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### **What Kind of History Do We Need? Remarks by a Participant in International Dialog Projects**

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## What Kind of History Do We Need? Remarks by a Participant in International Dialog Projects

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### I.

Historical disputes, which have been taking place in Poland recently, clearly show that history itself may be skilfully, yet inappropriately, involved in the contemporary politics and political manoeuvring. Few prominent exceptions notwithstanding, historians usually prefer not to take part in a game as such. However, they simultaneously do not enjoy considerable influence on how their arguments (in a simplified or even vulgarized form) are being taken advantage of by politicians, propagandists or ideologists. That last group, for instance, caters only for one version (interpretation) of history, either rejecting the others or regarding them as completely false. Nevertheless, a critical approach to history is not always taken for granted even by patriots. As Georg Iggers aptly observed, the 'invented pasts' of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did become the breeding ground for the contemporary arising nationalistic movements.<sup>1</sup>

The professional historian who is also methodologically oriented knows that the existence of 'the history', which would provide the ex-

1 Georg G. Iggers, 'Użycia i nadużycia historii. O odpowiedzialności historyka w przeszłości i obecnie', *ER(R)GO. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura*, 2001, no. 2, p. 9.

planation or the one and only version of the truth is, at best, a positivist illusion, or – at worst – a starting point for manipulation and stupefaction. Although in many cases it is possible to consider a statement about singular facts as perfectly correct, an attempt at relating those facts to each other is always already an act of interpretation, and an interpreter is never a neutral observer.

That does not mean, however, that history is somehow purged of falsehood, and that all interpretations are equal or acceptable. Therefore, it is of outmost importance to highlight from the very beginning that fraud, intentional lie or misinterpretation do differ from diverging perspectives or competing interpretations.

Let me illustrate these observations with a following example: for many years, in the USSR and other communist countries (including Poland), it was claimed that the massacre of the Polish officers in Katyń was perpetrated by the Germans in 1941. That statement is an outright falsehood – the victims were murdered in 1940 by the NKVD. However, a legitimate interpretation would allow to discuss the fact mentioned above in terms of either considering it a war crime, or an act of genocide. Hence, by setting the Katyń massacre either in the context of the Polish history of World War II or Stalin's Reign of Terror in the USSR, one also makes an interpretation of it.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 In the Polish-Russian dialogue about history, the establishment of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters [Polsko-Rosyjska Grupa do Spraw Trudnych] chaired by Professor Adam D. Rotfeld on the Polish side and Professor Anatoly Torkunov on the Russian side was undoubtedly a groundbreaking achievement. One of the results of the Group's work was a publication on the recent history entitled *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w polsko-rosyjskich stosunkach 1918-2008*, eds. Adam D. Rotfeld and Anatolij W. Torkunow, Warszawa 2010. The English translation came out in 2015 as *White Spots – Black Spots. Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations, 1918-2008*, ed. by Adam D. Rotfeld, Anatoly V. Torkunov, Pittsburgh (PA): University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. There also appeared a Russian version of that work. The editors' objective was to present a particular 'difficult' issue in the Polish-Russian relations from two perspectives so as to describe it in two separate essays by a Polish and Russian author, respectively. Another recent Polish-Russian project has concerned educational assistance materials that would be of help to History teachers both in Poland and Russia. Realized by the Institute of East-Central Europe [Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej] and the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Science, the funds for this project were granted by the Polish National Science Centre. Thanks to the work supervised by Miroslaw Filipowicz and Aleksandr O. Tchubarian, so far, there have appeared two volumes in Polish and Russian that contain the essays written by both Polish and Russian historians on selected issues of the Polish-Russian relations between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: *Polska – Rosja. Materiały do nauczania historii*, eds. Miroslaw Filipowicz, Aleksandr Czubarian, vol. I: *14th-18th Century*, eds. Jacek Chachaj, Leonid Gorizontow, Kirył Koczegarow, Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 2017; vol. 2: *19th century*, eds. Wiesław Caban, Le-

