Evoking Polish Memory explores the contemporary memoryscape of a mid-sized Polish city through the eyes of victims of repression and former security officers involved in political violence from 1944-1989. A theoretically sophisticated and methodologically rigorous ethnography, the book goes beyond recounting oral histories and uncovers how real people (re)construct memories of the past in the present through their interactions with social networks, state-sponsored memory projects, the court system, political discourses, and religious practices. Rich and compelling, Evoking Polish Memory is a rare success story in interdisciplinary research, taking an anthropological approach to questions of interest to political scientists, legal scholars, sociologists, and historians. Some minor revisions would strengthen the book even further and ensure that it garners the wider readership it deserves.

There are two main research questions: 1.) How do victims of repression and former security officers make sense of the past – and their role in it – in the context of contemporary memory projects? 2.) To what extent have contemporary memory projects been successful in establishing a dominant, politically correct memory regime? In chapters 1-5, the author explores the self-construals of victims of repression now commemorated as national heroes. In chapters 7-9, she explores the self-construals of former security officers now stigmatized as perpetrators. Chapter 6 focuses on monuments and other commemorative projects as a locus for the politics of memory and forgetting. The result is an unflinching, unsentimental, and penetrating look into the life-worlds of "hero/victims" and "perpetrators" – the two categories of people articulated not only in the contemporary discourse of memory politics but also in the broader discourses of law, transitional justice, human rights, and political violence. Because these subject-positions are so fundamental, the study has broad implications beyond the case of Poland.

What we see are people who fidget uncomfortably in the ill-fitting clothing of these labels. "Hero/victims" honored by the state were less generously judged by family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Some others were scorned as irresponsible troublemakers, naïve idealists, common criminals, and rabid nationalists, while others were suspected of collaboration. "Perpetrators" never came to terms with the harm they caused others, instead viewing themselves as hapless victims of a witch hunt led by vindictive, petty, and hypocritical extremists. Significantly, state-sponsored memory projects have failed to establish a dominant collective memory. The "politically correct" historical narrative propagated by the state has had little traction with people whose opinions were formed over decades of experience and in the context of particular sociopolitical
demographic groups.

What makes the book so convincing is its methodological rigor and sensitive reflexivity. The scope of exposure alone is impressive. Witeska-Młynarczyk takes the reader into meetings attended by victims of repression, court trials of former security officers, public inaugurations of memorials, commemorative events, masses honoring hero/victims, and meetings of a local town council overseeing commemorative projects. Even more impressive is her inclusion of interviews with former security officers – a particularly impenetrable population. Participant observation and interviews are supplemented with meticulous archival research. The author’s attention to methodological rigor is evident in her careful and thorough description of procedures and sources, including a detailed assessment of potential biases. Finally, her reflections concerning her research with these two unique populations is poignant and riveting.

Notwithstanding its intellectual merits, the book is riddled with typos and mistranslations so numerous as to become distracting. A future edition would benefit from ruthless copyediting. In addition, footnotes explaining certain terms to a non-Polish audience would expand its accessibility to a wider readership. Other terms could be better explained within the text. For example, the term "negative verification" is unlikely to be understood by an American audience unfamiliar with the mechanics of lustration and the terminology used to describe its outcome. Such misunderstandings are a shame, since this interdisciplinary book has obvious cross-over potential. I hasten to add that these issues, though troublesome, can be easily fixed and do not undermine the intellectual merits of the book.

Finally, a future revised edition could be expanded in several ways. First, the discussion of the legal framework for dealing with security officers is quite good but too brief and buried in a section devoted to the political party advocating historical justice, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. Such a presentation risks misleading the reader into thinking that the legal framework was developed only recently and by a single political party, when in fact its development began as early as 1991 and involved many political parties in parliamentary debates leading up to the passage of these laws. Hence, I suggest expanding this section to provide a fuller, more comprehensive overview of the development of the legal framework.


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Citation: