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R. Stobiecki: *Historiografia PRL*

The author, a re-known figure in the field of the history of Polish historiography Stobiecki, a student of the historian A. F. Grabski at the University of Łódź, established himself through his first monograph - History Under Supervision. Disputes on a New Model of History in Poland (second half of the 1940s – beginnings of the 1950s), Łódź 1993 - and his second publication – Bolszewizm a History. Próba rekonstrukcji bolszewickiej filozofii dziejów [Bolshevism and History. An Effort to Reconstruct the Bolshevik Philosophy of History]. Łódź 1998. , found inspiration for the title of his latest book in an older study by Marcin Kula Marcin Kula, Nieboszczyka PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna ... ale skomplikowana. [The Deceased PRL. Neither Good, Nor Wise, Nor Beautiful, but Complicated], in: Spór o PRL. Kraków 1996. pp. 104-110. . He has no aspirations to draw a line under the Polish historiography during the communist period as this subject is still fairly new and scarce. In this respect, also psychological barriers play an important role since many historians “surveyed” in his study are still active and their role and accountability for the post-war historiography needs to be dealt with. The full scale of the problem, i.e. the reluctance to acquire authentic testimonies of the historians as relevant sources, revealed an experiment from 1995. 150 historians were approached with a survey to comment on their personal and professional experience with the official censorship during the old regime. Only 24 of them returned their statements. Cenzura w PRL. Relacje historyków [Censorship in the PRL. Relations of Historians], edited by Zbigniew Romek, Warszawa 2000, pp. 8-9. The book comprises new as well as already published but partly revised and amended essays.

The main actor of Stobiecki’s new monograph is the community of Polish historians defined by research, personal and institutional aspects as much as by its publishing activities and the socio-political and cultural environment in which it operated. The author approaches this community in three main contexts. The first one offers Stalinism as political doctrine with a powerful legitimizing function. The second includes historiography from the point of view of ideological and methodological debates; the explanations are supplemented by a series of case studies on institutional (historical congresses), local examples (Łódź), and on several significant historians (Witold Kula, Zanna Kormanowa, Henryk Wereszycki). The third context encompasses plausible way-outs from the everlasting explanations and assessments of the communist time, including applications of the changing perspective of the everyday life (i.e. renaming streets in Łódź after 1989).

Stalinist doctrine was applied to historiography by an enforcement of new institutional structures, theoretical-methodological models, and new historical narratives. In the first direction, he looks on the process of creating rival organizations (Association of Marxist Historians set up in 1948), the establishment of an alternative platform that forced out older institutions (founding of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the abolition of the old one – Polish Academy of Sciences and Arts), or the inception of its own rookery of "experts" (Institute of Education of
Party Cadres).

Regarding methodology, Stobiecki analyzes two attempts on a methodological coup d’état. The first, unsuccessful one, occurred at the Wroclaw congress of Polish historians (1948), whereas the second took place at the infamous methodological conference in Otwock (held at the turn of the years 1951/1952) and resulted in a subjugation of the historical community to the ideological dictum. He also ponders over the manner of historical research at that time, when allegiance to Stalinist form of historical materialism became the only allowed methodological approach.

As for the new narratives the author focuses on attempts to fit in Polish historiography into the Soviet model of general history (grounded on alternations of socio-economic formations). The aim was to reach a synchronization of the general and national momentum by the use of a chronological scheme, which would frame national history in a desired manner while giving preference to progressive over reactionary traditions. The outcome was rather questionable – apparently Polish history was not a suitable material to manipulate with.

Stobiecki introduces the post-war situation within the context of modern Polish historiography. However, he does not judge the degree of its (dis-) continuity through the political history but through the development of its theoretical and methodological background. Using the examples taken from the congresses of Polish historians in the 20th century, Stobiecki demonstrates that theory was rather neglected and innovations coming from abroad were rather absorbed by traditional scholarship. Hence the Polish historiography after 1945 was hardly capable of dealing with methodological impact of Marxism.

If the historians wanted to resist the pressure of Stalinist dogma, they were forced to work out methods to grasp and understand it, which compelled them to turn their attention towards theoretical issues. The desertion of prevalent fields of scholarly work (political history) and their replacement by new topics, especially of social and economic history, contributed to a shift of research priorities and methodological approaches.

With the exception of themes controlled by communist regime (such as Soviet-Polish relations) historical research had won its breathing space at times of political liberalization, and split in three streams. The first one embodied a return to traditional scholarship, whereas the second, in terms of socio-economic orientation and study of mentalities, opened up Polish historiography to the Western influences (French Annales School). The third one had taken up on the Marxist line, though modified, as some historians followed the path of Orthodox Marxism while others floated on the waves of revisionism and sometimes even fully abandoned the original impulse.

The vigorousness of ideological penetration may result in a reversed image of the post-war historiography, which looks like a washing off the deposits of Stalinism. However, to what extent is it appropriate to assess the development of historiography from the perspective of erosion of the ideological dogma? Focusing on the role of methodology and keeping in mind that the dynamics of the post-war historiography had not been just a mere product of the political pressure, Stobiecki can see that “encounters” with Marxism accelerated theorization of history. When the regime left the Stalinist forms after 1956, Marxism became just one of the possible options while some historians returned then to traditional understanding of historiography, some continued to explore the new path, but outside Marxism.

Hence Polish historiography today has two strong and different approaches towards the communist past. The first one comprises of methodological formulas that are symptomatic of scientism (nothing but facts), tend to establish historical truths purely on source evidence and follow rather the path of traditional (political) history. The second approach evaluates (description seen as short of answers) and looks upon historiography as a way of fulfillment of a historical mission and understands methodology as a tool for confirmation of certain interpretations of history legitimizing certain political (moral based) visions of the (communist) past. Just a tiny group of historians keeps the task to understand and work on theoretical dimension of their craft (p. 209).

These reflections over Stobiecki’s new publication can be concluded by saying that the image of Polish historiography during communism has been formed by two tendencies. On the one hand we can observe very gradual modification and absorption of research, political and emotional potential stemming from national traumas of recent past. On the other hand, the historical memory of Polish society must be taken into account: the question remains which vision of history will people ask for, what stance will the community of Polish historians take towards this vision and history in general and how the historical self-reflection of this community will fit into it.
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