

When Moses Came to Poland

Migrants, Myths, and Mourning on the Poland-Belarus Border

Jo Harper

Abstract: How did Middle Eastern, African, and Asian refugees become caught up in and then central to a particular type of Polish “civilizational” border regime with Belarus – heavily racialized and militarized – under the Law and Justice (PiS)-led government – the largest party of the Zjednoczona Prawica (United Right) alliance – between 2015 and 2023? And why – under the apparently more liberal Civic Platform (PO)-led coalition after December 2023 – did it continue? This paper explores how this happened. It weaves together three different strands: a study of the legacies of collective historical trauma; a study of Polishness as a mutable and contingent identity shaped in part by domestic debates about history and current geopolitical forces, and a study of an evolving management regime on the Polish–Belarusian border.

Keywords: Poland, Belarus, Russia, migrants, refugees, borders, securitization, coloniality, trauma, therapy

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Introduction

How Middle Eastern, African, and Asian refugees became caught up in and then central to a particular type of ‘civilizational’ border regime – heavily racialized and militarized – under the Law and Justice (PiS)-led government – the largest party of the Zjednoczona Prawica (United Right) alliance – between 2015 and 2023 was genuinely concerning. As was why – under the apparently more liberal Civic Platform (PO)-led coalition after December 2023 – it continued.¹ It weaves together, respectively three different strands: a study of the legacies of collective historical trauma, a study of Polishness as a mutable and contingent identity shaped in part by domestic debates about history and current geopolitical forces, and a study of an evolving management regime on the Polish-Belarusian border. The three strands can of course stand alone. The links between the role of historical discourse and actual policy and, for example, between stereotypes and people’s actual behavior are open to multiple interpretations, and competing explanations may place the causal emphasis on different parts of an ever-changing myriad of factors.

This paper identifies some of the symptoms of collective trauma in the Polish case and the various ways in which Poles have dealt with them, with reference to a spectrum of strategies ranging from therapeutic/modern to religious/pre-modern. These are of course not watertight categories, and overlaps also occurred between and within political groupings. The literature on populism in Poland and the CEE region often tends to invite binarization into competing camps, one side ‘liberal’ in all respects, the other defined by its antithesis. While not a central concern here, an overview of the populist canon – in particular how PiS rode a populist wave after 2010 and 2015 when in power – is a necessary adjunct to the work at hand. This is followed by an overview of border management strategies understood as a political response to perceived traumatic experience, in turn feeding into questions of citizenship, modern statehood, and national identity.

The paper also looks at what it has become standard to call Russia’s “hybrid war.” How and why did Putin and Lukashenko’s system of exploiting and deepening an ongoing global

¹Ferreira, Susana, “From narratives to perceptions in the securitization of the migratory crisis in Europe,” *Critical Perspectives on Migration in the Twenty-First Century*, E-International Relations Publishing, 2018; Sobczak-Szelc, Karolina et al, *From Reception to Integration of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Poland*, 2023, London and New York, Routledge.

migrant crisis, seeking to destabilize Polish and other European societies, fit into the hybrid war model?

My premise is that the key to Russian strategy lies in attempts, deliberate and well-documented, to trigger psychological and political reactions in its enemies, to bring traumatic experience back into political play. History – or more precisely *historiosophy* – here is understood as a device to trigger trauma – and also to defend against trauma.

To frame modern attempts to define Polishness, I adopt aspects of a conceptualizing paradigm of post-communism as a hybrid of post- and neo-coloniality – a country escaping Soviet imperialism, but finding itself in a western space saturated with the legacies of past colonialisms, often inside Europe itself (Poland’s partitions, for example), and neo-colonialism of the US-led kind in the Global South.

The paper explores how the border situation fed into moral panics about migrants and border security, creating a war-like language that necessitated more security, but also cemented Poland’s place in the West and strengthened the West’s antagonistic approach to and understanding of Russia.

Traumaland

Preliminary observations in 2024, a few months after the attempt to purge Law and Justice (PiS) placemen from office after eight years in power had started, suggested that Poland was still a society grappling with trauma.² Few participants in the border drama – activists, locals, police, army, or migrants – escaped without at least some kind of traumatization from their experiences. Stories of already emotionally and often physically traumatized people arriving at the border were not hard to find, nor of the locals and activists who tried to help them. But the drama clearly affected the “other side” too. For example, research by Sadura and Urbańska on the psychological impact of a hostile migration management policy on Border Guards gives an insight into the emotional impact on the Border Guards of government policy.³

² Bilewicz, Michał, *Traumaland: Polacy w cieniu przeszłości* (Warsaw: Mando) 2024. Bilewicz looks at the idea of Polish martyrdom and effects of war trauma. See also: Kowalski, Mariusz, 2002/01/01, Electoral Behaviour in Poland as the Effect of the “Clash of Civilization,” *Geografický časopis/Geographical review*.

³ Przemysław Sadura, “The Migration Crisis as a Strategy of Struggle for Political Power. The Case of Law and Justice,” *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, 12 November 2021; Przemysław Sadura and Sylwia Urbańska, *Dwie granice, dwie Polski*, *Polityka Krytyczna*, March 26, 2022.

