

REGIONAL POLITICS
OF MEMORY IN POLAND'S
WARMIA AND MASURIA

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A contribution to memory studies, this work focuses on Poland's Warmian-Masurian voivodeship. Before the war, this territory and the neighbouring Kaliningrad region of Russia comprised the German province of East Prussia. In this article, we strive to identify the essence, mechanisms, key stages, and regional features of the politics of memory from 1945 to the present. To this end, we analyse the legal regulations, the authorities' decisions, statistics, and the reports in the press. We consider such factors as the education sector; the museum industry; the monumental symbolism, the oral and printed propaganda, holidays and rituals, the institutions of national memory, the adoption of memory-related laws, and others. From the first post-war years, the regional authorities sought to make the Polonocentric concept of the region's history dominate the collective consciousness. This approach helped to use the post-war legacy impartially and effectively. However, the image of the past was distorted. This distortion was overcome at the turn of the 21st century to give rise to the concept of open regionalism. An effective alternative to nationalistic populism, open regionalism provides a favourable background for international cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: politics of memory, Warmian-Masurian voivodeship, Poland, historical and cultural heritage, open regionalism

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Introduction

The concept of 'politics of memory' gained currency in the literature quite recently, in the 1980s. However, it is often used to refer to earlier periods in the 20th century. There are diverse interpretations of this term [1].



In this article, we understand politics of memory as the combination of the attitudes of the state and its affiliated institutions towards the past, and the embedding of certain interpretations of historical events in the collective consciousness in order to suit the political moment.

Discussions on the use of history for political purposes often centre on the national historical narrative, whereas the regional aspects thereof receive much less attention. The focus on Warmia and Masuria (today, Poland's Warmian-Masurian voivodeship) is explained by the fact that this territory provides us with an opportunity to compare Polish experience and Soviet practices [2; 3] of the reclamation of the former German province of East Prussia, which was divided between Poland and the USSR in 1945 at the Potsdam Conference.

In this study, we aim at revealing the contents of politics of memory and its tools employed by Polish authorities of Warmia and Masuria after the war, as well as at analysing the integration processes in the region — home to both the indigenous population and the new settlers. We relied on the local authorities' regulations and directives, official statistics, the publications in the press, and the recent works of Polish historians and political scientists [4—6].

Since the post-war history of Warmia and Masuria is not widely known, we will start our narrative with examining the origins of the local population.

An 'integration pot'?

The former South of East Prussia was first referred to as the Masurian District. Later, in 1946, it was renamed the Olsztyn voivodeship. After a series of administrative reforms, a Warmian-Masurian voivodeship was established in 1999. Home to 1,434 thousand people (2018), it covers 24.2 thousand sq km. The reforms restored the historical name to the territory [7]. The Poles have governed the region since May 23, 1945, when the Soviet commandant of the city Colonel Aleksandr Shumsky handed over power to Poland's Plenipotentiary Jakub Prawin. In December 1945, the Masurian voivodeship *Rada Narodowa* (National Council) was established by appointing 100 council members. The first election to the local bodies took place only in 1954 [8, pp. 682—683, 700].

As the fighting was over, approximately 200—250 thousand German citizen out of a pre-war population of 936.5 were remaining in the districts of East Prussia that were to be transferred to Poland. These numbers included both ethnic Germans and Polonophones. The decision of the Allied Control Council on the 'repatriation' of the German population to Germany enjoyed the firm support of the Poles. The *Wiadomości Ma-*

zurskie newspaper wrote that ‘the piles of hatred and untruth that grew between the Poles and the Germans’ precluded not only the assimilation of the latter but even the two peoples living in one state [9, p. 4]. The disabled and senile, the mothers with many children, and the orphans were the first to be expelled. With interruptions, the mass deportation continued from August 1946 through 1948. From the cessation of hostilities through 1950, approximately 112 thousand Germans left the Olsztyn voivodeship for Germany [10, p. 395—400, 412].

When it comes to integration processes in Warmia and Masuria, Polish historiography often refers to the concept of the ‘melting pot’ [11, s. 11—12]. Thus, it is important to analyse the composition of the region’s population and identify its largest groups.

