polish sociological review
1(197)'17
ISSN 1231 – 1413

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Between Dissonance and Convergence:
The Dynamics of Interactions Between Vernacular and Official (Non-) Memories of the Mass Murder of Germans by Poles in Nieszawa

Abstract: Nieszawa, which is situated in northern Poland, is unique in the history of Polish-German relations. In 1945 local Polish militiamen murdered a group of German civilians there. In 2000, after decades of public silence about this crime, the leaders of the local community decided to commemorate the victims. In this article, the mutual influence of three kinds of (non-)memory of the crime—national official, local official, and vernacular—are analyzed. In conclusion, some of the factors are identified that make members of a group that mistreated "Others" accept the truth about the event and acknowledge the need to discuss it publicly.

Keywords: vernacular memory, official memory, non-memory, local community, recategorization, public apology

The final period of World War II was a time of flight, expulsions, and much suffering for Germans living in regions liberated from Nazi occupation in Central and Eastern Europe. However, Soviet soldiers were not the sole perpetrators of the crimes against the Germans. Ethnic Poles and Czechs, including both civilians and representatives of the newly established authorities, also participated in the expulsion of their German neighbors and committed other acts of vengeance for the wrongdoing of the Nazi occupiers (Naimark 2002). Such an incident occurred in Nieszawa, which lies in northern Poland in the present Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship. During the night of April 7–8, 1945, militiamen from the district imprisoned a group of local Germans. The prisoners were mostly women, children, and elderly people. They were beaten and later taken to a nearby bank of the Vistula, where the Nieszawian militiamen, aided by others from nearby Aleksandrów Kujawski, ordered them to jump in (Golon 2005: 13–14). Those who did not drown were executed. Ten of the murder victims were identified; there are testimonies that speak of further victims (ibidem).

The uniqueness of Nieszawa in the context of Polish-German relations is not, however, limited to the tragic past. Thanks to the elites of the local community and in accord with the ideas of Christian and Polish-German reconciliation, the crime is now being commemorated. The aim of this article is to examine the dynamics of relation between how this event has been remembered in the past few decades by the local community, how Poland's national elites have conducted their "politics of memory," and how the attitudes of local elites have changed. In analyzing these relation-

ships, I have put special emphasis on the social factors that influenced the transition from a phase of dissonance (between the "tabooed" vernacular memory of the event and official non-memory) to the phase of convergence (between attitudes towards the "negative ingroup past" of the local elites and some residents). My analysis is founded on data from individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with three categories of respondents: the leaders of Nieszawa's local community—representatives of the local "symbolic elites" (former and current members of local authorities, teachers, priests, etc.); other citizens of Nieszawa of different ages and genders; and experts from outside the local community who have special knowledge in the field (such as journalists and historians). In total, during the two phases of research conducted in June and October 2014, 39 full interviews and 18 shorter ones (up to 20 minutes long) were conducted. In addition, media content and historical sources, including data from the investigation conducted by the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), were also critically analyzed and used in the study.

The "Negative Ingroup Past" as a Challenge to Collective Memory and Social Identity

From the perspective of the local community, the murders of the Germans in Nieszawa can be viewed as a "negative ingroup past," and thus as a situation in which members of the community committed crimes against members of another group(see Doosje et al. 2006). In light of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979), which indicates a connection between people's self-esteem and their perspective on their own group, confrontation with this type of past can constitute a serious challenge to a positive collective identity. Individuals who consider the group to be a crucial reference point in defining their own self, and hence perceive it and its past in a positive light, may consider information about this type of event a threat to the positive image of the community to which they belong (see Doosje et al. 2006). The more strongly they identify with the group and the more willing they are to glorify it, the more severe the threat becomes (Branscombe, Wann 1994; Roccas et al. 2004). According to Baumeister and Hastings (1997: 277), in such a situation, group members might employ one of two principal strategies: they can revise the image of the group or revise the meaning of the event. The first approach can be connected with the "working through" process, which makes it easier to accept and openly discuss the truth about the "negative ingroup past" (see Ricoeur 2004, LaCapra 2004). The strategy of revising the meaning of the event implies a number of actions aimed at depriving the event of its capacity to threaten the positive group identity and "pushing" the event into the area of social non-memory.[1] Not only do these practices deliberately avoid and ignore the "negative ingroup past," they also employ discursive methods of coping with the threat-

[1] Social non-memory, as understood by Elżbieta Neyman and Maria Hirszowicz, refers to both the acts of forgetting and the processes of "the tendentious blocking of certain elements" (2007: 76).

ening event, for example, by implicatory denial (Cohen 2001, Kurtiş, Adams, Yellowbird 2010).

