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Title: Patriotism of Tomorrow? The Commemoration and Popularization of the Warsaw Rising Through Comics

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As one of the most lethal urban combats ever, the Warsaw Rising evoked narrative representations even before the fighting had stopped. Along with the courageous 1939 defence of the city against the invading Nazis and the 1943 Ghetto Uprising, the Rising contributed to the Myth of Warsaw, that is, the glorification of Warsaw's heroic resistance to German attempts to annihilate the city. Particularly since 1989, the Warsaw Rising 'master narrative' has steadily gained prominence, reaching its peak in 2004, when the sixtieth anniversary of the insurgence was celebrated with the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum. Typical of this last phase of commemoration is the stimulation of the use of popular artistic media such as rock music, graffiti art, and comics. A striking example of this tendency is a yearly comics competition which is supported by the Museum and which resulted in four comics anthologies, and, indirectly, also in a series of individual comic books, and a professional comics anthology. This article investigates whether these comics merely affirm the Warsaw Rising as a sacrosanct landmark of national identity or if they also offer 'a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory'.¹

¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 15.

Introduction: The Warsaw Rising: Between Myth and Memory

As one of the most lethal urban combats of the Second World War, the Warsaw Rising (1 August – 3 October 1944) evoked narrative representations even before the fighting had stopped. Against the background of the changing political and social context (Stalinist repression, de-Stalinization, post-communism, renewed patriotism, etc.), this process of ‘narrativizing’ gave birth to a powerful ‘master narrative’, in which personal accounts of the traumatic experiences of loss and pain tend to be subordinated to the official, hegemonic discourse of heroism and martyrdom. Along with the 1939 courageous defence of the city against the invading Nazis and the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, this master narrative contributes to the Myth of Warsaw, that is, the glorification of Warsaw’s heroic resistance to, and rapid reconstruction after, the almost successful German attempts to completely annihilate the city. The ‘typically’ Polish, martyrological-messianistic mythology of suffering which the Rising has revived,² has not only left its mark on the construction of collective and national identities, but it has also affected the work of individual memory and its representation. Since 1989, the ‘myth’ of the Rising has steadily gained prominence, reaching its peak in 2004, when the sixtieth anniversary of the insurgence was celebrated with the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum.

In order to fully understand the present popularity of the Warsaw Rising, we should be aware both of the circumstances in which it took place, and of how exactly it was remembered during the subsequent communist period. The Warsaw Rising was started by the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) on 1 August 1944 under rather ambiguous historical circumstances: the Germans had begun to retreat from Poland, the Red Army was approaching from the East, and it seemed to be just a matter of time until the besieged Polish capital would be liberated. Apparently intended to last only a few days in order to legitimize the Polish government-in-exile, or at least to restore its waning influence, the Warsaw Rising actually continued for sixty-three days due to the unexpected passivity of the Soviets (who had already

² Cf. Maria Janion, ‘Zmierzch paradygmatu’ in *Do Europy – tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2000), pp. 19-34 (pp. 22-25).

reached the right bank of the Wisła river) and the belated and insignificant support by the Allies.³ Approximately 20,000 insurgents and up to 200,000 civilians were killed whereas some 700,000 inhabitants were expelled from the city, which was later systematically destroyed by the Nazis until it practically ceased to exist.

Contrary to what happened in countries that established democratic regimes immediately after World War II the way in which war events were to be treated in Poland was quickly appropriated by the People's Republic and its Moscow-controlled political caste. As the insurrection was raised by the Home Army and supported by the London-based government-in-exile, it was unimaginable that its tragic heroism would play any role in the evolving master narrative of the People's Republic and its depiction of the Soviets as liberators of the Polish nation. As soon as the Communists had seized power, Polish authorities either remained silent about the Rising or accused the insurgents of having started a hopeless undertaking and even of having collaborated with the Nazi enemies. From the 1960s onwards, the leaders of the insurrection and their political allies in London were still treated as traitors, but mentioning the brave soldiers of the Home Army and their heroic resistance was no longer forbidden. Until 1989, however, the honour of official commemorative activities (such as monuments, celebrations, etc.) was exclusively given to the soldiers of the Red Army and the Soviet-backed People's Army (*Armia Ludowa*). Yet in spite of – or maybe thanks to – the state control over the memory of the 1944 events, all kinds of (public) representations of the Warsaw Rising did emerge, and even though it was not always easy to mention the role of the Home Army, and indeed was impossible to raise the question of the passivity of the Red Army, a kind of stealthy mythologization took place.⁴ Having become an important point of

³ For a detailed account of the prehistory, the history and the aftermath of the Warsaw Rising, cf. Norman Davies, *Rising '44. The Battle for Warsaw* (London: Pan Books, 2004).

⁴ This fierce struggle for the (public) memory of the Warsaw Rising in communist times has already been analysed by several scholars. Cf. e.g. Jacek Zygmunt Sawicki, *Bitwa o prawdę: historia zmagani o pamięć Powstania Warszawskiego 1944-1989* (Warszawa: DiG, 2005); Justyna Krzymianowska, 'Der Warschauer Aufstand zwischen Tabuisierung und Heroisierung', in *Politische Erinnerung. Geschichte und kollektive Identität (Peter Reichel zum 62. Geburtstag)*, ed. by Harald Schmid and Justyna Krzymianowska (Würzburg:

reference for the supporters of Solidarność in the early 1980s (a *GegenErinnerung* or ‘counter-memory’ in their fight with communism),⁵ the Rising had to wait until the collapse of communism in order to grow into a powerful collective and national narrative, a basis on which a new post-Communist identity could take shape.

The process of reshaping national identity on the basis of past cultural traumas such as the Warsaw Rising was far from homogeneous. As Maria Janion noted, early post-communist Polish culture was characterized by a diminished interest in national history and the sacrosanct collective values of the Polish nation.⁶ Since all attention in the new independent state was devoted to the establishment of a democratic system and a competitive market economy, the practically uniform complex of romantic values, symbols and rituals that had dominated Polish culture for 200 years seemed to have fallen into a final decline. Around the year 2000, however, as Poland was in the middle of the European Union accession process, the romantic paradigm started to resurface in what could be called a postmodern guise. Poland’s integration into the multinational European Union went hand in hand with a re-examination of national identity. What seems to be characteristic of this recent identity debate is a certain eclecticism in choosing the components of national identity, the absence of a dominant voice, and most of all, the plurality of the forms through which the discussion is mediated. Indeed, whereas the dissemination of issues of national identity for so long had been the privilege of the national bards (in Polish *wieszczowie*, from *wieszcz*, ‘prophet’) who mainly expressed themselves in the form of literary texts, all Poles could now take part in the debate on a more equal basis, and the means by which they could express their opinions were countless. This postmodern levelling of existing cultural hierarchies reveals itself most prominently in

Köningshausen & Neumann, 2007), pp. 211-22; Tomasz Markiewicz, ‘Der Kampf um die Erinnerung. Denkmäler der Heimatarmee in Warschau seit 1945’ in *Die polnische Heimatarmee. Geschichte und Mythos der Armia Krajowa seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. by Bernhard Chiari, Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, 57 (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2003), pp. 753-75.

