

Reviews

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Jerzy Jedlicki (ed.), *Dzieje inteligencji polskiej do roku 1918* [The History of the Polish Intelligentsia until 1918], i: Maciej Janowski, *Narodziny inteligencji, 1750–1831* [The Rise of the Intelligentsia, 1750–1831], ii: Jerzy Jedlicki, *Błędne koło, 1832–1864* [The Vicious Circle, 1832–1864], iii: Magdalena Micińska, *Inteligencja na rozdrożach, 1864–1918* [The Intelligentsia at the Crossroads, 1864–1918], Instytut Historii PAN — Neriton (Warszawa, 2008), 260+322+232 pp., indexes, ill.

The recently published three volumes of the history of the Polish intelligentsia are the product of research that has extended over many years. At the beginning of the 1960s, Witold Kula and Jerzy Jedlicki designed a programme of studies of the social transformations in the Polish lands in the 19th century. This programme, realized at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IH PAN), embraced also research on the new social group — the intelligentsia. This research was conducted by a team headed and organized by Ryszarda Czepulis-Rastenis, the author of fundamental works in this field.¹ Towards the end of the 1990s, Jerzy Jedlicki, who headed the IH PAN Section of the History of the Intelligentsia, started intensive work on this project, long contemplated by the scholarly milieu.²

The three-volume work is arranged on a chronological basis. Jedlicki, the author of the general concept of this work, has also written the 'Preface', where he draws attention to the fundamental problems connected with this kind of research. First, the intelligentsia has in Poland been the subject of continual discussions, which are not deprived of current ideological and political significance and in which emotions usually run high. These polemics centre round the role played by this stratum in the life of society, the question whether this role is positive or negative, whether the existence of the intelligentsia testifies to a high degree of development, or backwardness of society, whether there are future prospects for this group, or whether it is anachronistic and will soon disappear. Such disputes inevitably — though in various ways — affect scholarly research. Secondly, as usual in the social sciences, we are dealing here with an imprecise notion, the boundaries of which are hard to determine. Despite

¹ Ryszarda Czepulis-Rastenis, *'Klasa umysłowa'. Inteligencja Królestwa Polskiego 1832–1862* (Warszawa, 1973); *eadem*, *Ludzie nauki i talentu. Studia o świadomości społecznej inteligencji polskiej w zaborze rosyjskim* (Warszawa, 1988); *eadem* (ed.), *Inteligencja polska pod zaborami* (Warszawa, 1978); *eadem* (ed.), *Inteligencja polska XIX i XX wieku. Studia*, vols. ii–vi (Warszawa, 1981–1991).

² 'Historycy europejscy o inteligencji i intelektualistach', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, xliv (2000), 2.

widespread opinion maintained in many countries, the term 'intelligentsia' in its social sense first arose not in Russia, but in Poland. This name, taken over from the philosophy of Hegel, in the 1840s started to be referred to the circles of educated, professionally active people, who were regarded as a group able to become the spiritual leaders of the whole society. The name 'intelligentsia' in this sense had a dual meaning which has presented a serious problem to later historians: they could study the intelligentsia as a group embracing all the representatives of professions that require suitable qualifications, or as a cultural, ideological and political elite.

These two different approaches divided the studies of the intelligentsia between social history and history of culture. Jedlicki, who points out the methodological dilemma facing his team, underlines that the most useful is an eclectic approach (let me add: eclectic in the best sense of the word). Consequently, 'The History of the Polish Intelligentsia' combines various perspectives of research: social history intermingles here not only with the history of culture, but also with political history; the authors' interests embrace the history of literature, scholarship and science, mentality and everyday life.

In his short summary of the achievements of various lines of studies of 19th century intelligentsia, Jedlicki is sceptical about the usefulness of the statistical portraits of individual milieus and professional groups. What he detects in them is rather a semblance of precision than reliable information: the inadequacy of official statistics and fragmentary character of numeric data frequently induce the researchers, overconfident in the value of such material, to create an illusion of knowledge well-grounded in the sources. Jedlicki values higher the studies of the labour market, and especially prizes the analyses of views, attitudes and customs. Making use of what has already been presented in many detailed studies and of various methodological inspirations, the authors create a suggestive and vivid narration that retains the rigours of academic precision, but is at the same time attractive for the reader.

The traditional approach to the question of East-European intelligentsia assumes that it constituted a separate stratum, while in the West the analogous groups were part of the bourgeoisie and later the middle class. Jedlicki distances himself from such a view. He says that, according to the studies conducted in Western Europe, there also knowledge, qualifications and talent were the criterion for the isolation of some social groups (such as the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, or the British 'professions'). The only difference lies in a different significance attached to the existence of a separate stratum of the intelligentsia: in the eastern part of the continent, this significance was much greater. This was, Jedlicki says, the specificity of 'dependent countries, ruled in an authoritarian way, deprived of any motive power in the form of enterprises or any effective levers of economic development' (i, 15). This relates to Eastern Europe, Poland and Russia, but the phenomenon had also an extra-European extent: the existence of an intelligentsia became a characteristic indicator of the peripheries of civilization.

