



Reception of historical memory in the works of contemporary Polish writers

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to explore how authors of Polish prose from the late 20th to early 21st century reflected the past and constructed collective experience by drawing upon a range of archival sources and artistic techniques. This study adopted an interdisciplinary approach that integrates comparative-historical analysis, reception theory, contextual interpretation of literary texts, methods of cultural analysis for examining collective memory, and a comparative perspective with analogous narratives in Ukrainian literature. The analysis demonstrated that Polish writers transformed historical material through genre experimentation, including elements of horror and phantasmagoria, which underscores the unfinished nature of social trauma and encourages readers' extended reflection on collective moral guilt, contributing to national identity development. The works of Stanisław Srokowski, Łukasz Orbitowski, Andrzej Szczypiorski, Igor Ostachowicz, and Sebastian Reńca demonstrate a dynamic interplay between documentary sources (such as archives and eyewitness testimonies) and the authors' psychological and myth-making techniques, which together create a space for multifaceted interpretations of the past. These texts also illuminated the moral dilemmas generated by divergent historical narratives. The findings demonstrated that the incorporation of figures such as ghosts, zombies, or other markers of the "return of the dead" functioned as metaphors for unresolved historical conflicts, which required contemporary re-evaluation. Such representations reflected deeply contradictory aspects of national memory, particularly in relation to taboo subjects such as collaborationism and the post-war underground. The reception of historical memory in these Polish texts extended beyond the mere presentation of facts, evolving into a complex interpretation that fused documentary evidence, authorial intuition, and socio-cultural stereotypes, while offering new perspectives on the interplay between official and marginalised memory. The practical value of this study lies in the potential application of its

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conclusions in further literary and cultural research, the development of educational programmes, interdisciplinary initiatives, and public discourse aimed at critically renewing historical consciousness and fostering a more sustained and reflective democratic culture of memory

Keywords: Second World War; Holocaust; horror; postmodernism; tragedy

Introduction

The relevance of historical memory in contemporary Polish literature emerged as a critical factor in shaping national and cultural identity, as it reflects the multifaceted efforts to preserve and reconstruct the past within post-conflict contexts. In Polish literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the analysis of stylistic and narrative features of fictional receptions of historical memory shows that writers employed various literary techniques to represent historical events. Authors combined archival data, oral testimonies, and documentary materials with fictional elements, thereby constructing complex narratives in which historical facts acquired symbolic and emotional resonance. Such an approach enabled writers not only to reconstruct the past but also to frame it within the context of present-day debates, exposing tensions between official historical accounts and subjective recollections.

Authors J.T. Baumel-Schwartz & L. Gannor (2024) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the history and memory of the Holocaust in the context of Polish and Jewish communities. Their use of an interdisciplinary approach and archival data indicated the multidimensional nature of collective memory construction. The study demonstrated that Holocaust memory underwent continuous transformations, blending personal testimonies with national historical narratives. C. Bertossi *et al.* (2020) explored how historical narratives were employed within the context of contemporary migration. By adopting an interdisciplinary methodology, they highlighted the complexity of the interaction between the past and the present. Their findings showed that historical narratives

played an active role in shaping contemporary identity politics and migration processes. M. Gancarczyk (2020) examined the strategic use of narrative techniques and the constructed illusion of self-interpretation in the works of Łukasz Orbitowski. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study demonstrated how the use of specific literary devices created an impression of a subjective yet contradictory interpretation of the self. The study also showed that narrative strategy functioned as a substantial factor in shaping readers' perception of the text, influencing its artistic coherence and the reader's ability to reconstruct the past.

Author P. Czapliński (2024a) conducted a detailed analysis of cultural practices related to the legitimisation of memory concerning the tragic events of the Holocaust within Polish society. Employing methods of textual analysis, he identified specific rhetorical and narrative strategies that shaped public discourse on death. The study uncovered that dominant literary models contributed to the reconstruction of historical memory by integrating official narratives with individual recollections and emotional experiences. The findings confirmed that contemporary cultural practices reflected the complex contradictions between official historiography and subjective experiences of tragic events.

K. Kończal & A.D. Moses (2023) investigated the interaction between patriotic historical narratives and (re)nationalisation of memory. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combined historiographical analysis with cultural studies, they uncovered the mechanisms through which collective memory was constructed and mobilised. Their analysis

demonstrated that state institutions and cultural producers significantly influenced public perceptions of the past. The study emphasised the critical role of these processes in shaping contemporary national identity. M. Kotwas & J. Kubik (2022) explored nostalgia in Polish political discourse using a comparative analysis of populist and non-populist narratives. Their findings indicated that nostalgic elements played a substantial role in shaping political identity and voter mobilisation. The analysis showed that the use of nostalgia generated an ambivalent effect, combining positive and negative connotations of the past. As a result, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of the role of historical memory in contemporary political processes in Poland.

In "Nadchodzi", L. Korol (2023) analysed M. Brynych's novel, focusing on the representation of the collective trauma of the Holodomor through the use of zombie apocalypse imagery. The author discovered that the provocative literary techniques employed by the writer aimed to reactivate historical memory and stimulate public dialogue concerning traumatic past events. The study emphasised that such an approach provoked debate on the moral and ethical boundaries of artistic representations of historical tragedies.