⁵ Cf. Helmut Altrichter (ed.), *GegenErinnerung. Geschichte als politisches Argument im Transformationsprozeß Ost-, Ostmittel- und Südosteuropas* (München: Oldenbourg, 2006).

⁶ Cf. Janion (pp. 25-29).

the growing tendency to privilege representations of national and historical themes in all kinds of popular forms of expression. In an article that deals with this problem, Marcin Czubaj considers this recent interest of pop and mass culture in issues of national identity as a new phase after a decade of reticence in dealing with national history; he believes that the main reason for this silence was the situation in the preceding communist period, when such means of expression used to be extremely ideologized not to say propagandistic.⁷ What makes Czubaj's contribution so interesting for my own discussion of recent artistic representations of the Warsaw Rising is that the author mainly draws on examples from the comic medium.

Many will agree that, in the wake of the inauguration of the Warsaw Rising Museum in 2004, public commemoration of the 1944 events has definitively entered into a new and, to a certain extent, 'post-memorial'⁸ era. In accordance with the more general trend in post-2000 Polish culture which I have just described, this new phase of Warsaw Rising commemoration is characterized by the stimulation of the use of popular artistic media such as rock music, graffiti art, and comics.⁹ One of the most striking

⁷ Marcin Czubaj, 'Pop pod flagą bialo-czerwoną', *Sprawy Narodowośćowe*, 27 (2005), pp. 119-29 (p. 121).

⁸ For a very instructive elaboration on the concept of 'postmemory', cf. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).

⁹ This new trend has evoked numerous journalistic comments both in Poland and abroad; cf. e.g. Marcin Wilkowski, 'Popstanie Warszawskie', *Historia i Media*, 1 August 2007 <<http://historiaimedia.org/2007/08/01/popstanie-warszawskie>>; Izabela Szymańska and Łukasz Kamiński, 'Pop-Powstanie Warszawskie', *Gazeta Wyborcza – Stołeczna*, 31 July 2008, p. 1; Agnieszka Niesłuchowska, "'Moda" na Powstanie Warszawskie', *Wirtualna Polska*, 28 July 2006 <<http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,48996,title,Moda-na-Powstanie-Warszawskie,wid,8419250,wiadomosc.html>>; Gerhard Gnauck, 'Patriotismus und Pop. Polen erprobt neue Formen historischer Vergegenwärtigung', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 19 September 2009 <http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/patriotismus_und_pop_1.3599674.html>. Examples include a concept album by the Polish rock band Lao Che (*Powstanie Warszawskie*, 2005), murals by the artistic collective Grupa Twożywo, the yearly popular festivities in commemoration of the beginning of the insurgence, theatre shows, a paintball game, etc.

examples of this tendency is a yearly comic competition which is organized under the auspices of the museum, which has already resulted in four comics anthologies and a couple of individual comic books. In 2007, the Warsaw Rising Museum also sponsored a more professional anthology that included graphic stories on the Rising by a pleiad of Polish comics artists. Memorial initiatives such as these comics projects seem to be aimed at establishing strong intergenerational bonds between former insurgents and their generation, and the post-memorial generation of young Poles who have grown up in post-Communist times. It remains to be seen, however, whether this recent pop culture boom merely affirms the Warsaw Rising as a sacrosanct landmark of national identity, or if some of its specimens also challenge the master narrative's hegemonic discourse. This article sets out to disclose some of the post-memorial and counter-memorial strategies that emerge from these recent comic representations of the 1944 insurgency, and to interpret these against the background of the evolving politics of commemoration. I believe that, no matter how modest the results of this particular commemorative project may be, the phenomenon itself of representing the Warsaw Rising in unconventional artistic forms such as comic books deserves the critical attention of all those interested in historical memory, despite the still existing and still pertinent prejudices against comics as a multifaceted form of cultural representation. In order to deal with this, I will further elaborate on the recent popularity of twentieth century Polish history in comics in general, and on the emergence of the Warsaw Rising comics subgenre in particular.

Comics and Twentieth Century Polish History

The evolution of comic art in Communist and post-Communist Poland clearly illustrates the changing attitude of popular culture towards national history. As has been argued a few years ago in the foreword to an anthology of comic stories dealing with World War II, in the highly ideologized communist era Polish comics often dealt with historical issues and more specifically with World War II, but were generally addressed to children and/or were part of state propaganda.¹⁰ After the Polish *glasnost*' of the 1980s had

¹⁰ Tomasz Kołodziejczak, 'Wrzesień 2003', in *Wrzesień. Antologia komiksu polskiego. Wojna narysowana* (Warszawa: Egmont, 2003), pp. 5-6. A notorious medium of state propaganda was the famous comics magazine *Relax* (1976-1981), whose motto, as Frąckiewicz reminds, was 'uczyć nie nużyć' ('to teach

already put an end to the historical current in Polish comic art, the production of comics itself could hardly survive in the wake of the events of 1989. A new generation of comic artists tried to become influential, but they were interested merely in the fantastic adventures of ahistorical superheroes. In order to illustrate the situation during the 1990s, the author of the same foreword refers to an earlier pivotal anthology of comic stories from the year 2000, within which only one out of thirty narratives dealt with war events. By the end of the 1990s, however, the state of Polish comic art had undergone a radical change; not only had the publishing market been stabilized, allowing comic artists of all sorts to publish and promote their works, but comic stories also started to echo the renewed public debate on important historical events and their commemoration. The World War II anthology *Wrzesień (September)*, which I have just mentioned, could be considered the starting point of a series of comic publications in which virtually every key event of twentieth century Polish history is brought to life. From the publication of *Wrzesień* in 2003 onwards, individual comic books and collective comic anthologies have been published which revive historical events such as the Polish independence in 1918 after 123 years of foreign rule, the 1939 invasion by Nazi Germany, the Warsaw Rising, the Holocaust, the Poznań 1956 protests or Poznań June, and pivotal episodes of the Solidarity years such as the Gdańsk Shipyard strike in 1980, the Martial law period, the murder of priest Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984, and the pacification of the Wujek Coal Mine in 1981.¹¹

without annoying?). Cf. Sebastian Frackiewicz, 'Komiks, historia, ideologia', *Witryna czasopism.pl*, 28 (2005) <<http://witryna.czasopism.pl/pl/gazeta/1050/1158/1209>>.