Both the strategy of "revising the image of the group" and the strategy of "revising the meaning of the event" are realized in various domains of the collective memory, including in vernacular and official memories, as distinguished by John Bodnar (1992). Official memory "originates in the concerns of cultural leaders or authorities at all levels of society" (Bodnar 1992: 13). It is therefore created by the groups defined by Teun Van Dijk (2009: 5) as "symbolic elites," which include politicians, journalists, writers, teachers, scientists, and so forth. While analyzing the processes at a local level, it should be remembered that Bodnar uses the terms "cultural leaders" and "authorities" for elites functioning at all levels of society. This constatation, especially in the context of democratic societies, suggests that there are official memories existing at different levels of social life, rather than one monolithic discourse. These national, regional, and local official memories, however, are not the only domains of collective memory defined by Bodnar. He also distinguishes vernacular memory based on the "lived or shared experiences of small groups" (Bodnar 1992: 247). These experiences are stored in the autobiographic memory of the members of "small groups" and are transmitted to succeeding generations and to friends or neighbors (ibidem). Although the spheres of vernacular and official memory are analytically distinguished, they do interact with one another and are characterized by a lower or higher level of convergence (see ibidem). If elites "condemn to oblivion" the same events that are forgotten by other community members, or if they promote aspects of the past that exist in the vernacular memory in a similar form, then we can talk about a convergence between these two domains of collective memory. Dissonance between these two types of memory occurs when a given aspect of the past is remembered at the level of one domain but forgotten at the level of another, or when a given event is remembered at the level of both domains, yet its substance or the meanings associated with it differ (see Szacka 2006). Members of the elite, having at their disposal more resources than other community members, can effectively initiate social processes aimed at changing social consciousness and can thus cause discrepancies between official and vernacular memories to be eliminated. Initiatives undertaken by elites in the context of memory of a "negative ingroup past" are a special example of such actions. Members of symbolic elites can "silence" (Trouillot 1995) and "erase" (Bartov 2007) memories of shameful events in the vernacular memory, or they can take the opposite approach of making public apology for the crimes committed by their group members against members of other groups (Blatz, Ross 2011). When adequately performed, these apologies can influence the way the events are remembered by members of the perpetrators' community (see Wohl, Hornsey, Philpot 2011). The effectiveness of such actions results from a number of factors, including the substance of the apology (Blatz, Schumann, Ross 2009), the "social background" (Wohl, Hornsey, Philpot 2011), and social perception of the motives of the leaders who are apologizing (Blatz, Ross 2011). The case of Nieszawa, which held commemorations of the German victims in the spirit of public apology, draws attention to the relation between the effectiveness of such actions, the authority of the leaders undertaking them, and the image of the victims—both the image present in vernacular memory and the one promoted by the symbolic elites.

The Dissonance between the Vernacular Memory and Official Non-Memory under Communism (1945–1989)

Local vernacular memory concerning the crime against the German residents most likely began to take shape in the first few days following the event, as is indicated in testimonies given by members of the older generation of Nieszawians during an investigation conducted by the IPN.[2] The memory has been preserved for years in conversations among families and groups of friends in Nieszawa, as is proven by information obtained from different generations of residents during individual in-depth interviews:

[I heard it] from my grandmother. And she heard it from my great-grandmother, who lived through the war (male, about 30 years old).

Having been born in Nieszawa, I've known about this crime since my early childhood. People from Nieszawa would (…) talk (…) among their family members, among close and not-so-close friends, neighbors, acquaintances (leader).

Some residents considered redefinition of the event more useful than the strategy of "revising the image of the group." In local discourse employing implicatory denial (see Cohen 2001) the entire responsibility for the crime is placed on the officers from nearby Aleksandrów Kujawski. Thus an account of the event that helped to create an unambiguously positive image of the Nieszawian Poles and did not threaten the interests or good names of the perpetrators was popularized:

Others escaped; only old men and women stayed, so they drowned them. (…) They came from Aleksandrów (male, about 85 years old).

