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What is new in Polish historiography?

Summary: The paper discusses core issues of the Polish Historiography, focusing on main challenges. The author observes a process of its transformation, resulting among other from significant changes in a Polish social reality at the beginning of the 20th century. Main conclusion of this brief analysis is that Polish historiography differs from Western historiographical discussion, being less interdisciplinary and focusing on political history. The author diagnoses also a decreasing role of professional historians in explaining the past. On the other hand, Polish historiographical reflection differs also from former Soviet Bloc countries, with their ethnocentric historiographies avoiding discussion on crucial, yet often uneasy or even painful, issues.

Keywords: Polish historiography, methodology, Pierre Nora, Jerzy Topolski

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I. It appears that the answer to the question stated in the title is only possible in the form of an essay showcasing new phenomena in the Polish historiography, but by no means pretending to provide their comprehensive description and explanation. I would like to focus on the condition of the contemporary Polish historiography and its future challenges. I propose that Polish historiography at the beginning of the twenty-first century is in a state of deep transformation caused by several overlapping phenomena. They pertain to, first, the internal metamorphosis of historiography itself as understood by its creators and historical works; second, key reassessment of the relations between the academic historiography and the social life, which directly corresponds with the profound shift of the historic knowledge in the intellectual tool repertoire of the modern man, which takes place before our very eyes.

II. To provide a well-detailed background, I will start with the latter. The evidence that we, as historians, lose the symbolic *reign of souls* over the shape of historic knowledge, is abundant. It is not only in Poland that this development happens; as a community, we cannot find our place in a world permeated with the cult of the present and the future. It has radically changed even since the second half of the last century. The development of memory devices makes us cast away the art of remembering. Overwhelmed by an excess of information, we have more and more trouble with its selection. Lastly, we are unable to react to change of the history's place in its existential dimension. Recent years have been marked by the acceleration of historic processes which changed the position of history. It used to stabilise and legitimise the socio-political order for many centuries. Nowadays its influence is destabilising; it creates new dangers and poses new questions to which we, as historians, often do not have answers.

While trying to understand the changes in the socio-political landscape accompanying the development of historiography, we should indicate three phenomena. The first of them is the rapid intensification of using the past for the purpose of politics, tourism and trade.¹ The past becomes merchandise, competing with other goods, governed, to an extent, by the

¹ P. Nora, *Czas pamięci*, "Res Publica Nowa" 2001 (7), p. 41.

same laws of market as any other products. This situation necessitates the commercialisation of history, leading to sensationalism, cultivating stereotypes, simplification and radicalisation historic argumentation.

In contemporary Poland there is a demand for a historical knowledge market. For a few years, leading newspapers and weeklies such as “Polityka”, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, “Newsweek” or “Rzeczpospolita” have been publishing in mass quantities all kinds of historical supplements dedicated to Polish rulers or the most important battles in world history, popularise recent history of our neighbours and strive to inspire discussions about the role of history in our daily life. Lately, the aforementioned “Gazeta Wyborcza” has embarked on a unique initiative to publish a book series dedicated to Polish and world history, comprising twenty-one volumes written by foreign and domestic authors. Broadly defined history is also of interest for other, more elite socio-cultural periodicals, namely “Przegląd Polityczny” from Gdańsk, which has been popularising texts about the history of ideas for many years now, “Arcana” from Kraków, which shows new and controversial recent history events, “Borussia” from Olsztyn, which inspires studies about, i.e., the Polish-German border region, or “Tygiel Kultury” from Łódź, which explores the multicultural heritage of that city.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum, opened in 2004, attracts great and unwavering attention; preparations are underway for the Museum of Polish History, the Museum of the Second World War, and the Museum of Communism. A great deal of positive things can be said about the popularising activity of the Public Education Bureau (Pl. *Biuro Edukacji Publicznej*) supervised by the Institute of National Remembrance (Pl. *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN*). It publishes the *Institute of National Remembrance Bulletin* (Pl. *Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej*), addressed to a broad range of readers (over a hundred issues have been published so far); it also organises sessions, exhibitions, and historical competitions for school students. The KARTA Centre also plays a significant role. It has published a magazine “Karta” for twenty-six years; it keeps the Eastern Archives devoted to Poles victimised in the USSR territories, inspires and organises numerous educational activities regarding the history of the twentieth century.²

² 25 years of “Karta” operations were summarised in the issue 50 published in 2006.

Secondly, as P. Nora observed, *Historians were deprived of their traditional monopoly for interpreting the past. Today historians are not the only producers of the accounts of the past. They share that role with judges, witnesses, media and legislators.*³ As a result, in Poland and other countries, academic historians are being replaced by better or worse and created by the media popularisers of historical knowledge. One example is the television journalist Bogusław Wołoszański, creator of the TV series “Sensacje XX wieku”, author of numerous books and the screenwriter for the TV series “Twierdza szyfrów” depicting the rivalry between the intelligence agencies in the last stage of WWII, aired by the 1st channel of public television and advertised as *the biggest Polish spy super production.*⁴ No academic historian in Poland can compete with him in terms of popularity with the sole exception of Norman Davies, who is the only professional historian with his own shelf in each major bookstore in Poland and whose works sell in quantities exceeding hundreds of thousands of copies.⁵

This situation inevitably leads to deprofessionalisation of historiography and social acquiescence of the fact that *everyone can write about history, even for the important publishing houses and magazines.*⁶ It also leads to marginalisation of academic historiography and a decline in the number of copies of history books, the authors of which either cannot or do not want to compete with such sensationalist and fictional form of recounting the past.

Finally, the third phenomenon is the return of historical argumentation in contemporary political and ideological conflicts. The French debate about the Armenian Genocide, Spanish discussions about the domestic war, Franco regime and the recently enacted laws related to them, Polish and German disputes about the Centre Against Expulsions, Europe-wide attempts to address the heritage of communism, the new Russian imperial

³ P. Nora, *Czas pamięci*, p. 43.

