

National Symbols in Politics

The Polish Case

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The article discusses functions of the Polish national emblem in the context of political and religious symbolism in Poland. The examination of the Polish emblem – the white eagle – in its historical development provides a background to understanding various aspects of the national and political ideology. Through the analysis of different structural forms of the emblem, composed of various symbolic elements in changing combinations, an interpretation is made of the political process in Poland. A specific feature of this process was the fact that both sides of the political conflict between the regime and the democratic opposition used the same national symbols, but in different structural contexts, thus giving them different, sometimes contradictory meanings.

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The article aims to demonstrate the functioning of Polish national symbols in the conditions of the communist and postcommunist state, to describe their resonances in Polish society, and to indicate certain symbolic processes typical of states dominated by ideology. For the sake of brevity, I shall concentrate on an analysis of only one symbol, namely the national emblem, which is undoubtedly the most important, and symbolically the richest.

Modern nations, like all human groups, are equipped with symbolic systems which represent their permanence and identity, qualities recognized as being the most sacred, and that distinguish them from other nations, referring to tradition and to visions of national characteristics. National symbols express in a concentrated form the central ideas and values of the nation.

Interpretation and understanding of a national symbolic system, of various usages and interpretations of the symbols by different people in different contexts and situations is then a way to understand identity of people and groups of which the nation and the nation-state are composed. In this article I am attempting to analyze changes of meaning of the

most central Polish national symbol, tracing interpretations given to it in history and in the present day by different groups. Through the reconstruction of the various meanings associated to the symbol I hope to achieve better understanding of the way members of the Polish nation and the Polish society construct their identity as Poles and as citizens, in the context of national culture and politics.

National symbols are eminently public (according to the distinction made by Firth between public and private symbols; see Firth 1973); they refer to values cultivated and shared by the nation, and also represent that nation. They are universal, at least in the sense that members of the nation understand their meaning, and among them there exists an agreement that the given symbol represents the nation as a whole. This does not, however, mean that all members of the nation interpret the symbols in the same way, nor that they identify themselves with the meaning the symbols convey in their "official" interpretation. According to the interpretation given to national symbols by the dominant group or groups within the nation, they are supposed to stand for values and ideas central

for that nation. However, not only there are members of the nation who may not share the values identified as central by the dominant group, but also there often exists a conflict of interpretation of a given symbol, due to its ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings (see Kapferer 1988; Bocock 1974, Mach 1993). Also, since most people today live in nation-states, national symbols became state symbols as well, and as such stand for states and their societies in international contexts. This identification of national symbols with state symbols causes problems for those members of a nation-state who belong to a national minority, as their loyalty to the state, signified by state symbols which are also national symbols of other people, may contradict with their loyalty to their nation, different from that which dominates the given nation-state (see McDonald 1989; Mach 1993). Often political opposition groups within a nation-state contest state symbols, which for them stand for values which they oppose. As those symbols are also national symbols, sacred to many people quite apart from their political significance, such an opposition may also lead to conflicts. Thus symbols not only express the integrity and solidarity of the group, but also divide people into supporters and opponents, friends and enemies, emphasize differences between them and define the boundaries of the political and ideological domain of the group. Symbols of the nation-state do not belong to a particular national group only. Different groups within the same political system often use the same symbols but combine them in different relations and use them in different contexts. With the emergence of political opposition the process of decomposition of significations begin. This is an important aspect of social change. Especially in contemporary nation-states of Europe and America most, indeed all, symbols are subject to questions and contestation. Nothing is sacred any more, nothing taken for granted. National symbols no longer have obvious meaning, and there even is a certain fashion among the educated circles, notably among the youth, to deconstruct and reconstruct the world of national and political symbolism. As I shall try to show, there are moments in history

of a nation when national symbols integrate the nation in opposition to foreign oppressors or to another nation. In such a situation symbols contribute to polarization of the social system, and those who are on the same side read the symbols in the same way, at least as long as the conflict lasts. On the other hand one must admit that even then symbols are often abused or misinterpreted, and thus misunderstandings and conflicts may arise. However, when the major political conflict which unifies the nation is over, various divisions within the society soon emerge, and the process of decomposition of meanings starts. The relations between the signifying and the signified are no longer stable and certain, nor generally accepted. Social life is then a continuous process of mutual identifications of various groups, in which symbols play a major role. Symbols are continuously identified, interpreted, reinterpreted and combined with others. Everything becomes pluralistic, relative and negotiable. Even the most central national symbols, declared as sacred to all during the time of conflict, say a war for national liberation, once the war is over begin to mean different things to different people in different contexts. This may cause certain nostalgia among conservatively minded people for those good, heroic days when sacred things were sacred to everybody, except the enemies, when the world was simple and the picture clear.

In contemporary societies there usually exists a classical set of national symbols (emblem, flag and national anthem) which are officially recognized and protected by law. These symbols have an ordering significance, distinguishing one nation-state from another, and at the same time conveying the message that the nation and the state are identical, and denoting the unity of the members of each nation and their loyalty to the state.

Polish national symbols, though similar in many respects to the majority of analogous symbolic representations of contemporary European nations, are distinguished by one essential feature, namely that they remained fundamentally unchanged from their very beginning. It is, as Firth emphasizes, a feature of national symbols that "a change in type of gov-

ernment may be symbolized by abandonment of the old flag and creation of a different one" (Firth 1973: 347). As a rule, a change of political system or of political leadership has brought with it a change of national symbols. Not only have nearly all communist countries adopted new symbols, but the same happened in France after the revolution, in Italy, and in Germany after World War II. From the moment that democratic systems were introduced in the majority of European countries, the old symbols that had come from the ancestral signs of the monarchs were discarded. At present, Eastern European countries leaving "the Soviet Block" and getting rid of communism in their internal politics and economy, very carefully remove the symbols of state socialism: they destroy monuments, change names of streets or even of the countries themselves, and eliminate "socialist" elements from official emblems and flags. One of the first things the Rumanian revolutionaries did in December 1989 was to cut out from state flags the emblems added by the communists. These flags with round holes in the middle were then waved by people fighting in the streets. Again, however, the involvement of the people – citizens of the communist states in the process of transformation of their symbolic world depends on their identification with ideas, norms, and values. For example in Poland the religious minority of Lutherans who live in a small enclave near the Czech border was not happy with the domination of Roman Catholic religious symbolism of the Solidarity movement and tried to oppose it. Also in Poland, people who settled in the Western provinces of the country, in the land which before the World War II belonged to Germany, did not change much in the political symbolism of their towns. They were re-settled there as a result of the war and of the subsequent shift of borders, did not migrate voluntarily, and never accepted the new land as their own symbolic space, their own place, the spatial aspect of their identity. The previously German land for them was alien and did not represent ideological value. Therefore in recent years, unlike Poles in other parts of the country, they did not bother to change names of the streets, nor to remove

monuments. In a sense it did not matter what was the name of the street, if the street itself or the town was of no symbolic value. For what they cared they could as well live anywhere else in the world (Mach 1993).

