



Between Words and Silence: Ethical challenges in researching conflicts of memory in digital era

By

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Abstract

This article tackles the risks of digitization of sensitive collections and the ethical limits of open access. Research into experience of conflicts and violence requires the submerging into a world of local taboos and practices that usually remain within the sphere of cultural intimacy. Similarly, the digitization of sensitive collections can grant an un-curated uncontrolled access to realms which should be handled with ethical awareness and sensitivity. We focus on two case-studies referring to the Podhale, a region in the Tatra Mountains inhabited by local people called Górale. The first one is the archive of Nazi anthropological photography and documentation recently rediscovered at the Smithsonian Institution Archives (SIA). Its digitization in 2007 marked the start of a research project on WWII anthropology in Podhale, evoking at the same time an ardent and emotional debate among both scholars and the Górale community. The most serious issues referred to the impact of the digitized photographs on the present-day collective memory of the Górale. In fact, till the archive's discovery and digitization, the episode of Nazi racial research was literally cast out from local history and memory. In this article we will ask how to deal with such materials and conduct research among people, for whom such documentation invokes unwanted and traumatic experiences. The second case-study focuses on contemporary memory conflicts related to the anti-communist guerrilla group "Błyskawica" (Lightning) operating in the aftermath of WWII on the Polish-Slovak border in the Tatra Mountains region. Accused by communist authorities of war-crimes, these partisans were officially rehabilitated only in the aftermath of the Polish Revolution of 1989. Memories about "Błyskawica" are still very vivid in this region evoking conflicting feelings from undisputed glorification to total condemnation. This article will inquire into the ambiguous digital discourses in the social media around such

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conflicting memories build on digitized resources from the archives of the former secret police (now deposited at the Institute of National Remembrance; INR - *Institut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN*). Both case-studies deal with a similar period, region, type of sources (archives produced in the past by the regime's institutions of power). Both refer to the memory of experiences of violence, difficult choices, local conflicts, oppressive regimes and practices. We argue that the transition of such sensitive data into the digital realm raises the danger of manipulation by various interest groups, arbitrary defragmentation and reconfiguration. It can enliven and even reinforce old conflicts, generate new ones and even undermine the fragile social and cultural balance within a community.

Keywords: Digitization, memory conflicts, vulnerability, archives, photography, science and power

Poland's breakaway from totalitarian historical politics in 1989 revealed a complicated polyphony of ethnic, regional, local, and class memories related to experiences from World War II and the first decade after it.¹ Some of these memories are incompatible with the monumental history of that period, which is being rewritten to fit the interests of the nation state (Herzfeld 1991: 10). The significance of the problem came to light in the last decade due to a change in the historical policy, introduced by the currently ruling national-conservative party. The discrepancies between the communicative memory (Assmann 2008: 111) of various social groups, and official memory, which is institutionally-imposed as the one true memory, evoke strong, or even extreme, emotions. Particularly so when the memories of the witnesses of history and their descendants involve violence, trauma, shame, and the everyday fight for survival of the oppressed, and do not fit the officially endorsed, highly polarizing story of heroic Poles fighting against the German and Soviet occupiers. As Aleida Assmann writes, the pantheon of national heroes – comprised exclusively of brave warriors and model martyrs – has no place for traumatized victims who never put up any resistance (2006: 82).

However, the disclosure of the archives of the Security Service of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) – *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (PRL)*, in 2000 has forced such groups to confront the difficult, often repressed, past. The archive fever (Derrida 2016) in Poland is intensifying, and the number of people interested in the past grows. Not only academics, but also journalists, politicians, and history aficionados are attempting to unravel the course of specific events, sudden disappearances, and betrayals. All this to find a decisive answer to “what really happened,” describe the suffering of victims, indicate the “perpetrator,” “collaborator,” or “coward,” and share one's findings with “the world” in online forums and blogs. Thus, the decades-long local conflicts of memory related to difficult experiences from the occupation and the post-war period are now moving to the virtual sphere, where they become public conflicts. Digitized memories, photographs, and documents circulate the web, where they are reinterpreted time after time, often in a manner far detached from the original context.

When researching conflicts of memory in the digital era, we as anthropologists must answer a range of fundamental methodological, epistemological, and ethical questions. These questions come to light during traditional fieldwork research when we come in to direct relations with our interlocutors as well in archival queries with documents produced without our involvement. Should anthropologists share the knowledge they collect in the field? And if so, how to do it not to escalate conflicts and harm the people who have entrusted their memories to them? Should anthropologists anonymize the data, as traditional ethnographic practice dictates, or personalize them to give voice to the interlocutors? After all, we have always kept in mind that once ethnographic fieldwork is complete,

we leave research area, and the people we worked with stay among the local community. This is especially problematic if the researcher him- or herself lives in the area and is part of the community. If the results of research are to be made public, which in this digital age means sharing them online, how can we approach it responsibly?

Possible answers to these questions can be found in the results of two research projects conducted in the Podhale and Spisz, two neighboring regions in the Tatra highlands, over the last ten years.² Both projects concerned memory about oppression during World War II and its long-term consequences. The first one focused on the memories of a group of highlanders (Górale), who during the German occupation were drafted into Nazi racial and ethnographical research. The second project addressed contemporary conflicts of memory related to anti-communist partisan warfare taking place in the region directly after the end of World War II.

Considering these two cases, we will focus on the ethical challenges that arise when working with archival and ethnographic sources that contain sensitive data, which are also potentially threatening for our interlocutors. We will try to point out the complexity of problems related to the consequences of publishing the results of our research in the context of the requirements of free access and the demand for responsible involvement of anthropologists. On the example of various, both academic and non-academic ways of using these sensitive sources, among others in art, politics and museum exhibitions, we will discuss the question: who and to what extent has the right to distribute these results. So, in our paper we will consider the issue of digitalization as only one aspect of much broader and complex problems of responsible handling of sensitive data in a public space.