⁴ Cf. *Nie lubię słowa “fikcja”*. Rozmowa z Bogusławem Wołoszańskim, “Konspekt” 2005 (4), <http://www.wsp.krakow.pl/konspekt/24/wolosz.html>, [access: October 2007].

⁵ A phenomenon of N. Davis popularity in Poland deserves a separate elaboration.

⁶ K. A. Makowski, *Sila mitu. Żydzi w Poznańskim w dobie zaborów w piśmiennictwie historycznym*, Poznań 2004, pp. 423–424. Cf. also A. Wierzbicki, *Niepokoje historyka historiografii*, “Mazowieckie Studia Humanistyczne” 2002 (1), pp. 95–100.

rhetoric heavily relying on the past events – those are just a few chosen examples.

With at least three great debates so far, contemporary Poland is no exception. The first one was a dispute about the Polish People's Republic, while the second constitutes the discussion about the pogrom in Jedwabne; the third one was the recent media debate about the historical policy. Each of them had a multidimensional character, but what linked them most was the role of context. The events recounted in them started once again to divide the contemporary generations of Poles and became a point of reference for the current political and ideological choices.

The first one, in a sense, still on the agenda, stems from the natural need to review and account for the last forty-five years. In its course, a variety of perspectives on the Polish People's Republic emerged, from the one-sided, at the early stages, to increasingly nuanced ones as time had passed since the end of the 1980s.⁷ It was dominated by the concept of totalitarianism and only recently some attempts to expand it with new theoretical avenues were made.⁸ At the same time, the discussion about the lustration – its rationale, extent and social consequences – remains the immanent part of this dispute.⁹ The intensity of the discussion in the spring of 2007, when the government prepared the amendment to the lustration

⁷ More on this topic cf. P.S. Wandycz (ed.), *Spór o PRL*, Kraków 1996, compilation of text published earlier in "Tygodnik Powszechny"; A. Friszke, *Spór o PRL w III Rzeczypospolitej 1989–2001*, "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość" 2002 (1), pp. 9–28; A. Friszke, *Polish Communism in Contemporary Debates*, in: *Stalinism in Poland. Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies*, ed. and trans. A. Kemp-Welch, London 1999, pp. 144–157; P. Machcewicz, *Spory o PRL w polskiej historiografii i publicystyce po 1989 r.*, in: *Historycy polscy i ukraińscy wobec problemów XX wieku*, eds P. Kosiewski i G. Motyka, Kraków 2000, pp. 68–81. Stobiecki, *Spór o interpretacje PRL w publicystyce i historiografii polskiej po 1989 r.*, in: *Historia, poznanie i przekaz*, ed. B. Jakubowska, Rzeszów 2000, pp. 169–182.

⁸ For example, the conference organised in October this year in Poznań, titled *Obrazy PRL. Konceptualizacje realnego socjalizmu w Polsce* [the author mentions here an event from 2007, and outcomes of the conference published as *Obrazy PRL. O konceptualizacji realnego socjalizmu w Polsce*, ed. K. Brzechczyn, Poznań 2008 – editors note].

⁹ Among the recently published, cf. *Naznaczeni i napiętnowani. O wykluczeniu politycznym*, ed. M. Jarosz, Warsaw 2008.

law which was later rejected by the Constitutional Tribunal, made Poles aware again of the healing and stigmatising power of the arguments from the past.

The discussion about the Polish-Jewish relations was sparked by the book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* published in 2000, written by Jan T. Gross, a Polish historian living in the USA. The public was shocked, as the book undermined the commonly shared image of the Poles and Poland as the innocent victims of WWII. It raised questions whether Poles are able to, aside from the heroic image of their past, embrace also the shameful one, related to the suffering that the society brought on people of other nationality and denomination. From today's perspective we may say that the public has accepted that other image of the events in 1939–1945.¹⁰

The third of the great history debates emerged from the political changes in Poland, after the Law and Justice party had won the elections in 2005. In the project of the Fourth Polish Republic (Pl. *IV Rzeczpospolita*) promoted by the intellectuals associated with that party, the internal and external historical policy of the state played an important role. They emphasized the fact that in the 1990s the authorities turned away from the past of the nation, considering it an unnecessary ballast that impedes the modernisation of Poland. In this regard, it was argued that there is a need to change the shape of Polish patriotism, to contest the negative approach to the national past in favour of the more affirmative one, and to make historical memory the new binder for the national unity.¹¹

How do the academic historians react to the changes happening at historiography's doorstep? Generally, most of Polish researchers seem to be oblivious to them. Any attempt to spark a discussion on that

¹⁰ For a summary of the debate about the pogrom in Jedwabne cf. the two-volume publication P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, Warsaw 2002, in particular the introduction by P. Machcewicz, *ibidem*, pp. 9–62.

¹¹ For example, cf. R. Kostro, T. Merta (eds), *Pamięć i odpowiedzialność*, Kraków 2004; A. Panecka (ed.), *Polityka historyczna. Historycy – politycy – prasa*, Warsaw 2005. For a polemic with those publications, cf. R. Traba, *Historia – przestrzeń dialogu*, Warsaw 2006; cf. "Przegląd Zachodni" 2007 (1), entirely dedicated to the remembrance and politics of history.

topic is hampered by various obstacles. Let us take, for example, the text of a young historian, Maciej Gablankowski, titled *Historians run away from history*, published in "Gazeta Wyborcza". The author accused the historians of isolating themselves from the society, avoiding public debates and engaging only in the studies of narrow problems, appealing only for the specialists. In his opinion, it will result in their marginalisation and the increase in the political pressure on historiography.¹² The only published reaction (unless there were others, left out by the editorial board), however important, was a letter written by Marcin Kula. The Warsaw historian, while concurring with the diagnosis of attitudes dominating in the researchers' community, indicated some deeper forces, currently at play, resulting in the isolation of academic historiography and its creators. In his opinion, the presence of historians in the public debate, or lack of it, is not only a result of their own desire or aversion (due to the danger of instrumentalization or simplification of their stance), but also of some other conditions. M. Kula mentioned among them: the results of pedagogical methods used at universities, community norms depreciating the popularisation activities regarding history, obsolete methodological attitudes of some researchers, and the isolation of historians from representatives of other social sciences.¹³