However, in the Nieszawians' vernacular memory there was also a tendency to admit the guilt of the local Poles involved in the killings. As part of this tendency, information about who they were and their place in the local community was shared:

People talked among themselves and knew who had done it, but nobody had been caught red-handed so it was difficult to point a finger at anyone (male, about 70 years old).

My grandmother named names and said, "This man; that man" (leader).

The positive image of the German victims seems to be one of the major reasons why knowledge of the "negative ingroup past" prevailed in the vernacular memory of at least some residents of Nieszawa. The murdered Germans were, and still are, relatively often remembered as friendly and helpful neighbors:[3]

[2] See witness interrogation protocols in the documents from the investigation by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) into murders of local German citizens by officers of the former Civic Militia (*Akta śledztwa w sprawie zabójstw w 1945 r. w Aleksandrowie Kujawskim i na terenie byłego powiatu nieszawskiego zamieszkałych tam osób narodowości niemieckiej przez funkcjonariuszy byłej Milicji Obywatelskiej*, sygn. S7/01/Zk).

[3] Statements about the positive relations between the German victims and the Polish community in Nieszawa appear not only in the interviews, but also in testimonies given by witnesses (Nieszawa residents) questioned as part of the above-mentioned investigation conducted by the Institute of National Remembrance (*Akta śledztwa w sprawie zabójstw w 1945 r.…*, sygn. S7/01/Zk).

She [the speaker's grandmother—author's note] *told me that there were only "Nieszawians" here. There were no Germans, Jews, Poles (…). So relations were friendly here* (leader).

The Germans who were killed then were called (…) by the locals (…) "the good Germans." Those were Germans who helped Poles throughout the entire occupation period; they protected people (male, about 50 years old).

Various ethnic groups (…) lived here in harmony up to the occupation (…) they helped each other—this I know from the stories of my mother and aunt, and my uncle (male, about 60 years old).

Memories of positive contact with the German minority were shared among friends and families and allowed the victims to be perceived, in accord with the recategorization mechanism,[4] not as members of a hostile ethnic group who deserved vengeance for the Nazis' crimes but as representatives of broader social categories common to both perpetrators and victims: the Poles and Germans of Nieszawa, "members of Nieszawa's community," or simply "people." Such a process may have made it easier to feel empathy for them and inclined the residents to share the truth about the tragedy:

Citizens were killed here—civilians: women, children (…) of German nationality (female, about 50 years old).

At the end of World War II, Nieszawians—Poles—killed on the embankment a dozen or so Germans who were also residents of Nieszawa (female, around 25 years old).

Even though knowledge of the crime against the Nieszawian Germans existed in the vernacular memory of the local community after World War II, it had no chance of being present in official memory during the Communist period. The truth about the German victims who had been killed by Poles in Nieszawa contradicted the image—promoted by the Polish communist authorities—of the Germans as eternal aggressors (Dudek 2009: 23). In the framework of official national memory, it was only possible to discuss publicly those elements that strengthened a positive national identity by commemorating the victims of German war crimes or the heroes who fought against the Nazis (Traba 2000: 60). Consequently, events that destroyed the coherence of the positive image of the national community—such as crimes against Germans—were subject to the practices of erasing and silencing. Discussing the crime in public was likely to trigger repression by the authorities; thus the slaughter was the subject of conversations occurring only in "safe interactional spaces" such as the family or the neighborhood circle. Fear of repercussions for spreading the "wrong" version of the past resulted in public silence about the tragedy of the German neighbors (Golon 2005: 14):

Obviously, nobody wanted to talk about it (…) There was some kind of peace and stability; everyone had a job and wanted to maintain the status quo (male, about 60 years old).

[It] *was a time (…) when you had to think about what you wanted to say so as not to make trouble for yourself* (female, about 70 years old).

[4] Gaertner et al. in explaining the role of this mechanism wrote that "recategorization is not designed to reduce or eliminate categorization but rather to structure a definition of a group categorization in ways that reduce intergroup bias and conflict" (Gaertner et al. 1993: 5–6). The recategorization which allows the members of two different groups to perceive each other as the representatives of just one common category "can be achieved by increasing the salience of existing common superordinate group memberships or by introducing new factors (e.g. common tasks or fate) that are perceived to be shared by the memberships" (ibidem: 6).

