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Forum for Researchers of Contemporary History

There were barely enough chairs in the Hall of Columns at the Institute of History, Warsaw University, to seat the throng of researchers of contemporary history who had arrived from all over the country. They had come from Cracow, Łódź, Gdańsk and even Rzeszów in south-eastern Poland, as well as many other cities, at the invitation of the Polish Historical Society and the Committee of Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Alongside historians, there were sociologists, literature specialists, ethnologists and psychologists at the Warsaw Forum for Researchers of Contemporary History. They came to discuss the impact on their discipline of a state history policy convinced of its own divine mission and the ways in which academia can respond to it. The urgency of this problem was evident not only from the large number of participants, who could only be accommodated by hurriedly finding additional seating; it was also visible from the intense debate over the remit and direction of the planned event in the run up to the invitation. From the beginning, it was clear that the forum had achieved its goal to reach the broadest possible spectrum of researchers of contemporary history.

The Forum for Researchers of Contemporary History took place on 10 December 2016. It had emerged from an initiative by a group of well-known historians around the Warsaw-based contemporary historian Marcin Zaremba. They had disseminated an invitation to an extraordinary meeting on contemporary history in September 2016 via social media and other means. The cause was the unease felt by the initiators, who undoubtedly belong to the liberal voices in the Polish historical landscape, at the current developments in historical politics. These include, in particular, the attacks on the Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War, various draft laws that intervene in the public debate on contemporary history and the growing strength of the state-sponsored cult of the so-called 'cursed soldiers'.¹

Right-wing and conservative historians criticized this proposal comprehensively and, sometimes, abrasively. The historian Jan Żaryn, who sees himself as a shaper of history policy² and currently represents the Law and Justice Party in the Senate, condemned the organisation of an extraordinary forum

¹ Adam Leszczyński, 'Alarmowy zjazd historyków', *Gazeta Wyborcza* (27 Sept. 2016) <<http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20751165,alarmowy-zjazd-historykow.html?disableRedirects=true>>.

² See, for example, his most recent monograph: Jan Żaryn, *Polska pamięć. O historii i polityce historycznej* (Warszawa, 2017).

on contemporary history as a unacceptable intervention by academia into politics.³ The historian Andrzej Nowak's criticism was no less unequivocal. However, in contrast to Żaryn, he took the opportunity to call for a debate among Polish historians of contemporary history that included all currents of thought instead of a gathering of refusés.⁴ The mediation of the Polish Historical Society and the Committee of Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences led to the Forum for Researchers of Contemporary History under the joint leadership of Zaremba and Nowak.

The organisers' attempt to create an even playing field for the debate was evident in the shared chairmanship and the choice of speakers. However, it also betrayed the considerable tension surrounding the gathering. The speakers giving the six (!) ten-minute opening talks certainly represented a balance of political opinions. But, there was clearly no room for a woman or a young scholar.⁵ These had to fight to get to the microphone in the following public debate to make themselves heard. The fact that the speakers delivered their papers in alphabetical order also gave the impression that the organisers could not agree on another sequence. In addition, there was a consciously factual tone and the chairman of the Polish Historical Society made several technical points to create a kind of neutral space between the short introductions of the two moderators Zaremba and Nowak. This further gave an indication of the magnitude of the divide that needed bridging to make dialogue possible. The fact that this was successful deserves respect.

In his introduction, Marcin Zaremba stated that this was the largest meeting of contemporary historians ever to take place in Poland. He also responded to the accusation that his initiative sought to politicize academia. Without directly naming the target of his words, he underlined that the immediate cause of this gathering was emotions such as unease, bewilderment and even anger at the attitude to history in the Polish public sphere. There was, however, no intention of taking a political position in a political debate. Rather, emphasized Zaremba, it was their duty as scholars, specialists and, not least, lovers of history (Pol.: *miłośnicy historii*) to respond to the

³ 'Część historyków organizuje – wzorem sędziów – konspiracyjny kongres! Prof. Żaryn: „To próba wejścia w zwarcie z władzą”', *wpolityce.pl* (21 Sept. 2016) <<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/308983-tylko-u-nas-czesc-historykow-organizuje-wzorem-sedziow-konspiracyjny-kongres-prof-zaryn-to-proba-wejscie-w-zwarcie-z-wladza?strona=2>>.

