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The memory politics of Cursed Soldiers, antisemitism and racialisation

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between racism and the memory politics of the anti-communist underground in Poland. It explores a covert antisemitism behind the conservative nationalist hegemonic project of transforming the anti-communist underground into the ideologically charged symbol of the Cursed Soldiers. It demonstrates that under the conditions of the condemnation of antisemitism, the symbolism of the Cursed Soldiers has become a covert way of expressing anti-Jewish prejudice in hegemonic memory politics. The paper argues that this covert antisemitism must be seen in the broader context of historical racialised antisemitism and racialised structures of Polish national identity. The paper challenges the notion of Poland as a country free from racism, by unpacking the role of racialisation in the dominant understanding of Polishness. It demonstrates how the memory politics of the Cursed Soldiers fit into the racialised logic of the dominant ideology of Polish national identity.

KEYWORDS

antisemitism, memory politics, Poland, racialisation, racism

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyse the latent links between the nationalist conservative memory politics of the anti-communist underground (AU) in Poland, antisemitism and racialisation. It demonstrates that behind the transformation of the

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AU into an ideologically charged symbol of the Cursed Soldiers (CS) lies covert antisemitism, which is manifested in the downplaying of Jewish suffering and the transformation of Jews from victims into ungrateful executioners of Poles. The paper argues that covert antisemitism needs to be seen in the light of historical racialised antisemitism, which in turn was a manifestation of a broader tendency towards a racialised Orientalism, which underpinned the hegemonic Polish national identity. This racial logic of hegemonic Polishness has been recently more clearly evident in the racialised Orientalisation of Muslims during the 'migration crisis' (Bobako, 2017; Jaskulowski, 2019). Unlike previous studies, the paper hypothesises that anti-Islamism does not so much draw on older antisemitic patterns, but that these two forms of hostility have a common denominator: the racialised structure of hegemonic Polishness. In this context, it is argued that the symbol of the CS may be seen as signifying the defence of the Polish nation not only against communism but also implicitly against other (Eastern) civilisations whose otherness is more or less openly defined in biological terms.

By critically analysing the nationalist hegemonic memory politics of the CS in the context of the racialised structures of Polish nationalism, the paper aims to broaden the scope of the discussion on racism in three respects. First, it goes beyond the prevailing Western-centred studies of racism by advancing the postulate of studying racism outside the Western context (Balogun, 2020; Bonnett, 2018; Jaskulowski & Pawlak, 2020; Zakharov & Law, 2017). Second, it draws on the nascent literature on racism in Poland but adopts a different perspective to the dominant approaches to this research in Poland, which treat racism in individual terms. On the one hand, they have focused on personal experiences of discrimination based on biological characteristics, and, on the other, on individual prejudices towards different minority groups, especially Blacks and Muslims (Balogun & Joseph-Salisbury, 2021; Jaskulowski, 2019; Jaskulowski & Pawlak, 2020; Narkowicz & Pędziwiatr, 2017; Nowicka, 2018). In contrast, this article looks at institutions and broader structures by analysing the links between memory, the hegemonic ideology of national identity, and racialisation (Balogun, 2020; Bobako, 2017; Drozdowski & Matusz, 2021; Jaskulowski, 2021; Polynczuk-Alenius, 2021). Third, the paper assumes that in order to explain the conditions of possibility of these structures, it is necessary to go beyond the compartmentalisation that characterises research on racism in Poland. It critically combines several strands of research that have been developed in relative isolation: racism studies, memory studies, antisemitism studies and anti-Islamism studies (Bilewicz et al., 2018; Drozdowski & Matusz, 2021; Jaskulowski & Majewski, 2022). Thus, the paper is not another narrow case study—rather it aims to provide a broad overview and synthesised analysis of memory politics in the broad context of the dominant structures of racialised Polish national identity.

We present our arguments in three sections. First, we provide the historical and political context; using the category of hegemony as a prism, we analyse how and why the AU has been transformed into an ideologically charged symbol of the CS (Hall, 2016). The second section examines the relationship between the memory politics of the CS and antisemitism in the context of the discourse on two totalitarianisms and two Holocausts (Katz, 2016; Subotic, 2019). The last section situates covert antisemitism in the broader context of dominant cultural structures, by analysing the conditions for its possibility and demonstrating the racialised logic of hegemonic Polishness.

2 | BUILDING A HEGEMONY: FROM BANDITS TO THE CS

The term AU refers to the conspiratorial resistance movement against the communists after 1944. Having entered the territory of Poland, the USSR installed a government composed of Polish communists, which did not, however, enjoy much support from Polish society. Whereas most Poles hoped for a peaceful removal of the communists from power, some were looking to a more militarised AU. The AU originated largely from the Polish underground formed during the Nazi occupation; however, it was much less numerous. At its peak in 1945, there were approximately 300 partisan units numbering between 13,000 and 17,000 fighters in total (Gehler & Schriff, 2020; Mazur, 2019). The AU was fragmented, uncontrollable and driven by internal conflicts (Mazur, 2019). Some partisans held antisemitic views, killed Jews whom they associated with communism and conducted ethnic cleansing in the borderlands

(Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009; Tokarska-Bakir, 2017). The armed struggle against the communists was short-lived; the number of partisans quickly melted away due to repression and amnesties. In 1947, there were only 1000–2000 partisans, who were focused on survival under conditions of increasing social isolation, deepened by the Catholic Church's dissociation from the underground. In total, tens of thousands of partisans, soldiers and militiamen died in the civil war, as well as about 10,000 civilians who fell victim to pacification actions, ethnic cleansing and murder (Gehler & Schriff, 2020; Mazur, 2019).

