

## The Ministry of Memory

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**In order to tell the history of the communist period, Poland created a mechanism that is uniquely Eastern European: an Institute of National Remembrance, which combines legal investigations with scholarly research. Though it was created for political reasons, the Institute has become a fixture of Poland’s academic and historiographical landscape.**

Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance (INR) is often referred to as the “History Ministry” or “Memory Ministry.” The success of this Orwellian terminology is undoubtedly largely due to the media controversies that its work has often provoked: it owes its fame, for instance, to the publication of a controversial biography of Lech Walesa, which accused the former Solidarność leader of being a secret informer for the communist political police. This was in 2008, only a year after the spectacular Geremek Affair, in which another key figure of the anti-communist opposition refused to undergo a lustration process<sup>1</sup> conducted by the INR. Poland’s president at the time was Lech Kaczyński (2005-2010) and its government consisted of a coalition led by his twin brother, Jaroslav (2005-2007), of the Law and Justice Party (PiS).

While the accusations leveled against the negotiators of the Round Table Agreements<sup>2</sup> did indeed represent an attempt to use the past to undermine political opponents, it would be wrong to see the INR solely in this light. Beginning in 2005, it became the vanguard of Poland’s “historical policy,” a fully-fledged government historical program aimed at serving the state’s presumed interests that was commissioned by Poland’s new leaders. Yet the INR, which was born in the early 2000s, was not the creation of the Kaczyńskis. Within the historical profession, the Institute laid bare the rifts dividing the discipline, in a way that resonated with debates occurring in other countries, notably France. The question was: how does one write one’s national history? And what is this history’s political and social role? There is no doubt that the INR became a sanctuary for a group of nationalist historians, whose inclination was towards a hagiographic history that would inspire a sense of national pride.

Yet the attitude of historians towards the INR must also be considered from the perspective of the conditions in which the historical profession was practiced. The context was one of chronically under-financed research and academic salaries that were stagnant and low.

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<sup>1</sup> Lustration policies seek to verify the past records of candidates to important political and administrative positions in order to exclude former members of the communist security services. Such policies have been implemented in most post-communist countries.

<sup>2</sup> The agreement between representatives of the Polish Unified Workers Party (PUWP) and the opposition organized around Solidarność, which in 1989 made it possible to organize a democratic transition.

Since students of history had few professional opportunities and doctoral fellowships were rare, the creation of “memory institutions” (such as the INR or museums) offered historians new job and funding opportunities, as well as greater media visibility, even if the price to pay was less autonomy in pursuing their research. The INR thus represents a new approach to history, which provisionally benefited a historiographical trend (predating the INR), which made preserving the national memory its primary vocation.

### **An Unusual Project?**

The Institute was created by the law of December 28, 1998. Its implementation, however, took time, and it was not until the 2000s that it became operational. Its creation was meant to resolve the thorny issue of how the archives of the old communist security apparatus were to be made available. These archives, which would notably make it possible to discover the identities of the police’s “secret informers,” were and continue to be used in public debates to attack political and media figures who (actually or allegedly) collaborated with the former regime. The origins of this institution can thus be traced to the question of opening these archives; it was charged with making these documents available to the public in a framework that was strictly defined by law<sup>3</sup>. Yet from the outset, the INR was given much broader prerogatives. In addition to the state security archives (1944-1990), it administers other civil and military collections relating to Nazi and communist crimes against Polish citizens.

Archives, however, comprise only one of the Institute’s departments, which also include a Bureau of Public Education (BPE), an office responsible for lustration (created following the 2006 reform) and a General Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. The latter is the heir to an investigative commission into Nazi crimes, which was established by the postwar communist regime. After 1990, it became the Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (which included communist crimes). Established on these four pillars, the INR’s responsibilities extend to archives, research and education, lustration, and legal inquiries into past crimes.

