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Home-Making Through Deathscapes or How to Circumvent the Contradictions of Nationalism: The Case of Polish Far-Right Activists in Britain

Rafal Soborski [ID] | Michał P. Garapich [ID] | Anna Jochymek [ID]

Centre for Global Diversities and Inequalities, London Metropolitan University, London, UK

Correspondence: Rafal Soborski (rafal.soborski@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Using the case of Polish far-right activists in Britain, this paper explores how migrants joining far-right groups in countries of residence reconcile their own transnational lives with nativist attachment to the national soil. The paper adopts an anthropological framework on discursive and performative strategies used to navigate this contradiction. Drawing on interviews with Polish migrants and observer participation in their political rituals, we identify their ways of political home-making in Britain. Special consideration is given to the symbolic elements that have always been at the heart of far-right political thought—the national soil, the dead ancestors, and the heroic past—and, for our respondents, are brought to life in the Polish cemeteries in Britain. We explore mythopoeic narratives and ritualised performances around these 'deathscapes', which help activists establish an organic connection with symbolically significant locations in the country of residence and claim a special place in its ethnic hierarchy.

1 | Introduction

Among the core features of nationalism is its deep attachment to a specific place—a socially constructed area of land. Nationalists make claims over a given territory, believing unwaveringly that the physical land, and the nation that they see themselves as representing, are mutually constitutive. As Gellner (1983, 1) writes, nationalism is a 'theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones'. The fixation with territory as the ultimate anchor of national identity, the object of utmost loyalty and the marker separating people naturally into discrete cultures and hence, in the nationalist's ideal world, polities has a long history in nationalist thought and a particularly powerful articulation on the far right[1] of the political spectrum where the exclusionary, nativist variant of nationalism resides (Newth 2021; Pirro 2023). According to a well-established 'organic' (Sternhell 1973) nationalist perspective, nations have developed distinctive characteristics through

centuries of interactions with their territories paving the way to biological-like connections between people and places. Nationalism's 'sedentary metaphysics' is therefore at odds with mobility, migration-driven diversity and cultural diffusion (Malkki 1995). However, while the equivalence of the territory and the nation has always been more of a normative principle and political objective rather than a fait-accompli, today it is particularly susceptible to erosion by processes of globalisation with increasing numbers of people leading highly mobile, transnational lives (Haas de, Castles, and Miller 2020; Sheller 2017; Vertovec 2004).

It is not just the nationalists themselves who do not appreciate the hybridity and fluidity of nations, or porosity of borders between them, and who tend to treat territorial states as 'de facto containers' of nations (Mitchell 1997). A large share of the literature on far-right interpretations of territory and place continues to focus mainly on single-country case studies and

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nationally centred forms of far-right ideology, including far-right perceptions of place and nature (Forchtner 2020), without paying adequate attention to the increasingly transnational dimension of far-right politics. This methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) may leave scholars ill-equipped to understand ideological and organisational transformations on the far right resulting from increased transnational connectivity. In particular, the literature tends to omit ideological and strategic adaptations that migrants, diasporas and minorities sympathising with the far right make in new political environments and how this conditions their engagement in new place- and home-making practices. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring patterns of activism emerging under pressure of the transnational social formations and fields within which increasing numbers of far-right activists operate.

We consider home-making practices by Polish migrants active in far-right groups operating in a transnational political field between Poland and Britain. To place this phenomenon in a broader historical and ideological context, we begin by a reminder of nineteenth-century articulations of organic nationalism (Sternhell 1973), such as Maurice Barrès's doctrine of 'the soil and the dead' (*la terre et les morts*). This helps us assess the extent to which transnational far-right groups have departed ideologically from their more traditional, nationally bounded predecessors and explore discursive strategies used to navigate the contradictory place of far-right activism in transnational spaces. We identify an ideological shift which consists in emphasis being placed increasingly on the level of civilisational or cultural affinity, bringing whiteness to the fore. This, we argue, adapts the logic of nativism to new circumstances but does not undermine its attachment to place or its exclusionary fixation on rootedness. Then, in the main part of the paper, we use an anthropological framework to interpret some ritualised performances by Polish far-right activists residing in Britain. The rituals support the activists' attempts to establish an organic connection with the new host environment by bringing in a particular interpretation of the past where the symbolic predecessors of today's migrant nationalists played a special role connecting Polish and British history. As we show, long-established ideological tropes run through these mythopoeic narratives and meaning-making practices. The soil and the dead retain their power as major symbolic embodiments of far-right political myths (Čolović 2002; Flood 2002); they are transplanted into the new context giving them new meanings and new symbolic capital. We draw on our anthropological work on rituals revolving around the graves of Polish soldiers in Britain, those mythologised heroes whose blood is seen as 'sanctifying' also the claim of later generations of Poles to a special place on the British soil and the associated processes of racialisation and 'whitening' (Kalmar 2023; Narkowicz 2023) of Polish migrants in the country's multicultural context. Going beyond national containerisation characteristic of methodological nationalism, the paper opens new avenues for further research of an increasingly transnational nature of far-right politics today, which to date has not received adequate scholarly attention. We hope that the paper will help scholars to further explore the complex, transnationally constructed empirical reality on the ground where some migrants adhering to far-right ideologies reinterpret notions of place and rootedness to reconcile their transnational lives and nationalist commitments.

