

Review

Krzysztof Mudyn¹

University of Rzeszów, Institute of Psychology

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6177-7241>

Bilewicz, M. (2024). *Traumaland. Polacy w cieniu przeszłości* [*Traumaland. Poles in the shadow of the past*]. Wydawnictwo WAM, 336 pp.

This work is a convincing attempt to describe the specificity of the Polish mentality, which distinguishes us from other nations, by referring to the concept of *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD). In short, the author – referring to several comparative studies – puts forward the thesis that the distrust typical of Poles (towards authorities, institutions and fellow citizens), the high level of stress in the context of potential and actual threats (e.g. Covid), the conviction that we live in a rather unjust world, as well as complaining as a safe (favourite) style of communication are the result of unarticulated and unprocessed traumatic historical events. Events and situations that our ancestors experienced, especially in the last few decades. Of course, to understand the exceptional tendency of our compatriots to treat authority and all regulations as something alien and unwillingly accepted, one would have to go back even further, i.e., to the time of the partitions of Poland.

In light of contemporary research, there is a growing belief in the multigenerational inheritance of trauma. It appears that grandchildren take over traumas not only from their parents, but also from their grandparents. Although the mechanisms of this transmission are still unclear (regardless of theoretical orientation), researchers agree on the very fact of such transmission. Furthermore, the consensus among many clinical psychologists, and not only, is that untold, unexpressed (and, as it were, ‘secret’) traumas are particularly vital and destructive. And – surprisingly – they are most easily inherited, sometimes spectacularly so. The author reminds us in this context (which is quite obvious to the older generation of compatriots) that in the period after the Second World War,

¹ Correspondence address: kmudyn@ur.edu.pl.

many traumatic events and experiences were politically (and to some extent socially) tabooed. Although the type and scope of dangerous topics have changed and evolved, they are still present.

The concept of post-traumatic stress disorder has become very popular over the past 30–40 years while at the same time broadening the range of situations to which it is sometimes referred. Originally, PTSD was associated primarily with the severe mental disorders observed in many veterans (e.g., returning from the Vietnam War) who systematically experienced the threat to their lives and the hell of war with all its horrors and tragedies. The war is also roundups, shootings, displacements, temptations to collaborate, partisans fighting the occupying forces and each other, sporadic underground actions, and reprisals against civilians. War is, of course, not the only source of extreme stress and misery. Natural disasters, catastrophes, terrorist attacks, traffic accidents, experiencing violence, and other misfortunes are also potential sources of trauma that affect entire communities. Individual psychological wounds and scars become (with luck) the focus of attention and therapeutic interventions by professionals. However, the question arises: How do the vast majority of victims (who probably make up at least 99% of the victim population) cope with their traumas? It seems that they suppress them, more or less successfully pushing them out of consciousness, and consequently store them deep inside themselves and (against their intentions) somehow pass them on to their descendants. Moreover, it is sometimes possible to observe astonishing repetitions of traumatic individual events in subsequent generations (Wolynn, 2021; see: Mudyń, 2023).

Michał Bilewicz addresses many of the more specific issues in his work and cites an impressive number of comparative studies of an international nature. Many of these were conducted with his participation. There is also the problem of the so-called founding myths, based on which the history of a given nation, the cultivated tradition, and the construction of a national identity are transmitted. In this context, i.e., in constructing one's identity, the idea of an enemy or 'stranger' proves very useful. In the case of Poland, the motif of national liberation struggle is cultivated, and the tradition of martyrdom is celebrated. We eagerly celebrate all anniversaries of successive liberation uprisings, most of which ended tragically. The martyrdom tone appears repeatedly, both in the context of education and in official celebrations. "And those who have good eyesight and hearing..." can also hear echoes of the romantic-messianic slogan in them: "Poland the Christ of nations". This does not change the fact that Adam Mickiewicz was a great poet, and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński's poem is beautiful. The conviction of the exceptionality of one's own nation is admittedly something common among all (?) nations, but it is not necessarily built on martyrdom. After all, by nature, each of us is the center of the Universe, and our country is the Middle Kingdom. However, with globalization and digital technology, it is becoming increasingly easy to see that others also have their own Universes.

