

CHRONICLE

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THE 18th CONGRESS OF POLISH HISTORIANS, OLSZTYN, 16-19 SEPTEMBER 2009

The 18th Congress of Polish Historians was organised by the Polish Historical Society (PTH) Branch in Olsztyn under the motto 'Return to the sources'. The majority of the sessions and celebrations were held on the campus of the Warmian-Masurian University (UWM) established not long ago. Nearly two thousand historians, history students and teachers participated in the sessions. Those from Poland were in the overwhelming majority. Among the participants of individual sections there were also several dozen foreign researchers from Germany, Russia, Lithuania, Spain, Finland and Great Britain. The congress was accompanied by a number of events. The main one was the Historical Book Exhibition. The congress and the concomitant events were taking place under the patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland Lech Kaczyński who delivered the inauguration speech. One of the prominent guests was Katarzyna Hall, the Minister of National Education. Traditionally, a part of the program was reserved for the presentations of papers by doctoral students and students.

Such formal meetings of Polish historians always provide a good occasion to re-examine the condition of the Polish historiography and to make generalisations about it. This issue was discussed briefly in the opening presentation by Andrzej Chwalba (Jagiellonian University, Cracow). Touching upon the question concerning the social role of the historian, he highlighted two of its aspects: popularisation of history and historical education in Poland, and international cooperation. He called for the creation of new Polish research institutes – akin to the Centre of Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin – in selected European cities; support of the foreign historians' research on Polish history and an increase in the expenditure on translation of Polish scientific monographs into foreign languages. Polish engagement in international projects is growing. In Chwalba's opinion, however, participation of Polish academics in international research projects is still unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, the younger generation of Polish historians has been catching up on the shortcomings of many years in this field. The general estimation of the discipline in Poland presented by Chwalba was surprisingly positive and optimistic by contrast with the financial misery in the research area and the resistance to recent

government proposals for changes in the history curriculum encountered within the teaching staff environment.

The course of the further part of the congress proved, however, that there were grounds for the above-mentioned optimism. Certainly, the underinvestment in research and the fading social awareness of history are structural weaknesses of historiography both in Poland and in other countries of 'New Europe', and probably will remain the same in the future. However, those saddening phenomena did not disrupt the normal course of the congress. It must be highlighted that many sessions involved a high level of academic lively discussion of the congress participants. Thanks to the involvement of the audience, the congress proceeded in a good atmosphere and on a high professional level.

Most papers referred to themes in historiography which have recently become very popular, the *return to the sources*, mentioned in the title of the congress, and the *collective memory*. The section on the 'Disciplines enabling examination of the sources' attracted the attention of both theoreticians of history and historians, who dealt with the title subject matter within the wide context – from the history of 19th century historiography (Jolanta Kolbuszowska, the University of Lodz), various categories of sources (audio-visual, psychological, material, medical, oral traditions, and also – lately very popular in Polish media – the sources created by the secret services) to alternative concepts of sources analyses (Wojciech Wrzosek and Ewa Domańska, the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). A part of the session was dedicated to the analytical problems of medieval and early-modern historical sources, rarely used by researchers, such as narratives, court books, illuminated documents and calendars. A lively discussion about the changes which should be introduced in the selection process of material collected in Polish archives was held during the session. Wiesława Kwiatkowska (the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń) remarked that collecting typical records, and not the documentation of individual cases, loses sense in view of the changes to the way how the public institutions function on the one hand, and the transformations in historiography itself on the other. It is not possible to go in for modern historiography based on the sources of statistical nature only. The problem of different aspects of sources returned at the session devoted to teaching history.

The two remaining sessions of the congress were focused on the problem of collective memory, although the said category also appeared in their titles ('Europe at its sources', 'At the sources of identity'). The most popular issue, to which many papers referred, was the concept of realms of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) in the description of collective memory (*histoire au second degré*). Its impact on historiography was especially evident during the 'Regional History of Warmia and Masuria' session as well as during the all-day symposium on medieval European battles and their social identity role. The symposium

– with the participation of many foreign researchers – gained great popularity with the audience. In methodological context, the concept of realms of memory was analysed during the debate devoted to interrelations between collective memory and the concept of national identity.

The ‘sources of European culture’ session had the most general and diverse character of all. The thematic scope of the session varied from Christian Churches, universities, law culture to the town evolution and individual autonomy in Europe starting from the 15th century up till recent years. Moreover, specialist micro-debates were also held on: ancient, medieval, early-modern, 19th and 20th century history together with thematic sessions on: the military, education, medicine, parliamentary, demographic history and historical geography, biography, economic history, the history of press and the history of Slavic cultures. Theoreticians of history and historians of historiography also had their individual session.