2 | Methodology

Using ethnographic methods to explore Polish migrants engaging in diverse forms of far-right activism in Britain we fill a gap in research which, as Agnieszka Pasieka notes, 'is dominated by quantitatively oriented studies and a presentation of individuals and groups in terms of "political campaign targets," "voters," and "recipients of political discourses"' (Pasieka 2021, 997). Scholars have only recently begun to move away from the 'externalist' approach and acknowledged the need for a closer, anthropological angle (Blee 2007, 120). Reasons for the rarity of such approaches have been debated by scholars tackling issues of access, safety, trust, empathy, potential legitimisation or reproduction of hate in far-right research (Ashe et al. 2021; Blee 2007; Pasieka 2021; Pilkington 2016; Toscano 2019). As these authors stress, there are risks—political, ethical and reputational—inherent to it, but we agree with Hilary Pilkington that 'to prioritize our own ethical comfort constitutes not the enactment of an active political stance but, on the contrary, a form of political faintheartedness' (Pilkington 2019, 36). 'Pathologizing' and 'de-humanizing' social actors that sit on an opposite end of political spectrum will not only lead us nowhere in terms of understanding why people do what they do, but may also perpetuate increasing political polarisation.

This paper is based on data generated through overt ethnographic immersion into several far-right milieus where the tropes of the soil and the dead are reproduced discursively and through social practice, as part of mundane activities as well as public rituals with various degrees of formality and structure. Participant observation, in-depth biographical interviews and observation of online activities were our main data gathering tools. We interviewed over 60 far-right leaders and decision-makers as well as rank-and-file members, and people who had disengaged from politics. The formal membership in far-right groups is difficult to determine due to the rhizomatic nature of some of the organisational forms (Griffin 2003), but most of the interviewees either had significant periods of involvement in organising rituals around deathscapes—'the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death' (Teather 2001, 185)—and WW2 commemorative monuments. Five of the activists interviewed were instrumental in initiating grave cleaning, commemoration or maintenance activities, making this the core of their organisations' practices. We took part in several rituals around Polish veterans' monuments as well as informal discussions between activists about the logistical and funding issues, and observed people taking part. As our broader research project[2] concerns Polish-British connections on the far right, the interviews revolved around the development of mutual ties and recruitment strategies probing the exchange of ideas and resources but also tensions and limits of far-right transnational cooperation. Our respondents are not a representative sample of Polish immigrants as such. For example, the picture is unbalanced in terms of gender because the far right is a notoriously masculine space. While women are present in various organisations, our assessment is that they are harder to convince to be interviewed, and we have just four women in the sample. The majority of our respondents are middle-aged men with working-class background; they tend to be self-employed in construction, as drivers, delivery men and handymen. There are a few activists who hold tertiary education and several second- or

third-generation Polish-British nationals. Interviews were conducted in England (London, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Cambridge, Southport and Sheffield), but we also interviewed returnees in Poland. For this paper, we paid special attention to the respondents' understanding of, and attachment to, nationalistically valorised places—in Britain as well as Poland.

We combine the analysis of far-right ideologies and repertoires of action with the activists' narratives and trajectories of engagement and their links with migration experience. Crucially, we emphasise that the tactics, strategies, and the 'what' of activism also shed light on its 'why'. The discussion thus includes the prefigurative (Boggs 1977/1978) aspects of far-right activism where 'struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present' (Maeckelbergh 2011, 4). Whereas prefigurative politics of left-wing mobilisations has been given a lot of scholarly attention (for a critical review of this literature, see Soborski 2018, 2019), prefigurative dimensions of far-right movements have been less thoroughly explored (exceptions include Futrell and Simi 2004). While focusing on the ideas and practices of far-right activists, our approach also looks at the social and—particularly important for this paper—territorial milieus where they operate. In doing this we follow calls by Cynthia Miller-Idris to catch up with the fast-moving reality of far-right radicalisation. As she argues: 'In addition to focusing on the why and how of far-right radicalization and growth [...] we should be asking where and when radicalization happens [...] What are the new spaces and places of contemporary far-right extremism?' (Miller-Idris 2020, 3).

3 | This People on This Land: A Look at Organic Nationalism

To evaluate the extent of continuity and change within far-right nationalism in the context of its increasingly transnational ideational themes and organisational dynamics, we need to look at its traditional articulations and their approaches to territory. Topophilia (Tuan 1974), or love of place, has always been one of the distinctive features of nationalism. Edmund Burke put this sentiment in evocatively poetic terms when speaking to English Parliament in 1794: 'We all know that the natal soil has a sweetness in it beyond the harmony of verse. This instinct, I say, that binds all creatures to their country, never becomes inert in us' (in Deudney 1996, 132). Burke's words bring to mind an idyllic organic community conceivable only in a society that remains relatively closed and immobile. This way of thinking and its sense of deep emotional attachment to place runs also through romantic, anti-universalist counter-Enlightenment narratives in continental Europe (Rueda 2020; Biehl and Staudenmaier 2011) where emphasis is placed on nations as organically bound to particular places, having evolved as political communities within them as their dwellings, both physical and ideational. Through naturalisation of the historical process, the bond between people and territories becomes both organic and deterministic (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983).

