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**BOOK REVIEW**

**ALEKS SZCZERBIAK. 2018. POLITICISING THE  
COMMUNIST PAST: THE POLITICS OF TRUTH  
REVELATION IN POST-COMMUNIST POLAND.  
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The scholarly field of transitional justice has experienced a surge of research in recent years. One of the more frequently explored regional foci has been Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – a region that has not only been subject to complex societal transformation after 1989 but also home to societies coping with their communist past. In this regard, one of the key aspects of the research is the question of dealing with the authoritarian past of these societies, in particular how to deal with the perpetrators, victims and heroes in the politically framed collective remembering and forgetting of the painful past.

In the research on transitional justice in CEE, scholars have frequently explored “lustration”, that is, political practices of dealing with the former employees of the communist security services, confidential informers of these services as well as their careers in the democratic politics, mass media and business after 1989. One of the leading scholars in this subfield of transitional justice is Aleks Szczerbiak, professor of Politics and Contemporary European Studies at the University of Sussex, who has been conducting research on the subject of “lustration” and de-communization for at least the last fifteen years (e.g. Szczerbiak 2016, Szczerbiak 2017, Williams/Fowler/Szczerbiak 2005). His research on lustration and de-communization covers a plethora of issues such as various modes of lustration, public attitudes towards de-communization and practices of truth revelation in post-communist societies.

Szczerbiak’s recent publication “Politicising the Communist Past: The Politics of Truth Revelation in Post-Communist Poland” is a continuation of his research hitherto but also a more complex approach including an analysis of true-revelation procedures in Poland as opposed to other CEE countries, the phenomenon of recurring lustration in Poland, the controversies surrounding the access to the files of the communist secret services and truth revelation as a political legitimization and de-legitimization strategy in the public sphere. Poland appears to be a particularly interesting case, as the approach to true revelation moved from the politics of forgiving in the early 1990s to mild vetting regulations

and then ended up in a more radical transitional justice approach targeting the privileged pensions of former security service employees.

The book explores this changing approach, offers instructive comparison to other CEE countries and reflects on a number of connected issues of both theoretical and empirical value including the question as to the motives behind specific truth revelation policies by political actors. The book starts by introducing the readers into the very topic of truth revelation and its political relevance in CEE. Chapter 2 explores the Polish lustration policies in their variance and fluctuation, while discussing controversies surrounding the file access regulations, on which lustration procedures often hinge. One of the key questions in this chapter is the late introduction of lustration legislation in Poland and its impact on the political debates. Szczerbiak depicts the controversies of the early 1990s including Mazowiecki's thick line of forgetting and Macierewicz's list of alleged confidential collaborators and links them, among others, with the more pervasive feelings towards the so-called *nomenklatura* capitalism in Polish society (p.18). Afterwards, the chapter moves on to discussing later lustration regulations and lustration-orientated political "affairs" up to the power takeover by PiS in 2015 and the subsequent lustration discourse.

Chapter 3 uses the existing literature on transitional justice and truth revelation in order to approach the "late lustration" in the Polish case. The central issue in this chapter is whether lustration and de-communization are functions of power politics in CEE or rather stem from normative and ideological considerations of political actors. Szczerbiak (p. 44) rejects the Huntingtonian dictum that the form of transitional justice can be derived from power constellation during the transition negotiations. Huntington has famously argued that the policies towards the representatives of the authoritarian regime tend to be largely dependent on the type of bargaining processes between the old and new elites that determine the mode of systemic transition. In contrast, Szczerbiak argues that research is needed to look into normative concern of political actors concerning incomplete lustration, rather than purely power-driven motivations. While the focus on the bargaining mode in the early transition phase is certainly too narrow to explain the meanders of the Polish transitional justice, lustration can still be closely connected with legitimization of power, which is visible in Poland especially after 2015. It is surprising that this aspect is treated rather marginally in Szczerbiak's analysis, in particular given the fact that lustration arguments have been openly used by the PiS to justify its state restructuring and elite exchange projects. Therefore, it does not require a great leap of faith to view "lustration" as "mnemonic legitimization" (Müller 2004: 26) to justify especially those of the more controversial reforms.

Chapter 4 discusses the lustration and file access debate in the mid-2000s, the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and a new momentum for truth revelation linked with the latter. This chapter is very instructive on the variety of emotional responses and rationalizations in the Polish political elites vis-à-vis various lustration attempts such as the controversial "Wildstein list" and the broad spectrum of attitudes towards the level of necessary "purification" of the post-communist elites. While describing the meanders of Polish lustration, Szczerbiak is quite detailed on some of the pathological issues regarding the Polish "lustration system", even though he tends to be less than pronounced on some of the pathological issues. One of such outstanding issues is the highly powerful position of the IPN, which can be (and has actually been) subject to political influence. For instance, for years the IPN has kept prosecutorial prerogatives and continues to hold

its triple powers: of the prosecutor, of the guardian of the evidence (also the classified files, unavailable to the defense and the scholars) and of the main (and often the only) source of expert witnesses (assessing the credibility of the documents). This is likely to constitute an institutional predominance that is susceptible to manipulation and political misuse.

Chapter 5 deals with a specific case of the “Bolek affair”, a long-lasting controversy regarding whether the legendary “Solidarity” leader and the later Polish president Lech Wałęsa was in fact a confidential informer to the communist secret services in the early 1970s. In this chapter, Szczerbiak shows the deep divisions the issue has created among the former dissidents but also the entire Polish society, as the question touches upon the very legacy of “Solidarity” and the legitimacy of the democratic transformation after 1989. For the critics of Wałęsa, mainly from the PiS milieu, the “Bolek affair” is a clear sign that all institutions of the Third Republic have been morally and political tainted. As Szczerbiak (p. 126) argues, a negative assessment of Wałęsa often goes hand in hand with a vision of the Third Republic as a “bastard child” of the communist security services. With regard to Walesa, Szczerbiak (p. 126) quotes Zybertowicz speaking of the “Bolek-ization” of the Third Republic, that is, a foundation of post-communist Poland on “a false myth of freedom” produced by a communist agent. However, for many former opposition activists, the “Bolek affair” amounts to an attempt of replacing Wałęsa as the hero of “Solidarity” with Lech Kaczyński, the deceased brother of Jarosław Kaczyński—the powerful PiS chairman. Szczerbiak stops short of pursuing the more power-orientated meaning of these radically different assessments, especially in the context of the flare-up of the “Bolek Affair” after 2015. He appears to take a position that we deal here with two equally justifiable positions reflecting deep normative conflicts in the Polish society resulting, at least partially, from the incomplete lustration. But again, he seems to dismiss that the “Bolek affairs” might be more than just a symbolic struggle over the heroes of “Solidarity”. As “symbolic power” of commemoration is still power, the question remains in how far the PiS raises its claims to the legacy of “Solidarity” in order to legitimize the ongoing controversial restructuring of the state with the “mnemonic device” of the “Bolek affair”.

Chapter 6 examines polling data on public attitudes towards transitional justice and tackling the communist past in post-communist Poland, while Chapter 7 relates the main findings to the core questions of the book, namely the reasons for the recurrence of the lustration debate in Poland and its motivations between instrumental and normative motivations for lustration.

In sum, the book, though only 206 pages, is a highly valuable source of theory-orientated analysis and offers detailed insights into the logic of the Polish truth revelation discourse. Still, there are two main drawbacks of the publication. *Firstly*, the author is silent on the more recent lustration controversy on the new law on the salaries and pensions of former security service employees that reached a new peak when PiS prepared and pushed through the parliament in 2017 the new “de-Ubekization” law stipulating that even one day of service in the communist security services (including minor activities such as short training in the security institutions with subsequent work for, for instance, in the criminal police) would lower the entire pension to an average level of the civilian sector. As a consequence, experienced officers that served, for instance, for the Polish intelligence in Iraq or policemen that fought organized crime in the 1990s would have sizably reduced pensions from October 2017 on. The law has provoked a wave of criticism. The very name “de-Ubekization” suggested that the brutal Stalinist repressions of 1944–1956 were equal

to the period of 1986–1989, even though in this period there were no real political prisoners in Poland and liberalization due to the roundtable negotiations started. Moreover, the law was criticized for the fact that it might not be about lustration and de-communization but rather about a show of repressiveness, collective revenge and exclusion. *Secondly*, Szczerbiak seems to ground some of his arguments on the opinions of rather controversial figures including the sociologist Andrzej Zybertowicz who is one of the more mercurial ideologues of PiS. Outside of the PiS milieu, he is mainly known for rather peculiar statements including the one on the “Machine of Narrative Security” (a grotesquely sounding narrative strategy to secure the legitimacy of the PiS policies) or the “grey networks” of former communist security services penetrating the Polish state (without much sound evidence). Zybertowicz also described the public protests against the rule of law reforms of PiS as a possible form of hybrid war of Russia against Poland. With topics like lustration that are almost by definition surrounded by secrecy, political manipulation and lacking reliable evidence, one should be more cautious regarding the rather thin line between a real insight, a conspiracy theory and musings of confused spirits.

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