

Politics of memory in Upper Silesian schools: Between Polish homogeneous nationalism and its Silesian discontents

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Abstract

The article discusses the connections between nationalism and history teaching in the context of dominant structures of collective memory in Poland. Drawing on qualitative research in Upper Silesian schools, the article analyses in detail how the state-sponsored history is enacted and resisted by the teachers in school practice. The article also demonstrates the advantages of processual conceptualisation of collective memory. It provides further theoretical insight by bringing together three strands of literature: memory studies, nationalism studies and critical media analysis.

Keywords

collective memory, nationalism, Poland, politics, school history, Upper Silesia

Introduction

The aim of the article is to analyse the connections between nationalism and history teaching in the context of dominant structures of collective memory in Poland. Theorists of nationalism concur that the state, through schools, attempts to establish a hegemonic collective memory, which could serve as the basis of national identity (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1999). Although the links between history education and nationalism have been generally recognised, the detailed mechanisms by which this process unfolds in various local contexts remain under-researched (Carretero, 2011; Van Sledright, 2008; Williams, 2014). Following Bent Flyvbjerg (2006), we regard social knowledge building as an inductive process that must take into account

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the context-specific social phenomena and that requires production of thorough case studies. Our article focuses on a concrete exemplar of teaching history in schools in Upper Silesia in Poland, drawing on qualitative research conducted among history teachers. Our article also presents theoretical insights as it critically links three strands of literature: nationalism studies, memory studies and critical media theory. Referring to Wulf Kansteiner (2002), we assume that collective memory must be understood in terms of the complex process of production and consumption. This process is embedded in relation of power, which involves the interplay of dominance and resistance (Molden, 2016; Ryan, 2011). We see teachers not as passive consumers of textbooks or curricula but as active agents capable of transforming and resisting the official representations of the past according to their own agenda. Building on Stuart Hall's (1980) critical media theory, our article analyses the modes by which the official history is enacted and resisted by history teachers in the Upper Silesian school context.

Theoretical context

Following a constructivist paradigm, we assume that nations are not naturally produced; rather, they are continuously imagined through nationalist signifying practices (Anderson, 1991). Thus, nationalism in our article is understood as a way of constructing a meaningful social reality (Hall, 1996). Nationalist practices organise social reality around the category of the nation which is imagined as a community united by a common language or set of other cultural markers, the bearer of political sovereignty, the central object of individual loyalty and the source of collective identity (Jaskulowski and Majewski, 2016).

Theorists of nationalism regard school education as a key instrument in the production of nationalism. They argue that states use school history education to establish a sense of attachment to a nation by imposing a shared hegemonic collective memory (Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1999). Although there is a growing literature on 'collective memory', we still lack an agreed definition of the term (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008). As Kansteiner (2002) notes, there are two trends in defining the concept of collective memory. The term may refer to a socially shared recollection of the past or to various and complex practices of memory production and reception. We agree with Kansteiner that the second definition is most useful, because it sensitises us to the fallacy of the concept's reification and enables us to think about collective memory as something people do, not as some social static *Ding an Sich*. A processual approach to collective memory allows us to think of teachers not as passive textbook users, but instead as active agents who are capable of modifying textbooks' representations of the past according to their own agenda (Jaskulowski and Surmiak, 2017). It enables us to go beyond textual analysis of history textbooks or curricula and to focus on history teachers; this, in turn, may provide an insight into how the dominant state-sponsored collective memory is enacted and resisted in the school context. It is here where critical media theory is useful, as it reminds us that 'consensus is not intrinsic to meaning, so the mere dissemination of a certain message does not assure its acceptance' (Ryan, 2011: 159). Hall (1980) argues that meaning is never fixed; instead, it must be actively decoded, and it is always open to various interpretations. He shows that the interpretation is conditioned by the social positioning of various social groups which decode meaning according to their own interests. Hall concludes that the moment of reception can take up one of three positions: hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. In short, dominant decoding implies that the receiver accepts and reproduces indented hegemonic meaning. Negotiated means that the hegemonic meaning is partially modified in a way which reflects the social positioning of the receiver. Oppositional decoding implies that the social situation posits the receiver in opposition to hegemonic meaning (Ryan, 2011).