¹¹ *11/11 = Niepodległość. Antologia* (Warszawa: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2007); Florian Fiedler et al., *Powstanie Wielkopolskie. Mieszkańcy Swarzędza w zwycięskim zrywie niepodległościowym 1918-1919* (Swarzędz: Urząd Miasta i Gminy Swarzędz and Zin Zin Press); Mariusz Wójtowicz-Podhorski and Krzysztof Wyrzykowski, *Westerplatte. Złoga śmierci* (Gdańsk: Milton Media, 2004); Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Krystian Rosenberg, *Achtung Żelig! Druga wojna* (Poznań: Zin Zin Press, 2004); Maciej Jasiński et al., *1956: Poznański Czerwiec* (Poznań: Zin Zin Press, 2006), Maciej Jasiński et al., *Solidarność – 25 lat. Nadzieja zwykłych ludzi* (Poznań: Zin Zin Press, 2005), Jacek Fraś, 'Stan'. Appendix to *Przekrój* 49 (2006); Maciej Jasiński and Krzysztof Wyrzykowski, *Książka Jerzy Popiełuszko. Cena wolności* (Poznań: Zin Zin Press, 2005); Maciej

As might be concluded from the choice of the represented events, this new tendency in comic art not only threatens to reinvigorate the ‘typically’ Polish martyrological-messianistic mythology of suffering, but it also seems to reflect a pertinent concern for giving due to historical events that have been distorted or silenced by communist historiography. However legitimate this counter-hegemonic reassessment of recent Polish history through comics and other media may be, the question is always to what extent these new versions themselves may become hegemonic. Or, to put it another way, as these events are increasingly claimed as the sacrosanct landmarks of the newly-forged Polish identity, they may themselves start to take on an ideological and even propagandistic guise, as a consequence of which alternative voices are threatened to be silenced.¹² This is particularly the case for the comic genre which as a medium of mass communication has a long history of susceptibility to ideological and propagandistic goals. What makes the example of the Warsaw Rising so interesting in this discussion is that it has evoked a plurality of comic projects, both of an individual and an institutional nature, and executed both by professional artists and amateurs. In this way, an examination of the different comic narratives of the Warsaw Rising and the context in which they were created will disclose the various ideological roles that may be performed by comics that represent turbulent historical periods.

One of the first post-communist comic stories dealing with the Warsaw Rising is Jacek Frańś’s ‘Kaczka’ (‘The Duck’), which was created at the turn of the millennium and later incorporated in the

Jasiński et al., *1981: Kopalnia Wujek* (Poznań: Zin Zin Press, 2006). Since 2007, even the IPN (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej) has started to issue comic books as illustrations of particular historical episodes that it sets out to commemorate.

¹² A similar skepticism about the ideological role of historical comics in contemporary Polish society is shared by many commentators of the phenomenon. For an interesting discussion of the subtle ways (when compared to communist times) in which comics are nowadays submitted to the ideological wishes of those in power, cf. Michał Błażejczyk, ‘Komiks (wciąż) w uścisku władzy’, in *Komiks a władza* (= *Zeszyty komiksowe* 8 (2006)), pp. 70-72.

Wrzesień anthology.¹³ Fraś's dark and fairy tale-like story is in fact one of the best accomplishments in the Warsaw Rising comic subgenre that would soon start to flourish. The author even gained international renown for this six-page story as he received the prestigious Prix Alph-Art award in the Young Talents category at the famous Angoulême Festival International de la Bande Dessinée in 2001.

In 2004 the Warsaw Rising Museum opened its doors. The realization of this museum could be seen as the apogee of a long struggle to finally do justice to the memory of Warsaw's most traumatic past event. After decades of struggling for its memory the Varsovians, and with them the entire Polish nation, could now demonstrate to the world that, ahead of any other event of the Second World War, the 1944 Rising was to be considered one of the nation's most important identity-shaping factors. Of course, the public commemoration of the insurgence had already been given an important boost by the erection of the Warsaw Rising memorial, which was inaugurated fifteen years earlier in the symbolic year of 1989.¹⁴ Unlike this memorial, however, which rather exclusively glorifies the collective suffering of the Warsaw insurgents (particularly due to its monumental proportions and its socialist realist style), the commemorative project of the museum was pluridimensional from the very start.

First of all, the Warsaw Rising Museum itself is brilliantly conceived and attractive to both young and old due to its multimedial approach. Furthermore, since its inauguration, the museum has established itself as the most important propagator and sponsor of all kinds of commemorative activities, which often even exceed the scope of the 1944 events. As a result of this seemingly less ideologically biased approach, the museum is successful in uniting all sorts of people, survivors and their descendants as well as those less afflicted, Poles as well as foreign visitors, in commemorating the same historical event in all its complexity. Yet, one of the main goals of the museum seems to be the historical and patriotic education of those who have grown up in post-Communist Poland, in a period in which national history was

¹³ Jacek Fraś, 'Kaczka', in *Wrzesień. Antologia komiksu polskiego. Wojna narysowana* (Warszawa: Egmont, 2003), pp. 121-26.

¹⁴ Cf. Markiewicz for a discussion of the prehistory of the memorial (pp. 769-71) and of other, more modest pre-1989 commemorative projects.

considered to be threatened by the effects of unbridled capitalism and rapid globalization.¹⁵ One of the most effective ways to tighten the intergenerational bonds between grandparents and their grandchildren has been the use of and support for all kinds of pop cultural representations of the events. Of particular interest here is a yearly comic competition that has been increasingly appropriated by the Warsaw Rising Museum.

In 2005, the ‘Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego’ (‘Episodes of the Warsaw Rising’) contest started as a co-organization of the Warsaw Rising Museum and the Print Partner publishing house. The participants were mainly amateurs, and the modest quality of the submitted works can be discerned in a poorly edited anthology of the best eleven contributions (*Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursowych/Episodes of the Warsaw Rising. Anthology of Submitted Works*). The second edition of the competition, which was announced by the publication of the comic book *Strzały pod Arsenalem* (*Shots Near the Arsenal*) by one of the former laureates, not only attracted more participants, but it also resulted in a decently edited anthology of eight stories (*Edycja 2006/Edition 2006*), some of which were already of a higher quality. The 2007 edition, however, which was also preceded by a separate comic album (*Ocaleni* (*The Rescued*) by Tomasz Bereźnicki, the former edition’s winner), did not increase the quality of the results, as can be concluded from an evaluation of the third anthology (*Edycja 2007/Edition 2007*), which contains the best six stories.¹⁶ The reason for this might be of an organizational nature, as the competition

¹⁵ In its bylaws the Museum explicitly stresses the importance of educating the younger generation: “The fundamental goal of the Museum is to conduct research and teaching activities directly related to the Warsaw 1944 Rising and to the legacy of the Polish Underground State. The Museum strives to achieve this goal mainly by accumulating, developing and preserving collections as well as by disseminating and popularizing knowledge on these subjects. Some of the other activities carried out by the Museum aim to integrate veterans’ and military circles and *educate youth in the spirit of patriotism and respect for national traditions* (italics mine). Cf. ‘Objectives and Tasks of the Museum’, *The Warsaw Rising Museum Website* <http://www.1944.pl/index.php?a=site_text&id=12850&cse_id=12865> [accessed 22 October 2009].

