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The Importance of Myths and Legends in Shaping Polish Historical Policy in the 21st Century: Contemporary Determinants

Znaczenie mitów i legend w kształtowaniu polskiej polityki historycznej w XXI wieku. Współczesne uwarunkowania

• Abstract •

The aim of the article is to analyse the value of myth and legend in shaping historical policy. The activity of politicians and their influence on shaping historical policy is most often associated with political change, secession, reconstruction, or state renewal. The creators of these transformations seek to find historical connections in the past that would legitimise the changes and the purposefulness of the actions taken by the government. Historians play a considerable role in such endeavours; however, they should not forget historical truth, which may conflict with political needs.

Keywords: memory politics; historical policy; myth; legend; political power

• Abstrakt •

Celem artykułu jest analiza znaczenia mitu i legendy w kształtowaniu polityki historycznej. Aktywność polityków i ich wpływ na kształtowanie polityki historycznej najczęściej wiąże się ze zmianą polityczną, secesją, odbudową czy odnową państwa. Twórcy tych przeobrażeń poszukują w przeszłości historycznych związków, które legitymizowałyby zmiany i celowość podejmowanych przez władze działań. Dużą rolę w takich działaniach odgrywają historycy – nie powinni oni jednak zapominać o prawdzie historycznej, która może być w konflikcie z potrzebami politycznymi.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka pamięci; polityka historyczna; mit; legenda; władza polityczna

Introduction

The presented article is an attempt at a reflection on the ways of interpreting history within the framework of the concept of historical politics prevailing in Poland. In the process of implementing historical policy, an essential role is played by myths and legends, which often create social images, contributing to the perpetuation of the historical policy promoted by the ruling camp. The following authors, among others, wrote on the subject of true and false legends and the role of myths, their reception and social transmission: Tomasz Biernat (2089), Heidi Hein-Kircher (2008), Danuta Waniek (2011), Jolanta Załączny (2016), and Waldemar Paruch (2017).

The role and significance of history in the politics of every country testifies to the importance of reflections on historical policy. In 2015, the team formed by the circles gathered around the Polish President Andrzej Duda called the entire concept of change in the official historical policy the “Strategy of Polish Historical Policy”. Historical policy has two aspects: the internal one and external one. The first aspect serves to shape social identity (*Zapis spotkania...*, 2015, p. 38). The second, the external one, concerns shaping the image of Poland in the world.

Responding to the needs of the state, historical policy is in principle intended to “guarantee the integrity of the state and the nation and the functionality of the political regime at a given time (*ad intra* measures), as well as to build the state’s power (in terms of *hard power* and *soft power*) in international relations (*ad extra* measures)” (A. Wójcik, 2016, pp. 441–446; Zenderowski, Cebul, 2020, p. 107).

In recent years, a wide-ranging discussion has been held on historical politics, both among historians and representatives of the broadly understood social sciences. These issues are featured in the writings of, among others, Eugeniusz Ponczek (2011, 2015), Katarzyna Kačka (2015), Anna Wolff-Powęska (2007, 2011), Michał Łuczewski (2016, 2017), Rafał Chwedoruk (2018), or Paweł Ukielski (2020).

Research methodology

Historical policy is not a creation of modern times; it came to being with a view to emphasising the correctness of thinking about the past, invoking expected patterns and developing historical justifications for the actions of the government. Its creators and interpreters look back upon the past in search for historical connections which would justify the purposefulness of their current actions. The author formulates a hypothesis whereby historical politics is dependent on the policy of the state and the ruling political regime. An important element of the analysis is to highlight

the importance of myths and legends, which affect the durability of proclaimed historical assessments and facilitate social acceptance expected by creators of historical policy. Its consequence is the emergence of a social (national) identity, with historical politics exerting influence on its formation (collective memory). In order to demonstrate various approaches to the problem, it was considered necessary to compare the following concepts: historical policy, historical memory, memory politics, public (civic) history, 'war of memory', and other ones. The article employs historical and comparative methods.

What is historical policy?

One of the most crucial tasks that political regimes face is to create an appropriate ideology motivating public support. Most often, the basis for gaining social support is historical policy. In its creation, we can perceive hidden political goals (Korzeniewski, 2008, pp. 7–8).

There are many definitions of 'historical policy' around the world. In the case of Anglo-Saxon countries, the term 'public history' functions, explaining history politics as a history that belongs to society. This concept is based on emphasising its public context. The obvious goal is to create civic arguments, to program '*citizen historians*' (*What Is Public History?*, n.d.).

