

**DEHUMANIZING OF COMMUNISTS
IN THE PUBLIC HISTORICAL DISCOURSE IN POLAND.
SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS
CONCERNING THE CASE OF HELENA WOLIŃSKA**

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Abstract. This article presents some preliminary remarks regarding the formation of collective memory of communism in Poland and aims to trace some aspects of the dehumanization of communists in the public right-wing narratives of the Polish Third Republic shaped. These narratives shaped Poland's historical policy, especially after 2005. The article covers selected political statements, press articles, and books popularizing recent history in Poland, as present in the dominant political discourse. The presented case of Helena Wolińska, a Polish communist with Jewish origins, who was involved in the post-war juridical system and, after 1998, was prosecuted by the military justice system in Poland, reveals how the anti-communist public discourse has become more decisive and bolder over the years. The real settlements against the previous system's crimes have ceased to count. The dehumanization of communists served current political goals.

Key words: dehumanizing, Polish communists, collective memory, Helena Wolinska

ДЕГУМАНИЗАЦИЯ КОММУНИСТОВ В ПОЛЬСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕННО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ. НЕСКОЛЬКО ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫХ ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ, КАСАЮЩИХСЯ СЛУЧАЯ ХЕЛЕНА ВОЛИНЬСКОЙ

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Аннотация. В статье представлены несколько предварительных замечаний, касающихся формирования коллективной памяти о коммунизме в Польше, а также прослеживаются некоторые аспекты дегуманизации коммунистов в общественных правых нарративах Третьей Польской Республики. Данные нарративы формируют польскую историческую политику, особенно в период после 2005 г. В статье рассматриваются некоторые политические утверждения, публицистические статьи и книги, популяризирующие недавнюю историю Польши, которая представлена в главенствующем политическом дискурсе. Недавний случай Хелены Волиньской, польской коммунистки с еврейскими корнями, вовлеченной в послевоенную судебную систему, а после 1998 г. преследовавшуюся польской военной юстицией, проливает свет на то, как антикоммунистический общественный дискурс становился со временем более однозначным и явным. Реальные взыскания по преступлениям прежней системы перестали братья в расчет. Дегуманизация коммунистов служит текущим политическим целям.

Ключевые слова: дегуманизация, польские коммунисты, игры памяти, коллективная память, Хелена Волиньска

Every state system creates its memory games, which are «played by political and administrative elites, activists, and professional groups in various local, national, and European venues» [3, p. 4–5]. The Third Republic of Poland that emerged in 1989 due to transformation was the narrative antithesis of Polish People’s Republic. The collapse of state socialism reinforced anti-communist historical narratives. In the 1990s, two contradictory narratives clashed in Poland: the anti-communist founding myth of the Third Republic and the nostalgic one expressed

in the slogan «communism come back». The first one was dominant and used as a tool in the ongoing political struggle. Based on the myth of the «Solidarity» movement, the anti-communist discourse became the Third Republic's cornerstone¹.

«History in politics has a great future» — claimed the opinion-forming weekly *Polityka* in 2017 [4]. Thirty years after the end of state socialism, the anti-communist narrative became even more decisive and bolder. In recent years, it has risen to official state propaganda represented by the main political actors, such as the president, the prime minister, and others. In November 2020, the Polish Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, appeared on public television and stated the following about the European Union: «We have reached a level in Europe worse than the Soviet Union and communism. <...> Europeans today are neo-Marxists, postmodernists, who have the same Marxist roots as Bolshevik communism and German National socialism» [1].

It has thus become clear that «the more distant the communist past becomes, the more prominent a place it occupies in the political imaginary» [8, p. 121]. Along with the condemnation of the former state system, which was presented as criminal, attempts to dehumanize communists began. Piotr Osęka distinguished «three dominant strategies in the memory games employed in public discourse in Poland...: neutralization, retribution, and zombification» [Ibid., p. 120]. The zombification strategy consists of «widespread attempts to manipulate collective memory to bring dead perpetrators back to life» [Ibid., p. 122]. The case of the political afterlife of Helena Wolińska (1919–2008) is an example of such zombification.

Wolińska nee Fajga Danielak, born in 1919, was a part of the so-called «the last generation» of Polish Jews [9]. Before the war, she was a law student with strong leftist views². During the war, she fought in the communist resistance movement. She played an active role

¹ Since 2005, all government coalitions have consisted of right-wing forces. The two main political parties, Civic Platform and Law and Justice, are within the right wing spectrum.

² All biographical information comes from Helena Wolińska's personal files from the Archives of the University of Warsaw, (AAN), the State Archives in Milanówek, the Central Military Archives in Rembertów, Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), National Archives in GB, as well as the home archives of Wolińska's stepdaughter, Janina Nadaner.

in establishing the Polish People's Republic. From 1949 till 1954, she was a military prosecutor. She oversaw the investigations of people accused of crimes against the state, including significant figures from the dissolved Home Army. In 1968, during the wave of anti-Semitic purges, Wolińska and her husband, professor of economy at Warsaw University, Włodzimierz Brus, were expelled from the communist party. Shortly after, they emigrated to Great Britain, where they later obtained citizenship. From 1998 Poland sought the extradition of 79 years-old Wolińska-Brus. The attempts continued until her death in 2008 [4a].