After a radical change of a political system, new political elites usually claim some continuation of what they regard as good, just and progressive elements of the past of the nation, and refer to them in the construction of the new symbolic structure of the state (Lane 1981; Binns 1979, 1980; Mach 1993). Old symbols are often revived in new contexts and meanings. The idea behind such symbolic manipulation is to identify the new state with the nation or, at least, with those segments and social forces of the nation whose support is sufficiently important to the new ruling elite, and who are expected to give legitimation to the new elite (Moore 1977; Cohen 1969, 1974).

The emblem and flag of Poland have their origin in the Middle Ages, and the exact time of their appearance cannot be ascertained (Grzegorzewski 1920; Russocki *et al.* 1963). Historical sources record their existence at the beginning of the 13th century. The emblem of Poland precedes the flag, and so it seems to be more interesting as a subject of analysis.

The principal symbolic motifs appearing in Europe as elements of emblems are: the griffin, the lion, the eagle, the crown, the sceptre, the globe, and the colours of gold and purple. At times, too, there appear religious elements with an ideological function, representing the idea of defender of the faith or conferring religious sanctions on the political ruler. The emblems originate principally from knightly coats of arms, and are thus composed structurally according to the general principles of heraldry. The sides of the world are considered as from the point of view of a person standing behind the emblem – behind the shield and its coat of arms. The order of inclusion of symbolic elements represents the hierarchy of importance (that which surrounds is of prime importance); and the whole is more important than the parts while simultaneously the central elements represent the essence of the emblem and define its present state, its particular meaning in a given context (e.g. the dynastic

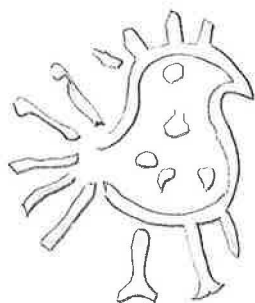


Fig. 1.

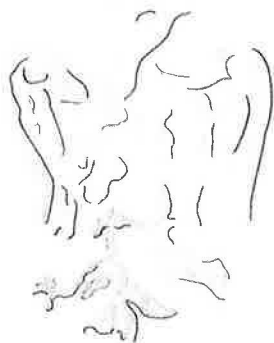


Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

coat of arms in the centre of the national emblem).

The emblem of Poland depicts a white eagle with outspread wings, its head turned to the right, with a golden bill and talons. It is set against an even red background on a heraldic escutcheon. The genesis of the emblem and its symbolism lay in the period of the creation and strengthening of Poland's statehood in the Middle Ages. It originates without doubt in the coat of arms of the Piast family, who ruled Poland from the 10th to the 14th centuries. During this dynasty the independent Polish state was created. The heraldic principle was to incorporate images of people, animals or objects with a symbolic significance in Medieval painting and in a stylized fashion in accordance with ideas about nature and the universe then current. Only a limited range of heraldic colours was permitted: red, blue, green, black and two metals, gold and silver, replaced respectively by yellow and white. Despite the facts that in Poland a very broad choice was available concerning the creation of heraldic representations, and that heraldic rules were not fully codified until the 15th century, the Polish national emblem is basically constructed in accordance with the general principles of heraldry. The reasons for the choice of the white eagle as a symbol are not clear. In Europe, the eagle had since Roman times been a popular symbol for rulers, a representation of power and heroic nobility (Cirlot 1971: 91–92; Cooper 1978: 58). The symbolic motivation was of course the qualities attributed to the eagle as the king of birds – the strongest and most

formidable, independent and majestic. A legend, still recounted in Poland and without doubt of some significance in the formation of Polish attitudes to their emblem, speaks of three brothers, Lech, Czech and Rus, who arrived long ago in Poland. One evening Lech saw, against the background of a beautiful sky red from the glow of the setting sun, a white eagle, which had just flown up from its nest. Moved by this sight, Lech decided to settle at this very place, and to call his settlement Gniezno (from "gniazdo", meaning "nest"). Gniezno was the first capital of Poland. Another legend has it that silver eagles on the coats of arms were granted to the first Polish king, Bolesław by the Emperor Otto III, as a token of his position of imperial power.

The white of the eagle is connected with the colour of good in Slavonic mythology (black was supposed to represent evil). A more worldly explanation of the white may be the fact that on an actual, as opposed to a stylized, coat of arms, the eagle was made of silvered tin, which when transferred to another medium gives the colour white. One must also bear in mind the simple fact, indicated by the legend recounted above, that at that time the species of eagle known as the white eagle was quite common in Poland, so it is not surprising that a white eagle was chosen as a symbolic emblem. The red background of the coat of arms is connected with royal purple – a symbol of the majesty of the ruler. The earliest reliable historical sources testify to the existence of the eagle as the emblem of the Piast dynasty at the beginning of the 13th century (fig. 3 and 4)



Fig. 4.

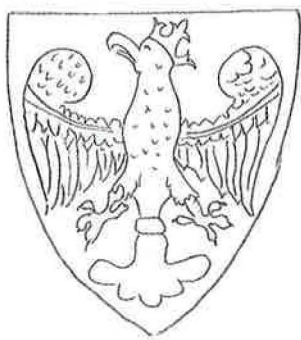


Fig. 5.

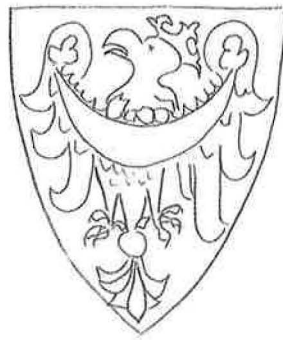


Fig. 6.

although it may be assumed to have fulfilled this role even earlier (fig. 1 and 2). While the kingdom was broken up into feudal principalities the Piast eagle had no crown. It assumed the crown at the moment when, in the course of the unification of Poland at the end of the 13th century, Prince Przemysław II was crowned King, sovereign leader of a Christian state, equal with all European leaders (fig. 5). From this moment it may be said that the crown on the eagle's head constitutes a symbol of the political sovereignty of the Polish nation (later in this article I shall consider the far reaching consequences of this fact in the present day). The coronation seal of Przemysław II, made in 1295 and depicting an eagle with a crown, bore around its rim the inscription, "the Almighty himself hath returned the signs of victory to the Poles". From this time to the present day, the white eagle has been the symbol not of individual leaders or even dynasties, but of the nation and the state. Contrary to the tradition universally accepted elsewhere in Europe, in Poland up to the end of the 18th century, in the name of equality amongst the nobility, aristocratic titles (prince, count, baron etc.) were not recognized. Thus, the symbol of the crown belonged only to the king the sovereign ruler. The crowned eagle represented precedence over other heraldic eagles and the fullness of the monarch's power.

