate a national-level nostalgia for the movement that launched a post-communist and forward-looking Poland, but its promotion has proved to be impossible under the conditions of culture war. The right-wing nostalgia for Solidarity, firmly embedded in nationalistic frames, refers to it as yet another instantiation of Polish national greatness, not as a collective effort of people struggling for human rights.

Nostalgia for National Greatness

Cultural constructions of national greatness often refer to highly mimetized glorious past exploits—preferably military successes—and such references are nostalgic by their very nature (Boym 2001). Polish right-wing actors, moderate and radical alike, routinely invoke images of great national accomplishments, drawing on and reinforcing the national sensorium (Zubrzycki 2011). One of the icons of the past greatness which has evolved into a powerful and versatile symbol is the Polish winged hussar.

Hussars were a heavy cavalry formation recruited from the Polish nobility and used mostly in the XVI-XVIII century, in particular, during the period considered to be the golden age of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth when it was geographically the largest political entity in Europe (Kępa 2017a). They proved effective during many military conflicts of that era, but their current legendary status is mostly owed to the spectacular victory at the Siege of Vienna in 1683. The relief hussar troops led by the Polish King John III Sobieski, summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, defeated the Ottoman army despite its overwhelming numerical superiority (Brzezinski 2006). For many historians, the battle marked the turning point in the Ottoman-Habsburg wars, a 300-year conflict between the Holy Roman and Ottoman Empires, thus forever sealing the dominant status of Christianity in Europe.

The winged hussars were famous not only due to their battlefield prowess and distinctive weapons, but predominantly due to their unusual and extravagant dress, featuring characteristic wings made of predators’ feathers attached to two tall vertical wooden rails, mounted to the backplate of a soldier’s armor or the back of his saddle. The cavalymen also wore striking leopard skins on their shoulders or wild animal pelt capes (Brzezinski 2006). This recognizable representation of the hussars seems to be largely based on their XVIII-century’s ceremonial dress (Sikora 2010), and it is impossible to confirm to what extent and in what exact shape the wings were used in battle. Nevertheless, the image of a charging winged cavalry unit clad in wild animal skins and triggering both fear and admiration among enemy soldiers, has become a perfect candidate for high mimetization.

The winged riders appeared in the works of the nation’s greatest painters and writers, including a Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz. More recently, the fig-

ure of the hussar has become an omnipresent pop-cultural icon, featured in video games, graphic novels, music videos, and murals (Kępa 2017b). With the growing interest in historical reenactments, the winged soldiers are an important inspiration. In 2019 several reconstructionist groups united to form The League of Polish Hussars that not only cultivates the tradition of this formation, but also promotes patriotism and the “glory of Poland and the Polish arms” (wSensie.tv 2019). As a widely recognized symbol of Polishness, the hussars are used as a self-identification tool by Polish diaspora groups—from amateur football teams to motorcycle clubs. And perhaps the most spectacular display of the hussar wings as a symbol of the Polish identity took place at the Miss Universe 2021 beauty pageant, when the Polish entrant appeared on stage with a pair of huge glittering wings attached to her costume while dragging a gigantic cape made of the national flag (Myszkowski 2021).

Many contemporary visual representations of the hussars differ from the historical imagery. They have been filtered through the aesthetics of fantasy and superhero fiction, presenting the soldiers as epitomes of masculinity or as merciless angelic-devilish characters resembling the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Such hyper-stylized winged hussars are often commodified in patriotic tattoos as well as patriotic clothing and gadgets¹⁰—the compulsory accouterments of the Polish far-right sympathizers. Concurrently, this image has also become an effective symbolic tool of mobilization for far-right movements along with other visual themes from the canon of Polish patriotic imagery. While working on the interpretation of the March of Independence (Kotwas and Kubik 2019), regarded as the biggest far-right gathering in Europe, we examined the posters promoting the March. Visual representations of the hussars are featured on four posters out of eleven. In the first poster in the series, produced for the 2010 March a lone charging hussar is the central element. In the 2012 poster, one of the two soldiers framing a woman who seems to represent the Polish nation is a winged hussar (the accompanying slogan reads “Let’s recover Poland.”). The 2016 poster (“Poland—the Bulwark of Europe”) features a wingless cavalryman, who nonetheless can be interpreted as a hussar, portrayed against a background of a giant cross and massive marching crowds. In the 2020 poster (“Our civilization—our rules”), a cartoon-stylized hussar uses his sword to smash a rainbow-and-red star, simultaneously representing the rejection of communism and the opposition to what the right portrays as the morally repugnant “neo-Marxist LGBT ideology” (Figurski 2019).