Referring to Hall's model, we will analyse the teacher reading of the official collective memory, as represented by textbook and history curriculum, and its links with nationalism in the specific local context of Upper Silesia. Such detailed local analysis has broader theoretical significance since we assume, following Flyvbjerg (2006), that knowledge building is an inductive process that requires analysis of the context-specific social phenomena. Such analyses are particularly important in those situations where, as in Poland, most studies on education take a prescriptive nationalist position (Chałas and Kowalczyk, 2006; Jaskulowski and Surmiak, 2017). Few critical studies mainly focus on the representation of national and ethnic minorities in the history textbooks (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Szuchta, 2014; Kamusella, 2010; Kowalski, 2008).

It must be noted that the question of national and ethnic minorities is an important topic in the context of the subject of our article. As we will see, Upper Silesia has been an ethnically diverse borderland region. However, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, Polish nationalism has traditionally imagined the Polish nation as a homogeneous community which, in turn, has led to various exclusionary policies (Kamusella, 2009; Porter, 2000). To provide a broader context, it is worth noting that the homogeneous conception of the Polish nation was paradoxically strengthened by the communist regime in Poland. Communists feared the lack of political legitimacy in Polish society and adopted many elements of Polish ethnic nationalist rhetoric and policy to increase their support among the populace (Zaremba, 2001). Only the rise of a democratic transformation in the 1980s and 1990s paved the way for more open policies towards national and ethnic minorities (Jaskulowski, 2012; Kamusella, 2012). Against this background, one must read the findings of the recent aforementioned Polish history textbook analysis that speak of the predominance of homogeneous and ethnic conception of the Polish nation 'exclusive of minority identities' (Kowalski, 2008: 364). Based upon an analysis of Central European school atlases, Tomasz Kamusella (2010) arrives at a similar conclusion that Polish atlases promote ethnic nationalism by presenting the nation-state as a 'natural' and homogeneous entity. Textbooks used by Upper Silesian history teachers also fit this pattern; they not only marginalise national and ethnic minorities but also present a celebratory, unilinear and teleological story of the Polish nation, which has already existed in nascent form from time immemorial.¹ The central protagonist of this story is the collective hero – the homogeneous Polish nation personified mainly by different political figures. The narrative of these history textbooks is shaped by a schematic narrative template (Wertsch, 2002), which can be summarised in four points: (1) the Polish nation lives peacefully, (2) the peace is interrupted by some threat, (3) there is a time of suffering and struggle, which inspires other European nations, and (4) ultimately, the Polish nation triumphs over its enemies, thereby proving its love of independence. While these short analyses present some background for our study, we want to go beyond these types of textual analysis. However, before presenting our findings, it is necessary to discuss briefly the specificities of the Upper Silesia region.

Upper Silesia

Historically, Upper Silesia is the south-eastern part of the Silesia region located along the upper course of the Oder. There is no agreement as to whether the term Silesia (*Śląsk* in Polish) comes from German or Slavic. However, it is agreed that the first Slavic ethnic (sub)groups arrived in Silesia around the seventh century, and the region was part of the Greater Moravia state in the ninth century; then, in the tenth century, it was incorporated into the kingdom of Bohemia. At the end of the tenth century, the Piast ruler Mieszko seized Silesia and incorporated it into his state. It should be mentioned that in the Polish history textbooks, the Piast state is portrayed in a teleological manner as a forerunner of the Polish nation-state and Silesia is regarded as originally and inherently the Polish territory. However, for most of its history, Silesia belonged to German-speaking or

Czech-speaking polities. Thus, after the break-up of the Piast monarchy in 1138, Silesia was initially controlled by numerous local feudal dukes from the House of Piast before it was absorbed into the Crown of Czech Lands at the end of the fourteenth century. In 1526, Silesia became part of the Habsburg hereditary lands (Kamusella, 2007, 2009).