The communist repression was accompanied by propaganda depicting the AU as fascist bands. However, during the People's Republic of Poland (PRP), among the factions of communists with nationalist and antisemitic views, demands were already appearing for the rehabilitation of the AU (Jaskulowski & Majewski, 2022). Jerzy Ślaski (1981), who himself was a member of a post-war partisan group which benefited from an amnesty, also spoke out in this vein. In the PRP, he worked as a journalist and sat on the board of the 'Pax' Association—an organisation of pro-communist Catholics, founded by Bolesław Piasecki, the leader of the pre-war fascist grouping of the National Radical Camp 'Falanga' (Kunicki, 2012). Paradoxically, although the communists condemned ethnic-authoritarian nationalism in their propaganda, they welcomed nationalists who wanted to cooperate with them. In 1981, Ślaski (1981) published an article entitled 'Cursed and erased', in which he emphasised the point that the partisans were also Poles (as opposed to employees of the Security Office [SO], as the article might suggest) and that they had been unjustly erased from the collective memory. Thus, during the PRP, Ślaski had already coined the term CS, which has been appropriated by the contemporary right-wing, presumably to diminish the collaboration of some ethnic-authoritarian nationalists with the communists.

After the fall of communism, the AU became an element of right-wing symbolic politics, when a fringe organisation, the Republican League (RL), used the symbol of CS to legitimise its anti-communist radicalism and delegitimise the Third Republic of Poland (III RP) as a system created by compromise with the communists (Kurkowska-Budzan, 2009). Driven by moral resentment, RL demanded the exclusion of ex-communists from political life, claiming that they had no moral right to hold any office (Barbalet, 2004; Liga Republikańska, 1993). The symbolism of the CS became popular in various radical anti-communist circles spreading conspiracy theories about the III RP as the product of a communist secret service plot. The radicals framed themselves as the heirs of the uncompromising CS and contrasted themselves with the treacherous liberal elite that enabled the communists to maintain their dominant position in the III RP. Due to its aura of revolt against establishment, the symbolism of CS also became popular among football ultras, who generally have right-wing leanings in Poland (Nosal et al., 2021).

The symbolic politics of the CS, functioning on the margins of political life, was incorporated into mainstream politics at the beginning of the 2000s, which paradoxically was helped by centrist parties, although this politics delegitimised them. Two issues were of key importance in this process of incorporation: first, the activity of the Institute of National Remembrance (INR, the Polish state research and educational agency with investigative powers), especially since 2005, when it was headed by a president nominated by the Law and Justice party (PiS). Under the new leadership, the INR intensified its propaganda activities relating to the CS. Second, at the beginning of 2011, the parliament adopted a law stating that the National Day of Remembrance of the CS was to be celebrated on March 1 (Kończal, 2020). After winning the 2015 elections, PiS transformed the CS into a key symbol of its memory politics which stood behind its hegemonic project of the moral regeneration of the Polish nation. Thus, state ceremonies related to the commemoration of the CS gained momentum both at the central and local level. Although this trend was already visible before, it has now become more pronounced—the ceremonies have clearly taken on a state-church character, and the presence of Catholic hierarchs has become an inseparable element of these celebrations. The scale of involvement of the state, the Church and institutions controlled by PiS in the memory politics of the CS has increased. For example, the construction of museums dedicated to the CS has been announced, and through controlled media and cultural and local government institutions, PiS has started to incorporate nationalist popular culture more intensively, especially rap music (the second most popular music genre in Poland), awarding grants and prizes to rappers, or inviting them to commemorative ceremonies (Majewski, 2021). PiS has also reorganised the school system and taken this opportunity to modify the core curricula, including history that has been subordinated

to the logic of the nationalist model of education, involving celebration of the CS as national heroes serving as a moral example for students (Jaskulowski et al., 2022).

Simultaneously with the institutionalisation of its memory politics, PiS attached to the CS additional meanings consistent with its ideology in a process of symbolic thickening (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019). The symbol of the CS underwent a multidimensional process of signifying thickening, which consisted of eight dimensions. In the first, nationalisation, the symbol began to represent more clearly the fight for a Polish sovereign nation-state and became inscribed in the history of Polish national liberation struggles as another national uprising. In the second, sacralisation, the CS, shedding their blood for the nation, became a sacred national symbol to be honoured and respected (see Durkheim, 2008 [1912]). In the third, Catholicisation, sacralisation was also accompanied by the association of the CS with Catholicism, which PiS ideology defines as the basis of Polish national identity. In the fourth, radicalisation, the CS who had committed war crimes, including crimes against humanity, were glorified. In the fifth, ethnicisation, the CS became a symbol of Polishness narrowly understood in ethnic terms. Paradoxically, at the same time, the sixth dimension of this thickening occurred, Europeanisation: Namely, the CS began to represent the defence of European civilisation against communism understood not only as a criminal and immoral ideology but also in civilisational terms, as a creation of an 'other' and barbaric Eastern civilisation. In the seventh dimension, masculinisation, the CS became a symbol of patriarchal masculinity allegedly threatened by 'gender ideology', and in the eighth, moralisation, the CS became the embodiment of morality, the foundation of which is uncompromising loyalty and sacrifice for the nation. As a result, the symbolism of the CS 'thickened', acquiring a whole range of meanings and becoming a concrete and visible sign of the PiS ideology and a key summarising symbol of its hegemonic memory politics.