The multiple SVNs that use the symbol of the hussar despite belonging to different genres and registers have a lot in common—they are all cultural in Assmann’s sense and characterized by a very high level of mimeticism. Keen on promoting nostalgia anchored in “usable pasts,” the nationalistic right searches for episodes that are not only unequivocal examples of national greatness, but also provide a coherent and concise narrative—a *myth* that can be molded into an attractive iconographic program. The vivid representations of Polish winged cavalymen stoke *reflective* nostalgia for Polish military and territorial dominance. On the other hand, the historic context of the Battle of Vienna, interpreted as a triumph of Christendom over Islam,

¹⁰ T-shirts and accessories with the winged soldiers motif are available from most brands offering patriotic clothing such as Magna Husaria, Imperium, or Ultrapatriot (see <https://magnahusaria.pl>; <https://imperium.sklep.pl>; <https://ultrapatriot.pl>).

provides fertile ground for *restorative* nostalgia amplified by xenophobia. The figure of the hussar provides material for construing a triumphant variety of messianism,¹¹ and gets instrumentalized as an icon of the nationalists’ call for the commencement of Poland’s mission to revive “true” European—that is Christian—values.

Nostalgia for the Lost National Innocence

Between 27 and 30 January 2018, the historically incorrect phrase “Polish death camps” scored almost one million hits in Google search engine (TVN24 2018). This shocking result was the effect of the controversial anti-defamation bill passed by the Polish Parliament (Sejm 2018). Its objective was the exact opposite—to prevent and prosecute the use of that very phrase as well as other forms of attribution of the Nazi crimes against humanity to the Polish nation or state. The bill that introduced the maximum penalty of 3-year jail term as punishment for defaming Poland caused an international scandal and strong reactions from Israel, the USA, and other countries. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it an attempt to rewrite history and deny the Holocaust (BBC 2018). While some of the criticism was focused on its incompatibility with international law, many scholars of the Holocaust raised concerns about this legislation’s potential for curbing academic freedom and even putting Survivors who suffered at the hands of Poles at the risk of being prosecuted for recalling their painful experiences (Urbaniak 2018). The bill was signed into law but eventually, in July 2018, it was amended and its most controversial fragments removed (Kończal 2021). While we are not qualified to contribute to the debate on Poles’ culpability in the atrocities of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes that took place in the occupied Poland, we are interested in tracing the discursive shifts in this debate, their purposes, and effects. We argue that with this failed initiative PiS began to establish a discourse of Polish national innocence based on a Manichean black-and-white distinction between victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

As Czapliński observes, until the mid-1980s “the Shoah, seen as a separate catastrophe, remained overt and at the same time hidden in the open, because its effects on the broader Polish society were never reflected upon” (2021:573). While the tragedy of the Polish Jews was subsumed under Polish war-time suffering, and therefore absorbed into the myth of national martyrdom, the Holocaust was “mostly effaced or diluted as but one part of a broader history of fascist aggression” (Zubrzycki 2017:203). As a result, in Poland the Shoah did not have the status of uniqueness which it had achieved in much of Western historiography and memory studies. This mnemonic paradigm, Czapliński writes, was first challenged in 1984–87 by a number of Polish language publications, authored by, among others, Grynberg, Błoński, Śpiewak, Krall, Huelle, and Konwicki, as well as the theatrical release of Claude Lanzmann’s documentary *Shoah*. The final straw, which completely burst the dis-

¹¹ In her influential analysis of what she calls the national sensorium, Zubrzycki (2011) focuses on the two central themes of Polish mythology: Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity and Polish messianism. While both are undoubtedly at the core of Poles’ self-understanding and have been reproduced in many channels of cultural production, it is worth noting that the latter does not only take the form of messianic martyrdom, related to the myth of national heroic victimhood, extremely popular among the Poles (Sitnicka 2019), but it also has a triumphant version.

course on Polish complicity open, was the publication of Jan Gross' book *Neighbors* in 2000, retelling in acute detail the murder of the local Jewish community of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors in July 1941 (Czapliński 2021). The public debate that followed lasted several years and “is rightly considered the most critical public struggle regarding Poland’s contemporary history” (Kończal 2021:4).