The creation of an institute of this kind is far from being a uniquely Polish phenomenon. Many other post-communist European countries have, since 1989, established similar institutions (including Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria). It should also be recalled that there is nothing new about special institutes or commissions of historians being charged with writing history. After 1945, several western European countries founded research centers that were specifically dedicated to the “history of the present.” This was a widespread European phenomenon, in which the most sensitive aspects of contemporary history were assigned to *ad hoc* institutions, which generally had greater autonomy vis-à-vis academic institutions than they had in relation to political authorities. It was as if “pressing” historical issues—questions relating to Nazi and communist crimes, the Shoah, or decolonization—which could jeopardize national cohesion or relations with neighboring countries, were too serious to be left in the hands of academic historians. Their task was also to condemn—either morally, through the “tribunal of history,” or legally—crimes perpetrated by past regimes (as in the

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<sup>3</sup> Each individual has the right to know if he or she attracted the attention of the security services and, if so, to consult his or her file. The entire collection is available to journalists and scholars, consistent with applicable rules.

Papon, Touvier, and Jaruzelski cases) and, in certain instances, to provide victims with compensation. In the case of the INR, we see something like an official historical narrative. Not in the sense that political authorities would themselves write history, as was the case back in the days of the Polish United Worker's Party (PUWP), but in the sense of mass publications bearing the stamp of the "Institute for National Remembrance," which were widely diffused (notably in schools) thanks to major public financial support, creating the impression that they were state-sanctioned. This vision of the state was explicitly articulated in the INR law's preamble: "to preserve: memory against the damage inflicted upon the Polish nation during the Second World War and the postwar period; patriotic traditions of struggle against occupiers, be they Nazi or communist; and civic efforts on behalf of an independent Polish state, the defense of liberty, and human dignity." Of course, the diversity of the authors' interpretations and political inclinations makes this conception of the state more or less monolithic, depending on the topic being addressed. Thus, if the People's Republic of Poland is condemned primarily for being a totalitarian regime and is addressed, in the INR's work, primarily through the security apparatus, the Institute also contributed, through the Jedwabne Affair, to dispelling the national myth that Poles played no role in exterminating the Jews during the Second World War<sup>4</sup>. The fact remains that official narratives of this kind are less concerned with objective and scholarly knowledge of the past than with considerations relating to collective identity (such as with the national community) and political and moral judgment.

If the Polish Institute has a distinctive character, it lies in the way that it blends legal and scholarly concerns. While most comparable institutes in post-communist Europe combine lustration, research, and education, the INR is alone in its ability to initiate legal proceedings relating to past crimes. Practically speaking, this means that the Institute employs a hundred or so prosecutors in its Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. Of course, this commission has no influence over the work of historians and operates completely independently. Even so, the coexistence within a single institution of an educational and research vocation and of a judicial branch leads to a confusion of genres, which the Walesa affair (among others) did little to dispel. The INR's structure and budget are also unique. At present, it employs over 2,100 individuals, scattered between a central office in Warsaw, eleven local agencies (*oddziały*) in the voivodeships (or regions), and seven delegations in smaller provincial cities. The Institute's budget, which has constantly increased since its creation, has now evened out around 55 million euros annually. It increased dramatically in 2005 and 2007 when the PiS government was in power; subsequent governments have not gone back on these commitments. With the exception of the Gauck Institute, which houses the Stasi archives in Germany and which became the first institute of its kind (established in 1991, it was the model for all that came after it), comparable institutions in post-communist Europe have much lower profiles.

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<sup>4</sup> Following the publication of Jan Gross's work on the massacre of the Jewish population in Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors (*Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton University Press, 2001), the INR offered a second opinion which confirmed Polish responsibility and identified similar massacres: Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *Wokół Jedwabnego* [Around Jedwabne], 2 volumes, INR, 2002.