Figures 5 to 10 depict royal and at the same time state emblems of Poland, conceived in accordance with the ornamental principles of the Gothic style. With the eagle of King Jagiello (fig. 9) there is associated an interesting story

demonstrating the significance of the emblem, the loss of which (for example in battle) symbolized defeat and disgrace. In the course of the great Battle of Grunwald in 1410 between the Poles and the Teutonic Knights, a great red standard with a white eagle symbolizing the whole Polish army found itself in the midst of the fray and nearly fell into the hands of the enemy. Seeing the symbol in danger, the Polish knights threw themselves desperately to the rescue, while the Teutonic Knights had already begun a hymn of victory, judging quite rightly that the loss of the symbol would administer the final blow to the Polish army. The Poles, however, recovered the standard and attacked the enemy with redoubled fervour in order to give vent to their patriotic feelings and to clear themselves of dishonour (Długosz 1982: 127).

The eagle of Zygmunt I (fig. 11, in the Renaissance style) is embellished with the symbol of the ruler (the letter S for Sigismundus). From this time, one encounters frequent incorporation of the symbol of the king or the dynasty into the emblem, lending it, as mentioned above, a specific, concrete character, defining it and the nation or state symbolized by it, its specific content, its essence, the expression of which depends on the concrete symbolic context in which the symbol is used. Thus eagle fig. 11 represents the Poland of Zygmunt I, eagle fig. 16 the Poland of the Wazas and so on. Figure 12 is the eagle of Zygmunt August with the letters SA on its breast. The crown surmounting the coat of arms symbolizes the monarchy as a prime idea. During the rule of the



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

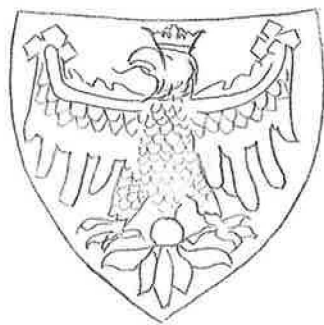


Fig. 9.

Jagiello dynasty Poland concluded the unification of the Crown (the Poland of the Piasts) and of Lithuania. Henceforth, the coat of arms of Poland consisted of two elements, the eagle and the Pogoń (meaning "Pursuit"), the emblem of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The form of the emblem symbolizes the principal idea of unity and equality of the two parts joined by a common leader (the symbol of the crown) into one whole. The eagle alone (without the coat of arms) was henceforth the emblem of the King (fig. 14, 16 and 19). Emblems 15–20 bear in the centre (a heart-shaped escutcheon) the coats of arms of the royal houses, in accordance with the principles already described. According to the rules of primacy, the idea of the united kingdom is depicted as being the most important, to which the autonomy of individual provinces is subordinate, as is the person of the King, who is head of state but also subordinate to the idea of the sovereignty and unity of the nation. The Renaissance and Baroque eagles become increasingly ornate in style. Golden talons and bills seem to symbolize the valour of the eagle; it is to such qualities that attention was to be drawn. Eagle no. 21 is the emblem of the last king of Poland, Stanisław Poniatowski. This eagle holds a sceptre and a globe – the symbols of power. The sceptre is the symbol of rule, of supreme power, the globe of rule over the world, as symbolized by the ideal form – the sphere.

During the Napoleonic wars, in which Polish

forces fought for the independence of the fatherland, the sceptre was replaced with a sword – the symbol of struggle (fig. 22). After the partitions of Poland, during Napoleon's reign, there arose the Duchy of Warsaw under the rule of the Wettin's dynasty, whose dynastic coat of arms occupied half of the emblem of the Duchy (fig. 23). The November 1831 uprising against the Russian occupation restored the emblem to the Republic for a short time, though without the king's emblem, for there was no king in Poland at that time. There remained, however, the ideas of sovereignty and unity (whence comes the crown surmounting the coat of arms). Figure 25 depicts the emblem of the Kingdom of Poland created within the Russian Empire. It is a black two-headed Russian eagle bearing the Polish national emblem on its breast. In accordance with the principle already mentioned, the meaning of this emblem may be expressed as follows: the Kingdom of Poland is part of the Russian Empire, which is most important and has precedence over all else. The white eagle symbolizes as it were, a concrete version of the Empire, the Polish version, in the Kingdom of Poland, which, although belonging to the Russian Empire, in its heart remains Polish. The Polish eagle thus lends the Russian eagle a concrete, regional character, but is hierarchically subordinate to it. Its relationship to the Polish eagle, then, is the same as that of the coat of arms of the king to the emblem of Poland in the cases described above. It is worth adding



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.

that in the principal emblem of the Russian Empire the Polish eagle also appeared, only not centrally but on the wing, along with the emblems of the other provinces, for there it did not represent the eagle of the Empire but symbolized one of its many territories.

Figure 26 depicts the emblem of Poland used by the Polish forces fighting in Hungary during the 1848 rebellions. It is an eagle without a crown. In the 19th century certain radical organizations attempted to demand such a change in the name of egalitarianism, but without success. For the spiritual leaders of the nation, the nobility, the clergy and the intelligentsia, the idea of sovereignty, represented by the crown, was more important, especially that the sovereignty itself was not granted to the Poles at that time, and seemed to be the principal condition of success in every aspect of life. Figure 27 is the emblem of federal Poland as conceived by those who took part in another anti-Russian uprising in 1863. Alongside the eagle and the Lithuanian emblem, we also have here, as an equal third part, the Archangel Michael – the patron and symbol of Ruś (Ruthenia). Figures 28 and 29 are the emblems of independent Poland after the World War I. Figure 30 is the post – World War II Polish emblem, a version of fig. 29 divested of the crown. I shall return in a moment to a discussion of the meaning of this symbol.

In the period after World War I, after Poland attained independence, the eagle with the crown became popular as a symbol of patriot-

ism, worn as a badge or as jewellery. Often the symbols of particular patriotic organizations were incorporated into the figure of the eagle. Generally speaking, the Polish national ideology, as developed through the centuries and expressed in the national emblem, rests above all on the idea of sovereignty and national independence. The country's stormy history has often forced Poles to the defence and recovery of these prime values. Thus, independence is strongly linked with the concept of the nation's struggle for existence and permanence.