This organic nationalism (Sternhell 1973) culminated in the thought of Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) who opposed what he saw as an inevitable offspring of universalism: *déracinement* (rootlessness) in his organic, botanical vocabulary. Barrès's

nationalism is an extreme exemplification of the ideal of biological rootedness in the place, and hence of a categorically localist attachment. In other words, it is localism centred on *la terre et les morts* (the soil and the dead):

> The soil speaks to us and works with the nation's consciousness quite as much as it cooperates with the dead. The soil gives the active life of the dead its efficacy. Our ancestors pass on as a whole the heritage accumulated in their souls only by the immutable vital activity of the soil (in Steiner 1970, 192).

A crucial conceptual concomitant of this radical form of organic nationalism is a particular type of inequality, and associated exclusion, which does not need to imply innately different levels of intelligence or talent. An ardent anti-Semite, Barrès did not advocate the idea of a racial inferiority of the French Jews. Instead, his hostility towards the Jews was based purely on their alleged lack of roots in the French soil—a characteristic that, Barrès believed, necessarily implied their disloyalty to France (Steiner 1970, 181). The notion of the fundamental inequality between those who belong and those who do not has been passed on from Barrès, and other 19th century radical nationalists to the contemporary far right where a new form of racism, one which does not refer to biology but to culture, now prevails.

Similar to French nationalists, German thinkers also conceptualised the national community as an organic Volk attached to a particular place and expressing itself through distinctive habits, traditions, mythology and folklore. Accordingly, 'people who are the product of the same geographical environment, the same climate, and who heard the same tales and legends at their mother's knee possess a mentality which is unique of its kind' (Sternhell 2000, 144). From this angle, nationality is a matter of nature rather than a civic or political fact. For Romantic philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), nations are separated by virtue of natural features and individuals naturally belong to and are constituted by, their particular nationalities. The nation is not a mere collection of individuals but a *Volkstum* (folkhood), an organic, indivisible and unique being that generates particular ways of thinking and living. A later articulation of this idea was *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) and back-to-the-land Nazi movement associated with the Artaman League and Richard Walther Darré, the Third Reich's Minister of Food and Agriculture. The movement revolved around the ideal of absolute and exclusive unity between a racially defined national body and a specific territory (Bramwell 1985). It is widely cited by contemporary writers on the Polish far-right scene who endorse its eco-fascist discourse (see Obodrzycki 2019).

The far right today thus draws on a long intellectual tradition reproducing a vision fixated on rootedness and biologisation of society and history. It is also uncompromising in the rejection of what it sees as a 'view from nowhere', an abstract cosmopolitan perspective detached from local beliefs and practices and thus devoid of meaning. As one far-right ideologist puts it, 'territory is to a people what air is to lungs' (Krebs 2012, 85), and so any society that detaches itself from its roots and transgresses borders between cultures—for example, by allowing 'alien' cultural elements to enter its realm—represents a deviation from the natural,

territorially bounded and determined mode of human existence. Lech Obodrzycki, a publicist for a Polish outlet *Szturm* associated with the *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* (National Radical Camp) or ONR,[3] connects members of the national body through shared land and bonds of biological nature. He calls them 'peasants' and contrasts their rooted status with that of the 'nomads' who, similar to Barrès's Jews, are presented as disloyal individuals who do not belong anywhere, parasites, disruptors of stable, traditional and morally just ways of living. The question is what would happen if these mythical peasants were uprooted and moved. There is a strong metaphysical and moral dissonance here—if you are a nationalist, why migrate? And if you do migrate, how do you retain connection with your land? How not to become a nomad?

The paradox at the centre of this paper's argument is that while roots and attachment to place—the national territory and specific locations within it—are core concepts for the far right, not all followers of far-right ideologies lead such rooted and localised lives. Thus, given nationalism's attachment to place, as a socially constructed area of land, the question is how it articulates its core ideas in transnational spaces. This is not just a theoretical or speculative question. The unprecedented rise in human migration in the last half century is an integral part of globalisation and modernity (Triandafyllidou 2018) with tens of millions on the move and figures rising. As research on social remittances indicates, ideas, norms and values travel with people (Levitt 1998; Grabowska et al. 2017), and this includes far-right ideas carried by activists who declare uncompromising loyalty and attachment to place.

A vital challenge for nationalism operating transnationally is the potential loss of biological connection with the 'land', 'soil', 'blood' and 'national environment', which the 'sedentary metaphysics' (Malkki 1995) embeds in nationalist discourse. One discursive response from the far right is to shift its emphasis onto alternative, transnational or supranational spaces. Alongside national loyalties, far-right discourses today feature more extensive frames to anchor a sense of loyalty and attachment. The ideas of white racialism provide one example of an increasingly supranational orientation. By choosing 'race' as the point of reference, the white supremacy movements have backed off from nationality as the main criterion of identification (Beirich 2022). Elsewhere, in far-right theory today, the notion of rootedness (Čolović 2002, 21–28; Olsen 2020) is employed to articulate a type of prejudice, which is as exclusionary as biological racism and yet can be put forward as a discourse that seems less offensive within the parameters of liberal democracy. Even though it downplays biological racism, the discourse of rootedness leads to the same preference for segregation and rejection of multiculturalism as allegedly jeopardising separate cultural identities. In practical terms, this position translates into a fierce opposition to immigration, and hence to any global connections that may be held responsible for international flows of people. Other arguments ostensibly reject biological racism and focus instead on large civilisational units to essentialise cultural differences. The civilisational focus has been foregrounded through a theoretical discourse within the New Right movement, a pan-European network with the most significant base in France, where the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) emerged in the 1970s (for an insider overview, see De Benoist 2017–2019).