A confirmation of the proverbial "historians' retreat from the history" can also be found while observing how the majority of the community reacts to aforementioned debates. A similar mechanism could be observed regarding each of them: contrary to the German disputes (famous *Historikerstreit*) none of the Polish ones was inspired by the academic historians. The first was initiated by the press, i.e. "Polityka" or "Tygodnik Powszechny". The discussion about Jedwabne was inspired by the book written outside the country and noticed by the media. Finally, the historical policy debate was sparked by politicians and publicists associated with the Law and Justice party. It is worth noting that the participation of the academics in the aforementioned disputes was relatively small and they were not the ones who set the tone and scope of those discussions. The historians entered

¹² "Gazeta Wyborcza" 23 VII 2007.

¹³ Ibidem. M. Kula wrote more extensively on this subject in *Historia moja miłość z zastrzeżeniami*, Lublin 2005.

those debates belatedly and full of doubts. It is characteristic that the issue of the historical policy only recently became a subject of interest for the wider group of researchers. Academic conferences are held and the attempts are made to increase the perceived significance of the issue.¹⁴ Finally, it seems that the professional historians fail to notice how such discussions can popularise their own achievements or to facilitate the acquisition of funds for the research projects conducted within various institutions.

This standpoint is, to some extent, understandable. Experience from the Polish People's Republic and apprehension about the excessive politicisation of historiography could play a major role. The way that the historical argument is treated in public debate could also be discouraging. Sometimes we do not show restraint in this *necrophiliac ardour*. It seemed to be a concern for Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresić, who, describing her experiences during the lectures on the Free University of Berlin, remarked: *The hysteria about the past is still in progress, the past is the favourite chewing gum for the intellectuals, historians, writers, academics, media, and politicians.*¹⁵

To confirm this statement, one needs to look no further than the way the issue of lustration and lives of people accused of collaborating with the secret communist police (Security Service, Pl. *Śłużba Bezpieczeństwa*) is presented in the Polish media. Most often it resembles a mixture of a historical research and journalistic or prosecutorial inquiry.

III. The fact that the academic historians tend to be oblivious to some transformations the social role of historical knowledge undergoes does not mean that historiography remains absolutely impenetrable for new ideas coming from the outside, or that historians themselves do not feel a need for change. The nature of an essay requires limiting the number of examples given below.

I will start with a few remarks about the changes in the methodology. Two problems seem to stand out. The first of them is the state or level of the Polish researchers' methodological knowledge. As indicated

¹⁴ Cf. B. Korzeniewski (ed.), *Narodowe i europejskie aspekty polityki historycznej*, Poznań 2008.

¹⁵ D. Ugresić, *Nowi barbarzyńcy*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 12–13 V 2007.

before, contemporary Polish historiography has not yet seen a discussion about the postmodern history criticism. As it was emphasized by Krzysztof Zamorski, the only journal that addressed this issue was "Historyka" from Kraków.¹⁶ Other periodicals about history such as "Kwartalnik Historyczny", "Przegląd Historyczny" or "Dzieje Najnowsze" practically ignored or belittled the challenge arising from the postmodern turn in the world historiography. It does not mean that this topic is completely absent from the historical reflection. It is addressed by the circle of historiography theoreticians, such as Ewa Domańska, Wojciech Wrzosek, Tomasz Wiślicz or Krzysztof Zamorski.¹⁷ The works of leading representatives of the narrative turn in historiography are being translated as well.¹⁸

Such methodological novelties are, however, frowned upon by most of historians. The rare attempts of polemics are rather opinions resembling ideological admonitions from the first half of the 1950s. One example can be Marek J. Chodakiewicz's text about the *followers of intellectual heresy*; he lumps together real and alleged practitioners of *postmodernism, deconstruction and moral relativism*.¹⁹ Why is it happening here? It seems at least

¹⁶ *Jesteśmy niewolnikami naszej kultury historycznej i polityki*. O metodologicznych problemach historii rozmawiają profesorowie Jacek Chrobaczyński, Andrzej Chwalba, Czesław Rybotycki i Krzysztof Zamorski, "Konspekt" 2003 (14–15), <http://www.wsp.krakow.pl/konspekt/14/rozmowa14.html> [access: October 2007].

¹⁷ E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Poznań 1999 (2nd edition, Poznań 2005); Idem, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006; T. Wiślicz, *O myśleniu historycznym*, Bydgoszcz 2009; K. Zamorski, *Dziwna rzeczywistość. Wprowadzenie do ontologii historii*, Kraków 2008.

¹⁸ Some translations worth mentioning: H. White, *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, eds E. Domańska, M. Wilczyński, Kraków 2000; E. Domańska (ed.), *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych. Antologia przekładów*, Poznań 2002; F. Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, in E. Domańska (ed.), Kraków 2004; J. Kałużny (ed.), *Opowiadanie historii w niemieckiej refleksji teoretyczno-historycznej i literaturoznawczej od oświecenia do współczesności*, Poznań 2003.

¹⁹ M. J. Chodakiewicz, *Wędrowki historyka. Kilka słów o metodologii*, in: *Wokół teczek bezpieki – zagadnienia metodologiczno-źródłoznawcze*, ed. F. Musiał, Kraków 2006, p. 177. More nuance remarks in M. Cetwiński, "Potężniejszy od Boga"? *Historyk a granice naukowego poznania przeszłości*, in: eds S. Rosik, P. Wiszewski, *Ad fontes. O naturze źródła historycznego*, Wrocław 2004, pp. 17–26.

a couple of causes can be found for this disinclination the circle of historians show for any theoretical work.