Another important factor contributing to this situation was fear of the possible revenge of some of the murderers, who became "important officials" in Aleksandrów Kujawski and Nieszawa:

Was there fear? (…) Definitely, particularly because the people directly involved (…) were important officials in Aleksandrów Kujawski, in the Aleksandrów district—so the fear was justified (leader).

The fact that some of the murderers were high-ranking local officials discouraged the citizens of Nieszawa from talking in public about their past acts against the Germans. On the other hand, it was a paradox that the murderers' "social visibility" kept vernacular memory of the murder alive:

The elderly would say: (…) "that man walks with the priest in the procession, but he was pushing the Germans off the bank" (male, about 80 years old).

A German girl saved and adopted by one of the local fishermen probably had a similar influence on the local community. As an adult, she worked at the local school:

One girl was saved from the slaughter (…) and then she lived in Nieszawa and taught at the school, but she's already passed away (male, about 70 years old).

The "social visibility" of the people connected with the tragic event in the past can be interpreted in categories of "retainers" of local vernacular memory of the crime. It seems that their presence in the local public space had more influence on the vernacular memory of the murder than did material traces of the German minority.

Reducing Dissonance and Achieving Convergence: The Role of Local Leaders in the Process of De-tabooing and Working Through the "Negative Ingroup Past" in Nieszawa After 1989

In 2000, the local elites undertook the first steps to reduce the dissonance between the official image, promoted under communism, of Polish-German relations during World War II and the Nieszawians' vernacular memory about the crime. That year, two local priests—Fr. Wojciech Sowa, the parish priest, and Fr. Zdzisław Pawłowski—began the process of commemorating the German victims (Morawiecki 2001a). However, before that could happen, a change had to take place in the normative aspect of official memory at the national level. This happened via a process called "the democratization of memory." According to Marek Ziółkowski, its nature was not a change in the content of collective memory but rather its form: the state lost its monopoly on public discourse about the past, and narratives that had been marginalized, silenced, or erased could finally emerge (Ziółkowski 2001: 3). The story of the murder of the German minority, which had been preserved in the vernacular memory of the Nieszawians, was undoubtedly such a narrative. However, changes in the normative aspect of national official memory were not accompanied by a transformation of the norms conditioning vernacular memory of the murder in Nieszawa. The narratives of this event, though transmitted to subsequent generations in safe interactional spaces, were

taboo in the public sphere both because of the post-communist fear of the negative consequences of "digging into the past" and because of the shame caused by the crime against the German neighbors:

I think they didn't want to dig (…) It was (…) based on a kind of satisfaction that it was okay, we survived somehow, times are better than they used to be, something happened, but let's leave it now, no need to delve into it (expert).

[The residents] *didn't want to publicize it, to get involved. It was taboo here, no one wanted to talk about it* (male, about 70 years old).

Consequently, the crime was discussed in the local community in a manner termed "aloud-silent" (*głośnocicho*) by a Nieszawa resident, who was quoted in Jędrzej Morawiecki's article (2001a):

The slaughter is still talked about as in '45: aloud-silent—out loud at home and outside not a word. Because there's nothing to be proud of.

The increasing democratization of social life was the factor that allowed a slow and limited transmission of information from the vernacular memory to official memory to occur, in spite of shame or post-communist fears (Morawiecki 2001b). Knowledge of the event was shared with respected local leaders who sometimes entered the safe interactional space. Such situations included the local priests' visits in parishioners' homes:

He [Fr. Sowa—author's note] *had contact* [with the residents] *and many people told him stories, which helped him reconstruct those tragic events* (leader).

It was close to his tenth anniversary in the parish, and during one of the visits (…) someone opened up (leader).

Both of Nieszawa's priests, FF. Sowa and Pawłowski, were inspired to initiate public utterance of the truth by John Paul II's call for debt forgiveness in connection with the Great Jubilee in 2000 (Morawiecki 2001a, Wasicka 2005: 37):

When Fr. Wojtek [Sowa] *came with Fr. Zdzisław* [Pawłowski] *and started analyzing the material, the memories, they realized there was no remedy but to speak out* (leader).

