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Cultural Trauma of World War II: The Case of the Upper Silesian Village of Bojszowy

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Abstract

This article analyzes the trauma of war present in the collective memory of the inhabitants of the village of Bojszowy. It may transform into a cultural trauma that significantly determines the community's identity. Combining four strands of literature—memory studies, nationalist studies, historical studies, and psychological studies—the authors argue that in the community under study, the trauma connected with Upper Silesians' service in the Wehrmacht during World War II constitutes such a collective cultural trauma. Based on the study of the collective memory of the Silesian community and interviews with the Silesian intellectual elite, the article analyzes in detail how the memory of these events has changed the identity of the Upper Silesian community in recent years. This does not mean that we underestimate the importance of the other elements that make up the Upper Silesian tragedy. A combination of local circumstances meant that the service of Silesians in the Wehrmacht was crucial to the occurrence of cultural trauma (in J. Alexander's terms).

Keywords: postwar; national identity; memory politics; historical narrative

Introduction

The purpose of this text is to show how the trauma of war, present in the collective memory, can transform into a cultural trauma that changes the identity of a community. From the initial conception of *cultural trauma*, there has been a firm assertion that this form of trauma is distinct from and cannot be equated with trauma caused by a group experience of suffering (Alexander et al. 2004a). Certain conditions must be met that allow the community to understand that they have experienced trauma for cultural trauma to take place. In ongoing recollections of past experience, the community must be continuously recognized as the victim (Assmann 1999; Łuczewski 2017). The empirical study of cultural trauma must be specific to the phenomena that shape it, such as the Holocaust (Alexander 2004b; Giesen 2004), slavery in the USA (Eyerman 2004), postcommunist society (Sztompka 2000, 2004), or the identity of the German nation (Giesen 2004). John J. Kulczycki (2001) describes the problems of the Silesian collective identity that emerged in the region, especially in 1945, in connection with the events of World War II. He refers to the research by Stanisław Ossowski (1967), who proposed a different concept of national identity from the one officially adopted and presented by Polish authorities and publicists. For the vast majority of village inhabitants in Opole Silesia, nationality was not a permanent characteristic of an individual but rather something like belonging to a political party or accepting a political ideology, which may depend on the political balance at a given, historical moment, a factor that cannot be controlled or

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influenced by individuals. For the occupiers of Silesia, only their regional, Upper Silesian identity was of a permanent nature, imprinted on them from birth. Regional identity took precedence over the more or less ephemeral national identity. Only a few could afford the luxury of manifesting Polishness and of being active in the Polish national movement in the lands annexed by Nazi Germany. Researchers point out that, in this hostile environment, more vulnerable individuals gave in to the pressure, out of necessity or opportunism, and some even joined the Nazi party. Even school-age children joined the Hitlerjugend, whose influence was dangerous to resist. The “Polishness” of this majority was only found in their customs, traditions, and language, which they nurtured—not because they were in any sense Polish but as part of their own local Upper Silesian culture, which distinguished them from the Germans (Ossowski 1967, Kulczycki 2001, 211). Thus, in connection with the experience of World War II, there remains the fundamental problem of the identity in the Silesian community. Here, we examine the trauma associated with the service of Upper Silesians in the Wehrmacht during World War II. Research in other local communities would certainly yield different results. However, we conducted research in a village where a central figure restored the memory of soldiers serving in the Wehrmacht lives. For years, he has collected accounts from former soldiers and their families. It is a live subject in this village. Alojzy Lysko’s activities overshadowed other aspects of the Upper Silesian tragedy. Therefore, the findings from Bojszowy cannot be extrapolated to the Silesian community. The example of Alojzy Lysko’s activity can serve as an excellent exemplification of the role that, according to Jeffrey C. Alexander, is played by agents of trauma (Alexander 2004a).

Elsewhere, it is explained why other factors, which in other parts of Upper Silesia were conducive to the emergence of cultural trauma, were not at work in Bojszowy (Bierwiazzonek and Nawrocki 2019, 2020). The forced labor of women during the war was generally viewed positively. The memory of the tragic events associated with the entry of the Red Army in January 1945 was influenced by good relations with the personnel of the military airfield, who resided in Bojszowy for several months. This period completely changed the perception of the Soviet soldiers. The scale of the removal of miners from village to the USSR was also different. Although there were cases, they were dominated by the memory of the cruel treatment of Wehrmacht prisoners of war in the USSR. Even the immediate vicinity of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was not so significant (see Bierwiazzonek and Nawrocki 2019, 2020). Therefore, we decided to choose service in the Wehrmacht because that experience was not only traumatic but, in this case, transformed (in the light of the material collected) the identity of this community. Therefore we are interested in how the memory of these events has changed the identity of the community in recent years and in demonstrating how Silesians, deprived of the right to experience their own trauma, demanded the right to acknowledge the suffering of their own community and to symbolic compensation. Trauma becomes an important resource for community moral capital (Łuczewski 2017); thus, we go beyond cultural trauma theory and refer to analyses of “memory games” taking place around historical politics (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Neumayer and Mink 2013; Łuczewski 2017). In our analysis, we refer to a study (coconducted by one of the authors) of the collective memory of villagers in Bojszowy. Thirty informal interviews were conducted with residents at that time.¹ An analysis of the material collected in these interviews led the authors to put forward a thesis about the development of cultural trauma among Silesians, trauma resulting from their service in the Wehrmacht. In order to verify this thesis, the authors conducted three interviews with people from the intellectual core of the Silesian regional movement.² We also refer to the growing number of publications addressing the issue of Silesians’ service in the Wehrmacht (Kaczmarek 2010; Lysko 2017; Szmeja 2017; Rokita 2020).