This is hardly surprising given the role they had to play, as soldiers on a metaphysical battle field, real-time “defenders” of the national interest. The traumas of those guarding Poland thus spoke to wider and deeper issues of national identity. If all migrant reception systems shift between *securing* (neutral) and *securitizing* (“enemy–friend” based) approaches – in democracies hopefully finding a middle ground, a balance where rhetoric and policy meet, upholding civil rights and international conventions, on the one hand, and the need for border controls on the other – then in the period between 2015 and 2024, Poland lurched towards the securitizational end of the spectrum. All systems – from heavily militarized to open borders – are thus, we can say, the outcome of political choices, created via interactions between actors with different definitions of what constitutes threat and audiences who either endorse or reject such claims. There are no security issues per se, only issues that “securitizing actors” construct through the use of speech acts or “securitization moves.”⁴ One saw in this case a relationship develop between what appeared to be blind stigmatization of all “irregular” people crossing the border, punitive and hostile policy decisions, and increasingly militarized and criminalizing mechanisms (push-backs, detention, deportation) set up to deal with them.⁵ A process of creeping border surveillance and militarization was also taking place at a discrete level of quasi-privatization – aka outsourcing – blurring boundaries between public and private interests and weakening political accountability. The police and border guards became increasingly militarized and the army acquired civil functions – backed by EU policy and EU politicians’ rhetoric. The EU – including Poland – deployed legal, psychological, and physical violence in three spaces: first, at the point of entry; second, inside sovereign territory – illegalized migrants sent to specially designated “waiting zones” – camps, prisons, and detention facilities where asylum-seekers remained in limbo, as neither “criminals” (irregular migrants) nor beneficiaries of protection (recognized refugees); third, at the point of exit, states oblige illegalized migrants to voluntarily leave or be forcefully deported.⁶

This response was typical of a post-traumatized national polity. After all, “shock therapy” – the immediate post-communist plan to shift Poland from socialism to capitalism –

⁴Beck, M. (2017). *Securitisation of the Recent Influx of Refugees from the Middle East to Europe*. Center for MelleMØststudier; Bello, V. (2017). *International Migration and International Security: Why Prejudice Is a Global Security Threat*. Routledge; Bello, V. (2022).

⁵ The concept of “Departheid” perhaps best highlights how the West’s migration system was created for the protection of the Global North from “uncivilized” intruders.

⁶Balzacq, T. (2015). The “Essence” of securitisation: Theory, Ideal Type, and a Sociological Science of Security. *International Relations*, 29(1), 103-113; Myriam Douo, Luisa Izuzquiza, Margarida Silva, Lobbying Fortress Europe: The Making of a Border-Industrial Complex, *Corporate Europe Observatory*, 05.02.2021.

had not been an entirely coincidental term, but expressed the view that to remake Poles and to move away from *Homo Sovieticus* only a shock would work. And it did, on its own terms. But the effects of such a breakneck shift were not to be seen until after the 2008 financial crisis. Old traumas that had been apparently sidelined came back to life, while new and old methods for dealing with them arose. These were part of a wider debate gathering pace in the West about its identity, what kind of “civilization” was it and was to be, and how would this affect relations with other “civilizations” – after 2001, most clearly the Islamic one – but also the post-Soviet?

One can map out – if only in broad strokes – collective symptoms, including delusions of grandeur, paranoia, repetitive syndrome, and narcissism, often framed in a religious-infused lexicon of sin and punishment, while instrumentalizing profane fears of loss of sovereignty and statelessness. At the heart of the trauma was a rejection of the “*abject*” – I suggest – which became displaced during the “migrant crisis” from traditional onto new targets, ones that better fitted the zeitgeist and the age of AI, surveillance and social media reality.

The impression of threat, built around notions of “ethnic” or “racialized” territory, was a crucial feature of the emergent populism of the far-right after 2015 in Poland (and of course elsewhere).

Victim–perpetrator

A key dilemma that had become apparent after 1989 and was shunted center-stage in 2010 was whether post-communist Poland could – or indeed wanted to – sustain a self-defined image of victim, while also opening up historical research and public debate on actions and events in the past that put it – if only partially – on the side of the perpetrator.

Alexander outlines a model of trauma – derangements of collective representations – with competing narrative identifications of victim and perpetrator. He suggests a number of typical strategies by which societies cope with traumas. For perpetrators, the memory of trauma poses a threat to collective identity that may be addressed by denying history, minimizing culpability for wrongdoing, transforming the memory of the event, closing the door on history, or accepting responsibility. The dissonance between historical crimes and the need to uphold a positive image of the group may be resolved in another way – prompting the creation of a new group narrative that acknowledges the crime and uses it to accentuate the current positive actions of the group.

In the struggle to settle the “perpetrator–victim” debate after 1989, Poland had already been the site of many symbolic “battles” over the reconstructions of the meaning of initial traumas,⁷ not so much to understand the past, but to make sense of the present – and break the deadlock. The nationalist attempts to hijack November 11, Independence Day, was perhaps the most obvious case in point. But as a form of collective repetitive compulsion – the unconscious tendency to repeat a traumatic event, symbolically re-enacting it – it was perhaps best observed in reactions to the 2010 air crash in Smolensk, which under PiS became a kind of a meta-rehash of emotions tied to Katyn. Repetitive syndrome appeared as if “the nation” must relive – or be made to relive – the horrors of the past to remaster them, finally, even if only in the form of beating imagined enemies.

The subsequent decade saw a marked clash of competing “Polands,” exacerbated after 2014 by the return of war to Eastern Europe. Then came the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees after the full-scale Russian attack in February 2022.