The collective shock caused by Gross' book on Jedwabne prompted what Czapliński called a *retroactive catastrophe*—the Holocaust, even though it took place many years before, became a central topic in the debate on Polishness only upon the book's publication. This led to a major shift in the intellectual debate on national identity and, combined with the spirit of “critical patriotism,” produced voluminous new research on the history of the Holocaust and the wartime Polish-Jewish relations. It also had a major impact on the memory politics in Poland (Kończal 2021:4) and resulted in numerous mnemonic projects aimed at rediscovering the material traces of the Jewish absence—ranging from such monumental initiatives as the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN opened in 2014, through local festivals of Jewish culture to the revival of Ashkenazi cuisine (Zubrzycki 2017). For many actors it was an opportunity to contribute to the discourse on Polish national identity and challenge the hegemonic tone of heroism and sacrifice. This changed when PiS took the reins of government and, together with other conservative actors, initiated politics of memory designed to “protect the good name of Poland and Poles.”¹²

When his party won elections in 2015, Kaczyński made a programmatic declaration that Poland would never have to be ashamed again (Czapliński 2017). The state-sponsored memory politics was to be driven by efforts to end the “pedagogy of shame” and get Poland to “get up off its knees.” It soon found its expression in a number of overt decisions and ambiguous gestures, ranging from museal directorship changes and funding cuts¹³ to calling the question of Polish culpability in the Jedwabne massacre “a matter of opinion” by the PiS Minister of Education (Kończal 2021). In 2019, a group of PiS politicians and sympathizers launched a campaign aimed at discrediting world-class Holocaust scholars Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski (Wójcik 2021), the editors of *Night without End*.¹⁴

It soon became obvious that PiS and its allies were not only going to challenge the formerly dominant post-Gross discourse, focused on evidence-based examination of the Polish complicity in the Holocaust, but would seek ways to promote a “heroic” vision of Poles' conduct during World War II. Since it was apparently assumed that shame was something that could be unlearned, the process of relinquishing it would require staging pertinent “political spectacles” (Czapliński 2017:64). Their future shape was revealed very clearly in September 2017, when then Deputy

¹² For instance, the ultraconservative legal think-tank Ordo Iuris criticized the European Parliament for defaming Poland and spreading false information in the resolution of 11 November 2021 “on the first anniversary of the de facto abortion ban in Poland” (Ordo Iuris 2021). The resolution is a direct response to the legal changes from 2020 Ordo Iuris had been lobbying for since 2016.

¹³ For a detailed account of these decisions see Kończal (2021) and Napiórkowski (2019).

¹⁴ The book's promotional leaflet reads: “However difficult for many to accept, historical evidence collected in this volume leaves no doubt: considerable and identifiable groups of the Polish population took part in liquidation operations (and later – during 1942–1945) directly or indirectly contributed to the deaths of thousands of Jews who were seeking rescue on the ‘Aryan’ side.”

Prime Minister Morawiecki suggested that the whole Polish nation deserved its own tree in the Yad Vashem’s Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations, which recognizes people who helped save Jews during World War II (wPolityce 2017). This discourse of innocence was soon institutionalized, with a large variety of projects, museums, and commemorative initiatives which celebrate Poles who saved Jews receiving substantial public funding and public attention (Kończal 2021; Napiórkowski 2019). Some of the better known such initiatives are: the Markowa Ulma-Family Museum of Poles Who Saved Jews in World War II, the National Remembrance Park and the “Memory and Identity” Museum in Toruń, From the Depths Zabinski Award, and the “Called by Name” initiative of the Pilecki Institute. Most of these projects aim to publicly showcase Polish heroism. The Toruń project is a park-monument featuring a hundred large white-and-red pillars with the engraved names of 16,000 Poles who saved Jews. The Pilecki Institute installed several markers commemorating heroic Poles—and often situated them in the vicinity of the former death camps, such as Treblinka (Grabowski 2022).

