

CHRONICLE

Acta Poloniae Historica
109, 2014
PL ISSN 0001-6892

Dritte Tagung Deutsche Polenforschung 'Wissen, Verstehen, Übersetzen: Nachbarn im Dialog', Gießen, Germany, March 20–22, 2014

The conventions of German experts on Poland have a short history behind them. The first such meeting took place in 2009 in Darmstadt and the following one, two years later in Mainz. The third, held this year, has been hosted by the University in the Hessen town of Gießen. With no considerable background in the German scholarly tradition, compass has become a major advantage of the event. Its first edition saw more than a hundred researchers of Polish history and culture, with the following two editions gradually expanding. In 2009, there were seven sections in session, with nine two years later and sixteen most recently. The number of attendees, the public and the contributors, has been growing proportionally, hitting less than three hundred lately. Should this trend be seen collapsing in a future, the reason would probably be the financial burden related to the organisation of such large a conference – rather than lack of interest on the part of German scholars.

One might obviously doubt whether a period as short as the one between the Darmstadt and the Gießen encounter allows at all for grasping some relevant tendencies. With this proviso in mind, it seems that the gradual increase in the number of active participants has over the last five years been accompanied by subtle changes as to the subject matters debated and institutional background. The former aspect consist in the incrementing prevalence of historical and culture-related topics over those representing political or literary sciences. In parallel, the number of contributors representing scientific institutions whose mission is research in the field of Polish-German relations has been shrinking (such entities including e.g. the German Historical Institute, Warsaw; the Berlin-based Centre for Historical Research, Polish Academy of Sciences; or, the 'Willy Brandt' Centre for German and European Studies; and, no less importantly, the Viadrina University in Frankfurt [Oder]). Participants have been arriving in increasing numbers, for a change, from various German scientific hubs where Poland has no special statutory role. This process can be understood as a sign of normality: the neighbouring country, associated with Germany and the Germans by multiple relations and a shared history, is so interesting a topic that it goes without institutional incentive. Penetrating Poland's history and, simply,

interest in this country comes as a mere consequence of individual curiosity of the world, reinforced by the close presence and influence of Polish-German neighbourhood.

The organisational aspect plays an important part with an event of this size. The fundamentals of the agenda have remained unchanged since 2009. At the recent edition, the choice and exploration of the offer was facilitated by a voluminous reader containing abstracts of the conference papers. The agenda's pillars were the parallel thematic sessions and, subsequently, so-called *Zwischenzeiten* (presentations of institutions, scholarly networks, books and research teams, delivered 'in the meantime', between the sessions) and, finally, brief communications on doctoral and 'habilitation' projects. The pressure of time was felt the most severely during a ninety-minutes-long plenary session focused on these projects. Each of the more-than-twenty speakers (yes, indeed) was offered 2.5 minutes, a situation compared by one of them (wickedly though aptly) to speed dating.

With this particular group, as well as among the lecturers in thematic sessions, aspects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century were dominant. Within this chronological framework, certain problems enjoyed particular interest. With a closer look at the eighty papers delivered, noteworthy is a strong representation of history of science – to be more precise: transfer of knowledge and its social and political determinants and conditions. Lesser in number, though still visible, were the presentations on collective memory (a much exploited topic at the previous editions) and cultural relationships (particularly, translations – being one of the slogans of the most recent convention). An underrepresentation of anniversary topics seems significant to me: one session (much shorter than the other ones) was devoted to the historicising of the year 1989, whereas a half of the session on WWI was composed of papers discussing various forms of violence in East-Central Europe after the combat in the Western Front ended; this, in fact, made the session's connection with the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War rather pretextual. Compared to the two jubilee sessions, topics such as environmental history (with papers referring, mainly, to the history of environmental protection in Poland) or cultural borderlands where Polish-German relations played not-quite-significant part, if any at all (e.g. the session on Polish-Turkish relations, or the nineteenth-century history of Wilno) stood out even more. Finally, the session on transformations of Polish trade unions since Poland's entry into the EU and the one on linguistics are worth mentioning.

This enumeration serves a more extensive purpose than to simply fulfil the reporter's duty. During the last year, the organisers of the *Tagung* sessions have been competing as part of an open call for sessions; hence, the subject-oriented arrangement of the convention gives some idea about what is really going on in Germany's Polish studies. So, what is actually attested by this

extensive choice of research propositions and completed studies, connected, in one way or another, with history and culture of Poland?

