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# PiS and Polish History

How the Party Uses the Past to Shape the Present

By *Mateusz Mazzini*



On April 5, Poland's Supreme Administrative Court issued a ruling allowing the government to merge the country's [Museum of the Second World War](#), in Gdansk, with the Westerplatte Museum, a smaller institution commemorating the war's first battle between German and Polish troops in the same city. The Museum of the Second World War was created by the liberal government of former Prime Minister [Donald Tusk](#) in 2008, and it presents the conflict from an international perspective, attempting to reflect the universalism of the suffering it caused. Poland's ruling conservative [Law and Justice](#) (PiS) party has rejected this framing, arguing, in the words of Culture Minister Piotr Glinski, that it does not put "enough stress on the Polish point of view."

The court's decision was the latest episode in an ongoing struggle between Poland's liberal-minded Europhiles and its Euroskeptic conservatives over how to approach Polish history. Since PiS took



country's thorny past, seeing few political benefits in, for example, formally commemorating its [democratic transition](#). This has created a vacuum that PiS has now filled in service of its own ends.

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Since PiS took power, Poland has been swept by a wave of official historical revisionism. First, a number of PiS politicians started to suggest that prominent transition figures who now serve as opposition lawmakers were in fact in league with the former communist authorities. In December 2015, speaking at an event commemorating Poland's 1970 riots, Polish President Andrzej Duda suggested that the country's post-transition leaders had treated "[communist criminals](#)" as "[men of honor](#)." His comments have been echoed by other PiS officials, such as the deputy internal affairs minister, Jarosław Zieliński, who accused the Senate Deputy Speaker Bogdan Borusewicz, a former member of the pro-democracy union [Solidarity](#), of [protecting communist informants](#) during a more recent vote on reducing pensions for former Secret Service functionaries.

For Poland's liberals, [the transition](#) stands out as a rare success story among postcommunist states: in the 1990s, the country built a healthy democracy and a stable financial system. Duda and Zieliński were appealing to Poles who instead believe that transition-era liberals allowed former communist elites to maintain much of their influence, undercutting Poland's democratization and excluding many citizens from the fruits of economic growth.

The offensive peaked in February 2016, when the Institute of National Remembrance, a research institution affiliated with Poland's government, released files appearing to show that Lech Wałęsa—an icon of Poland's anticommunist resistance, a co-founder of Solidarity, and a vigorous critic of the PiS leadership—had collaborated with the communist government's secret police in the 1970s. Ruling-party officials saw a clear opportunity: [Jacek Sasin](#), a PiS lawmaker, suggested that Wałęsa should be stripped of his status as a Solidarity icon and be replaced by the Kaczyński brothers, among others. It's true that Jarosław Kaczyński—like his brother, Lech, the former Polish president who died in a 2010 plane crash—had an important role in Solidarity, and it's possible that Wałęsa served as an informant under official pressure before the formation of that group. But the intensity with which PiS was pushing Poles to turn their understanding of Polish history on its head was striking.

So was the lack of resistance from Poland's liberal opposition. Distracted by internal conflicts and day-to-day politics, they sought to defend Wałęsa and other top figures but did not respond to the underlying trend: the reinterpretation of Polish history. When the liberal lawmaker Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz argued in January that "[matters of memory and history should be left to historians, not to politicians](#)," she, like others in the opposition, was failing to recognize the extent to which PiS' actions had made such a division of labor impossible.





*PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński in Warsaw, May 2016.*

The liberals' feeble response was the result of a broader failure to properly reckon with Polish history. In the 27 years since the transition to democracy, liberal Poles have generally sidestepped the past. They seem to have believed that addressing it would have risked creating costly controversies. Consider the legacy of the 1989 Round Table Talks between the communist authorities and the democratic opposition: some former Solidarity members question the concessions given to former regime officials and thus regard the talks as a failure rather than a success. As a result, the anniversaries of the talks have often been marked by controversy and a lack of official gravitas—as in 2009, when separate commemorative events were held by then President Kaczyński and by some of the participants of the talks.




There is no public holiday marking Poland's transition from communism, no single day set aside to commemorate the moment when Poland became a democracy, though the country observes the anniversaries of several minor and major events from the transition period. Since 1989, the Christian Epiphany has become a public holiday, and the Polish government has reestablished holidays marking the 1791 signing of an early constitution and the 1918 creation of the Second Polish Republic. But no government has honored the end of the Round Table Talks or the June 1989 elections—the country's first open vote since before World War II—in the same manner, and the country's school curricula only [scratch the surface](#) of the late communist and post-transition periods.

It is this vacuum, created by successive Polish governments, that PiS is now filling. The party emphasizes moments of heroism and national glory, but it downplays controversial issues, such as the role of Poles in the murder of Jews around the time of World War II. Many of its tactics are plainly partisan: last year, for example, the government merged a commemoration of the plane crash in which Lech Kaczynski was killed (a central event in PiS' history) with a celebration of the [Warsaw Uprising](#).

Plenty of young Poles, especially politically active ones, are fascinated by Poland's transition from communism to democracy and by the other turning points in the country's recent history. The trouble is the source of their historical knowledge. Too often, it comes from right-wing



Spread widely enough, these positions pose a danger to the foundations of democracy. In Poland as elsewhere, the best way to push back and improve the quality of political debate is through grass-roots movements that promote factual accounts of history, free from narrow visions of national identity. 

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