The particular ideologies of groups or provinces are subordinate to the idea of a sovereign and integrated Poland. The ruler is called upon to guide the nation, he is a leader but not a dictator. He should always be subordinate to the good of the nation as a whole and to fundamental national values. Amongst these values, alongside independence and unity, equality is also of importance, symbolized if only by the equal positions of the particular component parts of the Republic, and also by the fact already mentioned of non-recognition of aristocratic titles, as a result of which the crown symbolizes only the king or the kingdom.

A characteristic feature of Polish history is the fact that the Poles never abolished the monarchy. There was no bourgeois revolution in Poland. The monarchy came to an end at the time of the partitions. In the course of Poland's subjugation under foreign powers structural and perceptual changes occurred, as a result of which Poland appeared anew as a parliamen-

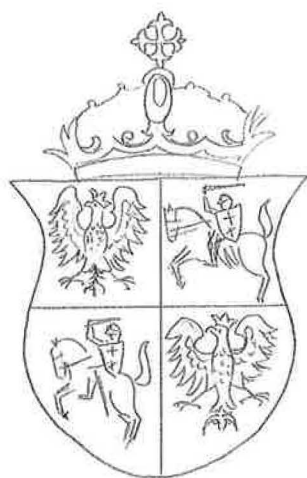


Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.

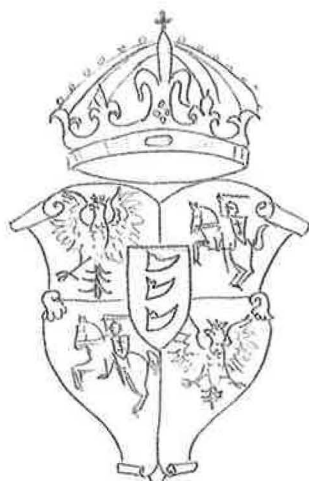


Fig. 15.

tary democracy. But in old Poland the king was not an ruler, but something like the leader of a parliament of nobles, to whom legislative power belonged. In effect, the notion of the monarchy symbolized by the crown is not incompatible with the notion of democracy.

Polish nationalism has always been closely tied to religious symbols. Polish society is decidedly Roman-Catholic, and is tightly bound to its religious tradition. In the past there existed many significant religious minorities in Poland (Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, Jewish), but nevertheless Polish national identity became related to Roman Catholicism. It so happened in history that the nations threatening the political sovereignty of the Polish nation differed from it in terms of religion (Turkey, Sweden, Russia, Prussia). Thus, for centuries Polishness was closely associated with Catholicism, and fighting for political independence meant opposing domination of people of different religion. This found its symbolic expression in the uniting of national and religious symbolic elements into a single whole. In the period 1768–1772, for example, the anti-Russian military confederacy (the Bar Confederacy) adopted as its symbol a white-and-red flag with a silhouette of the Virgin Mary. A sign surprisingly similar in form and symbolic meaning appeared during the state of martial law in 1980s, when a label badge depicting Our Lady of Czestochowa on a white-and-red back-

ground became popular. During the partitions of Poland, in the 19th century, particularly after the defeat of the armed uprising of 1864, there arose the custom of wearing black mourning jewellery, representing a combination of national and religious symbols.

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland has as a rule taken the part of the nation in its struggle with various oppressors, and it is a tradition in Polish thinking to combine national ideas with religious ones. In the image of the world widely accepted in Polish society the two elements are mutually supportive and never in opposition.

In the period before and after Poland attained her independence, the linking in one emblem of the Polish eagle and religious symbols became universal. Of particular significance here was the image of our Lady of Czestochowa placed on the eagle's breast in the place of the previous royal coats of arms (fig. 31). Following the method of analysis we have adopted, it may be said that this is a symbol of Our Lady – the Queen of Poland (in Polish tradition Our Lady of Czestochowa was very often given this name), and at the same time an indication of the fact that Catholicism is the essence of Polishness. The Poland represented by this symbol is a Catholic Poland. It is a symbol of Poland with its "heart" – the religion. The structure of the symbolic sign, however, indicates that in the ideology represented here



Fig. 16.

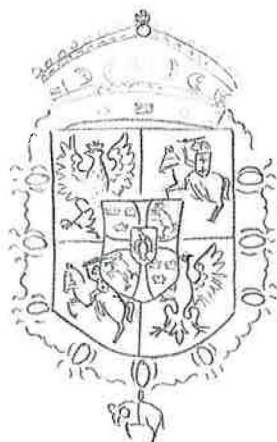


Fig. 17.



Fig. 18.

Polishness is more important than Catholicism, for the eagle embraces and encloses the figure of the Madonna, and is in heraldic terms superior to it, just as in old Poland it was superior to the royal coats of arms. Thus, we are dealing here with a combination in one whole of a national and religious symbol, though with a clear indication that primacy in the hierarchy of values belongs to the idea of the nation.

At this point, some attention should be paid to the particular political situation and to the specific character of the ideology and symbolic political activity to be found in communist dominated Poland. The communist authorities, like any authorities, devoted a considerable amount of their activity to the affirmation of their legitimacy, their legal validity. The essence of communist power was that in justifying the reasons for its own existence, it could appeal neither to tradition, nor to the personal traits of its leaders, nor to generally observed rules of legal democratic behaviour and a consequent social mandate. The one reason for the existence of communist authority was ideology, a certain vision of history, its guiding forces and its aims. Only by accepting this vision could communist rule be recognized as legally valid. Consequently, political symbolism played a fundamental role in the legitimization of communist power. It served to create a certain kind of symbolic reality which replaced the reality of social existence and

which was consistent with ideology (Besancon 1977; Flis 1988). Political rituals organized by the communists in the countries where they governed fulfilled then a function of strengthening and validating the political system: participation in the ritual introduced into a worldview of human masses an order consistent with ideology, helped that ideology to be accepted and organized activity in a direction consistent with it. Through mass participation in the symbolic events, whether forced or voluntary, be it through conformism or fear, an ideological creation of reality and legitimization of power was achieved. A characteristic of communist political ceremonies and rituals in their Polish version was the introduction of national elements. Fundamental orthodox communist ideology is anti-nationalistic, stressing instead class elements. However, the particularly turbulent history of Poland, full of struggle for independence, meant that the good of the nation stood and still stands at the top of the Polish hierarchy of values, before peace, well-being or even religion. In view of this, in imposing their rule on Poland with the help of Soviet troops the communists decided against a systematic destruction of national values, and attempted instead to introduce them into the compass of their own ideological system. This process has manifested itself particularly clearly in the last years of the communist rule in Poland, after the arousal of aspirations to

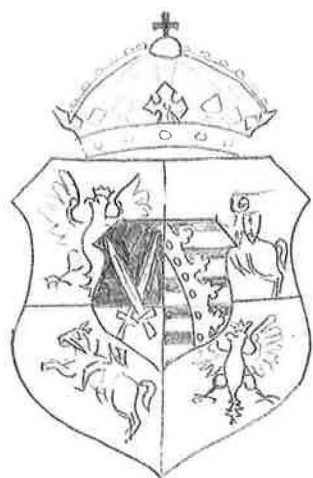


Fig. 19.

