

History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology

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Abstract Based on archival and ethnographic data from the Polish case, this article argues that national mythology is structured by historical events and embodied in visual and material cultures, which in turn frame national subjects' understanding of the present. It suggests that the convergence and exchange between diverse sites of material expression and sensory perception, and their compression into trans-temporal nodes—what I call the “national sensorium”—makes them especially resilient. Even so, as historically constructed, contingent and contested systems of myths, the extent to which national mythologies can shape national identity or mobilize toward nationalist action depends on the specific historical contexts in which they are deployed. Theoretically, this article joins historical and phenomenological approaches to propose a framework for thinking about the constitution, persistence and shifting social and political valences of national mythologies.

Keywords Nationalism · National mythology · Visuality · Materiality · Affect · Poland

Unlike many other ideologies, national mythology is anything but invisible. It is simultaneously created, congealed and disseminated in multiple sites and through manifold sensory media. It can be found in history books and maps; in monuments, the built environment and the landscape; in poetry, folktales and theater; in speech patterns and popular sayings; in paintings and popular art; in music and dance; in vestments and jewelry; in family photographs, memoirs and tombstones. It is, moreover, enacted in artistic performances and embodied in mourning rites, commemorative practices, religious processions, parades and protests; as well as distilled in commodities, marketed in advertising, packaged and sold in touristic excursions and consumed in specific foods and drinks.

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The material omnipresence of national mythologies, the convergence and exchanges between their diverse sites of expression, their various modes of sensory perception, and their compression into “trans-temporal nodes” make them especially resilient. Even so, as historically constructed, contingent and contested systems of myths, national mythologies are compelling insofar as the myths that comprise them are complementary, reinforcing, or overlapping at a given time. Moreover, the extent to which they can shape national identity, frame the understanding of the present, or mobilize toward nationalist action depends on the specific historical contexts in which they are deployed.

The task for scholars of nationalism, then, is to identify when, why, how, and to what extent national mythology “works” in concrete cases. I approach that question using the Polish case: I first delineate the contours of the dominant Polish national mythology, identifying the historical contexts in which its two core myths emerged and discussing the process through which they were interwoven into a coherent mythology. Next, I show how that mythology was visually depicted, crystallized in material culture, and embodied in various practices and performances, creating what I call a “national sensorium” that rendered the abstract idea of the nation concrete for (national) subjects. I then analyze how that national mythology has come into play since the fall of communism and the rebuilding of a national state, through the examination of two events: the War of the Crosses at Auschwitz in 1997–98 and the 2001–2002 debate about Poles’ involvement in the Jedwabne pogrom during World War II. Finally, I analyze the relative salience of core myths for different cohorts and social groups in new historical contexts.

Combining macro-historical and phenomenological perspectives shows how—and to what extent—national mythology matters. It is perhaps by now a commonplace observation that the historical and the everyday are joined in the making of national identity. Here I show *how* they are joined, by attending to the visual and material embodiments of national mythology that act as conduits through which subjects become ideologically and affectively invested in the nation.

Theoretical and Methodological Orientations

“Myths,” as I use the term, are not fictitious stories or plain lies easily opposed to terms like historical “reality” and “truth.” Rather—and whether or not they are based on historical “facts”—they are stories that are posited by a given social collective as real, true and important. Despite often being themselves ideological products of long conflict, myths present themselves as natural and uncontested. Thus, for example, they typically have no identifiable author or origin text that would allow one to point to the myth’s “construction.”

National myths are significant in defining the group and establishing its boundaries, in socializing its members, and in establishing the illusion of community (Schöpflin 1997). They also determine the limits of the possible and desirable, and offer explanations for the collective fate. National myths, in other words, are one of the ways in which collectivities establish the foundations of their own being, their systems of beliefs about themselves (ibid, pp. 19–23). Encoded in liturgies and symbols, they are enacted in rituals that play a crucial role in politics and power (Kertzer 1988). Thus, they are an essential building block of modern nations, a key feature of national identity and a core element in nationalist politics (Smith 1986, 1999).

National *mythology*, then, is a narrative weaving together different myths of the nation. It is structured by history; it is embodied, following Roland Barthes (1957), in visual and

material culture, enacted in ordinary and extra-ordinary practices, and consumed in everyday commodities from magazine covers to “national” beverages; ultimately structuring the understanding of the present, and potentially shaping the future. Such a conceptualization is useful because it explains national mythology’s resiliency without assuming its immutability. While the nation is always and everywhere a crossroads where diverse discourses intersect, with political and cultural actors fighting over the direction of advance (Bourdieu 1991; Verdery 1993; Zubrzycki 2006), symbolic representations are not simply up for grabs. Rather, their contestation is more likely in certain historical contexts than in others, contexts that vary from case to case and which we must therefore identify. My conception of national mythology is thus deeply historicist. It assesses the ways historical events shape myths and potentially transform them into new narratives of the nation’s past and imagined future. It is also materialist, as it considers the embodiments of national mythology in things, and the practices through which “national things” are engaged. Finally, it is sensorial as it takes into account how (national) subjects perceive myths and their embodiments through the senses, potentially shaping and channeling national sentiments.

Experience, Affect and Material Culture

The phenomenology of national identity has been grossly overlooked in the literature on nations and nationalism, in part because of the intrinsic difficulty of studying the subjective domain of “experience,” especially in historical research. The key work remains Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. That text mapped out the impact of perception, experience, and affect in causing the abstract idea of the nation to appear proximate, directly relevant and salient to individuals.¹ Anderson states from the outset that it is ultimately feelings of filial love—fraternity—“that makes possible...for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings [the nation]” (1991 [1983], p. 7). He returns to the issue of attachment and “self-sacrificing love” when he argues that while the affective bond to the nation is primarily achieved through linguistic means, we must look beyond the meaning of words themselves and consider the *experience* of simultaneity created through practices such as poetry readings and collective singing. These are key, he argues, because their unisonance allows the physical realization of the imagined community, which facilitates the affective attachment to it (ibid., pp. 141–145).²

In a different but related vein, Michael Billig (1995) has shown that myriad daily practices constitute what he termed “banal nationalism.” Banal nationalism is constituted by “ideological habits that enable established nations...to be reproduced,” providing the mental “wiring” that can be “switched on” to ignite intense nationalist reactions, or “hot nationalism.”³ Billig was concerned with discursive habits that are constituted by, and

¹ George Mosse’s work (1975) was also significant in showing the links between bodily practices, visions of the nation and construction of the state, but has had a more limited impact on the field than Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. On the literature on emotions and affect in nationalism studies, see Berezin (1999) and Suny (2006, 2009).

² Here, obviously, Anderson builds on and expands from Émile Durkheim’s (1914) notion of “collective effervescence,” through which individuals come to physically experience “society,” reifying the abstract idea in the process.

³ Recent studies have pushed forward the idea of everyday nationalism by shifting the focus to practices of “ordinary people,” which are not necessarily ideological but can nonetheless be significant (Edensor 2002; Brubaker et al. 2006; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

constitutive of, a universe in which the existence of the nation is taken for granted, and in which national identity becomes so ingrained that one would be willing to die for one's nation at the turning on of that "switch." While Billig was examining what he calls "established nations"—nation-states whose existence is recognized and unthreatened—the notion of banal nationalism can be usefully extended to "un-" or "dis-established" nations. As we shall see, in the Polish case the *state* disappeared from the European map for more than a century and could thus never be "taken for granted." Yet, banal nationalism did play a role in rendering the *nation* a self-evident "fact," a fact that needed to be remembered and defended during long periods of statelessness (1795–1918) or at moments of occupation (1939–1989).

If the "cultural turn" pressed scholars to consider national identities as partially shared ways of speaking and reading, recent scholarship on visibility and materiality suggest the importance of images, sounds, textures, smells, and even tastes.⁴ National mythology is not only located in texts or oral locutions, but is also embedded in visual images and material artifacts. These, when recognized, cue certain paradigmatic stories and sentiments, or *their subversion* in iconoclastic acts. I argue that it is the relatively shared set of stories, images and material symbols, and the disagreement as much as the consensus evoked in response to them, that generate "a nation"—however thinly coherent its culture may be (Sewell 1999).

Visual and material culture thus provides a crucial point of entry into national mythology and the transformation of national identity because images have a special ability to mediate imaginary, linguistic, intellectual and material domains (Morgan 1998, p. 8; Nora 1997). By calling attention and acting as concrete substitutes for abstract discourse (Agulhon 1981), images are agents of socialization. And because they influence thought and behavior, images play an important role in marketing and propaganda (Bonnell 1997; Cushing and Tompkins 2007). Deciphering the various components of what French historian Maurice Agulhon (1981) has called "pictorial discourses" set forth by institutions and social actors, then, is a way to see how subjects are nationalized. Visual culture, however, is not only constituted by flat two-dimensional images, but also by three-dimensional objects, which because of their own physical properties impart multiple dimensions and meanings to the image they carry. In this sense, as W. J. T. Mitchell (1998) has pointed out, attention to "the visual" pushes us to attend to all the senses, since every "visual object" is in fact perceived through multiple faculties. The study of visual culture is therefore necessarily an "intertextual" enterprise, one in which "images, sounds, and spatial delineations are read onto and through one another" (Rogoff 1998, p. 24).

⁴ The field of visual studies, which took off in the mid-1980s with the work of W. J. T. Mitchell on iconology (1986, 2005) and David Freedberg's on the history and theory of response (1991), has slowly left the confines of cultural studies and communications to enter the social sciences. On visual studies in historical and cultural sociology, see Bonnell (1997), Wagner-Pacifici (2005), and Hall (2005). The field of materiality studies has also witnessed a vibrant revival in recent years. For a useful introduction to the key terms, theoretical approaches and debates in studies of materiality and material culture, see Miller (2005, pp. 1–50), Woodward (2007) and Henare, Holbraad, Wastell (Eds.) (2007); for key statements by specialists in the field on a variety of topical areas, see Tilley et al. (2006). On visibility, material culture and religion, see Morgan (2005) and McDannell (1995); on material culture and national identity, see Edensor (2002, pp. 103–137).

In sum, my sociology of national identity analyzes historical processes and contingencies in relation to everyday experience. It acknowledges that once “inscribed,” national myths are durable even as they remain contested and liable to change under certain conditions. And it emphasizes that visual depictions and material objects are loci of historical narratives, both by serving as sensorial canals that filter, assemble and direct national sentiments in particular directions, and by serving as attractors and fixtures for discursive elaborations of those affects.