Project I

This paper illustrates the aforementioned problems related to digitization and sharing of sensitive data using the authors' own experiences from research on a hitherto obscure collection of materials gathered by Nazi anthropologists in occupied Poland during World War II. In 1940, several months after the German army took over Poland, Nazi authorities established the *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit* (Institute for German Works in the East; IDO) in the facilities formerly belonging to the Jagiellonian University (JU) in Krakow. While IDO was designed as a foundation for a future German university, its main function, as with many other Nazi institutions, was to support German propaganda and politics (Stopka 2015). IDO was tasked with researching and assessing historical, cultural, populational, and economic resources across the occupied territory of Poland for the purposes of ethnic reorganization in the East. The institute was divided into

many different sections, including the *Sektion Rassen- und Volkstumsforschung* (Section for Race and Population Studies; SRV), whose employees conducted extensive anthropological, populational, medical, and sociological research in select towns within the General Government (GG).³ The data they collected were to constitute the “scientific basis” for future selection policies carried out among the subordinated population (Michel 2000, Schafft 2006). In the GG, such research involved the highlanders living in the Carpathians: the Lemkos from the Beskids, Górale from the Tatra highlands, residents of several Polish villages, and a part of the population considered to be German. In addition, studies were also conducted among the Jews living in the Tarnów Ghetto several days prior to their total extermination. Over three years, German and Austrian researchers from SRV created extensive documentation spanning 73,000 pages. The collected materials also included hair samples and fingerprints (Schafft 2004, Maj & Trebunia-Staszal 2015).

Following the failed campaign on the eastern front towards the end of 1944, Germany evacuated the documents collected by SRV and transferred it to Bavaria. Immediately after warfare ended, the American army, believing the documentation to be strategically important, transported it to the US, where it was deposited at the Smithsonian Institution Archives (SIA) in Washington (Stopka 2015). There it lay forgotten until 1997, when it was rediscovered by the American anthropologist Gretchen Schafft during her archival query for information about anthropology in the Third Reich (Schafft 2004). In fall 2003, the Polish government issued an official request for transfer of the IDO-SRV documentation from SIA to JU. The American task force agreed to grant the request,⁴ but under the condition that a digital copy of the original documents remains in the US. Poland was to cover the cost of digitization. Once the appropriate amount had been collected, with significant funding from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), the entire SRV collection was conserved and digitized.⁵ The electronic version of the documents remained in USA while the originals, together with another digital copy, were moved to Poland (Stopka 2015). Today, anyone interested is able to read them, albeit the electronic versions are only available on site, at both USHMM in Washington and JU in Krakow. Copying the documents and public use by third parties is possible with a written approval of the Director of the JU Archives. The USHMM website lists a similar requirement.⁶

Discussions and controversies surrounding the SRV collection emerged immediately after the documentation was recognized. In 2004, G. Schafft, the first researcher to systematize the Washington archives, published a book based on them, entitled *From Racism to Genocide: Anthropology in the Third Reich*, in which she contests their scientific value, claiming them to be pseudoscientific nonsense produced for heinous purposes (Schafft 2006: 21–28). Schafft points out

that the data collected by SRV were a tool for the Nazi policy of extermination of the conquered groups and nations. Furthermore, taking into account the purpose of the collection, Schafft claimed that researching the documentation is unethical (Schafft 2006: 1–4). Schafft's attitude brought to light the problematic nature of the SRV collection; however, it did not prevent interest from other researchers. A team of ethnologists from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at JU began research on the collection, treating it as a source of information about the oppressive practices of German anthropologists and ethnologists (Maj 2015). The collection was also recognized for its other scientific value. As Krzysztof Stopka, the Director of the JU Archives, observes,

Whereas the original intent of the Nazi compilers of various research materials was to justify racial selection and the extermination of 'expendable' groups, the same materials, given the many years that have passed, may be used to learn about and preserve the memory of these groups instead (Stopka 2015: 22).

A team of ethnologists from JU followed the same principle in their research on the SRV collection after it arrived from Washington. An extensive review and analysis of the anthropometric, ethnographic, medical, and sociological data showed that their Nazi authors followed already-existing scientific procedures at the time, creating nothing new in terms of theory or methodology (Libera 2015: 7–18, Trebunia-Staszal 2019). What is worse, they twisted the purpose of scientific knowledge to support Hitler's extermination policy. They integrated Nazi ideology into academic theory and practice, making it the driving force behind their research (Michel 2000). Consequently, we believe that by labeling the SRV materials as pseudoscientific, we relieve the Nazi researchers from responsibility for deliberately abusing the authority of science for heinous purposes. Thus, in our analysis of the involvement of science in the Nazi regime, we took care to show that the problem is still pertinent, and that a collaboration between science and political power leads to disastrous consequences. Anthropologists should be aware of any ideological foundations at all stages of the research process, regardless of what topics or issues they are investigating (Trebunia-Staszal 2019).

As part of our overview of the problems that appeared in studies on the SRV documentation, we would like to list the different dilemmas related to sharing such materials. The digitization of the documents allowed Poland to import the originals, as well as making investigating them much easier. The digitized photographs proved useful in field research as a medium that helped the witnesses of the German ethnographic survey to recall the events from that period. However, considering the nature of the documentation and the emotional responses it

evokes, our team decided that allowing public access to it created too much risk, and we limited ourselves to publishing our results in a textual format only. Our first publication was a collection of articles summarizing our research on the SRV documentation entitled *Antropologia i etnologia w czasie wojny* (Anthropology and Ethnology During World War II, Maj 2015), followed by its English translation (Maj, Trebunia-Staszel, Brocki 2019). The photographic materials gathered and seized by SRV were analyzed by Elżbieta Duszeńko-Król (2014).

Discarded, Forgotten, Recovered.

As has already been mentioned, our team of anthropologists from the JU Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology began studying the SRV collection after it arrived at the JU Archives. For me (S. Trebunia-Staszel), as someone from the mountainous Podhale in Poland, the most interesting part of the collection was the documents related to that specific region. However, personal motivation was not the only reason I chose this topic. A preliminary review showed that nearly a third of the collection concerned the Podhale. In particular, the village of Szaflary was the only location where the German researchers conducted a full array of studies, including ethnographic, anthropological, sociological, and medical studies. No other village in the GG underwent field research of this scale. Furthermore, Szaflary was the only village where the research also included many children and youth, rather than exclusively adults. Therefore, there was a chance that witnesses of World War II were still alive, and that their testimonies would help to reconstruct those past events.