The strategy of reframing the concept of belonging by elevating it to a higher, supranational level, defined either by culture or 'race' is employed, in exoteric forms in everyday political contestation, by Polish far-right activists in Britain when they assert their claim to a special position in the country's social hierarchy, in contrast to groups deemed culturally alien and hostile, especially Muslims. The race factor may form an element in the strategy that we call integration-through-racism (Garapich, Jochymek, and Soborski 2024) and others described as 'pathological integration' (Fox and Mogilnicka 2017). This discourse of whiteness emerged on particular occasions, such as during Black Lives Matter protests, which some Polish far-right activists opposed by taking part in counter-demonstrations. But racism may also emerge in more nuanced forms, for example in references in far-right activists' online posts to 'Christian Europe' which in Polish discourse always assumes whiteness. This process of 'becoming white' within a new host country (Kalmar 2023) is not without precedence as similar efforts were made in other contexts by Italian, Irish or Jewish migrants amongst others (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998). What differs in our case is that, as we will see, Poles in Britain draw also on various symbolic resources that strongly resonate with the British context, positioning them as a special 'kind of whites', the ones who are symbolically associated with armed struggle, defence of the British soil and spilled blood.

One response to the paradox of a nationalist's émigré status, has been their engagement in what Benedict Anderson calls long-distance nationalism (1998), which has had huge impact on nation-state building since the nineteenth century. Although we recognise that the framework is hugely beneficial to understand migrants' engagement, we argue that in its focus on 'home' country politics, this approach neglects local, host countries dynamics of systemic racism, where long-distance nationalism, is better understood through short-distance articulations of white supremacy, something we explore elsewhere (Garapich, Jochymek, and Soborski 2024).

Notwithstanding discursive or practical attempts to circumvent the paradox, far-right nationalists leading transnational lives represent a contradiction in terms. This tension reflects broader inconsistency of nationalism which, according to Zygmunt Bauman, posits, in a deterministic fashion, a primordial fixed collective identity—nationhood—while at the same time urging an agentic drive to achieve or sustain it. As Bauman writes, quoting Barrès, the soil and the dead 'cannot be chosen freely. Before any choice can be as much as contemplated, one has been already born onto this soil here and now and into this succession of ancestors and their posterity' (Bauman 1992, 684). At the same time, Bauman continues, nationalism 'makes the nationhood into a task always to be struggled for and never to be fulfilled in the degree justifying the complacency that comes with victory' (684). As a result,

> nations can never stay still; complacency and fading vigilance is their worst sin – a mortal (suicidal) sin, to be sure. The order that sustains them and which they sustain by their "daily plebiscite" is after all artificial (even though "natural" because of reflecting what the soil and blood dictate), and hence precarious from stem to stern (Bauman 1992, 687).

This 'paradox of man-made collective identities which may hold fast only when perceived as beyond human power'

(Bauman 1992, 696) derives from the fact that although nationalism centres on biological determinism, it has to deal with reality which is far from being neatly arranged into distinct Volks, states or cultures. This contradiction is felt particularly acutely in the conditions of super-diversity (Vertovec 2023) brought about by globalisation processes. To cope with it, nationalists draw from a vast and fluctuating pool of cultural and ideational resources transmitted through political narratives, often of mythopoeic character, as well as engaging in ritualised meaning-making practices. The practices we focus on in the empirical section take place within deathscapes, which we operationalise in the context of immigrants' commemorative practices in relation to military history. The deathscapes are symbolically functional ritual spaces that link grand narratives of Polish nationalism with specific contextualised situations of Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom. Like all ritual spaces, deathscapes make sense of contradictions and diffuse dissonances between the normative and the actual.

4 | Polish Transnational Nationalism

Polish nationalism was formed during the partitions period (1795–1918), which deteremined its defiant militancy and siege mentality. From this perspective, Polish nationhood needs to be reenacted in continuing struggle against enemies of the Polish nation and Catholic religion—in Polish nationalism, the two tend to go hand in hand denying ethnic and religious minorities a role in Poland's history except as foes (Porter 2001). The political myth of the soldier-émigré whose functions we will explore shortly is the product of this stateless context and offspring of the meta-political Polish messianic myth about the special role Poland plays in the grand scheme of things as defender of European and Christian values, freedom from tyranny and barbaric hordes—usually from the East (Zubrzycki 2019). Following the reestablishment of independent Poland in 1918, Polish nationalism, like its counterparts elsewhere in Europe, doubled down on its anti-Semitism which continued in more or less concealed forms under the communist regime. Following the latter's collapse in 1989, the far-right scene in Poland emerged into the open, with a plethora of various organisations taking a wide variety of sometimes conflicting positions on different issues (for useful overviews of Polish far-right scene, see Kajta 2020; McManus-Czubińska et al. 2003; Witkowski 2023). However, regardless of their political differences, Polish far-right nationalists assume a moral imperative, similar to Barres's, that the 'land and the dead' need to be defended against external enemies, epitomised by the EU, NATO, USA, left-wing ideologies and other 'globalist' forces (see, e.g., Doboszyński, Gmurczyk, and Holland 2013; Braun and Sommer 2020). These fears underpin ideological arguments and narratives that hark back to pre-WW2 Polish fascism.

How is this nationalism inflected on a transnational level? As with other emigration countries, Polish nationalism has always had a strong diasporic angle (Garapich 2016; Erdmans 1992, 1998; Gabaccia, Hoerder, and Walaszek 2007; Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann 2004), and this is an important cultural resource that contemporary Polish activists benefit from. Far-right nationalist groups have emerged in destinations of large waves of Polish migration since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. Following

the accession, more than two million Poles have emigrated to other European countries (Kaczmarczyk and Okólski 2008) with the United Kingdom as a key destination. Although Brexit and the pandemic have reduced these flows, and the number of Polish nationals living in the United Kingdom has come down from over 1 million in 2017 to over 700,000 in 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2021), this is still a significant population. As documented by the media, anti-racist activists and NGOs (Lowles and Collins 2018) and some rare research on the subject (Garapich, Jochymek, and Soborski 2024) Polish far-right groups in the United Kingdom are particularly active, and several Polish individuals have been convicted under British anti-terror legislation.[4] Notably, there has also been an active and public effort by British far-right organisations—such as British National Party, EDL, Britain First or Reform UK—to engage on various levels with Polish politics, network with Polish far-right parties and even attempt to recruit Poles as members.

Polish far-right groups active in Britain offer an opportunity to explore how their ideological output and activist repertoires reproduce organic nationalism's discourses on the soil and the dead in new settings. Focusing our lens on what ideas, symbols and themes are being omitted, redefined or amplified once they have migrated with their proponents is key to understanding the appeal of the far right and demonstrates its flexibility and adaptability. Compared with the Polish context our data reveals a lack of emotive tropes related to their new places of residence. They are generally silent on the issue of nature and place-bound identity when it comes to the British land. We did not hear overtly politicised or nostalgic praise or affectively phrased passages about the Welsh countryside or Scottish Highlands or English villages from our respondents.[5] In fact, some of them went as far as to declare their sense of alienation from and dislike of the British climate and landscape: *this weather, which was 80 per cent cloudy, depressing. I did not like the flora there at all. I did not like the landscapes at all. I hated those landscapes from the beginning* (Aleksander).[6] Where the 'land' or 'soil' are invoked in symbolic connection to nationalism they refer to Polish land and soil. In light of migration scholarship, this is hardly surprising. Migrants' incorporation into various domains of the host country is a long, sometimes multigenerational process, involving complex 'anchoring' (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2020) into the local labour market and even more complex processes of learning and acquiring new skills, knowledge and familiarity with local cultural codes, norms and values. However, considering the strength of territorial, 'topophilic' (Tuan 1974) sentiments on the far right, one can expect some other ways through which biological connection with places is established. We turn to one such case below where the dead buried in the foreign soil become a powerful medium for sustaining the sense of national identity among the activists who claim their ideological ancestors' symbolic lineage.

5 | Through the Dead to the Ownership of the Soil—Polish Deathscapes in Britain

As Zygmunt Bauman noted, under modernity, '[t]he ostensibly firmest foundations of identity (such as territory or racial stock) have been exposed [...] as irreparably fluid, ambivalent and otherwise unreliable' (1992, 696). This fluidity has made

reconstructions and reaffirmations of symbolic power by imagined national communities (Anderson 1991) especially important. In particular, this concerns nationalists engaged in processes of 'homing' which, according to Boccagni, who has theorised this term in a diasporic context, 'involves a strive to reproduce emotional and sensorial connections with a home (land) grounded in the collective memories of the past' (Boccagni 2022, 588). In our case, Polish migrants, torn between their nationalist commitments to the land and realities of modern economic-driven mobility, interpret pivotal junctures from a mythologised Polish history in a way that facilitates their homing, with Polish Spitfire pilots fighting for Britain during WW2 providing a useful symbolic connection.

Until they find a worthy way to enact their nationalist beliefs abroad such migrants experience a feeling of living in a contradiction. As we read in the blog of one of the activists who spent considerable time and resources maintaining graves of WW2 Polish veterans:

> Leaving my homeland, I felt like a traitor, but only until the day when I realized that it was not a betrayal but a mission. Over the years, I have met many distinguished Poles here and a completely different part of history than that I had known so far. First, I met a Home Army medic and participant in the Warsaw Uprising, who quickly became my mentor. It was thanks to this exceptional woman that I understood that I was not here without a reason. Today, I prefer to think that I am here to loudly speak for our Heroes [...] Leaving Poland showed me how much there is to do in Great Britain so that the memory of the Poles who once lived here – the Heroes – does not disappear and that the next generations of the Polish Diaspora [*Polonia*] remember them as well.[7]

Polish far-right activists we spoke to construct their political roles in terms of a 'community of values' (Anderson 2013), which revolves around ethnically essentialised nationhood, Catholicism and, as evident in the quote above, is carried through particular symbols of Polish military history, mainly associated with the WW2 and Polish participation in the Battle of Britain. As numerous activities, social media posts and data from our interviews indicate, Polish nationalists in Britain invest significant time and resources to promote the idea of Polish combatants as the essence of Polish character, equating warfare and fighting for freedom with Polishness. Most of our respondents were adamant that this history must be remembered and honoured, implying that it is under attack:

> *Wherever Poles appear over the years, in terms of wars* etc. *we have always taken the lead - bravery, honour.... And remembering, being able [...] to pay tribute to the people who lie there, who are forgotten, is something beautiful* (Stefan).