The first opportunity to publicize knowledge of the events of 1945 was at the Advent Recollection held in December 2000 by Fr. Pawłowski (Morawiecki 2001a). He attempted to accentuate the connections between the victims, the perpetrators, and the contemporary local community:

We are (…) in debt to the murdered victims, among whom were innocent people, especially children. They have no relatives to care for their memories. They only have us, members of the same community as those who harmed them (after Morawiecki 2001a).

Not only did Pawłowski perform "recategorizing" actions, but he also prevented the Nieszawians from being unjustly burdened with the crimes of other group members, which—as some researchers have suggested—can result in hostile reactions to these activities. He emphasized that the basis of their actions was not to make the residents responsible for sins against the German minority but to preserve memory of the innocent victims:

None of us, present here, are personally responsible for the crime. Most of us were born after the war, and today's elders were still children at the time (…). By acknowledging the crime none of us need feel accused (after Morawiecki 2001a).

The ecumenical gatherings of October 16, 2001 and June 30, 2002 were attended by Lutheran clergy and were a continuation of the activities to commemorate the tragic events (Morawiecki 2001a, Wasicka 2005). At the end of the second commemoration, the participants proceeded to the riverbank, where they paid homage to the victims of the murder (Wasicka 2005: 37–39). During the first mass, Fr. Sowa depicted the German victims as members of the same social group as their Polish murderers and the contemporary residents of Nieszawa. He defined them as "citizens of this town" and "neighbors," in line with a strategy of "revising the group's image:"

A dozen or so citizens (…) who belonged to the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (…) became victims (…) of a brutal attack by those who allegedly acted on behalf of the authorities. (…) For many years they have not received the commemoration they deserve. They were, after all, our neighbors—the citizens of this town! (…) Today, when we are no longer afraid, we can say before God—I am sorry (after Morawiecki 2001b).

Sowa's recategorizing actions were supported by the public testimony of Barbara Gilewicz, a resident of Nieszawa, who remembered the pre-war relations between the Poles and the Germans. In her speech, she drew attention to the positive relations in the interwar period between the multinational residents of Nieszawa, some of whom were victims of the later crime:

Pre-war Nieszawa. Poles, Germans, and Jews lived together. There were no signs of conflict, no demonstrations of nationalism (…) My father, who worked in the municipal power station in Nieszawa, had many friends among the local Germans (…) I remember Mrs. Pieper well—she was a victim of the later crime. She was a good, calm person. (after Morawiecki 2001b)

The events of August 29, 2004 were the final phase in the top-down process of detabooing the "negative ingroup past." On that date, Nieszawa celebrated Polish-German reconciliation, with the involvement not only of priests but also other representatives of the local elites. Almost half a year earlier, on 29 March 2004, in the spirit of recategorization, members of the Nieszawa City Council had formulated their stance on "the commemoration of innocent murdered citizens of Polish and German nationality who lived in the Nieszawa district in 1939–1945." They pointed out that "the enormous number of crimes committed by the German aggressors against the Polish nation during World War II, and especially against Poles in Nieszawa in 1939 (…) cannot (…) be used to justify the crimes committed in 1945 against the innocent residents of German nationality in Nieszawa and the surrounding areas." In concluding, members of the city council stated that "memory of the innocent murdered Polish and German residents should be honored by a monument in an appropriate spot in Nieszawa" (as cited in Wasicka 2005: 41). Such a monument, thanks to the efforts of the local leaders and people involved in the matter, was already in place before the commemorations in August. It is located on the bank of the Vistula, a couple dozen meters from the site of the tragedy. On the monument itself there is an inscription which commemorates the suffering of Poles and Germans, who are included in the single category of "innocent victims": "To the innocent Polish and German victims of war and

violence in the Nieszawa district in 1939–1945." The speech that Andrzej Nawrocki, mayor of Nieszawa, gave during the ceremony of Polish-German reconciliation was in a similar recategorizing tone. He spoke about "innocent victims" and "neighbors" and emphasized, in accordance with the message on the monument, that there were victims on both the Polish and German sides (Wasicka 2005: 67).