I firmly believe that to this day it is extremely difficult for Polish historians to part with the remnants of the narrow, positivist thinking about the past. After 1945, it was even more firmly established by Marxism in its various, not only Stalinist, enunciations. The conviction that we as historians strive to discover the absolute and immutable truth that we need to exhaust the sources base to approach it, that information about the past can be taken directly from the sources – those statements are repeated like a mantra by the large part of the community and they are the essence of their methodological beliefs. Too rarely, I'm afraid, Polish historians ask themselves about the nature and status of the truth that they seek. In this regard, as Sławomir Sierakowski remarked in his interview with H. White, Poland is still a country of positivism and its historians, armed with a few procedures considering the criticism of sources, set off to *conquer the historical truth*.²⁰ Recent polemic between Łukasz Kamiński and Marcin Kula is a good illustration of the fundamental conflict about the historian's methodology, which can be observed in Polish historiography. The number of archival collections the historian should employ while preparing a research monograph became the main issue in the dispute. For Ł. Kamiński, and it is probably not his solitary opinion, but the completeness and representativeness of the source base matter; originality or the way the issue is presented are neglected.²¹

There are other causes as well. Ewa Domańska, in her text about the mutual aversion between the theoreticians of historiography and historians, noted the works of the former are often belittling in tone, while the latter are not acquainted with the key developments in methodology. Moreover, she emphasized the abstract and theoretical character of the Polish methodological reflection about the past and the style of narration which the

²⁰ *Pisać historię, z którą można żyć*. Sławomir Sierakowski talking with Hayden White, "Krytyka Polityczna" 2005 (7–8), p. 227.

²¹ M. Kula, *W kwestii wysiadywania spodni*, "Newsletter. Instytut Historyczny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego" 2003 (27); Ł. Kamiński, *O pożytkach z wysiadywania spodni słów kilka*, ibidem 2004 (31).

true historians may find repulsive and which was at the time exemplified by the handbooks written by J. Topolski.²²

As a result, discord accrues in contemporary Polish historiography between the theoretical reflection, which is far from being limited to the uncritical application of the postmodernist recipes, and the practice of historiography which often, though not always, remains, in terms of methodology, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The second issue pertaining to the aforementioned matters are transformations of the historian's role in the contemporary world.²³ The expropriation of the historian from the monopoly in interpreting the past, mentioned by P. Nora, necessarily contributed to rendering invalid the two *traditional* images of the historian created in the nineteenth century. The first one corresponded with the figure of a neutral observer, cold scientist, impartial seeker of truth, free from the context of the times in which he happened to live. His main objective was to acquire knowledge. This attitude was best expressed in widely known and extensively quoted words of the great German historian Leopold von Ranke. The second *traditional* portrait of historians was created in opposition to the aforementioned declaration made by Ranke. This image, deeply rooted in the romantic tradition, especially Polish, invoked the figure of the spiritual guide, educator of the nation or the warden of national and universal values. It was strongly emphasized by, among others, Joachim Lelewel.

The turn of the twenty first century revealed not only the anachronism but also the limitations inherent to both of those standpoints. Contemporary world looks at historians from a different perspective. The public would like them to be neither impartial commentators nor the codifiers of the grandeur of given culture, nation, race or class, but rather the translators and mediators between them, and, simultaneously, experts and social therapists, who would allow the community to *domesticate* the most

²² E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: refleksje*, pp. 256–259.

²³ More on this issue in my essay: G. A. Dominiak, J. Ostoja-Zagórski, W. Wrzosek (eds), *Rola historyka we współczesnym świecie*, in: *Gra i konieczność. Zbiór rozpraw z historii historiografii i filozofii historii*, Bydgoszcz 2005, pp. 49–60. Its shortened version was published under the same title in: "Tygodnik Idei Europa", supplement to the newspaper "Fakt" 2005 (2), pp. 8–10.

dramatic episodes from the past. It seems that Polish historians (or is it just them?) cannot properly handle this new role, so often far from the norms and principles they had learnt as university students and members of their professional circle.

In this regard, I share the opinion expressed recently by Witold Molik that Poland needs historians to discuss the place of history in contemporary Poles' awareness (in this case, the participation of representatives of other humanities – sociologists, anthropologists or political scientists – would be desired) and assess the state of current Polish historiography, as well as its achievements since the end of the 1980s.²⁴

Disputes about the new image of national history constitute a significant part of changes happening in recent Polish historiography. There is no doubt that the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s rendered the two visions of Poland's past, which competed with each other ever since 1945, obsolete. The first was the Marxist-Leninist one, based on a framework of the theory of socio-economic formation and figurative identification of the People's Poland with the Piasts' Poland. The second was the

²⁴ W. Molik, *O nowy model syntezy dziejów regionu na przykładzie Wielkopolski*, in: *O nowy model badań regionalnych*, ed. K. A. Makowski, Poznań 2007, p. 19. A conference *Theoretical problems of the historic knowledge*, held 23–24 September 2010, was an attempt to address those expectations. In a letter about its premises, the organisers (E. Domańska, T. Wiślicz, R. Stobiecki) wrote: “The meeting in Otwock, called The First Methodology Conference of Polish Historians (28 December 1951 – 12 January 1952) has its distinctive place not only in Polish historiography after WWII, but also in the memory of historians. It can be said that it was in Otwock that the future of Polish historiography was decided: its organisation, its theoretical and methodological foundations, and interpretational canon of Polish history. Taking in consideration the important, in our opinion, ironic aspect of the past, and wishing to provocatively question the remembrance of the location of the aforementioned meeting, we are going to organise the next conference in Otwock. We hope that *genius loci* will help us to address the ghosts of the past, discuss the condition of historical knowledge created by Polish humanities at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to pave the way for the future, even if only provisionally. Our intention is for the next Otwock conference to be a meeting place for all historians, and representatives of other fields, who are concerned for the future of Polish history and its place in the intellectual instrumentary of contemporary generations of Poles”. Conference materials were published in E. Domańska, R. Stobiecki, T. Wiślicz (eds), *Historia dziś. Teoretyczne problem wiedzy o przeszłości*, Kraków 2014.

image of Polish history widely present among the emigrants, emphasizing the spiritual dimension of the past, dominated by history of politics and promoting a symbolic synthesis of the Piasts' Poland and Jagiellons' Poland.