One of the key spaces where they are able to do that are numerous cemeteries with graves of Polish veterans and, monuments commemorating them which can be found across England. As one of the activists told us,

> *We went to the graveyard, graves ... graves of insurgents* etc. *Somewhere we managed to find some names, find insurgents who rest here somewhere, something like this. And I guess it started from that, just like this, we started cleaning* [the graves] (Zbigniew).

From the interviews we conducted there emerges a sense of obligation to protect the reconstructed memory these deathscapes embody: *Cleaning graves is more a question of self-respect, respect for history and the people who fought for my freedom. It is my duty. That's what I believe* (Zbigniew). At the same time, as another respondent (Olgierd) explains, the fulfilment of that obligation brings migrant activists closer to their country of origin:

Researcher: *And why did you clean those graves?*

Olgierd: *Because it's our patriotic duty [...] It's probably a form of expressing some kind of longing for the country, you know?*

Researcher: *Longing for the country?*

Olgierd: [...] *I do not know how to phrase it, but let us say something like that. Maybe not even that so much, but more of a desire to stay in touch with the country.*

Other activists emphasise the affinity that connects them to earlier generations of Poles who lived and died in Britain: *I feel an attachment to these people, that it is like... that we are connected by blood* (Witek). In reality, few of the activists concerned, who mostly arrived after 2004, are related in terms of family bonds to post-war refugees. Although some family connections existed (Garapich 2016; Burrell 2003) these two groups belong, by and large, to very different migratory cohorts, generations and social realms—one involves British Poles living in Britain for perhaps eight decades as well as their descendants who are British, the other—recent economic migrants taking advantage of the freedom of movement in the EU. Nevertheless, since late 2000s, there has been a significant increase in the interest from various Polish groups in Britain in the local history of their place of settlement, and this refers to the Polish history of a particular town or area. Here a local cemetery plays a prominent role and new groups have come out with the idea of grave search, maintenance and symbolic events such as grave cleaning rituals.

Interestingly, groups and individuals who maintain graves usually do not request permission from family members. Sometimes, when we asked whether they sought consent they responded with a surprised look, or an outright denial that this was required. In this sense, activists lay a collective claim to what is essentially an intimate space for individual mourning. They turn what is private and personal into public and communal; asking for permission would undermine this. Sometimes the initiative is met with protest and shock from the families concerned, but at other times with appreciation. The labelling of the graves as 'forgotten' also implies that the British descendants of the Polish veterans do not care or have de-polonised [pol. *wynarodowić*] themselves. One group calls itself 'Defenders of Polish Graves', and its activists compete in attending, cleaning

and 'claiming' particular graves as 'their own' to protect. There is a class element in that name too—as one activist sarcastically commented: *they are called Defenders of Polish Graves, since it sounds better than Cleaners of Polish Graves*. This development is also fuelled by the Polish state's own policies towards the diaspora (Nowosielski and Nowak 2022) and its focus on history and politics of memory employed especially by the previous Polish right-wing government of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) (Jaskulowski and Majewski 2023a). This involved, in particular, the development of the cult of so-called Cursed Soldiers, members of post-1945 underground guerrilla units (Jaskulowski and Majewski 2023b). These policies mean that funding from the Polish state for Poles abroad engaging in such activities is available and numerous organisations benefit from it. Unsurprisingly, given that Polish graves in the United Kingdom is a limited resource, conflicts and tensions between groups occur. Grave maintenance has become a source of prestige and funding, thus also subject to competition.[8]

Apart from grave-cleaning rituals, a number of events attended or organised by Polish far-right groups in Britain takes place around commemoration dates and locations. These include gatherings of activists and officials for anniversaries of the start of the WW2, Warsaw Uprising, or the Katyń massacre. While these events are attended by broader public, far-right activists are particularly involved in organising, publicising and ritualising these events, with flags, flares and public speeches voicing nationalistic stances. We must stress that the far-right groups that organise these events are not numerous in terms of membership. However, they are very vocal in public spaces and, as mentioned, have caught attention of the British media and authorities. Sometimes this resulted in controversies as some groups were refused entry to cemeteries due to their association with the far right. One group organised a commemoration event in front of a Polish military monument, without seeking formal permission, which later drew condemnation from the official carers of that particular monument. Again, the group involved made a direct claim to that monument as Polish, hence theirs to organise an event around it, which included flares, and a nationalist hip-hop song by a well-known Polish far-right rapper who appeared on a large mobile screen streamed from Poland.

Polish activists regularly post pictures of various Polish soldiers' graves on social media. The dimension of 'homing' (Boccagni 2022) is evident here too, especially as the figure of a Polish WW2 combatant corresponds on various levels with Britain's own memorisation of the WW2 and resonates in debates on the legacy of the Empire and search of a new, post-Brexit sense of purpose on a global stage. There is certainly hope on the part of our interviewees that their actions can contribute towards appreciation of Polish heroism from British hosts:

Stefan: *Maybe some Englishman passing by, looking at what is happening there – "well, there are some people in the cemetery, they are lighting flares, some march is going by, Polish flags, why are they doing this etc." – maybe it will open someone's eyes.*

Researcher: *What for?*

Stefan: *To appreciate what [Polish] people did for them. So that next year he might read about these people who lie in this grave, in this cemetery. Maybe next year he might take, if he has one, his son, his grandson or he himself might come to this cemetery, might say: "look, here lies someone who lost his life for this, for us to live in a free country".*