⁴ Andrzej Nowak, 'Zaproszenie Klio na wiec. Tu nie chodzi o rozmowę, ale o krzyk, o wyrażanie zaciśniętą pięścią. O wejście do (pluszowych na szczęście) okopów ...', *wpolityce.pl* (19 Sept. 2016) <<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/308807-zaproszenie-klio-na-wiec-tu-nie-chodzi-o-rozmowe-ale-o-krzyk-o-wygrazanie-zacisnieta-piescia-o-wejscie-do-pluszowych-na-szczescie-okopow?strona=1>>.

⁵ At 49, Henryk Głębocki was the youngest of the six speakers.

instrumentalization and trivialization of contemporary history in the public sphere. The gathering was also to be a sign of solidarity with the colleagues at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, who had been the target of the Polish government's politically motivated criticism.

Andrzej Nowak replied to Zaremba by claiming that the latter had chosen his words as if he had been speaking at the meeting he had originally planned. In doing so, Nowak implicitly repeated the accusation of politicization. Nowak's concept, which the gathering was in fact putting into practice, was a meeting of all those bound by one emotion – the love of history. He concluded with a long quotation from the Polish chronicler and bishop of Cracow Magister Vincentus (Wincenty Kadłubek, *ca.* 1150–1223) and an appeal for people to treat each other with respect and acknowledge one's own mistakes as well as those of others.

The first speaker was Andrzej Friszke, who set out his position in 10 minutes. As one of the initiators of the original appeal, he began by responding to Andrzej Nowak's paper. The bewilderment and anger felt by the signatories of this appeal arose not from professional historians' discussion of history but rather the way in which politicians and journalists spoke about it in the public sphere. He gave as an example President Andrzej Duda's claims that since 1989 historical lies have flourished and the memory of the 'cursed soldiers' has been besmirched. Friszke said that these statements felt like a personal attack. Despite the numerous debates over the past almost 30 years, only the beginning and the end of the People's Republic of Poland are present in the public discourse: the late 1940s and the 'cursed soldiers', and the late 1980s and Solidarity's role in ending the regime. Both, claimed Friszke, are discussed outside their social, political and international contexts. A myth has been created about the 'cursed soldiers' that has little to do with genuine scholarly inquiry. Leading figures of the democratic opposition such as Lech Wałęsa, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Adam Michnik have, by contrast, been subjected to unjustifiable attacks and slander, while their undoubted services have gone unrecognized. In this way, the complex reality of the People's Republic of Poland has been forced into a black-and-white pattern according to which every act of cooperation, however small and pragmatic (such as the Round Table), is depicted as black. In the past, however, even politicians on the right had displayed the ability to view the People's Republic of Poland in a more nuanced way, a point Friszke demonstrated by referring to Jan Olszewski and Lech Kaczyński.

Henryk Głębocki began his paper by saying that he had not come out of emotional reasons or as a sign of solidarity with anyone. The debate, he went on to say, should not be about emotions but rather what knowledge of the past should be handed down to younger generations. Głębocki was also annoyed at the talk of the "Putinization" of Poland, although he did not specify who was actually using this term. Certainly, at this conference, he

was the only one. Putin's system was based on concealing the truth about the past, he explained. In Poland, neither the government nor the Institute for National Remembrance took upon itself the responsibility for attempts to conceal the truth and thus prevent a symbolic reckoning with those responsible for communist crimes in Poland. Głębocki blamed the left and liberals in Poland for what he called a "campaign of hate" against those scholars who had studied Lech Wałęsa's collaboration⁶ and the attempts by "some" Polish historians to prevent lustration at the universities.

Krzysztof Kawalec remarked that history debates in the media followed changing fashions. These often approach the topics in a manner far removed from what a historian would wish as a scholar or pedagogue. In addition, he complained about the lack of historians in the public media, which preferred to ask the representatives of other disciplines for comment. In the following discussion, many participants expressed the view that the opposite was in fact the case. According to Kawalec, there were two ways in which those in government could approach history. They could seek an overly close relationship to the subject, as was currently the case. This led to the pressure that some of the other participants were angry about. On the other hand, the government might not be interested in history at all and view it as worthless. At least in the first case, said Kawalec, those in power valued what historians have to say. This claim, too, led to some disagreement later on, in particular the objection that there was plenty of space between the two extremes.