Psychological Trauma versus Cultural Trauma

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association 2013), trauma refers to an event that goes beyond normal human experience, thereby exhausting the individual resources of the person who goes through such experiences. As a result of living through single episodes (e.g., rape, motor-vehicle accident) or prolonged experiences (e.g., war, ongoing sexual abuse), children and adults can

develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association 2013). Consisting of a broad spectrum of symptoms, PTSD involves: ruminating about and reexperiencing *flashbacks* related to the traumatic experience (including intrusive thoughts), hypervigilance, difficulty sleeping, lowered mood, and persistent avoidance of stimuli related to the traumatic event (people, places, thoughts, feelings; (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Complex posttraumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) refers to a clinical impairment following a prolonged trauma—lasting months or years—and is associated with a loss of control over one’s life as well as the inability to escape or make autonomous decisions (Herman 1992). Psychological problems resulting from human-centric trauma (e.g., war, abuse) are associated with longer-lasting and more severe presentations than the psychological changes observed following traumatic experiences caused by nonhuman factors (e.g., natural disasters; Charuvastra and Cloitre 2008). Research also indicates that PTSD and C-PTSD often co-exist with mental health challenges such as depression and/or anxiety disorders (Flory and Yehuda, 2015; Puetz, Youngstedt, and Herring, 2015), alcohol or substance addictions (María-Ríos and Morrow, 2020), and/or problematic internalizing behaviors (e.g., guilt or shame; (Lee, Scragg, and Turner 2011). Many individuals living with PTSD may also experience social isolation, stigmatization or self-stigmatization, and/or social bonding disorders (Bonfils et al. 2018; Charuvastra and Cloitre 2008).

According to Alexander (2004a, cultural trauma occurs when a community is subjected to a traumatic event that transcends previous experience and resources, thereby significantly and irrevocably changing the group’s identity. Alexander refers to the concept of trauma in psychoanalytic terms, although it is noteworthy that the criteria he described follow the clinical picture of PTSD, with the exception that cultural trauma affects a larger group, not merely individuals within that group (Braveheart-Jordan and DeBruyn 1995). Cultural trauma is cumulative and emotional, and it is cognitive suffering of many individuals that lasts for years and transfers to subsequent generations. Because of their shared experience, Braveheart-Jordan and DeBruyn (1995) point out that it can be more difficult for a community to explicitly work through grief and cope with trauma—the multifaceted nature of individuals’ experiences can prevent recovery. These difficulties are further exacerbated by a belief that “good people face something bad” (Alexander 2004b). It is worthwhile to refer to Lerner’s (1980) concept of a just world, which assumes the existence of a cognitive error related to the attribution of experienced suffering: good people should encounter good things, so the suffering and evil experienced may imply a deserved punishment for bad behavior. Research indicates that individuals with strong beliefs about the justice of the world are more likely to place blame on the victims, not on the tormentor. This way of interpreting events by the community can result in persistent feelings of guilt, catastrophic thoughts, and ruminations related to the trauma experienced, all of which can result in the development and prolongation of PTSD (Lee et al. 2011).

It is important to note that social support is an important protective factor against developing PTSD, especially receiving help from others. One central factor of trauma therapy is the ability to talk about what happened, to confront it, and to work through it (Schwartz 2016). As van der Kolk (2015) highlights, some people “forget their tongue” after experiencing a traumatic event, making it difficult to verbally describe events evoking powerful feelings of anxiety or fear. Immediately after the event, and even years after the trauma has occurred, individuals may lose the ability to describe the event when they recall it. In fact, neuroimaging evidence demonstrates decreased activation in Broca’s area (one of primary speech centers responsible for naming thoughts and emotions) following emotional trauma. This issue deprives the individual of the ability to communicate their feelings and perspective of events, disrupts memory consolidation and recall, and prevents the trauma from being worked through. This is even more important in the case of cultural trauma, where collective memory is a primary carrier not only for the trauma itself but also for how it will be passed on to future generations, an inheritance that leads to the collective experience and reliving (reproducing) the trauma. On the contrary, there is some evidence to suggest that *physiology* rather than cultural transmission and collective memory may better explain the generational transference

of PTSD. For example, a genetic susceptibility to the presence of reduced cortisol levels has been found to be related to the appearance of trauma symptoms in children of Holocaust survivors or war veterans (Yehuda and Seckel 2011).

Walters and Simoni (2002) proposed a model of trauma, coping, and health that accounts for cultural factors in Native American women. This model shows that cultural indicators such as identification-related attitudes, acculturation, or culturally derived coping styles are important mediators in the relationship between trauma experience and mental/physical health. Consistent with van der Kolk's (2015) assumptions that the key to trauma development is the context in which it occurs, Walters and Simoni's (2002) model clearly points to the relevance of cultural processes for dealing with trauma. Along these lines, it should be further emphasized that when a given community's culture is treated as undesirable or stigmatizing, the risk of developing PTSD is increased. Thus, it is the event itself *and* the environmental context in which the event occurs that contributes to traumatization. Therefore, it seems reasonable to apply this model more broadly, considering the culture not only of Native American women but also of other minority cultural groups in other regions around the world.

The Concept of Cultural Trauma

Psychology research in the 1990s laid the foundations for the “discourse of trauma” (Sztompka 2000, 16). The notion of trauma, which previously only functioned primarily in the field of psychology, became increasingly used by other social sciences and humanities fields during this time, including sociology (Caruth, 1995, 1996; LaCapra, 1994; Maruyama, 1996; Neal, 1998; Sztompka, 2000). In particular, the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California, provided a significant contribution to the discourse, stating, “trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society [...] when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2004a). It should be noted, however, that “events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction” (Alexander 2004a, 8). For trauma to emerge, members of the group must either experience the suffering directly or share a sense of suffering through symbolic extension and self-identity (Alexander 2004b, 199). Trauma occurs by “this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collectivity actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 2004a, 10).

Therefore, certain events may be traumatic at one point in history and not at another, so the sociocultural context is pivotal here (Smelser 2004). In this line, we can assume that cultural trauma is being referenced when (a) a memory is acknowledged, accepted, and publicly affirmed by the relevant group or (b) a community is triggered by an event or situation that is loaded with negative consequences, represented as unmovable, and treated as threatening to the existence of society or violating one or more of its basic cultural assumptions (Smelser 2004).

It is crucial for this group “to build a convincing framework for cultural classification” (Alexander 2004a, 12) and to construct a new story that convinces the group they have experienced trauma. It can be a struggle to define the situation and impose it on the group (Eyerman, 2004). According to Alexander (2004a, 13–15), waging such a battle, and the subsequent emergence of a collective imaginary, depends on answering questions about

- (a) the nature of the suffering (what happened to the group or wider community?)
- (b) the nature of the victim (what group of people was affected by the trauma?)

- (c) the relationship between victims of trauma and the wider community (what is the relationship between the community and the repressed group?)
- (d) assigning responsibility for the trauma (who hurt the victim?)

Next, we attempt to show how the individual tragedies of Silesians serving in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War transformed into a story about the experience of cultural trauma experienced by the Silesian community. Here, we understand the Silesian community as a group of people for whom identification with Silesianness is an important element of their identity. This concept is independent of the existence and intensity of their national identification (Polish, German, Silesian).

Upper Silesia: A Historical Problem

Within nation-states, regional histories have been subject to neglect or have been incorporated into the master narrative of the mainstream national history, becoming subordinated to the surrounding culture. Today, we are dealing with the opposite phenomenon: regions dissect their histories and attach equally legitimate stories about the history of Europe, its regions, and its national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups (Kamusella 2005, 134). Postwar Poland was rebuilt with the goal of an ethnically uniform national state from which all non-Polish elements were removed; the history of Upper Silesia was no exception. In this context, the identity of the contemporary population of Upper Silesia required verification and a revelation. Regional history should help in the process of identification with a small homeland whose past is often ethnically and politically un-Polish (Kamusella 2005, 135).

The word “Śląsk” (Latin for Silesia) in international terminology has meaning in relation to a geographical region and an area of historical significance. It is an area that currently lies within the borders of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany. The division into Upper and Lower Silesia, partly geographical but also historical and cultural, is of great importance. Upper Silesia lies in the basin of the upper Oder River and the initial course of the Vistula River occupying the southeastern part of historical Silesia. From the Historical point of view, Silesians have shaped their borders since the Middle Ages through conflicts over sovereignty between the interests of Polish and Czech princes. A significant date is 1348, when the Polish king Casimir the Great relinquished his rights to Silesia to the Czech king John of Luxemburg. From the point of view of separate history and different social and cultural experiences, this is important, because from that moment until the 20th century, Silesia was outside the territory of the Republic of Poland. The end of the First World War, and with it Poland’s regained independence, brought a great breakthrough for Upper Silesia, which was divided between Poland and Germany in 1922. “This is undoubtedly a key moment in history, which shaped most of the contemporary forms of Silesian regionalism in all its manifestations and forms [...]. Looking from the social side, the crossing of Upper Silesia by the Polish-German state border was a tragedy [...]. The first visible consequence was the mass resettlement of the population, who, driven by national considerations, abandoned their home areas to move to the other side of the border” (Smolorz 2012, 45–56). The Plebiscite and the Silesian Uprisings are a tragic part of the history of Upper Silesia, being a symbol of often fratricidal fights.

Again, the critical date for Upper Silesians is October 8, 1939, when after the September campaign, the Katowice Regency was incorporated into Germany and the Opole Regency was enlarged by new districts. In order to fight political opponents, to implement the Nazi racial and national policy, and to maintain maximum mobilization of the society for the war effort in the time of total war, methods of state terror including forced labor, special courts, imprisonment in concentration camps, arrests, executions of hostages, and even public executions were used against Upper Silesians (Kaczmarek 2011, 258). Upper Silesia posed a great challenge to German nationality policy. Basing the policy on the racial division of members of the German community into “ours” and “foreign” had to assume the possibility of accepting Silesians into the German

community under certain conditions due to their historical “Germanic” origin. The solution to the problem was to be the Deutsche Volksliste (DVL), the purpose of which was to divide the region’s population into four groups as the people were incorporated into the Reich: Groups 1 and 2 were politically active and passive members of the German minority who were granted German citizenship; Group 3 was constituted by other nationalities—for example, Upper Silesians who could, as an exception, be granted limited German citizenship; and after 1942, Upper Silesians were automatically granted a third group and treated temporarily as German citizens. The 4th group comprised people of German origin who were “Polonized” during the interwar period (Kaczmarek 2011, 260). Belonging to a particular group was obligatory for the Silesian population, and a special commission decided about its classification. The remaining inhabitants of the incorporated territories were recognized either as people under the protection of the German Reich (this meant deprivation of their political and partial civil rights and economic discrimination) or as enemies of the German Reich (Jews and Gypsies—for whom this meant deportation to the east and systematic murder; Kaczmarek 2010, 422). In reality, however, the needs of industry (e.g., certain positions in mining were linked to higher categories) and local considerations (such as the possibility of influencing the actions of the Commission) made it clear that the DVL had little in common with a given industry’s goals, and also said little about the actual identification of the people.