While a substantial body of research exists on historical memory, the relationship between official historical narratives and personal recollections in the work of contemporary Polish writers remains underexplored. The purpose of the study was to identify artistic strategies employed in the rethinking of historical memory in contemporary Polish prose, to determine the specific ways in which documentary and fictional elements are combined in modelling collective experience, and to establish the role of literature in the critical revision of historical narratives and the development of new socio-cultural approaches to understanding the past. The objectives of the study include identifying the stylistic and narrative features used

in the interpretation of historical memory, analysing the relationship between collective and individual memory, and exploring the influence of historical and cultural factors on the formation of contemporary narratives of the past.

Materials and Methods

A wide range of theoretical and literary sources was utilised in this study, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of historical memory in Polish and related Ukrainian literary contexts. The theoretical framework drew primarily on the work of M. Halbwachs (2020), which addressed the development of collective memory within social groups. The study by Y. Assmann (2011) provided important distinctions between individual and collective levels of memory, while the contributions of P. Nora (2021) were essential for understanding the concept of "lieux de mémoire" within cultural consciousness. These theoretical approaches served as the methodological foundation for interpreting the artistic strategies through which Polish writers construct historical memory in their works.

The empirical component of the research involved the analysis of literary texts that represent various aspects of historical events. Particular attention was given to Polish works such as "Nadchodzi" by L. Orbitowski (2017), "Night of the living Jews" by I. Ostachowicz (2009), "From the shadows. A novel about the ex-clausted soldiers" by S. Reńca (2011), "Ukrainian lover" by S. Srokowski (2008), and "Beginning" by A. Szczypiorski (1986). The Ukrainian novel "Bread with Cartilage" by M. Brynych (2020) was also examined, which allowed for a broader perspective extending beyond the Polish cultural context. These texts serve as examples of how authors employ a range of narrative techniques, ranging from realism to phantasmagoria and horror, to reconsider and recontextualise the historical past.

Five key methods were employed to achieve the research objectives, each playing a distinct role in the overall investigative process.

The historical and cultural analysis enabled a connection between literary texts and their historical context, allowing for the tracing of how socio-political conditions influenced the formation of plots that transformed real events into artistic form. This approach made it possible to interpret literary texts as a mode of “philosophical reflection,” in which ethical dilemmas and existential questions surrounding traumatic events were interwoven.

The literary method encompassed the identification of narrative strategies and the exploration of poetics that shaped the reader’s perception of the past. This method facilitated conclusions regarding the generic nature of the analysed texts, the functions of realism and fantasy, and the characteristics of the authorial style. The comparative approach allowed tracing how similar historical premises or conflicts were represented in Polish and Ukrainian cultural contexts. Polish literary texts such as “Ukrainian lover” by S. Srokowski and “Nadchodzi” by L. Orbitowski were compared with the Ukrainian novel “Bread with cartilage” by M. Brynich. This allowed for the identification of shared narrative paradigms and unique national strategies for adapting traumatic historical experiences. The analysis examined whether recurring narrative paradigms could be observed in Polish and Ukrainian texts or whether each national literature demonstrated distinctive means of engaging with a tragic past. The integrated application of these methods provided a comprehensive picture of the literary reception of historical memory, highlighting the multi-layered and often contradictory nature of its representation in the works of Polish writers and selected authors from the Ukrainian cultural sphere.

Results

Key themes and motifs of historical memory in contemporary Polish literature

Historical memory occupied a prominent place in historical and cultural research, as it

encompasses the preservation and transmission of knowledge about the past. M. Halbwachs (2020) argued that collective memory is formed within specific social groups, with its boundaries and interpretations shaped by the community’s current needs. According to this theory, people do not recall the past in its pure form; instead, they produce selective images that reflect their system of values and worldview. P. Nora (2021) maintained that in the era of information technologies, a rupture emerged between individuals’ direct experience and the globalised world, resulting in memory entering a state of archiving. He emphasised that memory was losing its organic authenticity and was instead being constructed in “sites of memory” – such as museums, monuments, and archival repositories. Y. Assmann (2011) explored “cultural memory”, which, unlike personal recollection, operates in the public sphere and sustains collective identity across generations. He highlighted the role of rituals, texts, and traditions in stabilising a community’s conception of its own history, also noting the inherent selectivity and potential distortions involved.

In the context of Polish literature, the issue of historical memory underwent a specific mode of representation, visible in texts that blend elements of documentary testimony with fictional invention. A distinctive feature of literary interpretation lies in the fact that authors do not merely recount facts, but construct a new totality in which historical events take on symbolic meaning. Writers employ a range of narrative devices – from realism to phantasmagoria – to underscore the ambiguity of the past and demonstrate that memory does not exist in a monolithic form. Despite a general tendency towards documentary realism, Polish authors simultaneously exhibit a proclivity for the subjectivisation of history, drawing on individual emotional perspectives.