## Reconsidering the Institute's Origins

Why was an Institute for National Remembrance, charged with writing the history of Nazi, Soviet, and communist crimes in Poland, created after a decade of post-communist change in which politicians and the media had been relatively (and paradoxically) silent on questions of history and memory? Three reasons are generally given to explain the INR's relatively belated creation<sup>5</sup>:

- First, the fact that the transition between the communist regime and the Third Polish Republic was negotiated, notably during the Round Table Agreements. In the early 1990s, social and economic reforms were given priority over the settling of historical scores.
- Second, the failure of the first major attempt at radical de-communization in 1992, when then-Interior Minister Antoni Macierewicz made public a list of alleged former informers for the communist security services, which included the names of several members of Parliament and the President of the Republic (Walesa). The scandal triggered by this initiative resulted in the government's resignation.
- Third, the return to power of former communists following the 1993 parliamentary election, in which the SLD (Democratic Left Alliance) emerged triumphant. This successor party to the old PUWP was careful not to paint an excessively negative picture of the old regime, which risked damaging its own image.

One must not, however, conclude that there were no histories of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) prior to the creation of the INR. Several pioneering authors (such as Krystyna Kersten, Andrzej Paczkowski, and Andrzej Friszke), who, in some cases, had published the first work on the origins of the PPR beginning in the 1980s through underground distribution networks<sup>6</sup>, began to write the history of the communist regime as soon as it fell. Moreover, the media often addressed history's "white spots"—events that had been censored under the communist system (the Katyn massacre, the Warsaw Uprising, and so on).

The INR's creation was supported in the late 1990s by a conservative government coalition that arose out of *Solidarność*. This idea was far from receiving unanimous support among former dissidents. Poland's leading daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (run by Adam Michnik) and the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* (which was prominent in the dissident press under the PPR) immediately opposed the project, which they saw as a threat to the Round Table compromise. The Institute's creation was, moreover, made chaotic by the fact that Poland's government was at the time divided, with President Aleksander Kwasniewski (of the SLD) vetoing the project, before his veto was ultimately overturned by three-fifths of the parliament. As a result of these

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<sup>5</sup> See the text by Dariusz Stola under "Further Reading."

<sup>6</sup> Including exiled publishing houses in France and Britain, as well as the anti-communist opposition's clandestine press.

tumultuous origins, the Institute's president was given a highly protected legal status, which made it almost impossible to remove him during his term. He was to be assisted by a council of specialists chosen by the various political parties. Yet the INR's second leadership team, which was elected in 2005, was deemed too partisan and attention was called to the incompetence of some of the figures of the council who were close to Kaczynski's government coalition. Consequently, the INR law was rewritten in 2010, ensuring that academic historians would control the council.

## Poland's Great Historical Research Center

What influence does the INR have over Polish historiography for the period between 1939 and 1989? As it has been said, the history of more recent periods, devoted to the Second World War and the PPR, did not wait for the INR to develop. In 1989, this field, which more than any other had been undeniably controlled, censured, and falsified by communist authorities, got a second wind. The primary sites where this history was produced were Warsaw University and the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), as well as Krakow's Jagiellonian University. Other sites of university research generally tend to be more geographically or thematically specialized. For example, Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute has often worked in relative isolation vis-à-vis other research centers, to such an extent that until recently, Polish history and Polish Jewish history were considered to be separate fields<sup>7</sup>. The PPR's history was explored in particular by the PAS's Political Studies Institute, which in 1990 created a research team at the initiative of Andrzej Paczkowski and Andrzej Friszke, two specialists on political opposition to the communist regime. They recruited a new generation of historians, trained in the 1990s, who emerged primarily from Marcin Kula's seminar (at Warsaw University), which advocated a social history of the PPR that transcended the black-and-white debates characteristic of studies of this period: it included, among others, Paweł Machcewicz<sup>8</sup>, Dariusz Stola<sup>9</sup>, Krzysztof Persak, and Marcin Zaremba. Within university institutes, research teams remain limited however, and PPR specialists constitute a microcosm. This situation has, in a sense, been upended by the INR's creation.