One of the more tragic *postwar* problems for Silesians was the compulsory military service of Upper Silesians in the Wehrmacht, which resulted from granting them German citizenship and introducing the general obligation to serve in the army. The Polish resistance movement recorded in its reports that about 250,000 men were conscripted in Silesia (Kaczmarek 2010, 177). Refusal to serve was directly linked to state terror and held consequences for entire Upper Silesian families, not just for individuals. The landing of the Allies in Italy and France was therefore connected with the mass desertion of Upper Silesians. Despite the liberation of Europe, together with the Polish Armed Forces in the West in the postwar reality, the history of the Upper Silesian shattered any attempt at a uniform image created after the war in the historiography of communist Poland, according to which Poles did not agree to cooperate with their Nazi occupiers. Postwar Poland was envisioned as an ethnically homogeneous nation-state, for ethnic Poles only (Linek 1997a, 168). The approaches to ethnic homogenization of Upper Silesia were to be “population transfer” (expulsion); “national verification”; and “national resocialisation” (ennationalization), “degermanisation,” and “repolonisation” (that is, Polonization) (Linek, 1997b; Kamusella, 2004: 31). A kind of “black legend” of the Upper Silesian was created, including the stereotype of an Upper Silesian as a renegade, a personage associated in the rest of Poland with traitors in Wehrmacht uniform (Kaczmarek 2010, 373). Such stereotypes were connected with the persecutions of the Silesian population after the war.

From the Trauma of War to Cultural Trauma

The Upper Silesian community felt the effects of the war long after its end. Silesians were imprisoned in German camps, miners were taken to work in Soviet Russia, civilians were displaced (regardless of their will) to Germany. There were still no men returning from the war, and Polish citizenship was not automatically regained by residents of the portion of Upper Silesia that belonged to Poland before the war. Citizenship status depended on the category of the DVL, which was assigned top-down to Silesians during the war. Many years later, this complex phenomena of degradation of the Upper Silesian community in the first years after the war became known as the “Upper Silesian Tragedy.” In addition, immediately after the war, there was a struggle against all manifestations of Germanness (Kamusella 1999, 2006), and later the communist authorities used the German threat as an element of control over Polish society. Therefore, until the breakthrough of 1989, it was not possible to work on the trauma caused by Silesians’ service in the German army during World War II. This was also the case in other communist countries (cf. Pušnik 2019). In

western European countries, the problem of the trauma of serving in the German army may have been addressed earlier (cf. Kidd 2005; Uhl 2011).

The content taught at school (Jaskulowski and Majewski 2017) and present in cultural texts did not take into account the wartime drama of Silesians. The dominant belief concerned the betrayal committed by Silesians who were Volksdeutsche (Szmeja 2017). This led to a situation in which, as Maria Szmeja noted, the official history of the dominant Polish group remained completely different from the collective memory of Silesians (Szmeja 2017). In the official version of the past, there was no place for the different fate of the Upper Silesian community. Years later, Zbigniew Rokita (2020, 105), searching for his Silesian identity, wrote,

[a]fter the war, we will have to keep silent about fighting in the *feldgrau* uniform. Remember quietly, carefully, and only among the trusted. The Upper Silesian memory will once again become blasphemous and circulate in the background. It is an exciting memory, but also a memory that is often immersed in myths, an uneven memory. Everyone remembers in his or her own way, Silesian memory will never be fully tamed, its borders will never be drawn. It is a diffuse, private, nebulous memory. It will never be placed in any of the state incubators. It will never be accredited by the Ministry of Education so that you can write a test about it.

War trauma of the war persisted in the memories of the native inhabitants of Upper Silesia. Absent from school and in the media, the wartime past of Silesians was confined to family or local transmission. Admittedly, former soldiers were not always eager to tell their children and grandchildren about their past. They wanted to spare them knowledge that was inconvenient in Poland. However, during family and neighborhood gatherings, at birthday celebrations, at funeral banquets, at festive tables, those years were indeed remembered. Accounts such as the one obtained in the village of Bojszowice evidence this:

We always had to travel with my parents whether it was for funerals or other family celebrations. As a driver, I drove. And then I listened. When I came here, there was a smithy here. Later they demolished it, and my dad built himself a little smithy because he needed it. There would come old frontiersmen who were crippled, farmers, one without an arm, another without a leg. They used to go there, because in those days people used to go to the barber or the blacksmith. Even though he had nothing to do, he came to listen. There, the stories were different. You know a lot of things, because you heard from these people what they told you about the war, about these times. As far as my family matters, funerals and other things, I've always heard a lot ... and with my parents, they've been telling it." (M_P2)³

This remained the case until the turn of the 1980s, when Silesians began to make identity claims (Tilly 2005; Łuczewski 2017). There was a demand to depart from the conviction, obligatory in the People's Republic of Poland, that Polish society lacks ethnic separateness and to notice the specificity of the Silesian identity. These actions were very much rooted in Silesian history (Eyerman 2004, 75), and their claims were formulated by groups referred to by Alexander (following Weber) as *carrier groups*—the collective agents of the trauma process (Alexander 2004a, 11). Silesian regional social organizations were established, including the largest of them, still active today, the Silesian Autonomy Movement. There also appeared intellectuals such as Kazimierz Kutz, Michał Smolorz, and Szczepan Twardoch, all of whom undertook the effort to articulate Silesian identity claims (Eyerman 2004, 63). The memory of the camps in which the Silesian people were imprisoned, the miners' deportation to the USSR, and the murders of civilians committed by the Red Army in the winter of 1945 was restored. However, the service of Silesians in the German army was still a sensitive issue.