The “choice” – as if traumatized entities have much of that scarce commodity – appeared as one between a public language saturated with religious motifs, idioms, and catechisms (good and bad, sin and punishment), or a secular language of rational argument, evidence, justice and rights. The nationalist–religious emphasis on a heroic and grandiose past, both imagined and real, ignoring talk about darker historical corners, was one stool, the other being a “Western” liberal “therapeutic” – “cosmopolitan” – approach that spoke of transparency, “coming to terms with the past,” opening and healing, a mutual exchange between victims and perpetrators.

Any observations became unavoidably enmeshed in this ongoing, if “submerged,” struggle between a culture of emergent, if stifled, “cosmopolitan” memory-based remedies and traditional religious and nationalist-based discursive “remedies.” This internal conflict was aggravated by a legacy of communist and then post-communist propaganda tinged with overtly nationalistic strands and one-sided historical education. To remember – and be reminded of – what it meant to be Polish was also to understand that modern Polishness was created largely in conflict with foreigners, both Polish and non-Polish citizens.⁸

⁷Alexander, Jeffrey C., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 2004, University of California Press. On 10 April 2010, an aircraft crashed near the Russian city of Smolensk, killing all 96 people on board, including the president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński. The group was flying from Warsaw to attend an event commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, which was to take place not far from Smolensk.

⁸ Kuus, Merje, “Europe’s Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe,” *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (2004): 472-489.

A nationalist approach

Warsaw under PiS seemed to have decided that its weapons of choice would be threats soaked in historiosophical rhetoric and semiotically (and if Border Guards were to be believed, actually) weaponized “irregular migrants” – all also, incidentally, potentially refugees – crossing into the swampy wastelands of north-eastern Poland from north-western Belarus. These were, after all, often stateless people (many made so by the Polish or Belarusian Border Guards’ alleged burning of their passports), and thus – for both sides – malleable vessels with just enough ascribable visible and pre-assigned cultural resonance for it to work, and few if any spaces for their voices to be heard.

The border infrastructure thus appeared as a crucible for a performative and demonstrative politics – like a medieval battle fought somewhere in a field. The forest was, after all, a relatively quiet, safe space until Ukraine descended into actual war, a place where theories could be (relatively) safely tested, reactions measured, new strategies rolled out, with plausible deniability and minimal casualties. It was also cheap – the arriving actors would pay for their own travel and accommodation.

For the spectacle to work, the audience had to witness the purging of foreign bodies.⁹ Stories about borders being breached, of brutal, animalistic attackers, destroyers of civilization were not incidental. Non-European migrants could be projected as terrorists or sexual deviants, evoking an ambivalent eroticism and exotic temptation – that which must be repressed. Both weaponized archetypes also evoked fears of enslavement – again evoking women and Muslims in an ambivalent exotic admixture of the sensual and the punitive, a classic Saidian form of Orientalism.

As if guarding the border symbolically during 2021, “LGBT-free” towns sprung up, dotting the border area, a kind of unofficial metaphysical defense force, often led by local priests rallying locals to repel the new devils. Intruders from outside the “European family” could be excluded, pushed back into the jungle, disappeared back into the dark. The government under PiS, for example, even started planting trees in the name of former Pope John Paul II. On the other hand, the idea of universal suffering – central to Levy and Sznajder’s

⁹Carmela Murdocca showed how the diseased and degenerate body is produced in media to ensure the exclusion of racialized bodies, to produce a subordinate group, with fears of the immigrant body expressed in relation to infectious diseases: Avian, SARS, HIV/AIDS, cholera, tuberculosis, and the plague.

“cosmopolitan memory,” a process through which global concerns become part of local experiences – had never found fertile soil here.

For many nationalists – in Poland and elsewhere – therapy, in its broadest sense, was distrusted as a Western – and among some catholic clergy even a “Jewish” – import, a symptom of collective decline, or worse, indoctrination rather than personal growth, and a threat to the social function – and income – of the clergy. Like “gender,” “therapy” occupied a space in the higher echelons of the “neo-Marxist” canon for such people. Why so? One potential answer is that it offered a path to recovery, and therefore a threat to the foundations of the Christian faith: endless rounds of salvation and redemption could be ended, and with them the Church’s entire business model. Opening up alternative – secular – avenues in which historical truths could be expressed beyond the confession box was, it seems, dangerous – speaking of democracy, not hierarchy, of pluralism, not ecclesiastical diktat – and it potentially spoke of beans spilled over wartime atrocities committed by parishioners. However, the traditional methods of dealing with trauma – expunging, purging, exorcising, cleansing, ritualized salvation, ignoring and denying it, while accepting God’s will, manifested in narratives of pain and suffering and told through visualized fables, morality tales of sin, punishment and shame – pre-modern religious concepts in a rhetorical rivalry over competing versions of (ostensible) modernity – were becoming increasingly less popular.