The analysis is based on a varied body of data, collected through archival and ethnographic research in the course of 40 months of fieldwork in Poland over the last two decades. In addition to everyday living among Poles, ethnographic research included participant and non-participant observation in religious events, popular festivals, historical commemorations, national holidays, political demonstrations, touristic excursions, and museum visits. From these combined methods, I have gathered data that includes formal and informal interviews in countless ethnographic encounters in a variety of settings; primary texts (e.g.: poetry, theater plays, novels, political speeches, sermons, inscriptions on monuments and crosses, textbooks, newspaper editorials); iconographic materials (e.g.: icons, paintings, prayer cards, postcards, posters, photographs, graffiti, ads); audio-visual materials (e.g.: photographs, films and amateur videos, radio broadcasts, music and soundtracks), as well as artifacts (e.g.: flags, jewelry, crosses, monuments, devotional objects).⁵

Dissecting Polish Mythology

National mythology is based on a specific telling of history, one that overemphasizes some aspects of the past while glossing over or ignoring others, weaves various historical threads into a coherent fabric, and blends historical facts with more or less accurate interpretations of those facts. Historian Norman Davies has pointed out that in Poland, “the poetic, imaginative, and enthusiastic approach to History is still more common...than the critical, reflective, or analytical approach,” boldly declaring that “in the Polish tradition, the historical image has proved far more convincing than the historical fact” (1982, p. 18). The most prevalent and pervasive Polish mythology—disseminated in homes, circulated in the public sphere, as well as reproduced in various academic circles in Poland and abroad—paradigmatically goes as follows: essentially and eternally Catholic, Poland is the bulwark of Christendom defending Europe against the infidel (however defined). A nation assailed by dangerous neighbors, its identity is conserved and guarded by its defender, the Roman Catholic Church, and shielded by its Queen, the miraculous Black Madonna, Our Lady of Czestochowa. Christ among nations, it was martyred for the sins of the world and resurrected for the world’s salvation. Last but not least, it is a nation that has given the

⁵ Most of the materials were unused in previously published work, but part of it was collected in the context of a broader project on national identity and religion in Poland, which resulted in *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (2006). For a discussion of specific data and methods used in this article’s section on the War of the Crosses at Auschwitz, see Zubrzycki (2006, pp. 30–32 and pp. 231–233). Other data were collected through the web archives of Ośrodek Karta, Warsaw’s Museum of National Independence, the Museum of the National Sanctuary of Czestochowa, as well as commercial products’ websites (Chopin, Sobieski, and Belvedere Vodkas).

world a Pope—deferentially referred to as the “Pope of the Millenium”—and rid the Western world of communism.⁶

This mythology is constituted by two different, but reinforcing myths: that of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity and of its messianic martyrdom. While they appear to Poles—and to us—to be one and the same, perfectly blended into one mytho-logic, for long those claims were actually seen as antithetical, as the martyriological strand was actually religiously heterodox, if not squarely heretical. It is only in the twentieth century that the two myths were interwoven into a coherent and dominant national mythology (Zubrzycki 2006, pp. 51–76). While asserting its dominance, I am not claiming that this national mythology is hegemonic. One of this article’s points is precisely that there are some conditions and historical moments that make national mythologies more liable for open contestation than others.⁷

Two Myths, One Mythology

Although the myth of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity starts “at the beginning”—that is, with Prince Mieszko I’s conversion to Christianity and the foundation of the Polish state in 966—it was primarily articulated in the seventeenth century, with the convergence of significant historical events: In 1653, in what belongs to legend as much as to history, Pauline monks in Częstochowa resisted and defeated Swedish invaders, a miracle attributed to the presence of the icon of the Black Madonna in the monastery (Tazbir 1990). As a sign of gratitude, in 1656, King Jan Kazimierz dedicated Poland to the Virgin Mary and consecrated the icon “Queen of Poland.”⁸ Her cult began to spread during the Catholic counter-Reformation, under the shadow of conflicts with Ottomans and the threat from the Infidel (ibid., p. 119). Thirty years later, in 1683, King Jan III Sobieski liberated Vienna from a Turkish siege, which “confirmed” the status of Poland as *Antemurale christianitatis*—the bulwark of Christendom—conferred upon it already by the mid-fifteenth century (Tazbir 1986, pp. 83–102). Key tropes of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity were now in place.

The messianic martyriological thread was spun only much later, in the nineteenth century, when Poland had disappeared from the European map, partitioned among Russia, Prussia

⁶ In qualifying that narrative as mythology, I do not imply that the Catholic Church did not play a significant role in Polish history or that Catholicism did not shape Polish culture. What I am emphasizing here is the specific “status” that narrative has; its quasi-sacred character that shapes national self-understanding and presentation of self to others. According to Brian Porter, the myth of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity has had an especially significant—and problematic—impact on both collective memory and historiography as it imputes “specific meaning to the past and helps to determine what is remembered and what is forgotten” (2001, p. 291). A significant effort has thus been recently undertaken to “demystify” Polish history and to question the dominant belief in its eternal and essential Catholicity (cf. Zubrzycki 2006, pp. 34–76; Bjork 2008). For examples of historiographic works that reproduce that mythology, see Raina (1985) and Cywiński (1993, 1994); for a discussion of the extent to which that mythology informs public discourse and scholarship, see the introduction of Brian Porter-Szücs forthcoming book, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*.

⁷ For an analysis of the questioning of that dominant national mythology after the fall of communism in the Polish public sphere and a discussion of the challenges to establish other national narratives, myths, and visions of the nation more specifically, see Zubrzycki (2001, 2006).

⁸ It is probably from the King’s vows of faithfulness to the Virgin that Poland’s traditional motto, *Polonia semper fidelis* [Poland always faithful] originates. Those vows were renewed 300 years later, on August 26, 1956, in a Mass in Częstochowa attended by one million pilgrims. The vows were the opening act of the Great Novena, a nine-year ritual initiative that promoted religious renewal and mass mobilization as the repressive years of Stalinism were coming to a close (Osa 1996).

and Austria (1795–1918). The most influential creators of Polish messianic martyrology were not religious (or political) actors, but Romantic poets who equated the Partitions of Poland with its crucifixion. Poland, in the writings of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1849),⁹ was the “Christ among nations”: sacrificed for the sins of the world, it would be brought back to life to save humanity from Absolutism. This interpretation of the Partitions was coupled with the prophetic revelation of Poland’s victory *qua* resurrection in poems, plays and other writings, such as Mickiewicz’s *The Books of the Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage*, a national-biblical parable¹⁰:

And finally Poland said: “Whosoever will come to me shall be free and equal, for I am FREEDOM.” But the kings when they heard of this were terrified in their hearts and said: “We drove out freedom from the earth, and behold it returneth in the person of a just nation that doth not bow down to our idols! Come, let us slay this nation.” (...) And they martyred the Polish Nation and laid it in the grave, and the kings cried out: “We have slain and we have buried Freedom.” But they cried out foolishly (...) For the Polish Nation did not die: its body lieth in the grave, but its soul hath descended from the earth, that is from public life, to the abyss, that is to the private life of people who suffer slavery in their country, that it may see their sufferings. But on the third day the soul shall return to the body, and the Nation shall rise and free all the peoples of Europe from Slavery... And as after the resurrection of Christ blood sacrifices ceased in all the world, so after the resurrection of the Polish Nation wars shall cease in all Christendom (1944, pp. 379–380).

As this archetypal text illustrates, messianism provided a grammar for Poles to make sense of the political situation in which they lived and a vocabulary to talk about it. The Partitions were widely described using religious metaphors and allegories: it was the period of “Babylonian captivity,” the “Descent into the Tomb,” and “the Time on the Cross” (Davies 1982, vol. 2, p. 18).

If by the twentieth century messianism has been successfully interwoven with the myth of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity to the point of constituting a single thread, accepted and promoted by the hierarchy of Catholic Church itself,¹¹ when Poles’ “singular secular gospel” (Janion and Żmigrodzka 1978, p. 10) was articulated, it was quite heterodox and even seen as heretical by some, since it promised an earthly incarnation of the divine (Porter 2000, p. 28). As the Holy See, moreover, had recognized the Partitions of Poland, Polish Catholics were instructed by the Church hierarchy to focus their thoughts on things eternal and to leave worldly affairs to anointed authorities, the partitioning rulers (Żywczyński 1995; Porter 2000, p. 31). The dedication of the lower-clergy to the national cause, however, offset the position of the hierarchy and the Vatican (Casanova 1994, p. 93). In a context where education, publishing, and freedom of organization were seriously

⁹ They are called in Polish, the “Trzej wieszczowie”—which means at once the “three bards” and, significantly enough, the “three prophets.” Together, they are part of the national pantheon of founding fathers, martyrs and heroes.

¹⁰ The work was first published anonymously in 1832, shortly after the failure of the November Uprising in Russian Poland (1830–31). It appeared in the form of a missal commonly referred to as the “Mickiewicz Homilies,” and was widely distributed, free of charge, to newly arrived émigrés/exiles to Paris, where Mickiewicz himself lived. The work was condemned by papal edict for its use of religious motifs to justify the pursuit of what the Church considered a radical social program (which included the abolition of serfdom and the declaration of universal civil rights extended to women and Jews). http://www.culture.pl/en/culture/artykuly/os_mickiewicz_adam (accessed April 21, 2009).

¹¹ See, for example, the sermons of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, Primate of Poland from 1948–81 (1996a, b).

limited and where Polish was banned from public usage, religious worship and practices provided a significant space for Poles to affirm their sense of community (Olszewski 1996; Kłoczowski 2000). Although the Church had neither created nor openly endorsed this fusion of Catholic symbols and practices with Romantic messianism, Catholicism became the “carrier” of what Ewa Morawska (1984) named “romantic civil religion.”

Messianism, however, gave not only a narrative structure to the situation of Poles under the Partitions, but a framework for interpreting Polish history in its entirety. Poles were a chosen people, “the spiritual leaders of mankind and the sacred instrument of universal salvation” (Walicki 1990, pp. 30–31), innocent sufferers at the hands of evil oppressors. The messianic vision of Poland as martyr and savior became a core narrative, or what Victor Turner called a “root paradigm,” referring “not only to the current state of social relationships existing or developing between actors, but also to the cultural goals, means, ideas, outlooks, currents of thought, patterns of belief which enter into those relationships, interpret them, and incline them to alliance or divisiveness” (1974, p. 64). Messianic martyrology gave meaning to events and social relationships by offering an interpretive frame through which to make sense of them. It also provided what Tim Edensor, following Raymond Williams, calls a “structure of feeling”—“a communal way of seeing the world in consistent terms, sharing a host of reference points which provide the basis for everyday discourse and action” (2002, p. 19), in addition to serving as a semiotic center for clustering religious and national symbols and articulating a script for collective rebellion (Kertzer 1988; Kubik 1994).

