H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrice M. Dabrowski. *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland.* Blommington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 313 S. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34429-8.

Reviewed by Laurie Koloski (Department of History, College of William and Mary)
Published on HABSBURG (May, 2007)

Celebrating the Stateless Nation, or How the "Polish Question" Stayed Afloat

The Poles' "long nineteenth century" was even longer than that of most European nations, stretching as it did from the first partition of 1772, when Prussia, Austria, and Russia claimed chunks of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to 1918, when an independent Polish state re-emerged. Between the third partition of 1795 and the end of World War I, Poland as a political entity essentially disappeared from the map of Europe, and ethnic Poles found themselves governed by three different imperial states. Had the partitions happened a century earlier, the "Polish question" might have settled into historical obscurity. What Poland's partitioners could not know in the late eighteenth century, however, was that in a few short decades, their new subjects would make good use of the emergent ideology of nationalism and that, not long thereafter, an "age of commemoration" would render memories and monuments the perfect venue for putting Polish national identity and political aspirations on display. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, Polish activists used Krakow and other patriotic settings to promote a new kind of Polish nation, one broadened to include the peasantry, steeped in a mythologized past, and committed to an independent Polish future. In so doing, they kept the Polish nation, and the "Polish question," alive and well. *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland*, Patrice Dabrowski's excellent new study, shows how.

The Polish "predicament" in the nineteenth century, as Dabrowski points out early in the book, involved "the mind of a large nation in a stateless body" (p. 7). This dilemma turned out to be a source of inspiration for Polish national activists who had two goals: first, to broaden the nation to include the peasantry (only an inclusive nation would be strong enough to revive an independent state); and second, not only to avoid the trauma of failed uprisings (several had been launched, in 1794, 1831, and 1863), but also the apolitical tactics and implications of "organic work," the post-1863 efforts to turn away from anti-imperial resistance and focus on economic and social modernization. Commemoration met both needs. Celebrations and monuments carried national and political messages, and "gave rise to a more palpable sense of national unity and strength" (p. 6), appealing to even the "nationally indifferent" (p. 15). As Dabrowski describes them, commemorations were a "new brand of Polish 'defiance' … tempered by concrete deeds … a constructive, creative, yet intensely national variant of organic work–an attempt at national modernization, Polish style" (p. 15).

Nowhere was Poland's commemorative age more visible than in Krakow, the provincial city sitting near the northwestern edge of Austrian Galicia, which occupies the center of Dabrowski's story (though the book also includes case studies from Lwow, the Galician capital, and Warsaw, in the Russian partition, as well as brief discussions of other locales).[1] Krakow was the first Galician city to benefit from limited self-rule in 1866, which meant city residents could conduct their official business in Polish, send their children to Polish schools, and, as it turned out, host huge public celebrations in honor of national heroes and anniversaries. This was no small matter, particularly compared to the limitations and repressions of everyday life under Prussian and Russian rule at the time. Moreover, though Krakow had no "national" standing in the political or economic realms, it could boast an impressive cache of medieval historical monuments. The combination of these sites with the city's relative cultural and political autonomy was a potent one, and Krakow "proved to be a national space par excellence," in which Poles could literally see their national past–and, ideally, their future as well (p. 215).

Dabrowski's is the first monograph-length study of east central European commemoration-as-nation-building to be published in English, and it is a welcome addition to the growing body of work on "imagined" national communities in the region. Her central questions

are not new: how did the modern Polish nation take shape? What were the mechanisms through which Polish subjects of three different imperial states were encouraged to identify themselves as Poles? Which definitions of Polishness prevailed, and why? Nor will readers familiar with Polish history be surprised to learn that the Polish nation which emerged by the turn of the twentieth century was simultaneously more expansive (socioeconomically) and exclusive (ethnically and culturally). Yet in considering Polish nation building through the prism of commemoration, Dabrowski gives us a fresh and clearer picture of who and what were involved in the process, and how "messy" it was (p. 16). Her work thus adds a great deal to existing studies of Polish nationalism and nation-building in east central Europe.[2]