In many cases, we can notice that "the nations that gained statehood in the 19th and 20th centuries invoke their history to legitimise their national ambitions. The movement for the unification of Germany and Italy, as well as the liberation movement in Greece, were based on an idealised image of antiquity. In Ireland, nationalism drew on its Celtic roots, and Zionism justified its claim to the territory of Palestine with an Old Testament reference to antiquity" (Wolff-Powęska, 2007, p. 7). Historians played an extremely important role in the whole process. They created a new national identity. With the cooperation of historians, politicians and officials, the state influenced citizens, creating a new interpretation of history. New myths and legends were created, leading to the emergence of the cult of ancestors and heroes. There was one goal, namely, to justify the relationships between history and the present day, in other words, to transpose the present into the past, looking for justifications. For science, this meant the loss of independent existence (Wolff-Powęska, 2007, p. 8). Anna Wolff-Powęska believes that historical policy is the result of the conscious actions of the political class, the aim of which is to "shape the scope and nature of collective historical memory" (Wolff-Powęska, 2011, p. 10).

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to use the terms ‘policy towards history’ or ‘policy towards memory’ (Traba, 2010, p. 317). Of course, the attitude of historians alone is of crucial importance. As Jacques Le Goff argues, “for history, as for other sciences, the only norm is truth” (Le Goff, 2016, p. 174).

In Germany, on the other hand, the term ‘Geschichtspolitik’ emerged after 1989 to denote the attempt of state institutions to influence the representation of history and the social forms of creating collective memory (Hahn, 2008, p. 31; Wolff-Powęska, 2011 p. 20; Trzcielińska-Polus, 2013, p. 14). Other terms are also used: ‘Erinnerungspolitik’ (politics of memory) and ‘Vergangenheitspolitik’ (politics of the past), or the term ‘Historikerstreit’ (difficult history), which is accompanied by retaining the relics of the past era in the public sphere as a kind of warning for present generations (Hahn, 2008, pp. 31–33). Political elites strive to shape a common picture of the past.

In the case of the Russian Federation, in the period after the collapse of the USSR, three stages of development were under way: privatization of the economy, modernization, and return to their own past. The third stage dominated the public debate (Kowalska, Kuryłowicz, 2014, p. 7). At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the historical policy of the Russian Federation assumed a clearly imperial character (memory war). In the Russian Duma, a draft bill on punishment for lies about the role of the USSR in World War II was introduced. By decree of the President, a commission was established to counteract attempts to falsify history to the detriment of the interests of the Russian Federation. The investigation into the Katyn massacre was closed, with simultaneous attempts to highlight the “hostile” actions of the Polish side towards Bolshevik prisoners of war after the Polish-Soviet war (1920) or to accuse Poland of irresponsible policy leading to the outbreak of World War II (Chwedoruk, 2018, p. 171; Boridzenko, 2019, p. 78). According to Ilya A. Kalinin, Russian historical policy is an attempt to establish a monopoly on the control of the historical past (Kalinin, 2013).

The top-down, authoritarian imposition of the way the society reacts is visible after the outbreak of war with Ukraine (in 2022). The Kremlin authorities forbid the use of the term ‘Russian-Ukrainian war’, ordering the use of the term ‘special military operation’, the purpose of which is to defend the population of Donbass against “genocide” and to conduct “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine” (*Putin ob’yavil...*, 2022).

The basis of modern Russian historical policy is the so-called ‘Russkiy mir’ [Russian order], a neo-imperialist ideology based on the expansion of Russia, revanchism leading to the restoration of state borders from the USSR period. Making reference to historical memory, going back to the Middle Ages, the Romanov dynasty and

the time of the USSR is one of the pillars of this concept (Wasiuta, 2020). Under Putin's rule, history undergoes securitization, and the events of the past, which are considered important for the state, are chosen by the authorities. There exists a "rightful" narrative of history (Wyszczelski, 2022, p. 146).