The theories of M. Halbwachs, P. Nora and Y. Assmann underscore the distinctions between collective and individual memory.

Within contemporary Polish literature, these categories emerge in a multidimensional interaction, as authors depict characters who attempt to reconcile personal recollections with what is accepted in public discourse. Collective memory is often portrayed as an official narrative serving specific political or ideological functions, whereas individual memory consistently brings problematic aspects to the fore, challenging or supplementing established versions. Such interactions suggest that the past does not simply constitute a set of “facts” but becomes a foundation for conflicting interpretations. Literary fiction constructs representations of the past that may draw upon archival sources, oral histories, or cinematic reflections, but does not merely replicate them. Rather, it transforms them through the author’s imagination and distinctive style. In this way, images of the past became dynamic, and writers transformed into mediators between actual history and its reception. The employment of various genre forms – from the realist novel to fantastical prose – enabled a deeper appreciation of the diversity of historical experience. For example, authors could extract fragments from archives or eyewitness testimonies and intertwine them with fictional narrative strands, thereby creating a contrast between the “official” version and a more “personal” interpretation.

The interaction between literature and other forms of memory (archives, oral histories, cinema) emphasised that historical experience was multidirectional and required diverse means of representation. In the Polish context, it was evident that writers consulted archival records to verify or reconsider facts. Oral history, recorded through interviews or familial narratives, became an important source for revealing the subjective dimension of memory, while cinema provided a visual channel capable of influencing viewers’ emotions and imagination. Consequently, these different channels of memory interacted, reinforcing the multifaceted nature of historical truth. Thus, literature did not

remain isolated from other forms of representing the past but engaged in a dialogue with them, reflecting the layered complexity of experience.

Polish literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in its depiction of historical memory regarding events of the Second World War, frequently offered a profound reflection on the nation’s past, exploring complex moral and political aspects of Polish society’s struggle against the occupier while revealing tensions among various social groups. Polish writers, drawing on the tragic context of 1939-1945, created a distinct cultural code in which recollections of resistance to occupation and internal conflicts among Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews played a substantial role. At the heart of these works lay a process of “revealing old wounds”, whereby authors not only recounted the drama of war but also proposed original narrative techniques, for instance, the incorporation of elements of the horror genre. This approach underscored a further dimension of responsibility regarding how the tragic aspects of the past should be remembered and recounted, ensuring that the public debate on complex questions of national history would not dissipate (Wójcik-Dudek, 2020).

In the novel by S. Srokowski (2008), “Ukrainian lover”, the author attempted to portray the complex and contradictory relationships between Polish and Ukrainian populations, who have long coexisted in border regions. These territories lay at the intersection of civilisational, religious, and political interests at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Europe’s map was being redrawn in the wake of the First World War, new states and borders emerged, and nationalist movements intensified. Regions where Poles and Ukrainians came into contact became a political battleground for asserting identity. In some parts of the Polish Republic, a segment of the Ukrainian population sought cultural autonomy, while radical representatives of nationalist circles stressed the need for separation (Vialova, 2020). In the 1930s, Polish

authorities pursued a policy of “pacification” in Ukrainian villages, which provoked a wave of indignation and heightened anti-Polish sentiment. With the onset of the Second World War and the arrival of Nazi forces, the situation became even more complex; both the UIA and the Home Army sought to exploit German occupation for their political aims, while Nazi terror decimated both Polish and Ukrainian elites. S. Srokowski vividly portrayed this atmosphere of total suspicion and hostility, which often took on a menacing character owing to issues of loyalty and collaboration with the occupying regime. Hence, the historical foundation of this novel lay in the portrayal of the prolonged burden of conflicts rooted in various eras and the heightened state of wartime misery when local misunderstandings escalated to particularly brutal forms.

In “Nadchodzi”, L. Orbitowski (2017), in his book “Nadchodzi” (“It is coming”), addressed alternative aspects of wartime and post-war realities by combining historical facts with elements of gloomy fantasy. At a time when the Warsaw Ghetto had become a symbol of the tragedy confronting Polish and Jewish communities, the city was subjected to the daily terror of occupation, its inhabitants faced mass shootings, deportations, and comprehensive round-ups. Isolation of the Jewish population began as early as 1940, following the Nazi decision to segregate Jews from the rest of the city by erecting walls around them and stripping them of fundamental rights. Within this historical context, L. Orbitowski emphasised the religious and ideological clashes that only intensified the prevailing atmosphere of helplessness. He also wrote about the mobilisation of the Polish underground; the Home Army and units of the National Armed Forces fought the occupier, although varied ideological orientations emerged within these groups. The historical reality was so complex that some underground formations, perceiving a threat from the Soviet advance, frequently experienced internal conflicts regarding

their future political direction. In “Nadchodzi,” L. Orbitowski stressed that mass killings and death camps were not merely ordinary episodes of the wartime period but had evolved into a collective trauma that haunted subsequent generations. This fantastical element enabled him to convey, even more vividly, the fear and guilt that emerged in a society incapable of preventing a catastrophe and the enormous loss of life.