Understood as a reflection on the past, history is deeply rooted in both the world of values and sphere of culture, thus becoming their inseparable part. Appositely, neither is the historian a neutral scientist, nor they are separated from the world of values – their research differs strikingly from that of the bacteriologist studying bacteria, or the chemist performing experiments on various substances. The cognitive role of the historian consists in describing a relation of one culture reflecting on another. This is how a shift in historical interpretation occurs – after all, culture is not a static phenomenon, but the one that constantly evolves, develops and changes, thus generating a new set of questions that the past is being confronted with. This is that paradoxical nature of history, quite different from that of the sciences; in history, a significant work usually does not finish the discussion about a given issue but just initiates it anew. The past changes together with the present.<sup>3</sup>

History in itself is amorphous or – that interpretation is also feasible – allows for so big a number of storytelling techniques that the historian from the very beginning is forced to make certain choices. It is the historian who shapes the shapeless; it is the historian who puts forward new routes. However, that does not happen in a void or the way one pleases. Affected by the contemporary culture and the then used methods of research, the historian's work always reflects their own world of values and preferences. And if one's imagination and sense of perception are also taken into account, then an ability to distance themselves from one's own cultural and cognitive perspective, which is the most salient objective, turns out to be quite rare a phenomenon. No wonder that when in the 1970s Hayden White published *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*,<sup>4</sup> its critical reception by historians was rather poor, yet the work was

onid Gorizontow, Piotr Głuszkowski, Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2017. Both in Polish and Russian, the work can be downloaded for free at [www.polska-rosja.eu](http://www.polska-rosja.eu).

- 3 Wojciech Wrzosek, *Historia – Kultura – Metafora. Powstanie nieklasycznej historiografii*, Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Wrocław 1995 [English translation: *History. Culture. Metaphor. The Facets of Non-Classical Historiography*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1997]; Jerzy Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza 'Rytm', 1996; an overview of the latest methodological approach and specialist literature in *The Post-modern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins, London: Routledge, 1997.
- 4 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

applauded by literary theorists. White's study has turned out to be groundbreaking when it comes to the very thinking of what history, in fact, is. Then, there started to come out publications by Frank Ankersmit, a Dutch scholar, who was analyzing various aspects of historical narrative as well as the functioning of the notion of sublime. At one point (in 'History and Theory') Ankersmit even challenged the 'traditional' form of historiography.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, historical practitioners needed some time to realize the essence of their profession.

Something has definitely changed within the last several decades (although in our part of Europe it is fair to say 'several years'); hence, there have been published books inspired by that previously neglected theoretical reflection. The study by Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569-1999* (Polish edition: 2009), seems to be a case in point.<sup>6</sup> In the very beginning, Snyder poses few fundamental questions: "When do nations arise, what brings ethnic cleansing, how can states reconcile?"<sup>7</sup> and then suggests the answers, which allow him to distance himself from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century grand historical narratives; the narratives that have shaped the European thinking of history, especially in the Eastern part. Snyder later notes that "[d]ialectics of myth and metahistory [understood here as the grand historical narratives based on nationalistic objectives – MF] sharpen the minds of nationalists, and are thus properly a subject rather than a method of national history."<sup>8</sup> The difficulties in accepting such a view by both historians and ordinary readers are clearly visible when one invokes an extremely critical Polish reception of the works by Daniel Beauvois. This French historian tells the history of the eastern lands of the Republic from a completely different perspective, which is much less favourable for the Poles themselves.<sup>9</sup> In theory, the Pol-

5 Frank Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', *History and Theory*, 1989, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 137-153; idem, *Historical Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001; idem, *Political Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002; idem, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

6 Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569-1999*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2003. It is worth mentioning another work by this author, that is, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

7 *Ibid.*, 1.

8 *Ibid.*, 10.