¹⁶ *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursowych* (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2005); Kajetan Wykurz, *Strzały pod Arsenalem* (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2006); *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia*

was now sponsored by the ‘Patriotyzm jutra’ (‘Patriotism of Tomorrow’) government programme¹⁷ and patronized by the Union of Warsaw Insurgents (*Związek Powstańców Warszawskich*). Almost simultaneously, the Warsaw Rising Museum started organizing its own ‘Powstanie ’44 w komiksie’ (‘Rising ’44 in Comics’) competition, which did not result in an anthology (though one was announced by the organization), but which appears to have brought the ‘Epizody’ competition to an end in 2007.¹⁸ In 2008, the second edition of the ‘Powstanie ’44 w komiksie’ contest took place, and an anthology containing the best contributions has been issued in 2009 (*Powstanie ’44 w komiksie*).

This year’s edition is still running, and for the first time it explicitly invites foreign cartoonists and scenarists to take part. The subsequent comic competitions also yielded indirect results in the form of separate comic books by former laureates and participants. Examples are *Plaszczyz Ajewskiego* (*Ajewski’s Coat*) by the winning duo of the 2007 edition of ‘Powstanie ’44 w komiksie’ and *Wśród morza ruin* (*In a Sea of Ruins*) by one of the laureates of the first *Epizody* contest. One of the participants of the second *Epizody* edition even had the chance to publish his story ‘Legenda’ (‘The Legend’) in a brand new collection of

prac konkursowych. Edycja 2006 (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2006); Tomasz Bereźnicki, *Ocaleni* (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2007); *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursowych. Edycja 2007* (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2007).

¹⁷ The ‘Patriotyzm jutra’ government programme was established in 2006 by the former Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Kazimierz Ujazdowski (then a member of the *Pravo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) party of Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, nowadays an independent parliamentarian). It subsidized all kinds of initiatives that revived national traditions and patriotic history in a contemporary way, and as such perfectly fitted in the ‘polityka historyczna’ (‘historical politics’) discourse of the Kaczyński brothers. In 2008 the programme was closed down by Ujazdowski’s successor, Bogdan Zdrojewski (from the *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform) party).

¹⁸ The only trace of the first edition of ‘Powstanie ’44 w komiksie’ to be found in print is the winning comics entitled ‘Ostatni koncert’ (‘The Last Concert’), which was published as an appendix to the Warsaw edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*Election Gazette*). Cf. Tymek Jezierski and Monika Powalisz, ‘Ostatni koncert’. Appendix to *Gazeta Stołeczna*, 1 August 2007.

insurgent songs. The last contribution to the flourishing Warsaw Rising comic subgenre was made by the popular cartoonist Papcio Chmiel (Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski), a former insurgent and nowadays driving force of the subsequent comic competitions. In 2009, this Nestor of Polish comics devoted what should be the final issue of his famous 'Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek' series to the 1944 uprising.¹⁹

Apart from supporting these comic competitions, which did succeed in popularizing the 1944 events, but without yielding high-quality artistic results, the Warsaw Rising Museum stimulated the production of comics dealing with the 1944 events in yet another way. On its initiative, the comic artist Przemysław 'Trust' Truściński gathered a so-called 'dream team' of Polish comic artists, with whom he issued a monumental anthology entitled *44. Antologia komiksu (44. Comics Anthology)*. This was published by the Museum itself and which contains no less than seventeen comic stories by a pleiad of scenarists and cartoonists.²⁰ With the publication of this impressive collection, the Warsaw Rising comic subgenre finally succeeded to link up with the early artistic success of Jacek Fraś's story 'Kaczka'. The question remains, however, as to what extent these comic stories have the potential to challenge the dominant master narrative of the Rising, bearing in mind that they are supported by, and in a way even integral parts of a museum project that was designed for mass consumption, and as such cannot but repeat the master narrative's hegemonic discourse. Or, to put it another way, do these comics merely affirm the Warsaw Rising as a sacrosanct landmark of national identity, or do they somehow also offer 'a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory'.²¹

¹⁹ *Powstanie '44 w komiksie* (Warszawa: Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego and Egmont, 2009); Tymek Jezierski and Monika Powalisz, *Plaszczyzna Ajenskigo* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2008); Andrzej Chyży, *Wśród morza ruin* (Łódź: Andrzej, 2008); Wojciech Pawliński, 'Legenda' in *Oni mieli nasście lat... Piosenki powstańcze* (Warszawa: Eurograf, 2009); Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski, *Tytus, Romek i A'tomek jako warszawscy Powstańcy 1944 z wyobrażeń Papcia Chmiela narysowani* (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2009).

²⁰ Przemysław Truściński (ed.), *44. Antologia komiksu* (Warszawa: Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego, 2007).

²¹ Huyssen, p. 15. The full fragment reads as follows: 'Fundamentally dialectical, the museum serves both as burial chamber of the past – with all that entails in terms of decay, erosion, forgetting – and as site of

In order to tackle this question, I will now take a look at how the master narrative of the Rising is constructed, and then try to distinguish between instances of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic memory.