S. Reńca (2011), in his work “From the shadows. A novel about the ex-clausted soldiers,” focused on a period that was conditionally considered post-war, even though numerous conflicts continued to unfold on Polish territory. Although the Second World War ended in 1945, groups of underground fighters, known in historiography as “cursed soldiers” (Tomczok, 2020), remained active in Poland. They opposed the communist regime, drawing on the legacy of pre-war independence organisations and armed structures that distrusted the new order. The historical context primarily reflected the considerable influence of the Soviet Union over Poland and the imposition of the new order through repressive, coercive methods, including the persecution of former officers and underground members. S. Reinca employed a complex historical framework to illustrate how an absence of unequivocal evaluation of past events, coupled with the accumulated burden of war, led to new acts of violence. Consequently, the “cursed soldiers” sparked fierce debates in Polish society, with some viewing them as unyielding fighters against totalitarianism, and others regarding them as perpetrators of bloody reprisals.

Researcher A. Szczypiorski (1986), in his novel “Beginning,” provided a detailed portrayal of occupied Warsaw, which had been under Nazi control since 1939. Historically, the city experienced a series of humiliations and restrictions, ranging from the destruction of cultural monuments to mass executions and the persecution of its intelligentsia. The Jewish population of Warsaw, once one of the largest

in Europe, suffered particularly ruthless annihilation between 1940 and 1943, during the period of the Ghetto. Constant raids, food shortages, diseases, and deportations to death camps transformed life in the ghetto into a struggle for survival. Meanwhile, beyond the ghetto walls, a segment of Poles joined clandestine organisations such as the Home Army, while another part of society sought to avoid any form of resistance, concentrating solely on self-preservation. Studies emphasised that the fate of Jews in the ghetto largely depended on the willingness of other citizens to risk their own lives by offering assistance. However, fear of reprisals prevented many from having the courage to shelter fugitives or provide support. A. Szczypiorski, in "Beginning," illustrated how people in these extraordinary circumstances faced existential dilemmas, which formed the principal historical foundation of the work.

"Night of the living Jews" by I. Ostachowicz (2009) presented an unusual narrative in which the former victims of the Holocaust returned to contemporary Warsaw as zombies. This artistic metaphor suggested that the collective consciousness of Poles had not yet fully processed the issue of accountability for the tragic events of the 1940s, including the mass murder of Jews and the culpability or indifference of those who remained passive. Historically, Warsaw lay in ruins following various uprisings, including the Jewish uprising in the ghetto in 1943 and the general uprising in 1944, forcing its inhabitants to rebuild almost from scratch (Hiemer *et al.*, 2021). In the post-war period, as communist authorities established a new political order, debates over whether Polish society aided in rescuing the Jews or distanced itself from their fate remained deeply contentious and were at times suppressed (Żurek, 2021). I. Ostachowicz interpreted these issues through the prism of the "return of the dead", demonstrating that the ability of the "phantom of the past" to intrude into the present provided a stimulus for re-evaluating national and moral

responsibility (Höllwerth, 2021). This idea underscored that history never remained confined solely to the past if society failed to draw appropriate conclusions.

All the works examined drew inspiration from the historical events that unfolded in Poland during the first and middle decades of the twentieth century. They focused on pressing issues of national memory, occasional mutual accusations, and the complex challenges associated with survival under occupation or the reconstruction of a devastated country. The roles played by Nazi crimes, the Holocaust, internal nationalist movements, and post-war underground activities sparked debates among historians and in broader public discourse (Ray & Kapralski, 2019). In academic discourse, the topic of the "cursed soldiers" was particularly contentious, as it touched upon questions of heroism, sacrifice, and simultaneously a willingness to resort to violence for political ends. Relations between the Polish and Ukrainian populations in the border regions, where historical wrongs multiplied by military troubles, have long served as a breeding ground for conflicts, were equally contradictory. Concerning the Holocaust, literary works explored the issues of societal participation versus indifference, highlighting individual narratives of rescue or betrayal (Stępień, 2019). Moral evaluation of these events proved complex and multifaceted; therefore, authors employed a range of artistic techniques, from realist descriptions to elements of fantasy and horror.

The above texts diversely elucidated intricate themes of historical memory associated with the involvement of Polish partisans in the conflict, internal struggles, the fate of the Jewish community, and the arduous search for truth regarding brutal acts committed by various sides. Authors utilised varying genre techniques – spanning naturalistic depictions of violence to eerie, unsettling elements – to underscore the enduring wounds inflicted by war, wounds which persisted for decades and

continued to evolve in contemporary culture. The narratives served not merely to preserve memory but also provided an opportunity for critical re-evaluation. Such works released memory from idealised recollections and invited readers to actively reassess the past. They encouraged a reconsideration of conventional images of heroism and drew attention to the complex moral conflicts that frequently remained outside the bounds of official historical accounts.