9 Daniel Beauvois, *Polacy na Ukrainie 1831-1863*, Paris: Institute Litteraire Kultura, 1987; idem, *Trójkąt ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793-1914*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo

ish seemed to accept the fact that the history of the Republic might be presented from a different point of view; however, when that happened, a problem occurred almost instantly. Appositely, there has been almost no thorough discussion in Poland of fundamental works by an American scholar, Brian Porter-Szűcs. One of his works was even translated into Polish, but I have not encountered any significant scholarly engagement in its analysis, yet.<sup>10</sup>

## II.

One should not confuse history with narratives about history – the latter do not signify the past, they are the tales about the past. Storytelling, in turn, may entail a number of points of view – hence the importance of using metaphors. Being too methodologically naïve to still believe in the concept of ‘historical truth’, rarely do historical practitioners remember about them as they are.

History does not exist without metaphors which make it possible to create a tale about history. One of the most basic metaphors in history is anthropomorphism, thanks to which countries, nations, societies and communities are being endowed with human features, so they can be born, they can develop, grow old, fall, and revive, etc. Without anthropomorphism, there would be no history understood as tales about history. Other fundamental metaphors (or, as some scholars prefer to call them – ‘fundamental myths’) are deeply ingrained in a concept that might be referred to as a ‘supporting structure’ of history. If eliminated, the whole narrative would collapse and man would not be able to create a tale about history. The metaphors of evolution/revolution, sublime, cohesion, causality, activism, determinism/indeterminism, etc. are the basic constituents of that ‘supporting structure’ of any narrative about history. Methodologists cannot agree if historical reality (the past, history, the historian’s object of interest) does possess an in-built ‘narrative structure’, which is to be discovered by the historian,

UMCS, 2005.

- 10 Brian Porter-Szűcs, *When Nationalism Began to Hate. Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [Polish edition: *Gdy nacjonalizm zaczął nienawidzić. Wyobrażenia nowoczesnej polityki w dziewiętnastowiecznej Polsce*, Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2011]; idem, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity and Poland*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; idem, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, Hoboken (NJ): Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

or whether it is the historian who invents the structure in question. The scales have been in favour of the anti-realistic standpoint supported, for instance, by H. White or F. Ankersmit. That being so, a historical narrative is always already a kind of form chosen by the historian to shape that initially amorphous history. On the other hand, the realistic approach considers 'narrative' a consequence of the events that are being analyzed; by telling a story, the historian does not impose any form on the past, but just re-discovers a form that has already been there. However, it must be noted that the historian does perform an interpretation of a given fragment from the past; the fragment, which has already been transformed into a 'narrative'. Therefore, only through its textualization can one reach historical reality.

However, even in the realistic approach, a conviction that history is 'as much invented, as discovered', has its place. What is more, that approach also acknowledges the historian's point of view, thus accepting absolutely legitimate differences in interpretation. It is worth reminding once again that the historian is never indifferent to historical reality as they represent one system of values and analyze another.

### III.

How should one write about history to make it beneficial to thinking of 'us' and 'others'? I shall present my standpoint in several remarks:

1. It is essential to be faithful to the methods of historical research. No ideological goal, even if lofty, should be realized at the cost of disregarding the professional principles.
2. One should accept that other nations can perceive the past, both their own and that of the others, in a different way. Appositely, my point of view is always limited. While trying to analyze a common past, it is worth remembering the ancient Roman principle *do ut des* – 'I give so that you will give'. And this is not an easy task. While working with Russian historians, I have noticed that bold and critical approaches to the Polish history are often confronted with covering-up of any dark sides of the Russian history, and that is being done especially by those historians who hold official positions. Reluctance to consider one's history in a critical manner notwithstanding, this is not an argument for supporting unwillingness to maintain a critical detachment to history when one is needed. Sometimes one has to wait a bit longer for the neighbour's reaction.