Paweł Machcewicz's incisive paper demonstrated the expertise that the author had acquired in presenting his views on Polish history policy in the last few months. The Minister of Culture had recently dismissed him as director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk by questionable if technically admissible means. This experience as the head of an institution that had come under fire from the agents of history policy informed his critique. First, he argued, when politicians set themselves up as the sole arbiters of how history should be presented or what the Polish perspective is, it is an attack on the independence of history writing and cultural pluralism. In this way, the government sought to achieve a monopoly on Polishness and patriotism. This approach is incompatible with his concept of history policy, which in a democratic system has to represent society's diversity of voices. Machcewicz's second point concerned the promotion of xenophobia and the isolation of Polish history to inoculate it against any comparison. One cannot discuss Polish history in the Second World War without comparing it to the experience of other nations, he claimed. The attempt to do so was a threat to the fundamental tools of the historian, above all that of comparison.

⁶ Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk, *SB a Lech Wałęsa. Przyczynę do biografii* (Gdańsk, Warszawa, and Kraków, 2008). The book had triggered a wave of criticism, cf. https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/SB_a_Lech_Wałęsa.

His third point addressed the decline in academic standards and the connected ideologization of the historical debate. This was evident from the one-sided and superficial ‘expert’ reviews on the museum’s exhibitions written for the Ministry of Culture.⁷ History’s autonomy and pluralism are, alongside the debate on historical facts, values that should bind every historian regardless of political, philosophical or professional differences. They must be defended. As an example, he gave Andrzej Nowak. In a joint declaration with the American historian Timothy Snyder, Nowak had called to keep the Museum of the Second World War’s exhibition, even though it was under attack from members of his political camp. Nowak felt that this praise co-opted him too much; in his conclusion, he later stressed the government’s right to exert influence over museum projects.

Jan Pomorski argued that the power of historical myths created for political purposes lay in their constant repetition and public omnipresence rather than their substance. The only, but powerful way the historian can intervene is to deconstruct these myths and reveal the politicization of history. Drawing on the sociologist Piotr Sztompka, he explained that while myths create social capital, they can only use this capital to build a community based on positive moral values. Pomorski argued that the speeches of some contemporary politicians, who, after all, had studied history, had a very different source. Their “captive historical thought” (Pol.: *zniewolony umysł historyczny* – an allusion to Czesław Miłosz’s collection of essays) led them to use history purely as a tool to manipulate people.

The last speaker was Wojciech Roszkowski, who first outlined his view of history policy: it was policy to the same degree that economic policy was politics and not scholarship. The difference between politics and scholarship, however, was that politics looks for the benefit, while scholarship strives toward truth. The historian and former PiS MEP further explained that a decisive factor in the strength of the state was the citizens’ memory. However, he did not mention whether this should steer the benefit-oriented history policy or the truth-seeking scholarship. Finally, he put forward the thesis that contemporary Europe was downright hostile to history. He found evidence for this, for example, in a programmatic paper of the House of European History in Brussels (on whose board of trustees he serves) that was particularly critical of nationalism. Later in the general debate, Włodzimierz Borodziej remarked polemically that if he was Roszkowski he would resign from the board of an institution whose work he found to be so bad.

⁷ The reviewers were the historians Jan Żaryn and Piotr Niwiński, whose reports are available on the museum’s homepage (muzeum1939.pl), and the journalist Piotr Semka, whose report appeared on the homepage of the daily *Rzeczpospolita* <<http://www.rp.pl/Plus-Minus/308119920-Muzeum-II-Wojny-Swiatowej-Analiza-Piotra-Semki.html#ap-22>>.

At this point, the moderators summarized the debate so far from their perspective. Nowak approached this by asking those present who actually owned history: the historian or the citizen? His words indicated that he tended toward the latter, although in this conception the citizens were clearly represented by the government. He could not resist directing another barb at his co-moderator Marcin Zaremba when he warned against historical comparisons in assessing contemporary politics in the press. Here he suggested that the former head of the Polish People's Republic Władysław Gomułka was an inappropriate figure for comparison. Several days before, Zaremba had written about the similarities between the history policy of Gomułka and the current government in the news magazine *Polityka*.⁸ When it was his turn, Zaremba assiduously explained that it was exactly because of his research on Gomułka that he rejected the idea of history policy. After all, Gomułka's use of historical myths and national sentiments to legitimize his rule had shown that this leads into murky waters.