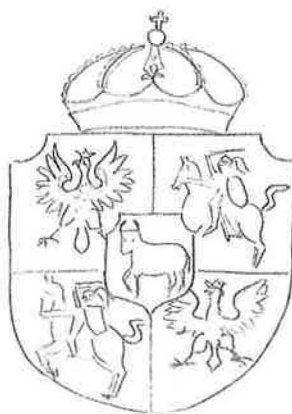


Fig. 20.



Fig. 21.

independence in the Solidarity period and the subsequent introduction of martial law.

National symbols were introduced into communist political ritual after the new regime took power in 1945, and appeared alongside communist symbols and portraits of party and state leaders. This was paradoxically facilitated by a formal similarity between the national flag and the flag of the Communist party. In a hall or a street decorated for the purposes of such a ritual, the colour red predominated (the white part of the national flag is not so striking in relation to the red). The decision to retain unchanged the official national symbols (emblem, flag and national anthem) was motivated, it would seem, by a desire to exploit national ideology in order to strengthen communist ideology and to contribute to the legitimation of the new powers. These powers, in using such symbols, were intended to be seen by the society firstly as sovereign, independent of the USSR; secondly as a native to Poland, coming from the nation, conscious of its links with that nation and working for its good. A change of official symbols would have confirmed the general intuitive feeling about the alienation of the communists from the nation, especially considering the fact that after World War II the new state leaders arrived in Poland along with the Soviet army and de facto fulfilled the function of Soviet representatives. A strong argument in favour of

such interpretation is the particular form of the national emblem chosen by the communists. It is an eagle similar in appearance to the Piast eagle. Thus, in Polish history every once in a while there is revived the memory of the greatness of the Piasts, during whose rule Poland attained full state sovereignty and saw economic prosperity, and whose representatives, unlike the majority of later elected kings, were Polish. The Piast sovereign, therefore, was a symbol of a Polish sovereign. The Piast symbol represented firstly a powerful and sovereign nation, and secondly a nation ruled by Poles. Furthermore, the reversion to the idea of the Poland of the Piasts permitted the justification of territorial changes. Poland, obliged to concede its Eastern lands to the Soviet Union, received in return lands in the West which once belonged to the Piast princes. From the point of view of the creators of political ideology, then, the federal concept of the unity of Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia was to be abandoned in favour of the Poland of the Piasts. The only change, and yet a fundamental one, introduced by the communists in the national symbols was to deprive the eagle of its crown. The communists believed that removing the eagle's crown would symbolize the liberation of the Polish people from class hierarchy and the relics of feudalism. They ignored the important fact that the eagle's crown symbolized above all state sovereignty, that far

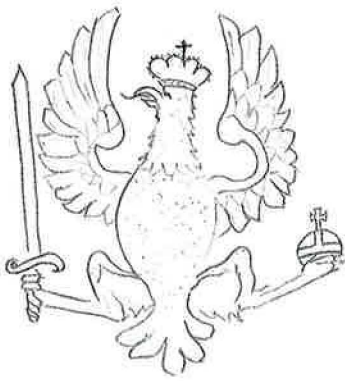


Fig. 22.



Fig. 23.

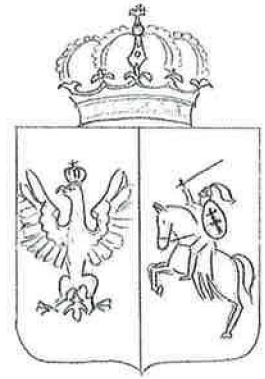


Fig. 24.

back in history the eagle was given a crown when the nation attained full independence. An eagle without a crown, then, was not just an egalitarian eagle but above all an eagle deprived of sovereignty. This too, it would seem, is the way most people in Poland understand this symbol. In all actions against the communists in which national symbols played a part, the eagle regained its crown. This did not signify nostalgia for pre-War times, it was not retrospection, a longing for past greatness. It certainly was not an expression of political sympathy with old Polish aristocracy and nobility, as most participants of the oppositional, anti-communist demonstrations were workers and sons of peasants. Rather it looked forward, and represented a desire to return political independence to the Polish people. The significance of this fact was also perceived by certain representatives of the ruling group. During the period of martial law in Poland, for example, one of the representatives to the Sejm (Polish parliament) suggested the return of the crown as a link with historical tradition.

Throughout the period of communist rule, national symbols appeared, with varying degrees of intensity, in rituals organized by the state bureaucracy. Political meetings on the occasion of official public holidays, anniversaries or condemnations of the "enemies of socialism" were held in halls in which, alongside the red flag and busts or portraits of Lenin, Stalin

(until 1956), Marx, Engels and other leaders of the Communist parties of the USSR and Poland, there were also white-and-red flags and the national emblem.

The communist powers ably and extensively manipulated national symbols in the quest for legitimacy. But these symbols also played a leading role in the ritual of political opposition. Traditionally, as I have mentioned, they were associated with religious symbols. In times of relative social peace they appeared in an oppositional role principally in churches. At moments of increased tension and open social protest they became visible on streets, on the walls of houses and in general in public places, and on duplicated leaflets. National symbols appeared here in a different function from the previous one. Being changed by appearing in different contexts, they no longer fulfilled a role of strengthening and legitimizing the political system, but on the contrary generated feelings aimed against the unwanted authorities. National symbols in the context of the opposition primarily signified the polarization of Polish society into, on the one hand, the Polish nation, deprived of sovereignty and all political rights but demanding them, and on the other hand, a group of communists possessed of the means of force and of the support of the neighbouring power, and ruling despite the wishes of the nation. Moreover, these symbols fulfilled the function of integrating the



Fig. 25.



Fig. 26.

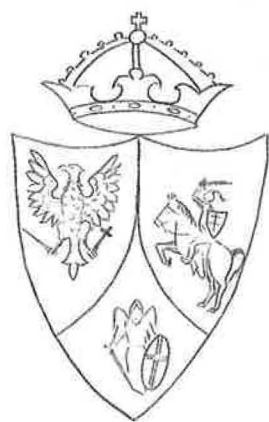


Fig. 27.

nation, gathering together all its various sections on an ideological plane and uniting it in the struggle for sovereignty. Finally, these symbols stirred strong emotions, ordered them and turned them against the enemy, the political authorities.