- To be fair, I should clarify that the majority of the Russian historians I have been working with represent an honest and decent attitude.
3. Grand historical narratives shall be balanced by the historical research on micro-narratives: on the basis of individual life stories or history of particular communities, the past appears to be different from what can be assumed if seen from the angle of history of countries, authorities or political parties. Studies on remembrance and possible conflicts/dissimilarities concerning this phenomenon are also quite important here. Of similar significance, working on the repressed or forgotten areas within a given sphere of remembrance should also be taken into consideration.
  4. The third party, that is, the foreigners, sometimes perceive things better than we do. It is worth listening to their opinions as they more often than not have a distance to a given issue. Excellent works about the history of Poland and Polish-Russian relations have been written by Norman Davies,<sup>11</sup> Daniel Beauvois,<sup>12</sup> Klaus Zernack,<sup>13</sup> or Richard Butterwick.<sup>14</sup> *Nemo iudex in causa sua* – ‘No one should be a judge in his own case.’ Obviously, it is the Polish who will author the lion’s share of the works on Polish history just as it is the Korean who will create the fundamental body of studies on Korean history. Yet, an empathic foreigner often allows us to look at our own history from a new and inspiring perspective.
  5. It is essential to be in a position to listen to the other party with empathy, although it does not mean that one should be uncritical. Yet, an empathic attitude would enable us to better understand

11 Norman Davies, *God’s Playground. A History of Poland*, New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. There have been published other numerous editions of this work, including the Polish translation entitled *Boże igrzysko. Historia Polski*, transl. E. Tabakowska. Few foreigners have done more than Norman Davies did by writing that book to make Polish history recognizable in the West.

12 See footnote 9.

13 Klaus Zernack, *Polen und Russland. Zwei Wege in der europäischen Geschichte*, Berlin: Propyläen, 1994. Polish translation: *Polska i Rosja. Dwie drogi w dziejach Europy*, transl. A. Kopacki, Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 2000.

14 Richard Butterwick, *Poland’s Last King and English Culture: Stanisław August Poniatowski, 1732-1798*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Polish translation: *Stanisław August a kultura angielska*, Warszawa: IBL, 2000; *The Polish-Lithuanian Monarchy in European Context, ca 1500-1795*, ed. idem, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001; idem, *The Polish Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1788-1792*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Polish extended edition: *Polska rewolucja a Kościół katolicki 1788-1792*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Muzeum Historii Polski, 2012.

the neighbour's way of thinking, their oversensitivity or lack thereof. And what is the most important here – that approach helps to better understand ourselves, too.

6. History should be told by paying special regard to all her colourful multidimensionality and not just in that oversimplifying white-and-black convention (it is usually we who are 'white'; the neighbours are often 'black'). Various shades of grey as well as other hues can be used while telling the story about our own and common past. Most probably, there has never been a situation when a perfect nation neighboured a society completely deprived of human features, yet, of course, being the invader is one thing, and the invaded is another.
7. It is always worth bearing in mind the benefit of paradox and an exception to the rule. Alongside the prevailing, or more well-known, phenomena (oppression, atrocities, cruelty), one should also seek for the opposite in the neighbour. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, not all Russians were bloody aggressors just as not all Poles were heroes. Appositely, not every attempt to accustom to the circumstances should be considered collaboration or national treason. Sometimes from one's unheroic conduct came some good to society, and heroic deeds resulted in irreplaceable losses. Obviously, it is quite difficult to talk here about a certain rule, yet it is always good to bear proportions in mind.
8. It is of outmost importance to avoid judging one's own history in terms of being a victim. Even Renan emphasized the significance of 'shared suffering' for shaping national identity.<sup>15</sup> Hardly ever does 'victimization' of one's history find understanding in the outsiders; what is more, it does exert a negative influence on creating national identity. Paradoxically, this problem concerns many countries. The idea of considering one's history either in terms of being the victim or the betrayed affects not only those countries that were losing battles in the past; interestingly, this phenomenon is also pre-