"Memory politics" in Poland in the 21st century

After the political changes in Poland in 1989, the lack of an explicit founding myth, of a new vision of the state, breaking away from the communist era of the Polish People's Republic, became a problem. The emerging myth of the "round table" did not appeal to the entire society, as instead of creating a collective whole, it divided the society without creating the so-called new beginning. The division into "post-communists" and "solidarity camp" over the next years led to a radical conflict in the latter, which involved the division into "liberal Poland" and "solidarity Poland" and the replacement of the "round table" myth with the myth of creating the 4th Republic, and then after the Smoleńsk catastrophe, with the "Smoleńsk myth". A deep polarization of the political scene ensued, resulting in radical social divisions. The Third Polish Republic has a "white" and "black" legend, overlapping with the boundaries set by polarization (Dudek, 2013, pp. 9–10).

The beginning of a new perspective on historical politics in Poland is associated with the person of Lech Kaczyński, who, in order to emphasize a certain historical continuity, talked about three conspiratorial resistance movements: 1939–1945; just after the Second World War; and the third one, developing after 1976, which he called "solidarity resistance movement" (Chmielecki, 2017, p. 106).

The concept of "memory politics" implemented in Poland is based on interdisciplinary research, including "social and national identity, national consciousness, autobiographical memory of the individual, nationalistic processes, symbolic politics, etc." (Nijakowski, 2008, p. 29). One of the first definitions of "memory politics", by the Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage in the Law and Justice government Tomasz Merta (in office from 2005), took into account the need to choose a specific tradition; the author defined the term as "constant renewing of the story of the past that we want to tell ourselves and our children" (Merta, 2005, p. 72).

Should historical policy be an element of broadly understood politics? For many politicians, it is a fully legitimate element of Polish politics, right next to economic, social, or foreign policies, present in party programs, governmental plans, and social measures. The discourse on history is subject to various forms of institutionalization

(central – state, local – self-government and regional institutions). One of the factors influencing historical policy is its educational value. The appearance of this factor in school curricula in the education of the young generation has an impact on the future interpretation of history, which in turn constrains the elements of historical reflection to those desired by the creators of historical assessments. The most important task for the creators of historical policy is to construct a vision of the past which will endow the nation with a high moral status (Łuczewski, 2017, p. 25). This is indispensable particularly in international relations. For this purpose, a comparison of victim/perpetrator and victor/loser is made. The position of the victim, which arouses moral emotions and strengthens moral capital (*gloria victis*), wields the strongest emotional influence (Łuczewski, 2017, p. 28).

Historical policy in Poland after 2015

The actions taken after 2015 with a view to creating a new interpretation of historical memory are a special kind of conservative revolution (counter-revolution). In fact, it is an act of disassociation from all post-1989 governments and political elites unrelated to the Law and Justice party, consisting in opposing the “ethnic meltdown”, rejecting the still existing evil and drawing on Christianity (union of the Catholic Church and “Solidarity”) (Łuczewski, 2016, p. 228).

The beginning of the discussion on the direction of the development of Polish historical policy after the election victory of the Law and Justice party and Andrzej Duda in the presidential election was associated with the creation of a new “Strategy of Polish Historical Policy”. The president discerned the dangers stemming from the construction of an inappropriate historical narrative towards Poland in some countries (Germany, Ukraine, the Russian Federation), which, in his opinion, occurred in false international messages. Andrzej Duda referred to the words of Lech Kaczyński that “one must not equate patriotism with nationalism, because the sources of the two are different. The foundation of patriotism is love, while nationalism or xenophobia grow out of hatred. The question is, how, in the difficult and specific situation in which Poland finds itself in Europe, should we act to strengthen patriotic foundations?” (*Polityka historyczna...*, 2015).

In recent years, as part of the historical policy, a multi-annual program “Niepodległa 2017–2021” [Independent 2017–2021] was implemented in Poland, aiming at strengthening the civic community of Poles, and as part of the Strategy for Responsible Development, a “Dziedzictwo buduje wspólnotę” [Heritage Builds Community] program was passed by the Council of Ministers – which consisted in

restructuring and supplementing the network of museums in Poland. Poland became active in the “sphere” of historical policy, referring to selected elements of national heritage, consistent with the strategy of the state’s historical policy.

Interpretations of legends and myths and their impact on collective identity

What is a legend? Władysław Kopaliński defines this concept as: “a fantasy story about historical events, usually based on folk tales” (Kopaliński, 2007, p. 161). A legend is a story, or a group of stories, conveyed through a verbal message, usually consisting of an exaggerated or unreliable description of a person (a saint, a monarch, or a popular hero). Legends, unlike myths, refer to human beings, not gods, and sometimes have, in contrast with myths, some historical basis (Baldick, 2001, p. 138). Looking at the problem of the legend from a literary perspective, let us cite the interpretations of this concept by Stefania Land: “A legend is understood by me as the transformation of a historical personality, its life and deeds in terms of adapting it to the concept that contemporaries create about it against the background of their mood” (Land, 1935, p. 7; cf. W. Wójcik, 1986, p. 22).