In the modern period, Prussia annexed around seven-eighths of Silesia in 1742, leaving the Habsburg monarchy only a small southern part of Upper Silesia which today belongs mostly to the Czech Republic. Then, Prussian Silesia found itself incorporated within the frontiers of the German Empire, created in 1871. In the wake of a complex history at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Silesian population was divided religiously mostly between Catholics and Protestants. Silesians were also bilingual or multilingual (German, Polish, Czech or Silesian). Moreover, until 1918 the estate divisions were more important than national identifications (Kamusella, 2007). After the end of the First World War, Upper Silesia became the subject of fierce rivalry, especially between Germany and the new state of Poland. In the wake of a plebiscite and three Polish uprisings, the easternmost part of Upper Silesia was incorporated into Poland and the rest into Weimar Germany (Kamusella, 2007). Silesians found themselves under increasing pressure from Polish and German nationalisms, which did not accept Silesians' distinctiveness. This pressure was particularly severe under Nazi occupation of interwar Poland's section of Upper Silesia. After the Second World War, German Silesia was transferred to Poland: almost all the German-speaking population was expelled and the rest (mainly Silesians, labelled by the communists authorities as 'autochthons') were forcibly Polishised. It is worth mentioning that the annexation of Silesia is interpreted in the Polish history textbooks as a return of the land to its natural homeland (Kamusella, 1999). However, the local Silesian population remembers the period immediately after the war as a time of persecution by the Polish state. In communist Poland, Silesia was divided into different administrative units which did not correspond to historical divisions (Kulczycki, 2016; Polak -Springer, 2015). In today's Poland, the historical Upper Silesia roughly covers the Opole and Silesian voivodships. However, the term Upper Silesia in popular imagination and in official documents refers only to the Western part of this historical region within the borders of Silesian voivodships (Smolorz, 2012). Despite ennationalizing pressure, there is still a significant German minority in the Opole voivodship (however, the minority's members mainly speak Silesian in everyday life, Berlińska, 2011). There is also a Silesian minority in the Silesian voivodship. The latter, however, is not officially recognised by the Polish state as a minority, and the Silesian language does not have an official status (Kamusella, 2012). Recent years have seen the development of the Silesian Autonomy Movement which supports the idea of autonomy for Upper Silesia on the basis of its distinct national Silesian identity (Sekula et al., 2012).

Politics of memory in Upper Silesian schools

Since we assume that data do not exist independently of a methodological framework, we would like to discuss the research process in the institutional context of the Polish educational system. Our research is based on semi-structured interviews, which facilitate the asking of a prepared list of questions while allowing the informants to raise themes that are important to them. Our choice of method was also determined by the fact that teachers were difficult to access due to their busy schedules. It was time consuming to obtain their consent to take part in the research. The teachers were recruited through personal networks, teacher's organisations and snowballing technique. Following the concept of saturation, 25 history teachers were interviewed.² In accordance with the maximum variation principle, our sample consists of teachers of different ages and from all tiers of pre-university school education (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). There are three tiers of education in Poland. There is a 6-year primary school (PS) from age 7 to 13 years, followed by

lower secondary school (LSS), which lasts 3 years. The next stage is semi-compulsory secondary education, which students must continue until the age of 18 in upper secondary schools (USS) or through vocational training offered by employees. Thus, our sample includes 7 teachers from PS, 11 from LSS and 13 teachers from USS (some teachers work in more than one type of school). There were 14 female teachers and 11 male teachers. Most of the interviewees were in their 40s, the rest was in their 30s or 50s.

The interviews took place from March to June 2015 in five locations within the borders of the Silesian voivodeship. Each interview lasted, on average, around 50 minutes. The interviews were conducted by one of this article's authors and a research assistant. All of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. We have obtained consent to use the interviews for academic purposes under the condition of not revealing the identities of our informants. Consequently, we do not provide more detailed personal data which could be used to trace the identity of our informants. Our method of analysis was open coding, which involves close and multiple re-readings of transcripts to allow themes to emerge from data. To ensure the credibility of our analysis, we coded our data independently and then discussed our interpretations to reach a consensus (Saldaña, 2012).

The Polish school system is governed centrally by the Ministry of National Education, which sets the core curriculum for schools (Polish EURIDICE Unit, 2012). The history curriculum defines in rather general terms the scope of historical knowledge and skills that pupils must acquire. The curriculum stipulates that history classes should also shape various attitudes and loyalties among students: civic participation, responsibility, tolerance, social sensitivity and allegiance to the local, national, European and even global community (Ministry of National Education, 2012). However, the main focus of the curriculum is the history of Poland, understood in unilinear and teleological terms: from the legendary beginnings to the contemporary Polish nation-state. Importantly, the core curriculum sets only a broad and general framework and leaves much autonomy to teachers, who can decide which themes or attachments should have priority in class. Moreover, teachers can decide which textbook to use in class (from a list approved by the Ministry) and to what extent. As one of the interviewed teachers states, 'it simply depends on the teacher, because everyone sees in a textbook what she wants to see and it is never possible to use a textbook from A to Z' (interview 20).

