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# Dealing with Communist Past – the Polish Experience

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## Short chronology

- 1976-1989 opposition, especially „Solidarity” used history as a source of own legitimization and de-legimitization of the communist system; first attempts to deal with the past
- 1990's – „lost decade”
- 2000 – creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN)
- 2010's – growing interest of the public, political tensions

# Justice

- 1989 – Rokita's parliamentary commission; obstruction by Communist-lead Ministry of Interior; report – 88 cases of secret service/militia involvement in killings, or at least proofs of manipulations in investigations; dozens of investigations started, few ended in the courts
- 1991 notion of „Stalinist crime” introduced; less than 100 accused
- 2000 specialized prosecutors unit created within IPN; „communist crime” defined in the law; thousands of investigations; 550 accused
- Main problems: passing time, lack of evidence, legal issues (Supreme Court rulings)

# Rehabilitation, compensation

- 1991 Act on declaring invalid judgments issued against persons repressed for activities for the sake of the independent existence of the Polish State, legal procedure, compensation for imprisonment
- Many categories of repressed omitted, 14 amendments (last 2021)
- 2015 Act on activists of the anti-communist opposition and people repressed for political reasons; special status, benefits (healthcare privileges, monthly allowance, periods of imprisonment and unemployment because of political repressions included in pension calculation)



# Symbolic recognition

- Monuments, street names etc. (First monuments of victims of communism – 1981)
- Many people decorated with „standard” state decorations, especially after 2005
- 2003 Siberian Exiles Cross
- 2010 Cross of Freedom and Solidarity (over 7 thousand decorated)



## New remembrance days/public holidays

- 1990's communist holidays/remembrance days cancelled
- 2002 Day of Remembrance of the Martial Law Victims (13 December)
- **2005 Freedom and Solidarity Day** (31 August)
- 2006 Day of Remembrance of June 1956 revolt in Poznań (26 June)
- 2007 Day of Remembrance of Katyń Massacre Victims (13 April)
- **2011 Day of Remembrance of „Cursed Soldiers”** (1 March)
- 2013 Freedom and Civil Rights Day (4 June)
- 2013 Siberian Exiles Day (17 September)
- **2018 Day of Remembrance of Steadfast Clergymen** (19 October)

# Exhumations & DNA identifications

- 1990's, 2000's – several attempts, mainly individual efforts
- 2011 IPN with Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites and Ministry of Justice starts big program of search for unknown burial places of the victims of communism
- 2012 – first identifications (thanks to relatives DNA)
- Big interest of media & public



# Lustration

- 1990's – long debates, without result
- 1992 failed attempt, political crisis
- 1997 Act on disclosure of work or service in state security organs or cooperation with them in the years 1944-1990 of persons performing public functions
- „Polish model” – admitting to past collaboration/service enough for holding public offices; court verifications; complicated procedure
- 2006 new law, IPN responsible for lustration, more people vetted
- Online catalogs of state security & party functionaries
- Limited attempts of self-lustration (Catholic church)



## De-communisation, „Disubekization”

- 1990's – failed attempts at de-communization
- 2009 political consensus, former communist security service functionaries pensions reduced to the average level
- 2016 political conflict, further reduction of pensions (post-1990 service period treated like pre-1990)

# Public space

- First communist monuments demolished in 1989
- 1990 – 1864 street names changed
- 2013 – only 8 streets, IPN education campaign
- 2015 – more than 1000 remaining, 500 monuments & memorial plaques
- 2016 Act on the prohibition of the promotion of communism or other totalitarian system by the names of organizational units, commune auxiliary units, buildings, facilities and public utilities, and monuments (state may force local government to change a name or remove a monument)
- Protests of Russian government (problem of „gratitude monuments”)



# Access to archives

- „Right to the truth”
- 1990’s limited access to communist party files, almost none to former secret services, many destroyed 1989/1990
- 2000 – communist party archives open
- 2000 – creation of IPN, over 90 000 meters of files accessible to the victims, researchers and journalists
- 2006 – liquidation of postcommunist military secret service, hidden materials found
- 2016 – last top secret materials available



# Research

- 1980's – first research & documentation initiatives in the underground (Solidarity Archive, Eastern Archive)
- 1990's – Institute of Political Studies created with limited team of historians; Karta Centre - NGO; individual efforts of historians, lack of wider state support
- 2000 creation of IPN – Public Education Office with more than 100 historians specializing in the history of communist era; over 1500 books published; opening archives – big wave of interest of historians



# Education

- 1980-1981 exhibitions organized by „Solidarity”, popular publications on contemporary history
- Martial law – supplementary education materials printed in the underground
- 1989/1990 changes in school curricula, in many cases not introduced in practice (lack of lessons time, teachers not prepared)
- 1990's only NGOs active in the field (mainly Karta Centre)
- 2000 creation of the IPN, breakthrough (hundreds of exhibitions, thousands of other actions, web portals, materials for teachers, games)
- 2014 European Solidarity Centre, a few local museums
- Currently many public institutions and NGO active in the field; still no museum of communist terror

# Culture

- 1980's independent culture movement, partially involved in debates about past
- 1990's a few important movies, lack of wider interest of cultural milieu
- Since 2000 growing interest – movies, novels, plays (including special series of public TV theatre), pop, rock, rap music



# Conclusions

- Dealing with the communist past is a complicated, complex and multifaceted process
- It requires various tools – legal solutions, education, research etc.
- There is a place for many actors – public institutions, NGO's, local governments, museums, cultural institutions etc.
- State should play an important/leading role (legal framework, funding)
- It is late, but not too late