While the transnational dimension of the Polish-British far right is evident here, both symbolically—Polish bodies buried in the British soil—and organisationally, with increasing recognition from British activists and groups, there are limits to how far this transnationalism can go. Several activists showed awareness of their contradictory position in being a 'nationalist abroad' and that, in principle, a true nationalist should stay put. One, for example, declared *we do not want to move furniture in a house where we are guests*—a phrase conveying that in essence they will never be 'home'. That is why Polish activists recognise some political issues and debates as a British 'business': *I do not want to be a hypocrite, so I'm certainly not going to organise Piccadilly protests on the main promenade in Manchester to convince the English to some anti-Muslim views or whatever* (Witek). In this context, celebration of a particular interpretation of Polish history—as idealistic, militaristic and heroic, and efforts to protect its material legacy—Polish graves—becomes one of the directions that Polish far-right activism in Britain can deem appropriate and relevant:

> *I have something to do here, that there is also some work for people with my views and that it is not completely pointless to be a nationalist abroad, because there are people here who can be helped in some way or, let us say, places that are worth taking care of.* (Witek).

Cemeteries—in Witek's words, 'places that are worth taking care of'—are liminal spaces par excellence. They bind different worlds and ontological categories—the living and the dead, nature and culture, the biological and the social, past and present. Their liminality, as described in van Gennep's classic work (1960), allows us to move from one domain to the other and to deal with the inevitable, by socially accepting and turning it into a norm whereby the biological act of death becomes also a social one. In the migratory context deathscapes gain particular importance due to evoking notions of home, belonging and placemaking. Their home-making function makes deathscapes a contested terrain of different power dynamics, narratives and counternarratives (Kong 1999). From our perspective, they become important ritual spaces precisely because they epitomise the vital connection with the imaginary ancestors—and ideological predecessors—and the physical soil which may, in the case discussed here, be notionally foreign, but representative of Polish history, the kind of history which—as Marek, one of the activists, told us—is 'marked by graves'.[9]

Literature on migration and funerary culture among diasporic communities points to an important factor of place-making in decisions concerning what to do with the dead—send them back to the 'homeland' or bury them in their new 'home'—and immigrant cemeteries emerge as important substitutes for the nostalgically imagined 'home'. But cemeteries of migrants or members of diasporas are also a form of making a claim to a piece of land from host country because, as Hunter argues, '[d]eath in diaspora may be the occasion to lay what are perhaps the deepest and most permanent foundations for settlement and

belonging of migrants and subsequent generations, through burial and other funerary practices in the adopted homeland' (Hunter 2016, 249). In other words, cemeteries allow to connect 'here' with 'there' in the context of immigrant status and reconcile the root element of the soil with a vision of heroic military history through the bodies of real or imagined soldiers buried abroad. In the process, strongly masculine and heteronormative undertones of this discourse are reinforced as the figure of the Polish soldier evokes manhood embodied in a male heterosexual warrior—physically fit, able to defend the land, the soil and the vulnerable, especially women and children.

As van Gennep (1960) reminds us, one of main functions of rituals are 'restorative', aimed to respond to social crises (due to deaths, but also changes in collective status) and subsequent shifts in social structure. In the context of funerary rituals, we have a ritual of commemoration which is directed at the crisis of identity and status of Poles in Britain which, through a nationalist lens, brings an uneasy contradiction and tensions integral to nationalism as such but exacerbated by the contradiction of a 'nomad' nationalist. The literature on necropolitics and removal or retention of dead bodies for political purposes points to how in times of social upheaval the necropolitical becomes the political (Verdery 1999). There is an important strand of research linking necropolitics with long-distance nationalism, as in the case of work by Rudling (2020) on Ukrainians in Canada and the role of WW2 monuments and veterans' associations in the reproduction of a particular strand of nationalism with far-right elements. However, what our data shows is that the popularity of that particular ritual space in Britain stems not just from conscious and calculated political action—as in the case of long-distance nationalism—but also from tensions and contradictions in the positionalities of far-right nationalists abroad, and also 'short-distance' reproduction of white supremacy in relation to the British society. An ideologically committed far-right activist who leaves their homeland has their value system put in doubt and enters a space marred by social crisis hence the answer is the increased use of cultural, religious and symbolic resources to ease the tension inherent in being an immigrant strongly committed to the nationalists' cause. With its rich transnational military history and Catholic patriarchal discourse, Polish nationalism offers perfect spaces for rituals to restore ideological balance. This is dealt through finding new and reinventing old symbolic spaces where the power of the dead and the soil can be reestablished. The paradox of determinism versus agentic meaning-making practices discussed by Bauman is dealt with through placing ever stronger emphasis on the latter.

As perceived by Polish migrant far-right activists, the military history of the Polish diaspora evokes several symbolic tropes simultaneously—heroism, sacrifice, whiteness, freedom from tyranny, Europeanness, Christianity, masculinity and heteronormativity—all materialised in the physical presence of Polish graves in Britain. Although engaged in different networks, and sometimes not knowing each other, the Polish activists we interviewed seem to share a conservative, nativist, civilisationist worldview and occupy similar symbolic space related to Poland and its history, in particular in its articulation of white, European or cultural supremacy, class position, unique historical mission and place in a hierarchy of belonging in Britain all of which generates similar meanings and

practices. Through its connotation of military history, the 'defence' of Polish graves campaign puts down the group's roots in a new soil within a recognisable imaginary community of values and attributes.