Nationalism

All the interviewed teachers from all types of schools concur that history lessons are not only about developing cognitive skills among pupils (e.g. understanding historical concepts such as causality) but they should also accommodate identity functions. History lessons should shape collective memory, which serves as the basis of national identity. Asked about the sense of historical education, the teachers answered that its role is to nurture among pupils the Polish national identity and to develop emotional attachment and loyalty to the Polish nation: 'it sounds pathetic, but love of the fatherland, respect of national symbols, of national ceremonies (...) sense of belonging to this social group, to the nation (interview 24).

Although teachers defined the aims of education in nationalist terms, they never used the word 'nationalism' to describe their own stance, preferring 'patriotism'. They refer to the 'term' nationalism only with regard to radical fringe ideologies. According to Michael Billig (1995), such dichotomic opposition of patriotism and nationalism leads to the naturalisation of one's own nationalism, which is taken for granted. However, our data suggest more complex approaches to the 'nationalising' function of history.³ Modifying the aforementioned Hall (1980)'s model of reception, we can distinguish three stances: hegemonic ('the conformists'), radical hegemonic ('the radicals') and negotiated ('the Silesian discontents'). As for the hegemonic approach, it refers

to those conformists who rather passively accept the ‘nationalising’ function of history classes: they do not see any potential tensions between teaching history to promote nationalism and teaching history as an objective discipline. The conformists unreflexively accept the aim of teaching history, which is to simply stick to the official textbook vision of history, and they try to avoid discussing sensitive issues in Polish history. They constitute a heterogenous group that consisted of teachers of various age and both sexes. The latter two categories, this is – the radicals and the Silesian discontents – require more detailed discussion.

The radicals: Polish homogenous and heroic nationalism

Although the radicals set themselves in opposition to the state educational policy as not ‘patriotic’ enough, their views fit within the nation-centred logic of the curriculum and textbooks and their unilinear and teleological vision of the Polish history and the homogeneity of the Polish nation. They seem to claim this logic is not fully realised: ‘I think that there is too little stress on patriotism’ (interview 19). In their opinion, the main reason why there is too little ‘patriotism’ in schools is due to the fact that the curriculum and textbook focus too much on general history: ‘something is getting lost, this history of Poland compared to world history. The students know more about the history of the USA; this worries me as a teacher’ (interview 3). The radicals also complain that the textbooks do not promote positive personality patterns and are too critical of the Polish nation, especially in the context of relationships with the Jewish minority. At the same time, they are convinced that there is a crisis of national attachment among pupils. As one of teachers puts it, ‘sincerely speaking, it is difficult to shape these [patriotic] attitudes [...] among young people [...] because they are simply not interested in it’ (interview 18).

The radicals agree that history in schools should mainly concentrate on the history of the Polish nation. Some radicals even argue that Polish history should be taught as a separate subject in the framework of a new course on ‘patriotic education’, as proposed some years ago by Roman Giertych.⁴ In their opinion, focusing on Polish history could help to counteract the aforementioned crisis of patriotism among the students. However, to foster patriotism among the students, school history should not only concentrate on Polish history but this history must also be shown in a positive light so as ‘not to alienate young people’ (interview 18). Thus, the radicals focus on political and military history, which gives an opportunity to show the bravery of the grand Polish leaders and the greatness of Poland. For example, one of the teachers told how the pupils asked her in class what she thought about Putin’s alleged suggestions to divide Ukraine between Poland and Russia. She answered that they should look at a map and ask themselves to whom Ukraine belonged. Then the pupils shouted, ‘It belonged to us!’ which she commented, ‘You see, Putin was right [...] He also looked through textbooks’ (interview 24). Although she explains that it was kind of kidding, at the same time she explained to the students that Putin’s proposal fits the logic of Polish history (interview 24).

This fragment is also interesting because it suggests that the radicals see the relationships between nations as the battle ground. As the above-quoted teacher notes, ‘we must show ... that this world of big politics is brutal. Every state minds only its own interests’ (interview 24). This type of thinking on international relations is a reflection of the interwar nationalist ideology of the *Endecja*, which is continued by the ruling Law and Justice Party today (Jaskulowski, 2012).⁵ However, at the same time, the radicals claim that Poland was much less egoistic than other states since it always kept its promises, in contrast to its allies: ‘maybe we do not always do it right, but in most cases Poland was an excellent ally. If we signed treaties, we signed them seriously and we took our commitments seriously’ (interview 19). Moreover, they stress that although Poland has been in a difficult situation many times, it has rarely compromised its integrity: ‘we the Polish have

not calculated too often; we tried our best to get out of trouble with honour; as minister Beck said, there is nothing more precious than honour' (interview 19).⁶ They suggest, in accordance with the Polish Romantic tradition, that Poland was morally superior to other countries and did not accept the Machiavellian rules of politics. Three points connected with this idea of moral superiority are worth underlining here.