What is, in turn, a myth? Władysław Kopaliński defines myth as: “a belief, a view, considered true by members of a specific group, especially if they serve as support for certain existing or traditional practices or institutions, although they are completely unfounded (social myths)” (Kopaliński, 2007, p. 287). According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, myth is a type of story, usually traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social mores or explains the sources of human and natural phenomena, usually supernatural or conceivable. The myth functions in two senses: “rational” and “romantic”. In the first sense, a myth is a false or unreliable story or belief (adjective: mythical), while in the second, a myth is a higher intuitive mode of irrational reasoning (Baldick, 2001, pp. 163–164).

In the political sense, there is a broader concept of social myth, irrational unjustified ideas about social reality, often constituting systems of stereotypes and rationalizations of antagonisms. It influences collective consciousness. It must be obvious and simple (Jaskólski, 2009, p. 197; Cegielska, 2018, p. 351). Political myths are a kind of unbalanced mix of historical truth and distorted facts and fictions (Bouchard, 2013, p. 285; cf. Czapiewski, 2016, p. 86). The durability of the myth depends on its polysemy, hybridity, plasticity, and especially the sense of external threat (Bouchard, 2013, p. 278). The process of mythologization usually

consists of three stages: initial formation, dissemination, and institutionalization (or ritualization) (Bouchard, 2013, p. 286).

A political myth is different from the generally held concept of a myth. It is supposed to constitute a specific path to power, inclusion of ideology in the creation of political rituals and social life, with the political regime determining the pressure on social perception, which is clearly visible, for example, in the situation of authoritarian systems (Biernat, 1989, pp. 306–308).

Danuta Waniek draws attention to the importance of the so-called ‘founding myth’, which is crucial for political changes and reorientation of the state’s historical policy. In recent decades, this concerned the emergence of “Solidarity” and the Third Polish Republic, the myth of the Fourth Republic (referring to the Sanation policy of the Second Republic and supported by the so-called “Church of Toruń” or the “Smoleńsk myth” (Waniek, 2011, p. 44; Włodarczyk, 2013, p. 150).

A reliable observer may notice that “a myth absorbs everything, every falsehood, every half-truth (sometimes also by accident) and presents a ready-made, easy-to-accept template that everyone can voluntarily adapt to reality” (Waniek, 2011, p. 43). A myth simplifies the understanding of reality and reduces it to a form which is easy to understand and accept, is clear to every recipient (Pawelczyk, 2003, p. 112).

Our knowledge of socio-political life is also formed with the participation of existing myths, symbols, or political ideas. All this has an impact on the assessments and theories created for personal political use (Reykowski, 2002, p. 120). Each nation faces the need to build two myths: the founding myth and the hero myth. Myths are the glue binding social awareness, the basis for joint action, especially in situations of security threats, they trigger social activity.

A myth is a particularly effective political tool because it imposes a certain specific way of thinking in an indisputable way, therefore it creates not only patterns of social behaviour, but also the foundations for the language of power (Siewierska-Chmaj, 2016, p. 12).

Writing about national myths, Wojciech Polak notes: “National myths are a certain vision of the history and the present of a given nation, adopted and functioning universally in the social space. [...] Myths are based on historical knowledge, but they distribute accents differently than in the findings of historiography. They emphasize everything that is positive, sublime, and noble. They do not deny the existence of evil things, but they do not particularly emphasize them either”. The author adds: “National myths are common property and demonstrate immense resistance to manipulation by politicians and the mass media. They are also part of the national identity of Poles” (Polak, 2015, p. 22).

The whole process is associated with the introduction of mythicization, understood as “the process in which a more or less true message about the past or an opinion about it gains the attributes of a myth, becoming a permanent element of the collective memory” (Ponczek, 2015, p. 30).

What is the role of a legend? During the two-decade inter-war period, the legend of Piłsudski was created. It was already created during his lifetime, mainly by his subordinates. Consequently, the cult of Marshal Piłsudski emerged, and it was used by Piłsudski’s supporters camp to shape state policy, also after his death (Hein-Kircher, 2008, p. 31; Załączny, 2016, p. 56; Paruch, 2017, p. 147). This was accompanied by the legend of the Polish Legions and especially the First Brigade. Invoking symbolism, rituals or celebrating anniversaries of legionary holidays are the exemplary ways of using the legend to restore the so-called ‘founding myth’ of the Second Polish Republic after World War II (Waniek, 2011, p. 29).