Table 1

The population of the Olsztyn voivodeship in 1950, by origin [12, p. 329]

Population category	Autochthonous	Internal migrants	Repatriates from the USSR	Repatriates and reemigrants from the West	Unknown origin	Total
Number (thousand people)	117.2	352.4	134.2	3.1	3.3	610.2
Specific weight (%)	19.2	57.8	22.0	0.5	0.5	100

Table 1 shows that the majority of new settlers (57.8%) originated from the southern and central Polish voivodeships. The autochthonous population and the settlers from the USSR accounted for a similar proportion — around 20%, whereas the percentage of the repatriates from the West was insignificant. Let us consider each group to gain an idea of their social experience, life ambitions, and collective memory. This comparison will make it possible to evaluate the actions of the authorities, as well as the relevance of the theory of ‘melting pot’ to the situation in the region.

Autochthons. This term was used to refer to the local Polonophone residents that were citizens of the Reich. However, it was not completely accurate, since there were many descendants of migrants among the East Prussian Poles. The actual autochthons of the region were the ancient Prussians who had been fully assimilated.



Whereas the Soviet authorities deported all the German citizens from the Kaliningrad region, regardless of their ethnic origins, their Polish counterparts distinguished between the Germans and the autochthonous Poles. The two major groups of the latter were the *Warmians* (the Polish residents of Warmia who practised Catholicism) and the *Masurians* (the Protestant residents of the Masurian Lake District). These former German subjects had to go through the *verification* procedure — their Polish descent had to be confirmed by a ‘civic commission’. The applicants had to prove that they originated from a Polish family, spoke their native tongue and cherished the national traditions. They also had to sign a declaration of loyalty to the Polish state. The preservation of their identity was out of the question. Moreover, the Polish settlers perceived the autochthons as ‘Schwabians’ and often discriminated against them. The verification was a lengthy process. In 1949, the Polish authorities granted forced citizenship to those autochthons who refused either to leave for Germany or to take an oath to Poland. Overall, approximately 133 thousand Warmians and Masurians obtained a Polish citizenship in the course of verification [10, p. 396; 13, p. 488].

These groups of the former East Prussian residents found it hard to adapt to the new conditions. When the opportunity arose, they preferred to leave for the country that they still considered their homeland. In 1956—1959, 3.9 thousand autochthons left the Olsztyn voivodeship for the GDR and 32.3 thousand for the FRG. In the next decade, another 15,000 people managed to obtain exit permits. The repatriation gained momentum as Poland and the FRG concluded a family reunion agreement on October 9, 1975. In 1976—1984, 36.2 thousand people left for the FRG in the framework of the reunion programme. Overall, 105 thousand residents of Warmia and Masuria resettled in West Germany in 1952—1984 [13, p. 488]. Today, the official Polish statistics largely neglects these ethnic groups. In the 2011 census, only 1376 people identified themselves as Masurian. The number of Warmians is usually estimated at 4—5 thousand people. Some experts write that these groups number 20 thousand people, i. e. not more than 1.5% of the total population of the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship [13, pp. 488—491; 14, pp. 91—92].

Internal migrants. This group comprised the settlers from the central and southern voivodeships of Poland. Either resettling of their own will or recruited to populate East Prussia, all of them were coming to the region seeking a better life. Among them were several thousand people from war-ruined Warsaw, most of whom were high-ranking officials. However, the majority of the new settlers came from the rural areas. Although poor and ill-educated, they were active, mobile, enterprising, and

in the prime of the lives. Some of the new settlers would terrorize the local population by committing plunder and robbery and dislodging the rightful owners from their flats and houses [15, p. 201].

The internal migrants included the Ukrainians who were forced out of the south-eastern voivodeships as part of Operation Vistula in 1947. The operation aimed at removing material support for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) and the cells of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in Poland. Approximately 12 thousand Ukrainian and mixed Polish-Ukrainian families, numbering 55 thousand people, were deported to the Olsztyn voivodeship. They were to settle in the most war-torn districts at the border of the USSR. Although the majority of these people was never engaged in any subversive activities, both the authorities and the settlers of the Polish origin treated them as second class-citizens [15, p. 192—193; 16].¹

Repatriates from the USSR. Another stream of settlers was coming to Warmia and Masuria from Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, and the Vilno province, i.e. the parts of the Second Polish Republic that were incorporated in the USSR in 1939—1940 (the Poles called these areas *Kresy*). In 1950, the Olsztyn voivodeship became home to over 130 thousand *Kresy* residents. Their repatriates continued over the next years, with most *Kresy* Poles (approximately 30 thousand people) arriving in 1956—1960. Settling primarily in the cities, they accounted for 42% of the Olsztyn population in 1950. Most of the repatriates from the USSR were psychologically damaged, having gone through arrests, imprisonment, and exile. They felt that they had been wronged and combined strong anti-Soviet attitudes with hostility towards the new political regime. They settled close to each other, preferred isolation, and tried to preserve the traditions of their home areas [11, p. 17—18; 17, p. 614; 18, p. 138].

Most settlers from the West were the Poles who either had been deported to Germany for forced labour (repatriates) or had left the country of their own free will (re-emigrants). This group was rather small in numbers (slightly over 3,000 people in 1950). However, their international experience (most of them returned from Germany and France) made them the transmitters of the knowledge, norms, and traditions that they had obtained in these countries [19, p. 175].

There were significant differences among the four groups. The relationships among them were not free of tensions or even hostility. Sometimes, the tensions led to open conflicts. All this rendered the ultimate goal of uniting these diverse elements into a harmonious regional community and an integral part of the Polish nation even more difficult to at-

¹ In 1990, Poland's Sejm condemned the deportation of the Ukrainians.

tain. The authorities were faced with the challenge of ensuring a fair distribution of land, dwellings, and other material values. They had to establish equality of rights among all the population groups and to provide access to social benefits, education, and culture. Alas, this was not easy to do.

Since the majority of both the local residents and the new settlers had had traumatic experiences in the war, of pivotal importance for the state and its institutions was to mitigate the consequences of this trauma and launch massive propaganda and awareness campaigns. It is quite natural that the construction of the ‘correct’ collective memory lay at the heart of the authorities’ efforts. The collective memory was to unite people with different historical experiences.

Regional politics of memory in the post-war years

Firstly, it was necessary to develop an attitude to the East Prussian legacy. In the Soviet and Polish parts of East Prussia, the authorities’ ideological attitudes rested on a common principle of denying the values of German culture, which was proclaimed ‘Nazi’ and ‘hostile to Slavs’. Both the Olsztyn voivodeship and the Kaliningrad region resounded with the calls to ‘expel the Prussian spirit’, to ‘erase any traces of Germanisation’, to ‘get rid of all the German things’, to change the old toponyms, and to establish the new national and ideational symbols [20, p. 4].

In a short time, almost all the monuments and memorials were either dismantled or ‘revamped’. For instance, a relief was taken off the monument to the German economist Franz Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch in Olsztyn. Instead, a plaque was mounted, saying that now it was a monument to the fighters for the freedom of Warmia and Masuria. The famous Tannenberg Memorial in the environs of Olsztynek was dismantled and its magnificent granite blocks were repurposed for the district’s largest memorial — the Monument of the Gratitude for the Soviet Army Soldiers (it was opened in 1954 and renamed the Monument to the Liberation of the Warmian-Masurian Land in the early 1990s) [21, pp. 395, 397, 403, 409]. In those days, still restorable buildings and fortifications were often demolished so that their bricks could be used in construction. This happened in Dobre Miasto and Lidzbark Warmiński in the 1950s. Some of the local churches were lost for good [22, p. 292—294].