In accordance with the logic of a summarising symbol, these meanings are connected with each other on the 'all or nothing' principle (Ortner, 1973). The symbol represents a conglomerate of ideas, emotions and meanings, which one has to accept in their entirety or reject, thus situating oneself by this ideology outside the Polish nation. In the rhetoric of the PiS, the symbol of the CS is a tangible embodiment of national identity (the Polish nation as the CS), marking the boundary between us true Poles (patriots, anti-communists, Catholics, traditionalists), who support PiS—the only heir to the tradition of the struggle for independence—and all the rest of the internal enemies (such as liberals, leftists, communists and 'genderists') who have yet to be re-educated and restored to the nation and various external enemies.

3 | CS, THE HOLOCAUST AND ANTISEMITISM

An important context for the nationalist memory politics of CS is the debate about Poles' participation in the Holocaust. This was triggered by Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbours* (Gross, 2001), which described how Poles murdered their Jewish neighbours in Jedwabne in 1941. Subsequent books by Gross (2006), Gross and Gross (2012) and other historians showing that some Poles murdered Jews provoked angry reactions from the conservative-nationalists, who after taking power tried to judicially limit the freedom of research in this area (Grabowski, 2013; Hackmann, 2018). The debate arouses great emotion for two reasons. First, although there were already some voices saying there had been Poles who murdered Jews, the books by Gross—an employee of the prestigious American university, publishing simultaneously in Polish and English—raised this discussion to the international level, which the right-wing circles interpreted as proof of an international conspiracy against Poland. In the rhetoric of the right-wing, Gross is the 'main Pole eater'—this derogatory term seems to be an allusion to the blood legend that Jews eat matza made from Christian blood (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008) who symbolises the anti-Polonism of the Western liberals. Second, the discussion presented some Poles as perpetrators, which undermines the myth of the Polish nation as a victim, an important element of Polish national identity (Porter-Szűcs, 2014). From a logical point of view, the fact that there were some Poles who murdered Jews does not imply that the Poles as a nation could not have themselves been victims in history. However, myth has its own rules, and conservative nationalist ideas of victimhood are linked to innocence and moral superiority. Polish nationalism (like many other Central-Eastern European nationalisms) is characterised by

envy of the Holocaust and rivalry over who was the greatest number of victims as a result of the Second World War (WWII) (Katz, 2016; Subotic, 2019). According to this logic, claims about the crimes of Poles are a manifestation of a Jewish tendency to focus exclusively on their own suffering and accuse everyone of antisemitism.

This competition for suffering in the context of the Holocaust had already been initiated by the communists, who resorted to nationalist rhetoric to enhance their legitimacy (Steinlauf, 1997; Zaremba, 2019). For example, the communists constructed the 'Piaśt' founding myth of the PRP, claiming that their alliance with the USSR had created an ethnically homogeneous Polish state that had returned to its natural early medieval borders (Thum, 2011). This nationalism also evoked the rhetoric of Holocaust envy, the cultural basis of which can be found in Polish Romantic nationalism with its myth of a suffering Poland as the Christ of nations (Walicki, 1994). The Communists secularised this myth and used it to for their ends, emphasising the martyrdom of the Polish nation as the main victim of WWII. This was translated into the Polonisation of the Holocaust, which was manifested, for example, in the declaration of Auschwitz in 1947 as a monument to the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other nations, in order to marginalise the Jewish experience (Kucia, 2019; Zaremba, 2019). It is worth mentioning here the case of the encyclopaedists, namely, the publication in 1966 of an encyclopaedia, which distinguished between concentration camps and extermination camps, explaining that the latter were, as a rule, intended for Jews. The Party then launched a press campaign against the editors, who were accused of being of Jewish origin and of belittling the suffering of Poles, which was a prelude to the antisemitic purge of 1968 (Zaremba, 2019). Paradoxically, PiS, while stressing its anti-communism in memory politics, simultaneously took over the communists' martyrological schemes, and even strengthened them, by emphasising that the exceptional suffering of the Polish nation is the guiding theme of its memory politics.

The hegemonic memory discourse suggests the equivalence of the suffering of Poles and Jews during WWII. It emphasises that the Germans aimed at the total extermination of Poles simply because they were Poles and therefore pursued a similar extermination policy as they did against Jews. In 2021, the INR prosecutor, in a move reminiscent of the communists' actions against encyclopaedists, launched an investigation and questioned a journalist who had written that the death camps were not built for Poles but for Jews (Sokol, 2021). Moreover, officials responsible for the memory politics belittle the suffering of Jews, as exemplified by an article by Tomasz Panfil, then the director of the National Education Bureau of the local branch of the INR, who stated that initially during the German occupation Jews had been better off than Poles, because the former had had their own self-government in the ghettos while the latter were deprived of the possibility of organising themselves and were murdered in massive numbers (Panfil, 2017). It should be added that Panfil was associated with neo-fascist groups and made a name for himself as a judicial expert, stating that the combination of a Polish emblem with a Celtic cross and the slogan 'White Power' was 'awkward' but expressed patriotic intentions. Panfil is just one of many employees at the PiS-controlled INR who have had links with neo-fascists (Witkowski, 2018). Moreover, there are claims that Jews themselves are to some extent responsible for the Holocaust, which is also a form of belittling Jewish suffering, if not a form of negationism. One can refer to Prime Minister Morawiecki, who stated at a press conference that 'there were Jewish perpetrators', or the 'jokes' of the state-owned TV channel director, who said in a TV programme: 'from the linguistic point of view, these were not German or Polish, but Jewish camps. After all, who operated the crematoria?', which may echo some conspiracy theories claiming that the Jews themselves organised the Holocaust (Kublik, 2018; Landau, 2018).