15 "A people shares a glorious heritage as well, regrets, and a common program to realize. Having suffered, rejoiced, and hoped together is worth more than common taxes or frontiers that conform to strategic ideas and is independent of racial or linguistic considerations. 'Suffered together,' I said, for shared suffering unites more than does joy. In fact, periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort." Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on 11 March 1882, [in:] idem, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992.

sent in the countries, which were the oppressors. Historiography should not deepen such inclinations; quite the contrary – it ought to prevent them. And that should happen not due to taking care of public opinion – it ought to result from professional decency. There is also one more reason to that, and it is quite pragmatic: a more nuanced story with elements of irony and optimism would be a much more comprehensible version of history than an outline martyrdom tale that has been repeated for generations. Of course, both might be correct, yet the martyrdom version is usually more oversimplifying. Let's invoke Michel Foucault here – a story of sacrifice can also be told in an original manner.

Something I have noticed in Seoul might serve here as a nice, yet quite symbolic, illustration of the approach mentioned above: in the very centre of the city, there is an old and beautiful, yet very imperial, edifice, erected by the Japanese authorities, which is as if 'covered' by a modern and impressive municipal building of splendid architectural features. I think it is a smart move. Warsaw has a similar example: the Palace of Culture and Science, for years a Stalinist symbol of Soviet dominance, seems to be less sinister when surrounded by modern sky-scrapers or interestingly lit-up.

9. No trivializing compromises. While working with Russians (it would be better to say: Russian officials dealing with history), I have been often asked to avoid discussing inconvenient issues and focus on those, which were pleasingly neutral and conflict-free, for instance, history of cultural exchanges. They are, of course, extremely interesting and worth studying, but such a 'reductionist' approach to the past is nothing else than an escape from problems. History is full of conflicts and even by putting them on the margins will not make them disappear. Most probably, left out and suppressed as such, they would spread to the spheres, where historians' arguments are of no use.
10. It is significant not to oversimplify things: we write 'Russians,' yet both Russia and the USSR were multiethnic countries, just as multiethnic was the state and civil service apparatus. In the communist Poland, there was an official linguistic convention, according to which tsarism was bad, but the Russian revolutionary movement was usually referred to in a very decent manner. Hence, there were no Russian repressions, those were the tsarist ones. On the other

hand, not all Soviet repressions or crimes straightforwardly signified Russian repressions or crimes. The Soviet oppressors were of Russian, Polish, Latvian, Georgian, Ukrainian and Jewish origin. What is more, it was the Russian who suffered the most – after all, they constituted the biggest ethnic group in the USSR. However, balance is needed and one should not exaggerate in either direction in the name of political correctness. It is worrying when somebody is talking about the Nazi crimes without clarifying the place of the Nazi origin: Germany. The Austrians seem to have found the smartest solution – as a well-known joke goes – they managed to convince the world that Hitler was a German, but Beethoven – an Austrian.

11. It is a very common phenomenon that an oppressive country is much more cruel towards its own citizens than to the outsiders. The Katyń victims constitute just a drop in the ocean of blood that was being shed in the USSR. Focusing on common experiences may bring nations closer, thus allowing both Russians and Poles to learn a lot from each other. That is why it is worth highlighting those uniting aspects while preparing international projects. What is more, historians should not engage themselves in the arguments that seem to be lawyers' domain; for instance, that concerns the Katyń massacre and its status either as a war crime, or an act of genocide. In the course of juridical disputes, actual victims and memory about them seem to disappear.

In addition, it is worth remembering that the oppressed nations might sometimes turn out to be the oppressors towards other nations. Daniel Beauvois' works offer that critical approach to the Polish history under the Russian Partition. A small town, Jedwabne, is another case in point. In 1941, at the beginning of the German occupation, the Poles murdered there a Jewish community. A current discussion of the attitude of Poles towards Jews and the Holocaust also provides one with interesting research materials. One group of people would like to strongly emphasize the acts of Polish help for Jews – those are the legitimate facts of human heroism. Others, on the other hand, believe that the examples mentioned above are just 'a fig leaf' for passing over those numerous examples of Poles who did denounce or even murder Jews. There has been written a lot about that problem, which is no longer considered highly con-

troversial by scholars. It is, however, employed in the contemporary political manoeuvring and used for supporting the creation of national mythology. It is worth remembering that the historian cannot follow the principle, according to which if the reality is inconvenient, well, it is too bad for the reality.