Historiographically, Dabrowski seeks primarily to contribute to discussions on the genesis of modern Polish nationalism. She is critical of intellectual historians' emphasis on "the logic of ideas," which, as she argues, "moved the masses rarely–if ever" (p. 16), and of scholars who emphasize the critical role conservative Galician leaders played in fostering a new sense of Polishness (p. 17).[3] Instead, Dabrowski seeks to extend agency to historiographically marginalized groups, particularly Galicia's liberals and peasants, and to highlight the contested nature of nation building and the changing "constellations" of political power that accompanied it. In this sense, her book can be considered a valuable companion to Keely Stauter-Halsted's excellent study of peasant nationalism in Galicia (cited above), both historically–Dabrowski's story is an essentially urban one, even if her protagonists are often seeking peasant support for their agendas–and historiographically.

Dabrowski seems less eager to situate her work within the broader scholarly literature on collective memory and its role in nation-building, but to my mind it belongs there as well.[4] This is, after all, a story of how individuals and groups mobilized the past in the service of their present goals, and Dabrowski does an excellent job illuminating the political and social agendas that inspired them and their audiences. Her book reminds me of Alon Confino's *The Nation as a Local Metaphor*, in which he makes a convincing argument for the centrality of local ideals in an emerging German national identity and successfully balances the power of representation with the agency of reception.[5] Dabrowski's story is a very different one, but its approach and lessons (though missing Confino's explicit theoretical apparatus) are similar and equally illuminating of the complexities of national identity formation.

Dabrowski divides her monograph into three sections, each devoted to a stage in the commemoration-as-nation-building process. Part 1 focuses on the late 1870s/early 1880s and the first of the "notable public celebrations with a broad reach and impact" that are the book's focus (p. 20). In the first chapter, Dabrowski traces the many agendas visible in the 1879 jubilee of Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski, a prolific and popular writer from Prussian Poland. Chapter 2 chronicles the 1883 commemoration of the 1683 "Relief of Vienna," a battle against the Ottoman Turks led by Polish forces under King Jan Sobieski. In the book's second section, Dabrowski turns to commemorations of the 1890s, exploring the interactions between celebration and mass politics and the growing assertiveness of the Polish peasantry and integral nationalists. Two of three chapters chart the commemorative significance of national bard Adam Mickiewicz, whose remains were transferred from France to Krakow in 1890 (chapter 3) and whose Krakow and Warsaw monuments, erected in 1898, were the stuff of contest but also national construction (chapter 5). In an intervening chapter, Dabrowski shows how Poles in Krakow, Warsaw, and Lwow celebrated the Enlightened constitution of May 3, 1791 and Tadeusz Kosciuszko's 1794 insurrection against the partitioning powers. By the early twentieth century, with the growing threat of war–and possibility of Polish independence–nationalists' emphasis had shifted from bards to battles, and in the third part of the book, Dabrowski turns to celebrations of the Polish insurrectionary spirit. These included the six-hundredth anniversary of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's 1410 defeat of the Teutonic Knights at Grunwald (chapter 6) and the more recent anniversaries of the 1813 death of the Polish prince Jozef Poniatowski, who had fought with Napoleon, and the 1863 anti-tsarist uprising (chapter 7). In a lengthy conclusion, Dabrowski fleshes out the central implications of her study fully.

The overall narrative that emerges is one of growing awareness and action, as previously disengaged sectors of the population (with the peasantry at the forefront) came to acknowledge Polishness as their own and as Poles in all three partitions came to prioritize a revived Polish state as well as the fighting spirit required to achieve it. Commemorations, Dabrowski argues in the conclusion, helped consolidate Poles and Polishness in four key ways. Along with the institutions they spawned (among them museums and educational programs directed at peasants), celebrations drew Poles from all three partitions, fostering "horizontal" integration. They led to "vertical" integration as well, as peasants came to play an increasingly pivotal role in visions and cele-

brations of Polish nationhood. No longer could nobles cast the nation in their own image or avoid interacting with "the people." Commemorations also "fostered what could be considered a notion of 'Polish' or 'national' time, a time that transcended partition and geography," and in this sense promoted "temporal" integration between past, present, and future (p. 215). Finally, as a "living national relic" (p. 215), Krakow contributed to the Poles' "symbolic" integration, serving as a "surrogate homeland" and promoting a "shared vocabulary for a national discourse" (p. 216).