One may wonder about the reason for the specific interest of German researchers in the Podhale. Archival query indicates that the scenic and touristic values of the region were a prominent consideration. Shortly after Poland was overtaken, Germany created a restricted zone at the foot of the Tatra Mountains, intended as a recreational resort for Nazi dignitaries, their families, and soldiers (Gąsiorowski 2010: 20–23). Furthermore, the Germans were curious about the distinct culture of the Górale, in which they saw influences from medieval German colonization (Trebunia-Staszel 2019).⁷ It is worth mentioning that the highlanders occupied a special place in the Polish national *universum*. Throughout nearly the entire nineteenth century, i.e., in the period of partitions when Poland as a state no longer existed,⁸ Górale were mythologized by the Polish elites of the time. They were portrayed as free people, proud and unfettered, whose tradition nurtured the native, ancient elements of the Polish nation that were crucial for the preservation of Polish identity and spiritual independence (Trebunia-Staszel 2019).

The occupiers manipulated the culture of the Podhale highlanders, which was valued as a vessel of Polish patriotism, and used it as a means of symbolic

violence against this ethnic group. Nazi propaganda experts attempted to reinvent the most characteristic parts of the local tradition – dress, dialect, and decorative art – as symbols indicating their German origins in order to establish a highlander nation, called *Goralenvolk* (Szatkowski 2012: 88–121). All this was intended to antagonize Polish society in accordance with the *divide et impera* principle (Wnuk 1980: 11–79, Madajczyk 1961: 48). The Germans were able to convince a small group of highlanders to form the Górale Committee, which was to offer *kenkarte*, or identification cards marked with the letter “G,” to the highlanders. Those who accepted the card were considered members of *Goralenvolk* (Wnuk 1980: 31–46). Despite intense propaganda and lies perpetrated by German officials and local collaborators, the Nazi operation failed miserably, not least because of the local underground organizations, including the Tatra Confederation established in 1941 by the highlanders (Wnuk 1980; Kasperek 1990). However, even though the *Goralenvolk* movement was derailed, it still stigmatized the highlanders as traitors, thus affecting intergroup relations and the Podhale’s history. The local population was threatened or forced to accept the *kenkarte*, which left many painful memories and deep wounds. After the war, these difficult, sensitive subjects were seldom broached again (Trebunia-Staszal 2019). To this day, the topic of *Goralenvolk* is very emotional and controversial to the highlanders.

Before the SRV collection reached Poland, as early as in 2007, I began looking for witnesses of Nazi research at the request of the Director of the JU Archives. With help from my acquaintances, I was able to find a group of people who, in childhood, were drafted into the German research. However, the first stages of fieldwork were difficult. I was aware that this complicated and long-abandoned subject required a certain care from me as an anthropologist. That is why I humbly accepted the fact that most of the people I found refused to give me any information, saying, “There’s no need to bring that up now,” or “Enough harm has already been done.” I sensed that behind their reluctance was a fear of talking about *Goralenvolk*. In the end, only three women agreed to an interview. When I showed them photographs from their childhood and the anthropological questionnaires, they were very surprised, but also moved. They recalled their lives during the war, bringing up events related to the SRV survey, buried deep within their memories, as well as other episodes from the occupation (Trebunia-Staszal 2019). Over time, more people began inviting me into their homes to share their memories. Whenever I met with a resident of the Podhale, I asked myself how it had come to be that such a large-scale research operation that yielded thousands of documents had lingered for so long, locked away within human memory. The operation was recorded neither in writing nor in the collective consciousness. A resident of Szaflary remarked, “I don’t know why we never spoke about it. There was just no need to bring these things up.” Taking into account this remark and other responses from the witnesses, it seems that the

forced participation in the research, during which both men and women had to strip naked, was a humiliating experience for many. “Some folks cried, others joked about it. Nowadays it’s different, with all the nudity everywhere, but back then, it was horrible.” The Nazi research was seen as a humiliating act of oppression. During my field study, I met several women who refused to even look at their photographs, cutting short my invitation with “I don’t know,” “I don’t remember,” or “I don’t have time,” at which point I decided against interviewing them and left. The responses I collected helped me to realize that what for me as a researcher was an interesting subject, was for the witnesses of the events sensitive history that they associated with humiliation, fear, and objectification and that they did not want to remember. In reference to Paul Ricoeur’s concept, members of the community in question can be said to have used the strategy of passive forgetting in an attempt to free themselves from the paralyzing memory of the humiliating experience. After all, forgetting is an inextricable part of remembering and may determine one’s ability to succeed in future undertakings (Ricoeur 1995: 38). After many decades had passed, and following the intervention from our team of ethnologists, the community started to recall those events in order to give their testimonies about the times of the occupation. On many occasions, children of the witnesses joined the interviews. Some of them asked for photographs of their ancestors to put in family albums. Others, however, avoided conversation to the very end and were suspicious about our research.

During our field research, some of our colleagues suggested publishing the photographs of the witnesses of Nazi operations online in order to aid identification. However, considering the negative emotions felt by my interlocutors when I showed them the German materials – insecurity, uneasiness, and anxiety – I decided against it. I also did not want to share the photographs without their permission, as the photographs were met with ambivalent feelings and often brought back painful memories. At the same time, I observed that other researchers, who did not familiarize themselves with the local context, had no qualms about using the digitized SRV collection.