Not without reason, then, did there appear on each occasion of oppositional ritual, be it a mass meeting, a march, or a spontaneous gathering of people, for example around a monument to fallen workers, white – and – red flags, while the national anthem was sung. Striking workers would hang out national flags and wear white-and-red armbands to stress that their protest was a question of more than the particular interests of one or another group of workers. An attack by police units on a place of work on strike assumed the character of the storming of a bastion in which the nation was defending itself.

During and after martial law, as always during periods of intensification of repression, the Church became a centre for the organization of political ritual. National ideas and symbols were present at the majority of services, and from time to time exhibitions were organized at which national and religious symbols were put on show in the context of political opposition. There was also a return to the 19th century tradition of national mourning jewellery. One symbol that became popular was a cross, usually in mourning black, on which in the place of Christ there was a Polish crowned

eagle (fig. 32). This symbol has a double meaning. On the one hand, it represents the notion of the martyrdom of the nation “crucified” by its oppressors. On the other hand, it refers to the idea, popular in the 19th century, of national Messianism. Poland was presented in literature and art as a Messiah, who by his death would redeem humanity. Thus, Poland, by its martyrdom, is to redeem the world and expiate its sin. A particularly interesting version of the crucified eagle is one on whose breast can be seen the figure of the Virgin Mary (fig. 33). This is a condensed symbol in which a whole set of religious and national meanings is concentrated. The Virgin Mary – Queen of Poland symbolizes that particular form of Polishness which through its Catholicism and martyrdom is particularly predestined to play the role of Messiah-Redeemer of humanity. At the same time, despite the apparent predominance of religious symbols, this is a supremely national symbol, with the national ideology dominant, and emphasized further by religious signs placed accordingly in the symbolic structure. The Virgin Mary is thus above all the Queen of Poland, occupying a position in relation to national ideas similar to that which characterized the ruler in old Poland, respected, representing the nation’s supreme values but not dominating the nation, a leader and a guide but not a dictator.

Of course, the holders of power could see the danger arising from the use of national sym-



Fig. 28.



Fig. 29.



Fig. 30.

bols in opposition situations, and did not intend to tolerate it. For it was a feature of communist ideology to exclude any alternatives, as the existence of alternative, rival symbolism would impair the legitimacy of the authorities, based as it was exclusively on ideology and on the myth of its being universally accepted by society. The assuring of a monopoly in the sphere of symbolic activity therefore became one of the principal concerns and endeavours of the authorities. This manifested itself through legal and ideological action and through the exploitation of conformism. In certain ideological pronouncements representatives of the authorities tried to present themselves as true Poles, thus entitled to use national symbols, and the so-called "anarchic opposition" as antinationalist trouble-makers, usurping the right to address the nation and thus illegally making use of national symbols. In this context, then, symbol and ritual both appeared as divisive, not integrating factors, although this time, while the dividing line occupied the same position as in the pronouncements of the opposition, its meaning was inverted. The functions of the political ritual dividing society into true spokesmen of the national interest and usurpers, remained fundamentally unaltered.

Religious symbols in the context of national symbolism were particularly dangerous for the political authorities; for they indicated a source of authority other than the communist party (i.e. the Church), and also a national religious

tradition different from the tradition of revolutionary struggle to which the communists appealed. Furthermore, these symbols, unlike national symbols, could not be incorporated into the context of communist political ritual. The discrepancy between ideological principles was here too great. Thus, as they could not be used in the authorities' quest for legitimization, it was argued that they should have been discarded, forgotten, they should have died of their own accord. For this reason, too, the Polish communist authorities attempted to remove religious symbols from all areas of public life outside the Church, from public buildings, places of work, schools and the mass media.

The legal monopolization of national symbols is one of the means of controlling political ritual. It is a question of the political leaders having the exclusive freedom to decide where, when, by whom and in what situations national symbols may be used. The first step here was the decree of 1955 introducing fines or imprisonment for up to one year for illegal use of the emblem and colours of the Polish People's Republic. In the 1970s, along with the intensification of opposition political activity involving wide use of national symbolism, there was also an increase in the activity of the authorities in the direction of monopolization. In 1976, an amendment was introduced into the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic, banning the use of national symbols in a way incompatible with the intentions of the



Fig. 31.

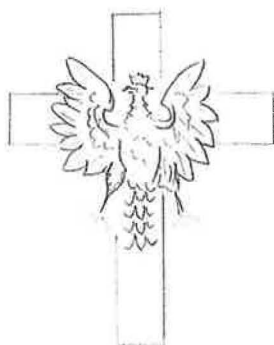


Fig. 32.



Fig. 33.

legislators. Any use of the flag or the emblem or any singing of the national anthem without the approval of the authorities became a crime. This law was reinforced by a decree issued during martial law and by banning the use of all unregistered symbols (including for example the Solidarity badge). On the other hand, there existed a decree ordering the decoration of streets and even of private houses with national flags on the occasion of public holidays and other celebrations dictated by the authorities. A refusal to take part in this ritual also entailed a fine. Of course, as I have mentioned, the purpose of all these decrees was not to secure respect for symbols, for no-one in Poland was expected to wish to abuse them. It was simply a question of the authorities ensuring a monopoly of their use.

Political changes in Poland in 1989 also had their symbolic dimension. The new parliament, especially the democratically elected Senate, attributed great value to the change of symbols of political order and of the nation – state in such a way that the regained independence would be clearly expressed. The representatives of the Democratic Party, which was previously associated with the communists and then reformed and created its new identity, proposed that the Parliament should change the official emblem of the state into the crowned eagle. It was explicitly stated that the crown was the symbol of sovereignty and thus it should be returned to the eagle, since Poland was once again a sovereign state. Some members of the parliament from the Solidarity group objected on the grounds that the country was not yet fully independent and that the

emblem should be changed only as the final step of the whole process of reforms, especially after changes in the constitution. But both the majority of members of parliament and public opinion in Poland were strongly in favour of crowning the Polish eagle, seeing it as an expression of independence, negation of communism, a powerful symbol of reforms, and also as an act which would mobilize social energy and provide a strong patriotic stimulus to the nation. In December 1989 it was decided that the state emblem would be changed together with significant alterations in the constitution. The changed constitution no longer mentioned the leading role of the Communist Party or the alliance with the USSR. The word “socialism” was removed from the text, to indicate a clear break with the socialist past and the name of the state was changed from Polish People’s Republic into Republic of Poland. On the 29th of December the parliament restored the crowned eagle as the official emblem of the state. In February 1990 there was a discussion in the parliament about the actual design of the emblem. The first idea was to return to the pre-World War II emblem, simply negating symbolically the post-war changes. Later, however, a new idea was put forward that the crown should be topped with a cross, as in some of the historic emblems, to indicate that only under the sign of cross does Poland have its true, religious identity. Some members of the parliament objected to this idea (notably liberal Catholic MPs) since they believed that Poland was also the home of people who were Polish but not Christian or even not religious. Finally the parliament decided to return to the

pre-war emblem with the golden crown and without the cross.