In the *Zarys historii historiografii polskiej* (*Outline of the history of Polish historiography*) published in 2000, Andrzej F. Grabski emphasized that the most important challenge that contemporary Polish historiography faced was *to elaborate a new, comprehensive image of the Polish history, cleansed from the myths that overgrew it.*²⁵ Did it happen? Last dozen or so years brought the publication of several dozen syntheses and quasi-syntheses of Polish history, not counting the reissues of the ones published earlier. They are usually the attempts to compile or simply popularize the knowledge on the issue. Most of them lack conceptualised and comprehensive thought constructions, aiming rather to spread new factual findings or, less often, to outline new areas of research.²⁶ I will not attempt to offer an exhaustive characteristic of those publications, but only point out new ideas and proposals that they contributed.²⁷

In some of syntheses published since the beginning of the 1990s the concept of *history of Poland* was defined differently than before. Andrzej Sulima-Kamiński expressed it most distinctly:

²⁵ A. F. Grabski, *Zarys historii historiografii polskiej*, Poznań 2000, p. 246.

²⁶ Critical assessment of new syntheses can be found in W. Molik, *O nowy model syntezy*, pp. 15–23.

²⁷ In this part of the essay I refer to the following elaborations: three-volume history of Poland signed by the Institute of Central and Eastern Europe and written by J. Kłoczowski, *Historia Polski do końca XV wieku*, Lublin 2000; A. Sulima Kamiński, *Historia Rzeczypospolitej wielu narodów 1505–1795*, Lublin 2000; H. Dylągowa, *Historia Polski 1795–1990*, Lublin 2000; ed. J. Tazbir (the authors of individual parts are H. Samsonowicz, A. Wyczański, J. Tazbir, J. Staszewski, T. Kizwalter, T. Nałęcz, A. Paczkowski, A. Chwalba), *Polska na przestrzeni wieków*, Warszawa 2006; A. Friszke, *Polska. Losy państwa i narodu 1939–1989*, Warszawa 2003; A. Chwalba, *Historia Polski 1795–1918*, Kraków 2000 (it is a part of a more extensive project by the researchers from Kraków, namely S. Szczur, *Historia Polski. Średniowiecze*, Kraków 2003 and M. Markiewicz, *Historia Polski 1492–1795*, Kraków 2004); A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939–1989*, Warszawa 1995, (2nd edition Warszawa 2006); P. Wandycz, *Pod zaborami 1795–1918*, Warszawa 1994, translation from English, J. Topolski, *Historia Polski*, (8th edition, Poznań 2005), (this work is a part of the set of auxiliary books for high schools); J. Zdrada, *Historia Polski 1795–1914*, Kraków 2006.

The reader will without doubt notice that I rarely use words “Poland”, “Pole”, “Poles”. Meanwhile, “the Republic of Poland”, “citizens of the Republic”, “Great Duchy of Lithuania”, “Lithuanians”, “the Crown” and even “citizens of the Crown” occur much more often. I believe that a historian who uses the term “history of Poland” to describe sixteenth to eighteenth centuries assumes the colloquial name of the state, which occurs in the cartography and writings of that time, despite the legal situation and the national awareness of the day. The Great Duchy of Lithuania was not Poland, in as much as Russia or Ukraine were. In the history of the Crown and the Republic the Poles played a significant role. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the history of Republic can be called history of Poland, neither can all the inhabitants of that state be called Poles. Since the sixteenth century the word “Pole” had two meanings: the ethnic Pole or the citizen of the Republic, regardless of their nationality. Overuse of words: “Poland” and “Poles” to describe the history of the Republic can easily create an impression of the historical imperialism towards the nations which, along with Poles, created the Republic of the Polish Crown and defended it. We often speak about the Prussians, Cossacks, Jews, Belarusians and Ukrainians. The two last names are anachronistic, but the historical word “Ruthenians” did not seem proper when we write the histories of Belarus and Ukraine starting in the prehistoric times. In any case, French and Italians write their histories using the contemporary names to describe the histories of peoples whose French or Italian national awareness is not much older than Belarusian or Ukrainian.²⁸

Similar accents, which narrow down or redefine the subject of the history of Poland, can be found in other works as well, especially those of Jerzy Kłoczkowski and Andrzej Chwalba. Some Polish historians attempt in this way to overcome the previous focus on the Poles and indicate close cultural, political and religious connections between the inhabitants of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before the partitions, as well as complicated relations of the nations in this area in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Such an approach is in line with the international perspective attempting to *not only illustrate the abundance of local experiences, but also underline their*

²⁸ A. Sulima-Kamiński, *Historia Rzeczypospolitej wielu*, pp. 10–11. Cf. *O tradycjach Rzeczypospolitej. Rozmowa z Andrzejem Sulimą-Kamińskim*, in: A. Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium. Spojrzenia na historię Europy Wschodniej*, Kraków 2004, pp. 315–336.

significance by introducing a broader background, eschewing glorifying the nations at the same time.²⁹

Nevertheless, not all researchers go so far in the reinterpretation of the term *history of Poland* itself. Andrzej Wyczański, author of the chapter pertaining to the years 1506–1586 in the compilation *Polska poprzez wieki* (*Poland across the centuries*), rarely uses the word *Republic* (Pl. *Rzeczpospolita*), emphasizing rather the differences than similarities between Poland (the Crown) and Lithuania (Grand Duchy of Lithuania).³⁰ This is the case in the handbook written by Jerzy Topolski as well.³¹