Equating the sufferings of Poles and Jews is accompanied by the claim that crimes against Poles are diminished or ignored by international public opinion. The claim sometimes takes the form of accusations that there are attempts to make Poles responsible for organising the Holocaust. According to this logic, the phrase 'Polish camps' occasionally appearing in the international media is evidence of some orchestrated campaign against Poland. At the same time, the crimes committed by Poles against the Jews are denied, their antisemitic character is negated, or their perpetrators are symbolically excluded from the Polish nation as being socially marginal (Dobrosielski, 2017). The hegemonic memory politics stresses that Poles generally helped Jews and emphasises that Poles are the most numerous among the Righteous among the Nations (but relative numbers are never given, e.g. in relation to the number of Jews in particular countries). It is symptomatic that the institution of memory politics established by PiS, which honours Poles who helped Jews was named after Witold Pilecki, who in the popular consciousness is the iconic

representation of the CS (CBOS, 2017). The Institute's activity is in line with the rivalry in suffering: It has begun a campaign to commemorate Poles helping Jews by focussing primarily on the area around the Treblinka extermination camp. Actually, the area around this camp was a place where many local Polish inhabitants hunted and murdered Jews (Engelking & Grabowski, 2018). In this way, as Jan Grabowski has noted, the Institute 'neutralises' the memory of Jewish suffering and uses the Holocaust for the purposes of Polish nationalist memory politics (Grabowski, 2021).

The next element of the emphasis on the uniqueness of Poles' suffering is the discourse of two equivalent totalitarianisms, namely, German and communist. It is symptomatic that in the case of the former, the memory politics emphasises its nationality, claiming that the use of the term Nazism is an attempt to dilute German responsibility and to distort reality, because there is no such nationality as a Nazi (it is implicitly assumed, in line with nationalist thinking, that every person must have some national identity, which overrides other identifications). In the second case, the nationality of the system is not emphasised, although Polish pre-war Sovietologists wrote about the continuity between the USSR and Tsarist Russia and the stamp that Russianness had on Soviet communism (Kucharczyk, 1948). One may venture the hypothesis that the lack of emphasis on communists' nationality is convenient for this memory politics because it allusively allows the saying of what is difficult to say explicitly due to international repercussions. In other words, it opens a space for speculations on the nationality of communists and why that is not mentioned openly. In this context, it should be remembered that traditionally Polish nationalism identified communism with the Jews, according to the stereotype of Judeo-communism (Dobrosielski, 2017). In fact, some INR historians scrupulously count the number of Jews in the SO, assuming that a Jew, even a communist, will always remain a Jew (in contrast, e.g. to Poles who, by becoming communists, cease to be Poles) (Szwagrzyk, 2005).

This discourse of two totalitarianisms does not so much allow for stressing the equivalence of the suffering of Poles and Jews, as it guarantees the victory of the former in the competition of who suffered more, and more or less openly turns Jewish victims into persecutors of the Polish nation. Thus, whereas Jews were victims of Nazi Germany alone, Poles were persecuted by both the Third Reich and the USSR. Simultaneously, the hegemonic discourse not only emphasises the mass scale and cruelty of the persecution of Poles in the USSR, but also its uniqueness, which makes it possible to put it on a similar level to the Holocaust. Subsequent repressions of Poles in the USSR are compared with the German extermination policy towards Jews. The dominant memory discourse interprets the USSR's policy as aiming at the annihilation of the Polish nation, suggesting that Poles were murdered, imprisoned and deported only because they were Poles (Zechenter, 2009). Lech Kaczyński also spoke in this vein in 2009 on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of WWII:

one can ask what is the comparison between the Holocaust carried out by Nazi Germany and Katyn carried out by Soviet Russia. There is one comparison between these crimes, although their scale was obviously very different. Jews died because they were Jews, Polish officers died because they were Polish officers – that was the verdict in both cases. (BB, 2009)

At the same time, the memory politics polonised the victims of Soviet repression; for example, deportations to the USSR between 1939 and 1941 (which are compared with Auschwitz) are presented as the martyrdom of ethnic Poles, although there were a disproportionate number of Jews among the deportees. References to the situation of Jews also are evoked in the case of the CS, whose struggle is compared with the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. One of the articles referred explicitly to the 'Holocaust of the CS' (Stelmasiak, 2018). It is claimed that under these circumstances, the partisans could only choose an honourable death with a weapon in hand. In this context, the CS function as a symbol of the heroic and persecuted Polish nation, being an allegory of its post-war fate (the CS as the Polish nation). The history of the CS in the hegemonic memory discourse is part of the Polish wartime martyrdom, which one of the right-wing publicists described as the Polocaust, and proposed the construction of an appropriate museum (Masters & Mortensen, 2018). It is also characteristic that in memory politics, the main place is occupied by the iconic representation of the CS, namely, the aforementioned Witold Pilecki, who is a tangible symbol linking the two totalitarian systems (CBOS, 2017).