12. It is always good to meet, listen to each other, discuss or even be at each other's throats. That attitude is better than just sitting comfortably in one's own ethnic ghetto, immersed in a sense of superiority. The ghettos as such are the home for frustrated, misanthropic types who, convinced of their perfection, turn out to be interesting only to themselves.
13. The importance of comparative studies. If we can find the situations or circumstances corresponding to those in other parts of the world, it is always worth pondering upon them as they may teach us something. However, a analogy cannot be made by force; quite contrary to what claimed Thucydides, thinkers of the Enlightenment or the positivists, the past abounds with unique occurrences that cannot be compared to anything that existed before. Even striking similarities have their limitations.
14. One should seek for new paradigms. For sure, while investigating the history of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia and the USSR, it is useful to invoke the imperialism paradigm, which allows to approach those countries as multiethnic empires. The terms was introduced to the Russian studies years ago by Andreas Kappeler, a Swiss historian working in Vienna.<sup>16</sup> Even before Kappeler, that paradigm was adopted by Richard Pipes to his analysis of the USSR.<sup>17</sup> Nowadays, it is being developed in an excellent Kazan journal 'Ab Impero'. In Poland, the paradigm is followed by Andrzej Nowak, one of the leading scholars of Polish-Russian relations.<sup>18</sup> Another quite

16 Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich. Entstehung-Geschichte-Zerfall*, Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1992; English translation: *The Russian Empire. A Multiethnic History*, Harlow: Longman 2001.

17 Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union. Communism and Nationalism 1917-1923*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1954, new edition 1964, 1997. Polish translation: *Czerwone imperium. Powstanie Związku Sowieckiego*, transl. W. Jeżewski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Magnum, 2015.

18 Out of his numerous works, let me mention four: *Od imperium do imperium. Spojrzenia na historię Europy Wschodniej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Instytut Historii PAN w Warszawie, 2004; *Rosja i Europa Wschodnia: „imperiologia” stosowana = Russia and Eastern Europe: Applied 'Imperiology'*,

popular outline of Russian history inspired by the imperialism paradigm was written by Wojciech Zajączkowski, a historian, diplomat and former Polish ambassador to Moscow.<sup>19</sup> It must be noted, however, that this paradigm – of use to the analysis of the history of Russia, the USSR or Central Asia – cannot be directly applied to studying the history of Northeast Asia. Hence, the role of Japan in that region would not correspond exactly to the role played by the USSR in East-Central Europe or by the Russian Empire – in Poland. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the imperialism paradigm cannot be used at all while studying the history of Japan in the context of Northeast Asia.

15. Nowadays, while discussing the concept of history, we engage ourselves in a dialogue with and between generations that are few or even several decades apart from the events which are being discussed. It is worth invoking here a comment made by Wiktor Woroszyński, a Polish writer affiliated with the democratic opposition during the PRL, who, while pondering upon Polish attitudes towards the Holocaust, noted in *Notebooks [Dzienniki]*: “No community, national or foreign, should be convinced to believe in a collective sense of guilt for what was done in the past or – and this is even more important here – for what was committed in a given territory and had not been prevented. Neither Germans! (Nor Turks for Armenians, or Russians for Stalinism, etc.). The socio-psychological results of such endeavours may turn out to be abhorrent.”<sup>20</sup>
16. Last but not least: it is of utmost significance to think today of a rather ironic remark assigned to Ernest Renan, who was to define ‘nation’ in a following manner: “a group of people united by an incorrect view of the past and hatred towards the neighbors.”<sup>21</sup> Fa-

ed. Andrzej Nowak, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, Instytut Historii PAN w Warszawie, 2006; *History and Geopolitics. A Contest for Eastern Europe*, Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs 2008; *Ofiary imperium. Imperia jako ofiary. 44 spojrzenia = Imperial Victims. Empires as Victims. 44 Views*, ed. Andrzej Nowak, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Instytut Historii PAN, 2010.