New elaborations of the national history written after 1989, usually very eclectic when it comes to theoretical and methodological premises, stem from searching for a new vantage point for synthesis. In many cases, they attempt to transgress terms, quite loosely defined anyway, such as: state, nation or social and economic formation. Most often, the axis for synthesis is conceptualised as broadly defined society, a community interpreted not in ethnic terms as usual, but civic ones. Many researchers are convicted that the term *civic society* surfaces in Europe starting from eleventh-thirteenth centuries. When it comes to Poland's history it culminated in the emergence of the Polish-Lithuanian state in the end of the fifteenth century and its construction upon the fundament of the nobles' democracy. Aspects of the Commonwealth's heritage related to the historical genealogy of the civic society are strongly emphasized in the contemporary historiography of Poland. I refer particularly to the affirmation of the personal dignity and freedom, the co-responsibility for the country's fate, the ability to decide about the shape of the local community. Nationalist and imperialist meaning of the Jagiellonian idea is rejected; historians emphasize that the Commonwealth created in 1569 following the Union of Lublin was not,

²⁹ R. Traba, *Przeszłość w teraźniejszość. Polskie spory o historię na początku XXI wieku*, Poznań, p. 40. Traba refers to the works of such authors as M. Kula, M. Janion, H. Orłowski, A. Mencwel.

³⁰ Characteristically, the author dedicated only one paragraph, half a page long, to discuss the Union of Lublin, *Polska na przestrzeni wieków*, p. 177. In contrast, in the subsequent part of the book, authored by J. Tazbir, term "Polish Republic" is used as early as the title of the first chapter, *ibidem*, p. 226.

³¹ J. Topolski, *Historia Polski*, p. 113.

in fact, a republic of two nations but of many nations – Poles, Lithuanians, Ruthenians (Ukrainians), Jews and Germans.

In this context, the assertion that the Polish nation is not the sole successor of the Republic partitioned in 1795 by Russia, Prussia and Austria, seems of particular importance. The other national communities also have the right to this heritage, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians in particular. In regard to the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary Polish researchers also depart from interpreting the terms such as Poland or nation in terms of ethnicity or language only.³² The new standard is to emphasize that at least until the second half of the nineteenth century the nation should be understood in terms of politics and state, limited at first only to the multi-ethnic nobility and gradually spreading to the other social classes. It seems that P. Wandycz was justified to point out that the aforementioned definition of nation was destroyed only in the second half of the nineteenth century, upon the awakening modern nationalism, referring to ethnicities.³³ Only then, as H. Dylagowa emphasized: *In Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine the process of awareness-raising turned against the Polish identity, which went unnoticed for most of Poles and reached the authorities only with great difficulties.*³⁴ This tendency to emphasize the role of national minorities in the history of Poland is less often found in works about the Second Polish Republic. In this case the *national state point of view* is still dominant.³⁵

The consequence of adopting this theme for synthesis is the rebuff of previous period-defining schemes. The criteria for dividing the history of Poland into periods are not in the economic transformations (the subsequent socio-economic formations) or the political events (the rule of respective dynasties) but in the processes pertaining to the evolution of social interaction, relations between the authorities and the society, changes in people's awareness. The strict boundaries between the epochs become blurred and most of them are treated as customary. Chronological

³² Cf., e.g. P. Wandycz, *Pod zaborami*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

³⁴ H. Dylagowa, *Historia Polski*, p. 127.

³⁵ Cf. A. Chwalba et al., *Polska na przestrzeni wieków*, pp. 538–619.

approaches are replaced by chronological-thematic or purely thematic ones. Some syntheses, for example A. Chwalba's book *Historia Polski 1795–1918* (*History of Poland 1795–1918*), dispense with the boundaries between periods completely.

It is inherently more open-minded to consider history in terms of social history, less involved in the contexts of ideology, politics or religion. It fosters writing about the Polish history in a more multilateral way that questions the dogma of political or military history which has prevailed so far.³⁶ In the syntheses, but also in the high school-level history handbooks, extensive chapters appear pertaining to the history of culture, daily lives, customs and mentality.³⁷ It is particularly visible in regard to the history of Poland in the nineteenth century, thus far described as history of conspiracies and uprisings. In this case, A. Chwalba's synthesis particularly stands out, for instance with the chapter titles from the first part as follows: I. People, their income and mobility; II. Humans and civilisation; III. Old and new means of transport. Flow of information; IV. Social interaction; V. Family. Women in public life; VI. Culture of religion; VII. Culture of the elites. Popular culture; VIII. Nations and stereotypes.

The accents were differently placed in a synthesis *Polska na przestrzeni wieków* (*Poland in the course of history*). The authors' main focus was on the development of the national awareness, influence of the state (or lack of it) on the fate of Polish ethnic community, our place in contemporary Europe and its attitude toward Poland.³⁸

Another characteristic feature of the emerging new image of Poland's history is a strive to express it in a broader historical and geographical

³⁶ On the different perceptions of the category *social history* cf. R. Traba (ed.), *Historia społeczna, historia codzienności, mikrohistoria*, Warszawa 1996 (it is a collection of statements by the German historians published as the first volume of the series *Klio w Niemczech*).

³⁷ Namely, e.g., such handbooks as: A. Radziwiłł, W. Roszkowski, *Historia 1789–1871*, *Historia 1871–1945*, *Historia 1945–1990*, Warszawa 1995, cf. next editions; A. Garlicki, *Historia 1815–1939. Polska i Świat*, *Historia 1939–1997/98*, Warszawa 1998 and next editions.