Polish authors exhibited a desire to unearth the inconvenient truth stemming from divided assessments of partisan actions, the implicit acceptance of anti-Semitism, or accounts linked to reprisals against civilian populations. Similar motifs emerged in depictions of Jewish citizens who, having survived the Holocaust, often encountered a renewed wave of hostility in the post-war period (Czapliński, 2024b). This evidence confirmed that the remembrance of the Second World War in Polish literature was not confined to portrayals of patriotism or heroic self-sacrifice. Memory became a field of intricate ethical enquiry in which every detail assumed the weight of testimony to past trauma and served as a measure of humanity. In analysing the horrors of the Holocaust and the experiences of the Polish underground, authors refrained from embellishing or justifying certain episodes; instead, they established a direct emotional communication with readers, inviting thoughtful reflection.

The reception of historical memory in the works of contemporary Polish writers proved to be multifaceted. The texts addressed issues of responsibility and guilt, the dilemma between struggle and indifference, and society's capacity to confront truth and acknowledge its failings. Both heroes and anti-heroes symbolised acts of heroism alongside the darker aspects of national consciousness. The subject of the Second World War, the activities of Polish partisans, and the tragedy of the Warsaw Ghetto reflected a search for justice in circumstances where moral benchmarks became blurred. Allusions to

the horror genre emphasised the profound psychological impact of the war, with terror arising from actual historical events surpassing that of any fictional monstrosities.

Stylistic and narrative characteristics of the artistic reception of historical memory

Polish literature from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century, oriented towards a re-examination of historical memory, often employed intricate and multi-layered narrative strategies through which authors sought to revitalise the past within the framework of contemporary debates. Artists of the twenty-first century no longer accepted a one-dimensional portrayal of historical facts. They pursued innovative approaches that integrated documentary foundations with fictional narrative strands, enriched texts using postmodern techniques, and engaged in irony alongside a playful subversion of conventional narrative structures. In this manner, the artistic reception of history assumed the character of a multifaceted dialogue between past and present.

Autobiographical and documentary elements assumed a central position in this process. In many Polish novels devoted to World War Two or post-war events, authors employed the form of "personal testimony". S. Srokowski used eyewitness accounts, partially interweaving them with his own recollections of a childhood on the border. S. Srokowski created a distinct "engagement effect", whereby genuine details drawn from familial or local narratives were incorporated into the artistic fabric of the text, imbuing it with historical authenticity while simultaneously raising doubts regarding its complete accuracy. The writer deliberately blurred the boundary between fact and fiction to highlight the complexity of perceiving wartime experiences; even those who witnessed events first-hand could never capture every aspect of reality. The inclusion of archival documents, memories, and letters assumed a similar function in S. Reńca's novel "From the

shadows: A novel about the ex-clausted soldiers.” This author concentrated on the ambiguous activities of Polish partisans who, following the conclusion of World War Two, contested the prevailing political reality and continued their struggle. S. Reńca incorporated fragments of archival reports, excerpts from military protocols, and correspondence that reflected the genuine sentiments and conflicts of that period. Such recourse to documentary sources fulfilled a dual function; on one hand, it grounded the work in a specific historical context, while on the other, it created a space for subjective interpretation. Archival texts could be incomplete or distorted by political censorship, thereby providing scope for authorial manipulation and generating doubts about the “official” versions.

Literature as “personal testimony” manifested itself most distinctly when authors wrote in the first person or introduced semi-autobiographical protagonists who were either witnesses to events or had meticulously researched the archives and landscapes of memory (Van der Poel, 2019). A. Szczypiorski offered an almost intimate portrayal of occupied Warsaw and life therein, relying on the inner monologues of characters who experienced tension and fear yet strove to maintain human dignity. A. Szczypiorski did not conceal the documentary sources upon which he based his narrative; he adeptly integrated these within the inner lives of his characters, thereby obscuring the boundary between chronicle and subjective confession. Postmodern techniques of historical interpretation emerged as an attempt to undermine established grand narratives and propose alternative forms of memory that invited critical reappraisal. Writers who employed such methods sought to demonstrate that history was not univocal but rather composed of numerous fragments that sometimes contradicted one another. In “Nadchodzi”, L. Orbitowski deliberately combined historical realities (including the existence of the Warsaw Ghetto) with elements of a horrific atmosphere that disrupted the

linearity and realism of the narrative (Tabaszewska, 2023). This strategy challenged the possibility of a single “true” version of events and permitted the depiction of wartime traumas through the prisms of absurdity, irrationality, and fear, thereby accentuating the helplessness of humans in conditions of catastrophe.

Intertextuality and the deconstruction of historical narratives in Polish prose entailed explicit quotation of classical texts, references to folkloric motifs and popular culture, which obstructed the conventional reappraisal of traditional perspectives. In “Night of the living Jews”, I. Ostachowicz incorporated not only the zombie theme but also allusions to biblical narratives and works devoted to the Holocaust (Borowicz, 2015). I. Ostachowicz transformed the classic zombie image into that of a victim of the Holocaust, deconstructing the established understanding of the tragedy and compelling the reader to consider whether extreme cruelty can be addressed in terms of genre conventions. The writer appeared to breach acceptable limits by merging historical reality with the mass culture, demonstrating that memory is not static but is continuously reshaped under the influence of modern discourses. Irony and playful engagement with historical facts pervaded Polish prose, especially in works where authors induced the reader to question the veracity of official accounts. S. Srokowski, while describing the struggles between Polish and Ukrainian formations, intermittently interwove humorous episodes that highlighted the disjunction between officially endorsed heroism and tragic reality, whereas L. Orbitowski transported the reader into a realm of semi-fantastical nightmares, in which historical details sometimes aligned with archival records and at other times diverged from them. This strategy undermined the modernist myth of linear history and affirmed that memory is shaped by fragile and mutable constructs.