The military prosecutor's office accused Wolińska that she «unlawfully deprived general August Emil Fieldorf of freedom» [4a]. Her role in the death sentence of Fieldorf — one of the commanders of Home Army — was secondary³, but those who approved the highest sentence were already dead. Fieldorf's family demanded justice. The newly established Institute of National Remembrance, a government institution for the prosecution of Nazi and communist crimes in Poland, was actively involved in the case. In December 1998, the Regional Military Court in Warsaw issued a decision to temporarily arrest Wolińska [4a]. It became media coverage. The opinion-forming *Gazeta Wyborcza* opposed the extradition. One of the high-circulation right-wing newspapers, «*Życie*», compared Wolińska to Pinochet, who was demanded by Spain at that time. «They are almost the same age. There is an international uproar around the first case, and silence over the second request» [16, p. 7–10].

Wolińska's guilt is a complicated question, and this article does not take a stance regarding that matter. Instead, it focuses on analysing the process of her public dehumanization. It also tries to answer why she has become one of Poland's anti-communist narrative's main villains. The investigations she supervised under Stalinism concerned citizens of Jewish origin (prosecuted for wanting to leave for Israel), Jehovah's Witnesses, and soldiers of the underground state. Nevertheless, the public opinion focused only on the last group. Wolińska declared herself Polish, but the media emphasized her ethnic origin and the changed name.

³ On behalf of the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office, she supervised his case only in the initial phase. After eight months of investigation, the arrested person was transferred to the General Prosecutor's Office. Along with the change of the military dimension to the civil one, the legal classification of the act was also changed.

The narrative conducted in this way led to the conclusion that a «Jewish torturer» butchered «Polish patriots».

Since 1998, Tadeusz Płużański, a right-wing media journalist, has been the most prolific author writing about Wolińska. He created his own vocabulary about her, which was soon followed up by other publicists: «Stalinist inquisitor»; «bloody prosecutor»; «criminal, arrogant murderer»; «the monster in uniform»; «unambiguously black (or rather — in terms of ideology — red) personality» and even «a possessive wife». «Her vulgar style terrified even the Stalinists», claimed Płużański. He claimed that Wolińska «persecuted Poles», and was motivated by «hatred of Polishness and towards Poles». «She sent many Poles to bite the dust» [2, 12–14]. Płużański dehumanized Wolińska in the literal sense: «Helena Wolińska was “the vestibule of death” in the communist system».

Płużański reissued his articles about Wolińska in the book «Beasts. Murderers of Poles», published in 2011. The book, a story about Polish communists involved in a system of repression, was stylistically incoherent, had no archival sources indicated, and was full of bias. Nevertheless, it brought the author popularity. Płużański wrote a few more books, including «Beasts 2» and «My Meeting with Beasts». In November 2016, he founded self-styled the Social-National Court, which announced infamy for Bolesław Bierut, Stefan Michnik, Władysław Gomułka (two of them were already dead) [7]. In 2017, he became one of the heads of the state news television TVP Info. At that time, the dehumanizing of communists became a component of Poland’s historical policy and state propaganda.

Following the zombification metaphor [8, p. 135–141], Płużański became one of the Houngans⁴, who evoked the demons of «the bloody communist regime» to use them for the current political struggle. «Zombie-resurrection» was started by the leading daily «Rzeczpospolita». Journalists informed that the funeral of Helena Wolińska took place two days earlier than stated in the official announcement (the family was afraid of disrupting the ceremony). Interestingly, the authors of the article blamed the deceased for this fact. «Wolińska did not stop shocking even after her death», they concluded [6].

⁴ A priest in Haitian Vodou.

In 2013, five years after Wolińska's death, the director of the film «*Ida*» Paweł Pawlikowski said, he was inspired by the Wolińska's biography. «Wolińska — a monster in a uniform — was revived in the winning film 'Ida,'» wrote Płużański in the article «Powdering the beast» [16]. The posthumous unpopularity of the former prosecutor reached its zenith. Polish actors used her dehumanized public image for the ongoing political struggle. In 2016, ultra-catholic interest groups proclaimed Wolińska patroness of the so-called Black Protests, which were mass female protests against the restrictive anti-abortion law [5, 10, 11]⁵. «In 1956, the communists implemented the Soviet's abortion solutions in Poland. Their promoter was the prosecutor Helena Wolińska...» — said the *Ordo Iuris* lawyer, Joanna Banasiuk, in the parliament. «She pleaded with satisfaction in favor of 'abolishing the legal protection of the life of the fetus.' It was carried out with the statutory impunity for abortion. Unfortunately, also in free Poland, the views of the prosecutor Wolińska are eagerly promoted. The fight against communist enslavement was also a fight for children's legal protection from birth, which the Nation promised its Queen in the Jasna Góra Vows» [17]. This example shows how little the dehumanizing of communists has to do with history. It is a deliberate attempt to discredit the current political opponents as moral descendants and heirs of the «beasts». Dehumanizing of communists is a just convenient tool in the political power struggle.

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⁵ The protest was defended in her 1960s doctorate «Termination of pregnancy in the light of criminal law».

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