First, notable is the large number of academic centres producing studies on Poland. As already said, nowadays, most of these institutions are not specialised in Polish studies as a scholarly discipline, but compose a pretty representative selection of 'regular' German universities. Second, a great majority of participants represent the younger or middle generation. This fact is, clearly enough, of no relevance in appraisal of the quality of their work, and it makes one hope that the wave of interest in the topics in question would not be expected to tumble within the decades to come. Taking the opportunity, the linguistic competences of German scholars are worth of appreciation, especially with those individuals who are not personally related with Poland. Command of Polish is not, and in all probability will not be, common among German humanists, but has apparently ceased to be unique, for good. Thirdly, taking a closer look at the subjects of the papers presented, a shift clearly appears from strictly bilateral questions toward a history open to the other nations and problems. Polish-German relations appeared at the Gießen sessions most frequently in a broader context of regional and intellectual history.

Most of these phenomena are well illustrated by the section on Polish-Jewish knowledge transfer (*Polnisch-Jüdischer Wissenstransfer in der Neuzeit*, facilitated by François Guesnet and Katrin Steffen, commented by Yvonne Kleinmann). As was the case with most of the *Tagung* sessions, almost complete absence of the issue of Polish-German relations was significant. Yet, this particular session was typical not only with respect to this dimension but also the age structure of its contributors and the chronological placement of their research projects. The team of four lecturers included two PhD students and two experienced researchers. A half of their papers concerned twentieth-century issues, one extended to the nineteenth century and another one spanned a larger temporal compass. Each of the participants gave the term *transfer* a slightly different meaning. For Mr. Guesnet, transfer consisted in the migration of the *plica polonica* motif in space and between the sphere of folk beliefs and medicine – that is, from the first, sixteenth-century mentions from the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, up to the accounts of nineteenth-century French, German, and British doctors who discerned in the Polish plait certain genetically pathological symptoms. In parallel to these two transfers, another one occurred, where *plica polonica* gradually ceased to be an exotic curiosity from the extremities of Europe, turning into a tool of exclusion and stigmatisation affecting the Jewry, in the first place (as illustrated by *Judenzopf* – the new name of the phenomenon, which grew increasingly popular since the eighteenth century). Katrin Steffen proposed an approach whereby 'transfer' consisted in the Jewish physicians joining the Polish racial discourse – in the first place, the aspect of it that

focused on anthropological evaluation of the biological value of Jews for the Polish national organism. This lecturer has shown how the scientific racism, lined with anti-Semitism, penetrated into the ideas formulated by exponents of the stigmatised minority group. Dorothea Warneck presented in her paper the role of knowledge transfer, in the most traditional sense of the notion: she described the late birth of Jewish collections and museums in Polish lands, directly influenced by, primarily, the Polish model. Finally, Stephan Stach dealt with the role played by Jewish collaborators of the Institute of Nationalities Affairs in the shaping of the Second Republic's internal policies after the Coup of May 1926; in this particular case, the transfer went from a group of experts to the Polish authorities.

The significant shift in the interests of German scholars, from Polish-German relations as a narrow concept toward regional and supra-regional issues – including those loosely connected, if at all connected, with Germany – harmonised with the topics of the convention's fringe events. The overall political situation has particularly affected this very section of the agenda. The deliberations were preceded by a panel discussion titled *Quo vadis, Ukraine?* (with contributions from the political scientist Andrei Gawrich, the historians Nazar Hucul and Anna-Veronika Wendland, and Gabriele Lesser, a long-time correspondent for German mass media in Poland), with a ceremonial lecture delivered by the Ukrainian fiction author Yuriï Andrukhovych. However paradoxical it may sound, it seems that the obviousness with which this convention of German Polish students expressed its interest in the Ukrainian affairs testifies to a well-working communication between the scholars on both sides of the Oder – more efficiently than any official declaration of Polish-German friendship and cooperation may do. Apparently, they have assumed, on both sides, that the topic is of importance for Poland, and thus ought to be of interest to German experts dealing with Polish matters.

The Gießen *Tagung* has shown an attractive face of a dynamic and prospective research direction, which is basically good news for Polish historians. In a neighbour country there has got formed a sizeable and interesting group of people keen on Poland and things Polish, who perforce look at our country from a somewhat different perspective. Let us hope that this would allow us to witness a clearer-than-ever embodiment of the final segment of the convention's motto: may we be the '*Nachbarn im Dialog*', neighbours in not only a political but, in the first place, scholarly dialogue.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Maciej Górny