It was not until the publication of the book "To byli nasi ojcowie" (*They Were Our Fathers*, 1999) by the Silesian writer Alojzy Lysko that the process of restoring the problem of Silesian Wehrmacht

soldiers to the official discourse began. It was then that a legitimizing narrative began to take shape that would allow Silesians to change from the status of *perpetrator*, ascribed to them after the war, to that of *traumatized victim* (Łuczewski 2017). Lysko's publication was followed by others, including memoir books and historical studies (cf. Lysko 2004, 2017; Kaczmarek 2010, 2011; Szmeja 2017) that developed this narrative, claiming dignity and prestige for the Silesians in question (Łuczewski 2017). The process of objectification of war trauma began. At that time, a legitimizing narrative began to emerge that would allow Silesians to change their status—from that of perpetrators, attributed to them after the war—to victims who experienced years of complex trauma (Łuczewski 2017). This effort was followed by subsequent press publications, exhibitions—for example, *Dziadek z Wehrmachtu. Doświadczenie zapisane w pamięci* (2015), prepared by Haus der Deutsch-Polnischen Zusammenarbeit-Stowarzyszenie Genius Loci—memoir books, and historical studies (cf. Lysko 2004, 2017; Szczepuła-Ponikowska 2007; Kaczmarek 2010; 2011; Szmeja 2017), which further developed a narrative reclaiming the dignity and prestige of Silesians (Łuczewski 2017). The process of debunking the lies about the war trauma began, and some people started to report typical symptoms of PTSD, a condition that had been denied by postwar, communist-driven narrative that was two dimensional (Polish vs. German experiences with no consideration of Silesian experiences; cf. Lysko 2004).

Alojzy Lysko himself experienced the trauma of war as a child. His father was drafted into the German army when he was only five weeks old. As a child, Lysko waited a long time for his return, but he never came home from the war. Then he began to look for traces of his father, who died in Wehrmacht service, and undertook activities to commemorate the inhabitants of his own village, Bojszowy. This gave rise to a book describing the collected stories (the author himself uses the expression “family legends”) of forty-seven Bojszów residents who died in the war, their service documented and illustrated with photographs of soldiers in uniform, prints of letters, and military documents. Relationships were presented in an emotional way, without scientific apparatus, and such a presentation enhanced the power of their popular influence. Lysko's intention was expressed in the first words of the book: “my generation, as a natural human impulse, has for half a century protected the memory of their fathers killed in the Wehrmacht with all the strength of their hearts. Now, when the curtains of silence have been lifted from the painful stigmata of Silesia, and the life of my generation is coming to an end—the desire to preserve this memory for a longer time has become even stronger” (Lysko 1999, 7).

A year later, the Paweł Woldan and Włodzimierz Filipek film *Kolumbowie w kolorze Feldgrau* (2000) had its premiere. There were publications in regional and central media. Serving in the German army ceased to be something that was “talked about in hushed tones.” As one of the interviewees told us, people were experiencing “something like a revelation. What lived somewhere in individual memories was part of some larger phenomenon that affected the whole community” (W_P3).⁴ Family memories thus blended into the history of the entire community (Eyerman 2004, 74).

In this way, the “game of memory” that was being played in Upper Silesia gained new dynamism. Silesians rejected the status of perpetrators ascribed to them prior to 1989 and demanded the right to be considered victims (Assmann 1999; Łuczewski 2017). The growing awareness of being a victimized individual was transferred to the whole Silesian community in an occurrence of the phenomenon that Jie-Hyun Lim described as *victimhood nationalism* (Lim 2010; Łuczewski, 2017). This effort, however, was not received favorably by other participants in the memory game. To them, it was unacceptable that Silesians would change their position in the ongoing global competition for the amount of suffering endured in World War II (Polonsky and Michlic 2004, 9). This is why some Polish actors in the memory game denied the Silesian community the right to change its status from perpetrator to victim. This has been especially true since the German threat was and is being used by the political forces in power in Poland since 2015, thus, the use of the information about the service of the grandfather of one of the candidates (Donald Tusk) in the Wehrmacht during the presidential campaign in 2005 and the calling the supporters of the Silesian

Autonomy Movement “a hidden German option” by Jarosław Kaczyński (2011). Not surprisingly, a Christmas text that included a paragraph dedicated to the suffering of German soldiers on the Eastern Front was taken down from one of the websites. After mass protests denying the right of soldiers to suffer, the text was taken down and readers apologized (W_P3). The Silesians have no allies in this game. They can only count on some regional politicians and journalists from a few national magazines (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*). However, both major political forces in Poland do not support the claims of the Silesians. This may be a paradox since the leader of one of them, Donald Tusk, was at the beginning of his political career associated with the Gdansk regionalists. In addition, he is a Kashubian—that is, a representative of a group similarly experienced as the Silesians.

A small role in the process of objectifying the trauma of war was played by the Polish school curriculum (Jaskułowski and Majewski 2017). The process can be described rather an instrument of symbolic violence against the Silesian community (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970), an interpretive move that ignored regional and ethnic diversity of the Silesian people (Bartoszek et al. 2009). The history of the region, in the sense of the term “history” used by Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), is thus devoid of legitimacy, a fact that resonated very strongly during our primary research interviews. The proof can be seen this statement by one of our interview subjects: “The official history course mainly concerns Polish history and deals with it in such a martyrological-patriotic way and nobody mentions the Upper Silesians or gives only perfunctory information about them. I think that this can be done by enthusiasts of what is called regional education” (W_P2).