In this work, which is voluminous with 336 pages, including footnotes, a bibliography, and an index of persons and concepts, many other important problems are raised, e.g., the relationship between the popularity of conspiracy theories and the feeling of helplessness, the problem of the historical conditions

of social distrust, etc. I will only stop here to signal their presence. Instead, I will stop at a question of a practical-educational nature. Should schoolchildren (e.g. in connection with history lessons) visit such a place of remembrance as the concentration camp at Auschwitz? The issue is complex and delicate. In general, it seems that it is necessary. However, the question arises: At what age or from which grade? And is it compulsory or by choice (or with parental consent)? Indeed, from the research on high school students cited by the Author, it appears that some young people are strongly affected by this. He writes:

More than 13% of the students who visited the former camp developed all the symptoms typical of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, after one month. Two-thirds of the students complained of recurring memories of the camp visit. One in four students avoided any situation, however, related to the experience of visiting the camp. (p. 70).

It seems, therefore, that such visits should be thoughtfully and carefully prepared. This would require, I think, a separate meeting with potential participants before and a longer meeting after to share their experiences, talk about them, and partly unwind. And it should certainly not be the case that a visit to this camp is part of a tourist offer in the style of "Visiting the Wieliczka Salt Mine and the Auschwitz Museum in one day". Cemeteries are not visited; rather, one "visits the graves" (usually of loved ones) when needed.

Michał Bilewicz's reported work addresses several socially very important and difficult topics. The author's narrative combines historical knowledge and interest in current socio-political processes with a social psychologist's empirical skills and experience. Such a broad range of interests is rare in academic circles today. Indeed, it becomes a burden (and sometimes even a gaffe) in the rat race played out in the narrow alleys of the social-institutional labyrinth.

In general, I find the author's arguments and conclusions convincing. In particular, I agree as much as possible on the similarity of the mentality of Poles and Greeks as regards their attitude to authority. There is only one issue that leads me to argue. The author states at one point, "Thinking of memory as a zero-sum game is a trap. [...] The failure to understand that a community of victims may be a better way to recognize suffering than a competition between them leads to a situation in which all parties to the conflict over memory *de facto* lose" (p. 248).

Firstly, thinking of social memory in terms of a game does not suit me very well, but since I accept this, I would defend the thesis that it is nevertheless a "zero-sum game" in the short and medium term. In other words, it is clear to me that individual memory (especially short-term and working memory), like the resources of attention, is limited, and the capacity of individual memory has quite unambiguous limits. The same also applies to the so-called social memory, whose window (under the onslaught of new information and pseudo-information) narrows increasingly (today's hot news displaces the day before yesterday's). In short, I believe that the descendants of the former Belgian Congo are rightly outraged that the celebration of World War II crimes by Belgians

effectively (and somewhat vicariously) overshadows the former crimes of Belgian colonists against their ancestors. The author's postulate "about a community of victims" may be correct, but only from a long-term perspective, perhaps heading towards infinity. Much here depends on the political climate and the involvement of influential people.

I recommend the reviewed work to all Readers attracted by the so-called 'significant problems'. I also have a quiet hope that the problems raised in it will somehow permeate general education by osmosis rather than by top-down regulation.

References

- Mudyń, K. (2023). Recenzja książki Marka Wolynna *Nie zaczęło się od ciebie. Jak dziedziczona trauma wpływa na to, kim jesteśmy i jak zakończyć ten proces* [Review of Mark Wolynn's book *It didn't start with you. How inherited trauma affects who we are and how to end the process*]. *Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna* [Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology], 23(2), 124–125. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374813353_Nie_zaczelo_sie_od_ciebie
- Wolynn, M. (2021). *Nie zaczęło się od ciebie. Jak dziedziczona trauma wpływa na to, kim jesteśmy i jak zakończyć ten proces* [*It didn't start with you. How inherited trauma affects who we are and how to end the process*], M. Reimann, Transl. Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca.