



The symbol is a P and a W typed in the same space and resembles an anchor. It can be made on a typewriter by going back one space and 70 years, but impossible on a computer keyboard. *PW* is for *Polska Walcząca* (Poland Fighting). The symbol is all over Warsaw today, more than in the 1940s when it first appeared.

It flies officially on flags or graffitied unofficially on walls. It is a symbol of, and meant to symbolize, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944—two months of nagging resistance against Nazi occupation. It is also the reason why there are so few “pre-war” buildings—because in trying to rise up the city fell down. Nazi occupiers had no patience for resistance from mere boys with antiquated rifles. Much of the city was destroyed in an efficient swat to kill a few flies as the Russians watched from across the river. The symbol was banned under communism because it signifies disenchantment.

Story in Polish: *Historia*.

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History is story. But the story, and thus the history, changes depending on the teller.

History is messy, but not as messy as memory. Memory is not chronological. History is, but only if told that way. What follows are observations and thoughts, also not in any order.

“Heroes of the uprising” can ride public transit free for life in Warsaw...or any child born on public transit.

This story of trying to tell the story of how the present and the past echo each other can not be told chronically but in order of remembering. Were this story to be imposed in the order dates, that is our rigid time line of chronology, it would make even less sense than it attempts to do already. Memory is not history, so no order is required. But memory can also be the enemy of history no matter how much it struggles to be in its service. Like if one selectively takes from the past an event to serve an argument in the present then history is used for memory and enemy of both the past and the present.

We can, to be honest, only vaguely remember the history we’ve been told: how one event lead to another which lead to the moment when that caused another moment to mark an event...and that’s as far as we remember a history. History: events we are told to remember that are connected somehow. The story of the connections is where the meanings exist. History should not be just dates or events. Dates are the easy anchors we are quizzed on, a point on a timeline we keep for trivia nights. Fact is not truth either. Truth hides in the shadow of history’s dates, emerging only in the story. It is only through the story of history we can begin to make sense of what might have really happened. If that is the goal.

History on a timeline is only what we’ve been told and comes with a powerless conclusion we’re meant to accept. Now onto the celebrations of defeats and glorious myths that displace history.

Westerplatte, September 1st

Anniversaries are strange affairs, especially ones where we are told to remember and never forget something we never experienced.

There are no busses to the peninsula today because the president of Poland is going to attend the ceremonies—I don't know how they're related, maybe security or insecurity, but a foreigner learns not to question because he so often feels he's the only one with questions. So I borrow a bike from the hotel I'm staying at in Gdansk, or *Free City of Danzig* as it was called in 1940, to go the 10k to the site where World War Two started. Where German boots stepped onto Polish soil, breaking a treaty and officially starting a war. Or so the story goes.

Poland has a tendency of being invaded. Historically it's often the sandbox between two bullies on the European playground. The border between a cold East and warm West though itself sometimes East, depending on where Poland's shifting borders are. A few times in history Poland ceased to exist at all, at least on maps. Today it's in the European Union and shares the same time zone as Europe: Central European Time. Central, not cold Eastern European Time also called *Kaliningrad Time*. The last invasion Poland successfully repelled was from Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century.

On this September morning in 1939 the Polish army held their ground for a few days—so now they're being resurrected as heroes, even though they lost. Hey, to be fair, France also fell to the Nazis. And Belgium...Netherlands...

Poland ceased to exist in 1939, its land divided between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. It will appear again on maps after 1945.

My hands are frozen as I arrive at Westerplatte and I'm pissed by the mistaken routes and close calls with trucks angrily destined to or

coming from the ports. Pretty sure I passed a kidney stone while biking on cobble-stone roads, plus my ass fell off somewhere along the way. A band is setting up on a stage built on the leeward side of a large semi-truck trailer because of the wind. Holy shit the Baltic wind—a bitter reminder of how unfriendly a place this can be. They're testing disco lights and a fog machine despite the event being held during the day and outdoors. A fog of war machine? Why is there a band, rapidly changing colored lights and a fog machine to celebrate the anniversary of the start of a world war? It's looking like an overpriced wedding reception for a couple I would never be friends with. Is this to impress the president later today? The drummer is warming up, literally—testing his bass drum, and like a bad stage event the drums are amplified sending explosive percussions through enormous speakers and the only unintended nod to the war being celebrated. Celebrated? Are they celebrating the deadliest military conflict in history? Celebrating 80 million deaths? Or the attempted genocide of a people hidden in that fog of war? No. they're probably celebrating the resistance and heroic resilience of the poorly supported young soldiers asleep early that cold morning of September 1st, 1939.

The drumming is too loud and the lighting too tacky so I leave the present for the past. Not far away a group of re-enactors has set up their period army camp. Children pose for photos on period cannons on period wooden wheels, swinging from the business end or in a smile under a period helmet on the trigger end—shooting their sibling at long last. It's a family-fun blast. A jeep-like topless period army car thing drives tourists on a short loop for a small fee while playing a pre-recorded history tape on another loop.

Period re-creators are generally people with one foot in the present and one toe in the past. History is something that happened, period. Events took place on a timeline, that's history. Long dissertations are written and always end with a period. History should always end with a

period. But history in Poland rarely ends in a period. More likely it ends with a comma, an aside, an ellipsis, a sloppy footnote to a date, or at its most problematic it is erased. Reenactments are ways to experience an idea of history, never the reality. Accuracy becomes the true battleground in re-creations, it is a war between aesthetics and authenticity. Every “soldier” today has an i-Phone, but that’s not to dismiss, only to anchor us in the present. I enter a historically probably-inaccurate-but-what-do-I-know little army camp with my big camera because I am a time-traveling tourist.

The most authentic features of this camp are the age differences: most of the privates are in their early teens and the officers, or those dressed as officers, are mustached and too old for a real war. The mustached “officers” are grinning and speak no English other than “America is great!” and “Trump loves Poland!” whereas the baby-faced younger guys are not smiling and speak fluent English. They’re all recovering from a 4am authentic reenactment (a contradiction) to defend Poland against the mighty non-existent German army blowing in from the bitter Baltic Sea.

Reenactments are about frolicking in the aesthetics of the past. Great reenactments flirt with a deeper meaning of war gained only by trying to step deeper into the past and realizing they can’t. The other accuracy I notice is that the officers are drunk. What’s inaccurate is they are boastful and happy. That’s the contemporary re-writing through re-creating: they are playing heroes now, not forgotten ghosts. One kid is telling me how he made his green uniform, how the epaulettes and fabric are pretty close to accurate. Accuracy is the personal gauge of success for period reenactors—accuracy in the re-creation but not necessarily in the meaning. He tells me that he and his family are anti-war. I point to his uniform and sweep my arm at the camp in a WTF look. No, he says over the joyful squeals of children playing on the period cannon, I’m here to warn people and tell them war is a horrible thing. The officers seem to

be enjoying themselves, I point out. Yes, says the kid, they’re drunk. I ask this boy if he will join the military when he comes of age. (Hell) No. What if you had to? Then I will leave the country. Seems strange to hear such treasonous talk from a kid dressed as a soldier with one foot in 1939 and listening to him confess the tactical failures of the army and now a little confused about being told to be proud of what he supposedly did, and failed to do, when the Germans came.

When the historical fact and general narrative is one of defeat (see all history books) the Polish government likes to respond by opening museums to re-write the story. Or, is often the case, threaten to open a museum. They have plans for a museum to the noble heroic resistance by the soldiers at Westerplatte in 1939 to open in 2026. Which is a hard task considering the war is not over—people are not fighting the war, they’re fighting over the war. The planned museum is probably coming from the *Institute of National Remembrance* (PIN), a department started around 2000 (because it’s never too late to start remembering). My worry alarm always sounds when I hear a government has a *ministry of political memory* or an official *memory policy*, or uses the word remember/memory instead of history. *Historical policy*, not history. History is written in pen, stuck on dates and harder to change whereas memory can be written and rewritten and governments wield the largest erasers. One principal of PIN is to highlight: “The patriotic traditions of the Polish Nation’s struggles with its occupants, Nazis and communists.” (I’ll assume they mean occupiers). The hero narrative in the political memory policy is in constant battle against the failure or defeat narrative of history. Westerplatte is still a battle ground between the aesthetics of the past and the politics of the present.

The dead speak the loudest and I’m talking to one in uniform. Did you survive this morning? I ask the sad looking kid in a period uniform.

No, he says. Period.

It starts raining and I don't want to bike from 1939 back to Gdansk. Luckily there's a pirate ship. It's one of the ships built for filming the "Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise and now runs between Gdansk and Westerplatte for tourists. I toss the bike on the ship and say I'll pay anything, swab the poop deck or punch Jonny Depp. Sure, they say, taking pity on the tourist who looks like he just survived a war.



Memory is neither right or wrong, it's personal and therefore closer to story than truth. History can be proven, or as seems to be the fad, disproven and pulled down. Histories are anchor points on a timeline to loop a story around or to re-ground your own memories when they begin to drift. The further they drift from the truth the more nostalgic the images become. Memory requires an image, history does not. That is the power of memory: we see it, we feel it, we imagine it, or we are asked to imagine it. See enough images they become your memory of the history.

The story of history lays in the selectiveness of the storyteller. I'm the storyteller here recalling only the stories and histories I tried to ask about—questions inspired by the little I knew or thought I knew. These are only some of the journeys I had in asking questions that generate not answers but new questions. In this way I am the meaning-maker, if only for myself. This is a typical disclaimer, and precedent, for all attempts at historical understanding.

Bombs throughout Warsaw

More than now and then Warsaw waltzes between then and now.

There are posters on free-standing Parisian-like kiosks throughout Warsaw asking people to “remember September 1939.” Drawings of the idea of bombs or icons of bombs and probably not what bombs really look like but conform to our idea of bombs scatter around the text. It is impossible to remember 1939. If there is someone still around who does then childhood memories are probably not their strength. The rest of the sign reads: “81st anniversary of Germany's aggression against Poland.” I don't know what we're being asked to remember about September 1939 exactly. Since there is no living memory we are being asked instead to remember what we were told about September 1939. The real question is why are we being asked in 2020 to remember 1939? Which we can't. Maybe to remember that we were/are told WWII officially started on September 1st when Germany invaded Poland.

Wars have to start on a date because history, and remembering history, depends on the anchor of a date to a timeline that is linear and easy to memorize. But the start of a war is more complicated than just a date—the date is the day a straw broke a camels back, the day a spark ignited the fuel that had been growing till it lights itself, when resources in another country become too tempting to have for ourselves so we are told that they are the enemy. Or the date is when a hatred grows so immense that action is inevitable. The “when” is not the same as the “why.” Why did war break out instead of When did war break out is more complicated than a poster.

What perceived or real injustices were politically/strategically stirred in the time previous to the remembered start of WWII? What were people reminded to remember? (translated: “get ready to fight!”) What posters were around Berlin in the mid-30s that asked people to remember? Remember when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated? Never forget 1914? Were Germans asked to remember they lost the great war, humiliated by unfair treaties chipping away at their wealth, territory and spirit of their mighty country? The drum roll of war grows louder when a leader rises to power by chipping away at democracy and pasting posters around cities till he orders his troops into Poland in September 1939. If you’ll remember.

The posters of today do not ask us to remember how much they resemble posters of the past. So what war is being fought, or wants to be fought, because we are asked to remember a previous war just like the last time?

The rhetoric for reasons to wage war always start by citing the injustices experienced by our ancestors, never for our children’s future.



After the history, when no one with a living memory of the time is left to tell the story, only the story of the story can be told. After the story of the story is believed to be history the teller of this story leans more and more on it like a crutch to ease the pain of the present.

Heroism is myth solidified. But in order to pass into myth it's best that no survivors remain to dispute the facts with memories. Memories are not facts, they are often the opposite of truth—memories are also a powerful form of belief that can shape history.

Heroes is safest created in retrospect, easier to do when they are dead. Myths are strengthened when heroes fall silent and we can speak for and through them in an act of historical ventriloquism. The dead can not dispute legacy when we are their voice.

Heroism can also be idiocy in retrospect, recasted to fit the present. Myth can serve evil as well as good.

We are defined by our relation to the Other, the enemy—real or imagined. But imagine something for long enough and you end up creating it. War is not just for defeat another, it is also for defining ourselves.

A Character Sits on a Street

An individual with an uprising tattoo desires to rise up—to drop the beer bottle and join a fight. He is bored standing outside on the street with his mates, smoking and admiring a parked car. They talk louder the more they drink. Resentment and ennui fermenting in the inaction.

This character wears a patriotic hoodie and is usually a guy. A hoodie with the uprising symbol printed on it, meant to look like a hasty brush stroke on a brick wall in the red and white the pallet of the Polish flag.

Technically, historically, the uprising mark is a mark of not being able to rise up. It is the symbol of a struggle, not of a success. But history is about the many, not the individual—the many gather in history, the one is featured in a story. Sometimes, like I have just unfairly done, we invent individuals and cast them into a story in the service of history. We press the many into the one for the sake of meaning. Cold facts like dates or number of dead or who signed what treaty when and where are not stories, they are merely history varnished as truth. Histories are events that happened, and over time, are told to have happened, made permanent in books. Story is the only way to make meaning of facts. The selectivity of events and the order they are presented is a form of storytelling—meaning created by the assembly of truths. An event that comes just before a war is now a resentment or a reason for the war. Context is created in the order of telling.

History is made into a story best by casting a character—a wounded body to walk through time and a voice to speak the meanings. He enters the state of history with an earlier event hanging over him, context is the background for the audience to see but not understand till the character speaks. The off stage event he enters from, maybe a

perceived historical wrong, is now one that must be righted with pen or bullet by our hero. This is context, when a character knows or is acting on a history that came before the history they have been cast to speak for. All historical characters must struggle because they carry the impossible weight of meaning while trudging past the milestones, the dates, the numbers we vaguely remember from school. A name is easier to speak than a meaning or a wish or a realization or a struggle of thousands of names. It is the many that are embodied in a single character, one voice to be the meaning-maker.

A character is created and cast as a hero when the meaning they carry originates not from the past but the present. Same with an enemy: the antagonist pressing down on the hero defined by his struggle to uprising. I know who I am because I know who I'm not. I will know myself only when I know who my enemy is.

No single person can rise up today to carry the burden of meaning when they use the past as a crutch to hobble down their street. A street with the name of an army general from some other war not known (or stylistically we say forgotten) in the immediacy and intoxication of the present. That's another story perhaps, one that would likely be a challenge to the seductive clarity of the symbol tattooed on our character's sunburnt skin who, because of the tattoo and their presence on the street, has also become a symbol. An uprising stamp that both ties him to the past and liberates him from the present by becoming a symbol himself—he is a story. A *historia*. Freed from the aimlessness of an individual in the present he is recast not as a soldier from the past but as a pick pocket of the past. Taking a symbol, becoming a symbol—a character borrowing from history to write his own story.

There is a resentment that history happens only to other people. The present is a struggle to participate in a meaningful moment that will be talked about. A moment one can lay claim to and able to say “I was there.” Today “being there” becomes the goal, a selfie the proof and the point. To be seen doing a thing is more important than doing the thing. So easily moved by a movement and a desire to join in the army of social posts.



A Base Based in History

The base is exactly where you would expect a base to be based today: in the North-East corner of Poland.

From the base it's a short hop to Kaliningrad—a weird Western-most federal outpost of Russia that was a Prussian settlement around 1255 C.E. Not a country but an outpost of a country where I would need a visa to visit and where Teutonic Knights tromped through during the Northern Crusades aggressively spreading Christianity. In feudal days, around 1466, it was a Polish fief. Up till WWII it was Germany's Eastern most city: Königsberg. Then part of the Soviet Union from 1945 when it was Russified, named, re-named, Kaliningrad in 1946. Then when the Soviet Union dissolved this political thumbnail of land on the Baltic sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania stayed Russian. Great for the Russian navy, not great for its neighbor to the South.

To the East of this base is Belarus, a close, and maybe too close, friend to Putin. The rest of Poland's Eastern border is shared with Ukraine. All former Soviet countries, kind of like Poland but not. Ghosts of Soviet soldiers quietly stand ready on all of Poland's long Eastern border. Now and then Russia thumps its chest so NATO thumps its chest in reply. That's why I've come to this NATO base in this corner of Poland, to see how they, we, thump our chest back.

I drove to a very small pin in the middle of nowhere on google maps that translates as the "Military Training Center of the Land Forces." Armies love training. US forces are joint something or other something support cooperation in training something NATO something...I don't know military speak. It took a few phone calls to clear a site visit and interview with the US commander and Polish commander. Plus lunch in the DEFAC..."dining facility" misspelled, mess hall, chow. I know DEFAC, I have done embed tours with the US military in Afghanistan

and Iraq. It was coming back to me, the endless senseless and far more confusing acronyms than the things they mean to abbreviate.

NATO, another acronym of military might formed in 1949, a collective defense strategy against...well, against the countries just an RPG away from this base. A base that's meant to act as a deterrent because it's too small to stop an invading force, but also a justification for an alliance that often thinks it's still to use the terms allied and axis. The base is a show of force, a chest-thumping reminder that a greater force stands ready all through Europe. The strategic equivalent of sharing a selfie with a frenemy that says "yo I'm still here."

This military base was always a military base, it's the borders of empires that have shifted across it. The NATO commander points out the cemetery on base grounds: German names and Christian crosses, Russian names and Orthodox crosses, enemies from different wars and different times buried together. Not even the dead have seen the end of war. Wars make ghosts.

This base started in the 1750s for the Prussian calvary, there are still rings on old iron bollards for tying your horse. There are no horses. The base grew and grew and rose and fell and rose again. During WWI Russian troops were stationed here, now they are the enemy the base is tasked to keep an eye on. Wars stir the pallets of history, mixing and confusing people and places, redrawing maps in a narrative of victory and/or defeat depending on where you stood before the line was redrawn.

During the inter-war period this base was used to test new weapons, being in the middle of a forest where there's only nature to destroy. I wonder if they called it inter-war period then. The military is a hammer and maybe knew it was inter-war before anyone else because they wanted it that way. When was World War One called One? Numbering to imply there would be another, otherwise it would just be the great war, the war to end all wars, or the first in a series. Stay tuned.

The commander tells me war is a horrible thing, I don't know if he's talking as a person or a soldier, he adds that war is a constant in history. Especially on this base at the edge of a country that has itself gone in and out of existence because of war. Chris has lost soldiers under his command in Iraq and Afghanistan. His office is getting crowded with ghosts. Considering what is just beyond the forest and the ghost army of soldiers waiting for orders I wonder if this period will be called inter-war in retrospect if war is a constant in history it is a constant in the future.

I'm here to try and understand a swelling of nationalism in Poland and the re-writing of history that happens in its service. A nationalism that's changing its historical narrative from victim to hero. Poland is becoming a mighty nation instead of a sandbox between two bully powers on the political playground. The new/historical Poland is a place of resistance, strength and uprising. Redefining itself as a place of noble resistance instead of victims without historical agency. Nationalism is a drumroll best played by the ghosts of soldiers—when the past is summoned to appear in the present. The drumming has always been a seductive sound, one I can hear today in the resistance of E.U. policies as politicians grope for an enemy because war is a constant. Globalization is the emerging enemy, an occupying power that invaded when the wall fell, the borders were lowered and sameness invaded.

In 1939 Wehrmacht troops used this base as training and staging grounds for the invasion of Poland. Oops. After the war, during Polish communist times the base grew larger as the war grew colder. Today, hats in hand, soldiers are going up and down in the stairwell-obsessed communist building. The army keeps soldiers busy in war times but especially busy in peace time and you never wear a hat indoors. This lego-like concrete building is next to an older ornate brick building that once served as officers quarters when officers had their own horses. I'm talking with American troops in a former communist military building because history is like that.

If the past and the present are any indicators then this base will always be a base based in this spot. The name of the country or empire it is based in will change but this base will never move.

As much as we are defined by our enemy (who we are not) we are defined by war. War is our collective historical memory. Stories of hardships become the defining moments in our collective memory.

Inter-war periods (sometimes called peace time) long for conflict by definition. If we are not in a war we are in an inter-war period. History tells us this. If it has been too long since a war society gets itchy and starts to dust off historical memory, especially hardships of the past, and wrap them in nostalgia. Soon the ghostly drumroll to war approaches in the imagination. We (history, society, economies, empires, language, borders...) are defined by war, shaped by conflict. War is a force that gives us a greater meaning and a chance at immortality—to make a mark on the timeline of history. Tempting. All milestones and collective dates and periods of history are wars. Happiness and uneventful days are not recorded in history, they are the empty spaces on the timeline between conflicts or calamities. Ordinary is not history. Without a war we leave no mark.

In Poland the past is a bizarre outdoor bazaar. Where one is free to roam and poke through the past and select a few trinkets to take home to the present. Antiques like communist war metals and party pins. The communist party loved giving out metals. Now useless, their value is determined by nostalgia. Metals have become “memorabilia”—items to illicit memories. Not history. There’s the “little Stalin” pin to indoctrinate the young into a desire for more career metals. Years of service in the party once priceless and only earned are now sold for a price.

Capitalism is victorious when the past is commodified.

Nostalgia is a weapon in the fight over or for memory. But nostalgia for a time you did not personally live through is called advertising...or at its worse: politics.



Stalin's Middle Finger and Shopping Malls

A statue of a strong Soviet worker stands proud outside Stalin's Palace of Culture in the center of Warsaw. Originally called "Joseph Stalin's Palace of Culture and Science" but history changes when victors like Khrushchev carry enormous erasers.

Architecturally and ideologically the building is a middle finger to the people of Poland from the USSR. Most communist countries under the Soviets were gifted nearly identical buildings whether they wanted one or not. Warsaw, if you recall, if you remember, tried to rise up but fell down and was a blank slate of rubble for an empire to start fresh. The building that rose up from the destroyed city is also referred to as Stalin's needle or Stalin's penis.

Every part of the Palace of Culture was designed to broadcast the Soviet socialist ideology. There are museums for the people, an ornate pool for party members, cinemas to entertain comrades and their families, a large hall for Communist Party congresses and a spire of radio towers still broadcasting from the top of his middle finger. It is the tallest point in Warsaw till next year when a neo-modern capitalist office building will rise up higher than Socialist realism and people can finally look down at Stalin's shrinking penis.

The palace is the center of Warsaw—a compass point for all roads, maps and postcards. Parade grounds and parks wrap the building but like any open space in the city has become chaotic car parks. Invaded right to the gates by capitalism in the selfish form of privately owned cars.

The handsome worker statue outside the congress hall (turned concert hall) has been gazing into the socialist future from the same spot since 1955. In his hand he still holds a stone tablet with MARX, ENGELS, LENIN engraved on it. There is a large space where once was written STALIN. It was erased from the stone because history can move mountains.

His stony gaze into the socialist future of worker equality now stares directly at a massive shopping mall. A crystal palace of consumerism right in the heart of Warsaw. But he does not see any of this. Our hero looks beyond the cars, beyond the angry roads, beyond the shopping mall, beyond the tall office buildings built to hide Stalin's gift which he still defends. He does not see the present because it's the opposite of the future he was chiseled to see. He does not see the shopping mall giving him the middle finger.

By design, cultural identity is in subservience of globalization (the required sameness and want that one must conform and aspire to in order to participate). But an angst and anger can ferment in the void when we sacrifice the local for the global. When we exchange or abandon the past for the global present, for the insistent and seductive now. Enforcements in the shopping mall assure behavior in this palace of culture, this crystal palace of consumption. Mall cops eject the unkempt, those drunk with resentment, the odorous, those who can not afford to participate in this sterile palace of want. They can sit and smoke under the socialist worker statue but can not loiter or pretend to shop inside the mall. Our character comes back to this story, the one with an uprising tattoo sitting on a step.

Instead of surrendering what is unique about them to the uniformity and conformity of the present they must instead shop for identities that are not on display in the global mall with its soundtrack of techno beats pulsating from every surface. Soon the resentment builds and the urge

to rise-up beckons, often when drinking late at night on a dirty set of concrete stairs after all the beautiful stores have closed and shuttered against them yet stay Arctic-bright beckoning all night. The repression breaks briefly with the shattering of a drained bottle and a drag of a last cigarette. But it is too late at night to do anything but complain and drunkenly decide that the present holds little for them. The rejected look instead to the detritus of the past.

A past maybe when Poland was great, when foreign powers also pushed down hard on the people and they resisted. They picture their great-grandfathers or their imagined selves in the past instead of a present occupied by international brand names and foreign corporations dividing up the country in economic conquest.

Nationalism, a tempting antidote to the meaninglessness of a material world—a world by design people are taught to aspire to but never achieve. A relapse into mythology is tempting if you can't afford the present.

The fallen soldiers of modernity are banished to the streets. They carry no credit scores or plastic cards to purchase the plastic things inside the plastic world that has displaced them. They know little English. They have become, or so maybe they feel, refugees in their home town—economically internally displaced persons. A new generation fueled by despair and demoralization...perhaps. Again, this is only how this visitor, this invader, sees it.

Capitalism fusses value with price so people with little wealth are of little value. What to do? The heroes of the past and the increasing nationalist messages in the present suggest that they rise up. An uprising.

Individualism is an illusion of choice because illusion of choice is one of the great tricks of capitalism. What agency or choice does one really have when the aspiring culture is something purchased or defined by the ability to purchase? Our clothes, our uniforms, are chosen to

indicate inclusion, not for standing out or being unique as marketing will have us believe. A success of control comes from this illusion of choice and a want to fit in by convincing us we are unique. What matters most is that we are seen to afford to participate and thus not ejected from the global shopping mall.

The shopping mall, and its addiction to the illusory, is the contemporary palace of culture. But history teaches us, if we are willing to listen, that empires which run on illusion will fall by disillusion.

Again, our character in his hoodie.

The Russian word *Gopnik* comes from the slang for *street robber*—think soccer hooligans. Guys who wear track suits and squat for hours on their haunches to show they can handle the cold floors of Russian prisons. In Polish the term is *dres* which means *track suits*. It's the uniform of the down-trodden and pressed-down. *Blockers*—millennials born into former communist block apartments and squat proud but disillusioned outside with little to do. A block person in track pants. They are young, they smoke and drink. Some have a *PW* tattoo.

The ejected wear the uniform of the non-participants but are a uniformity even if thought otherwise by those appareled in dirty jean shorts in summer or three-striped Adidas track pants or two-striped knock offs—sergeants and captains in the down-rising. And fanny packs are not yet gay in Poland, the cool guys wear them crossed over their chests. The street army of the sunburnt, tattooed and marginalized.

Poverty chic occasionally appropriates elements of capitalism's ejected and in turn sells pre-ripped jeans displayed on over-lit anorexic mannequins. A mean tactic in the war against the poverty it created: selling the aesthetic of the poor to the rich. One can also purchase uprising apparel—hats, postcards, hoodies, t-shirts...

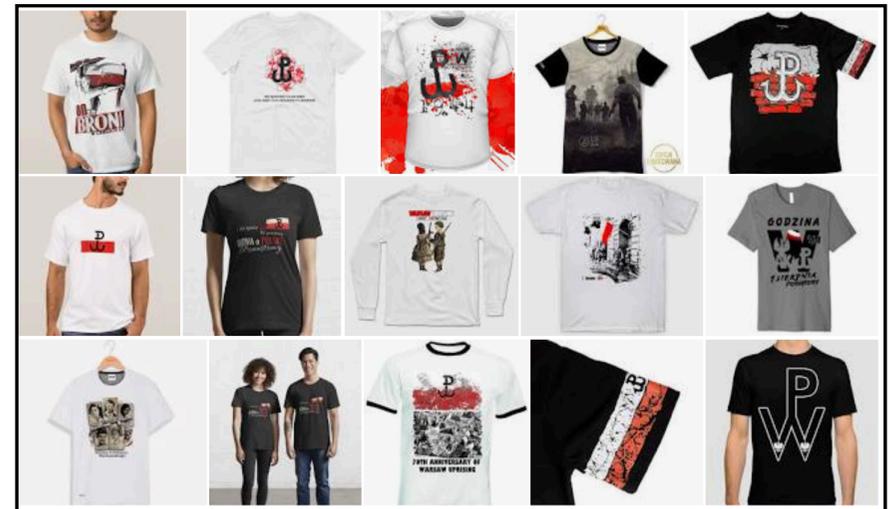
There are only two ideological choices: decadence of global consumerism or resistance through nationalism. But remember: under capitalism choice is an illusion. Plus in the 21st century irony and tragedy are so intertwined they're hard to tell or pry apart or know which came first. Contradictions abound. One is the Uprising symbol. Spray-painted, tattooed, flagged, or celebrated on official city signage. But it is only a symbol and like all symbols it is fraught with contradictions, confusion and power groping. The power of any symbol comes only from the power we give it.

One can only rise-up if one is kept down—the uprising symbol can only be a symbol of that struggle. It can not be one of victory no matter how victorious the story of it is told. The other requirement for an uprising is something pressing down. If there is no enemy pressing down then there is no uprising symbol. If one wants to uprising they will create an enemy.

So a question: Is the *PW* symbol being adopted by the unmonied as a protest by those who can not participate in globalization? Those who do participate in the modernity that has invaded this EU member country, or at least give an illusion of participating, are not likely to have an uprising tattoo hiding under their blue button-down shirts. Thats the blue uniform of the uniformed economic masses that commute to the financial center daily, more and more driving to work in mimicry of suburban success. Their definition of the other, who they do not want to become of confess to have come from, is the same mechanism of self-definition their opposites employ in clarifying who they are not. Are they the capitalist soldiers who press down on those not allowed entry into the promised economy of the EU? Soldiers who display wealth, or the illusion of wealth, conspicuously—like wearing curiously large watches that are not for telling the time. Men who aspire to own a BMW or

Mercedes (companies that profited handsomely from the last time Poland was invaded).

There has yet to be a reckoning, an uprising, with a system that has fused price and value as tightly as it has irony and tragedy.



Museums and memory

The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are eventually who we become. And the best way to make a history is to tell the a story of it again and again. The story of history matters and the storyteller holds all the power. Nothing tells a story, creates a narrative, better than a museum.

“Welcome to the Uprising museum please take off your hat this is a place of mourning,” a little lady without a hat greets me. The “Warsaw Uprising Museum” or “Warsaw Rising Museum” is a museum built to tell the story of the 1939 uprising. It strategically opened in 2004—only two generations, 60 years later. Communist Poland would not have allowed a museum of resistance, or resistance of any kind and the symbol itself was banned. But more than likely no one would have asked for one because the uprising was just a footnote in history—the war lasted years, the uprising only two months. In the chronology of history it could be missed unless you build a museum to it.

Museums are memory reified, not history. But whose memory? It was not built for the past because the best way to keep something at rest in the past is not dig it up and start a museum. A history museum is a contradiction—one is what happened in the past, the other the ideology of the present. The ideology of the uprising museum screams sacrifice, heroism, nationalism and victory in defeat.

When a survivor of the uprising dies they ascend to heroism. Heroes are never living. When they die the present scrambles to pilfer the body for little treasures that can be aligned for a new narrative. Narratives need characters. The facts do not change but are placed in context with new stories. The dead do not bury themselves. The uprising museum was officially tasked with executing “historical politics.”

The uprising museum, like all history museums, was created not for the past but the future. Credit for the museum’s creation in 2004 goes to the then mayor of Warsaw. It looks good on a CV to have started a museum to the glory of the struggle of something something. So impressive in fact the mayor becomes the president of Poland—the first conservative elected since 1922. The political party he started with his brother is now the dominate “Law and Justice Party” or PIS in Polish. Conservative. Right-wing. Nationalist. Authoritarian. Populist. Not at all keen on abortions. The tweaking of the victimhood narrative of Poland, or any use of victim, is generally an alibi for political conservatism. The usual you-name-it reactions to globalization and cheapest way to get the angry vote. And a museum to victims/heroes is a savvy start. The seeds of national pride planted in the school children visiting over the years by the bus load now of age to vote. But the plot thickens:

For politicians all tragedies are opportunities, strategic stepping stones. In 2010 the president of Poland who built a museum to the resilience of Poles and started a political party dies in a plane crash in Russia of all places. He was en route to commemorate, and politically appropriate, another massacre that happened 70 years prior. A history with no memory becomes important to leverage, to figuratively dig up, in the political present. Their deaths, their sacrifice, strengthens the party’s future. They crashed near their destination: a spot where 22,000 Polish soldiers were killed by the Soviet Union in 1940. A few more now added in the 21st Century. The crash was ruled an accident, but in the weaving of the telling of the story of history it’s tempting to remember things differently, even conspiratorially.

But not to worry, or worry, at this point in the story. His twin brother takes over as the de facto ruler of Poland. Yes, his twin brother. No, you can not, or should not, make this stuff up. Later the new leader will exhume his twin brother’s body to look for clues that the plane was shot down. But since that’s not a thing, he uses the opportunity to move the

remains to Krakow to be buried among Polish kings—a posthumous ascension from mere history to political memory. And more Catholic votes. World leaders who wanted to be seen in the photos of the twin brother’s heroic reinterment could not make it due to volcanic ash over Europe—they didn’t want any planes crashing.

The stories we are told about the past through museums will eventually become the past. Museums are a dangerous weapon of ideology and memory, not history. Dangerous because they use history to create memory.

The Schindler’s factory museum was renovated in 2010, because even history needs remodeling. It’s “#3 of 310 things to do in Krakow” on tripadvisor.

The Solidarity museum in Gdansk: This museum tells the story of the start of the noble resistance leading to the overthrow of the communist overlords in 1989, or so the story and thus the history goes. Workers at the “Lenin ship building yards” created the first independent union, in clear opposition inside communist Eastern-Europe. All this happened in the 1980s in black and white photos. In 2014 the huge museum opens at a cost of \$51million Euros, mainly paid in Euros by the EU. Now the shipyard museum is a tourist destination and indoctrination trip for school children.

The shipyards themselves have a history: Workers used to make German war ships for the Nazis, then Soviet war ships for the USSR, now the remaining still functional areas of the port do some commercial repairs and others build luxury yachts. Take that communism. Solidarity,

unions, have fallen on hard times, or just fallen away. Or, spitting on both history and memory: privatized. A Ukrainian corporation now owns %75 of the shipyards. That’s OK, the solidarity movement, sorry Solidarity, in the telling and retelling was a struggle to liberate the country from communism and that is its history. Again, the struggle is the story.

Museum of the Second World War: Of course a history museum about a war has become a battleground for memory. “The Museum of the Second World War” just barely opened in 2017. It was to be the definitive European/global museum to the second war but plans changed and it’s now “a state cultural institution”.

Gdansk was chosen because it’s near where German troops stepped onto Poland and officially started the war in 1939. The PIS party didn’t like the story being told about Poland in the design of the galleries (victim) so they worked not to change history but to change the story (hero). The host country took over the curation in a coup and now the galleries go from victim to heroes of resistance. Rise up against victimhood, even if that rise makes them victims again.

Historical museums should be a punctuation mark, but the war over the war is still being fought. Exhibits start with the crisis after WWI, mainly the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism in Europe. The last gallery was to take museum goes into the Pacific front but instead it’s a large space dedicated to the Warsaw uprising much to the objection of the fired curators when the government took over. After the Uprising you exit to the toilets and coat check. But any war museum, or history museum, really should be circular, as confusing to exit as an Ikea, ending at the beginning, starting again, themes surfacing, repeating with the rise of authoritarianism, then the horrors then noble resistance then disenchantment then charismatic leaders promising to pull the country back up, the propaganda asking people to remember the shadow of an unfair history just before history is made again so they can start a new

war that is not wholly different from the last one, the technology of weapons may change but the people pulling the trigger remain the same. War museums should not have an exit, they should be an endless loop and “history that repeats itself as farce” instead of an exit sign.

2014: POLIN museum. The most telling and authentic feature of the “POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews” is the metal detector and bag check one must pass before entering. An unintended working example of the contradiction in combining “museum” and “history” when the history, the war, is far from over. It’s a telling retelling of the horrors of history to serve the present under the pretense of a reminder. Another successful victim-to-noble-myth narrative recasted through the ideological power of a museum. The Warsaw uprising is told to have inspired the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising six months later, both catastrophes retold, and in the retelling, recast as a moral victories.

Commemoration: the enemy of understanding

The city has done something redundant: it has erupted in noise just after it does something seemingly impossible. It paused in remembrance.

5pm: the noisiest time in Warsaw has stopped for a moment then become even noisier. It starts with antique air-raid sirens ramping up their wail but do not induce panic as initially designed. It is the triggering sound of nostalgia telling a city to pause in remembrance: August 1st, the day the Warsaw uprising started.

The foreigner also stops because it eventually dawns on him that everyone else has just stopped. Pedestrians, cars, busses, trams, everything has, some literally, stopped in their tracks. But the pause of the city is brief. Next is an explosion of celebratory noise: honking, cheers, bells, police and ambulance sirens, men light and wave smoking road flares in the intersection now open for pedestrians. Flares are popular here in times of national celebrations or protests, maybe because they represent the Polish flag: red flame on the bottom, white smoke on top. Maybe also because they represent the angry kinetic of war and the fog of war in the descending choking smoke. The myth of violence and rebellion against repression is best cleansed by fire.

The scene on this intersection is the confusing myth of the war intersecting with the politics of nostalgia today. The foreigner can’t see very far and his eyes water from the smoke. He wonders why there’s always a thermal inversion on celebration days or if it’s always this way which may explain the normal near-toxic level of air pollution in the city. The foreigner is prone to meandering thoughts till he finds himself in the middle of a once chaotic intersection on foot to get upwind of the smoke. The corner shopping mall has an incredibly large flag hanging from the side disappearing into the fog and Starbucks below.

Children scream over their mother's shoulders in understandable fear. Mothers who hold and comfort them in the natural reaction to the chaos also embrace them into this, their, inherited frightening and confusing world.

One minute not of silence and mourning but an uprising of noise and celebration as the victims become heroes. In 1944 the uprising lasted only two months before participants were killed or deported to camps. But today, after only a minute and 75 years people slowly and almost sadly return to their narrow lanes on the sidewalks. The trams squeal forward impatiently. Cars re-occupy the streets demanding the right of way, victorious and destructive as any invader. The ambulance and police sirens stop, but only briefly for sirens and the sense of the urgent are a constant wailing in Warsaw. A reminder that the state is always present, keeping the sense of panic going because fear is the greatest power of nationalist governments and sirens are their soundtrack.

Two weeks later it's national Armed Forces day, a holiday combined with the Assumption of Mary day. I assume the flags flying all over the city are for the armed forces but I'm not sure. Patriotism is a form of religion here. Religion was a folly in the eyes of communism so it was in ironic defiance to have the state and the church celebrated on the same day. But if Mary were to ascend to heaven today she might get hit by a jet fighter bought from America.





Never trust a young person who says they're interested in history. Trust only those who are about to become it—they're the last that can correct any new narrative taking shape. Historical myth making is make possible only by forgetting.

The dead in Poland have not been allowed to die and rarely allowed to rest.

An uprising, were there to be one today, would be just as unsuccessful. It is a symbol defined by struggle, not success. A battle based on the Warsaw uprising can only be a strategic failure even, if later, a moral victory.

Its success would be its demise.

*Jake Warga
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Warsaw, Poland*