In this situation, the family message is supported by scientific literature and fiction. Polish, Czech, and German research thus fills gaps in the Silesian collective memory. The monograph, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie (Poles in Wehrmacht)* by Ryszard Kaczmarek is of particular importance here. Publications of the Silesian Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance also played an important educational role.⁵ Historical reportages have been published, as well as novels in which the problem of Silesians in the Wehrmacht appears more popular (e.g., *Zaniemówienie (Lose one’s tongue)* by Justyna Wydra) or more serious in tone (e.g., *Królestwo (Kingdom)* by Szczepan Twardoch).⁶ The educational role of such literature was noticed by one of our interlocutors:

The restoration of this memory itself or research on this period and public conversation or making the knowledge available to the public is a kind of reparation or, one might even say, historical justice. For several decades this knowledge was completely private and, one might even say, exclusive, reduced exclusively to this private dimension. So now the Upper Silesians as a community of memory, but also as an identity community, and deserves to be able to speak about it loudly, but also to speak in a certain opposition to the national historical narration, because some of these events are in such opposition. (W_P2)

The importance of regional organizations cannot be overlooked either, especially the largest of them, the Silesian Autonomy Movement. This organization seems to have completely understood the importance of historical policy for the reconstruction of Silesian identity while at the same time opposing the very proposal of an official historical policy. While discussing the importance of the *capital* of memory, one of our interlocutors said,

Some people would be shocked by such a statement, because I admit—we use this trauma politically, but we use it in a way that is completely natural to use such experiences and the memory of them because they build collective identity. It would be dishonest to distance ourselves from any political intentions because we live in a world where group identities are political; they are tied to politics. If we mobilize people, tell them we are a community, we share the same memory, and the next day say “vote for us because we represent your community”; this is politics. And even if we did not dot the Is and cross the Ts, someone else would do it because such mobilization causes that people are inclined to choose those

who, to some extent, fit into their memory and not those who negate or reject it. These are the things that are subject to political instrumentalization in the modern world not because we are some kinds of cheaters and *machers* but because this world simply looks this way. If I say consistently that if the Upper Silesian identity and the Upper Silesians as a community are to survive, this identity must have a political dimension because identity is reproduced today by other means, less in the family and more, in my opinion, at school. You have to influence the curricula, and you can influence the curricula with political instruments, so you cannot escape politics. And collective memory is inevitably connected with politics; it has a political dimension. (W_P3)

Later in the same interview, this subject added, “In my opinion it is not only a matter of some social engineering. This choice is connected with some identification of real needs and real emotions that are also behind individual memories that can be combined into such an identity binder” (W_P3).

Our research shows that the experience of Upper Silesians’ service in the Wehrmacht became an important element of their identity, marked statements about that time being “a pillar of identity” (W_P3) because those “events were more important than what happened after the war” (W_P2). Endowing them with the stigma of the perpetrator led to their greater integration, “this stigma with which people lived in Polish society and what bound them in local communities was service in the Wehrmacht” (W_P3). The lack of recognition for the sacrifice of Silesians in German uniforms turned into a claim to express and acknowledge grief associated with the profanation of values associated with the sacrum, which was the death and suffering of loved ones. The demand for emotional, symbolic, and institutional reparations—combined with the reconstruction of history—has also been formulated (cf. Alexander 2004a). However, the historical capital generated through this process (Ostolski 2011) is not reduced exclusively to the capital of suffering. It could only fully emerge in recent years as a delayed expression of a traumatic historical experience. The harm suffered, then, requires recognition and symbolic compensation (cf. Ostolski 2011; Łuczewski 2017), a desire for which was pointed out to us during our research:

The disclosure of this past, previously reduced to a private history, gave us a great sense of pride or was also such an identity bond. It is one of the elements, I would call it a myth, in the full sense of the word, which consolidated this community and the Upper Silesian community. And in fact, these successors, those who inherited both the cultural message and the trauma—to some extent they revindicated it because now the participants rather fulfil the role of these sources. Of course there are fewer of them due to the passing time, but they rather fulfil the role of the sources, those who tell about it, while the next generations or generations after 1989 have made this great turn, this memory finally became public. (W_P2)

This seems to be an important perspective, as it reemphasizes the importance of the need for self-determination and for debunking the prevailing stigmas and stereotypes about Silesians—all of which were significant in the development of the “conspiracy of silence” and which exacerbated the historical sense of trauma and exclusion.

As we have already noted, the occurrence of cultural trauma requires, according to Alexander (2004a, 12–15), the existence of four primary representations that provide answers to the questions that determine whether or not we are dealing with cultural trauma. The questions and their answers are presented below in Table 1.

The responses to the above questions indicate that we can speak of this moment as an incident of cultural trauma, a conclusion reinforced for years because it was not recognized by Polish society and could not be officially shown. Service in the German army became the central event in the story of Silesian identity (Łuczewski 2017). It has also made a significant contribution to increasing the stock of memory *moral* capital (Łuczewski 2017).

Table 1. Determinants of cultural trauma in the case of Silesians' service in the Wehrmacht from Alexander's (2004a, 2004b) perspective

The determinants of cultural trauma according to Alexander	Realization of the determinants of cultural trauma in the situation of Silesians' service in the Wehrmacht
The nature of suffering: What actually happened?	Serving in a foreign army, fighting on a side with which they did not identify in the vast majority, death and suffering of soldiers and their families, lack of recognition by Polish society of this fact as suffering.
The nature of the victim: What group was affected by the traumatic pain?	Silesians called up to Wehrmacht, their families, and communities they were a part of.
The relationship between victims of trauma and the wider community.	Polish society's failure to recognize Silesians as victims of the war, counting them as perpetrators (Łuczewski, 2017).
Assigning responsibility: Who hurt the victims? Who caused the trauma?	Attributing blame to the German state for forced servitude and to the Polish state for labeling Silesians as perpetrators rather than victims.
Conclusion: Cultural trauma exists	

An attempt to symbolically recognize soldiers who fought in the Wehrmacht as victims rather than as traitors and enemies would be an opportunity to limit the traumatic effects of their experiences. This would reverse the meaning of the phenomenon of intrusion threatening the community (cf. Smelser 2004), thus turning Silesians in uniform from perpetrators into victims. The first steps in this direction have already been taken, but more effort is needed, as there is no room in the official Polish policy of remembrance for understanding the complex situation of Silesians during World War II.