The reconstruction of the Polish state, in 1918, was thus interpreted and narrated as Poland’s “rebirth” (*Polska odrodzona*—Poland reborn), World War II was Poland’s “Fourth Partition” and new cross to bear, while the communist period—commonly referred to as the “Fifth Partition”—was interpreted as yet another crucifixion. That interpretive frame carried emotionally loaded analogies between present misery and the painful experience of statelessness during the Partitions, and emphasized Poland’s historical suffering, the alleged role of the Church in the nation’s survival, the notions of Poles as chosen people (*lud polski ludem Bożym*—“the Polish people is God’s people”) and of Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis* now defending Europe against atheist Soviets, blending elements of both myths.

This time, however, that specific interpretation was occurring in the context of a homogeneously Catholic¹² country in which the Catholic Church’s hierarchy, strong from the moral capital it had acquired during World War II, was taking pains not to capitulate under the harsh pressures of the new regime. By then, moreover, the Church hierarchy—for reasons beyond the scope of this article—had come to adopt as its own the Romantic discourse of martyrological messianism it had repudiated in earlier times as blasphemous. By the middle of the twentieth century, then, two national myths—that of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity and of its messianic martyrdom—were woven into a tight national mythology

¹² For most of its history, Poland was populated by people belonging to different ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. With World War II this was dramatically altered: Jews, who in 1931 constituted approximately 10% of the population, were exterminated during the Holocaust or emigrated after the war, as many survivors became targets of violent pogroms (Gross 2006) or of state-sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns (Stola 2000). The Polish state’s borders also shifted westward after World War II—Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian minorities were incorporated into the Soviet Union and German populations in the West were expelled. As a result, ethnic Poles, who before the war constituted approximately 65% of the Second Republic’s population, by 1946 accounted for about 95% of the People’s Republic. The population’s religious makeup was also dramatically altered: in 1931 Catholics composed 65% of Poland’s population, by 1946 the proportion of Catholics had increased to 96% of the population within the new borders (Michowicz 1988; Tomaszewski 1993).

given credence by recent historical experience, backed by an influential institution and articulated against a regime imposed from outside and above. While the Socialist party-state could not embrace (and actively opposed) the Catholic strand of Polish national mythology, it adopted and promoted the martyrological one in various venues, adding another level to that myth's sedimentation.

History and The “National Sensorium”

National mythology is more than a core narrative or a root paradigm—a structure defined by historical events and their framing that shapes the understanding of the present. It is also an embodied, phenomenological experience through which subjects become invested in the national idea.

For most of the nineteenth century, the secular and religious authorities banned the dense and cryptic messianic philosophical treatises and literary works. In the process of their covert diffusion to the masses, their message was streamlined: abstract messianic ideas were simplified, visualized and materialized in ways that ultimately facilitated attachment to the nation-idea. The messianic metaphor of the Partitions as a *via Dolorosa*, with Poland cast in the role of Christ, for example, left the confines of literature to be part of popular culture and religious life (Fig. 1).

Holy week became the occasion to create Easter Sepulchers that commemorated Poland's “crucifixion” and to pray for its “resurrection,”¹³ and Sunday Mass in churches of all the lands of partitioned Poland ended with the singing of patriotic hymns. As the mother of the crucified nation, the Virgin Mary accrued added significance. The icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, Queen of Poland, resonated with special intensity: Her scarred face and the miracles associated with her both represented Poland's mutilation and gave hope for its independence. In addition to numerous pilgrimages to the sanctuary of Jasna Góra in all seasons of the year, countless patriotic prayers were addressed to her (cf. Gach 1995). Blessed replicas of the icon could be found in home altars, and its image was printed on prayer cards and postcards, engraved on medals and brooches, and embroidered on religious vestments, ever present in the lives of those carrying the Virgin with them.

The Nation quickly became such a personified entity that after the violent crushing of the January Uprising (1863–64), during which Poles rebelled against Russia,¹⁴ Polish society underwent a “national ritual of martyrdom and death” (Janion and Żmigrodzka 1978, p. 549). Residents of Warsaw marched in funeral processions for the nation, and political protests were carried out at memorial sites, even at cemeteries during burials. Noblemen mourned the nation by wearing black gowns and “patriotic jewelry”—bracelets and necklaces reminiscent of rosaries, crosses engraved with “Poland,” pins with

¹³ The tradition was revived during the Second World War and remains to this day. Every church has a tomb with its own scenographic style, parishioners acting as judges in an unofficial competition. The Easter Sepulchers of Father Jankowski (Solidarity's chaplain in the 1980s) in St. Brygida's parish in Gdańsk, were infamous for their controversial nationalist depictions, often anti-Semitic in content.

¹⁴ The Insurrection left deep scars on Polish society. In addition to the villages razed, the estates confiscated, and the countless killed and tortured during the Insurrection, approximately 400 insurgents were executed by the Russian authorities after it had been crushed, while some 18,000 were exiled to Siberia. Altogether, about 70,000 Poles were imprisoned and exiled in the remote regions of Russia during and immediately after the Insurrection, most of whom never returned. Many also fled Poland and relocated in France in self-imposed exile.



Fig. 1 Popular postcard published circa 1891. The postcard commemorates major events in the life of the nation. In the background, Cracow's Wawel castle (the panorama was sometimes changed to a view of Warsaw). A cloth draped around the cross bears the inscription "The Time of Redemption has not yet Come." Poland is represented as both Jesus and his mother. The dates on Jesus' staff are of the Partitions (1772, 1793, 1795) and on the cross's beam of the Centennial of the Constitution of May Third (1791–1891); hence Jesus represents the union of the nation and the state, crucified (repeatedly partitioned) but certain to rise again. The pages ripped from the nation's bible, appearing against the background of Mary's cloak, mark key national uprisings. The Virgin appears to represent the nation mourning the loss of statehood; though presently in chains, she will one day be "free," i.e. regain independence. Source: Reproduced from Kłoczowski (1991), with permission of Editions Spotkania

the supplication "God save Poland," and brooches in the form of a crown of thorns or a bullet and chain. Locketts usually kept by women to hold miniature portraits of loved ones—husbands, fathers, brothers or sons fighting, deceased, exiled, or in hiding—now also contained those of generals, national heroes, and poets. Martyrs became important characters in the national saga, and personal and national martyrdom were blended into a single trauma (Figs. 2 and 3).

The Polish landscape, as the stage where the nation's Passion was played—its soil soaked with blood and tears, hiding bones and bearing the scars of conquest and war—became and

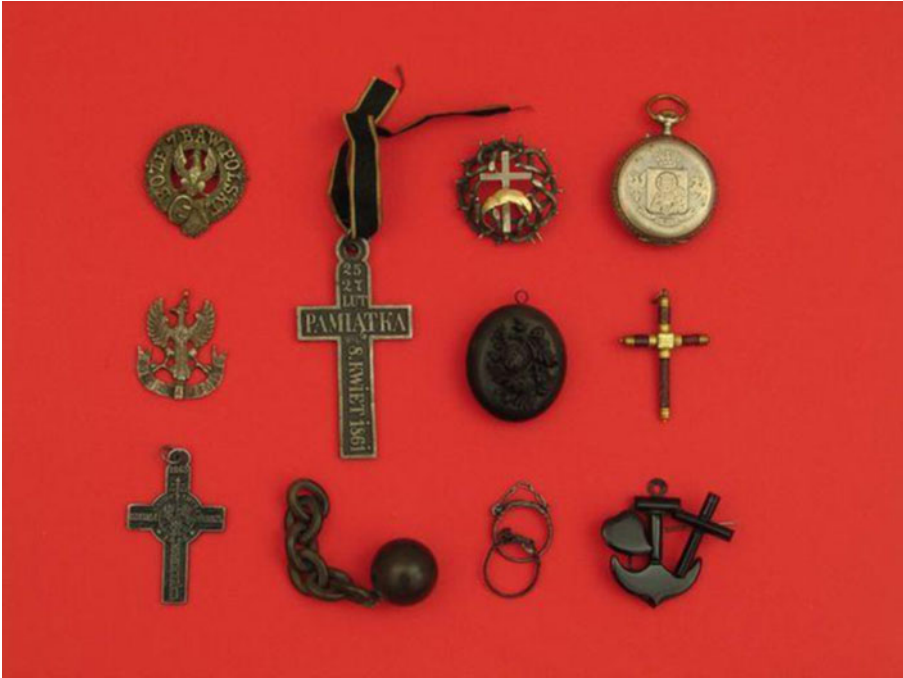


Fig. 2 19th century patriotic jewelry worn by women mourning loved ones and the nation. Source: <http://www.rp.pl/galeria/55362,1,93681.html>. Reproduced with permission of the Muzeum w Koninie

remain a constant reminder of the sacred history of Poland's loss of statehood/crucifixion (Fig. 4).¹⁵

Many of these symbols and practices resurfaced with unusual intensity during World War II and under communism, creating a language and providing sacred spaces to express rebellion against the authorities. The opposition, underground publishers and artists frequently used Paschal themes depicting Poland as Jesus (cf. Rogozińska 2002), protesters typically carried crosses during political manifestations, and Lech Wałęsa, Solidarity's charismatic leader, always wore a pin of the Black Madonna on his lapel (Fig. 5).

Beyond their immediate significations, these symbols and material objects were significant in that they often acted as what I call "trans-temporal nodes"—compressing history and condensing layers of historical narratives and myths into a single image or object, providing specific interpretive frames to understand the present (Fig. 6).

As noted earlier, there exists an inherent difficulty in assessing whether and the degree to which national mythology and the abstract idea of the nation, created "above," resonated "below," especially when dealing with the past. Without direct access to subjects' beliefs, feelings and opinions, it is easier to find evidence of the production of national mythology by elites than of its reception by the general population (especially in the case of illiterate populations). There are, however, a few indicators here that suggest that people did "care about" the nation and that the dominant national mythology in the making was instrumental in that process. That these myths and their symbols and rituals existed at all and were

¹⁵ For key statements on the association between the landscape and national identity see Cosgrove (1984), Cosgrove and Daniels [Eds.] (1988), and Dijkink (1996). See also Nogué and Vincente (2004), Lekan (2004), Muir (1999, chap. 5), Dabrowski (2008) and Edensor (2002, pp. 37–68) for case-studies.