In practical terms, the Polish authorities were, for the most, part ready to embrace the new environment without prejudice. They showed tolerance to the pre-war architectural landmarks and tried to draw on the economic practices used by the previous generations of local residents. The efforts of the Polish intelligentsia, especially its indigenous members, helped to save and restore the Teutonic Order’s castles, palaces, and pub-

lic and religious buildings. They succeeded in convincing the authorities that, in essence, the legacy received by the Poles not only was a product of German culture but also borrowed from the cultures of the other ethnic groups living in East Prussia — primarily, the Polonophone Masurians and Warmians. Later, the historical and cultural heritage of East Prussia was interpreted as part of Poland's national wealth (which was not always correct). This thesis was supported by the fact that the region was once a territory of the Kingdom of Poland or an area colonised by the Poles.²

An interesting aspect is the attitude of the Polish authorities toward the movable cultural legacy. The employees of the voivodeship and powiat administrations collaborated with the civic activist from 1945 to save the museum items, books, and historical documents from local and provincial archives, including those from the collection of the famous Prussia Museum in Königsberg. The documents, books, and artefacts collected across the voivodeship were brought to Olsztyn. In 1947—1951, over 800 settlements were surveyed and over 700 tons of documents retrieved. These efforts translated in the vast collections of the voivodeship library, museums, and the state archive in Olsztyn. Not only the items linked to the Polish national tradition but also those with German roots were saved from destruction [23, p. 467].

One of the major elements of politics of memory were museums and exhibitions. In the absence of television or opportunities to travel in Poland and abroad, the museum exhibits played a crucial role in the formation of collective memory. Moreover, museum visits were often obligatory. The Museum of Local History opened in March 1945, before the cessation of hostilities. It was housed in the Olsztyn Castle. In 1948, the Copernicus Museum opened in Frombork. Museums and travelling exhibitions had to familiarise the new settlers with the 'Polish traces' in Warmia and Masuria — early printed books and manuscripts, famous people, the fights of the Poles against Germanisation, etc. After 1949, the recurring themes of exhibitions were the achievement of socialism in the USSR, the PRC, and other friendly countries [24].

In May 1945, a voivodeship information and propaganda department was established to coordinate the political and educational initiatives. At the time, the department employed 24 staff. Two years later, the number of employees reached 86. Alongside the socialistic propaganda, the institution focused on historical education. The task was twofold — to famil-

² Warmia (German: Ermland), as a part of so-called Royal Prussia, was a province of Poland in the 15th—18th centuries. The historical area of Masuria (German: Mazuren) was populated primarily by the Polish colonists, who converted to Protestantism and were strongly Germanised.

iarise the autochthons with the Polish national historical narrative and to acquaint the new settlers with the rich history of the Poles living in Warmia and Masuria. The local press regularly published essays on the history of the region. Public lectures were held, many towns and villages organised popular courses and folk high schools. Public administration officials, teachers, and culture specialists were obliged to study the history of the region. Additional history classes were taught at the local schools [25, p. 63—64, 75—76; 26, p. 320].

Grand celebrations marked the anniversaries of the Polish triumph over the Teutonic Order in the Battle of Grunwald in 1410. In the times of the Polish People's Republic (PPR), the remembrance of this battle was the cornerstone of politics of memory. It was used to legitimise the republic's authorities. Moreover, Grunwald was a symbol of the 'Slavic unity', the brotherly alliance with the USSR. In the 1950s—1960s, a tourism and entertainment infrastructure was built around the Grunwald battlefield [27, pp. 287—288]. For Warmia and Masuria, the celebration was also a means to put the history of the region into the national context. The Weeks of the Recovered Territories, which were held nationwide from 1946, acquainted the whole country with the present and the past of the reclaimed lands.

The central role in these educational efforts was played by the Masurian Institute, which was established by the local intelligentsia. Engaged in both research and education, the Institute forged close links with the largest national universities. The Institute's staff were prolific authors and were often recruited as experts by the local administration [5, p. 63—65].

Politics of memory in the Polish People's Republic

Despite the ostentatious rejection of the 'German legacy' in 1945—1948, the Polish authorities pursued a consistent policy of re-Polonising Warmia and Masuria. The Polonophone autochthons provided a link between the East Prussian legacy and the hundreds of thousands of new Polish settlers. As the democratic opposition was crushed and Poland tread on the Soviet path of development in 1948, the situation on the Recovered Territories changed. The Communists were convinced that the Poles of East Prussia had been germanised to such a degree that their very presence was a potential threat to the Polish state.