Any discussion of the INR's place in contemporary Polish historiography must start with the following fact: the Institute's Public Education Office (PEO) is Poland's greatest research center on contemporary history. Not only does its budget far exceed that of university centers, but its size is daunting: the PEO employs over 200 historians—as many as the entire Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS). Furthermore, it is the leading publisher of historical work. This disparity must be emphasized: the INR has human and financial resources which give it considerable influence over historiographical production, at least as far as Polish history from 1939 to 1989 is concerned. Yet it would be pointless to oppose the INR to the academic world, given how interconnected they are: some of the most important authorities on the communist regime have sat on its council or had their work published by the Institute. Moreover, the INR employs many doctoral students from the PAS and other universities, offering them stable work and a salary. The Institute's budget allows it to offer higher salaries

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Yves Potel, *La fin de l'innocence: la Pologne face à son passé juif*, Paris, Editions Autrement, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *Polski rok 1956* [1956 in Poland], Warsaw, Oficyna Wydawnicza Mówią Wieki, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989* [A Country without an Exit? Emigration in Poland, 1949-1989], Warsaw, IPN et ISP PAN, 2010.

than in the academic world, providing young historians with attractive employment opportunities and the most established historians with the possibility of holding joint appointments at a university and the INR. It should, however, be emphasized that the INR primarily hires doctoral students and Ph.D.'s who are unable to find academic positions; university professors rarely hold their positions jointly with an INR appointment.

The INR and the university world thus overlap far more than they compete. Yet the research practiced at the INR is nonetheless distinct. If the necessary precondition of a neutral and objective science is its capacity to pose its own questions, it is difficult to describe the INR's research in these terms. Its direction is determined by the administration, consistent with its legally defined task: the defense of national memory.

Among historians, detractors of the INR include critical historians (such as Marcin Kula, Dariusz Stola, and Andrzej Friszke), as well as historians who have been directly involved in running the Institute (Paweł Machcewicz and Antoni Dudek). Criticism of the INR is aimed primarily at the bias of its publications, which provide a distorted image of historical reality due to their focus on the security apparatus. The Institute's more popular works are, moreover, accused of often adopting a hagiographic and polemical tone that would be inappropriate in scholarly writing. Yet no academic specializing in contemporary history has called for the Institute to be simply abolished. Even those who are most critical of it admit that the Institute's financial resources are a godsend for research. Bitterness arises, rather, from the unequal allocation of public resources for historical research, which is the consequence of the INR's existence. It is also due to the emphasis placed on political history, which rarely results in innovative research. Above all, most historians agree that the INR has invigorated research on the contemporary era<sup>10</sup>. This observation is also an admission of guilt: if the INR filled a gap, it is because, in the 1990s, academics were unable to encourage major research into the recent past. But the relative weakness of historiography on the communist period before the INR's creation can be explained in part by the lack of funding and the fact that it had not been politically commissioned. The question that Polish historians are now asking about the INR is not whether it is necessary, but how it might work better: the general consensus is that historical research would lose more than it would gain from abolishing the INR.

## **Black and White History**

Charged with investigating Nazi and communist crimes against the Polish nation and celebrating the nation's heroic resistance to its oppressors, the INR's primary task is to assemble a kind of national pantheon. Thus it is hardly surprising that the history produced by the Institute is often written in black and white, pitting heroes and victims against villains and butchers. The focus on security service archives, justified on the grounds that these documents are unpublished (and thus by the possibility of a "scoop"), often results in the reduction of the history of communist Poland to a faceoff between an oppressive state and a victimized or resistant population. While there is, of course, no denying the authoritarian nature of Poland's communist

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<sup>10</sup> The closing discussion of a conference devoted to the INR's contribution to Polish historiography on the occasion of its tenth anniversary, which is found in part V of the published proceedings, is very illuminating on this topic. See Andrzej Czerwinski, *et al.*, eds., *Bez taryfy ulgowej. Dorobek naukowy i edukacyjny IPN 2000-2010* [The INR's Scholarly and Educational Contribution], Łódź, INR, 2012.