Fig. 3 The young lady in Artur Grottger’s painting “Farewell to the Insurgent” [1864], in mourning dress, is pinning a brooch on her beloved’s hat. Note the rosary worn on her hip. Source: Reproduced with permission of the National Museum in Cracow, inv. number MNK II-a-249



transmitted through several generations without any formal institutional backing—for there was no Polish state until 1918—suggests their resonance. The fact that many of these national myths were inscribed in popular and folk culture (instead of being restricted to the elites’ “high” culture), also points to their favorable reception and assimilation in the lower social echelons. Finally, the large numbers of people engaged in religio-patriotic practices that were either discouraged, forbidden or often severely repressed (with imprisonment, deportation, or excommunication) by both secular and religious authorities alike—the partitioning powers and the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century; the communist regime in the twentieth—attests to the significance of national mythology in the lives of many.¹⁶

Sensing the Nation

Myths are thus historically-built ideological structures that are articulated in texts and speech acts, but animated and experienced by subjects in visual forms, as materialized in objects, and as embodied in various practices—*wearing* a crown of thorns brooch; *carrying* a cross at a political demonstration; *singing* patriotic hymns at church; *hearing* Chopin’s

¹⁶ Of course, the extent to which the masses were nationalized depends on which period we are talking about, the period between 1870-1914 being the crucial one in that process in most of Europe (Mosse 1975; Weber 1976; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Stauter-Halsted 2001). The extent to which peasant populations were nationalized also depended on regions within the former Poland, populations in borderlands taking longer to be nationalized (Kłoskowska 2001; Bjork 2008).

Fig. 4 Commemorative street altar, Warsaw. The plaque, wrapped in a banner in the national colors, indicates that this is the “Place sanctified by the martyrdom and the blood of Poles fighting for the freedom of their fatherland. Here on August 10, 1944, Hitlerites executed 15 Poles.” Polish cities—and Warsaw especially because of the extent of its destruction in the war—are dotted by such modest memorials to “martyrs of the nation” where private citizens light candles, and bring flowers and flags. Source: G. Zubrzycki, June 1989



funeral March for a fallen hero or family member; *brandishing* a flag and carefully *mending* its tears; *kneeling* before the sacred icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Queen of Poland, and *holding* its profane reproduction; *moving* through a landscape dotted by places of martyrdom (Fig. 7).

The visual and material manifestations of the abstract idea of the nation and their attending practices were significant in several ways. At the moment of its modern invention in the nineteenth century, “Poland” had no borders to reify the nation’s territory, no national education system, no army and no common currency. Without a state to reify the nation’s existence through its institutions and infrastructures, tangible signs of its “being” became especially important, rendering an abstract idea concrete to the masses. In phenomenological terms, through sensory cues “the nation” was constantly being made to feel ready-to-hand, at once important and intensely close and familiar.

Because these material embodiments of national mythology and their attending practices were often coupled with religious and memorial practices, thereby mixing the political and religious domains and collapsing individual and collective spheres of experiences, they facilitated affective attachment to, and support for, the idea of Poland. These religio-patriotic practices were not restricted to a single class of people, but were shared by nobles, bourgeois and peasants alike. They helped, to borrow

Fig. 5 Lech Wałęsa represented as a Christ figure, Poland's martyr-savior, with a crown of thorns around his head. The crown is made of barbed wire, evoking Wałęsa's imprisonment but also the nation's loss of freedom under communism and during martial law (1981–83). The color original uses white and red, replicating the national colors, but also suggesting the silencing of the nation and the bloodshed brought by communism. Source: With permission of KARTA center



Benedict Anderson's celebrated formulation, to imagine the nation as a *community*; to conceive of it "as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (1991, p. 7) despite significant inequities. These material embodiments of national mythology and their attending practices were therefore significant in rendering abstract ideas concrete, and creating affective bonds among subjects, as well as between subjects and the stateless nation (cf. Berezin 1999, pp. 357–363).

Expressed in myriad ways on various public and private stages, national mythology permeated all spheres of social life, saturating it with discursive tropes, visual images, sounds and music, tactile stimuli, and, most likely, smells as well.¹⁷ This multiplicity of sites, media and sensory experiences exerted, I suggest, a compounding effect: it facilitated the convergence and *exchanges* between multiple *sites of the nation* and their modes of sensory perception. One telling contemporary example: a Polish friend who lived in Moscow once told me that "when the train crosses the Polish border and we ride through the Polish countryside, I can *hear* Chopin." We know that nations have their soundtracks (Cerulo 1995; Biddle and Knights 2007), but what that informant described

¹⁷ This is more difficult to document, of course, but specific locales and historical periods certainly have their own smellscape associated with a season, foods that were eaten then, materials used to heat and so forth. The odors of war and repression—soiled clothes, blood, decaying corpses, burnt crops, gunpowder—are especially intense. However powerful they may be in shaping one's memory of a given period, unlike texts, images, objects and music that can be seen, spoken, touched and heard, smells can only be passed down to later generations indirectly through descriptions rather than through actual experience. Olfactive memory is therefore mostly missing from collective memory.



Fig. 6 Stained-glass window with Our Lady of the Home Army at Jasna Góra's Chapel of National Memory. A World War II variation on the traditional Black Madonna of Częstochowa, the Virgin has her head tilted in grief and exhaustion, the ruins of the city after the Warsaw Uprising surrounding her. Notice, on the left, three large crosses, a monument erected in 1980 to commemorate the death of protesting workers, killed a decade earlier by the militia in Gdansk. Throughout, symbols of Polish resistance ("PW"—Polska Walcząca—Poland Fighting). Source: Digital photograph provided by and reproduced with permission of the Jasna Góra Sanctuary, Częstochowa

experiencing is a form of synesthesia, the “transposition of sensory images or sensory attributes from one modality to another” (Marks 1978, p. 8) which “express...a relationship between features of experience that properly belong to different senses” (Ibid., p. 1). In this case of visually-induced auditory synesthesia (cf. Saenz and Koch 2006), moving through a landscape identified as “Polish” elicited “hearing” a specific melody. But why Chopin? We might suppose that Chopin was secreted from the landscape because he is the composer who most intensely indexes Poland.¹⁸ As with the work of Mickiewicz, Chopin embodies the Polish Romantic (musical) tradition and its

¹⁸ Although bi-national (born and raised in Poland from a French father and a Polish mother), Chopin is seen as quintessentially Polish—as both his personal life and his oeuvre were shaped by the national fate. He was abroad during the “November Uprising” of 1930-31 and was forced into permanent exile to France where he became, with Adam Mickiewicz, one of many expatriates of the Polish “Great Emigration.” Like Mickiewicz, many of his creations are odes to the lost nation. On Chopin’s music as narrative of national martyrdom, see Bellman (2009).

Fig. 7 Freeze frame of a website promoting cyclism and bicycle tourism. On this specific page, a “Polish Martyrology Trail” in the region of Toruń is proposed for a 38 km bicycle itinerary. Source: http://www.cyklista.q4.pl/t22_08.html. With permission of author, Zbigniew Suszyński

ideal. But precisely because his life and music are so closely associated with that of the nation, his music is often used in myriad “national” venues: in poetry readings, patriotic occasions, funerals and commemorative events, as well as in more mundane venues (such as television interludes showing the Polish landscape set to his Etudes). This in turn reinforces the coupling of his music with other sights and sites of the nation—hence the possibility of multiple and densely layered synesthetic exchanges.¹⁹ These couplings are striking because of how they can link emotions harvested from various contexts: the idle lull of a train ride becomes a nostalgic longing for one’s fatherland as one “hears,” through seeing the landscape, the music of the nation. That music, in turn, may also call to mind poems learned in school and repeated at home at diverse family occasions, chanting the glory of Poland and lamenting her loss. The point is that people learn to associate specific places, occasions, images, texts, and music. Scholars of nationalism

¹⁹ The opening credits of a popular 1970s television mini-series, which recounted everyday life under Nazi occupation, showed a dark night sky poetically illuminated by slowly freefalling bombs, which, upon hitting the ground, revealed in a flash of light the Polish countryside and its landscape dotted with iconic willow trees. The images were accompanied by a contemporary Chopinesque piano track. It can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmw9ohqOE-A> (accessed May 1, 2009). Significantly, the mini-series was entitled *Polskie drogi*, which is literally translated as “Polish Roads,” but also means “Polish Fates” and alludes to “Polish stations [of the cross],” echoing messianic martyrology. The series’ title was, incidentally, translated as “The Passions of Poland” in English.

must thus pay attention to this multiplicity of “sites” and the ways in which they overlap to nationalize subjects (Fig. 8).²⁰

This does not mean, however, that all sensory cues work the same way. Heidegger, for example, noted how one is barely conscious of the street that “slides itself... along the soles of one’s feet” (1962, p. 142). Even though the street against the one’s feet is much nearer empirically, and exerts more direct physical force than what the pedestrian *looks at* 20 paces hence, it is often the seen object that is affixed in thought. In the hierarchy of senses, certain faculties of feeling the nation exert greater “ideological” force than others—in the sense of those perceptions becoming objects of conscious contemplation and the focus of debates as to their meaning. Others remain below everyday awareness, yet they may serve as an important part of the national sensorium in the sense of generating habitual repertoires of action, and helping to create that which “goes without saying.” These layered senses render the nation present, and endow it with emotional force.

This was, for example, Victor Turner’s understanding of “dominant symbols,” which are singled out by a society exactly because of the ways ideological meanings are harnessed to emotions through sensory perception (1967). Turner, however, viewed these sensory perceptions as emanating from the physical properties of the symbol itself.²¹ While this material aspect of symbolic structures is crucial, it is important to stress that symbols are also *historically* built through past events and narratives about those events (Zubrzycki 2006). My conception of the symbolic process and interpretation of national mythology’s sociological relevance therefore unites material, ideological, historical and affective dimensions. The resilience of national mythology and its ability to shape the understanding of the present and potentially determine the future resides precisely in the conjoining of these dimensions. Instead of emphasizing one over the other, we must recognize their overlapping complementarity.

