

War relived and war retold. Interpretation of Polish records of personal traumatic war experiences of World War One and World War Two (records of therapy and medical treatment, medical discourse, testimonies and memoirs oral history)

In the first half of the 20th century almost all inhabitants of Poland were experienced by war in one or another way. For some of them that experience left a durable footprint in their memory and psyche. Soldiers traumatised by combat stress, prisoners of concentration camps suffered from the KZ-Syndrome, victims of Gulag or survivors of the Holocaust etc., had to grapple with psychic effects of those traumatic historical experiences through the rest of their lives. Because of that there were often objects of medical treatment or therapy, or, they re-told or noted down their stories from the time of war. Records of those experiences, that developed in the context of socio-political history of Poland in 20th century and in the context of the evolution of the medical approach to war trauma, has been gathered in the archives of medical units, former concentration camps, archives of oral history or published as memoirs.

Research objective of the project is an interpretation of those different forms of Polish 20th-century war trauma records in the context of the changes of socio-political and medical milieus (i.e. how the impact of war on a person war framed and understood in public and medical discourses). Having in mind that in Polish context the number and variety of materials (records and their analyses) referring the Second World War is much bigger than those from the war 1914-1918(1920), the project purposely combines the two historical war experiences in order to underline possible similarities and differences between them and to present the importance of social memory framework, within which war traumas could have been expressed after 1918 and after 1945. Project includes also records of both soldiers and civilians paying attention to differences between them. Its main research hypothesis is that, in spite of differences between World War One and World War Two, both wars deeply influenced lives of many people, but that influence was differently diagnosed and interpreted. Taking the perspective of a historical study of traumatic war experiences, the project refers to psychological and medical establishments on war trauma and PTSD (including the evolution of those establishments) and to memory studies and their findings on the influence of collective memory on individual remembrances.

Realization of the project includes interdisciplinary analysis of the sources of different origin and nature: archival records of treatment and therapy, medical literature, records and memoirs collected by different institutions (especially by museums in former concentration camps), published memoirs and oral history interviews (recorded in Poland since 1990s). Since those collections are far too broad to be analysed exhaustively, the materials will be selected according to statistical procedures and criteria of adequacy.

Interpretation of those selected materials will focus on the meanings that were given to war experiences both by the people and institutions that framed them within medical, political and historical discourses. Taking the perspective of current historical and psychological knowledge such interpretation will allow to answer the question how in 20th-century Poland one coped with the psychological effects of war on a person on both individual and institutional level. Therefore the expected results of this academic undertaking may be useful not only for an interdisciplinary dialogue between history (war studies, cultural and intellectual history, memory studies) and psychology or psychiatry, but also for a self-awareness of Polish society about its attitude towards war and its psychological effects.