Of the "sub-stories" that weave their way through this narrative of nation-making, that of the peasantry's growing engagement, both at the urging of liberal activists and on its own behalf, is perhaps among the most central. Here, Dabrowski builds on Stauter-Halsted's work to show in detail how activists used celebrations to promote political participation and the "polonization" of peasants in the ethnically mixed borderlands. Organizers of the 1883 celebrations of King Jan Sobieski's victory over the Turks worked hard to ensure peasant participation, and their efforts paid off, as some twelve thousand peasants came to take part (p. 61). In 1891, during anniversary celebrations for the 1791 constitution, liberals took advantage of the occasion "to highlight the value of democratic principles and promote both the transformation of the masses into citizens and the transition from a noble nation to a more comprehensive body" (p. 107). In creating the People's School Society (Towarzystwo Szkoly Ludowej), with its slogan "through an enlightened folk to a free Poland," liberal democrats hoped not just to educate, but also to "polonize" the peasantry, particularly border region populations most likely to consider themselves Czechs, Germans, or Ukrainians (p. 108). By the time Kosciuszko's rebellion was celebrated in 1894, peasants had added activities and agendas of their own. Indeed, this was an event tailor-made for peasant activists, as scythe-wielding peasants had helped Kosciuszko win the Battle of Raclawice in 1794. Though festivities in Krakow focused on Kosciuszko's oath on the Main Market Square, events in Lwow highlighted the Raclawice Panorama, a painting in the round that featured peasant soldiers and Kosciuszko himself in peasant dress and drew two hundred thousand viewers (pp. 122-126). Beyond coordinating pilgrimages to Lwow, peasant activists organized re-enactments of the battle, published a commemorative song book (which eventually sold eight hundred thousand copies), and, most important, held a peasant rally that led to the creation of the Peasant Party (Stronnictwo Ludowe) the following year (pp. 127-130). "The inclusion and increasing participation of the peasant in national matters is one of the successes of this Polish commemorative age," writes Dabrowski (p. 214).

Beyond showing how peasant citizens of nineteenth-century imperial states could look in the mirror of commemoration and see a new national self, Dabrowski weaves a second sub-story on the workings of the "constellation of power," political constituencies that organized and promoted, but also controlled and sometimes thwarted, efforts to build monuments and stage public festivities. The Poles' imperial rulers, Habsburg officials, of course, did their best to quash events judged subversive, though with mixed success; for the most part, the commemorations described here challenged rather than consolidated state-level imperial agendas. Still, there was nothing unified about the individuals and groups that sought to forge or capitalize on a new sense of Polishness, and to Dabrowski's credit, there is no easy "top-down" or elite-driven narrative here. Instead, as Dabrowski is well aware, commemorations were highly contested affairs. Challenging existing scholarship, which credits Galician conservatives with taking the commemorative initiative, Dabrowski shows that the liberal democrats were "the true initiators of the celebrations" (p. 17) and argues persuasively that conservatives, who were eager to maintain close ties with the partitioning powers and unwilling to sacrifice the mythology of the noble-led nation, had little choice but to try to co-opt commemorations they would have preferred to ignore. Conservatives themselves jumped on the celebratory bandwagon, though often reluctantly: after liberals launched an effort to translate Mickiewicz's remains to the crypts at Krakow's Wawel Castle in 1879, for example, the conservatives argued against burying a "foreigner" in the crypts (Mickiewicz had never been to Krakow and had spent many years in emigration); when that failed, they dragged their feet until liberal critics formed a citizens' committee of their own to collect the necessary funds and finalize the celebration. Faced with this *fait accompli*, conservatives reclaimed power in the name of the provincial authorities, and succeeded in bringing their more moderate plans to fruition and ensuring that nothing got out of hand (pp. 83-86).

Liberals and conservatives were not the only groups battling over how to celebrate the past. Church officials were also often reluctant to endorse commemorations, fearing that national ideals would supplant religious commitment. During the Grunwald celebrations of 1910, church officials faced a predicament, as the Vatican enjoyed close ties with Prussia, and the Teutonic Knights could be–and were by the Germans–presented as

defenders of Christianity against the pagan Lithuanians (pp. 175-178). As Dabrowski writes of the entire period, "for an age for which it has generally been assumed that Church and nation went hand in hand, there was a great deal of ambiguity on both sides" (p. 230). Youth groups and socialists, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, proto-paramilitary groups like the Falcons (Sokoly), promoted their own interpretations, with varying levels of success. By the early twentieth century, however, it was the integral nationalists and groups like the National League (led by Roman Dmowski) who had claimed the high ground of national commemoration. Already in 1894, at Warsaw celebrations of Kosciuszko's rebellion, Dmowski had called for "pan-Polish" deeds rather than separate ones (p. 117), exhorting even Poles in Galicia to "mourn" alongside their suffering brethren in the German and Russian partitions rather than celebrate and devote money to "national consciousness-raising" (p. 112). The nationalists' "unified" approach benefited from and contributed to a growing sense of activism and militarism as the twentieth century rolled in (pp. 131, 152-154, 163, 193-194), and eclipsed the socialists' mass appeal. Only the socialists could rival the nationalists in terms of appealing to the masses, but with a message that was also national in tone; given the ongoing reality of anti-socialist discrimination, theirs was an uphill struggle.

In the end, the vision of Polishness that prevailed was close to that of the integral nationalists, and in her third sub-narrative, Dabrowski uses commemoration to illuminate how this played out. Even as the Polish nation was expanding to include the peasantry, it was also narrowing to exclude those considered ethnically or culturally non-Polish. Though organizers of the 1883 celebrations of the Relief of Vienna had been careful to appeal to Ruthenes and other Slavs, albeit as "Poles" in the pre-partition sense of *gente ruthenus, natione Polonus* (pp. 68, 69), by 1910 and the commemorations of Grunwald, such efforts had all but disappeared. Grunwald, a battle fought by the troops of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was increasingly presented as a Polish victory, and Lithuanians, fully aware of the limitations of the new Polishness, boycotted the Krakow ceremony (pp. 173, 174). "Amazing for a partitioned nation," Dabrowski writes, "Poles seemed to be vying for hegemony in East-Central Europe" (p. 174). If early celebrations had "publicized the attractiveness of Polish strengths" and also "transcended the more narrow confines of the nation," by the early 1890s, they had contributed to a definition of the nation that was broader socially but "more exclusively ethnic" (p. 223).

A fourth sub-story, perhaps less central than the others but no less interesting, highlights the very real political power of ostensibly apolitical individuals and endeavors. Krakow painter Jan Matejko, a master of (huge) historical paintings, produced one titled *Sobieski at Vienna* for the 1883 festivities, which reached international audiences as well as local ones. Sending it to Vienna for public exhibition, Matejko surprised Austrian audiences with an interpretation of the battle unfamiliar to them–one in which a Polish rather than Habsburg ruler had played the central role (p. 59). But there was more: rather than presenting the painting to the newly opened National Museum in Krakow, Matejko gave it to local leaders with the stipulation that they give it to Pope Leo XIII on behalf of the Polish nation. "As an influential painter and generous patriot," writes Dabrowski, "Matejko effected a type of foreign policy in the name of his nation" (p. 74). In other celebrations, novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz and pianist–later politician–Ignacy Paderewski played pivotal roles (see chapters 5 and 6), stretching the bounds of the permissible and engaging Poles on emotional as well as intellectual levels.