³⁸ J. Tazbir, *Historyczne losy Polski i Polaków*, in: *Polska na przestrzeni*, p. 6. Fragments by A. Wyczański, J. Tazbir and T. Kizwalter were especially faithful to those indications.

context. It should be noted that the concept of Central and Eastern Europe recently experiences a renaissance of popularity. One of the first researchers who introduced it to academic circles was Oskar Halecki, Warsaw University professor from before the war, who later worked as an emigrant in the United States. In his work *The Limits and Divisions of European History*, published in 1950, he proposed the idea of Central and Eastern Europe as independent historical phenomenon.³⁹

Contemporary Polish historiography draws on O. Halecki's concept, which is reflected in several syntheses. In this context three books should be mentioned first and foremost. The two-volume *Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* (*History of Central and Eastern Europe*) was edited and partly authored by Jerzy Kłoczowski. It is a collaboration of international group comprised mainly of the Poles and French, and it was also published in French in *Nouvelle Clio* edited by Jean Delumeau.⁴⁰ It depicted a wide panorama of this part of Europe since its inception to the twentieth century. A synthesis *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* written by P. Wandycz and published in 1992 (London–New York) also corresponds with this approach.⁴¹ The author limits himself to describe history of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland as the core of this part of Europe. Finally, the third work which creatively draws upon O. Halecki's writings is J. Kłoczowski's book *Młodsza Europa: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w kręgu cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza* (*The younger Europe. Central and Eastern Europe in the circle of Christian civilisation of Middle Ages*), Warsaw 1998. It is an extended version of his earlier work called *The Slavic Europe*, Warsaw 1984. Kłoczowski, introducing the term *younger Europe*, repudiates the connotations present in the earlier historiography of Poland which emphasized either the vitality and strength of Poland contrasted with dilapidating

³⁹ Polish translation of the O. Halecki's work was published under the title *Historia Europy – jej granice i podziały*, Lublin 1994.

⁴⁰ *Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 2000, vol. 1–2. This work contains an extensive Polish and foreign bibliography. Among Polish researchers, J. Kłoczowski, H. Samsonowicz and P. Wandycz took part.

⁴¹ Polish edition: *Cena wolności. Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej od średniowiecza do współczesności*, Warszawa 1995.

West, or its belatedness in relation to faster developing Western Europe states.⁴² His intention is rather to extract the specificity of this civilisation, located on borderlands between East and West and to show its inherent links – political, religious, economic, social and cultural – with the totality of Europe's history. The concept of *younger Europe*, without doubt broader and more operational than the *Slavic Europe* allowed Kłoczowski to include into his considerations also the history of Hungary and the Teutonic state which in its heyday encompassed the Eastern Prussia with Gdańsk, Prussia and Livonia (today's Latvia and Estonia).

The aforementioned works represent a new quality in contemporary Polish historiography. The inclusion of Polish history in the history of Central and Eastern Europe allows, in many aspects, to overcome the tendencies to focus on Polish nationality and fosters the development of comparative research. It is also an interesting attempt to find a new place for the national history in the times of the uniting Europe. In this sense, Polish historians seem to state the same as the majority of the society: *we don't need to come back to the European civilisation, since we never left it.*⁴³

Finally, the last important phenomenon present in the discussions about the shape of the national history which I would like to devote my attention to, is the pursuit to revise the previous image of the history of Poles' interactions with their neighbours. As I mentioned before, the history of the Republic before the partitions undergoes a significant reinterpretation.

Today, we can say without doubt that the postulate proposed by Józef A. Gierowski as early as 1994 was fulfilled. This researcher was clearly in favour of rebuffing the presentation of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a history that is *mainly, if not exclusively, about the Polish nation*. Gierowski believed that *coexistence, not preponderance, should become the determinant of the history of this multinational country.*⁴⁴ This new approach is apparent in the vast majority of the syntheses – in the elaborations of A. Sulima-Kamiński, Mariusz Markiewicz or J. Tazbir. Likewise,

⁴² J. Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa*, Warszawa 1998, p. 13.

⁴³ J. Tazbir, *Historyczne losy Polski*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ J. A. Gierowski, *O nowe ujęcie dziejów Rzeczypospolitej*, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Historia", CXVI, Wrocław 1994, p. 9.

in the interpretations of the nineteenth century Polish historians began to pay attention to the history of Poland's neighbours – Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians and Lithuanians. They write about the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Galicia, analyse the issue of Jews assimilation, start to notice the civilizational merits of the Germans, mention the history of denominations – Protestant, Orthodox or Greek Catholic. More or less extensive fragments on those topics can be found in the works of A. Chwalba, P. Wandycz, H. Dylągowa or T. Kizwalter.

This new approach is also apparent in the research about the contemporary history. After 1989 there was a genuine explosion of monographs devoted to the Polish-German, Polish-Ukrainian, Polish-Jewish and Polish-Russian relations. The achievements of Polish historiography were also enriched by numerous source materials. The publication by G. Gross and the discussion accompanying it, sometimes very passionate, contributed substantially to undermining the *martyrological* image of Polish history, which described Poles as victims of the brown and red totalitarianisms. A similar role, albeit pertaining to the post-war period, was played by the works about the Polish-German relations. For this reason, interpretations more critical in character, boldly unveiling shameful fragments of the national history, which had been hidden for years, are increasingly easier to find in the syntheses. Holocaust and diversified attitudes of the Polish society to the dramatic fate of the Jews became a crucial part of the Poland's history during the WWII.⁴⁵ In the complicated dealings of Poles with their neighbours in the twentieth century the time has come for a dialogue, possibly difficult conversation about the dramatic events in their relationships. Recently published syntheses of the Polish history seem to foster this kind of dialogue.

The aforementioned dilemmas became particularly relevant in the wake of the ongoing discussion about the historical policy, signalled earlier. Proponents of interventionism policy in the realm of historical memory in most cases aim to create strongly romanticised image of the Polish history. In a booklet popularising the idea of opening the Museum of the

⁴⁵ Cf. A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939–1989*, pp. 93–96; A. Friszke, *Polska. Losy Państwa*, pp. 34–43.