Hegemonic Versus Counter-hegemonic Memory of the Warsaw Rising

The typically hegemonic discourse that master narratives such as that of the Warsaw Rising employ benefit from a straightforward account of the events. Characteristic of the organization of the plot are the inevitability of the Rising, though it had actually been a reckless undertaking, and its teleological development, though the Rising ended in the complete destruction of the capital rather than immediately in the intended relief of Warsaw. Furthermore, in order to successfully convey its unitary meaning, the master narrative tends to obscure the manifestation of multiple voices, as such instances of 'polyphony' threaten to scatter the 'monologic' organization of its discursive layer. Although it appears to be difficult to find individual narratives of the 1944 events in which the straightforward master narrative is completely abandoned, some of them do display strategies that challenge the hegemonic memory of the Warsaw Rising by interrupting the monologic and teleological development of its representation. Such instances of counter-hegemonic memory offer an opportunity to give shape to personal experiences of pain and loss, or they can at least question the unitary idea of the Rising's unique value, notwithstanding the horrendous toll it has taken for both the city infrastructure and its inhabitants. Whereas the monologic and teleological master narrative aims at alleviating these traumatic experiences by connecting them with the collective fate of the nation and thus bringing them to narrative closure, individual accounts may display instances of

possible resurrections, however mediated and contaminated, in the eyes of the beholder. No matter how the museum, consciously or unconsciously, produces and affirms the symbolic order, there is always a surplus of meaning that exceeds set ideological boundaries, opening spaces for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory.'

polyphony and ‘plot-lessness’, as a result of which attention is diverted from the centripetal ‘mythology of suffering’ toward the actual war trauma.²²

Being a particular combination of words and images (a ‘co-mix’, to use Art Spiegelman’s term),²³ comics by their very nature pose specific threats to the hegemonic discourse of the Warsaw Rising master narrative. Not only does monologic control of the verbal layer seem to be less evident in comics than in conventional historiographic accounts or historical novels, but even if the words on a comic page are more or less monologically fixed, the ideological balance can still be subverted by instances of polyphony in the corresponding images. In other words, comic representations of historical facts are far from reliable as mediators of these events’ hegemonic memory. In fact, both the organizers and the commentators of the subsequent Warsaw Rising comic competitions have expressed a similar awareness of the problematic character of employing the comic genre in order to ‘faithfully’ represent the Warsaw Rising. A striking example of this can be found in the third ‘Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego’ anthology. In his foreword, the president of the Union of Warsaw Insurgents, instead of unambiguously showing his appreciation for the competition, openly deplores that in many of the submitted comics ‘sytuacje walk powstańczych odbiegają od opisów zawartych w szeregu dostępnych publikacji, jak i w ekspozycji “Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego”’ (‘the insurgent combat situations differ from the descriptions included in a series of available publications, as well as in the Warsaw Rising Museum exposition’).²⁴ What is behind this remark is, as well as an extremely naive belief in the possibility of relating the past ‘as it really happened’, a preference for accounts that strengthen the hegemonic memory of the 1944 events by systematically

²² For a more elaborate discussion of the Bakhtin-inspired concepts of ‘monologic plot’ and ‘polyphonic plot-lessness’, cf. Dieter De Bruyn and Michel De Dobbeleer, ‘Mastering the Siege. Ideology and the Plot of the Leningrad Blockade and the Warsaw Uprising in Adamovich and Granin, and Białoszewski’, *Primerjalna Književnost* 32/2 (2009), pp. 53-76.

²³ Cf. Linda Hutcheon, ‘Literature meets History: Counter-Discursive “Comix”’, *Anglia* 1 (1999), pp. 4-14.

²⁴ Zbigniew Ścibor-Rylski, ‘Wstęp’ in *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursowych. Edycja 2007* (Warszawa: Print Partner, 2007), p. 3.

repeating the same set of factual details. This concern recurs more implicitly in the jury's selection of laureates. The majority of the comics selected for the anthology, and especially those awarded by the jury, are either factographic accounts of real historical episodes, or realistic portraits of real or fictive Polish combatants or civilians that allegorically personify the heroism and martyrdom of all Varsovians. A few stories even stage the Polish capital itself as the symbolic protagonist of the Rising, thus once more emphasizing that the collective destiny of Warsaw and its inhabitants should have priority over the individual fate of those physically or mentally injured by the 1944 insurrection. A recurring strategy in many of the available narratives is also the 'monologization' of the verbal layer, achieved through the employment of authorial comments rather than direct speech. The result of this is that they are closer to the more traditional sequentially illustrated stories than to 'real' comics.²⁵

Out of the twenty-five comic stories that have been collected in the three *Epizody* anthologies, only three seem to deviate from the general pattern. Unsurprisingly, all three graphic narratives appear in the second volume. 'Kurt Heller' and 'Królewska 16' ('Krolewska Street 16') are remarkable for their signs of empathy with the Nazi perpetrators, which transcends the traditional black-and-white depictions of the warring parties. 'Kasza' ('Groats') impresses with its fragmented and almost plot-less representation of two girls hiding in a cellar with a 'kettle full of groats gone cold long ago' ('garnek pełen dawno wystygłej kaszy').²⁶ What makes the example of 'Kasza' particularly interesting is that it would not have been included in the anthology if it had not been created by the sixteen year old Dominika Turowicz, who received a special mention as the most outstanding exponent of her generation for this five-page graphic story. The editorial introduction explicitly states that, though works by younger participants are generally neither rewarded nor published, the publication of one example may teach us 'how this national revolt is perceived among the young generation' ('jak postrzegany jest ten zryw narodowy wśród młodego

²⁵ For an interesting discussion of the ideological authority that results from the use of logocentric devices such as (physically superior) caption boxes with textual commentary, ruled dialogue balloons, and mechanical letters, cf. Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989), pp. 20-24.

²⁶ *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursonych. Edycja 2006*, p. 64.

pokolenia').²⁷ When taking a closer look at this seemingly amateurish story, however, one may become touched by the charming simplicity of the drawings and the intelligent treatment of the theme of the Rising (Figure 1). In one of the more profound reviews of the anthology to be found on the internet the critic even remarks that 'Kasza' has been drawn in a similar way as Marjane Satrapi's renowned graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000-2003).²⁸ Whatever the case may be, 'Kasza' presents itself as one of the few comics that deals with the Warsaw Rising in an unconventional way, fragmenting its extreme experience in a few de-familiarizing images instead of once again producing variations on the same sacrosanct set of Warsaw Rising symbols, motives and rituals (though its last page in some way repeats the patriotic orientation of the master narrative). Whereas many of the other stories lose themselves in an abundance of factual details, this graphic short story makes optimal use of the possibilities of the comic genre by directing the reader's attention toward what is happening between the panels, in the blank space of the gutter, thus raising the crucial question of the ineffability of traumatic experiences.

The *44* anthology, though it is of a completely different technical level, in many ways continues the general pattern that could already be discerned in the 'Epizody' competition contributions. The main difference is perhaps that in the *44* anthology the balance seems to have definitively shifted from mere factographic accounts to individual portraits with an allegorical function. Furthermore, some of the narratives included in the *44* volume reflect more on their own artistic form. Both these tendencies – the former away from the documentary and the latter toward formal reflexivity – in some way, as I have argued before, link up the anthology with Fraś's 'Kaczka'. Therefore, I will first briefly touch upon Fraś's innovative approach, and then I will give some examples from the anthology in which Fraś's work is echoed.

In the first panel of 'Kaczka', the question of the authenticity of any narrative of the Warsaw Rising is immediately raised in a highly reflexive way (Figure 2). Four men, two of which are more caricatural than the other two, are depicted on a photograph or postcard which is rendered more authentic

²⁷ *Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego. Antologia prac konkursonych. Edycja 2006*, p. 58.