An enemy was needed, and Jan Gross appeared at just the right time. As Alexander notes, the most extreme form of defense against accusations of being a perpetrator is to deny that the traumatic events took place in the first place. Conservatives’ attacks on attempts in the late 1990s – such as Gross’s *Neighbors* – to open up painful historical issues were an example of this, a counterreaction to acknowledging and apologizing, as they saw it, and a reversion to a form of Soviet era “*deflective negationism*,”¹⁰ driven by a nationalist urge to marginalize traits in Polish society not grounded in Catholic-infused, ethnic-based Polishness. *Neighbors* opened a door to a public discussion about the past – in particular related to Poland’s “Jewish self” – and set off a chain reaction of denial, counter-research, discussion, and more denial and finger-pointing. PiS leaders called Gross’ and others’ work the “*pedagogy of shame*.” PiS MP and Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage Jarosław Sellin said, “wise historical

¹⁰Blutinger’s three traditional approaches to memory politics in Eastern Europe are instructive here: “aphasia” – a taboo on memory (typical of the communist era); “deflective negationism” – where bad things are recognized, but responsibility is placed on “outsiders”; and “open examination.”

policies should maintain pride in [Poland's] past achievements” and “put an end to allegations that history should be left to historians only.”

The crosses at Auschwitz episode in the late 1990s¹¹ can be seen as a kind of precursor to the post-2015 attempts at a (re?)Christianization of national identity. In 1998, ultranationalist Polish Catholics erected hundreds of crosses outside Auschwitz, crystallizing – Zubrzycki argues – latent social conflicts regarding the significance of Catholicism in defining Polishness and the role of anti-Semitism in the process.

Demonization

According to Kosman, who investigated the dominant frames in the coverage of Poland's largest public television network (TVP) news program *Wiadomości*,¹² it often implicitly or overtly linked Islam with terrorism. Kosman's findings show that TVP portrayed immigrants and refugees mostly as dangerous, the collocations creating a frame that portrayed people at the border as threats. He noted further the predominance of references to criminal actions, as evidenced by the frequency of “smuggler.” “*Wiadomości* portrayed them as undeserving of international protection, given that they were shown to be breaching international law,” he writes.¹³ The people on the border were also described as “aggressive” and prone to attacking the border guard (e.g. by throwing stones). Moreover, their ethnicity was usually mentioned explicitly. The words “Africa” and “Islamic immigrants” were widely used. He also noted the frequent use of the topos of numbers. As mentioned earlier, “group” formed one of the most frequent collocations with migrants. At the beginning of each month the number of people attempting to (“illegally”) cross the border was reported.

The people on the move were thus rhetorically allied with the aggressor – Belarus and Russia – and Poles who opposed the admission of refugees were presented as repressed in their own country because of the growing role of alleged political correctness, Kozłowska-Grzymała noted. Often, she says, people would frame themselves as “plain speakers” with no racist axe to grind.

¹¹Zubrzycki, Geneviève, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, 1998.

¹²Marcin Kosman, Framing the Polish-Belarusian Border in 2021. “Framing the Polish-Belarusian Border in 2021. The Case of Public Service Television (TVP),” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2024. He noted that the most relevant topoi were those of “savior,” “advantage,” and “people.” PiS was presented as a party that had saved Poland from danger and would do so again.

¹³Kosman, op cit.

TVP showed graphic scenes of “marauding illegal migrants” and “honest, patriotic Polish armed services.” But what it failed to mention were the factors that pushed those newcomers at the border out of their homes, forcing them to embark on such difficult journeys. For instance, the involvement of Poland in the 2003 intervention/invasion of Iraq was not brought up.

Between March and May 2022, Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with migrants, including families with children and single men, a human rights expert, and activists.

Functions of the crisis

The border spectacle was crucial on multiple fronts simultaneously: it retold Polish society the story it has traditionally told itself – beleaguered, isolated, plucky Poland fighting for “your freedom and ours” in an area of competing authoritarianisms. It simultaneously performed the function of symbolic disciplining of the indigenous population, while also providing news content, redirecting collective discontent, and legitimizing the growing role of the military in civilian affairs and military industries in Poland’s political economy. It reiterated that genuine patriotism is rooted in faith, kin, and army and could also be used to elicit sympathy, boost reserves of moral capital, and trigger the US into its natural default position when threatened, i.e., to build up arms. It also helped boost the Polish economy and cement Poland into US energy and military supply chains.

This worked – though perhaps not directly or even deliberately – to obfuscate many of the negative social issues tied to Poland’s post-communist transformation.¹⁴ It also provided a convenient cover for bypassing Poland’s mythology about its historical role in the East and its ambivalence over domestic “foreignness,” exemplified most profoundly in its relationships with Polish Jews.

These people being sent into Poland via Belarus cut across several lines, fusing Polish historical trauma and fear of military attack, national identity issues, immigration and border management policies, democracy and statehood issues, and Poland’s relations with neighbors, the EU, and more widely, the US in particular. Migrants could be weaponized on multiple

¹⁴Brzezinski, Michal, Michal Myck, and Mateusz Najsztab, *Sharing the Gains of Transition*; Maddie Tepper, *The Paradox of Transnational (Neo)Nationalism: Neo-nationalist Entanglements with Capital-“isms” in Modern Poland*; Bukowski, P. & Novokmet, F. (2017). “Inequality in Poland: Estimating the Whole Distribution by G-Percentile, 1983–2015.” *WiD Working Paper Series* 21. The main burden of the crisis in Poland was shouldered by workers.

fronts, from national security, military defense, and civic identity, to ethnic and religious identity, health issues, and wider issues related to exogenous redundancy (from work to reproduction) or perceptions of it. This in turn provided an excuse for their often performative maltreatment at the border, which was sanctioned and supported by the EU. Poland's eastern borders became one of Europe's many sites of performative moral and political recalibration, undertaken via strategically projected stories. The liberal-center after late 2023 altered some of the rhetoric, but continued the basic framing.