As for the concomitant events, one is worth-mentioning – the Polish-German project on the joint history textbook. Its committee chairmen Michael G. Müller (Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg) and Robert Traba (Center of Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Berlin) referred to the existing French-German textbook of history. They also discussed numerous doubts concerning the prospects and the idea of creating the bilateral narration for school use. During the session, which was also attended by researchers from Lithuania and Ukraine, a promise was made that the textbook to be prepared will not present a vision of the history agreed and unified by the Polish and German parties. Instead, it will show controversies and divergent interpretations. Its objective is not to provide a joint history but to broaden horizons and to overcome the dominance of narrowly understood national history.

The congress in Olsztyn was an enormous academic undertaking and any attempt to sum up its proceeding in a few cohesive observations will certainly be a gross oversimplification. Having the above reservation in mind, it is worthwhile drawing attention to some phenomena and tendencies, which are interesting also for the prospects of development of Polish historiography. The participation of representatives of various scientific environments from all-over Poland and also the increasing number of foreign guests coming to the congress must be pointed out with satisfaction. Some decentralisation has been attributed to the Polish humanities for a long time and that is good that this tendency has not weakened. Both the methodological proposals presented at the congress, and the variety of the themes debated reflect closer and closer links between European and non-European historiographies. The issues concerning collective memory and identity are already an integral part of the vocabulary of Polish historians, next to those relating to modernisation theory, historical anthropology and micro-history. These ideas are not new or original. Therefore, it is hard to believe that the Olsztyn debate forged

a new paradigm in historical disciplines. Anyway, this was not the goal of the congress. However, the application of the imported categories not only to Polish history, but also to the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe (that issue was discussed during the 'Individual autonomy' session) can be beneficial for the Polish audience. This unique ability of linking the western methodology with the history of the region could become a Polish specialty in the future. Then the academics from the West and the East would also benefit from that. It could be said that aversion to methodology observed by the experts of Polish historiography, which was caused by the dominance of historical materialism present for a few decades, has begun to subside for good. On the other hand, the participants of the sessions concerned with methodology waited in vain for some examples of the practical use of the presented theories. Up till now, the *new lands* in history are still being explored rather by general historians.

The congress in Olsztyn was both scientific and political in its character. The political aspect was well-observed during the opening ceremony which was held on the 70th anniversary of the Red Army's invasion of Polish territory on 17 September 1939. The opening speeches delivered both by President Lech Kaczyński, who earlier opened the place on the university campus devoted to victims of the Katyn Forest Massacre, and by the representatives of PTH and UWM criticised the present historical policy in Russia. The resentment of the organisers of the congress is understandable. They had been preparing an excursion for the participants to the Kaliningrad District for a few months in advance and the issue of Russian visas was refused to them only a few days before the inauguration of the congress. It seems, however, that scientists should avoid political confrontations instead of fuelling them. Meanwhile the audience of the congress, including the Russian guests, could have had justifiable doubts about the objectiveness of the speakers who reminded the audience of the massacre of the patients of the psychiatric hospital carried out by Soviet soldiers in January 1945. The hospital used to function in the area, where the university is located now. The information about that unquestionable fact should have been supplemented by the remark that the same place was used by Nazis to commit 'euthanasia' on the people who were mentally sick and seriously ill. In fact, those murders had been committed before the very entrance of the Red Army to Olsztyn. The opening of an alley commemorating the victims of the Katyn Forest Massacre and linking it with the history of the Warmian-Masurian University could have astonished the foreign guests, not familiar with Polish memorial culture, even more. It is worth noting that the UMW was founded in 1999 and the city of Olsztyn was within the German Reich's territory up to 1945, and it was not even a university town then. However, this praiseworthy gesture of the University authorities wishing to commemorate the relatives of some present UWM employees raises the question why UWM did not commemorate, in the same

manner, the victims of concentration camps, victims of Warsaw Uprising or victims of Nazi terror in the Warmian region.

The impression of that opening ceremony somewhat unfortunately overloaded by ideology was successfully quickly covered up by the subsequent symposia which generally were of a high standard. Thanks to that as well as to the dedication and enthusiasm of the student-volunteers, the participants of the congress were able to bear organisational shortcomings cheerfully. Perhaps the organisers of future congresses should follow the good example set by Germany where outsourcing is used to organise such events instead of overworked members of the local branches of the historical society.

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