After the first papers on the subject were published (Duszeńko-Król 2014, Maj 2015), the SRV collection drew keen interest not only from the academia, but also artists and film directors. Among those inspired by the aforementioned compilation, *Anthropology and Ethnology during World War II*, was Dorota Nieznalska, a Polish visual artist in the critical art movement who was particularly fascinated by the photographs of the people forced into Nazi research. Nieznalska used the photographs as artistic material in her projects tackling the mechanisms of Nazi propaganda and the instrumentalization, hierarchization, and subjugation of the occupied communities. Below is an overview of two of several projects created by Nieznalska between 2016 and 2018, including issues related to the

public sharing of the digital data. In 2017, Nieznalska prepared an installation called *Kolekcja Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit, fotografie* (Collection of the *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit: Photographs*), in which she transferred selected portraits of the local residents found in the SRV documentation onto glass, creating ambrotype exhibits.⁹ Nieznalska intended the use of an old and established technique of photography to restore the dignity of the portrayed individuals, which was taken away from them over 70 years before. The art installation presented their identity and ethnic tradition as a value, in stark contrast to how the Nazis treated them.¹⁰ Nieznalska used a similar technique in her subsequent installation, entitled *Przemoc i pamięć. Badania SRV Sektion Rassen- und Volkstumsforschung* (Violence and Memory: Research of the *Sektion Rassen- und Volkstumsforschung*), which she presented in 2018 at the Gdynia City Museum and a year later at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow. This time, the photographs were composed into the symbolic form of an iconostasis. The wall of the iconostasis displayed ethnographical photographs (group shots of Lemko families or people standing in front of their houses), while behind the iconostasis, in the presbytery, i.e., the most sacred place, inaccessible to lay people, were the portraits of the people drafted into the Nazi racial research. By referencing the sacred sphere, Nieznalska wanted to imbue the portrayed individuals with a charisma of holiness. As the website of the Museum of Contemporary Art notes, Nieznalska's work became "a beautiful example of historical empathy. On the one hand, it evokes the memory of the forgotten, and on the other, it warns the viewer about ethnic hierarchization; lastly, it gives all those who have been subjected to such segregation the status of a holy martyr."¹¹ Nieznalska's intriguing arrangements have without a doubt become an impactful means of convening difficult and repressed stories. It should be noted that when Nieznalska built her artistic installations, she presented herself as a researcher disclosing previously obscure archives. Her claim was met with objection from the team of ethnologists from Krakow, who had been studying the German collection since 2008. Małgorzata Maj, Ph.D., editor and co-author of *Anthropology and Ethnology during World War II* (2015), criticized the artist for dishonesty in the research on the SRV collection, and for selective treatment of Germans archives¹². Maj observed that Nieznalska had selected specific fragments of the collection to create and exhibit an exclusively martyrologic vision of the portrayed groups, disregarding any materials and images that could in any way burden surveyed communities. This was evidenced by photographs in which German dignitaries were taking part in local Lemko customs and celebrations.¹³ In this sense, Maj explained, Nieznalska oversimplified the greater context and circumstances of the research (Maj 2015). From the point of view of contemporary art-based research that has emerged from the poststructuralist critique of archives as sources of objective and reliable data, Maj's comments might seem irrelevant

(Derrida 1995, Agostino et al. 2019). According to the authors of the article *Surveillance and Society: Uncertain Archives*, acknowledging the broader spectrum of potential ambiguities, ignorance, or even errors may open up a new, productive perspective in studies combining art and research on the continuously-expanding *big data archives*. Thus, projects conducted according to this postulate should first and foremost inspire reflection and fascination. Their goal is not to seek answers or establish facts, but primarily to pose questions and explore uncertainties (Agostino 2019). Nieznalska's works can be interpreted as belonging to this perspective. Nonetheless, in the case of the SRV documentation, a problematic collection marked with the stigma of criminal practices, any project, including art-based research, should take into account the responsibility for the published content. However, an even more important aspect here becomes the ethical dilemmas about sharing these sensitive data publicly. As noted above, Nieznalska incorporated photographs of individuals subjected to Nazi anthropometric research during the war into her installations in an attempt to restore these individuals' dignity. However, while her creative endeavor had a value of its own, she exclusively followed her personal vision, disregarding the fact that many of the witnesses of history, primarily those born in the Podhale, were still alive when she created her installations. Oblivious to the local context, Nieznalska left out emotions, ambivalent feelings, and attitudes of those whose images she had used. The witnesses never consented to having their portraits incorporated into a public art exhibition; some of the portraits even began spreading over the Internet. The case of Nieznalska's works reveals another problem related to digital exclusion. The witnesses of the German research I spoke to, due to their elderly age, had no devices that would allow them to access the Internet. They were unaware that photographs from their childhood and youth had been made public. Thus, having no knowledge of the different attitudes and feelings among the witnesses, she had no qualms about incorporating their portraits into her installations. The examples provided above put into question a common belief about the democratic nature of digital heritage and show that there is no single, universal rule governing the publication of data in an open-source format. For extremely sensitive data, such as the SRV collection, the process requires in-depth research, recognition of the local context, and a significant dose of sensitivity and responsibility. What, then, is the correct approach to the problematic SRV documents and the materials obtained during the field research, including the witnesses' memories and accounts? It seems that due to the cognitive value of such materials, they should be shared with a wider circle of viewers, at least partially. However, the question remains about what type and scope of content should be introduced into the public space, and who should make the decision. One of the options is having the witnesses' descendants take part in the process of the digitization, sharing, and interpretation

of the data. In my opinion, a good means of learning about the war period and facing the hitherto unspoken about episodes, threads, and events is a participatory research project, in which the group in question works together with an artist to create a joint exhibition about their own difficult past (Rakowski 2013).

Project II

As mentioned in the introduction, the second project concerns problems related to the digitization of materials collected as part of research on the conflicts of memory about the partisan anti-communist movement on the Polish side of the Tatra highlands between 1945 and 1957. The primary consideration here is the sensitivity of the data collected through both field and archival research, which, following digitization, may become a means of political manipulation, thus negatively impacting local neighborhood relations and the lives of individuals. Because the dynamics of such a conflict is strictly related to the external changes that have occurred within the last two decades in the official historical policy of the Institute of National Remembrance (INR), implemented on behalf of the Polish state, it is necessary to first present the statutory purpose of INR and its methods of shaping historical imagination among Poles.