Urged by the national authorities, the Olsztyn voivodeship opted for unification and the abandonment of regional identity. The Masurian Institute was closed (it was reorganised into a 'research facility' of the Western Institute in Poznan). The popular courses and periodicals focusing on

the local history stopped their operations. The members of the Polish movement in East Prussia were accused of breakaway and even separatism. The focus of the politics of memory shifted from regionalistics to a national Polish narrative [28, p. 29—30]. However, these changes did not affect the architectural landmarks, which were considered national wealth and protected by the state. Major restoration and reconstruction efforts were launched in the 1950s.

The Polonocentric model of memory, which was adopted in the late 1940s, remained virtually unchanged throughout the history of the PPR [29, p. 164]. However, the model gradually evolved over the four decades. As a rule, a change happened when the country was faced with another social crisis forcing the ruling Polish United Workers' Party to adjust its ideological tenets. In 1956 and in the first years of the rule of Władysław Gomułka, regionalistics was reinstated. The local historians and culture professionals were exonerated from separatism. This process was supervised by the *Pojezierze* (Lake District) civic association, which had been established following the official repudiation of Stalinism. This organisation brought together hundreds of local history aficionados. In 1962, the Wojciech Kętrzyński Research Centre was established in Olsztyn to coordinate the professional efforts at studying the past of Warmia and Masuria. The publication of the local history periodicals was resumed [23, p. 468—469].

An important landmark in the politics of memory relating to the Recovered Territories was an event that took place in 1965. During the Second Vatican Council, 34 Polish bishops, including Karol Józef Wojtyła (future Pope John Paul II) sent a message of reconciliation to the German bishops. This verbose document analysed the Polish-German relations within a wide historical context, examined their light and dark sides, and recognised the fact that millions of Germans fell victims to the post-war deportations. In inviting the Germans to the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism of Poland (1966), the Polish bishops addressed their fellow believers with the words: 'We forgive and ask for forgiveness' [30, pp. 179—186]. Signed by 41 bishops from the FRG and the GDR, the response to this message accepted the invitation and supported the idea of reconciliation. However, the German side avoided the recognition of the Oder-Neise Line, which was a top priority on the Polish agenda. This exchange of messages was condemned by the Polish authorities who interpreted it as treason by the clergy. The message of the bishops met a mixed response in the West and North of Poland, from where the Germans were deported after the war. Thus, this document can hardly be considered the 'cornerstone in the restoration of the Polish-German dialogue' [29, p. 324]. However, a quarter-century later, as the

communist regimes in Eastern Europe had collapsed and Poland sought accession to the EU and NATO, the message of the bishop came in useful in providing an ideational rationale for the ‘return to Europe’.

In the 1970s, the tension eased in Europe and the countries started to forge new relations with the FRG. Against this background, the debates on the historical legacy of East Prussia (which was usually associated with the threat of West German revanchism) lost their urgency. After the vast majority of the autochthons had left for the FRG, the remaining residents of the territory, most of whom were new settlers, had little interest in the region’s cultural heritage and local traditions. Turning into abstract museum exhibits, the local culture was cherished only by the few members of the Warmian and Masurian intelligentsia [31, p. 46].

Warmia and Masuria and the ‘historical wars’ at the turn of the 21st century

In the 1990s, the changes in the regional memory landscape were associated primarily with the dramatic social and political transformations and with the geopolitical rearrangement of Eastern Europe. The communist regimes collapsed, the USSR disintegrated, Germany reunified, and Poland was preparing to accede to NATO and the EU. Similarly to the other post-communist countries, Poland adopted memorial laws and created a ramifying infrastructure to support its politics of memory. Established in 1998, the Institute of National Remembrance has been a major actor in Poland’s academic, social, and political life since the mid-2000s. The ‘new revival of the politics of memory’ [32, c. 41—51]) in Eastern Europe owes to the growing nationalist trends and the use of ‘historical arguments’ in propaganda.