First, in accordance with the general tenets of nationalist ideology, the radicals assume that without attachment to the nation there is also no individual morality. They worry that there is too little stress on national honour in the textbooks, which is the precondition of being a good man: 'I just try to communicate this to children, that this honour is the most important. Because a man with honour won't become a thief, a thug, a corrupt man [...] You don't find this in textbooks, that we the Polish have such a national honour' (interview 19). Second, the radicals suggest that some historical injustice has been done to Poland. Thus, the Polish nation was betrayed, abandoned or invaded in the past by nations which are now better off than Poland: 'those states which thrive today, they betrayed us many times' (interview 19). Those states also have an unfair privileged political position: 'I say that England abandoned us, Germany invaded.... [the pupils] say: "Miss, but they are ruling the EU now" and I answer: "You see! Now it looks different"' (interview 24). This is again a reflection of the Law and Justice Party's ideology, which claims that to recompense Poland for historical injustice it should have more say in European politics. Moreover, former suffering makes Poland more morally sensitive and therefore predestined to revive the corrupted world of international politics. The third point connected with this discourse on victimisation and moral superiority is the conviction that Poland, as the victim, has never been an aggressor: it has always only defended itself. This also pertains to its internal politics. According to the radicals, Poland has never discriminated against its national minorities – on the contrary:

The textbook should convey one message, that through the ages we had a state in which the Jews found a second home. They couldn't stand living with anti-Semites for centuries. So I think that what is claimed, that we were anti-Semites ... obviously there were such incidents, episodes, but it was not a rule. The Jews chose Poland as a second homeland ... if there had not been the Holocaust, Poland would have still been their second homeland. As a teacher, I do not agree that we were anti-Semites. I think that the textbooks should show that neighbourhood relations [Polish-Jewish] were exemplary. (Interview 4)

The radicals see the history of Poland as focused on the heroic struggle of Poles for independence. In this context too, they interpret the history of Upper Silesia. They do not see any need to stress the specificity of this region, as it could undermine the unity of Polish history: 'I think we do not need some extra hours, some additional classes [...] I am opposed to dividing Poland into separate regions' (interview 18). The history of Silesia is important insofar as it is connected with the Polish celebratory and unilinear history. For example, one of the teachers explains that she has her own programme of extra classes on the history of Upper Silesia:

You can go to the museum to see monuments of Silesian national insurgents. Pupils are not aware what happened here; they are fascinated when I tell them about the insurgents who fought in the Third Silesian Uprising somewhere here and this is why there is a monument now [...] we look at bullet holes in the hospital walls. Actually, I do not know if these are bullet holes, but I always tell the pupils about gunfire. Thus, I do a lot, and I really think that is the right time to make children aware of Polishness here, that we are a regional group. (Interview 24)

This teacher, in accordance with the official state policy, underlines that Silesians are a regional group and not a national or ethnic minority. In this way, she discursively emphasises the links between Silesia and the Polish nation. This Polishness is strengthened by the fact that Silesians, in

her narrative, shed blood for Poland. Interestingly, to make history more attractive for children, she ‘invents traditions’ – deliberately tells a story she is not sure is true. The radicals prioritise identity functions of history over cognitive ones. As one of the teachers states, ‘I think that you should take care of the own national interest, and at this point the historical truth to every nation will be different’ (interview 19).

According to the radicals, history lessons should not only promote attachment to the nation but also make the pupils proud of their Polish identity:

First of all, pride in being Polish [...] that we are inferior [...] that we have to apologise, to be ashamed, this is absolutely unacceptable, and they [students] also feel this way [...] So I think that we should strongly stuff pupils’ heads with such conviction. (Interview 23)

This approach again seems to reflect the right-wing ideology of the Law and Justice Party, with its refutation of the so-called pedagogy of shame and the metaphor of Poland rising from its knees. Right-wing politicians criticise those historians who focus on wrongs done by the Polish in the past and condemn politicians who publicly apologise for historical crimes. The right-wing ideologists claim that state-sponsored history should be used to boost self-confidence and pride among Poles, which is the condition of increasing the international status of Poland. Similarly, the radicals also bother about the international position of Poland and teach history so the students ‘would think they can do something, that they have significance, that we are not a pawn in the EU, but a nation with history’ (interview 24). They do not give students too much opportunity to question this vision and function of history. Although the radicals declaratively praise the value of discussion, they set clear limits on it. First, they see history in dichotomic terms, which requires unequivocal assessments: ‘we need to explicitly say that evil is evil, treachery is treachery’ (interview 15). Second, while critically discussing Polish history, the students, according to the radicals, ‘have to appreciate the sacrifices of those who gave their lives for their fatherland’ (interview 15).