The Kremlin clearly saw in Poles' historical grievances and collective blind spots the makings of a strategy based on provoking "Polish complexes," deep-seated fears of defenselessness, the fear of "being disappeared" – deportations, usually unannounced – and this was also clearly a basic element of Putin's ploy to provoke Polish "complexes." Pro-Kremlin disinformation websites started to demonize Poland as a war-monger, "the hyena of Europe" founded on the ruins of the Russian Empire in 1918. Poland was "the *spetsnaz* of Europe" – "a Europe of bloody colonization and inquisition."

There were also obvious congruences in the Kremlin's and the Polish nationalists' projected images of each other. PiS's politics of fear, as Potulski and Modrzejewski¹⁵ call it, for example, clearly coincided with Putin's domestic strategy. For example, both sides adopted methods common to quasi-police states: subjugating public media, neutering the independence of the judiciary, attacking minorities, and justifying all these actions with the need to bring order, using a language of moral majoritarianism.

Centuries of statelessness have left Poles with a "post-traumatic" attitude towards sovereignty, making them wary of powerful foreign blocs, the EU, the USSR, and now Russia, Kuisz notes.¹⁶ Ambivalence about "the East" was manifested in a dualistic fear of Russia as a threat if it existed and a threat if it ceased to exist. A Russian collapse would evoke fears of a void, a borderless landmass open to mythical invaders dredged up from the past, Asiatic hordes, Genghis Khan. Such fears were something the Kremlin was adept at exploiting, evoking old fears of "the East" as a wild, dangerous, unpredictable and cruel force – one that, itself unstable, would destabilize others as a matter of course. Playing on historical pathologies – instrumentalizing deeply embedded schemata, often latent, of repetitive compulsion, projection, denial and rejection of the "abject" – that would feed into an identity crisis and

¹⁵Modrzejewski, Arkadiusz. "Fear as a Tool of the Electoral Narration of the Conservative-Populist Right Wing in Poland." *XLinguae*, 2024.

¹⁶Kuisz, ...

social conflicts, Russia sought to return the CEE region to its traditional role as a malleable muddle, recreating Russia's imperial buffer zone, its "Near Abroad." This played on Polish fears of loss of sovereignty, told through idioms of territory, of land beneath one's feet, evoking solid borders, rules, regimes. Fears of statelessness evoking embedded nationalist-driven fears of "the Jewish threat," "the female threat," and the "Asiatic threat" folded internal and external fears into a single entity and evoked echoed fears of mass displacements and NKVD early morning round ups and deportations "to the East." The border situation was one of several instruments used by Russia and Belarus in their hybrid weaponization strategy to re-evoked and deepen what they hoped would be traditional Polish pathologies. Russian decision-makers were also conscious that Poland contributed significantly to shifts in the approach of Western European states towards Russia.

The paradigmatic event – and the meta-signals it evoked to Katyń – in modern Russo-Polish relations is the 2010 crash in Smolensk. Its symbolic power lies in the process of reawakening historical demons. Katyń, after all, had been an attempt to liquidate the elite of the new Polish state that had re-emerged after 1918. Katyń was also a key part of relations between post-Soviet Russia and Poland, evoking for example memories of Western, mainly British, collusion in the cover up.

We need not rehash the details of the crash and its aftermath. Suffice to note that it fueled anti-Russian sentiment among far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists, claiming it was a political assassination, an act of war against Poland or a coup attempt, all orchestrated by Russia. On 1 December 2022, PiS attempted to amend a Sejm resolution on recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism in order to include a section describing Russia as being "directly responsible" for the crash.

But oddly, PiS was also overtly perhaps the most anti-Russian of Poland's main parties. This saw the peculiar juxtaposition of PiS developing a Smolensk conspiracy theory that framed Russia as the perpetrator, alongside a quiet conspiracy of silence over questions of illiberalism and often common interests in deposing a pro-EU liberal government in Warsaw.

Indeed, as was later revealed, Putin had decided around 2004 – the date of Poland joining the EU – that Warsaw would be key to creating tensions between Russia and the West, if such a need would arise.¹⁷ Grochmalski notes how this decision was taken on the day Russia

¹⁷Passing as Poland's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, in January 2023, Russian intelligence services forged the ministry's official logo and sent thousands of emails to Polish citizens asking them to provide information on whether they were hosting or renting rooms to Ukrainians.

established a new national holiday – the date of the expulsion of Poles from the Kremlin in 1612. He writes: “Since 2004, Russians have been taught to hate Poland; this process is progressing, and at the moment it is very similar to what the Russians did to Ukrainians.”

Gendered rivalry

The Polish–Russian “conversation” has been marked to a significant degree by genderized discourses, both deliberately and strategically deployed (by Russia and western nationalists in their so-called “culture wars”) and also as a product of the way in which rival national identities and state-building processes in Eastern Europe have traditionally been entwined culturally and idiomatically with gender: statehood as manhood, statelessness as effeminization; agency versus passivity, reason against chaos, security versus securitization. As we will see, gender would also play a key role in how migrants/refugees were discursively constructed on and by both sides.

On the one hand, Russia pointed to Polish weakness – alleged feminization (submission) at the hands of its stronger Slavic neighbor – and at the same time teased Poles about belonging to a “degenerate” Western society, one that celebrated the LGBTQ “lifestyle.”¹⁸ The Putin government’s bio-political intervention in the domestic Russian gender order was also a key factor; performative masculinity was clearly associated with deep social injury: a sense of shame and humiliation and accompanying anger.