Subsequent years brought decomposition of the meaning of national symbols in Polish politics. The end of the political conflict between the anti-communist opposition united under the symbolic name of Solidarity and the communist dominated regime brought to an end also the polarization of the society and its ideology expressed through national symbols. Other dimensions of the social structure came to the fore, various divisions, tensions and conflicts, hitherto hidden, became visible. Gradually, the political scene changed. Ethnic, regional, occupational and other groups emerged as social forces, and began struggle for their particular interests. Some ethnic groups, notably non-Catholic, like already mentioned Lutherans, Muslims, Orthodox Ukrainians and others did not identify themselves with the unification of national and religious symbolism, like for example in the aforementioned case of discussion in the parliament about the shape of the Polish eagle. For the Polish Lutherans the fact that Lech Wałęsa, now President of the Republic Poland, always wears badge with the Black Madonna – the Queen of Poland painted against the background of Polish national colours, is a symbolic expression of identification by the Head of State of Catholicism with national identity. The Lutherans, for whom the position of Virgin Mary in the dogmatic and symbolic structure of religion is a major source of argument with the Catholics, thus feel alienated from the Polish nation. All religious minorities, and liberal intellectuals, including Catholics, oppose identification of Polish national identity with Roman Catholicism. Some political discussion current in Poland, like for example the issue of abortion or teaching of religion at school, have been in fact transformed into discussion of the identity of the Polish state: whether it should be dominated by Catholics who are in the majority, whether the religious identity of the Polish nation should be mentioned in the Constitution, whether the Polish state should be ideologically neutral or should it follow the general ideological and moral line of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church plays a significant

role in these discussions, appealing to the Polish Catholic tradition, recalling the role of the Church in the struggle with the communists and in the creation and defending of Polish national identity in the recent as well as more distant past. The Church openly supports those political parties which made Catholicism part of their political programme.

There are also national minorities in Poland, like Germans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, who wish to be loyal citizens of the Polish state, but do not and can not accept Polish national identity as part of their own self-identification. They fear that the future Poland will be a nationalistic, and religiously fundamentalist state, where there will be no place for any minorities.

National and religious symbols are very widely used in these conflicts and discussions. Politicians often display them as a background or framework of their public speeches and important meetings. I have already mentioned Wałęsa and his badge with Virgin Mary. Ministers – members of the Christian-National Union, one of the most influential nationalistic parties, appear on TV with a cross and the Polish white eagle in the background. The white eagle and portraits of marshal Józef Piłsudski, a nationalistic leader of pre-World War II Poland, together with white and red flags compose the symbolic background of radical right wing nationalistic party Confederation of Independent Poland. National flags are used by workers on strike, even if, contrary to the strikes of the 1980s which were mainly political protests with very general aims and demands with which most Poles would identify themselves, the strikes of the early 90s are struggles of workers of particular branches of industry for their privileges, wage increase, and specific interests, alien to the rest of the population, and to other workers. Often in such strikes it is obvious that the fulfillment of the demands would be possible only at the expense of workers from other factories. National symbols are used, however, to recall the tradition of the strikes in the 80s, to present the protests as having more meaning than just purely economic. Workers who wear white and red badges or decorate their factory with Polish

national flags wish to convey the message that their protest is organized in the name of the whole nation. Such a strategy exploits the ideology of national unity, still very much alive in Poland. Unity of the nation was part of the ideology of the anti-communist opposition and the Roman Catholic Church at the time of struggle with the communists. It contributed to the polarization of the society. Those who argued against the principle of unity, for example by pointing at the fact that not everybody in the Polish society belonged to the Polish nation or to the Roman Catholic religion, would risk accusation of acting against the most vital interests of the nation. In a curious way also the communists propagated their own version of the principle of national unity. In their interpretation this principle meant unity of Poles under the single leadership of the Communist Party. At present, even if there is no single, fundamental conflict dividing the society, Poles are still attached to the idea of unity. Even in the parliament speakers never present their cases as interests of people who belong to a particular group, region, profession etc. Members of the parliament always speak as if in the name of the whole nation, never dare to argue for an interest group. It is as if the good of the nation was the only value worth fighting for, and the one which justified all actions.

As the consequence of the aforementioned changes, more and more people are confused about the meaning of national symbols. These symbols, once legally and traditionally protected, now are used by almost everybody, and in contexts which are understood by many as doubtful. There is a danger that the symbols would lose their sacred value, since they are often used in a way that is close to abuse, especially by groups which put forward extreme demands for privileges for themselves, like some workers, or some extreme though small parties. There is still much emotional attachment among Poles to the national symbols, and one does not hear of cases of deliberate abuse of them, like for example burning of the flag. But Poles become confused about what the national symbols really mean. In the past it was obvious: national symbols were also

state symbols, Poles either had or wanted to have their independent nation – state, for which the symbols stood. If there were conflicts in which the symbols took part, as in the case of the conflict between the communists and the opposition, it was easy to know who was who, it was clear that either particular versions of the symbols or their combinations signified easily recognizable ideologies. Now things became more difficult. From the single Solidarity movement there emerged parties which fight with each other, but which all seem to have right to the same symbols, and certainly use them in their actions. Also, the fact of the existence of minorities within the Polish society became more appreciated by Poles who for the past fifty years have been used to the ideology of the single, united nation. If this complication of the role of national symbols in the social life in Poland goes further, we may soon come across cases known from Polish centres abroad, especially from Chicago where about eight hundred thousand people of Polish origin live. There national symbols are often used in commercial contexts, where they indicate Polish traditional character of the commodity. Such cases as for example white eagle horse radish in jars decorated with the Polish national emblem are shocking to the Poles from the old country, who are not used to profane functions of their sacred symbols.

Let us then briefly consider the theoretical significance of the ethnography described above.

In the process of classifying and ordering social reality, bringing order into the world of things, people and phenomena in the human environment, of prime importance is the introduction of a boundary between the opposing categories of "ours" and "theirs". The division of the environment into these two categories constitutes the structural basis for the group's world view. This opposition is expressed symbolically; with the aid of symbols a model is constructed of the familiar and the foreign worlds and the boundary separating these two opposite categories. The division of the world into "ours" and "theirs" in turn constitutes the basis for the creation of a sense of identity within a social group. In each interaction with

others, people base their actions on this fundamental distinction, introduce a classification, the criteria of which vary according to the partner in the interaction and to the situation. The definition of one's own identity is a process of awareness, in which the other, parallel and simultaneous component is the definition of the partner in the social relationship. This is one of the reasons why self-identification depends to a large extent on the context, and why the interpretation of the situation causes certain of the aspects of the mental model of the world to be brought into relief (see Ardener 1992; Barth 1969; Issacs 1975; Elias 1965; Mach 1993).