After a coffee break, the open debate began, during which those present in the hall could make short comments. The list of speakers reads like a Who's Who of Polish historians: Włodzimierz Borodziej, Ewa Domańska, Barbara Engelking, Maciej Janowski, Jerzy Kochanowski, Marcin Kula, Karol Modzelewski, Dariusz Stola, Robert Traba, and Rafał Wnuk, to mention just a few names. There was a clear preponderance of those who are critical of the Polish government's history policy, both among the speakers and, judging by the levels of applause, among the attendees in general. Ewa Domańska, one of the only four women to take part in the discussion, pointed to the significance of postfactual arguments in history policy and, at the same time, warned against a split in the academic community: after all, everyone knew that while governments change, one's colleagues remain the same.

Dariusz Stola emphasized that defending academic autonomy, limited though it might be, was a question of self-respect. In a remark clearly aimed at Andrzej Nowak without explicitly naming him, he rejected the argument that history was too important to leave to the historians. Rather, it was too important a matter to leave to politicians alone. Stola also offered up a constructive suggestion: the Polish Historical Society should draw up a code of ethics along the lines of that of the American Historical Association. This would act as a guideline for the society's members during public appearances.

Jerzy Kochanowski took up an expression used by Henryk Głębocki and remarked that everyone lived in his or her own time and had also lived in the past, in Stalinism and in the People's Republic. Some behaved like Żanna Kormanowa or Józef Kowalski – advocates of the then ruling ideology, others like Tadeusz Manteuffel or Aleksander Gieysztor. He reminded his

⁸ Marcin Zaremba, 'Od Mieszka do Leszka, czyli historia pisana na nowo', *Polityka*, 49 (2016), 16–19.

colleagues, above all those who are politically active, for example as ministers or state secretaries, that the first group are forgotten today, while the latter have institutes named after them.

Robert Traba and Rafał Wnuk set out in detail how the ‘cursed soldiers’ were a group invented out of political calculation; in the past, they had simply been referred to as the anti-communist underground. Monika Piotrowska-Marchewa added that there was no place for women in the narrative propagated by Poland’s official history policy. Błażej Brzostek rejected Roszkowski’s thesis regarding European hostility toward history: the British, French and German historical literature and publications, as well as those countries’ television documentaries, proved the opposite.

Jan Pisuliński from Rzeszów, the last to get up to the microphone, raised the question of the consequences for the historian’s work of the legislation arising from history policy. He brought up the law stipulating up to two year’s imprisonment for anyone accusing Poles of participating in crimes such as genocide. While historians are explicitly exempt, what about public debate? Must it now take place with the public prosecutor? More generally, Pisuliński asked whether such a prohibition on speech would have an impact on historians’ choice of research topics, who must also consider that they must support families or pay off loans.

By way of conclusion, the speakers from the first part had the opportunity to respond. This, however, brought little new to the discussion. There was a small controversy over the forum’s joint declaration, which Tomasz Schramm read out. This included excerpts from a draft resolution prepared by Marcin Zaremba. In the declaration, the executive committee made up of Nowak, Zaremba, Schramm and Krzysztof Mikulski, chairman of the Polish Historical Society, pleaded for a defence of academic autonomy and pluralism of viewpoints in Polish historical debate; they called for respect for different opinions and the considerate treatment of others within the academic community. However, Krzysztof Kawalec and Henryk Głębocki spoke out against the resolution. Nevertheless, it received a majority when put to a vote.

Many Polish historians clearly view the political developments that affect their discipline with concern. This is particularly true when the government prescribes interpretative models for Polish history or eliminates scholarly pluralism in state institutions such as the Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War or the Institute of National Remembrance. These historians wanted to express this concern at the conference. Those, however, who are close to the government prefer not to recognize these problems or, at least, play them down. The fact that this has not led to a clean split in the academic community is a result of the earnest desire of both sides of the conflict to remain in a dialogue with one another. The leading figure in the camp close to the Polish government is undoubtedly Andrzej Nowak. Behind his mixture of jovial willingness to talk and sharp criticism of his opponents,

one can perhaps see Andrzej Nowak the political adviser's desire⁹ to avoid explicit criticism of the government's history policy. But one can also see how Andrzej Nowak the historian was ready to listen respectfully to voices from the academic community when they disagreed with his views. This sets him agreeably apart from other historians close to the government, for example the above-mentioned Jan Żaryn, who demonstratively stayed away from the conference. The fundamental paradox that he could not resolve was that, as a scholar politically active on the side of the government, he was attacking colleagues less closely or not at all linked to a political bloc for their criticism of a government policy that affects their academic discipline.

trans. Christopher Gilley

Stephan Stach

⁹ Nowak has supported PiS in various ways, is an advisor to President Andrzej Duda and in 2014 was even mentioned as a possible presidential candidate.