The Silesian discontents

The Silesian discontents criticise the homogeneous nationalist logic of the core curriculum and the textbooks. Although they also agree that historical education should promote ‘patriotism’, they understand the identity function of history lessons in broader terms. In contrast to the radicals, who concentrate on a heroic and political national narrative, they put more stress on the European, regional and everyday context, which reflects their interest in social history and microhistory. Moreover, they also underline the value of critical thinking:

We must be careful not to indoctrinate [...] it would bring us back to the pre-1989 period. But I think that the role of a teacher should be, say, to emphasise some values but at the same time to leave students some freedom, some agency, because they are also intelligent persons. So I think there should be no indoctrination, only showing some values – for example, democratic ones. The nation is also such a value [...] but a wise approach to the nation must include three elements [...]: the region, the nation and the context of Europe, so as not to induce megalomania, nationalism, chauvinism. (Interview 21)

Interestingly, while the radicals claim that school history has to concentrate more on the Polish nation because of the crisis of patriotism among young people, the Silesian discontents think that textbooks are too Polonocentric and worry about nationalistic tendencies among the students. As one of the Silesian discontents notes, ‘this patriotic education is good, but such extremely national education does not have to be good’ because, as he suggests, it may produce ‘xenophobes’ (interview 20). The Silesian discontents warn that the Polish school is

‘monocultural’, which could be dangerous in the future. Poland is becoming more and more multicultural and schools will be unable to accommodate ‘difference’, which would generate conflicts. They also worry that the schools are under political pressure, especially from the local politicians from the Law and Justice Party.

The Silesian discontents also undermine the teleological and presentist logic of the curriculum and textbooks:

I think that it’s not ... that [...] I have to subordinate the content to the idea of the nation. It would be artificial and false, let’s do away with such thinking [...] there are facts, but facts can be interpreted in that or another way, depending on our values. If the nation is a value for us, we can interpret facts in national terms, but we must consider the truth – that is, if, for example, the intentions of the people living in that time were not national, for God’s sake, do not make them national [...] here we would have historical misrepresentation. (Interview 21)

They are not convinced that promoting patriotism in the school necessarily involves interpreting the past exclusively in national terms.

The Silesian discontents regard the curriculum and the textbooks as focused too much on Polish history:

I do not have a clear opinion whether there should be such overwhelming information on the history of Poland. I know we are Poles, blah blah blah and all that stuff [...] sincerely speaking, there is too much, this content is so extensive and detailed. (Interview 1)

It is not only that there is too much Polish history in schools but, according to the Silesian discontents, it is also a very specific version of history which they call ‘Warsaw-centred history’. Their criticism focuses especially on this version of history of Poland because it does not take into account the specificity of Upper Silesia and the historical experiences of Silesians:

as for ethnicity, there is unitarism, homogeneity [...] of course I can do lessons on it, but it is not in the curriculum [...] it should be incorporated in the Polish, European or wider context, so they [the students] know there is some distinctiveness. (Interview 10)

The teachers raise a number of critical points in relation to this ‘Warsaw-centred’ vision of history. They maintain that history taught in schools is over-concentrated on relations with Eastern neighbours, especially with Russia in the context of military and political history. They also think that school history is too much focused on military conflicts and the martyrology of the Polish nation. In this way, school history induces enmity towards other nations. In their opinion, too little is taught about Western neighbours, especially Germany, which had strong historical links with Upper Silesia. Moreover, the history of Upper Silesia is presented only from the Polish perspective: ‘I cannot wait for the common Polish-German textbook. As far as I know, they are working on it [...] maybe at last history will be written by historians, not by politicians’ (interview 1).

The Silesian discontents admitted that they use their autonomy as teachers to modify the content of the curriculum and the textbooks. Symptomatically, they spoke about it rather reluctantly and hesitatingly. They need to be reassured repeatedly that interviews were anonymous and their identity would not be revealed. They were afraid not only about their own position but also about that of the interviewer. For example, one of the teachers, while criticising the content of textbooks, warned the researcher: ‘but do not even write this, because someone in Warsaw may destroy you’ (interview 1). Such an attitude is caused by fear of the aforementioned ring-wing politicians who try to put pressure on schools but it also reflects the historical experience of the Silesians. It must

be added that most teachers we named 'the Silesian discontents' are of local origin and some of them define their nationality in Silesian or dual Polish–Silesian terms.⁷ Part of the Silesian experiences is the conviction of so-called 'Silesian injustice', which refers to the aforementioned discrimination against Silesians in the past (Kamusella, 1999). Let us discuss the redolent story related by one of our informants. During the interview, the teacher started to speak under her breath about the last national census held in Poland in 2011. She said that her husband had wanted to declare only Silesian national identity. However, when the interviewer had come, her husband had been sleeping, so she had filled in the census form for herself and for him and ticked both Silesian and Polish identities:

I think, I tick both, don't I? Because there is such possibility. And he was upset. I told him that he shouldn't have been asleep [...]. And I said that it is better to protect yourself, because when there was a first national census in 1921, people answered that they were 'locals'. And I always ask the pupils, what nationality were they? Do you think that they didn't know what their nationality was? And they are surprised by 'locals', so such things are remembered. (Interview 5)⁸

The teachers were afraid because of the living memory of aforementioned persecution and discrimination against Silesians by the Polish state in the interwar period and after 1945. The latter period is remembered as the 'Upper Silesian Tragedy'.⁹ As we already mentioned, many Silesians classified as Germans were expelled from Poland and others were Polonized (e.g. officials changed local surnames into something more Polish-like). Interestingly, when some teachers speak about this period, they use the phrase 'those Polish who came here' and they use the pronoun 'we', meaning Silesians, unreflexively, in contrast to the Polish. This distrust towards the Polish state is deepened by the fact that the Polish state does not recognise Silesians as a national or ethnic minority. Moreover, right-wing politicians stigmatise the Silesian minority and those Silesian activists who speak about autonomy. They accuse them of being crypto-Germans who want to join Upper Silesia with Germany (Jaskulowski, 2012).

Even if the teachers do not define themselves as Silesian, they may fear the reaction of state officials, politicians or the press because they teach about Upper Silesia in a way that undermines the hegemonic collective memory. Thus, one teacher explains how his teaching goes beyond the textbooks:

They [the students] go to lower secondary school and have contact with a teacher like me who says, no, it is not so, the history is different. In the Battle of Grunwald, our knights fought on the side of the Teutonic Knights. Silesian uprisings do not have to be called national uprisings but rather civil wars, and the pupils learn it [...] and there are some lessons on regional history [...] and suddenly these children discover that they heard about it, and there is a lesson on the origins of Slavic states, so I tell children about Silesian tribes, that this word [Silesia] does not have to come from Silesian, but from the tribe Silings. (Interview 9)

Thus, this teacher undermines three points of the Polish national interpretation of history: that the name Silesia comes from the Slavic language; that in reality of the Battle of Grunwald was more complex than suggested by the Polish nationalist imaginary, which presents it as the great victory of Poles over Germans; and that Silesian uprisings were civil wars because Silesians were divided and fought on both sides of the conflicts, Polish and German.

However, the Silesian discontents devoted most attention to the Second World War in the specific context of Upper Silesia. They seem to think that this period had crucial significance, which can be explained by the fact that the war had enormous consequences for Upper Silesia. Moreover, while teaching about this period, they and the students can also draw on the living memory of

witnesses: ‘When you talk about the Second World War ... grandparents are still alive, so there are witnesses, the kids can ask’ (interview 5). Stories based on the living memory of Silesians are often critical of the Polish state:

When I teach about the Second World War [...] the grandparents are still alive ... my mother-in-law when the war began, she was a teenager [...] and she remembers something which is not taught in history classes. You know, as Germans entered, the people greeted them with flowers [...] I mention to the children about it. I do not know if I do right or wrong, but history should tell things as they actually were, and in the textbook they do not find that. (Interview 5)