Metaphors and the symbolism of memory functioned as essential instruments through

which Polish writers sought to convey the uncertainty and pain of the past. Images of ruins frequently served as reminders of demolished cities and disrupted human lives. In “From the shadows. A novel about the ex-clausted soldiers”, ruins operated not only as the material backdrop but also as a sign of the internal disintegration of protagonists unable to secure their place in the new post-war order. Apparitions appearing in the texts, for instance, in “Night of the living Jews”, embodied the resurgence of repressed memory, re-emerging into the present through horrifying visions; such imagery corroborated the necessity of re-experiencing historical trauma to prevent it from becoming a perpetual burden or even a threat to future generations.

Mirrors in selected works symbolised the means by which society might examine itself through the prism of history. Authors often depicted old mirrors discovered among ruins or in museums, reflecting not only the contemporary protagonist but also the tragedies of past decades. This technique conferred multiple layers of meaning on the portrayal, with the mirror becoming a site of self-encounter that simultaneously embodied the presence of another from a different era. The quest for individual identity within a historical context manifested in the insistence that the past would return, stirring the present and revealing deep fissures in cultural memory. Places of remembrance, including cities, museums, and cemeteries, frequently emerged as spaces where the past was revitalised and maintained close contact with the present. Warsaw in A. Szczypiorski’s “Beginning” functioned not merely as a geographical location but as a complex metaphor imbued with the imprint of occupation and destruction. A labyrinth of streets, divided into “ordinary” and “segregated” (Jewish) sections, intensified the perception of two coexisting yet virtually non-intersecting worlds. Museums, referenced in certain novels, such as selected episodes in L. Orbitowski’s “Nadchodzi”,

became spaces of official memory, while simultaneously revealing those gaps of information that were publicly omitted. Cemeteries served as the final boundary between the living and the dead, prompting protagonists to engage in painful reflections on the price that society paid for its ideologies and conflicts.

Within this context, the comparison with M. Brynich’s novel “Bread with cartilage” (2020) proved appropriate. Originating from the Ukrainian literary tradition, the work nonetheless revealed affinities with Polish texts in its approach to interpreting historical trauma. M. Brynich employed documentary motifs, integrating fragments that hinted at the events of the Holodomor and other twentieth-century catastrophes into a fantastical narrative. The zombie apocalypse unfolding in the village of Mitzne functioned as a metaphor for unaddressed past pain that resurged into the present with unpredictable consequences; the text exhibited postmodern features through hyperbolic irony, distorted intertextuality, and a distinctive grotesque that challenged unequivocal historical evaluations. M. Brynich effectively transformed his characters into witnesses of the “unspeakable return” of those whom the past should have permanently absorbed (Korol, 2023).

The stylistic and narrative features of the artistic reception of historical memory in contemporary Polish literature, and in selected related instances such as M. Brynich’s work, reflected the authors’ intent to expand the boundaries of traditional historical prose. Autobiographical and documentary elements were employed to infuse the texts with a sense of personal testimony and authenticity. Authors did not hesitate to adopt postmodern methods such as deconstruction, grotesque imagery, collage techniques, and symbolic allusions to question established historical canons. Places of memory, together with metaphors of ruins, mirrors, and ghosts, emerged as tacit witnesses to unhealed wounds, while

intertextuality and irony extended the reader's perception beyond conventional narratives of the past. Ultimately, these techniques prompted a collective inquiry into whether history could be apprehended as a singular sequence of events or whether it remained inherently partial and open to continual reinterpretation. Writers such as S. Srokowski, L. Orbitowski, S. Reńca, A. Szczypiorski and I. Ostachowicz, alongside the Ukrainian author M. Brynich, produced through their stylistic explorations and narrative experiments a multifaceted mosaic of memory that invited readers to critically engage with and re-evaluate historical conceptions.

Discussion

The comprehensive analysis demonstrated that the artistic reception of historical memory constituted a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, encompassing not only the factual reproduction of the past but also its ethical, emotional, and cultural reappraisal. In the relevant texts, authors combined documentary evidence with fictional elements (including genres such as horror or grotesque), questioned linear historical narratives, and highlighted contradictory aspects of collective identity. Similar strategic approaches facilitated the uncovering of long-standing traumas and the addressing of the gaps in history, thereby promoting a deeper engagement with psychological and moral conflicts. A fragmented structure of memory, which simultaneously drew on archival materials and transcended the limits of realism, enabled writers to critically re-evaluate political ideologies and national myths. Consequently, these artistic approaches demonstrated literature's potential to foster an open dialogue regarding contentious historical issues and encouraged society to re-examine its established conceptions of the past.