In Poland, politics of memory was widely used by president Lech Kaczyński and the conservative party Law and Justice. On September 17, 2009, the President opened the Alley of the Victims of Katyn to mark the 70th anniversary of the Polish Campaign of the Red Army [33, p. 453]. The unveiling of the monument was timed to coincide with the 18th Congress of Polish Historians, which was held in Olsztyn. At the Congress, President Kaczyński made a long speech, which set the tenor of the meeting. This case demonstrates that a major area of the Polish authorities’ politics of memory is a confrontation with Russia in the field of history. In recent years, Poland adopted the laws that extended the powers of the Institute of National Remembrance and sanctioned the demolition of the monuments of the communist era, including the memorials to Soviet soldiers (with the exception of the war graves) [34]. In the late 1980s, the region of Warmia and Masuria faced an identity crisis. The former sket-

chy and tendentious interpretation of the territory's past was criticised. These new trends, which were embraced by the Olsztyn intelligentsia circles, coincided with the socio-political and cultural transformations caused by the revolution of 1989. Moreover, the decentralisation of the social lead to the so-called 'uprising of the provinces', when the local community acquired a taste for independent actions, including local cultural initiatives [29, p. 165].

A major event was the establishment of the Borussia (the Latin of Prussia) cultural association in Olsztyn in 1991. The organisation was founded by the historian Robert Traba and the poet Kazimierz Brakoniecki, who started a magazine of the same name. The association's charter stressed that Warmia and Masuria had always been a multinational and multicultural region. Its members affirmed their commitment to a comprehensive study of the territory's past, of the political and national relations that had existed in the region, and of its cultural, artistic, and civilizational values. The goals of the association included the adoption of a critical and innovative approach to creating new knowledge, new culture, and new relations [35]. This meant both the abandonment of a unilateral, Polonocentric interpretation of the history of East Prussia and openness to all the ethnocultural groups that once lived on this territory.

The advocates of the concept of Borussia believe that, today, the central problem lies in the preservation of the identity of the local historical and cultural landscape amid globalisation rather than in overcoming the taboos in the history of East Prussia. Moreover, the 'open regionalism' approach is increasingly in conflict with the principles of politics of memory professed by the ruling conservative forces. Their conservative commitment to patriotic education and the strengthening of national identity may lead to a return to the old national-communistic interpretations of history [29, p. 166].

Conclusions

During the reclamation of the Recovered Territories, which began in 1945, Polish authorities had to develop a politics of memory that would prove the legitimacy of the new national borders, create the optimal conditions for the integration of these territories into the Polish state, and facilitate the adaptation of the new settlers to the unfamiliar historical and cultural environment. Soviet authorities had to solve similar problems in the Kaliningrad region of the RSFSR and the Klaipeda region of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, the politics of memory pursued in the two neighbouring states differed in terms of both form and content.



In Warmia and Masuria, the regional authorities found a solution in emphasising the Polish elements in East Prussian historical and cultural heritage and using the experience of the autochthonous population in the reclamation of the region. However, the hopes that the region would become an ‘integration pot’ and a common home to Warmians, Masurians, and the new settlers never materialised. The absolute majority of the local residents of Polish origin left Warmia and Masuria, primarily, for the FRG.

In the 21st century, the region of Warmia and Masuria became, on the one hand, a hub for research and cultural collaborations with the neighbouring territories and, on the other, found itself involved in the new ‘historical wars’ brought about by the rise of nationalistic populism in Eastern Europe. All this had a negative effect on the tenor of relations in the Baltic region. Although producing benefits for the ruling elite (such as national consolidation, and the legitimation of the regime), the ‘war of the monuments’ and other confrontations in the field of history may have very negative consequences for international relations. Moreover, they encourage xenophobic attitudes and provoke and deepen international conflicts.

This background gives rise to tensions and even conflicts between the capital and the region, whose local historical discourses rely on the regional identity, the recognition of the local multicultural heritage, openness, and the readiness to cooperate with the neighbours and the ‘big historical narratives’, which gravitate towards national singularity and exclusiveness. In seeking dialogue, open regionalism remains an effective alternative to aggressive nationalistic populism and encourages international transboundary cooperation and international integration.

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