In turn, those nationalists supported by Putin – indirectly including PiS – complained in their own Western countries of “wokeness.” Western Europe was described as a culture dominated by leftist influence, in which Christian values, tradition, and family had been forgotten. PiS also drew a connection between these “modern” ideas and the rise of Islamic terrorism in Europe, a process it said was both a product of Europe’s degeneration and a harbinger of things to come if left unchecked.

So, in a sense one sees a strangely inverted set of images, one projecting overt male power, while playing on fears of its own impotence and redundancy – a castrated (martyrological) view of the world – and the other projecting a plural, open liberal society more

¹⁸*NFP*, Sept 7, 2022, “Polish Leader Kaczyński Sues Journalist Who Alleged He Is Gay.” Jan Piński claimed that files on Kaczyński had been used by Antoni Macierewicz, deputy leader of PiS, to exert control over him.

accepting of difference in its many forms but imposing what can be described as neo-coloniality, economic and political.

An irony of anti-Russianism in Europe that saw Russia as emblematic of feminine archetypes – chaotic, lacking rationality, unpredictable, driven by emotion – is that Western nationalists shared the view of European masculine Whiteness promised by Putin. Hence, while the Russian tactic was to push Poland to accept refugees from outside Europe, while accusing it of being part of a degenerating Western culture, a multi-kulti feminization of the West, its strategy actually drove a marked masculinization of projected Polishness via pushbacks of migrants, the erection of “strong” borders, fences, and the militarization of border zones.

It is also no coincidence that Kremlin trolls targeted what in the West became known as Incels.¹⁹ Bonnie Mann notes that in the 1990s, the transition to democracy in Poland established itself in some parts of Poland’s collective consciousness as a re-masculinization of national culture, feminized by state socialism. In a strange irony, restricting abortion actually became for the far-right a symbol of the victory over communism, a process of national “uncastration.”²⁰

PiS in turn also framed its discourse as a form of re-patriarchization of women’s reproductive rights, presenting fertility as national necessity. The Polish Health Ministry even released a video showing reproduction of rabbits – encouraging citizens to multiply... like rabbits. Meanwhile, as Graf points out, rightist discourse notes that in PiS discourse on abortion, “foetuses” were replaced by “children” and the discussion revolved around the “protection of life” rather than the “right to choose.”

Race

One can talk of a key strand of Polish “coloniality” as domestic – the “home” front – in relation to Polish Jews. The Kremlin had much to play with here. A key element of the

¹⁹Mann, Bonnie, “How America Justifies Its War: A Modern/Postmodern Aesthetics of Masculinity and Sovereignty,” *Hypatia*, 21:4 (2006); Ashwin, Sarah and Jennifer Utrata, ‘Masculinity Restored? Putin’s Russia and Trump’s America,’ *Contexts*, 19:2 (2020).

²⁰Wojciech, Aleksander Śmieja, *Between Traditions and Technology: Political Radicalism and the Spectacle of Masculinity in Contemporary Poland*.

nationalist canon was also talk about the alleged *disintegration of the state*, and the abolition or dilution of borders – by Jews.²¹

The Ukraine war revived among far-right nationalists the myth of Polin – a Jewish state either planned on the territory of present-day Poland, or for centuries “secretly functioning in parallel to the official state.” In Polin, Poles would have a subordinate status, that of slaves in a “Jewish civilization.” Janion claims that a phantasm still popular, in an exaggerated version, was that Poland is actually secretly ruled by Jews (or people pretending to be “Polish,” while in fact Jews).

Another element of the antisemitic content outlined in the POLIN report was the identification of Ukraine with Jews. If Ukraine is a Jewish outpost, then any mutual friendly gestures between Poland and its eastern neighbors are in fact vassal gestures to the Jews and are interpreted as submission.²²

Poland’s “East”

As Tötösy de Zepetnek noted, Poland could be located spatially and temporally as a bulwark against the European “Other” – but also as part of that “Other.”²³ This suggested then both weaknesses and strengths. Poland could leverage support in the West by acting as a wall against Russia, framing its Russophobia as “defense of the West” long before Berlin’s U-turn in 2022, after which Warsaw reacted to Russian provocations by shoring up alliances with Western partners and drilling down on Russophobic messaging in Washington and Brussels. Poland was thus increasingly to play a key role in deteriorating Russian relations with the West. Poland’s “history policy” – once seen as a sideshow – in this vein took a much more central stage, framing a strong Poland against a weak and “Asiatic” Russia.

²¹Polonsky, Antony, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* Vol 14: “Focusing on Jews in the Polish Borderlands,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 14, (Liverpool University Press); Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place* (Harvard University Press); Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (xx)

²²“Kogo widzą Polacy, kiedy widzą Żyda” op cit.

²³Tazbir, J. 2017. “From Antemurale to Przedmurze, the History of the Term.” *Odrodzenie i reformacja w Polsce* 61 (2): 67–87.

Poland had a lot of material to work with. Pogonowska notes common stereotypical beliefs where the “European Pole” has to fight against the “Asian-Muscovite,” a barbarian from the savage East.²⁴

Meanwhile, as Jukic writes,²⁵ Russians’ treatment of Poland and Polishness was perhaps more ambivalent. Was it a weathervane for Russia’s perceptions of and relations with the West, which fluctuated over the centuries between *philia* and *phobia*, or a conductor, relaying unmediated messages backwards and forwards, or – as is most likely – a decoding agent for relations between East and West? In eras in which Russia looked west for inspiration, Poland could stand for Enlightenment values, “civilization,” good manners, etc.