This peripheral aspect has left its significant imprint on the idea of the intelligentsia, including its self-portrayal and self-definitions. The social functions of this milieu have been and continue to be described in terms of 'service' and 'mission'. In view of a lack of initiative on the part of the repressive, and at

the same time inefficient state, and a shortage of capital — people who had acquired suitable education were expected to engage in disinterested activity. This understanding of the role of the intelligentsia in Poland gave rise to endless discussions centred round the moral aspect of this milieu, the question whether it properly fulfils its tasks, whether it lives up to or disappoints the expectations invested in it as a social group.

The authors of the volumes under discussion distance themselves from the rash appraisals frequently articulated in the fervour of various polemics, and their work convinces us of one thing: that the intelligentsia has become an omnipresent factor in the history of Poland. Therefore 'The History of the Polish Intelligentsia' tells us as much about this group as of the history of the country in general. The picture that has arisen as a result, is, of course, specifically shaped. The history of Poland, seen through the prism of the activity and fortunes of the circles of the intelligentsia brings out what was dynamic and active. The intelligentsia is shown as a set of milieus which first aspire to the leading social roles, and later take over and long retain such leadership. 'The History...' also covers other aspects, the descriptions of the activity — sometimes hectic — of the elite are contrasted with fragments dealing with the prose of everyday life and the vast areas of passivity, which also embraced the intelligentsia. What comes to the forefront is, however, activeness in various fields — from science and education to politics. Let us note that the crucial events that divide this work into three volumes were national uprisings, the most dramatic part of Polish political history in the 19th century. These uprisings would not have come to effect without the initiative of the intelligentsia; and the Polish intelligentsia would have been different, if those uprisings had not taken place.

In the case of a synthesis such as that under discussion, the large area of its subject requires collective work. The authors made good use of its possibilities, and at the same time have not forgotten of the attractions inherent in their individual way of handling their material. Each volume has been prepared in accordance with the principles presented in the 'Preface' by Jerzy Jedlicki. Hence, in each part, the authors mainly focus their interests on the circles of the intelligentsia, interconnected by correspondence or a net of direct contacts. While analyzing their views, the authors did not focus on their originality; all the members of the team in the first place tried to establish what convictions can be regarded as the most characteristic of each particular milieu.

While the concept of the whole work is uniform, each volume has its individual character. What comes to light are both the differences in the authors' interests and their writing style — the reader comes in contact with authentic creativity and not a dispassionate presentation of the results of research.

The first volume speaks of the beginnings of the Polish intelligentsia. The process of its formation, says Maciej Janowski, had long resembled that of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* (although, he says, allowances have to be made here for the economic backwardness of the Polish lands, the greater role of the Polish landowner-gentry class, and the educational patterns that in Poland differed from the German neo-humanism). This similarity started to weaken after the downfall of the November 1830 Uprising. 'It was the moment of the rise of the Polish intelligentsia in the proper sense of the word' (i, 237) that is a group

for whom patriotic goals and social 'mission' were of supreme importance. The second volume covers the period which may be called 'heroic': it began with emigration after the November Uprising, and through the Springtime of the Nations had led to the January 1863 Insurrection. In Jerzy Jedlicki's text we can see an authentic drama of people who wanted to make some reasonable use of their knowledge and came across the overpowering opposition of foreign rule and the inertia of their own society; they were torn between the aspirations typical of the educated elite the world over, and the patriotic imperative. In the third volume the intelligentsia, who had gone through such an ordeal, enters the world of modern ideologies and mass movements. Magdalena Micińska carries her narration up to the beginning of the reconstruction of an independent Polish state. The members of the Polish intelligentsia could then start thinking of realizing their dreams, including that of 'getting access to power' (iii, 189). Many, however, were disappointed — says the author in her 'Conclusion'.

The last few pages of this book add to its narrative a short commentary that takes into consideration what happened in the 20th century. These remarks are not overenthusiastic. The author is of the opinion that in that century the Polish intelligentsia faced the same dilemmas that had been hard or even impossible to solve in the past. However, if we compare her conclusions with the appraisals recently presented by Denis Sdvižkov in his study of the French, German, Polish and Russian intelligentsia, we may say that the authors of 'The History...' have given their book an optimistic tone, although its optimism is not wholly obvious. Sdvižkov retains a cool distance to the subject of his research, and speaks of it with restraint of an analyst prone to think that he is rather dealing with some developmental disturbances than anything else.³ 'The History...', given all its academic value and balanced judgements, seems to be a more emotional work. While writing about the fortunes of the intelligentsia, who encountered more failures than successes, the authors try to show the moral aspect of its actions and the value of culture created by those circles.

(transl. Agnieszka Kreczmar)

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³ Denis Sdvižkov, *Das Zeitalter der Intelligenz. Zur vergleichenden Geschichte der Gebildeten in Europa bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen, 2006), 233–4.