Historical Policy of INR

One of the characteristic features of the current political rivalry between the liberal camp and the national-conservative camp is using Poland's communist past to legitimize one's rule. The PPR period is treated instrumentally as a repository of places, events, and individuals, which are woven together with little attention to historical specifics to create a tale of "us" and "our" enemies, heroes, traitors, victims, and oppressors. Since the political transformation of 1989, the PPR has been heatedly debated with respect to its place in the continuity of Polish nationality, especially Polish independence and totalitarian government (Friszke 2002)¹⁴. A particularly important period in this debate were the years 1944–1947, when the communist revolution brutally eliminated its political opposition as it strived for power. The current right-wing ruling party uses the tactic of exclusively presenting the dark side of this period by revealing the cruelty of communist crimes in order to not only undermine the authority of the oldest generation of the left-wing leaders, who began their political activity during the PPR, but also to discredit the entirety of the political left as ideologically suspicious. Consequently, victims of communist repressions and former enemies of the state are rehabilitated and officially designated as heroes and role models, while those who supported the revolution become antiheroes and collaborators with the "perpetual enemy

of the Motherland,” i.e., the Soviets. This change of vectors within the symbolical order only superficially refers to the past and past politicians vying for power; in actuality, it also forces the living descendants of the participants of the civil war into the debate – the descendants who have to cope with their familial heritage and the memory of their ancestors, whether the “good,” heroic memory or the “bad,” shameful one.

The role of arbiter in the debate about the communist past belongs to INR, a state agency equipped with specialized infrastructure and extensive privileges.¹⁵ As the caretaker of vast archival resources containing the secrets of a totalitarian state, it uses its privileged position of *power-knowledge* to support the ruling national-conservative party’s policy of restoring “national memory” (Foucault 1977: 28, Jimerson 2009, Tesar 2012). Consequently, in addition to in-depth, strictly scientific research, INR also conducts intense popularization activity, addressed primarily to the younger generations of Poles.¹⁶ The Education Department of INR combines carefully selected fragments of sources to create an image of the past containing a pantheon of heroes and foes and to establish a system of values and model behaviors that culminates into the pre-war military motto *Bóg – Honor – Ojczyzna* (God, Honor, Motherland). Thus, “the true Pole, Defender of the Motherland” is defined: he or she is the inheritor of the insurrectional traditions (Polish insurrections of 1831-32, 1863-64, and 1944), adherent to the ancestral faith (implicitly, Catholicism), and always ready to sacrifice his or her own life to defend the integrity of the national community as the supreme value.

The highly exclusive normative model of the Pole as a Defender of the Motherland designed by INR and interwoven with a narrative about the turbulent post-war period provokes strong responses, and it reignites old ideology- and identity-related disputes. Various groups speak out publicly in an effort to remind others about the harm done to their ancestors and demand justice as well as moral, and sometimes material, compensation. Some wish to recover the symbolical, social, and economic capital they lost under the PPR. Others fight to maintain their social *status quo* or to have their own version of the past, different from that espoused by INR, be recognized, in this way protecting themselves against ostracism and symbolical degradation (Bourdieu 1986, Irwin-Zarecka 2020: 437). A particularly controversial subject is the introduction by INR of the myth of *Żołnierze Wyklęci* (Accursed Soldiers), also called *Żołnierze Niezłomni* (Indomitable Soldiers), into the public sphere. The protagonists of the myth are members of the anti-communist underground resistance from 1944–1949. Because such formations were officially considered criminal organizations until 1989, remembrance of their activity was limited to a narrow group of combatants, their families, and oppositional national circles (Kurkowska-Budzan 2009, Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014). However, the process of rehabilitating the memory

of the anti-communist resistance as a military formation, which began with the political transformation of 1989, has for the past several years been highly controversial. The following part of this paper elaborates on this topic.

Myth of the Accursed Soldiers

The affirmation of the anti-communist resistance involves the condemnation of everyone who supported the communist transformation in Poland and helped build the new, socialist reality not only politically, but also socially, culturally, and economically. This reshaping of social imagination based on the ideology of a nation-state is aimed first and foremost at the younger generations of Poles, who have never experienced the life of the PPR. For this reason, INR is conducting an intense educational campaign online, publishing texts, quoting documents related to underground resistance, and disclosing the personal data of not only heroes, but supposed traitors, as well. The institute uses digitized photographs taken from its archives, which, due to the persuasive power of this medium, are to make the newly-created heroes both more credible and more interesting. The photographs, selected from the personal files of agents, reports from operations, and court files, and isolated from their original context, are a convenient resource for exhibitions and illustrated publications to make the message feel more real (Barthes 1981: 87–88). Thus, the photographs published online by INR and the Museum of Accursed Soldiers in Ostrołęka display groups of rifle-wielding partisans standing proudly or smiling nonchalantly at the camera; in more romantic instances, they are accompanied by their fiancées or female liaison and nurses.¹⁷ In turn, the martyrologic aspect of the history of the Accursed Soldiers is displayed in scanned photographs of the corpses of partisans who died in combat, selected from the operational archives of the Security Service.

The idea of basing the new historical policy on the Accursed Soldiers has met with significant difficulties, especially from the living witnesses of history and their children, as our team has experienced multiple times during our field research. This is because the myth of the Accursed Soldiers is a double-edged sword in that it also brought attention to the civil war that broke out in Poland towards the end of World War II with the incursion of the west-bound Red Army and the usurpation of power by Polish communists returning from the USSR. The political transformation in Poland escalated into a brutal civil war that lasted over two years and revealed deep political and social divisions that had been growing since the interwar period. The active resistance of the Accursed Soldiers against the communists was offset by the indifference felt towards them by thousands of the poorest members of society, who stood to gain from the radical political change. The collective memory of the “dreamlike evolution,” as Andrzej Leder writes,

experienced transpassively and suppressed by its witnesses,¹⁸ clearly compromises the new canon of history promoted since 1989 (Leder 2013: 27–47). According to the new vision of post-war Poland, the only *true Poles* were those who actively fought against the Soviet occupant. Conversely, supporters of the new government deserve nothing more than to be branded as traitors, and the fate of the passive witnesses embroiled in the conflict, including incidental victims of the civil war, no longer matters.

Perhaps this is why victims and their representatives hailing from minority groups, i.e., people who feel no obligation to follow INR's standard of patriotism, find it easier to speak openly about the traumatic experiences of that period. Other groups of memory,¹⁹ including the descendants of those who supported the political transformation or who simply wanted to stay politically neutral but became victims of the fights between the partisans and state security forces, prefer to keep their silence in public for fear of being branded a “communist” or “leftist” (*lewak*).²⁰ They give in to the current regime of official memory created by the state, in which shades of gray seem not to exist, especially if the lives of one's ancestors deviate significantly from the standard of patriotism preferred by INR. The threat of INR finding materials in its archives that could implicate their relatives is an effective deterrent to questioning the black-and-white image of the past.

Locally Accursed

An example of a contemporary conflict of memory is the dispute surrounding the anti-communist activity of the underground movement “Błyskawica” (Lightning), led by Józef Kuraś, nickname “Ogień” (Fire) from the village Waksmund. Between 1945 and 1947, “Błyskawica” fought on the Polish side of the Tatra highlands against the communist authorities and their sympathizers. The results of the field research conducted by our team indicate that the local memory about the period forms a much more complicated and incomplete mosaic than that promoted in INR's educational materials. Even though over 70 years have passed since that time, the memory about the internecine conflict caused by a new historical policy reignites old emotions within neighborhoods, families, and villages. In the contemporary image of Kuraś's partisan activity, glorification meets hate, pride meets shame, and vocal faith in the cause meets doubt and silence, provoked by the official canon of the current state-supported historical policy. These conflicts refer to numerous, very specific episodes from the post-war activity of the resistance, including places, events, and names, which, devoid of any significant detail or situational and historical context, are being reconfigured into a framework for various, often completely divergent, historiographies. As interest in local Accursed Soldiers grows, so too do questions and speculations among their descendants

about the course of particular episodes and the roles played by their characters – questions that the deceased witnesses of that period can no longer answer. Thus, INR archives and family stories are the primary means with which people attempt to uncover the mysteries of the past.

The officially declared stake in these conflicts fought with names, dates, and places is the restoration of the memory about the patriotic ancestors, whom PPR's historical policy has erased both physically and symbolically from the pantheon of national heroes by marking them as "bandits" and "enemies of the Motherland." However, the partisans are not the only ones whose justice and honor are at stake here; there are also those who, during the civil war, were marked as enemies and subsequently oppressed. The most drastic and devastating oppression concerned individuals who were accused by the partisans of collaborating with the German occupant during the war and with the new communist government after it, as well as people considered to be the "Others," such as the Slovakian residents of villages in Polish Spisz or Jews travelling through the Podhale.

INR's accusatory historical policy has reopened old wounds among small local communities. Today's conflicts of memory and disputes about who was the hero and who was the traitor during the war are a fight for dignity and respect for all parties involved. Both dignity and respect are key values that determine social prestige in a local community, where the principles of reciprocity and moral integration are still in effect (Domański 2019: 3). Families, social organizations, and political parties form different groups of memory that take action on behalf of their (rather than someone else's) heroes. For such groups, fighting to earn societal respect for their heroes also means fighting for a voice of their own. The fact that the partisans are criticized for their unethical practices towards local populations forces their descendants into a defensive position, with INR acting as the attorney and the highest authority. In turn, INR's defense of Kuraś and his troops by means of propaganda strengthens those groups of memory who affirm the partisans but ignore most of the local social context and the destructive effects of their own actions. One example is a pamphlet published online by INR about "Błyskawica," in which the FAQ section contains the names of individuals who supposedly directly contributed to Kuraś's capture. These deliberately-selected data are devoid of any situational context. In particular, the pamphlet does not mention the oppressive circumstances of how the investigators obtained information about Kuraś, nor does it include the biographies of the "perpetrators" themselves. After the pamphlet was published, the son of one of the individuals accused of treachery requested an explanation from INR about why his father was accused; however, INR never responded. During an interview with our team, he said that being mostly unfamiliar with the materials and not a historian himself, he felt helpless against the accusation, especially because the information published by

INR contradicted what his family had told him. He also did not know how he should proceed to clear his father's name among his personal circles, in which social relationships still rely on direct contact and follow strict rules of social control, after INR's accusation spread rapidly through his village.

It is apparent that the archive fever is also consuming local communities. A very important group in the conflicts of memory are those who represent the victims of Kura's ethnic crimes, demanding recognition of the wrongs they suffered. Each side of the conflict searches the INR archives to find evidence in favor of their position, treating the institute's collection as final proof of truth or falsehood. Leaders of memory, who emerge from each group, look for materials that will help them explain the yet unsolved mysteries of the past, eventually reaching the INR archives. Consequently, the materials produced in the past by the Security Service become key pieces of evidence for a presumed treachery or innocence in disputes taking place on Internet forums and local publications. However, the problem lies in the fact that these sources are treated as completely accurate and read literally with no knowledge of the broader context or the ability to interpret it, and so rather than resolve the conflicts, only serve to escalate them. At this point, it is worth considering what anthropologists should look for in the reports, surveys, and other documents contained in the INR archives, especially if their research focuses on the contemporary conflicts of imagination related to post-war partisan activity and the forms with which it is commemorated. Before this question can be answered, we should assess the cognitive value of the INR's documentation.