Russia also sought to frame debates within Polish historiography – or at least in the less nuanced form, it became presented to a wider, lay public as mythological images of historical events – as admissions of colonial culpability in relations with “the East.”²⁶

With this background in mind, it isn’t hard to see why the Volhynia massacres also became a weapon in the Kremlin’s propaganda armory, fusing social media and public statements by prominent members of Putin’s clique, aiming to “expose” Poland’s contemporary “colonial” intentions, its aim of reconstructing a Polish empire in the east. Bandera – ironically highlighted in similar campaigns in Ukraine by Russian bots as a Nazi collaborator – could in this sense be framed as a freedom fighter, the leader of a colonial liberation movement against Poland. Inflaming residual Polish anger over the Volhynia massacres was obviously intended to deepen such antipathies. Confederation, the far-right political party in Poland, was a useful conduit for spreading such myths.

Poland became a key ally of the US in Europe in particular after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, though the process had long been moving in that direction from the “New Europe” paradigm spoken of by Donald Rumsfeld et al. in 2002/3 and after. Given its awkward geopolitical location, Poland – as Thompson hints – had little choice but to show fealty initially to the Western powers – and this clearly meant a rather unbalanced love affair. At the same time, however, new forms of institutionalized contact created channels

²⁴E. Pogonowska. *Dzikie biesy. Wizia Rosji sowieckiej w antybolszewickiej poezji polskiej lat 1917- 1932*, Lublin 2002. 92-93.

²⁵Jukic, Luka Ivan, “Why Putin Is Haunted by the Spectre of Polish Power,” March 4, 2024.

²⁶See: Was Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth a Colonial Power? – Hieronim Grala, *PISM*, October 1, 2017; “Debaty IBI AL” vol. I, 2008, pp. 12–72; J. Kieniewicz (ed.), *Perspektywy postkolonializmu w Polsce*, Polska w perspektywie postkolonialnej, *Debaty Artes Liberales*, vol. X, 2016; J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, *Universitas*, 2011.

through which it could influence the making of future rules from within. Thompson's description of the relationship between Poland and the West as a "surrogate hegemon" may have underestimated the dialectical nature of such institutionalized and cultural channels, but it is clear that Polish aspirations of being included in Western Europe and accepted as not a "barbarian Slavonic" people did lead – if only superficially – to the creation of some kind of para-colonial relationship with Western countries.²⁷

In this light, discourses that Orientalized the East (Russia and the Soviet Union) in turn cemented the region's dependence on the West, "a reverse result of mobilizing, through the discourses of Eastness, a fantasy of autonomy. It highlights a tendency to transfer one's 'Eastness.'" ²⁸

Poland thus joined "the West" on terms lacking in political leverage, pushed by its historical desire to exit the East. But the channels for a recouping of this deficit had been created, on the condition that "the East" would again become a threat to states further west. Poland's "border defense of the West" narrative was about showing muscle, commitment to NATO – to "the West" – that Poles knew whose side they were on, and accepting their position in the hierarchy.

At the same time, issues around mass migration offered a discursive space for the PiS-led coalition after 2015 to locate Poland as a "champion" of the West. What had previously been an extreme nationalist discourse was mainstreamed, a useful weapon in the hands of political groups, welding together "Muslim migrants" at the border and a malign Russian strategy, lumping both into a single "Orientalized" pot.

If Merkel's 2015 "wir schaffen das" ("we can do it") had opened up a crucial question about Europe, and Germany's role within it – was it to be non-militaristic, pluralistic, open and acknowledging of past crimes ("cosmopolitan" in the sense defined by Levy and Sznajder) or militarized, defensive and closed? The answer seemed to be moving rapidly towards the latter by 2024. This had profound implications for Poland, where domestic narratives about Germany

²⁷The notion of "intra-European colonization" was first used to describe Ireland in the British Empire. Seamus Deane, *Irish Literature: Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Deane, 1990.

²⁸Zarycki, Tomasz, "Polish Stereotypes of the East: Old and New Mechanisms of Orientalization in the Regional and Transnational Dimensions"; Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Magdalena J. Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester, and Elena Gapova, *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); David Cadier, *Populism, historical discourse and foreign policy: the case of Poland's Law and Justice government*, 2020, *International Politics*.

– ranging from largely negative age-old stereotypes to more positive contemporary imaginings
– played a crucial role in PiS’s success at the polls from 2015 onwards, and later, the PO-led coalition’s pivot back towards Europe after its election win in October 2023.

While the Commission’s sanctions process, Article 7, achieved little, the admonishment was public and highly symbolic. The European Commission only ended the rule-of-law procedure – Article 7 – launched against Poland in 2017 in May 2024, noting that the new government had “launched a series of measures to address the concerns on independence of the justice system, has recognized the primacy of EU law and is committed to implementing all [European court] judgments related to rule of law.” The new government pledged to reverse PiS’s reforms. In February, it presented Brussels with an action plan to restore the rule of law.