Questioning the Myths after 1989

So far I have argued that national mythology is structured by historical events and is embodied in material objects and cultural practices, operating ideologically and phenomenologically to link affectively national subjects to the nation idea as well as to each other. I now shift gears to show how national mythology shaped the understanding of the post-communist transition on the one hand, and how it was destabilized by that historical transformation on the other. The key point I wish to highlight here is the

²⁰ The City of Warsaw, on the 200th anniversary of Chopin’s birth in 2010, has installed “musical benches” at key places associated with the composer. A recording of a specific Chopin musical piece is played when a passerby pushes a button on the bench. This initiative is an excellent example of how music, place, history and present experience are potentially collapsed. Judging by the number of youtube “slideshows” and amateur movies that use Chopin as a soundtrack to “quintessentially Polish” images, the matching between place and music is quite successful. While Poles excel at this bricolage, the specific mixing of the Polish landscape and Chopin has transcended the borders of the national community and is also embraced by non-Poles as representative of “Poland.” Clusters of symbolic representations, therefore, are part of the nation’s “branding” (willful or not). See, for example, a clip of peasant women digging potatoes at dusk, with Chopin’s Nocturnes complementing the tableau, prepared by a German music lover. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGPPDV8wBOQ> (accessed April 16, 2009).

²¹ The Ndembu tree’s power, as a dominant symbol, resided in the physical property of the tree as they allowed multiple significations. The tree secretes a milky sap when its bark is scratched; the liquid was metaphorically associated with breast milk, and ideologically linked to matriliney and group solidarity more broadly.



Fig. 8 Poster advertising the Frederic Chopin International Piano Competition. Chopin’s music is often graphically associated with willow trees that dot the Polish landscape. The willow tree, for example, is an essential element of the Chopin monument in Warsaw. See also the map of Poland marked with sites associated with Chopin (<http://en.chopin.nifc.pl/chopin/places/poland> [accessed April 26, 2009]) and a description of (national and international) tourism-pilgrimages to those sites (“Searching for Chopin, Finding Poland’s Past,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2009). Source: Tadeusz Trempowski, poster of the Fifth International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, print, 1955. Collection of the Fryderyk Chopin Museum at the Fryderyk Chopin National Institute. Copyright Fryderyk Chopin Association, inv. Number MP/3. With permission

contingency of a given national mythology, despite its self-presentation as natural and eternal. National mythologies structure historical experience and its narrativization, but they are also themselves historical products.

Poles inject communism, as we have seen, into a long narrative vein of conquest, occupation and oppression by powerful neighbors. The post-communist period was therefore plotted as the latest phase in the story of Poland’s fight for independence, and as such the transition was first and foremost understood by Poles as a national one: it was a period characterized not merely by democratization and marketization, but primarily by the construction of a national state, a state *of* and *for* Poles, to borrow Rogers Brubaker’s formulation (1996). Given this project, the issue of what exactly constitutes “Polishness” has been a recurring theme in public debates, and in the process the myth of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity has been seriously questioned (Zubrzycki 2001, 2006). The myth of

messianic martyrdom has also lost some of its relevance, now that Poland “has risen from the dead.” “Jews,” I show below, serve as a key trope through which both core myths have been questioned and debated during post-communism’s “long decade” (1989–2004).²²

Auschwitz

In the summer of 1998, self-defined “Poles-Catholics” erected hundreds of crosses just outside Auschwitz, in the backyard of what was, from 1984 to 1993, an infamous Carmelite Convent.²³ The controversial action was meant to mark the site as one of Polish martyrdom (as opposed to one of the Jewish Shoah) and to proclaim Poles’ intrinsic Catholicity. Before examining the event and what motivated it, however, a few words must clarify why Poles would care about Auschwitz in the first place—the death camp is, after all, a key site of the Shoah and a universal symbol of evil (Alexander 2002). Yet Auschwitz is also a core Polish symbol, since it was originally set up, in 1940, for Polish political prisoners. It was not until the Final Solution was implemented in 1942 that the camp was given the additional function of exterminating European Jewry, through the creation of Auschwitz II-Birkenau three kilometers away. While the death camps in Treblinka, Majdanek, Bełżec, Chełmno and Sobibór were and are synonymous with the extermination of Jews in Polish consciousness (because this is primarily where Polish Jews from the liquidated ghettos of Warsaw, Cracow, Łódź and Lublin were murdered), “Oświęcim” became and remained the symbol of Poles’ martyrdom during World War II, representing the attempt by Nazis to physically and culturally annihilate the Polish nation.

In 1947, the socialist state extended this already common understanding by creating the “State Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka” on the basis of a law “on the remembrance of the martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations.” As the name of that law suggests, Poles, although not the camp’s only victims, were its main martyrs. The Museum was squarely Polish from its inception, but the national narrative was told in the socialist mode and according to socialist parameters. In that narrative, “Victims of Fascism” from Poland and from 27 other states were exploited and exterminated at the camp, later liberated by the victorious and just Soviet army. The Jewish fact of Auschwitz was forced into the background, while the extent of Polish suffering was brought closer to the fore. Polish Jews, moreover, were included in the number of Poland’s victims. By conflating Polish Jews and gentiles into the category of “Polish citizens,” or sometimes simply “Poles,” it was implied that Poland had the largest death toll. The Museum has revised its narrative since the fall of communism and the opening of Soviet archives. It has dropped the socialist rhetoric and it now stresses that Jews constituted 90% of the camp’s victims. For ethnic Poles, however, who for three generations were socialized to believe that they had constituted the majority of prisoners and victims of the camp—a “fact” that fit neatly into the myth of Polish martyrology—this revision of history is not easily or unquestioningly accepted.²⁴

²² The quotation marks indicate the symbolic and discursive nature of the category. It is the image of Jews and representations of Jewishness that are used to define Polishness, not real, existing Jews—even when actual Jewish persons are referred to or symbolically abused, as was a frequent occurrence during the War of the Crosses.

²³ For a summary of the Carmelite Convent dispute, see Zubrzycki (2006, pp. 2-7). For detailed accounts, see Bartoszewski (1990), Głownia and Wilkanowicz (1998), Rittner and Roth (1991).

²⁴ See Chapter 3 of *The Crosses of Auschwitz* for an analysis of the various layers of meaning “Oświęcim” has for Poles and for a discussion of recent trends at the Museum. On the respective meanings of “Auschwitz” and “Oświęcim” for Jews and Poles, see also Tanay (1991), Webber (1992), Goban-Klas (1995), and Young (1993).

It is in the context of Auschwitz's narrative revision and, more broadly, of the reexamination of Polish national identity's relationship to Catholicism—that is, in the context of the questioning of Polish national mythology's two main strands—that the War of the Crosses was waged. The controversial event was spurred by rumors, a few months earlier, to the effect that a large cross, commonly called the “papal cross,” would be removed from the grounds of the former Convent, at the request of (non-Polish) Jewish organizations.²⁵ A series of commentaries by political figures immediately followed and popular mobilization soon was under way: some parishes celebrated special Masses for “the respect and protection of the papal cross,” alongside vigils for the defense of all crosses in Poland.

In June, Kazimierz Świtoń, ex-Solidarity activist and former deputy from the Right-wing Confederation of Independent Poland, appealed to his fellow Poles to plant 152 crosses on the grounds of the gravel pit, both to commemorate the (documented) deaths of 152 ethnic Poles executed at that specific site by Nazis in 1941 and to “protect and defend the papal cross.”²⁶ During the summer and fall of 1998, individuals, civic organizations and religious groups from every corner of Poland (and from as far away as Canada, the United States, and Australia) answered Świtoń's call to create a “valley of crosses.” By the time the Polish government finally had the crosses removed in May 1999, 322 crosses stood at the gravel pit.

The most common theme expressed on the crosses' inscriptions was that of Polish suffering, in an effort by their authors to counteract the recent revision of Auschwitz's history away from a focus on Polish martyrdom toward an emphasis on the Jewish Shoah. The great majority of the crosses bore small commemorative plaques dedicated to “Poles-Catholics murdered at the Gravel pit.” Other crosses bore biblical quotations and conjoined religious anti-Semitism with Polish martyrological messianism. One such inscription cited a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew that is frequently invoked to explain (and justify) the tragic fate of Jews.²⁷ While Jews were depicted as Christ-killers whose death at Auschwitz was therefore justified, Poles, in contrast, were rendered as truly sacrificial victims and heroes. In a messianic interpretation of their fate, Poles were not killed at Auschwitz as a punishment for any sin, but rather *to redeem sin* and save the world. The site is Poland's “bloodiest Golgotha,” claims another cross inscription, a religious metaphor borrowed from John Paul II's homily during his Mass at Birkenau in 1979, but often used to refer to Polish martyrdom.²⁸

In addition to the ubiquitous “Defend the Cross” placard, which was displayed throughout the summer and which exhorted Poles to defend Poland's intrinsic Catholicity, two banners, stretched on the gravel-pit's fence at the occasion of the annual “March of the

²⁵ The cross had been part of an altar on the grounds of Birkenau, Auschwitz's sister camp three kilometers away, where John Paul II celebrated mass in 1979 during his first, historic visit to Poland as Pontiff—hence the cross's popular naming as the “papal cross.”

²⁶ Approximately 100,000 non-Jewish Poles were prisoners at Auschwitz, of which about 70,000 were killed. About 1.1 million people found death at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 90% of whom were Jewish (Piper 1992).

²⁷ “Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever I tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice... Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some of whom you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth... Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation.’” (Matt. 23:1-3, 34, 36. RSV).

²⁸ The Katyn massacre, when some 20,000 Polish officers, intellectuals and civilian prisoners were murdered by the Soviet NKVD in the spring of 1940, is often called the “Golgotha of the East.”

Living” in April that year, are especially telling. The first, intended for Polish audiences since it was written in Polish, claimed that, “Here in the years 1940–45 Germans killed Poles,” protesting the recent narrative revision of Auschwitz and “setting the record straight” about Auschwitz being the site of Polish martyrdom. The second is more daring, as it provocatively advertised, this time in English, the existence of a “Polish Holocaust by Jews 1945–56,” referring to the commonly-held belief that the secret police, during Stalinism, was overwhelmingly constituted by Jews.

The placard and the banners, a discursive triptych, encapsulate the myths of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity and of its martyrdom—but their authors also, in their competition with Jews over legitimate claims of martyrdom, go even so far as to impute the source of Polish suffering to Jews. Although certainly shocking, this specific discursive move was not isolated and was repeated during the debate over the Jedwabne pogroms.