This reproduction of military symbolism does not happen in a void. Part of it can be understood as a response to anti-Polish sentiments following the post-2004 influx of Poles and especially in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum (Rzepnikowska 2018), but this political mythology has a longer history in the British context, with post-WW2 Polish refugees playing a key role in it for eight decades. It is also a message to British people who interpret it in their own way, but likely with intended connotations intact. The role of Polish nationalist mythology, with its emphasis on defence—never of attack—of Christianity, Europe and Western civilisation has therefore a mutually reinforcing functionality for both the British and the Polish far right. For the former, it is set as a norm, an ideal model; for the latter, it is used as a discursive tool to privilege Poles on the racial hierarchy in Britain. The sense of belonging is (re)produced through discourses of white supremacy—whether more covert (as with our respondents' references to 'cultural proximity' of Poles to Brits) or overt (as with assertions to the need to defend 'the white Europe'). In any case, this is also a response to a demand from sections of British society as Polish nationalist mythology offers British politics a rich repertoire of symbolic capital and tropes that can be evoked to reactivate nostalgia for Britain's own past, the by-gone era of an ordered, hierarchical and ultimately white Britain. Employed keenly by the British right, these ideas are inherent to what Francesca Melhuish calls anti-immigrant 'Powelite nostalgia' based on 'the long-standing and widely shared emotional desire to restore white English colonial authority over "foreign" Others' (Melhuish 2024, 2). In that sense, Polish individuals who engage in far-right politics in deathscapes are not only claiming a piece of physical soil but also making politically meaningful claims to a particular vision of Britain and Britishness in its white and Christian incarnation, with a masculine, military symbolism around it. As we argue elsewhere, this synergy between Polish nationalism in its far-right incarnation and British fast-changing far-right scene is what partially explains the relatively large number of far-right activists among Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom (Garapich, Jochymek, and Soborski 2024).

6 | Conclusion

The symbolic tropes of 'the dead and the soil' are important components of the far-right ideological repertoire. But while the far right draws on the long tradition of political thought around rootedness and naturalised notions of national identity, in today's global context, with its compression of time and space along with increase and diversification of transnational mobility, far-right nationalism looks increasingly unfeasible, incompatible with the world on the move. Still, political imagination and practice are always in flux and fluctuate in ways that do not necessarily conform to logic but can be very effective in mobilising followers. Of course, the far-right groups and activists engaging in abovementioned activities may have also had other institutional and personal reasons to conceive and carry them out. Nevertheless, it is clear that what we are dealing with here is a unique way through which far-right

ideology and activism adapt and realign with a changing transnational context.

Given that organic nationalism celebrates a primordial bond between 'this people' and 'this land', migrant nationalists seem to represent a contradiction in terms. Due to the disconnection between migrants and their countries of residence, the affinity with the soil would seem to be lacking. And yet, an organic sentiment underpinning their nationalist beliefs is identifiable; in fact, there is a special effort on their part to sustain and cultivate it through intense political myth-making and ritualised meaning-making practices that claim parts of Britain as Polish, or 'colonise' it through a particular interpretation of history and its protagonists, the dead. While the British land may not, as such, be evoking loyalty or pride, specific places may become 'polonised' through symbolic engagements with deathscapes and activities that centre around the soil as a core concept of far-right ideologies and the dead as their main actors. This happens also due to the demand from the British side expressing its post-imperial nostalgia. The symbolic claim to pieces of British soil in sacred spaces of the cemetery connects Polish and British far-right ideological tropes and symbols, turning the ostensible contradiction of nationalism abroad into a relevant and politically effective transnational force.

Endnotes

[1] The far right is an umbrella concept which comprises both radical and extreme right, where the former accepts a majoritarian form of democracy from an illiberal, 'ethnocractic' perspective, while the latter is more or less openly anti-democratic with Nazism as its farthest extreme (Mudde 2019).

[2] Everyday transnationalism of the far right: an interdisciplinary study of Polish immigrants' participation in far-right groups in Britain (ES/W010151/2) https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FW010151%2F2

[3] ONR uses the name of its pre-war predecessor, which was an openly fascist and anti-Semitic organisation. Various local-level cells of ONR were formed in late 1990s, and it became a nationwide organisation in 2005. It numbers around 1000 members, runs several websites and publications.

[4] See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55063243; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48672929; https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jan/12/britain-first-fan-who-drove-van-at-london-restaurant-owner-walks-free?CMP=share_btn_url

[5] Though we acknowledge that some groups may have deeper sentiments towards English nature; this particularly concerns Polish neopagans (*rodzimowiercy*) who represent another strand of Polish nationalism.

[6] Names have been pseudonymized. Quotations from interviews conducted in Polish have been translated by the authors.

[7] https://karolkamilperuta.com/o-mnie/

[8] Some activists describe this activity as 'grobbing'—a neologism made of Polish noun *grób* [grave] and English ending -ing and denoting commemorative activities around graves. There is a tone of humour in that word, it is not used on formal occasions.

[9] A similar interpretation evident in Serbian nationalism is discussed by Čolović: 'The Serbs are what their dead are, Serbia is where her dead lie' (Čolović 2002, 27).

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