On the face of it, these initiatives address the problematic status of those in Poland who did save Jews during the war but who failed to obtain recognition as the Righteous due to Yad Vashem’s particularly stringent criteria (Frazer 2020). However, inflating the extent of Polish assistance to divert attention from the extent of Polish atrocities, which is being construed as restoring the “right” balance between the two, instead can be understood as an effort to manufacture *collective amnesia*. Many Holocaust historians raise concerns that some of these initiatives attempt “to whitewash Poland’s wartime narrative and portray ordinary Poles as rescuers of Jews while ignoring their many acts of betrayal and anti-Semitism” (Frazer 2020). Grabowski notices that their effect is manufacturing “a new historical narrative that depicts the rescue of the Jews as a default position of Polish society during the Holocaust” (2022). He further argues that even though the government’s attempt to reframe history is not unique, as this trend is observable in other European countries, its scale and the degree of involvement of the state officials is unprecedented.

The textual and visual narratives commemorating Poles who saved Jews, promulgated via several SVNs such as museums, monuments and markers, are examples of cultural memory (in Assmann’s sense) that—in our view—has a strong nostalgic tone, but the longing they induce does not refer to any particular moment in history or a myth of greatness. It is a longing for a once dominant and now lost narrative in which Poles figure as either unequivocal victims of Nazism and Stalinism or war heroes, a narrative that may give them a sense of moral superiority and sanctify the idea of national sacrifice. It replaces the feelings of shame with pride. This form of nostalgia is thus based on the rejection of a heterodox—from the right-wing point of view—narrative that presents a complex, multifaceted, and at times morally uncomfortable portrayal of the role of war-time Poles as *heroes, victims, bystanders, and/or perpetrators*. Instead, it constitutes an attempt to reestablish prior orthodoxy built around the “innocent” albeit ambiguous figure of *victim-hero*, which fits well into the paradigm of Polish messianic destiny, envisioned as a combination of perpetual martyrdom and heroism.

INTERPRETATION

The existence of elective affinity between populist ideology and nostalgia is no longer in question and reconstructing its mechanisms is an urgent task. We aim to complement the growing body of innovative conceptual and theoretical studies supported by the mounting empirical evidence. Our study is driven by two questions: what makes nostalgia a political phenomenon, in particular a populist one? and which types of nostalgia show elective affinity with right-wing populist ideology and how are they constructed? To find answers, we use the extended case study method to simultaneously reconstruct institutional settings and semiotic mechanisms of nostalgia production. To this end we have coined the concept of *semiotic vehicles of nostalgia* (SVNs). Thus, we emphasize the semiotic dimension of the phenomenon and put aside the psychological approach. We also draw on Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory and Boym's seminal work on nostalgia, while Frye's reflections on the levels or intensities of mimeticism provide us with further analytical tools. In the final step of the analysis, we look for elective affinity between the characteristics of each type of nostalgia and the ideology of right-wing populism.

The analysis begins with what we treat as a benchmark case, in which predominantly *reflective* nostalgia appears in the recollections of the workers who were the events' participants (Case One). For the students, who want to use the new knowledge in their own activism, it is largely *reconstructive*. The case also documents the transformation of communicative memory into cultural memory. Emphasis on concrete events and personally experienced emotions, as well a modicum of verifiability achieved through juxtaposing reminiscences of various participants, help to produce a narrative and visual record in which low mimeticism dominates. As a result, the mnemonic vehicles and the tenor of nostalgia they invoke do not enhance polarization that right-wing populists thrive on. While the "vertical enemy"—the communist rulers and their police forces—are often in the picture, the commemorative work is not focused on reconstructing their conflict with "the people" but on celebrating—nostalgically—the solidarity among the people. Moreover, this conflict is not represented in Manichean terms. Since the confrontation with the authorities is not central to the conversation, the relationship between the challengers and incumbents is not analyzed, the structure of power is not reflected upon, and, consequently, the problem of *volonté générale* does not arise. Finally, no "horizontal" enemy appears in the story. In brief, what is generated is nostalgia devoid of any motifs congruent with right-wing populist ideology.

The manner in which Solidarity is nostalgically museified by the ECS (Case Two) is in sharp contrast to the mnemonic phenomena analyzed in the first case. The Center engages its public in a variety of ways, thus its message and effects on the viewers are not easy to characterize in the dichotomies we have introduced. The exhibition itself—a typical cultural vehicle of collective memory formation—has sections that are as meticulous and immersive as museal representations can be (for example, a reconstruction of a prominent dissident's office), while others are more synthetic, although still driven by the logic of "factual reconstructions." However, at the end one enters the hall whose atmosphere is deliberately contemplative, conducive to linking the memory of Solidarity and its nostalgic potential to the grand myths of

humanity about liberty, human rights, and universal solidarity. In Frye’s terms, the arrangement of the exhibition propels the spectator not only through time, but also through a narrative that evolves from low mimetic recounting of “facts” to the reflection on the meaning of Solidarity narrated and visualized in a high mimetic register. The mix of low and high mimetic genres of representation, characteristic for the ECS, is geared toward inducing simultaneously *reflective and reconstructive nostalgia*.