Jedwabne

The narrative revision of Auschwitz started to tug at the martyrological thread of Polish mythology, but it is the “revelation” and investigation, in 2001, of a series of pogroms that took place in the summer of 1941 in Northeastern Poland that broke it outright. Poles underwent an abrupt “narrative shock” following the publication of *Neighbors* (2001), a short book by Polish-born Princeton University Professor Jan Tomasz Gross that describes how ethnic Poles tormented and murdered their Jewish neighbors in the small town of Jedwabne. The book created a watershed public debate about Polish-Jewish relations, and generated very public soul-searching about the role of Poles in World War II and thereafter, as well as about Polish national identity more broadly.²⁹ If the post-1989 narrative reconfiguration of Auschwitz was the first blow inflicted on Poles’ self-representations as victims cheated by history, abandoned by friends, and invaded by foes, “Jedwabne” was the second, fatal one, as it forcefully exposed that not only were Poles not World War II’s main victims, but that they were in fact the perpetrators of some of its horrors. By rending the fabric of the martyrological myth—for one cannot be a sacrificial victim *and* a willful executioner—“Jedwabne” shook Polish national identity at its core.

The Polish government acknowledged the murders and erected a monument at the site where the local Jewish population was forcibly brought to a barn to be burned alive (Fig. 9).

Although the monument’s inscription fails to explicitly indicate that it was ethnic Poles who committed the crime, the official apologies by President Kwaśniewski on behalf of the Polish nation were unequivocal on that point: “Here in Jedwabne, citizens of the Republic of Poland died at the hands of other citizens of the Republic of Poland,” further qualifying the event as a “fratricide.” A few months later, however, a “counter-memorial” was installed in Jedwabne’s main square, not far from its church (Fig. 10).

²⁹ *Neighbors* was first published in Polish in 2000. Its English translation appeared a year later, allegedly to allow enough time for the Polish government to make appropriate apologies and officially recognize the role of ethnic Poles in the pogrom before the book became available to the American public. Following its Polish release, the Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej) opened an official investigation of the murders and published its findings in two volumes (Machciewicz and Persak 2002, 2002b). *Neighbors* also produced an important debate among historians in the form of lengthy editorials in the Polish press (see *Jedwabne: spór historyków wokół książki Jana T. Grossa “Sąsiedzi,”* 2002). Gross’s own responses to the debates appeared in a collection of essays published in 2003. Other interventions by prominent public intellectuals in Poland and abroad, as well as by Polish Catholic personalities, can be found in English in Brand (2001) and Polonsky and Michlic (2004).



Fig. 9 Memorial to the victims of the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom, unveiled in the summer of 2001. It is located outside the village, where some thousand local Jews were burned alive in a barn by their (ethnically) Polish neighbors. Cows graze in the field nearby, and further afield is the local Roman Catholic church on the village's market square. Source: G. Zubrzycki, May 2004

The monument consists of a series of brown rectangular bars representing railroad trellises, laid in the cobblestone ground. As they rise above the ground—suggesting a continuation of the tracks—the trellises now recall planks of rough wood affixed to the beams of cattle wagons, in which prisoners were deported. One of the two vertical beams holding the planks together is a tall cross overlooking the monument and the square. Most striking, in the composition, are several small crosses amidst the words “Siberia” and “Kazakhstan” are inscribed, as if scratched by hand with a rustic tool or even fingernails. Left of the monument is a stone with the following inscription: “In memory of those exiled, dead of hunger and cold in camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan. In gratitude for the miracle of those who survived—[signed] ‘Siberians’ and Polish Patriots of Jedwabne, 2002. For the memory of the dead, and as a warning for the living.”³⁰ The text in itself is not all that inflammatory, unless one places it in the specific context of the debate over Jedwabne and arguments that were commonly made to explain and sometimes even justify the murder of Jews by ethnic Poles. Indeed, many argued that the Jedwabne pogrom took place just when Soviets were retreating from Eastern Poland and the German army advanced in the region, as retaliation for alleged Jewish collaboration with the Soviets that led to the deportation of many Poles. The monument—planned, built and dedicated shortly after the one commemorating the murder of Jews by ethnic Poles—is therefore a clear response to the official memorial to Jewish victims, not only emphasizing Polish martyrdom to

³⁰ “Siberians” are survivors of Siberian camps.



Fig. 10 “Counter-memorial” to Polish victims exiled to Siberia and Kazakhstan, unveiled in the Jedwabne market square in 2002. Source: G. Zubrzycki, May 2004

counterbalance that of Jews, but insinuating that Jews, as accomplices of Soviet crimes, were responsible for Polish suffering—a belief that was articulated to me in countless ethnographic encounters and numerous interviews with informants during fieldwork in 2001 and 2004. By extension, it claims that Polish victimization of Jews—if it happened at all—was ultimately warranted since it was carried out in “self-defense,” issuing moreover a “warning to the living” that implies the possible need of “preemptive self-defense.”

Registers and Proximities

While the War of the Crosses may at first glance suggest that national mythology is stronger than ever, the close analysis of the public debates surrounding the controversial event

demonstrated the opposite (Zubrzycki 2006). Ultimately, instead of solidifying a vision of Polishness that has been eroding since the construction of a legitimate national state in 1989, it further contributed to the erosion it sought to halt. Contrary to the myth of Poland's intrinsic Catholicity and of the monolithic authority of the Church in that country, tension, fissures, and lines of division run deep.

The myth of martyrdom, however, is more resilient, as was apparent in both the Auschwitz and Jedwabne controversies. This was obvious in the mobilization of ultra-nationalists at Auschwitz, but it is also apparent from surveys conducted in the last 15 years: In the most recent one, conducted in 2005, over a third of Poles still predominantly associated "Oświęcim" with the martyrdom of the Polish nation, while less than a fifth associated it with the site with the extermination of Jews (CBOS 2005).³¹ Two thirds of respondents to another survey nevertheless correctly identified Jews as the group with the largest number of victims (OBOP 2000). This suggests that most Poles *know* that Jews constitute the majority of the former camp's victims, but that the myth of martyrdom and decades of socialization by the Museum and other state institutions trumps that knowledge for a significant number of Poles. When evaluating the persistence or decline of national mythology we must thus distinguish between its component myths.

We must also distinguish and identify for whom certain myths may remain relevant. While more resilient than the myth of Poland's intrinsic Catholicity and still significant for some segments of the population, martyrology is nevertheless losing its grip on others. It is much more prevalent among older cohorts of Poles than among the younger ones, especially among those born after 1989. The association of "Oświęcim" with the martyrdom of Poles, for example, was most often selected by people over 40 years of age, and least often by teenagers, who in turn most frequently indicated the Jewishness of the site (Kucia 2001, p. 13). Similar patterns obtain for Jedwabne: the debate most interested those over the age of 55, and the younger the respondent to surveys conducted, the less s/he was likely to declare being interested in it. This trend was especially marked in the 18–24 category, where only 15% declared following the debate (CBOS 2001). More than two thirds of young Poles, however, declared it necessary to expose the facts regarding the participation of Poles in the destruction of Jews during WWII (Zimmerman 2003, p. 12). These statistics may at first glance appear paradoxical, but it is perhaps not surprising that young Poles who find it important to recognize Polish involvement in the Holocaust were less interested in the debate about *whether* Poles had initiated and participated in pogroms, to what extent and why.

While fluent in its tropes and conversant in the various symbolic codes, images and rituals that constitute it, national mythology is increasingly "history" for younger generations of Poles in the sense of not being immediately relevant in the present. It is safely cordoned off from what I earlier described as an emotionally-loaded phenomenology

³¹ In 1995, almost half of Polish citizens (48%) associated Oświęcim with the martyrdom of the Polish nation, and only 8% with the extermination of Jews. A quarter associated the site with the "martyrdom of several nationalities," in accord with the socialist narrative (CBOS 1995). OBOP conducted two surveys in 2000, one on January 15–17 ($N=1,008$) and the other two weeks later (January 28–30, $N=1,111$), i.e. before and after the commemorative events of the 55th anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation. The same questions were administered in both surveys to measure the impact of the event on the population's knowledge and perceptions of Auschwitz. The results cited here are those of the second, post-commemorative survey. This OBOP survey was designed by and conducted for Dr. Marek Kucia, Department of Sociology, Jagiellonian University. I am grateful to OBOP for making the 2000 surveys available to me at no charge. For analyses and discussions of these (and other) surveys on Auschwitz, see Kucia (2001). The 2005 CBOS survey was conducted from January 28–February 1 of that year ($N=1,333$), after the 60th anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation.

of the nation, receding instead into “symbolic mindlessness” (Billig 1995, p. 41). Whether and the extent to which national mythology “matters,” then, depends on the historical context in which it is deployed, and on the historical experiences of national subjects. In the Polish case, because national mythology was articulated in relation to the loss of statehood around the tropes of suffering and chosenness, articulated in Christian metaphors and expressed through Catholic rituals, it has greater resonance and garners more consensus in the context of statelessness and occupation than in those of independent nation-statehood. Poland’s national mythology, therefore, has been much more open to contestation after the fall of communism and the building of a “truly Polish” state than it was in the communist period.

What I am suggesting is that national mythology, while still ever-present, persists in *varying proximities* to national actors.³² For some, most typically those who experienced World War II or the decades thereafter, the mythology is “present” at a close proximity and with a greater emotive force. For others, however, often (though not always) younger citizens without experience of the war, or of communism, enjoying what many older Poles would see as the luxury of peace and relative prosperity in an independent Poland, that “presence” appears at a critical distance; it does not have the salience, the weight and the sacred character it had in stateless Poland when it served on the one hand to explain (but not justify) the political situation, to give hope, and provide tools for resistance. While it comprises part of everyday knowledge, national mythology may exist for young Poles in the register of “history”—a familiar script learned from schoolbooks, family narratives and state rituals—or of a commodity. It may also occasionally seem near and pressing and could certainly (re)gain relevance were Polish sovereignty be threatened or lost again, or were dramatic events able to capture social imagination.

Such was the death of President Lech Kaczyński, killed in a tragic plane crash near Smoleńsk in Western Russia on April 10, 2010, along with his wife, dozens of parliamentarians, military leaders, and other civilian dignitaries. No one survived the crash, which claimed 96 victims. Within hours, the event was widely-reported and called a “second Katyń” in reference to the very event and place where the VIP delegation was headed to commemorate the deaths of some 20,000 Polish officers murdered in 1940 by the Soviet NKVD.