Silesian Trauma from a Psychological Perspective

Trauma in the psychological sense does not have to be solely related to physical injury or involvement in an accident: the experience of prolonged psychological abuse, including exclusion, stigmatization, and living in constant fear of danger, can also bear the hallmarks of trauma (van der Kolk, 2015). The described experiences of Upper Silesians in the context of World War II did not always meet the criteria of posttraumatic stress, but they were definitely related to collective suffering and exclusion, both of which were significant in the identity formation of subsequent generations of Upper Silesians and in determining their relations with other Poles (Kaczmarek 2011). It is also worth noting that the work of subsequent generations—such as Lysko and Rokita—who has reconstructed those events, heretofore consciously kept silent by the participants themselves.

In the first part of *Duchy won (Spirits of War)*, a fictionalized diary of a soldier from Silesia conscripted into the army, Lysko (2008, 15) writes that “blood spilled does not cease to cry from generation to generation.” This commentary seems to be important in the context of the experiences of Upper Silesians during the war and postwar periods. Throughout his fictionalized diary, Lysko presents the trauma of war, which seems to be universal, as a devastating and dehumanizing experience. At the same time, however, he gives it an additional dimension in the form of the problem of the *identity* of Upper Silesians conscripted into the Wehrmacht, for whom service for the Nazi regime constituted a dissonance, or even a further traumatization of the interwar period (Lysko 2008). Additionally, in the volume in *W sieroctwie bez skargi (Orphanhood Without Complaint)*, Lysko (2017) points to an additional dimension of the trauma associated with the forgetting and suppression of the war years—namely the fate of the orphans of the Upper Silesian soldiers:

Psychologists say that forgetting is our agreement to erase our own history. This must not be allowed to happen, because the erasure of one's own history is tantamount to the surrender of one's own subjectivity, and the surrender of individual subjectivity inevitably leads to the annihilation of regional subjectivity.

Orphanhood due to the loss of a parent or parents was a collective experience for hundreds of thousands of children who grew up during the postwar period (compare Mariusz Malinowski's [2010] documentary *Dzieci z Wehrmachtu—Children of the Wehrmacht* in which Alojzy Lysko was the main protagonist). For the Upper Silesians, however, an additional context was important: that of the nimbus of secrecy and denial, connected with concealing or keeping silent about the participation of a parent, usually the father, in the war on the Nazi side. It is also worth remembering, *nomen omen*, that some of the "Upper Silesian orphans" were children who were taken away from their parents against their will and transported to the Reich during the war. In addition to stories of families being separated during the war, *W sieroctwie bez skargi* cites stories of people who were persecuted by Poles and Soviets because family members served in the Wehrmacht. The memory of those members who died or did not return from the war was dangerous and additionally traumatizing; therefore, nonremembrance was a form of adaptation to a reality in which even the slightest mention of collaboration with the Nazis was treated as national treason. This, in turn, threatened exclusion from the community—a community which at that time was suspicious and unfriendly toward Upper Silesians anyway. Once again, therefore, it seems that the "forgetting" of wartime was somehow imposed by the environment and had the function of adapting participants to the reality in which the cultural trauma of the Upper Silesians was repressed—both by the environment and by the people who were involved.

The context concerning the diversity of identity of Upper Silesians—who differed significantly from "native" Poles in terms of cultural, religious, or economic experience—and therefore the "Silesian" context of the experience of World War II and its consequences differed significantly from the Polish narrative. For the Poles, the Germans were an alien element in the form of torturers and invaders, but for a large number of Silesians they were an important point of reference in the context of their own culture and several hundred years of history. Thus, special attention should be paid to the cognitive dissonance that accompanied the generations of Silesians who lived during and after the Second World War. On one hand, after the war Silesians were forced to choose between belonging to Poland or Germany, and this choice often involved family dramas, even fratricidal conflicts, and a significant interference in the sense of *constancy* of their own identity. This, in turn, led to unimaginably difficult moral dilemmas when, after the start of World War II, a significant number of Upper Silesians faced the decision to accept registration on the Volkslista and take up service in the Wehrmacht, which at the time significantly increased the chances of survival for the entire family. The alternative to rejecting the assigned DVL category could have been confinement in a concentration camp. In the case of being drafted into the army, the alternative was desertion.

On the other hand, after the war, in a reality rewritten without the involvement of Upper Silesians themselves, the inhabitants of the region were stigmatized and often punished not only for serving in the Wehrmacht but also for their ethnicity in general. Those punishments came in the form of imprisonment in transit camps, in deportation to Germany for forced labor, or in general social exclusion in communist Poland. As Szmeja (2017, 21) writes, descriptions of postwar events are often very laconic for two reasons:

First, the interviewees lacked words to convey what they experienced. The situation was so new and incomprehensible that they had trouble properly naming the treatment they had suffered. Their linguistic and cultural competence was too low to use the right words. The second factor that weakened their ability to describe the events was their limited historical knowledge and understanding of World War II; Silesians knew that they had been wronged, felt the injustice, but they could not relate it to global events; they focused on the region.