The mytho-poetic atmosphere of the last room may be interpreted in Manichean terms: the “good” forces of democracy and tolerance stand against authoritarianism, oppression, and close-mindedness. But since the emphasis is placed on the goodness of us, while the evilness of the elite is deemphasized, there is not much to resonate with populist ideology that demonizes the elite. The exhibition also closes off potential links to right-wing populism. While the movement insisted on expressing people’s *volonté générale*, it had strong respect for the procedures and democratic checks and balances, as is well documented by the ECS. Finally, the exhibition documents also that Solidarity was very careful not to activate the horizontal axis of thick populism. All efforts to juxtapose “good people” of Solidarity to any “others,” ethnically, racially, or religiously identified, were quashed (Kubik 1994). As we noted, an alternative way of remembering the movement, based on such a strong horizontal polarization congruent with the nationalistic ideology, is also possible, but it is not present in ECS.

Nostalgia-inducing SVNs that are associated with the Polish right-wing mythoscape have several major iconographic representations. One of the most prominent is the image of the winged hussar that has recently traveled from the ideologically neutral or banal nationalist imaginarium delineating “Polishness” and its pop-cultural reinterpretations to the iconography of the Polish far right (Case Three). The image functions as a floating signifier, whose possible referents range from Poland’s military and political dominance, through masculine strength, to anti-Islamism. As such it is perfect for evoking *both reflective and restorative* nostalgia for the national greatness pitched in a mythical idiom that is not totally unmoored from its historicity. Reproduced through cultural rather than communicative channels (pace Assmann) and pitched at a very high level of mimeticism, the figure of the hussar is an extremely effective symbolic tool for the populist right in one crucial respect. It helps to create the myth of a heroic and powerful nation, whose “best sons” fought on the side of good against the forces of evil (for example Muslim invaders). By doing so, it enhances horizontal polarization, elevating the “great” Polish Christian nation over others, particularly those outside of Christendom. It does not play an obvious role in setting up the opposition between the people and the elite, nor does it have anything to say about *volonté générale*.

The type of nostalgia we think exists in the cultural productions analyzed as our last case is not intuitively obvious. The *decisively restorative* and highly mimetic discourse of national moral superiority, and its predominantly cultural (in Assmann’s sense) SVNs, draw energy from the desire to restore the hegemony of a different discursive regime in which Poles were seen as “pure” and “innocent” (Case Four). Furthermore, focusing on national “purity” shows strong elective affinity with most strands of the right-wing populist ideology. Any assertion of “purity” can be used to

Table II. Four types of nostalgia and their features

| Object | Nostalgia | | | |
|-------------------|--|--|---|--|
| | Nostalgia for consequential comradeship | Nostalgia for being a universal model for the world | Nostalgia for national greatness | Nostalgia for lost national innocence |
| Function | Recollection of personal and communal importance | Celebration of a non-violent revolution of global significance | Promotion of national aggrandizement/ megalomania | Restoration of the "national purity" orthodoxy |
| Brief description | Yearning for the past when we created solidarity that nourished us | Yearning for the past when we achieved unity that could serve as a universal prototype | Yearning for the mythologized past when "we" were great | Yearning for the past discourse that represented "us" only in positive terms |
| Simple slogan | We were together! Those were the days! | What we did can inspire others! | Make our nation great again! | Stop saying we have been anything but great! |
| Boym Assmann | Reflection dominant Private and communicative | Reflection and restoration Cultural | Restoration dominant Cultural | Restoration dominant Cultural |
| Frye | Low mimetic | Hybrid (low/high) mimetic | High mimetic/ myth | High mimetic |