²⁸ Maciej Reputakowski, 'Epizody Powstania Warszawskiego 2006. Sierpniowi bohaterowie' <<http://komiks.polter.pl/Epizody-Powstania-Warszawskiego-2006-c6107>> [accessed 3 September 2009].

by a Nazi stamp. The words that accompany this panel are as follows: 'Prawdopodobnie wielu z was nie uwierzy w tę historię ze względu na jej niesamowitość. Jednak my wszyscy razem ją przeżyliśmy i dla nas jest ona niezaprzeczalną prawdą' ('Many of you will probably not believe this story because of its strangeness. Yet the four of us have experienced it together and for us it is the undeniable truth').²⁹ What follows is a mysterious story taking place on the penultimate day of the Rising. The four men depicted on the first panel appear to be insurgents who are trying to escape from German tanks on the Warsaw streets. They end up in a dark cellar where they run into a golden duck with a crown, a well known creature from a popular urban legend. According to this legend the duck is actually an enchanted princess who rewards anyone who manages to find her with an amount of money to be spent entirely on the same day and only for one's own expenses. The duck in the story indeed makes such a promise, but her intervention turns out to have been a trick to allow the Germans to catch the insurgents. After a couple of Nazis have arrived, the duck betrays the insurgents in clumsy German. The four men, however, manage to throw their last grenade at the assembled Nazis, which allows them to escape. On the last page of the comics, the drawings depicting the escape gradually merge into real photographs of the ruined capital and official documents, a process culminating in the impressive last panel, which is a photograph of young people caught behind barbed wire, four of which are slightly retouched with a black pen in order to resemble the four protagonists (Figure 3). Although Fraś's story obviously is not devoid of allegorical references to the collective fate of the Warsaw insurgents, it brilliantly applies the possibilities of the comic genre, thus generating the degree of formal reflexivity that seems to be indispensable when attempting to represent a traumatic past.³⁰ Furthermore, the deliberate distortion of a famous urban legend in some way opens a space 'for reflection and counter-hegemonic memory',³¹ as it reminds us, for instance, of the complexity of all war situations, in which everyone, even Warsaw's Golden Duck, may become a traitor of the nation.

If we now take a look at the *1944* anthology we can observe, first of all, that most stories in the volume illustrate what I have earlier called the movement away from pure factography. Indeed, for some

²⁹ Fraś, p. 121

³⁰ Cf. Art Spiegelman's legendary graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986-1991).

³¹ Cf. Huyssen, p. 15.

artists the Warsaw Rising is now the background against which the most intriguing and completely fictitious plots are woven. One of these stories is once again a creation by Fraś (this time in co-operation with the scenarist Grzegorz Janusz), and it recounts the birth of some kind of grotesque superhero that represents the resurrection of a series of famous national and religious heroes (ranging from the national bard Adam Mickiewicz to Jesus Christ) whose monuments had been destroyed during the Rising (Figure 4). The other movement toward formal reflexivity is exemplified by stories such as 'Przez Kampinos na Starówkę' ('Through Kampinos to the Old Town') and '63 dni' ('63 Days'). The former represents a famous Warsaw Rising episode in the form of a sketchy graphic diary, thus stressing the formal difficulty of representing historical events in a straightforward way. The latter contains references to its own comic form on the first and the last page. Another graphic innovation that can be observed in this story is that the faces of both the Warsaw civilians and the Nazis are grotesquely transformed in a way that is reminiscent of Spiegelman's *Maus*. One last innovation of the 1944 anthology could best be described as the aesthetization of the burning Polish capital, which for so long has been a taboo and which could not be better illustrated than by the final panel of a story that is emblematically called 'Schönheit' (Figure 5).

Some of the artistic innovations and, to a certain extent, counter-memorial deviations of the hegemonic pattern that had been initiated by Fraś and were later continued in the 1944 anthology, can also be discerned in what so far is clearly the most professional comic competition anthology, that is, the first *Powstanie '44 w komiksie* volume that appeared in 2009. Issued in full color under the artistic directorship of Przemysław 'Trust' Truściński, this book is in fact more comparable to the 44 volume than to the previous comic competition anthologies. Although participants were obliged to make use of at least one archival photograph from the days of the insurgence, their works hardly continue the factographic tendency that dominated the previous contests. Instead of relating authentic events, the majority of the comic artists now seem to have preferred to make full use of the conventions of the medium. As a result their narratives tend to be more cartoonish, or at least are more in keeping with the distorting imagery that is typical of so many comic genre classics. The most striking example to be found in the volume is perhaps Tomasz Pastuszka's narrative 'Legenda o Powstaniu' ('The Legend of the Rising'), which reiterates Fraś's re-enactment of the Golden Duck legend, and which adds other legendary characters, more specifically Syrenka and Bazyliśzek to it, all of which is rendered in a very caricatural way (Figure 6).

The difference with the *Epizody* volumes is put most aptly by the foreman of the jury, Papcio Chmiel, who in his afterword indicates that while assessing the submitted comics he had often been alone with his preference for ‘works drawn in a more realistic way, representing real historical events’ (‘prace rysowane bardziej realistycznie, których treści były odbiciem rzeczywistych wydarzeń historycznych’).³²

Although this undeniable tendency away from the ‘faithful’ representation of real historical episodes may imply a certain break with the master narrative *sensu stricto*, it has not necessarily caused a departure from the underlying hegemonic discourse. What we can perceive, rather, is an evolution from an (often pathetic) struggle for the memory of the 1944 events and the patriotic values that allegedly lay at their basis, toward a greater sensitivity to the work of memory itself and to the function of the Warsaw Rising in the shaping of collective and national identities in present-day Poland. This tendency could already be observed in the *1944* anthology and it seems to be omnipresent in the *Powstanie '44 w komiksie* volume. The latter contains no less than five stories that in one way or another focus on the way in which the memory of the Rising lives on or is passed on in the present. On the one hand, two stories raise the issue of the use of pop-cultural means of expression for representing the insurgence. In ‘Sierpień’ (‘August’) by Rafał Bąkowicz, the first laureate of the competition, a grandfather’s reminiscences of the Rising are remodelled in his grandson’s mind into some kind of video game, including giant Transformer-like fighting-machines (Figure 7) and even Sci-Fi creatures representing the Soviets on the other side of the Wisła that resemble the Martians from H.G. Wells’s science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898). In a similar way, ‘Barykada’ (‘The Barricade’) by Tomasz Niewiadomski and Maciej Parowski self-reflexively deals with the problematic nature of the comic genre as a means for relating historical events. On the other hand, then, three stories (‘Wyzwolenie’ (‘Liberation’) by Janusz Ordon and Radosław Smektala, ‘Wolna 44’ (‘Wolna Street 44’) by Antoni Serkowski and Mariusz Pitura, and ‘Pamięć Walcząca’ (‘Fighting Memory’) by Paweł Piechnik and Tomasz Kontny) reflect on the way in which the memory of the Rising leaves its stamp on the Polish present. Out of these three narratives, the latter is the most exemplary one – not only because of its revealing title, but also because it lets the image of present-day Warsaw merge with the 1944 burning capital into some kind of palimpsest whole, thus emphasizing the

³² *Powstanie '44*, back flap.

far from unproblematic structure of memory itself (Figure 8). What all these examples illustrate is that the memory of the Warsaw Rising has irrevocably entered into a post-memorial phase, in which the past is definitively reduced to being but an identity-shaping factor in the present. In this way, the history of the Warsaw Rising is now threatened by the ‘cultural amnesia’ of which the critics of the recent ‘memory boom’ have warned so often.³³

Conclusion

In an interview Maria Janion has criticized the Warsaw Rising Museum for being just another ‘messianic apology of a hecatomb of blood’ (‘mesjanistyczna apologia hekatomby krwi’), allowing that ‘children play at Warsaw insurgents’ (‘dzieci się bawią w powstańców warszawskich’) while this complicated tragedy is treated ‘unproblematically, univocally, heroically’ (‘bezproblemowe, jednoznaczne, bohaterskie’).³⁴ Although Janion’s fear of a too unequivocal strengthening of the Warsaw Rising master narrative is certainly legitimate, the museum still seems to offer certain opportunities for alternative narratives to come to the surface. It is true that the permanent exhibition abounds in hyper-realistic representations of street fights, including aggressive renderings of the sound of bullets and bombs, and that it consequently fails to open sufficient spaces for a more serene commemoration of those wounded and murdered. Yet, it also focuses on various aspects of daily life during (the first days of) the insurgency, thus emphasizing the temporary state of genuine freedom that was so exceptional in these days throughout most of continental Europe. Furthermore, the museum accommodates all kinds of multidimensional activities dealing with the Rising, including the Stefan Starzyński Institute, which ‘[t]hrough its educational, scientific and publishing activities [...] aims to disseminate knowledge about Warsaw, focusing on the modern history of the city and on issues related to its present dynamic development’.³⁵ In a similar way, by supporting artistic and

³³ Cf. Huyssen (pp. 1-9 in particular).

³⁴ Jarosław Kurski, ‘Moje herezje antynarodowe – rozmowa z Marią Janion’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1 October 2006 <<http://serwis.gazeta.pl/kultura/1,34791,3374302.html>>.

³⁵ ‘Stefan Starzyński Institute’, *The Warsaw Rising Museum Website* <http://www.1944.pl/index.php?a=site_text&id=1994&se_id=12868> [accessed 22 October 2009].

educational initiatives such as the comic competitions that have been analysed here, the museum truly offers opportunities to all kinds of counter-hegemonic versions of the 1944 events to come into being.



Figure 1: Dominika Turowicz, 'Kasza' (2006)



Figure 2: Jacek Fraś, 'Kaczka' (2001)



Figure 3: Jacek Fraś, 'Kaczka' (2001)

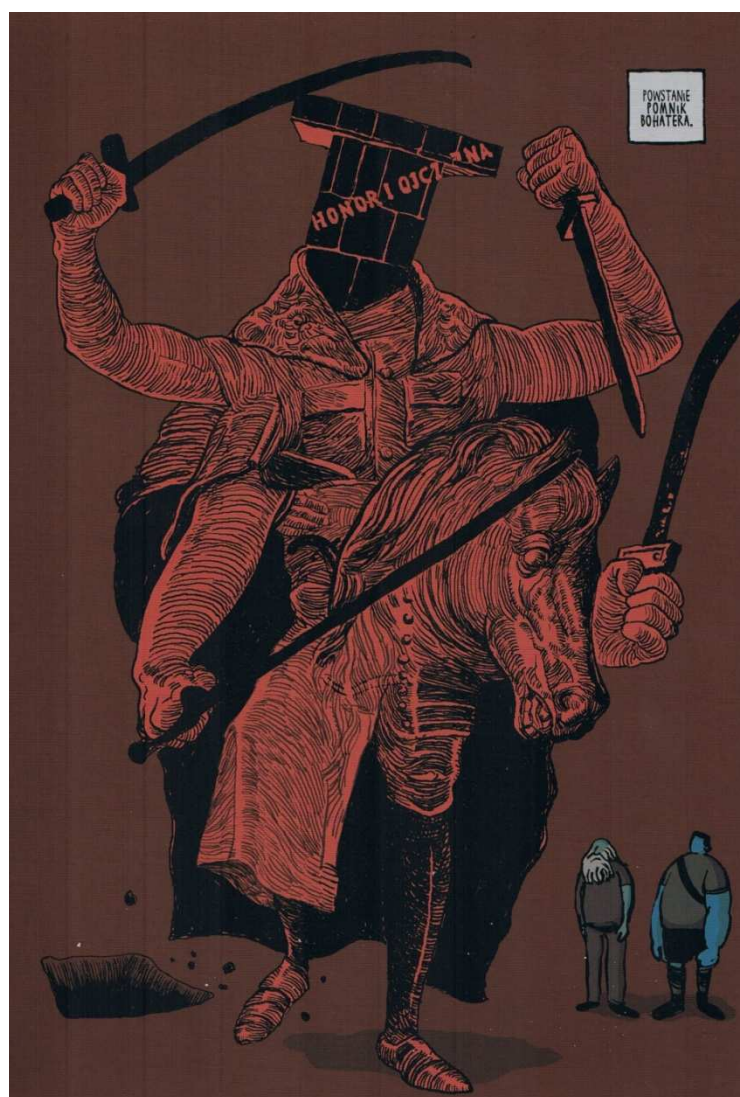


Figure 4: Jacek Fraś and Grzegorz Janusz, 'Zmartwychpowstanie' (2007)



Figure 5: Jakub Rebelka and Rafal Betlejewski, 'Schönheit' (2007)