The celebrations were attended by the local authorities, representatives of the voivodeship, Polish and German Catholic and Lutheran clergy, representatives of the Bundestag and the German Consulate General in Gdańsk, and residents of Nieszawa (Wasicka 2005). According to some local leaders, the input of Nieszawians from outside the group of the local symbolic elites was very small, and the most common attitude towards the local leaders' initiatives was indifference:

There were very few people involved (…) some members of Nieszawa's elites, whereas the rest of the community was completely indifferent to it; they were not at all interested and I think (…) they viewed it with reserve (leader).

Similar conclusions concerning the engagement of the residents in the commemoration can be drawn in regard to the small number of respondents who declared that they had participated in the commemorations of the murdered Germans. Public affirmation of what used to be a taboo in the local community became a catalyst for change in vernacular memory of the crime, though. The small number of persons who refused to participate in the research and the rather high number of participants who admitted that the slaughter was committed by Nieszawians can be regarded as indicators of this change, which concerned at least a part of the local community. The contrast can be explained by the fact that persons who did participate probably spread the message conveyed by these actions. The change in beliefs concerning the crime, among at least some of the people who participated in the commemorations, was the first stage of the process. In the case of residents who had no grounded, positive, or "recategorized" image of the victims, the leaders' actions may have created or consolidated such an image and helped them to accept the need for speaking openly about the event. As for the participants in whose memory such an image of the German victims already existed, the change in their attitude was affected not so much by the form of the elites' discursive actions, but by the very fact that leaders initiated public discussions of the event. Those among the Nieszawians who, by participating in the commemorations, changed their attitude toward the "negative ingroup past" have most probably become the "bearers" of the change. They most likely have transmitted to other residents the information about the leaders' actions and the de-tabooed knowledge of the event.

Conclusions

The actions to commemorate the "negative ingroup past" that were undertaken by representatives of Nieszawa's symbolic elites proved to be an important stimulus in changing the attitudes of at least some members of the local community. By the same token, they made it possible to transition from the phase of dissonance between the tabooed vernacular memory and the official non-memory of these events to the phase of achieving at least partial convergence between local leaders' and residents' attitudes. After analyzing the actions

to commemorate the slaughter of the German residents, I would like to draw attention to two factors that could also influence the effectiveness of public apologies in other social contexts. The first concerns the social authority of members of the elite who undertake actions to disclose a "negative ingroup past"; the second involves the way in which victims are presented in the public discourse.

It is clear from the data collected that Fr. Wojciech Sowa, the parish priest of the Roman Catholic Church in Nieszawa and one of the main initiators of the commemorations, was a leader whose opinion was respected in the local community:

Fr. Sowa was a very buoyant parish priest, he cared a great deal for culture (…) Everyone respected the parish priest (expert).

[He] *was the priest who would go (…) beyond religious matters (…), a unique man* (male, about 70 years old).

The respect which Fr. Sowa enjoyed among his parishioners definitely affected their attitude towards the initiatives he undertook. The fact that such actions were initiated by a leader who was deeply rooted in the local community and was vigorously acting to its benefit helped those who participated in the commemorations, or heard about them, to accept the message they conveyed.

Not only does the example of Nieszawa show the role of an authority figure who publicly speaks about the "negative ingroup past," it also emphasizes the significance of how the participants in the event are presented. The representatives of the local symbolic elites in Nieszawa attempted to restore the memory of positive experiences between the Nieszawian Germans and the Polish community, thus making it easier to perceive the murdered people as members of the same group to which the perpetrators and the contemporary residents of the city belong. In Nieszawa, this type of message was furthered by the vernacular memory of positive relations between the Polish residents and their German neighbors. However, this situation is not necessarily the rule in the case of other communities whose members have inflicted harm on "Others" and whose elites have resolved to make a public apology. Therefore, in such cases, rooting the recategorizing rhetoric in the narrative of the positive relations that existed between the victims and other members of the community seems to be all the more important.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on research within the project "Social mechanisms of remembering and forgetting mass murders committed by Poles on members of other ethnic groups. A comparative study of two local communities" funded by the National Science Centre Poland [Narodowe Centrum Nauki]. The funds were allocated on the basis of decision no. DEC-2013/09/N/HS6/00435. I would like to thank Professor Marek Kucia, for helpful suggestions and critical comments.

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