Researcher K. Barski (2019) asserted that the naturalistic aesthetic in the novels of Łukasz Orbitowski provided a foundation for a more profound depiction of the social and moral

conflicts of the era. The study acknowledged the importance of realistic details while proposing their combination with elements of genre play to achieve a multi-dimensional interpretation of historical events. Research also emphasised that symbolic and fantastical elements could broaden the interpretative horizons of memory, even though K. Barski's concept prioritised the naturalistic approach. Convergence of views was evident in the thesis that a detailed portrayal of characters' existential experiences contributed to the actualisation of social problems and historical traumas. In contrast to the argument that exclusive naturalism ensured sufficient depth in the artistic reception of history, the study upheld the idea of synthesising documentary texture with a hypothetical artistic form. Such a vision anticipated the creation of a more flexible narrative structure, one capable of reproducing individual experiences alongside collective memory. Ultimately, the author focused on enhancing realistic veracity, while the study demonstrated that moving beyond naturalism provided a broader framework for a critical re-evaluation of the past.

Authors S. Buryła & J. Giebułtowski (2023) emphasised that representations of the Warsaw Ghetto in Polish literature were grounded in a combination of documentary foundations and subjective reinterpretations, which reflected the broader socio-political contexts. The present study placed additional emphasis on the ways in which artistic experimentation with genre forms deepened the understanding of historical memory related to the Second World War. Both approaches agreed that literary texts encompassed official and personal layers of interpretation, thereby enabling readers to grasp the ambivalence of wartime experience. S. Buryła & J. Giebułtowski maintained that primary attention should be given to archival material and direct testimony, whereas the present study argued for the productivity of incorporating elements of the fantastic and symbolic imagery. Both positions

ultimately acknowledged the central role of literature in coming to terms with the past; however, the study at hand demonstrated that broadening the narrative framework contributed to a more multidimensional reception of historical memory.

Researcher J. Kochanowski (2024) contended that everyday life in occupied Poland frequently remained outside the focus of official historical narratives, which prioritised global political and military developments. The present study recognised that such a narrowing of perspective might result in an incomplete rendering of historical memory, while stressing that creative interpretation could compensate for this analytical gap. The author agreed with the claim regarding the importance of archival materials and direct testimonies; nonetheless, this study proposed that the inclusion of symbolic or fantastical elements enabled a more layered comprehension of the traumatic experience of occupation. It was also underscored that literary texts, by combining realistic depictions of domestic life with imaginative authorial elements, constructed a more intricate portrayal of the era. In contrast, J. Kochanowski's concept placed primary emphasis on accurate descriptions of everyday reality. The author rejected the assumption that generic experimentation could productively convey the psychological depth of historical events, arguing that such practices risked compromising the authenticity of documentary evidence. Both approaches converged in their understanding that literature played a crucial role in reflecting on the reality of occupation; however, the present study demonstrated that the boundaries of historical memory could be extended through the use of unconventional artistic strategies.

A. Morawiec (2021) argued that Polish literature addressing genocide primarily focused on documentary precision and the direct depiction of traumatic events. Nevertheless, the present study placed emphasis on the notion that combining archival sources with symbolic

or fantastical elements enhanced the complexity of historical memory. While A. Morawiec acknowledged the crucial role of written testimony in the investigation of genocide, the current analysis demonstrated that artistic experimentation also possessed the capacity to reveal the subjective dimensions of collective trauma more profoundly. A. Morawiec did not share the view that genre experimentation contributed to expanding interpretive frameworks of the historical past, considering the classical realist form to be the most appropriate for conveying the tragedy of events. In contrast, the study maintained that moving beyond realism offered additional possibilities for the critical reassessment of official narratives and collective myths.

D. Stola (2021) noted that representations of the Holocaust in Polish literature were shaped by a societal need to confront difficult and painful aspects of the past, which were often silenced or simplified within official narratives. The present study supported the view that literary engagement with the Holocaust in the works of Polish authors revealed overlooked or uncomfortable dimensions of history, while also highlighting the importance of experimental genre forms. D. Stola primarily focused on realist approaches and documentary testimony, which he considered most effective in faithfully representing historical realities. Conversely, the current analysis argued that the incorporation of genre experimentation, including elements of horror and the grotesque, enabled deeper engagement with the psychological and emotional dimensions of historical trauma. While both agreed on the importance of literature as a tool of memory, this study explored a broader range of artistic strategies as a means of avoiding reductive interpretations and encouraging a multifaceted reception of historical events.

K. Yanev (2021) observed that the reception of historical trauma in I. Ostachowicz's novel "Night of the living Jews" unfolded through the intersection of horror aesthetics and elements of camp, allowing the author to critically

reframe the Holocaust using unconventional genre techniques. The present study likewise emphasised that literary representations of historical memory in the works of contemporary Polish writers often relied on genre experimentation, particularly through horror and the grotesque. However, it was stressed that such a strategy aimed primarily at foregrounding ethical and psychological aspects of historical trauma, rather than merely engaging in aesthetic play. While K. Yanev focused on the entertainment and ironic potential of blending camp with horror, the current analysis argued that this genre interaction contributed to a more serious reflection on historical memory by drawing attention to silenced and difficult episodes of the past. Both studies recognised the value of combining diverse genre forms in representing the Holocaust in contemporary Polish literature, although they diverged in their assessment of the functions these genre elements served in cultivating a critical perspective on the past.