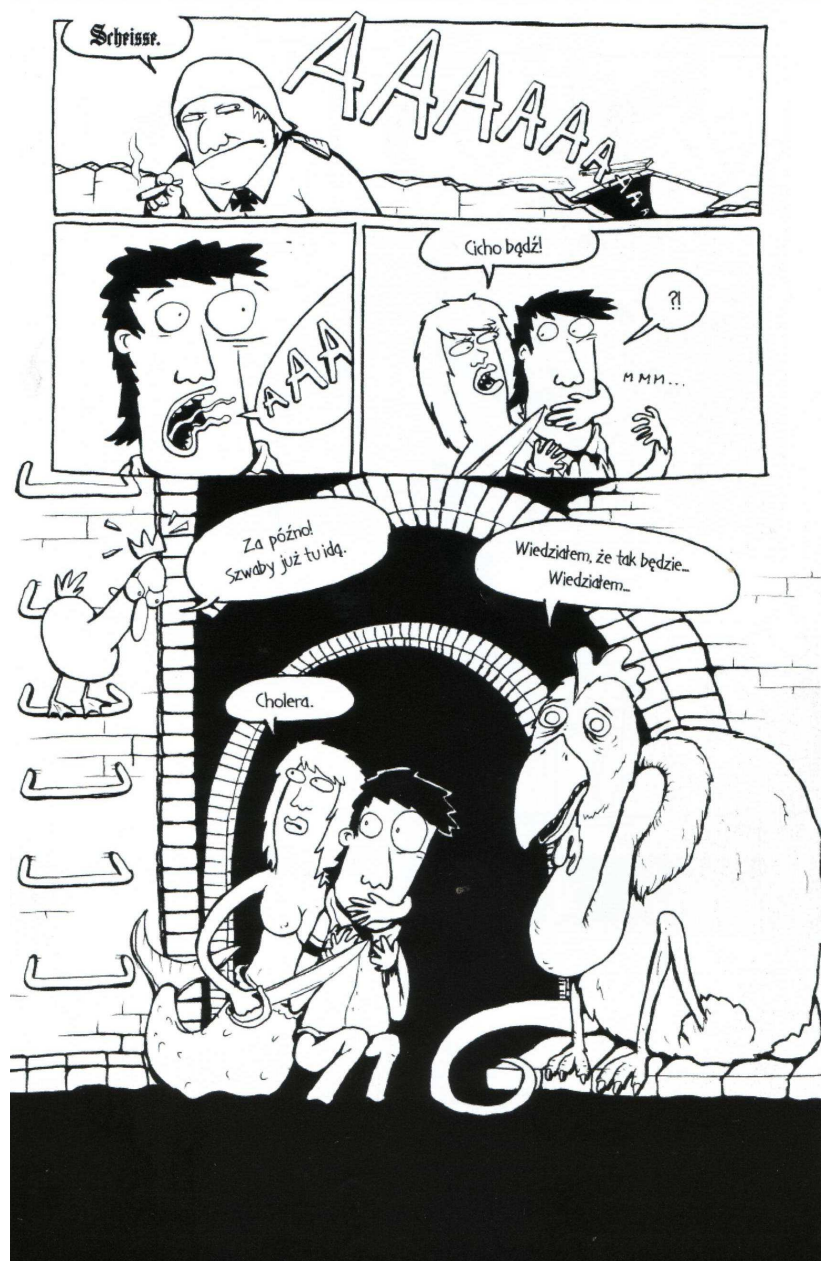


Figure 6: Tomasz Pastuszka, 'Legenda o Powstaniu' (2009)

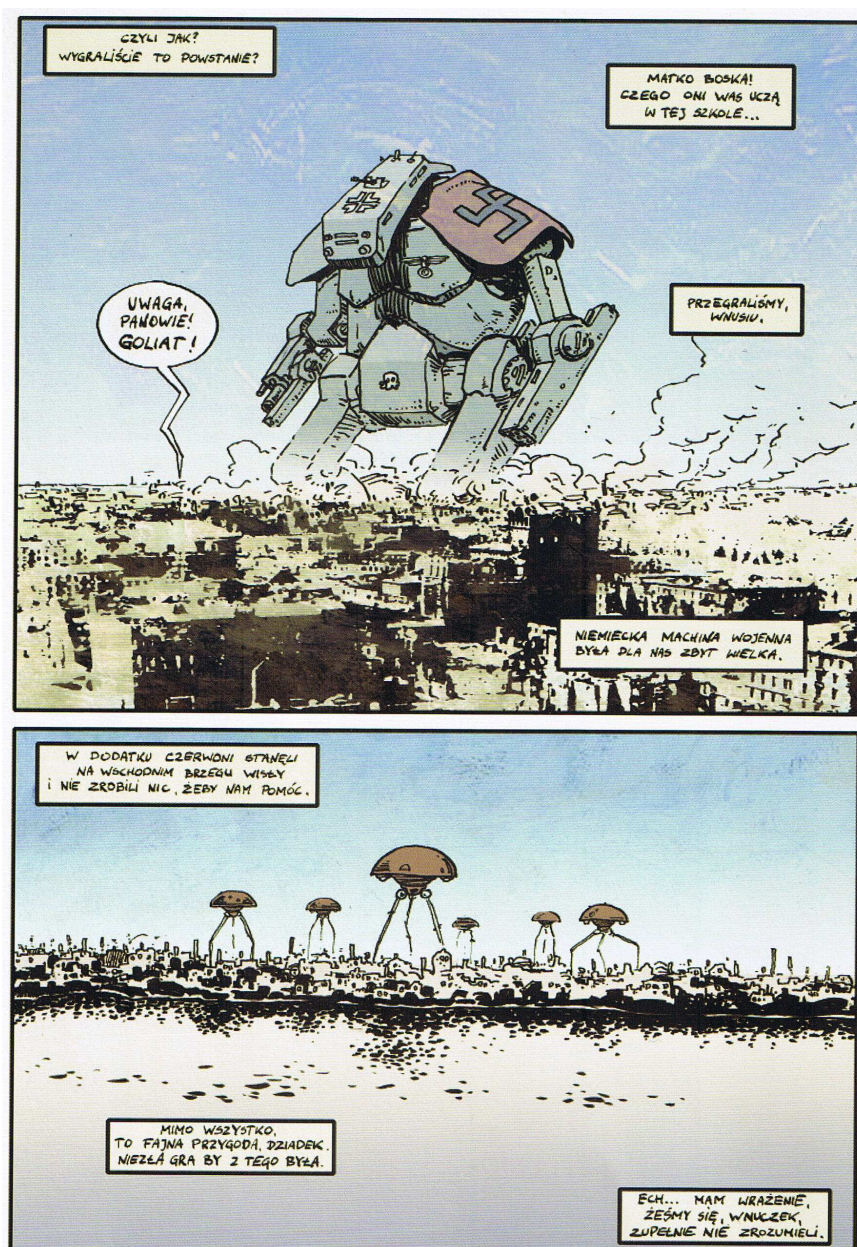


Figure 7: Rafal Bąkowicz, 'Sierpień' (2009)



Figure 8: Pawel Piechnik and Tomasz Kontny, 'Pamięć Walcząca' (2009)