Out of Context, or Archives and the Internet

According to the methodology of ethnographic research, the existing sources, are in this case, sources that not only were created with no involvement from the researcher, but that also originate from a different time and culture. For an ethnographer accustomed to personally collecting the research material in the field, interacting with "living" individuals, and observing phenomena as they unfold "here and now," such documents are a major challenge, especially considering the significant change in research practice effected by the self-reflexive and affective turn in ethnology, through which the former informants are now treated as partners, or even co-authors, of the studies. However, if research on conflicts of memory also takes place in an archive, it is our duty as anthropologists to familiarize ourselves with its contents. In order to enable a meaningful investigation of the research materials, we must first reconstruct their original situational and cultural context and determine their factual value in accordance with the principles of discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1993). After all, the archival

materials make up an internally divergent collection, created for different purposes by different individuals acting in a specific time and place.²¹

A major epistemological and axiological challenge are archival and field materials that refer to treachery, collaboration, or lynch law. However, in such cases, the most important task before an anthropologist is not to find and expose the “traitor,” but to try to determine the individual’s motivations. We should ask “Why?” rather than “Who?” because only then do we begin to realize the complexity of the situation surrounding the individuals in question. It also helps us to better understand the tragedy of human choices in the face of ethical dilemmas and the experience of trauma, loss, and humiliation. A striking example of this is the stories of women who decided to cooperate with the Security Service to save imprisoned children from death or to prevent an unfair fight they knew would cause too many casualties. These threads practically never reach INR’s official, masculinized discourse about Kuraś and his troops, in which conflicts took place due to exclusively political reasons as part of specific ideologies. In stark contrast, sources indicate that it was, in fact, the women’s desperate decisions that determined the course of events and the fate of the partisans.

Anonymization vs. Personalization

Another problem related to the digitization of the materials collected by our team through archival and field research concerns the privacy of sensitive data, especially when debates about the past are extremely politicized. Once the materials are published in JU’s online archive, even with access limited to “scientific purposes” only, they will start to recirculate in separation from their original context. This creates the risk of the materials being used not only (at least originally) in anthropological and historical studies, but also to support ideological and political manipulation, especially for data concerning events and decisions that, from today’s perspective, may have been even indirectly connected with communist crimes, which are punishable as per the Act on INR.²² An example of this are the reports of the Security Service from operations related to questioning the local population about the partisans and their supporters. Because from the viewpoint of individuals demanding compensation for past harm, finding the names of the “informants” is a priority; there is no room for details that could complicate the black-and-white image of the past. The official discourse about the Accursed Soldiers also does not contain any specifics about the Security Service using threats or physical violence against the informants. This greatly simplifies making unambiguous judgments by removing the need for reflection on the ethical implications of war. As James Hillman writes in *A Terrible Love of War*,

The norms war generates are not normative beyond itself. This omnivorous appetite to encroach and consume other norms of other gods, suspending their norms, is war's gravest danger. (Hillman 2004: 21)

It is worth reiterating the destructive effect of unreflexive disclosure of names found in the online archives of the Security Service on local communities, this time in the context of the ongoing discussion among qualitative researchers about the ethics of archiving ethnographic data in the digital age. The anonymization of data has recently become a topic of heated debate. The principle of protecting data by protecting the personal information of research participants, included in the research ethics codices of the Association of Social Anthropologists, British Sociological Association, Economic and Social Research Council, and UK Data Archive (Moore 2012: 332–334), has been questioned as another colonial practice and an offshoot of a paternalistic approach to participants that produces inequalities (Buthler 2014: 21). According to some critical researchers, breaking away from the imposed anonymization provides an opportunity to democratize the research process and give voice to the representatives of different individuals, especially those who have hitherto been unheard in the public space or, as with the victims of the Holocaust, who died anonymously, bereft of their own names. However, is the increasingly common procedure of restoring identity by negotiating anonymization universally applicable (Clark 2006: 19)? We are skeptical whether such is the case for the study conducted by our team, because unreflexive personalization performed without taking into account the discursive nature of sensitive data may result in the opposite of what is expected (Thor Tureby & Wagrell 2020).

Breaking the non-disclosure principle and publishing the data, even if they “only” concern the past, may intensify the ongoing conflict. This is particularly dangerous for small village communities, where social control is still strong and every resident functions within an intricate network of familial, neighborhood, and professional relationships. Anthropologists should also consider that the conflicts of memory related to World War II concern sensitive subjects, such as problems establishing the victim and the perpetrator with no ambiguity. In this context, it is worth invoking an entry from the ethical guidelines of the Oral History Society, which states that while personal data should be stored for the sake of public and scientific interest, access to them should be limited.²³

The unreflexive practice of sharing detailed information may exacerbate “name-hunting” for supposed perpetrators known from political publications created based on INR's archives.²⁴ The cases of Lech Wałęsa or Milan Kundera, referenced by Marek Tesar (2014: 111) in the context of the Czech Republic, demonstrate that finding a relevant mention in the documentation of the Security Service may easily destroy someone's positive image and stigmatize them as

a collaborator. Furthermore, the flow of anthropological data in the digital era may prove insecure, and once the data leak to the Internet, we lose control over them. Consequently, we agree with Will van der Hoonard's warning against an unreflexive application of a single template of ethics in different situations and contexts in which we conduct our research (2018: 15). Are we, as anthropologists, really entitled to intervene into Eriksen's "small places [of] large issues?" Do we really have the right to spearhead social change in the name of an arbitrary principle of social justice? After all, we are the ones who bring up the subject and initiate action as per our research applications; thus, we should take care not to become a "bull in a china shop" that leaves a divided community behind (Nowicka 1992: 112–114). First and foremost, we should use our imagination and think about what we leave behind us in the field. Perhaps we are so careful handling the collected data not because of paternalism or because we want to maintain our *status quo* as researchers, but simply because of a fundamental humility towards other human beings (Moore 2012). This humility manifested itself in our team by asking our interlocutors for consent to participate in an interview and later giving them the finished transcript, which may in time become a cherished memento documenting their past.

Conclusions

The materials collected by our team during our research contain many cross-references to specific people, both dead and alive. Any study conducted from two temporal perspectives invariably involves crossing the boundary between the past and the present, and encourages reflection about its short- and long-term implications. Our awareness of the sensitivity of these materials forces us to treat them with utmost care. In an era of widespread digitization and democratization of knowledge, this may paradoxically lead researcher to create "black boxes" inaccessible, at least temporarily, to the general public. Ultimately, researchers become hostages to the knowledge they collect, urging a drastic change of plans about publicizing the results. Consequently, our consideration of who may be interested in using the data our interlocutors have entrusted to us and for what purpose is dictated not by the egoistical desire to maintain our *status quo*, but rather by our carefulness to avoid involving other people in aggressive archival epistemophilia (Agostino 2019: 10).