The figure of Witold Pilecki is highly symbolic: He was a member of the armed resistance during WWII and then was active in the AU, forming underground structures focussing on collecting information. He was arrested and sentenced to death by the communists. Yet, we are interested here not in the historical figure himself, but in what he symbolises nowadays, and how he is used in memory politics. Although Pilecki did not belong to any post-war partisan units, he is promoted as being a CS and became the most recognisable icon of the AU (CBOS, 2017). Memory politics constructs Pilecki primarily as a 'volunteer to Auschwitz', who of his own will entered the camp in order to report on the situation in there and organise underground structures—although some historians question whether this was his decision (Cuber-Strutyńska, 2014). It is stressed that he was the first to inform the West about the Holocaust. The figure of Pilecki is well fitted as a symbol of two totalitarianisms, functioning as a link between Nazism and communism, and even suggests that communism was worse, as symbolised by Pilecki's often quoted words from the period of the SO investigation 'Auschwitz was a trifle'. The symbol of Pilecki is also significant in the context of Polish-Jewish relations and represents the attitude of Poles towards Jews (as we have seen, an institution documenting how Poles helped Jews was named after Pilecki). In this context, Pilecki signifies the heroism of Poles helping Jews (he risked his life to inform the world about the Holocaust) and absolves Poles of responsibility (he informed the West, which knew and did nothing to prevent the Holocaust).

Paradoxically, Pilecki has become a hero of football ultras and ethnic-authoritarian nationalists, who hardly make any secret of their antisemitism. In the context, Pilecki is useful as a symbol of the ingratitude of the Jews, who allegedly introduced communism to Poland after the war and murdered Poles, although the latter helped them during the war. For example, let us mention the tifo display prepared by fans in 2012, which was later copied on various right-wing websites. The fans displayed a huge banner with Pilecki's image and the text 'Volunteer to Auschwitz' with the distorted quotation 'Auschwitz was a trifle compared to them'. The pronoun 'them' referred to the names on a second banner on which was written: 'We Know the Murderers of the Polish Nation', which listed the employees of SO with 'real' Jewish names. What the official memory politics only suggests, the fans directly expressed: They contrasted the Polish nation symbolised by Pilecki with the communists who are identified with Jews, evoking the antisemitic myth of Judeo-communism. The juxtaposition of Pilecki with the Jews emphasises the ingratitude and perfidy of the Jews, who supposedly murdered a man who risked his own life to save them. The football supporters' demonstration can be dismissed as an extreme example of an unrepresentative milieu, but similar claims appear in mainstream politics (Frona, 2012). For example, a Constitutional Tribunal judge tweeted:

The Holocaust of Poles also continued after WWII. Światło, Różanski, J. Berman, Fejgin, St. Michnik, H. Wolinska, L. Brystygierowa and similar beasts murdered thousands of Polish Patriots in the prisons and courts in the 1950s. IZREAL, are these Jews guilty of crimes against Poles?

(Do Rzeczy, 2018)

Another example is the INR vice-president who, in an interview with an openly antisemitic and neo-Nazi activist, suggested that Judeo-communism is a fact (Flieger, 2019).

4 | ANTISEMITISM, RACIALISATION AND POLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

The conservative nationalist memory politics can be interpreted in the framework of the competition for suffering and envy over the Holocaust. In this context, it is relevant to discuss the research of psychologists who identified the existence of antisemitic attitudes in Poland, which they termed secondary antisemitism. This secondary antisemitism is a form of anti-Jewish prejudice involving competing in suffering, belittling the suffering of Jews, denying that there were Poles who murdered Jews and repressing guilt (Bilewicz et al., 2018, p. 7). As they have written, the competition of suffering constitutes 'a publicly accepted form of Holocaust denial and is a camouflaged way of openly expressing negative antisemitic attitudes' (Bilewicz et al., 2018, p. 16). They explain that this secondary antisemitism exists as

a 'latent cognitive structure' that is activated in certain situations (Bilewicz et al., 2018, p. 38). However, there are several problems with this approach. First, at the level of discourse, the difference between latent and overt antisemitism is not always clear, as we have seen. Downplaying the suffering of Jews is at the same time accompanied by antisemitic statements accusing Jews of involvement in the Holocaust and the introduction of communism in Poland, which can be interpreted as a form of conspiracy thinking. What distinguishes this secondary antisemitism is rather that, even if it refers to anti-Jewish stereotypes, it does not use openly biological language, which is reminiscent of the phenomenon of covert or symbolic racism in Western Europe and the United States (McConahay & Hough, 1976; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Second, this secondary antisemitism can be seen as a broader phenomenon, which includes not only the direct downplaying of Jewish suffering but also the nationalist memory politics of the CS. As we have shown in this paper, the institutionalisation of this memory politics coincides with a discussion of the Poles' participation in the Holocaust, which is closely related to the nationalist mythology centred on the competition for suffering. The hegemonic memory politics of the CS marginalises the WWII and the fight against Nazism, by concentrating on communism, constituting a Polish variant of the discourse about two totalitarianisms and the Holocaust, which may lead to the normalisation of fascism. This nationalist memory politics focuses on the suffering of Poles murdered by communists, and in this context, the externalisation of communism as an 'other', non-Polish ideology and its more or less open identification with the Jews is evident. In this way, it can be hypothesised that hegemonic nationalist memory politics not only diminishes the suffering of the Jews but transforms the victims into persecutors of the Polish nation, guaranteeing Poland a victory in the competition for suffering.