A few days after the event, Cardinal Dziwisz, Archbishop of Kraków, announced that the president and his wife would be buried in the Cathedral of the Wawel royal castle in Kraków, where kings and the greatest national heroes rest. The Cardinal explained in a press conference that “Surely President Kaczyński deserves to be buried at the Wawel since he died in exceptional circumstances—heroically even, one can say, *since he was flying to Katyń to honor the nation’s martyrs in the name of the nation*” (TVN24, April 13 2010. My translation and emphasis). Thus articulated, it was not President Kaczyński’s life or presidency that made him worthy of a royal burial, but his *proximity* to Katyń, a key site and symbol of Polish martyrdom: physical proximity, as the plane crashed by the Katyń

³² Although I privilege generational differences here because of national subjects’ historical experiences, their class and ideologico-political positions also certainly matters. Economic “losers” of the Post-Communist transition, for example, tend to narrate Poland’s accession to the EU as yet another dismemberment of the nation, as another crucifixion. National mythology is therefore closer to them than to those who have benefited from marketization and “Europeanization.” The losers, however, also tend to come from older cohorts of Poles who could not “retool” after the economic restructuring of the 1990s. Similarly with ideologico-political affiliations: those on the Left are much less likely to actively embrace Polish national mythology now that it has been tainted by the Right and the far-Right in events such as the War of the Crosses and protests over the acknowledgment of ethnic Poles’ role in the Jedwabne pogrom. The secular Left has therefore been trying to build a new national mythology by selecting different elements of its mythological repertoire, with more or less success (Zubrzycki 2001).

forest; historical proximity, as the President and the delegation were en route to Katyń to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the murders; and ideological proximity, as Kaczyński was a proponent of so-called “historical politics,” the political cultivation of historical consciousness as a tool for strengthening national identity. As part of historical politics, the President had organized a “parallel” commemoration of the event, distinct from the official one celebrated jointly by the prime ministers of Poland and Russia a few days prior and to which Kaczyński had not been invited.

“Katyń,” not just as place but as event, is a symbol of Poles’ World War II martyrdom and was forced underground during 50 years of communism. It has become, in the words of Prime Minister Donald Tusk, “the founding myth of Free Poland,” because it was finally possible to talk about that event after 1989. It is thus through its proximity to (and contagion by) the historical event turned sacred symbol of national martyrdom and freedom, and the narration of his death in that particular script, that the President attained the status of martyr himself. Despite the controversial nature of his presidency, low political capital and a questionable political legacy, Kaczyński was awarded the honor reserved to few exceptional historical figures, and none whose monumental status had not already been burnished over many years. But the power of Katyń itself also resides in the fact that the event fits neatly into a well-established national mythological script of messianic martyrdom, of which it had become a key twentieth century instantiation. The plane crash and Katyń were thus layered onto each other and folded into the national mythological structure. This martyrologization of President Kaczyński is far from being widely accepted, however. In fact, it caused the first cracks in a rare show of national grief and unity, as loud protests were organized immediately after Cardinal Dziwisz’s announcement of the Wawel burial.³³

Those cracks became canyons in the months that followed. Throughout August 2010, several thousand young Poles gathered in the streets of Warsaw, this time to protest against the presence of a wooden cross commemorating the death of President Kaczyński in front of the presidential palace. It had been agreed by state and church authorities that the cross, erected by Boy Scouts in the days following the plane crash in April, would be relocated on August 3 via religious procession to a nearby church. But self-proclaimed “Defenders of the Cross” aggressively prevented the church-led ceremonial relocation, which they understood as the profanation of the symbol and of the nation. The site quickly turned into a new “war of the cross,” providing a visible platform for proponents of the cross, but also the stage for protest against the religio-nationalist and anti-semitic Poland that the cross has come to signify in the years following the fall of communism. In addition to sober endeavors like the signing of petitions against the presence of the cross at that specific site and for a stricter separation of church and state in Poland, parody and mockery of the Defenders of the Cross

³³ Multiple Facebook pages protesting the burial plans and the martyriological mythologization of President Kaczyński, appeared within hours of the announcement, and was commented by users, bloggers and editorialists, as “national hysteria”—Pages named “Let’s all get buried at the Wawel!” “Wawel is not Enough! Why not the Pyramids?” were especially popular, gathering tens of thousands of “Fans.” For links to multiple Facebook pages, see http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80708,7771897,Facebook_Wawelem_podzielony.html?as=2&startsz=x. See also important editorials from Polish public intellectuals in the New York Times, specifically addressing the “traps” of national mythology and messianic martyrology (Wiktor Osiatyński, “Polish Heroes, Polish Victims” and Olga Tokarczuk, “Where History’s March Is a Funeral Procession,” both published on April 15, 2010). The controversy over the burial is not over: in the summer of 2010, I witnessed long lines of people—many of them elderly, sick or handicapped—patiently waiting to pay homage to the deceased President and his wife in the Wawel crypt, often posing for family photographs by the sarcophagus and touching its stone and gold letters, like the faithful do with relics; but also saw countless graffiti with the simple slogan “Wawel for Kings.”

and their crusade against the secular state have been quite effective: “They wanted a circus? We’ll give them a circus!”—announced a Facebook group inviting members to a protest. Within hours, more than 8,000 Facebook users confirmed their participation in the “happening”; the ultra-nationalist Catholic radio station Radio Maryja countered by appealing to its listeners, especially its *male* listeners, to counter-demonstrate against the counter-demonstrators... The city mobilized its police force, expecting the worse. TV crews set up their equipment and regular news shows were cancelled to cover this “special event.” The streets of downtown Warsaw were flooded with people—who prayed, protested, picnicked, partied or just happily “peeped,” under heavy police surveillance and in front of cameras. The organizers of the Facebook “happening” had specifically asked the participants *not* to bring national flags and banners nor any religious items in order to underline the insignificance of the self-proclaimed “Defenders of the Cross.” Bringing national symbols to their protest would bring legitimacy to the war of the cross, while the goal of the “Facebook” happening was precisely the opposite, namely to show how marginal the Defenders of the Cross were, and how absurd their campaign was. Participants were thus invited to come costumed, make up funny slogans, dance and play beach ball. The area around the Presidential Palace became a grotesque theater where small religious groups sang religio-patriotic hymns while protesters blasted “disco-polo” hits; where some elderly Defenders of the Cross tied themselves up to the cross with flags while young protestors mocked them by initiating a war of the cross “pillow fight”; and where some declared willingness to die for the cross while others wore t-shirts “where there’s a cross, there’s a party!” or brandishing banners “The Presidential Palace casts a shadow in the cross: Let’s Bomb the Palace!” Television viewers could see, among the “protesters,” Elvis and Pope impersonators.³⁴

The “stand-off” at the Presidential Palace, which lasted several weeks that summer, became the number one news in the media. Like the War of the Crosses at Auschwitz (Zubrzycki 2006), the event was initiated by a group of marginal characters, but generated vocal opposition and served as the prism through which social actors, politicians, Church authorities and ordinary citizens—many of them in the 18-24 age-group—discussed and debated the place of religion in Poland, and what that Poland is or should be. The contrast has perhaps never been clearer, and it was crystal clear that national mythologizing failed to win broad support.

Rejecting and Recycling National Mythology

While many for whom national mythology is now “history” remain merely indifferent to it, others actively oppose it. We have seen how effective mobilization and “street mockery” can be to initiate and generate substantive discussions about religion, national mythology and national identity. Art is another area of social life that provides a meaningful space for a forceful critique of national mythology. Take, for example, the work of Polish artists Peter Fuss and Dorota Nieznalska, who attack national mythology by highlighting its blind spots and denouncing its perversity. In several art installations, Fuss comments on the commodification of the national myth of Poland’s intrinsic Catholicity, which is stronger, he contends, than the actual religious feelings of most Poles (Fig. 11).

In “Santa Subito,” Fuss arranged dozens of “garden popes” on the exhibit floor, nestled between images projected onto the surrounding walls. On one wall, photographs of kitsch pope souvenirs and knick-knacks: clocks, snow globes, commemorative spoons, decorative

³⁴ For a collection of special news reports (in Polish) on the so-called “Smoleńsk cross” see <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/8,80287,8207484.html>



Fig. 11 From Polish artist Peter Fuss's exhibit "Santo Subito." <http://peterfuss.com/santosubito/index.html> [accessed April 18, 2009]. Reproduced with artist's permission

plates, coasters, pillows, pens, key rings, plastic shopping bags and so forth. On the other wall, photographs of fifty-seven monuments to John Paul II in Poland. To the journalist who asked him to explain his "fixation" with the Pope, Fuss replied:

It is not [a] fixation, it is a reaction to the reality around me...Even when [John Paul II] was alive the scale of his worship was really grotesque...The cult of the Pope is a very particular mixture of hillbilly, superficial faith with a large dose of kitsch and bad taste... To [the masses], [John Paul II] is more of an idol, a superstar than a spiritual leader, as paradoxically they know very little of his teachings or Papal encyclicals. People prefer to have pictures showing the Pope than Jesus Christ. They are also much more sensitive about the Pope than Christ...The police intervened several times during my exhibition... after they were called by people who felt offended by it. (<http://blog.groundswellcollective.com/2008/04/04/groundswell-talks-peter-fuss>)

Nieznalska is also (in)famous for her controversial attacks on Polish national mythology, as a consequence of which she was even charged, tried and sentenced.³⁵ Her critique of Polish national mythology is articulated primarily around its symbols and material

³⁵ In her 2001-02 exhibit "Passion," Nieznalska played on two significations of the term—the Passion of Christ and physical enthusiasm. The installation consisted of a photograph of male genitalia affixed in a cross-shaped frame suspended from the ceiling, and a slow motion video of a man's face during strenuous physical exercise. According to art critic Izabela Kowalczyk, the installation is a commentary on masculinity and consumption in the broader context of Poland's dominant Catholic culture (http://www.culture.pl/pl/culture/artykuly/os_nieznalska_dorota [accessed June 11, 2009]). For a photograph of the installation, see <http://www.artliberated.org/?id=20&p=cases> [accessed June 1, 2009]. In 2003, Nieznalska was found guilty of "offending religious feelings" according to article 196 of the penal code, and was sentenced to six months of unpaid community service. The artist appealed, the sentence was lifted and she was exonerated on June 4, 2009.

Fig. 12 “King of Poland,” bronze cast, 2008. From Dorota Nieznalska’s 2009 exhibit “Kingdom,” in which she takes on the Polish myth of martyrology through sculptures of crowns of thorns. Source: D. Nieznalska, with permission of the artist



representations, most notably through controversial sculptures of crowns of thorns (Figs. 12 and 13).