¹ This article borrows the term *historical politics* from Rafał Stobiecki, who defines it as “a synonym of deliberate actions taken by broadly-defined authorities in order to establish a particular vision of the past among society.” One of the types of action that seems to fit the situation is “a conflict between different groups of interest whose goal is to suggest, or even enforce, their vision of the past in society” (Stobiecki, 2008: 175–176).

² Project I: Podhale Highlanders in Nazi Nationalist Concepts and Ethnopolitics in Light of Documents Contained in *Sektion Rassen- und Volkstumsforschung, Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit*. Grant No. 013/09/B/HS3/03574 provided by the Polish National Science Center, Jagiellonian University, 2014–2016. Project II: Józef Kuraś, nickname “Ogień,” and His Subordinates in Social Imagination. An Anthropological Study on Experiencing the Past. Grant No. 013/09/B/HS3/03574 provided by the Polish National Science Center, Jagiellonian University, 2017–2021.

³ After the invasion, the western part of Poland was annexed into the Reich, while the occupied territories were merged into the General Government, headed by Hans Frank.

⁴ For more information about the fate of the IDO-SRV collection, refer to the USHMM website. See *Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit, Sektion für Rasse und Volkstumforschung*. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn35815> (accessed 18/06/21).

⁵ The costs of the operation were covered jointly by JU and USHMM.

⁶ The “Rights and Restrictions” tab on the USHMM website contains the following note: “This material can only be accessed in a Museum reading room or other on-campus viewing stations. No other access restrictions apply to this material.” Conversely, restrictions for use read as follows: “Fair use only. Duplication and publication of documents/microfilm reels or digital images for third parties require the written permission of the Archiwum Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego [JU Archives].” <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn35815> (accessed 21/07/21).”

⁷ Whereas the Podhale was settled by both Polish and German populations, the highlander culture owes its distinct character primarily to the influence of pastoral tradition, which was brought to the Carpathians over the period between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries by the Vlachs coming to the region from the Balkans (Dobrowolski 1970).

⁸ In 1795, following the partition treaty, Poland was divided between the three neighboring powers, Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

⁹ <https://nieznalska.com/kolekcja-institut-fur-deutsche-ostarbeit-fotografie> (accessed 15/07/21).

¹⁰ <https://nieznalska.com/> (accessed 15/07/21).

¹¹ <https://www.mocak.pl/przemoc-i-pamiec> (accessed 15/06/21).

¹² This statement was published on the website of the Gdynia City Museum during the Violence and Memory exhibition in 2018. After Maj’s intervention, the statement was corrected. For reference, see Maj’s letter to the Director of the Gdynia City Museum. The letter can be found in the Archives of the JU Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology.

¹³ This refers to photographs in which members of the local community wearing traditional attire take part in celebrations, feasts, and festivals with representatives of the German authorities.

¹⁴ According to the definition published on the official website of INR, the “Polish People’s Republic (PPR) was the official name given to a non-sovereign, USSR-dependent communist state, formally adopted on July 22, 1952, and in official use until December 31, 1989. Both during the communist period and after the restitution of [Poland’s] independence, PPR also referred to the preceding period, i.e., the years 1944–1952 [...]” See <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/upamietnianie/dekomunizacja/zmiany-nazw-ulic/nazwy-ulic/nazwy-dozmiany/38169,ul-lecia-PRL.html> (accessed 08/07/21).

¹⁵ INR’s Committee for the Persecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation began operations in 1999. It consists of: the Main Committee for the Persecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, the Office for Lustration, the INR Archives, the Office for the Remembrance of Warfare and Martyrdom, the Office for Searches and Identification, the Office for National Education, and the Office for Historical Research.

¹⁶This refers to social representation, a notion proposed by Bronisław Baczko. Collective representations are systems of beliefs and practices that, as the highest moral instance, combine all members of society into a single community. See B. Baczko, 1994.

¹⁷ See: [file:///C:/Users/MGC/Downloads/Ogien_broszura%20\(6\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/MGC/Downloads/Ogien_broszura%20(6).pdf)

¹⁸ Leder's "dreamlike revolution" refers to the radical social changes that took place in Poland between 1939 and 1956 as a result of the extermination of the Jews and repression of the pre-war elites (conducted first by the Nazis, and later by NKVD communists). Leder draws from Charles Tylor's theory of social representation and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. Specifically, he uses the categories of the symbolical universe, phantasm, and transpassivity.

¹⁹ "Groups of memory" mean societies in which social identity is based on shared memory. The notion of shared memory is identical here to Barbara Szacka's collective memory, which denotes "images related to the past of one's group, constructed by individuals based on the information they remember from various sources and obtain through various channels, in accordance with principles of psychology. These images are comprehended, selected, and processed based on one's cultural standards and worldview. In turn, these standards are created by society and thus are common to all members of a given community, which unifies the images and allows the individuals to talk about the collective memory of the group's past" (Szacka 2006: 44).

²⁰ The Polish term *lewak* was popularized after 1989 by right-wing politicians as an ironic, pejorative label for left-leaning individuals; see Drozda (2015).

²¹ Even subjects that are ethically very difficult can be analyzed in a methodologically sound manner, as shown by publications about agency and Nazism. See, among others, Ingraio (2011), Marks (2007), Walzer (1977), and Welzer (2012).

²² The Act on INR, amended in 2020, removed the period of limitations on communist crimes (Leniart 2015; <https://prawo.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1486448/zbrodnie-komunistyczne-bez-przedawnienia-us-tawa.html>).

²³ See <https://www.ohs.org.uk/gdpr-2/>

²⁴ The documents can only be accessed in the reading rooms at the INR Archives with consent from the Branch Director. Permitted parties comprise the families of the concerned individuals, journalists, and scientists. The materials can only be publicized once INR's Department of Reprography makes a copy, and the requesting person takes full responsibility for the fate of the copies.

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