Barbara Szacka is right when she writes: “what people remember enters the social circulation, then it goes to the official one, and what is found in these circulations provides categories and codes that affect the way individual experiences are perceived, interpreted and therefore, remembered” (Szacka, 2006, p. 45). Over time, legends and stories undergo sanctification which results in the fact that they cannot be disputed, as this would mean the profanation of *sacrum* (Ponczek, 2011, p. 172).

Every power that seeks political change, sanation and the transformation of social attitudes, i.e., the alteration of the mentality of its citizens, takes measures to form an appropriate historical policy. It is based on creating new emphases on the history of the state and the nation, and the rejection of the hitherto upheld interpretations of the past. It proclaims contempt for past times, adhering to the principle of creating new myths, supporting the expected measures favouring new parables or legends. In modern Poland, this is accompanied by clear recounts about the Cursed Soldiers, who were destroyed by hostile (foreign) communist propaganda and then forgotten by the Third Polish Republic during its first years, to become new heroes in the public sphere. Similar arguments are used when restoring the collective memory of the often-nameless heroes of “Solidarity” who were not provided with any compensation after the breakdown of the communist system. The element connecting these political areas was Lech Kaczyński, who after his tragic death became a legend, a symbol of this change. He was also the creator of the foundation of the modern strategy for historical policy (Chmielecki, 2017, p. 107).

When creating a new assessment of history, creators of political change do not often reach back to distant times, rather stigmatizing mainly their predecessors. Due to the short historical period elapsing since past events, it is accompanied by an attempt at combating human memory, which may even take the shape of

legal solutions. In 1938, the Sanation government in Poland, fearing anti-Piłsudski attitudes, passed an act on protection of the good name of Józef Piłsudski, the First Marshal of Poland (*Ustawa z dnia 7 kwietnia 1938 r. o ochronie imienia Józefa Piłsudskiego...*).

In turn, after World War II, Poland was placed in the USSR's area of influence. Along with the deepening Stalinization, the ruling authorities interfered in the assessments of Polish history and a search for the social-class-related nature of events in the past was on (Chwedoruk, 2018, p. 41). In a number of cases, what followed was the rejection of the truthful interpretation of history, criticism of Polish heroes, of the truth about the Katyn massacre or Soviet aggression on September 17, 1939, hostility towards the Warsaw Uprising, and silent disregard for important historical topics.

For the current ruling camp, the "Smoleńsk myth" and the legend of Lech Kaczyński became the foundation for creating the historical identity of the society (Sendyka, 2013, p. 44). The consequence of which is, for example, the undermining of the role and importance of Lech Wałęsa and the accusations made against him for his cooperation with the security service of the Polish People's Republic. The first chairman of the Independent Trade Union "Solidarność" [Solidarity] does not conform to the current strategy of historical policy. The consequence of this is the destruction of the legend of Lech Wałęsa.

Conclusion

Historical policy has a broad spectrum of an instrumental impact within which legends and myths play a significant role. The myths themselves have a legitimizing, mobilizing and integrating function. Therefore, they fit into the assumptions of any historical policy, especially since historical consciousness is mostly derived from myths or legends, presented as a confirmation of a specific historical legacy, while constantly ignoring public polemics and different interpretations of historical events.

Should politicians interfere in the assessment of history? An important argument towards a negative assessment of the interference of politicians was a manifesto, announced in 2005 by the French Le Comité de Vigilance face aux Usages publics de l'Histoire (CVUH), a document opposing the appropriation of historical memory by politicians who do not take into account the complexity of historical processes (*Manifesto...*, 2005). History cannot be ignored; history cannot be forgotten but history must not be manipulated.

Could politics exist without history? It seems to be an unreal process. History is everything that has passed, a minute, an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year (etc.) ago. We dwell on the past, refer to past events trying to answer important, personal questions which still bother us. The fact that politicians use history for the interpretation of events to achieve immediate political goals constitutes its politicization and is not related to the true historical account. Limiting the presence of historical knowledge in our lives leads to the susceptibility to myths and legends, which are often only a substitute for the real history, and the historical policy, used only for expediency, will never become a true interpretation of history.

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