19 Wojciech Zajączkowski, *Rosja i narody. Ósmy kontynent. Szkic dziejów Eurazji*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MG, 2009.

20 Wiktor Woroszyński, *Dzienniki*, vol. 2: 1983-1987, Warszawa: Ośrodek KARTA, 2018, p. 582.

21 Qtd. in: Georg G. Iggers, op. cit., p. 9. In *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Renan formulated his opinion in a little bit different manner: “Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality. Historical inquiry, in effect, throws light on the violent acts that

tal if existing independently, too frequent a concomitance of those two elements is, unfortunately, even worse.

#### **IV. A few examples of simplification**

I shall just mention a couple of examples from the history of Poland: from a Polish perspective, a history of the Republic seems to be much more optimistic than if it is analyzed from the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Latvian, etc. perspective. What is more, the Polish are very eager, and that happens almost subconsciously, to take all the credit for the achievements of that period, thus disregarding the fact the Republic was a multiethnic creation. Another thing is related to the Partitions of Poland. Although legitimate, the very term is, in fact, a metonymy since the partitions affected not only Poles and Poland (that is, the Crown which, together with Lithuania, constituted one out of two basic parts of the Republic). To illustrate these misunderstandings, let me invoke a situation that happened to a friend of mine, who is a well-known Ukrainian historian. While he was showing his small sons around the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, the burial site of John II Casimir Vasa's heart, he said that that was where the last Ukrainian king was buried. That was indeed a true piece of information – during the reign of John Casimir, Kiev was still legally located within the territory of the Republic, although in practice, since 1667, the city was subjected to Moscow. The boys, however, strongly protested when they heard a guide to a Polish trip talking about the heart of the Polish king, John Casimir (emphasis mine). They could not understand that both statements were correct; John II Casimir Vasa was, in fact, the King of Poland as well as Grand Duke of Lithuania, Russia (today: the Ukraine), Prussia, Masovia, etc.

Another example that illustrates only allegedly contradictory interpretations concerns the issue of the social dimension of national uprisings. We traditionally talk about the Poles fighting for independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but, in fact, we just analyze the insurrectionary effort put into the cause by a part of the social elite, while the major-

have taken place at the origin of every political formation, even those that have been the most benevolent in their consequences. Unity is always brutally established." Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?."

ity of the contemporary society, that is, peasants, were either indifferent, or simply hostile to such endeavours. That is who metonymy functions. On the one hand, if we look at that issue in a different way, there appears a clear use of synecdoche: the insurrectionary elite is put for the whole nation or the whole nation is reduced to the social elite. Appositely, we praise the patriotic sentiments of the Poles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet we pass over in silence the fact that those sentiments were only characteristic of a part of society. The majority either lacked national awareness, or had a conformist approach to life. And it would have been truly surprising had it been the other way round. The same can be said about the public attitude in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Talking about the Polish resistance against communism after World War II, so popular nowadays, does disregard the basic fact that, once again, the majority of society tried to accustom to the contemporary circumstances and was far from any forms of active resistance, which was represented by a substantial minority (that changed only a bit and for a short period of time between 1980-1981). Neither was the attitude of the Catholic Church that uncompromising and heroic as one would want to force through. These are the examples of how interpretation can be simplified. Simplification is useful for erecting new patriotic monuments but brings more irreparable harm than good for both critical thinking and practicing historiography which, if is to fulfil its aim, cannot be anything other than critical.

*Translated by Agnieszka Matysiak, Ph.D.*

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