In this case, memories are not only critical of the Polish state but also break the Polish national taboo, suggesting that some Silesians were waiting for the Germans in 1939 because they thought they would be better off under Nazi Germany. This breaking of the taboo is also clearly evident in stories about Silesians’ participation in the *Deutsche Volksliste* (German National List) and *Wehrmacht*. For example, one teacher tells children about his grandfather, who volunteered for the German army: his grandfather was warned by a friend who worked in administration that he would be conscripted and sent to the Eastern front to Russia. His grandfather decided to volunteer to the *Wehrmacht* because in that case he could choose to what front he wanted to go. Thus, he chose the Western front, which gave more chance of survival. However, serving in the German army during the Second World War does not fit in the framework of the dominant national collective memory. Similarly, the textbooks treat as traitors those Polish who signed the *Volksliste*:

There [in the textbook] is an entire entry on the *Volksliste*; as I am telling the pupils, it is such a Warsaw-centred perspective, so Polonocentric, all of them were traitors; there is such a condemnation of these people who signed the list and I always ask the students where their grandparents were during the Second World War, maybe here. (Interview 20)

However, as the Silesian discontents remind us, in occupied Upper Silesia, former Polish citizens were compelled to sign this list under threat of deportation to the concentration camp:

Interestingly, although many Silesian discontents define themselves in Silesian national terms, they do not see history as an instrument of promotion of the Silesian national identity. In contrast to the radicals, they more often speak about the historical truth in the context of teaching history. However, they understand historical truth in a specific way. For them, true history seems to be history which draws on the living memories of the people who witnessed the past events.

Conclusion

Our article shows in detail how school history is used to promote collective memory, which could serve as the basis of national identity. Our article also demonstrates the advantages of the processual and dynamic conceptualisation of collective memory. We argue that the ‘nationalising’ function of school history cannot be taken for granted, since the teachers are active agents capable of using the core curriculum and textbooks according to their own agenda. Referring to critical media theory, we distinguish three approaches among teachers: hegemonic, teachers who unreflexively accept the hegemonic frameworks of collective memory (the conformists), radical hegemonic (the radicals) and negotiated (the Silesian discontents). The main part of this article discusses these two latter approaches to show transformations of the hegemonic collective memory. In short, the radical seems to prioritise the ‘nationalising’ function of school history and looks at Upper Silesia through the prism of Polish homogeneous nationalism. Silesian discontents also accept the nationalising aims of historical education discontents, but at the same time they undermine some aspects

of the Polonocentric logic of the hegemonic collective memory in the name of historical truth. However, they understand the historical truth in a particular way, as referring specifically to living memory. Behind these two ways of teaching history, there seems to lie two different concepts of nationalism. Thus, there is nationalism which imagines the Polish nation as a homogeneous social entity and which promotes the idea of sacrifice and heroic struggle for the nation. On the other hand, we have nationalism which defines the Polish nation in more heterogeneous terms, more tolerant of diversity and promoting everyday civic obligation as the basis of loyalty to the nation.

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Notes

1. This conclusion is based upon a sample of the most popular textbooks used by interviewed teachers (Olszewska and Surdyk-Fertsch, 2012; Roszak, 2015; Roszak and Kłaczko, 2012; Wojciechowski, 2015).
2. Although the sample is relatively small, it meets the criteria of non-representative probing (Guest et al., 2006).
3. It must be also emphasised that the distinction between two types of national identity is well established in political psychology (Schatz et al., 1999).
4. Roman Giertych was a leader of the far right-wing party, the League of Polish Families, as well as a minister of education and vice premier from 2005 to 2007.
5. Endecja was the nationalist political party set up at the end of the nineteenth century (Porter, 2000).
6. Józef Beck was the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the interwar period. The teacher paraphrased his refusal of German demands in a speech from 5 May 1939.
7. We do not want to suggest that the division between the radicals and the discontents strongly correlates with identification, that is, those with 'pure' Polish identity represent merely radical hegemonic approach, while those with Silesian or Polish-Silesian represent only the discontent stance. Moreover, our qualitative research, due to its non-representative character, cannot provide the ultimate answer to the question of correlation.
8. The 1921 census did not cover Upper Silesia, but what is important here is not what actually happened but how it is remembered. Moreover, this memory reflects the fact that many Silesians were reluctant to speak openly about their identity in the past (Kamusella, 2007).
9. The phrase 'Upper Silesian Tragedy' refers to the persecution of the inhabitants of Upper Silesia (imprisonments, executions and deportations) by Polish and Soviet communists after 1945 (Woźniczka, 2010).

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