In the political situation which was described above and in which Polish society found itself under the communist domination, the national-political plane comes to the fore. Ethnic, religious or economic tensions and conflicts were set aside in the face of the fact, universally sensed, that the fundamental dividing line in Polish society and the principal conflict arose amongst groups distinguished according to criteria of national status, the representation of national interests and political attitudes. In public life a tendency appeared to build the identity of one's own group and those of the others on the basis of these very considerations.

Cultural identity is the sense of community experienced and expressed in the language of symbols. The basis here is a certain degree of cultural homogeneity within the group. In a situation of contact with the others, particularly when this contact assumes the nature of threat, the group's fundamental "interest" lies in preserving and cultivating cultural identity, and making sure that other groups respect it.

Symbols fulfil a special role in this process. Through symbols, a mental classification is conducted; symbols concentrate thoughts and emotions and set them in order; a model of identity is built of them and expressed through them. Symbols create a reality that is in accordance with the group's model of the world, and thanks to this regulate ways of thinking and forms the image of the world by creating the facts of experience. Symbols integrate the group; confirm and create the permanence of

its traditions, articulate its normative system. Based on faith in supernatural forces or beings, symbols construct a model of awareness in which they describe the basic structural and moral features of the group and define its relation to all other groups, beings and phenomena (see Cohen 1974; Geertz 1973: 93; Mach 1993).

In the situation of conflict symbols also fulfil a divisory function. If within a society a certain category of people come to be classified as "foreign", the symbolic actions articulate and confirm that foreignness. The group plays out ritual in order to express its own identity and at the same time the fact that it is distinct from others. For such rituals of "distinctness", those symbols are chosen which most forcibly emphasize the cultural and ideological differences of both groups. In the case of the Polish situation, national and religious symbols dominated. On the basis of these symbols, a cultural homogeneity of the society was built, which in the past created the conditions for the appearance of the nation. They also later, under the communist domination, formed the basis of Polish identity and, at the same time, of an expression of conflict with outsiders. The national-political opposition ritual in Poland has nothing in common with Gluckman's "ritual of rebellion". Its function is not the validation and reinforcement of the existing system. The situation described by Gluckman arises when despite dissatisfaction and tensions, there exists nevertheless a primary agreement on the basic principles of the social order, a fundamental acceptance of it (Gluckman 1956). In Poland this condition was not fulfilled. The representatives of the authorities were aware of the lack of social acceptance for the principles of the political structure, and as a result did not allow the rituals of conflict to be played out. Such a ritual, being a true social action, leading to an awareness and experience of something which previously had perhaps not been fully thought out or articulated, and which furthermore is eminently capable of generating other actions, might lead to the outbreak of revolution beyond the conventions of symbolic activity. Instead, national-political rituals were played out, the subject of which was the ruling elite and which were intended

to create an ideological image, to construct a symbolic model of a postulated reality. This ideology had its source in belief in the existence of an objective historical law determining social development. This law, independently of human knowledge or will, decides the essential direction to be taken by the evolution of mankind, and from its existence there arises the objective right for political power to be wielded by the communist party – “the vanguard of the leading social-forces”. Social support for this power might be obtained by the creation of a situation in which large groups of people adapt their vision of the world to this ideology. In the practice of governing Polish society it became clear that the society constructed its identity and its vision of the world on the basis of ideas about the nation, its independent development and its place amongst other people. Thus there appeared the problem of adapting national aspirations to communist ideology and of identifying that ideology with nationalism. This aim was to be served by political rituals organized by the ruling elite. National symbols played a central role in those rituals and their task was firstly to create a situation in which the nation was identified with the existing state and the system of power, and secondly to express that identification. The result of this process was intended to be the legitimization of power.

Thanks to the particular properties they have in combining different meanings, the same symbols also served the opponents of communism, in creating a model of national identity in opposition to the “others” in other words the ruling elite. To this end, national and religious symbols were combined, for the latter expressed ideas that were incompatible with communist ideology. Religious faith was here united with nationalist ideology and became the basis for the definition of Polish identity. National symbols appeared in versions and contexts that highlighted the differences between the “familiar” – those who demand the sovereignty of the nation, and the “foreign” – the usurpers. In this way opposition symbolic activity created a sense of unity of the nation and at the same time sets up symbolic boundaries between the nation and the “foreign” authorities. National symbols and national-religious-political ritual testified to the traditions

and to the cultural and political permanence of the nation and its culture, and manifested traditional ideals and values connected with the nation and in opposition to the rulers and their ideology, hence the importance of a historical understanding of the development of national symbols and of transformations in their meaning. The history of the nation is subject to a sort of mystification and it is in this form that it affects the consciousness of modern Poles. Whether and to what extent this mystification of history agrees with the real facts is not important. The only thing that is important is the way the members of the nation perceive its tradition. National symbols bear with them the national ideology, memory of the greatness and sovereignty of the nation, an image of its historical mission and its place amongst other nations. Thus it may be said that national symbols are the fundamental element in the building of the nation's identity. The appearance of these symbols in political ritual, during a demonstration, a march, a strike or a church mass said for the fatherland, render all of these ideas current and accessible to direct experience and imbue them with emotions. Ideas of the sovereignty and greatness of the nation, its independence, historical mission and rightful place in the world are difficult to conceive of and verbalize in rational discourse. A symbol, on the other hand, is a direct and condensed expression of something which is difficult or impossible to express, and makes it possible for us to consider and experience that thing. If we further take into account the fact that national symbols appear in association with symbols of threat and suffering, then the emotional saturation both of national symbols and of the ritual in which they play a central part becomes understandable. These rituals are truly able to inspire and direct social emotions and to rouse human groups to action.

The present process of decomposition of meaning of the national symbols is perhaps a logical consequence of the end of the political conflict which used to polarize the society. The symbols acquire new meanings and lose some of their sacred quality. They begin to signify the nation and the nation-state, in some con-

text also a nationalistic state, and are used in the discussions about the desired character of the state and the society: to what extent they should be dominated by a nationalistic or religious ideology and to what extent the state should become a pluralistic organization – home for various minorities which may wish to use their own symbols, national and religious ones included. But for the time being the feeling of uncertainty of meaning, and confusion about the proper or not proper use of symbols prevails.

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