regime, building a narrative of this period that consists of a series of protest movements that were brutally repressed until they ultimately triumphed overlooks many other aspects of reality. Thanks to the INR's numerous publications (150 to 200 titles per year, including popularizing journals), the way that the communist security and repression apparatus operated is now well documented. This is the main topic addressed in the Institute's publications through a research program devoted to "the security apparatus and" or "the security apparatus confronts" some segment of society (the Church, intellectuals, political dissidents, national minorities, emigration<sup>11</sup>, and so on). This program is, in turn, reiterated at the local level thanks to a network of local agencies. The same is true the anti-communist opposition (a multiple-volume encyclopedia of Solidarnosc was recently published<sup>12</sup>). Legal political life and daily life, however, remain fields that the INR has left largely unexplored. We still know little about how the party operated, as the INR rarely makes use of its archives. The communist regime's mechanisms of domination and legitimation still need to be explored. While a trend emphasizing the social history of the communist era does exist and has produced quality monographs on topics as diverse as the nationalism of communist leaders, working-class life, cinema, and tourism<sup>13</sup>, it has remained until now relatively marginal to the discipline.

In addition to scholarly publications (i.e., books and journals published by the Institute), the INR distributes educational materials in a wide range of media: popular periodicals, exhibits, websites, movies, board games, and so on. Public financing ensures that these media are widely diffused, notably in schools. Thematic packages consisting of lesson plans, exercises, and rich visuals are available for teachers, offering them ready-made history lessons. The purpose of this deliberately synthetic history, reduced to a playful and attractive format, begs the question: does it seek to popularize the past? Or to adulate it? Or, rather, to sententiously proclaim a duty to remember? What is the point of exhibits such as one entitled "Faces of Security," which consists in displaying in public spaces the portraits and biographies of former local officials in the political police? Good monographs are usually doctoral theses which cannot be considered the Institute's own products. There is little room for a critical history that would disturb national

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<sup>11</sup> Bartłomiej Noszczak, *Polityka państwa wobec Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego w Polsce w okresie internowania prymasa Stefana Wyszyńskiego 1953-56* [State Policy Confronts Poland's Catholic Church during the Imprisonment of the Primate Stefan Wyszyński], INR, 2008; Piotr Franaszek, ed., *Stłamszona nauka? Inwigilacja środowisk akademickich i naukowych przez aparat bezpieczeństwa w latach siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych XX wieku* [The Infiltration of Academic and Scholarly Milieus by the Security Apparatus during the 1970s and 1980s], INR, 2010; Dariusz Iwaneczko, *Opór społeczny a władza w Polsce południowo-wschodniej 1980-1989* [Resistance and Power in Southeastern Poland, 1980-1989], INR, 2005; Jarosław Syrnok, ed., *Aparat bezpieczeństwa Polski Ludowej wobec mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych oraz cudzoziemców* [Communist Poland's Security Apparatus Confronts National and Ethnic Minorities and Foreigners], INR, 2009; Ryszard Terlecki, ed., *Aparat bezpieczeństwa wobec emigracji politycznej i Polonii* [The Security Apparatus Confronts Political Emigration and the Polish Diaspora], INR, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> *Encyklopedia Solidarności. Opozycja w PRL 1976-1989* [The Encyclopedia of Solidarność: Opposition under the PPR, 1976-1989], volume 1, INR, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See in particular the work published by Trio editions in the collection "W krainie PRL" directed by Marcin Kula; Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, Legitymizacja, Nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* [Communism, Legitimization, Nationalism: The Nationalist Legitimization of Communist Power in Poland], Warsaw, Trio, 2005; Błażej Brzostek, *Robotnicy Warszawy. Konflikty codzienne (1950-1954)* [Warsaw's Workers: Daily Conflicts (1950-1954)], Warsaw, Trio, 2002; Monika Talarczyk-Gubała, *PRL się śmieje. Polska komedia filmowa lat 1945-1989* [The PPR Laughs: Polish Comedies, 1945-1989], Warsaw, Trio, 2007; Marcin Majowski, *Polska ludowa zaprasza. Polityka turystyczna w czasach Edwarda Gierka* [Communist Poland Welcomes You: Tourism Policies in the Times of Edward Gierka], Warsaw, Trio, 2008.

myths, by asking, for example, whether it was wise to launch the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, by examining more carefully relations between Poles and Jews during the war, or simply by recalling that at its peak, the PUWP had three million members. Moreover, the focus on security service archives as the key to understanding communist Poland leads researchers to dwell on the communist regime's crueler periods: its establishment (1944-1956), its crises (1956, 1968, 1976, 1980, 1981) and its final collapse. Periods of decreased agitation between strike movements or political upheaval do not fall within the Institute's areas of interest.