ignite or exacerbate antagonism between “innocent” Poles and the “treacherous” liberal elite that casts doubt on the nation’s unblemished reputation. The proponent of this nostalgia, PiS, motivated by the resentment toward the discourse representing Poles as not only victims or heroes but also as callous bystanders and perpetrators during the Holocaust, proposed an alternative discourse. The moral frame associated with this discursive shift has a strong Manichean tone. And finally, the centrality of “national purity” makes it also easier to enhance the megalomaniac claim to superiority over assorted “others,” also in the case of a controversial competition of “who suffered more” and “who was more heroic” during World War II. Table II summarizes the results of our analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analytical toolbox, combining a detailed definition of right-wing populism, a custom-made concept of semiotic vehicles of nostalgia, Olick’s delineation of collective and collected social memory, Boym’s distinction of two types of nostalgia, Frye’s scale of mimetization, and Assmann’s typology of social memory, was applied in a *comparative* study of four cases in which we detected nostalgia. Nostalgia, a state of mind engendered by a distinctive way of relating to the past, can be invoked by cultural mechanisms, often associated with concrete *lieux de mémoire*, and thus belongs to the order of *collected* not only *collective* memory, to rely on Olick’s critical distinction. We have introduced a concept of *semiotic vehicles of nostalgia* to focus our study on cultural and communicative mechanisms of nostalgia induction rather than its psychological dimension.

Aided by the benefits of a disciplined comparison, we analyzed the right-ward politicization of nostalgia with a degree of precision absent in earlier studies. We achieved two types of results: confirmation of three generalizations emerging in the literature and three new insights.

We have confirmed that actors of the right, particularly far right, often produce narratives, images, and performances that are congruent with a key postulate of their ideology: the restoration of national greatness (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). Second, our study also confirmed Kenny’s observation that restorative nostalgia, more often than not, tends to be associated with right-wing populist ideologies, while reflective nostalgia “appears more pertinent to everyday forms of political discourse in Western democratic contexts” (2017:262–3). However, more research is needed, since we expect that in the context of growing ideological polarization, the theme of restoration of some past may penetrate “everyday forms of political discourse.” Third, like some other researchers, we have also observed that politically instrumentalized nostalgias have different ideological affiliations, and thus confirmed that nostalgia is not a phenomenon associated exclusively with the political right.

There are three new findings of this study. First, we observed that when nostalgia evokes politically significant past events, the levels of instrumentalization by political actors seeking legitimacy for their actions or positions can range from almost nonexistent to intense. In the first analyzed case, we showed that a nationally

salient phenomenon can be nostalgically commemorated via SVNs that are minimally politicized.

Second, while all political formations strike nostalgic tones, at least occasionally, nostalgia of the right has specific formal and thematic features that show elective affinity with several constitutive features of right-wing populism. The intention of narratives, images, and performances designed to stoke nostalgia associated with national pride tends to be restorative rather than reflective. The semiotic vehicles used by the right are cultural rather than communicative and usually constructed top-down in a coordinated fashion. The content is pitched at the highest levels of mimeticism, often relying on Manichean binaries or anti-elitism, congruent with right-wing populist ideology.

By contrast, while more liberal non-populist actors at times do not shy away from relying on high mimetic genres—they invoke, also nostalgically, more universal and inclusive ideals. Moreover, the SVNs they employ seem to be more diverse, ranging from communicative to cultural and from low to high mimetic. The European Solidarity Center, which invokes a longing for the times when liberal-democratic ideals and universal ethical norms were more central in social and political life, is an example of such an SVN.

When right-wing populists champion the theme of return to national greatness they exploit elective affinity between this theme and right-wing populism's arguably most central feature—the construction and exacerbation of horizontal polarization. National greatness may only be asserted if aliens, whether external or internal, are construed as inferior, according to the premise of constructing a sharp contrast between “good” and “bad” people. The use of the symbol of the Polish winged husar by the Polish far right is an example of a compelling SVN used to that effect.

Third, we observe that right-wing nostalgia is not homogenous, either thematically or formally. While all right-wing populists emphasize the nostalgic theme of national greatness, some of them expand their nostalgic repertoires. We demonstrate how Polish right-wing populists have developed nostalgia for lost *national innocence*, a specific take on the theme of national *purity*, thus going beyond the appeals to “make Poland great again.” This type of nostalgia is useful for manufacturing the key narrative of populism, the narrative of a treacherous, alienated or simply alien elite that casts doubt on “the people's” purity. International organizations, human rights watchdogs, or transnational courts of justice are often represented as tools of such elites. When trying to evoke this type of nostalgia, right-wing populists construe the past in highly mimetic genres such as mythical narratives or militant discourses designed to invoke the nation's lost innocence. Such construals sharply clash with the scholarly discourse, but trigger or exacerbate feelings of self-pity and hostility toward the elites.

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