Polish History, the next flagship project in the politics of history after the Warsaw Rising Museum, we read:

In the Museum's activities we must emphasize exceptional, specific and fascinating things in the history of Poland. Poland is, after all, a country with the republican and parliamentary tradition, one of the oldest in Europe, a country in which the civil liberties developed, which achieved a level of religious tolerance extraordinary in the modern era, a country with a unique culture and customs.⁴⁶

Generally, the advocates of the remembrance policy aim to reinstate the pride in the national past and, which is no less important, to reinterpret selected themes from the history of Poland. It refers to the distant past in equal measure as to the recent events. Therefore, those change proponents declare the need to repudiate the state of historical awareness which one of the authors called *the Stańczyk school processed through the Polish People's Republic*, to reject the negative stereotype of the old Commonwealth symbolised, for instance, by Michał Bobrzyński's synthesis, and the necessity to rehabilitate *the true heroes whose place was for seventy years in the dustbin of history and who were the subject of attempts to keep them there in the last fifteen years*.⁴⁷

The critics of thus understood "patriotyzm jutra" (*patriotism of tomorrow*) underline its numerous weaknesses and limitations. Some of the historians attempt to oppose the affirmative concept of history with a vision of critical patriotism which would not be antagonistic, but which would respect the agency of others. Such patriotism invokes the nation in terms of political or civic community, not an ethnic one. Robert Traba believes

⁴⁶ *Odkryć historię – zrozumieć wolność. Muzeum Historii Polski*, Warszawa 2006, p. 16.

⁴⁷ The first quote is the statement of J. Choińska-Mika published in *Polityka historyczna*, pp. 79–80, the second is a fragment of comment by A. Nowak in discussion *Polska polityka historyczna*, "Biuletyn IPN" 2006 (5), p. 28. It is in a sense a return to the beginning of the 1990s, when we witnessed a renaissance in the approaches centred on Polish identity, emphasising the specificity of the national history and its uniqueness amid other discourses about the past. It was pointed out by the French researcher concerned with Polish history D. Beauvois. See his *Être historien en Pologne. Les mythes, l'amnésie et la "vérité"*, "Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine", 1991 (38), pp. 355–386.

that the interventionist historical policy leaves no place for *the cultural heritage that is “not ours”* and he adds:

If the creators of the new politics of history take no stance regarding the patriotism of regions and the heritage of the multinational Republic, their project will never be credible. It will remain a short-sighted political action which does not bring any new quality to our historical reflection.⁴⁸

Time will show whether this new dispute over the image of the national history will have a long-lasting impact on the subsequent syntheses of the Polish history elaborated by the researchers' circle.

IV. The question contained in the title of this essay remains largely open. The answer depends on many factors: research preferences, place of work, represented specialisation – a medievalist would probably have a different opinion than a researcher of the recent history – or generation. The comparative perspective is also crucial. Do we want to contrast the achievements of Polish historians with those of the western historiographies, or will the point of reference be the accomplishments of the researchers from Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR? From the western point of view, Polish historiography certainly seems more anachronistic, less open to dialogue with other humanities and continually dominated by the studies of political history. Like in Germany or France, we observe a crisis of academic historiography and diminishing role of the professional historians in the creation of socially accepted visions of the past. From the perspective of the former Soviet Union countries, this assessment is somewhat different. We can risk a statement that it is less ethnocentric in its purport and more open for the outside influence. Polish historians boldly tackle the issues which were perceived as sacred or taboo.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Kicz patriotyczny*. Wywiad J. Kurskiego z R. Trabą, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 7–8 I 2006; R. Traba, *Walka o kulturę. Przestrzeń dialogu w najnowszej debacie o polskiej historii i pamięci*, “Przegląd Polityczny” 2006 (75), pp. 45–53.

⁴⁹ Cf. S. Antohi, B. Trenesenyi, P. Apor (eds), *Narratives unbound. Historical studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Central European University Press, Budapest–New York 2007.

The author tried to avoid extremities while describing transformations of contemporary Polish historiography. It seems that those who write about the growing provincialism of Poland's historiography are mistaken, as are those observers who only see its significant achievements and ignore its weaknesses.⁵⁰ Finally, we can attempt a more general reflection. In 2003, Andrzej Chwalba characterised the achievements of Polish historiography as follows:

I believe that historiography /.../ is in a good condition. The researchers use new sources and consider new issues all the time. Great efforts are made to introduce verbal and iconographic accounts to research and to collaborate with other fields of humanities. The speed of those changes varies from centre to centre. Some still practice Annalist history, while others follow the most valuable achievements in world historiography. The image of Polish historiography is not a uniform one. Nevertheless, on the whole we can observe that historians are not as mobile, open-minded and innovative as anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists or Polish philologists.⁵¹

I concur with this, but with two significant objections. First, I believe the proportions to be different. It seems that the majority of the historian's community is characterised by the far-reaching traditionalism in methodology and an aversion to explore new research areas and breaching the constraints of the well-established mindsets. Karol Modzelewski appears to be onto something, when he writes:

We, historians, often fail to recognise the remnants of the past, their manifestations and heritage in our present day. In the unlikely event of doing so, we fail to interpret their role in modern history, we need an anthropologist, sociologist, specialists in culture and literature to better place them on the maps of contemporary history, to navigate it. **We need to leave our small backyards** [T/N – underlined by RS] to

⁵⁰ The statement about the deepening of Polish historiography provincialism was posed by W. Molik. Cf. his *O nowej model*, p. 19. Optimistic diagnoses most often come from the circle of those specialising in recent history.

⁵¹ "Konspekt" 2003 (14/15).

pose the key questions together and together, and each on their own, seek the answers.

Second, the most interesting developments in the Polish historiographic discourse are located rather on its margins than in the mainstream. It pertains to brilliant and, in many aspects, innovative synthesis written by A. Chwalba, as well as to the works about Poland's history after 1945 published by the Trio publishing house in series titled *W krainie PRL, w krainie KDL (In the realm of PRL/ In the realm of KDL)*, which overcome the constraints of the usual mindsets. Just as the former failed to replace the traditional approaches in the research practice, or university didactics such as the writings of Stefan Kieniewicz or Henryk Wereszycki, the latter loses the confrontation with annalist political history, which dominates the research on communist Poland.