The border strategies deployed by both wings of the Polish political elite were supported by the EU and, in fact, in some ways subsequently directed EU policy (viz Russia generally, but also migrants and support for Ukraine) and created a situation in which “Muslims/Migrants/Terrorists” became terms used interchangeably in public official discourse as a way of symbolically justifying a punitive border policy. Both Polish liberals and conservatives, then, after 2021 succumbed – to varying degrees – to a version of Polishness that largely failed (in the liberals’ case) or outright rejected (in the conservatives’ case) any remodeling of traditionally rigid ideas of Polishness as an ethnic and Catholic identity, a process that had started in the late 1990s and was ongoing in various streams of society.

Böröcz and Sarkar²⁹ suggest that denigration of the Muslim “Other” can be read as an attempt to portray Poland as “West-compatible.” For others, it was a (re-)masculinization of Polishness. Wherever it was, the existence of overlapping and interacting archetypes of Jews, women, and gays – the abject – in traditional Polish nationalist discourse, and more widely among society, tells us something about how the anti-migrant discourses post-2015 acquired such visceral and immediate expression. As if dormant, the archetypes were re-evoked and rolled into action, Muslims wandering into a space metaphorically once occupied by Jews.³⁰

²⁹At an anti-Muslim protest in Wrocław in mid-November 2015, shortly after the elections, was organized by several far-right groups, such as the neo-Fascist All-Polish Youth, and was accompanied by the burning of an effigy of a Hassidic Jew.

³⁰Steinlauf, Michael, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

Conclusions

The migrant “crisis” after 2021 was avoidable. Polish decision makers chose to demonize those crossing the border, increase security, and militarize the border region. Alternatives existed and were largely ignored. The “crisis” developed through familiar dynamics: a combination of Russian provocations and Western allies’ mistakes, one of which was a failure to address historical traumas and disregard in the western part of the EU for the concerns of the new eastern members – concerns about Russian intentions in particular – and then acting too late and with little authentic strategic purpose. Meanwhile, Russia would not allow Poland to forget the past, at least its version of it, while Poland – Russia’s eternal enemy – would not back down. Germany was driven by ambivalence over Russia until its post-1945 stance broke down in January 2022.

Poland pushed an anti-cosmopolitan historical agenda, based on a certain way of handling its own trauma, after 2015 and PiS’s second coming. Its stance posited Soviet communism as morally equivalent to the Holocaust, partly as a way of downplaying Polish complicity in the murder of Jews in the war. Poland simultaneously pushed NATO and the US into an anti-Russian stance.

The EU was thus split and its contradictory stance on migration exposed: admonishing CEE nationalists, but also needing them as a kind of buffer zone against Russian expansionism.

From Poland’s perspective, the migrant situation after 2015 and in particular in 2021 was an instrument it could use for galvanizing support, moral capital to be accumulated and spent on decidedly political ends. The “crisis” on the Belarus border provided a canvas for Polish nationalists – and later liberal-centrists – to paint a picture of Poland as the first line in defending the West, a version of it at least, while sidelining and avoiding some of the complications associated with actually being part of it. Islamophobia clearly assumed a more central discursive function after 2001, a sanctioned expression of enemy threat, based on the post-9/11 US foreign policy-led paradigm. The migrant “crisis” along the Belarusian border starting in 2021 provided a new space, terrain, and actors, both figuratively and literally, to continue this paradigm.

If the Russian goal was to swing the Polish center towards the right, mainstreaming far-right talking points, it worked. But if it was aiming to cement them into wider narratives, for example, to help frame the EU as an enemy and Russia as a template for a revitalized Christian, patriarchal Europe, it largely failed (at least at the time of writing in late 2024). Instead of

weakening Polish ties with the West, they actually appeared to strengthen them – both the Atlanticist and EU versions – in all spheres, from a deeper social level of cultural integration to formal security and political and economic commitments.³¹ Polish self-identity was also boosted by this “war on migrants.” Poland was finally able to call itself a “proper” Western nation, and one whose clout was growing. If this was a process that required ditching complexes, it worked. Putin’s strategy had backfired. But the cost was migrants’ lives, respect for international law, political transparency, and a heightened threat of international war.

Then it all suddenly made sense: was this not a dialectical process of religious contra secular – traditional vs. modern – responses to legacies of past traumas? Polishness on home soil as a performative synthesis, a reflex, a doxic response to real threats, a ritualized cant against bad spirits, fending off demons. Through the prism of Bourdieuan³² analysis, the dreary hetero-normativity inscribed in body language and language itself, the sullen, suspicious, conspiratorial, hard blank faces, thousand-yard stares, shallow machismo and monotonous performative homogeneity could be explained as deeply coded forms of cultural securitization. Perhaps Poland had not yet shifted from “the culture of trauma” to the “culture of acknowledged memories,” to borrow Thompson’s phrase, caught in a retarded stage of development, a kind of adolescence of democracy. Or was this a sign of a deeper wisdom, of resilience borne out of centuries of subjugation?

Polish trauma thus evolved into a useful resource for political manipulation rather than a condition that required treatment. Maybe that could come after Putin’s demise, but thoughts of a post-Putin Russia – or any Russia other than a defeated one – were few and far between during the “crisis” years.

³¹Basulto, Dominic, *Russophobia: How Western Media Turns Russia Into the Enemy*. White stains, black stains. Difficult issues in Polish-Russian relations, edited by Adam Daniel Rotfeld & Anatoly V. Torkunov, Warsaw 2010

³²Klimeczak, Joanna, “Punitiveness of Polish Society – a Variable or Permanent Trait?” February 2024, *Societas/Communitas* 1(35):113-126.

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