Paradoxically, the most famous crime the INR has investigated (from a legal as well as a scholarly perspective) is one that was committed not against Poles, but by Poles: the Jedwabne massacre. Yet despite Jan Gross's later publications on Jewish massacres in postwar Germany, the dominant view of Polish-Jewish relations during the conflict has not been challenged. A dominant narrative persists, one that rejects any Polish responsibility for the Holocaust and which seeks out uses of the erroneous expression "Jewish camps" in the foreign media. The enchanted view of a "country without a Quisling" (the head of Norway's collaborationist government) has not been pruned from INR publications on this topic. The latter usually emphasize the role the Poles played in saving the Jews, but have little to say about the question of pogroms, without even mentioning the participation of the Polish police and local dignitaries in exterminating the Jews<sup>14</sup>. The INR's research agenda on Polish-Jewish relations during the war was renamed "The Poles Helping the Jews" by the Institute's second leadership board. Readers seeking to enrich their knowledge of this question can go to the [INR website](#) (in English), which clearly illustrates this point.

What conclusions should one draw about the Institute? The INR is far from producing a critical approach to history, one that asks its own questions and is methodologically pluralistic. While this kind of institute is not an unusual endeavor in central Europe, it must be admitted that the resources at its disposal have made it unrivaled as a research center in the academic world. Yet in recent years its work has somewhat diversified as its administration has taken note of criticism on the part of academics<sup>15</sup>. For instance, the INR has published work on diplomatic and intellectual history<sup>16</sup>. If these developments are still too few and far between to alter its editorial line, a new generation of young scholars has begun to pursue more innovative research (on the party, women, and so on). Nothing is set in stone and everything seems to suggest that the most controversial period of the INR's short history is now behind it: there are fewer polemics and the option of simply abolishing the Institute is no longer mentioned in political debates, while historians have expressed the desire that the PEO might one day separate off from the Institute and become its own independent research center. Such a scenario is not impossible, as the INR in its current form may no longer have much purpose a few years from now, when 1989 will seem long enough ago for Polish society to adopt a calmer attitude about its past. Beyond what it means for the INR, such developments would have a profound impact on the way a non-nationalistic national history is written and on political conceptions of history's role.

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<sup>14</sup> Audrey Kichelewski addresses this topic on [Books&Ideas](#)

<sup>15</sup> See note 9.

<sup>16</sup> Magdalena Heruday-Kielczewska, *Reakcja Francji na wprowadzenie stanu wojennego grudzien 1981 – styczen 1982* [France's Reaction to the State of Siege], Warsaw, INR, 2012; Patryk Pleskot, *Intelektualni Sąsiedzi. Kontakty historyków polskich ze środowiskiem "Annales," 1945-1989* [Contacts between Polish Historians and the *Annales* School], Warsaw, INR, 2012.



## Further Reading

Valentin Behr, “Historiens militants ou historiens de bureau? Les producteurs du récit historique officiel à l’Institut de la mémoire nationale,” *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 42, n° 4, 2011, p. 5-35.

Agnès Bensussan et al., “Les enjeux des archives des polices politiques communistes en Allemagne et en Pologne,” *Genèses* vol. 3, n° 52, 2006, p. 4-32.

Pieter Lagrou, “L’histoire du temps présent en Europe depuis 1945, ou comment se constitue et se développe un nouveau champ disciplinaire,” [\*La revue pour l’histoire du CNRS\*](#) n° 9, 2006.

Georges Mink, “Les usages des instituts de la mémoire nationale dans les recompositions partisans (1989-2008),” in Georges Mink, Pascal Bonnard, ed., *Le passé au présent*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2010, p. 171-184.

Dariusz Stola, “Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance: a Ministry of Memory?,” in Alexei Miller, Maria Lipman, eds., *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, CEU Press, 2005, p. 45-58.

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