Conclusions

The analysis of the novels by S. Srokowski, L. Orbitowski, S. Reńca, A. Szczypiorski and I. Ostachowicz demonstrated that Polish literature actively addressed issues of moral and political responsibility, society's involvement in the tragic events of the Holocaust and the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, and contentious aspects of the post-war activities of the "cursed soldiers". The authors deliberately employed a range of genre techniques (from realism to horror) to emphasise the traumatic nature of historical experience and the necessity of its re-evaluation in contemporary society. Moreover, the interaction of literature with other forms of memory (archives, oral histories, cinema) illustrated the multidirectional nature of historical experience and the need for a comprehensive representation of past events.

The study demonstrated that the stylistic and narrative features of Polish literature from

the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century tended to combine documentary sources with autobiographical and fantastical elements. The use of motifs such as ruins, ghosts, and mirrors as metaphorical images served to underscore the uncertainty and traumatic nature of historical memory while foregrounding its psychological and emotional dimensions. In the works under analysis, considerable attention was devoted to the internal conflicts of characters confronted with moral dilemmas and the necessity of personally defining their stance in relation to controversial events of the past. Writers also blurred the boundaries between reality and imagination, between fact and artistic invention, which enabled them to highlight the contradictions and complexities of official historical narratives. The authors not only depicted historical facts but also explored questions of moral responsibility and both individual and collective agency through diverse means. This underscored the complexity and ambiguity of the past, drew attention to the traumatic nature of historical events, and stressed the importance of their critical reconsideration in the contemporary context.

Thus, contemporary Polish literature addressing historical memory fulfils not only an aesthetic function but also ethical and socio-cultural roles. Writers actively integrated documentary elements with experimental genre forms, enabling the rethinking and deconstruction of dominant historical narratives. In this way, literature became an effective tool for engaging with difficult and controversial aspects of the past, fostering critical thinking and promoting intercultural dialogue around shared historical traumas.

Future studies might broaden the analytical scope by examining literary works from other periods of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Polish history, particularly the era of communist rule and the societal transformations that followed its collapse. They could also enhance the comparative analysis of Polish and

Ukrainian literary contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies used to engage with traumatic memory. Particularly promising are studies that compare national strategies of remembrance with the experiences of other Central and Eastern European countries that underwent similar historical traumas in the twentieth century.

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Рецепція історичної пам'яті у творах сучасних польських письменників

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Анотація. Метою роботи було визначити, яким чином автори польської прози кінця ХХ – початку ХХІ століття віддзеркалювали минуле й моделювали колективний досвід, спираючись на різноманітні архівні джерела й художні прийоми. В дослідженні було застосовано міждисциплінарний підхід, що поєднував порівняльно-історичний аналіз, рецептивну естетику, контекстуальну інтерпретацію художніх текстів, культурологічні методи вивчення колективної пам'яті та компаративний розгляд схожих сюжетів в українській літературі. Аналіз засвідчив, що польські письменники трансформували історичний матеріал через введення жанрових експериментів, включно з елементами «горору» й фантазмагорії, які підкреслювали незавершеність суспільної травми та стимулювали розширену рефлексію читачів над феноменом колективної моральної вини, впливаючи на формування національної ідентичності. У працях Станіслава Сроковського, Лукаша Орбітовського, Анджея Щипіорського, Ігоря Остаховича та Себастьяна Реньки відзначався контраст між документальною основою (архіви, свідчення) й авторськими психологічними й міфотворчими прийомами, що створювали простір для поліваріантного осмислення минулого, а також висвітлювали моральні дилеми, породжені різновекторними історичними інтерпретаціями. Результати також продемонстрували, що залучення образів привидів, зомбі чи інших маркерів «повернення мертвих» слугувало метафорою незавершених історичних конфліктів, які потребували актуального переосмислення та віддзеркалювали радикально суперечливі аспекти національної пам'яті, особливо стосовно табуованих питань колабораціонізму чи післявоєнного підпілля. Рецепція історичної пам'яті в текстах польських письменників не обмежувалася констатацією фактів, а перетворювалася на складний процес інтерпретації, який поєднував документальні свідчення, авторські інтуїції та соціокультурні стереотипи, водночас пропонуючи нові погляди на взаємодію офіційної та маргінальної пам'яті. Практичне значення цих напрацювань полягає в можливості ефективно використовувати здобуті висновки для подальших літературознавчих і культурологічних студій, а також упроваджувати відповідні матеріали під час створення освітніх програм, міждисциплінарних дослідницьких проєктів і суспільних дискусій, що сприяли б подальшому критичному оновленню історичної свідомості та глибшому, тривалому і перспективному розширенню демократичної культури пам'яті

Ключові слова: Друга світова війна; голокост, горор; постмодернізм; трагічність