The third problem concerns the status of this latent antisemitism. Where does it hide? What happens to it when it is not activated? Why do people not forget about it? (see Billig, 1995). This secondary antisemitism needs to be seen in the broader context of historical antisemitism and the dominant structures of Polish national identity, which is based on various forms of racialisation, which, however, is often overlooked in analyses of Polish national identity (Balogun, 2018; Jaskulowski, 2021). The conventional wisdom says that Poland is a country free of racism and projects the idea of racism onto Western Europe and North America instead (Balogun, 2018). The phenomenon of racism is reduced to the eugenics movement promoting the idea of racial hygiene in the first half of the 20th century, which is perceived as short-lived and having little impact on Polish national identity (Jaskulowski, 2021). It is argued that the racist Volkist doctrine of defining the nation in biological terms, which excluded and discriminated against Jews based on biological criteria, never took hold in Poland as it did in Germany. Unlike Western European countries, Poland did not have colonies and therefore never developed racism, which was an ideology that justified colonialism and imperialism. This conviction is well expressed by a quotation from the work of two prominent sociologists:

The racial problem has never existed in our society. Poland has never been a colonial country ... In Poland racist ideology did not develop in wide social circles, and the reluctance towards other national and ethnic groups was based more on social premises, historical experiences[.]

(Nowicka & Łodziński, 2001, p. 153)

However, recent research demonstrates that scientific racism, and the eugenics that grew out of it, was not a marginal phenomenon and was closely linked to the processes of nation formation not only in Poland but also throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Balogun, 2022). The growing tendency in the early 20th century to biologise the social sciences coincided with the formation of nations in the region, which further strengthened the impact of biological concepts, and translated into calls for racial improvement of the nations that were just forming (Turda & Weindling, 2007). Thus, the Lviv school of anthropology, which was established at the beginning of the 20th century, not only described different racial types but introduced a hierarchy between them, and its representatives were active in the eugenics movement. It is worth noting that the Polish Eugenics Society, founded in 1923, following a massive influx of members became in the 1930s one of the largest eugenic organisation in the world (Balogun, 2022). In this context, it is necessary to mention in particular the representative of the Lviv school of anthropology, Karol

Stojanowski, who combined scientific and political activity and was associated with the Polish authoritarian-ethnic nationalists. Stojanowski (1927, pp. 67–68) defined the Polish nation in terms of racial purity and opposed the assimilation of Ruthenians and Jews, who for him were 'quite alien racial components'. In particular, he stressed the racial inferiority of the Jews, who could degenerate the racial structure of Poland, leading to 'the paralysis of Polish national life'. The eugenics-characteristic fixation on biological traits was one of the mechanisms for reproducing racism in Poland and translated into the exclusion of 'non-Polish bodies', the legacy of which can still be seen today in the form of racialisation of Muslims or Roma (Balogun, 2022).

It is doubtful that Poland did not participate in any way in Western colonialism and racism. A myth of romantic origin still persists here, that as Poland was not on the 19th-century political map, that it was itself a victim of colonialism; it could not have been a coloniser itself. Nevertheless, the elites participated in the European circulation of thought and were not immunised against the dominant Orientalist colonial schemes; they downloaded racial ideas from the 'imperial cloud' (Grzechnik, 2020). For example, let us mention here a book by one of the more widely read Polish 19th-century writers, Henryk Sienkiewicz (1917 [1911]), *In Desert and Wilderness*. Sienkiewicz is seen as a writer who had a huge influence on the formation of Polish national identity. Of course, Polish identity was formed under the influence of many factors, but what we are interested in here is not so much the actual formation of this identity as the ideas about it. What is interesting in this context is that Sienkiewicz's historical books, such as *The Teutonic Knights* or *Trilogy* (which were written to comfort the heart, because they showed that, despite defeats, medieval and early modern Poland eventually persisted) are considered to be key to shaping the understanding of Polishness (Klobucka, 2001). Yet, completely overlooked is the impact on the politics of national identity of the equally popular *In Desert and Wilderness* (Klobucka, 2001). The book recounts the adventures of a Polish teenager and a girl who are kidnapped by Arabs, escape and travel through Africa with their Black companions. The book is a paradigmatic example of 19th-century racism and Orientalism, constructing the Poles as representatives of a superior European civilisation, as contrasted with the cruel and treacherous Arabs and the cultureless Blacks, who are presented as closer to the world of animals than people. The book is still on the compulsory reading list in primary school, where it is discussed as an illustration of the customs of Africans, which differentiate 'them' from 'us' Europeans. Under the guise of familiarising children with the national literary tradition, the school system reproduces Orientalist racialised stereotypes.

Imperial racist imagery not only influenced literature and thus shaped the mass imagination but also translated into demands for colonies for Poland justified on the grounds that Poland, as a country belonging to the white European civilisation, should have its share in civilising inferior overseas populations. Having colonies was also considered an important part of building a strong nation-state with access to cheap raw materials, labour and land for settlement. After Poland gained independence in 1918, the main channel for these demands became the Maritime and Colonial League, which lobbied for Poland to obtain colonies and also engaged in educational and propaganda activities, especially in schools. By the end of the 1930s, the League was one of the largest mass organisations in Poland, with nearly a million members. The League's leaders came mainly from the elite and included politicians, officers, MPs, government officials and scientists (Grzechnik, 2020). Thus, the League had strong ties to the Polish government and in the 1930s tried in various ways to obtain land for Polish colonial settlement in an Africa perceived as an 'empty land', that is, inhabited by peoples who did not grasp the concept of private property and were unable to farm rationally (Skulimowska, 2022). The Polish government also saw in colonial expansion a solution to the 'Jewish question' and probed the possibility of Jewish emigration to, for example, Madagascar (Puchalski, 2021). Although the government did not openly resort to racist rhetoric and excluded the use of force, ethnic-authoritarian nationalists called for the forced emigration of Jews as racial others 'spoiling' the Polish nation.

The claim that there was no racism in Poland also fails to take into account that Polish antisemitism also had racist overtones and that it must also be analysed in the context of the legacy of 19th-century colonial imaginaries. In general, Polish antisemitism is explained in economic, cultural and social terms. Historians stress that antisemitism stemmed from the fact that Poles wanted to be a 'normal' nation, with a complete social structure. They assume that Jews stood in the way of modernisation and the creation of a modern Polish nation because

they blocked social and professional advancement for Poles. Jews were over-represented in commerce, the professions of the intelligentsia, and in the urban population, which made them 'natural' competitors for Poles, who reacted with expressions of antisemitism. Historians also point to cultural sources of prejudice resulting from the fact that Jews had a different culture and did not want to assimilate with Polish culture. Paradoxically, they also point out that Jewish culture was so different that assimilation was difficult, if not impossible. However, such arguments do not take into account the fact that Jews, who in the pre-modern period were defined in terms of religious difference, were increasingly seen with the coming of modernity in terms of distinct phenotypic features (Bauman, 1989). Thus, Polish ethnic-authoritarian nationalists, who believed that Jews could only be incorporated into the Polish nation in exceptional cases, defined Polishness in opposition to the Jews, seeing them as Poland's main internal enemies (Porter-Szűcs, 2000). This symbolic exclusion also translated into violence against Jews, which was manifested, for example, by the fact that the so-called regaining of independence in 1918 was accompanied by a series of anti-Jewish pogroms, a fact that has been completely erased from collective memory (Böhler, 2018; Gauden, 2019).

The ethno-authoritarian nationalist discourse can be described as cultural essentialism or cultural racism because it defined Jewish culture in terms of radical difference and saw the cultural differences between Jews and Poles as an impassable barrier. However, this discourse of cultural difference tended to be naturalised and took the form of racialisation. As we have seen, the anthropologist Stojanowski, who was active in eugenic and nationalist movements, defined Jews in terms of inferior racial types. But in the 1930s, such views were gaining popularity and were presented not only in hermetic anthropological works but also in the pages of the nationalist press or popular publications. Ethnic-authoritarian nationalists believed that Jews represented a distinct Semitic type, which determined their collective psyche and underpinned their distinct culture (Krzywiec, 2016).

The biologisation of language was particularly evident in the 1930s, manifested, for example, in the novel *Inheritance* by Roman Dmowski (1931), one of the main leaders of the ethnic-authoritarian nationalists. This book, written in the convention of a horror novel, described a Jewish–Masonic conspiracy to destroy Poland. In it, Jews were depicted not only as cultural others, but also as a distinct physical type distinguishable from Poles: Jews had other physiognomic features, such as black eyes, thick lips and luxuriant black hair. According to a racist stereotype, Jews give off a strong unpleasant smell, which they must suppress with perfume (similar stereotypes still exist today about Blacks and Roma) (Jaskulowski, 2019). In the novel, Jews represent a different racial type—the Semites, and their biological condition determines their psychological character: vicious, debauched, greedy, despicable, and in the shape of the Jewish civilisation, which was identified by Dmowski with the East. Nationalist discourse orientalised the Jews by defining them as representatives of a non-European civilisation, just as in Western Europe the population of conquered colonies was orientalised. However, it accorded the Jews an ambivalent status: On the one hand, it constructed Jews as representatives of an inferior and backward Eastern culture, who should be subordinated to the Poles; on the other hand, it provoked fear of them because they were supposedly characterised by intelligence and cunning and plotting to take power in Poland. Following the logic of racialisation, Dmowski portrayed Jews, especially assimilated Jews who pretended to be Poles, as a threat to the Polish nation (Gan, 2017). Today, the language of biological antisemitism is clearly associated with Nazism and is unequivocally condemned (at least declaratively). But as we have noted, this does not mean that antisemitism has disappeared, but that it has taken on a more allusive and veiled form, reminiscent of covert racism that downplays racialised rhetoric.

In other words, Poland has a heritage of participation in Orientalist colonial imaginary, which is not an aberration or contingent occurrence, but is inscribed in the dominant structures of Polish national identity, the hidden, overlooked basis of which is racialisation, as also confirmed by a number of recent studies. Studies on Polish national identity have suggested that it is relatively open and based mainly on cultural and political factors. However, under the influence of our criticism, sociologists have begun to investigate the biological basis of Polish identity (Jaskulowski, 2021). A recent study based on a representative sample showed that 54.8% of Poles believe that White skin colour is a condition of being considered Polish. It is worth mentioning that the question was asked straightforwardly, which

might seem to discourage people from declaring racist beliefs (Grodecki, 2021). The role of racialisation in defining Polishness is also indicated by research on the experiences of people of colour living in Poland, as well as on the attitudes of Poles towards migrants. Bolaji Balogun's analysis of the experiences of Black people living in Poland, for example, demonstrates that they are not only excluded from the Polish nation on the basis of their skin colour but are also subject to humiliating racist stereotypes. His research highlights the prominence of biological differentiation in everyday life, which are part of 'Polish-centrism', namely, the everyday practices that constantly reproduce the differences between 'them' and 'us' in taken-for-granted racialised hierarchies centred on Polishness and Catholicism (Balogun, 2020).