The most powerful piece of her exhibit “Kingdom,” photographed on its poster, is a crown of thorns attached to a chain (Fig. 12), a twist on the ball and chain often worn as patriotic jewelry in the nineteenth century (see Fig. 2). The ball and chain then metaphorically represented the common interpretation of the Partitions of Poland as the loss of freedom. By replacing the ball with the crown of thorns, Nieznalska claims that the martyrological myth is a heavy burden that keeps the nation prisoner. In another piece, she comments on the various implications of national mythology by showing how its dominance in the public domain impacts the private lives of its citizens. Her poster entitled “My Life, My Decision” (Fig. 13) depicts a woman’s body. Though showing only her midsection, the viewer quickly recognizes it is crucified by virtue of the woman’s arms raised out of the frame, her ribcage stretched out. Encircling her waist is a crown of thorns, reminiscent of chains that once imprisoned slaves. Catholicism, Nieznalska insinuates, turns women into martyrs by controlling their wombs and curtailing their rights. While Jesus-Poland was crucified to save the world and would resurrect, the message communicated here is that Polish women are sacrificed to save the nation, but that their own redemption is far from assured.

While some myths may be withering for younger generations or even be actively contested, those very myths are frequently revived for international audiences. Take the way in which Chopin, whose personal life was shaped by and became closely associated with the martyrdom of the nation, has recently become branded and commercialized in a luxury vodka sold to international markets as “quintessentially Polish.”³⁶ Following the

³⁶ On the “branding” of national identity, see Foster (1999, 2002; Hall 2005) and Aronczyk (2008).

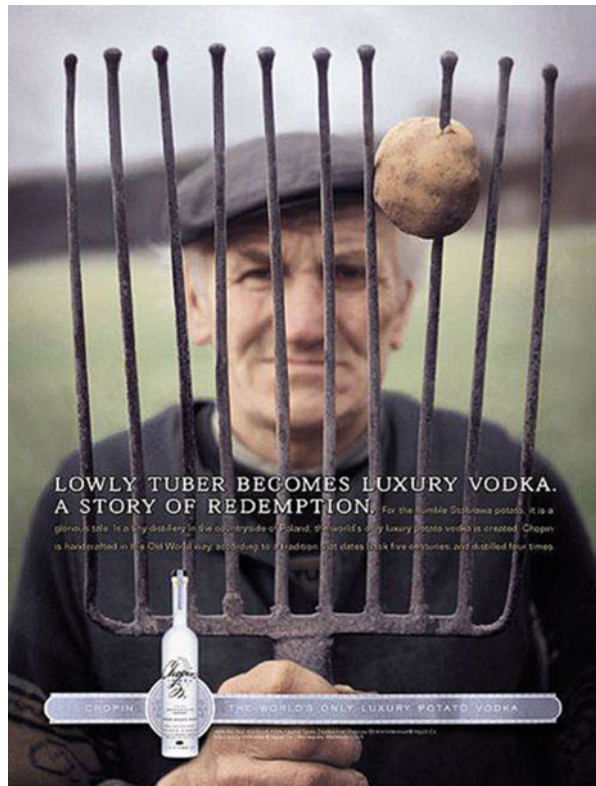
Fig. 13 “My life, My Decision,” Dorota Nieznalska, 2005. The project won third place of a contest organized by the Federation for Women and Family Planning, Poland. Source: D. Nieznalska, with permission of the artist



return of the cocktail to the bar scene in the 1990s, and the parallel rise of so-called “designer” vodkas, Polmos, one of Poland’s largest producers of vodkas, created and aggressively promoted the “Chopin” vodka in non-Polish markets. Why Chopin? Because the vodka had to be associated with Poland (and not Russia) and because it was branded as a *refined*, luxury vodka. The producer also emphasizes that it is a *potato* vodka (as opposed to rye or wheat), and plays on the contrast between the ingredient’s grittiness and the final product’s clarity, bringing attention to the *artistry* of the transformation process. Like a diamond, it is rough in its natural state, and only great tradition and skill can transform the vulgar vegetable into a clear, sparkling jewel. One of its advertisements depicts an old peasant holding a pitchfork with a potato impaled in its middle spike: “Lowly tuber becomes luxury vodka. A story of redemption.” The term “redemption” is significant here—if not to the (non-Polish) consumer of the ad (and of the vodka itself), certainly for its producer, as it suggests a way of thinking, feeling, and selling Polishness—or, more precisely, of selling vodka as a structure of (Polish) feeling (Fig. 14).

But what is being redeemed is also that which until recently was shameful. In a global economy where “old” nations try to turn what once made them appear “backward,” into unique, exotic and prized assets, antiquated farming methods, for example, are now lauded as healthier for both the environment and the consumers. “We don’t need to ‘go organic,’” Polish farming associations commonly proclaim, “we are and *always* have been organic.” The old peasant in the Chopin vodka ad reframes “backwardness” into tradition, turns it into trans-generational know-how and artistry that modern (Western) technology lacks. As

Fig. 14 Advertisement for the Chopin Vodka (<http://www.polmos-siedlce.com.pl/?id=prasa/galeria&lang=pl>)



the Chopin vodka website proclaims, the product is “handcrafted and produced in small batches...distilled from the potatoes grown in the Podlasie region in Poland, [which] due to its low level of industrialization...is one of the healthiest, most fertile agricultural regions of Europe.”³⁷

Although the vodka is said to be “named after Poland’s favorite son, renowned composer Frederic Chopin,” and to provide the consumer with “an authentic experience in the Polish tradition,” Chopin’s music is conspicuously absent from the marketing of the vodka: on its English-version website, a trip-hop track sets the mood to jetsetters drinking a “CEO martini” garnished with three olives stuffed with caviar (<http://www.chopinvodka.com/playvideo.html> [accessed April 22, 2009]). What is sold is not Chopin’s product—his music—but Polishness, its essence distilled and bottled for smooth consumption. To borrow the slogan of another Polish vodka marketed for export—Sobieski Vodka is “Poland in a

³⁷ The first Chopin ad campaign played extensively on the unique value of “backwardness.” Another ad claimed “Potatoes, water, yeast. In a tiny distillery in Poland, an extraordinary alchemy...in accordance with 500 years of tradition.” Subsequent advertising campaigns of Chopin vodka juxtaposed the terroir with high fashion, dirt and glam, wholesomeness and sex appeal. One, for example, showed a model in evening gown and Russian fur hat in a potato field, holding a wicker basket full of the vegetable (<http://www.chopinvodka.com/main.htm> [accessed April 22, 2009]).

bottle.”³⁸ The messianic and the romantic traditions are cleverly repackaged in products selling not only the vodka, but a mythological “Poland.”

Conclusion

If I am correct in noting, at least typologically, two different registers of apprehending persistent mythologies of the nation, it may be useful to more forcefully distinguish them such that they can be used in comparative analysis. The first is an experiential and emotional register in which a given national mythology is perceived as *sacred*. It impinges upon one as an inevitable, encompassing power. Communicated in and through images and things, for those who live the nation in this register, the images are a metonymic extension of something deeply real and fundamentally solid—though potentially threatened and hence in need of ardent defense. The second mode of apprehension of national mythology is *profane*; it is a register that allows for a certain critical distance, in which the nation is an oft-commodified *thing* to be used playfully or even ironically by national actors, or alienable for uses by cosmopolitan consumers and various other non-nationals. This ideal-typical distinction between two registers of experience may prove a useful comparative heuristic for future research on the phenomenology of nationalism. It pushes us, for instance, to identify the historical contexts during which both types overlap and reinforce each other, or compete and ultimately undermine national mythology instead. The analytical distinction may also help us to specify which register tends to have greater resonance with diverse social or age groups and better understand the various uses political actors and cultural agents make of national mythology.

Combining insights from the literature on nationalism, visibility and materiality, this cultural sociological approach links the historical and experiential, the ideological and material. It provides a framework to think about the constitution, persistence and transformation of national mythologies, and the new products through which images of the nation are circulated and consumed in global contexts.

I have proposed that we consider national mythology as shaped by historical events and their narratives, embodied in material culture, and enacted in a variety of practices in private and public settings. The incarnation of national mythology into cultural forms that come to life in various practices is not merely reflective of national identity, but constitutive of it; it is through that “national sensorium” that national mythology can generate sentiments of national belonging. Despite its timeless appearance, I have shown in some detail how a given national mythology and its attendant sensorium were built, and how they also crack and can break down under the duress of particular historical events and structures.

³⁸ It is not the martyrological myth that is evoked in the naming of the vodka after King Jan Sobieski, but the pre-Romantic messianic one of Poland as the Bulwark of Christendom, for Sobieski is most famous for “saving Vienna from the Turks” in 1683. This is the strong man’s vodka, not that of the effeminate Chopin, against which Sobieski vodka is implicitly marketed (<http://www.vodkasobieski.com/poland.php> [accessed June 7, 2009]). The campaign aims at demystifying all sorts of claim made by “other” vodka brands (French, Russian, Swedish, and Polish potato vodka), precisely by playfully resorting to Polish mythology (Zubrzycki [in progress] “‘Poland in a Bottle’: Redemptive Vodkas, National Branding and the Commodification of Nations”).

In the case of Poland, this questioning of national mythology has been a key feature of the post-communist transition, as the recovery of an independent state has seriously weakened the political valence of a dominant mythology primarily articulated in the context of statelessness and colonial domination. In this new context, I noted how those with no experience or memory of the war and communism use the same repertoire of aesthetic cues as those who lived through these historic times, but in a profane mode—as “history” kept at arms-length rather than ready-to-hand. In a more acute breakdown of national mythology, it is mocked in the streets or its material aesthetics are turned against it, as described in the examples of art installations critiquing the commodified worship of Pope John Paul II, or denouncing the implications of the martyrological myth for Polish women. Yet another form of fracturing occurs when the material cues of the sacred national mythology are alienated to become sheer commodities. In the global marketplace, the figures of the national mythology may be turned to ironic effect—the irony produced by the distance between the thoroughly grounded, rustic Polish potato farmer, signifier of national terroir, on the one hand, and on the other, the ethereal urban consumer of the vodka martini, who could be anywhere. And yet, even in the cases of turning against the myths, or exploiting them for commercial gain, the myths remain in circulation. Insofar as they continue to evoke responses, they remain ready for reactivation when historical winds shift again, and available also to potential new nationalists—those who do not merely dwell in a national mythology and its sensorium, but actually labor to produce and fortify it.

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