The book raises several issues about which I wished I could know more. Brian Porter has written of romanticism's staying power in late nineteenth-century Polish nationalism, even amongst such "realists" as Roman Dmowski, and I would like to have a clearer sense of how activists (before and after Dmowski's rise) drew on or sought to reject romanticism's legacies, which to my mind seem very powerful here.[6] I would also like to know more about activists' borrowing from or contacts with Polish emigres and non-Poles in western Europe. How did commemorations in Krakow compare with those in other European cities, or with those promoted for other, perhaps state-initiated, purposes? Finally, I would be eager to know more about the tension between the unifying effects of viewing and participating in national celebrations and the divisive politics involved in staging them (which Dabrowski has chronicled so effectively). Is our ability to see such tension a gift of retrospect, or were activists at the time aware of it as well, and, if so, what did they think and say about this? To end with these questions is not to suggest that the author should have written a different book than she did, but merely to say that in reading the book, I found myself wanting to know even more about the intellectual and cultural foundations, the ideological struggles, and the broader European context underlying these commemorations.

Dabrowski's book is an extremely impressive work that confirms what we have learned about nation-making in the late nineteenth century in a broad sense, but it also reminds us that the differences between one case and an-

other are real, significant, and worth our close attention. This is a book that, given the spectrum of European experiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should be of great interest to scholars and students of nationalism across Europe and even elsewhere. After all, the "Polish question" was as powerful as it was for as long as it was not just because noisy emissaries came to Paris in 1918 to demand a state. Throughout the long nineteenth century, the Poles had something important to say about nationhood and statehood, and Dabrowski does a superb job helping us understand what it was.

Notes

[1]. Dabrowski uses the anglicized "Cracow" throughout the book.

[2]. Of English-language works on Polish nationalism, see two excellent recent monographs, Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); reviewed on HABSBURG by Chris Chulos, http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=96141024029325. For an overview of recent work on nation-building and commemoration in the Habsburg lands and east central Europe more broadly, see the collections by Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield, eds., *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001); and Nancy M. Wingfield, ed., *Creating the Other: Ethnic Conflict and Nationalism in Habsburg Central Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), reviewed on HABSBURG, respectively, by Mills Kelly, http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=230631016640092, and by John Czaplicka, http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=203291016638963. See also Pieter M. Judson and Marsha L. Rozenblit, eds., *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe* (New York: Berghan Books, 2005). There is very little work in English dealing specifically with commemoration in nineteenth-century Poland. An early and still relatively isolated example is Keely Stauter-Halsted, "Patriotic Celebrations in Austrian Poland: The Kosciuszko Centennial and the Formation of Peasant Nationalism," *Austrian History Yearbook* 25 (1994): 79-95. There are several pieces on the Polish lands in the collections listed above, including one by Stauter-Halsted. Even in Polish, there is surprisingly little; Dabrowski lists relevant works in Polish by scholars such as Adam Galos (p. 239), and cites others throughout the text. There is, however, a large body of work on Krakow's symbolic role (and, by implication, its centrality to Polish nationhood), and Dabrowski cites many of these in her bibliography. In English, see Jacek Purchla, *Cracow in the European Core* (Krakow: International Cultural Center, 2000), a gorgeous and effusively celebratory album published to commemorate the city's 2000 designation as a European City of Culture. In Polish, see the work of Jacek Purchla, *Matecznik Polski: Pozaekonomiczne czynniki rozwoju Krakowa w okesie autonomii galicyjskiej* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1992); and *Krakow: Prowincja czy metropolia?-* (Krakow: Universitas, 1996). Also see Zbigniew Baran, ed., *Krakow: Dialog tradycji* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak/Miedzynarodowy Centrum Kultury, 1991); and Roza Godula, ed., *Klejnoty i sekrety Krakowa* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Wawelskie, 1994).

[3]. In particular, Dabrowski challenges the work of Brian Porter and Jacek Purchla, cited above.

[4]. Dabrowski cites numerous sources related to monuments, festivals and celebrations, myths, and memory; for example, Mona Ozouf's *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de memoire* (1984-1992), published in English as *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Iwona Irwin-Zarecka's more site-specific work, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994); and Wojciech Wrzesinski's *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Universytetu Wroclawskiego, 1994). However, she does not discuss them or her broader conceptual approach to the history and historiography of memory.

[5]. Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Wuerttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[6]. See in particular Brian Porter, "Who Is a Pole and Where Is Poland? Territory and Nation in the Rhetoric of Polish National Democracy before 1905," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 639-653.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Laurie Koloski. Review of Dabrowski, Patrice M., *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland.*

HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13175

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.