The significance of racialised hierarchies is also evidenced by research on the politics of the 'migration crisis' in Poland, which explains the ease with which PiS managed to create a moral panic against Muslim refugees from the Middle East and North Africa in 2014 and 2015. Although biological antisemitism has a more or less hidden character, racist anti-Islamism was openly expressed. Conservative nationalist discourse portrayed Muslim refugees as a political threat in line with the stereotype of the Muslim-terrorist. It also resorted to the language of cultural racism, defining Islam in terms of radical difference and incommensurability with European civilisation. This language of civilisational difference, however, tended to be racialised, and the darker skin of refugees was evoked as a visible marker of religious-civilisational difference. At the same time, and reminiscently of classical racism, Muslims were portrayed as primitive barbarians who stood at a lower level of civilisational development or who were closer to the animal rather than the human world, as manifested in the use of various animalistic metaphors. The importance of White skin colour was also confirmed by research on the reception of the dominant discourse, which also showed that studies identified Muslim refugees with a dark skin colour that became a visible marker of their radical otherness or cultural inferiority (Jaskulowski, 2019). Some studies have argued that this anti-Islamism appeals to older racialised antisemitic patterns (Narkowicz, 2018; Narkowicz & Pędzwiatr, 2017; Pędzwiatr, 2017). However, we propose a different interpretation: Antisemitism and anti-Islamism are both manifestations of the same racialised logic of Polish national identity, which was shaped in terms of the opposition between the Polish nation (representing European civilisation) and non-European civilisations defined in racial terms.

In this context, the conservative nationalist memory politics, which are centred around the concept of the CS, which was elevated to the status of the key national symbol, acquire an additional dimension. As we have argued, the symbol of the CS fulfils two basic interrelated functions in hegemonic memory politics. On the one hand, it constitutes an allegory of the fate of the Polish nation (the Polish nation as the CS) depicting its resistance, and above all its suffering, under communism. On the other hand, the symbol of the CS represents the national boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (the CS as the Polish nation), which are constructed around several symbolic thickening processes: nationalisation, Catholicisation, radicalisation, ethnicisation, Europeanisation, masculinisation and moralisation. However, in the light of our analysis, there is another signification process behind this symbol, which is not visible at first glance, namely, racialisation. The symbol of the CS sets boundaries between 'us' and a communism identified more or less openly with the Jews, whom Polish nationalism traditionally orientalist as non-European and non-Polish others belonging to some barbarian Eastern civilisation. Yet, Jews today are not openly racialised, due to the discrediting of the biological antisemitism that is associated with Nazism. Although hegemonic conservative nationalist discourse does not openly define Jews in biological terms, it does so openly in relation to Muslim migrants from Middle Eastern countries. In other words, the idea of a barbaric orientalist East is still present in the dominant Polish nationalist discourse, although not explicitly expressed when it comes to Jews, who have been replaced by Muslims as the object of explicit racialisation. In this context, the signifier of the CS as a key symbol of collective memory, which forms the basis of national identity by implicitly drawing a line between us and them, also refers to the racial underpinnings of Polish national identity contrasted with the barbaric East. In other words, the CS do not simply symbolise Polish ethnicity or Catholicism and European civilisation but also imply a racially pure Catholic European Poland 'uncontaminated' by Eastern barbarians, in line with the logic of ethno-authoritarian nationalism.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analysed the links between the memory politics of the CS, antisemitism and racism. We demonstrated how and why PiS transformed the post-war partisans into an ideologically charged symbol of the CS. We argued that the symbolism of the CS is a key element of hegemonic memory politics, which is part of the conservative-nationalist project of the moral renewal of the Polish nation. In the article, we demonstrated that there is a covert antisemitism behind the symbolism of the CS. After the Holocaust, historically racist antisemitism took on a subtler form, manifesting itself in a competition for suffering and the belittling of the suffering of Jews. The memory politics of the CS distracts attention from WWII by focussing on its consequences for the Polish nation. In this context, the symbol of CS is an allegory of the Polish nation persecuted by communism, which was as much criminal in nature, if not more so, as Nazi totalitarianism. Yet, communism is presented not only as a criminal ideology but also as a product of an inferior Eastern civilisation more or less openly identified with Jews, who from victims became persecutors of the Polish nation. Although contemporary antisemitism is devoid of racist elements, the conservative-nationalist discourse openly defines Eastern civilisation in Orientalist terms when it refers to Muslim refugees from the Middle East. Previous research has shown that anti-Islamic stereotypes were based on older anti-semitic patterns. However, in this paper, we hypothesise that both historically racist antisemitism and contemporary anti-Islamism share a common ground, namely, the orientalising racist dominant structure of Polish national identity. We argue that, contrary to popular opinion, Poland was not free of racism and colonial imaginary; on the contrary, this thinking underpinned Polish national identity, which was shaped in opposition to the non-European world conceived in Orientalist terms and represented by Jews, Arabs, and Blacks.

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