From the point of view of psychological functioning, the described experiences may have led to a loss of control and empowerment over one's own life and lack of understanding of one's own identity, as well as to the development of an autostigmatization that incorporated negative stereotypes about oneself as an element of one's own self-narration. This seems to be important because the commonly available narrative about Upper Silesians was that they collaborated with Germans, which resulted in a strong sense of guilt and stigmatization and a lack of understanding by their fellow Poles, which left no sense that such a narrative could be changed. It is worth mentioning that this narrative has survived to some extent until today: simply mentioning a "grandfather from Wehrmacht" by Polish politicians is offensive and intended to cause social conflict. Thus, bearing in mind the experiences of Upper Silesians during and after the war, it is important to note that the coping strategy of the majority was *avoidance* in the form of silence, regardless of the "side" on which one stood, whether their participation was voluntary or not. In psychoanalytic jargon, it would be appropriate to use here the concept of defence mechanisms and repressed memory—that is, the semiconscious exclusion of the possibility of engaging in conversation about past experiences and the process of forgetting them—factors that contributed to further feelings of helplessness, compounding the trauma (Loftus and Ketchum 1994). However, it should also be emphasized that the lack of undertaking the subject of traumatic experiences and entering into discussion with the narration imposed by communist authorities after the end of World War II did *not* result from the lack of involvement of Upper Silesians. It seems that what was crucial was learned helplessness (Seligman 2011): for several decades of the first half of the 20th century, Upper Silesians functioned in a very unstable environment, which translated into a lack of clear rules of conduct and social expectations. The apogee was World War II and what happened to the men and women of Upper Silesia after its conclusion: a collective feeling of not belonging, a fear of being judged by other Poles, and a lack of understanding of the moral dilemmas they experienced during the war.

Of course, the *context* of their punishment may have been relevant to the many years of silence about the events of the war and postwar times. As Łuszczyna (2017) points out, Silesians who chose not to leave Polish lands after the Soviet invasion and defeat of the Germans were incarcerated in former concentration camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were "bitten by the same lice" as prisoners incarcerated by the Nazis (Łuszczyna 2017, 24). The fear that information about one's wartime background or activities would be revealed led to concealment of that background and to a silence about wartime experiences for several generations, both of which reinforced the difficulty of coping with postwar trauma. These examples can therefore serve as models of behavior that, when copied by successive generations, led to the creation of cultural trauma among the Upper Silesians.

Conclusion

Our article demonstrates how the trauma of war can pass from one generation to the next so that under certain conditions, a cultural trauma is born, changing the identity of an entire community. The trauma of war destroys and dehumanizes those who lived through and survived the conflict itself, and it also affects individuals who later live with trauma survivors or who struggle with the absence of a loved one. The trauma is passed on to subsequent generations, although the memory of the war becomes a nonremembrance. Suppressing the memory of their experiences helped trauma survivors adapt to the situations they encountered after the war, in which serving in the Wehrmacht was equal to treason. Silesians struggling with their own trauma of war, or with the trauma of their fathers or husbands, lost a sense of control over their own lives. They incorporated negative stereotypes into their personal identity narratives, stereotypes reinforced by school education and the official media. It was only after the late 1980s that it became possible to claim the *right* to trauma. That is, only after the late 1980s did it become possible to claim the right to speak out about the trauma Silesians experienced. The Silesians who claimed their identity at that time referred not only to the feeling of injustice caused by what had happened to them in Poland after

1945 but also to the very *possibility* of acknowledging traumatic experiences related to service in the German army. Groups appeared to have become *collective agents* of the trauma process, and intellectuals began formulating their own Silesian identity claims. Gradually, a legitimizing narrative began to take shape that allowed the Silesians to reject the stigma of being referred to as perpetrators after the war and to claim the status of traumatized victims. The narrative allowed for the “closing of a figure,” the closing of a wound, the healing of the pain and of the sense of oblivion, all of which had predominated among Silesians for decades. This gave a new dynamic to the memory game taking place in Upper Silesia, an important element of which was the competition for suffering. The game was played outside confines of school curricula, which consistently ignored the regional diversity and specificity of Silesian history; scientific publications and fiction also played an important role. The truth about the “fathers in the Wehrmacht” was revealed in the family tradition and objectified in the regional circulation of culture. Gradually, the four conditions that Alexander (2004a) believes are necessary for trauma were met. The suffering was connected to the war experiences themselves and later exacerbated by denying the Silesians the right to their lived trauma. This context emphasized trauma as a primary element defining the Silesian community’s identity and highlighted that the status of the perpetrator (the Polish society) was negated. Thus, blame for the trauma was attributed to the Germans who sent the Silesians to war as well as to the Poles who denied Silesians the right to their trauma.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

- 1 Interviews in the project archive; Institute of Sociology, University of Silesia in Katowice.
- 2 Interviews in the project archive; Institute of Sociology, University of Silesia in Katowice.
- 3 In the statements of the Bojszów inhabitants presented in the text, abbreviations were used to indicate if the respondents were M-men or W-women and their generation: P1, people over 80 years old; P2, people between 61 and 80 years old; P3, people between 41 and 60 years old, and P4, people under 40 years old. In all cases these statements have been translated from Polish.
- 4 See [Note 1](#) for clarification on how Silesian interviewees from the regional movement are cited in this text.
- 5 The Institute of National Remembrance is the most important tool for implementing the historical policy of the ruling Law and Justice party. However, the Katowice branch retains considerable autonomy and its output is extremely important for understanding the complex history of this region.
- 6 Cf. Ron Eyerman’s analysis of the importance of popular culture in the emergence of African American identity (2004).

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