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The Fifth Congress of Polish Medievalists (Rzeszów, 20th–24th September 2015): A Report

Organised on initiative of the Standing Committee of Polish Medievalists, the Congress of Polish Medievalists has been held every three or four years since 2002, each time offering a special opportunity for Polish medieval history researchers to integrate. Preceded by Toruń, Lublin, Łódź, and Poznań, Rzeszów was chosen as the fifth edition's location. Mottoed 'Reception and Rejection. Intercultural Contacts in the Middle Ages', the 5th Congress took place from 20th to 24th September 2015 at the University of Rzeszów. The several hundred papers delivered as part of the deliberations covered a much broader array of topics and issues than signalled by the motto, thus reflecting the extensive pool of problems taken up in the contributors' regular scientific effort. The Congress was attended by more than 250 medievalists from all over the country, representing various scientific hubs and institutions, all age categories and, primarily, a most diverse array of research interests and disciplines. Guests from abroad were also present – suffice it to mention Jonathan Shepard of the University of Oxford and Rudolf Simek of the University of Bonn. The accompanying events included a fair of historical books, a dinner party, and two outings: a sightseeing tour of Rzeszów and a trip to the village of Trzcinica, nicknamed the 'Carpathian Troy' as it features an archaeological heritage park based on a Bronze-Age settlement.

Organised into twenty sections, the proceedings – genuinely fruitful but extremely strenuous – went on for three consecutive days. However, the set-up of this many diverse sections within a mere three days was not a logistically easy venture. Hence, a well-informed content-related appraisal of these deliberations far exceeds the competence of a single rapporteur, as (s)he only could have attentively listen to a small portion of the papers delivered. This circumstance makes the following report selective.

The sections most closely associated with 'Intercultural contacts' included, i.a.: 'Where the East Meets the West. Borderland in Polish medieval studies' (no. 1); 'Coexistence and confrontation: the Byzantine encounters with the East' (no. 11); 'Singular imitation into deliberate modernisation. Central European rulerships within early and high medieval continental interaction networks' (no. 15); and, 'Medieval art at the borderline of cultures: opportunities and limitations' (no. 18). Stanisław Rosik of the University of Wrocław facilitated session (no. 5) entitled 'Hierophanies, beliefs, ceremonies: medieval symbolic culture – between paganism and Christianity'. This intellectually stimulating session was run for two days, attended by as many

as sixteen participants, and covering a wide array of topics. For instance, László Tapolcai (University of Budapest) delivered a paper on the portrayals of female characters in Gallus Anonymus's chronicle. Aneta Pieniądż (University of Warsaw) showed the ways in which Christianisation informed the perception of revenge in the Frankian society of the Merovingian era. Janusz Cieślík (Cracow) discussed at length the complex problems related to the genesis of the 'Zbruch Idol'. Jagiellonian University's art historian Dominika Mazur talked about the religious symbolism of the late medieval tiled stoves. Leszek Gardeła, an archaeologist of the Rzeszów University, tackled the 'Ghouls, Convicts, and Community Misfits'. These few examples, so diverse as they are, demonstrate that the hierophanies section ranked among the most thematically and methodologically diverse areas of the Congress.

The undersigned delivered a paper as part of Section 2, themed 'At the borderline of Slavdom and Scandinavia: Polish Nordic studies', chaired by Jakub Morawiec (Silesian University), with contributions from nine researchers, most of whom represented the younger generation of historians. This in itself demonstrates how resilient is the development of Polish research in the history of medieval Scandinavia (seemingly, a somewhat exotic area). Scandinavian threads cropped up also in other papers presented at the Congress, just to mention Władysław Duczko's (Aleksander Gieysztor Academy of Humanities, Pułtusk) plenary lecture on the Scandinavian presence in Poland and Ruthenia, or the address by Andrzej Pleszczyński (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University [UMCS], Lublin) referring to an old hypothesis of Christian sources of the vision of Yggdrasil ash tree. As further regards the Nordic studies session, the paper presented by Włodzimierz Gogłoza, a lawyer with the UMCS, discussing 'Medieval Iceland as a subject of research in the field of non-historical social sciences', proved a particularly interesting example of interdisciplinary studies, as it indicated the potential of research into the social-political system of medieval Iceland with use of methods characteristic of economy, statehood and law theory, or political philosophy.

Medieval archaeology and its points-of-contact with other research disciplines were discussed within as many as three sections, respectively entitled: 'Historians and archaeologists as researchers of the Middle Ages: problems and collaboration opportunities' (no. 6); 'Archaeology and architecture' (no. 8); and, 'The disciplines of auxiliary archaeological and historical sciences in the face of twenty-first century challenges' (no. 9).

I should moreover briefly mention Section 10, which was focused on Jan Długosz the man and his work, and chaired by Maria Koczerska of the University of Warsaw. With its plenary lecture on Długosz's life and output by Jerzy Wyrozumski, this particular session was very much within this year's series of celebrations in honour of the great Polish historiographer.

Plenary lectures were held every day in the morning, before the day's agenda started. Apart from the aforementioned speakers, Duczko, Shepard, Simek

and Wyrozumski (in alphabetical order), Andrzej Buko, Michał Parczewski, Andrzej Pleszczyński, Jerzy Strzelczyk, and Przemysław Urbańczyk presented their lectures on this occasion. A particularly passionate talk was given by A. Pleszczyński, who criticised the views of some political and mass media-related authority figures in whose view historical (especially, medieval) research has no social bearing. Pleszczyński demonstrated how shallow is the historical reflection that stands behind such convictions, illustrating his argument with the 'idiot Pole' stereotype appearing here and there and based on much earlier intellectual sources than those who unwittingly use it may presume.

A summary discussion, concerning the Congress's deliberations and the general condition of Polish medieval studies, marked the event's conclusion. This session was co-facilitated by Wojciech Fałkowski (University of Warsaw) and Leszek P. Słupecki (University of Rzeszów), the latter being the event's leading organiser.

In sum, the fifth Congress of Polish Medievalists was certainly an interesting and successful event, both in terms of its scientific, scholarly and organisational aspects and as far as its social and socialising function is concerned. So, we look forward now to the following edition, which is due to take place in a few years in Wrocław.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Rafał Rutkowski

12th Joachim Lelewel Debate, 'A Triumphant Procession of Neo-Liberalism? New Aspects of the 1989 Transition', German Historical Institute, Warsaw, 6th October, 2015

The Joachim Lelewel Debate cycle is held at the German Historical Institute Warsaw (DHI Warschau). The patronage of Joachim Lelewel, whose research concerned aspects of the history of Poland within international context and determinants, excellently reflects the leitmotif of the Debates. The panel discussions focus on occurrences and events of importance related to the history of Poland and analysed in a European and international context. The attendees and contributors represent the international scientific and scholarly milieu. These delegates represent a variety of research disciplines, with varying approaches to the questions set at the table for discussion; this provides a framework for intensive exchange of views and opinions. The attending public is invited to take interactive part in the discussion. The organisers have intended to create a scholarly climate where the different confronting opinions and stances may contribute to explore the problem in question and to draw constructive conclusions.

The topic of the most recent, twelfth, Debate is essential since the developments that took place in 1989 and afterwards have reshaped the political,

social and economic relations and relationships not just in the transition countries but across the European continent. These issues have gained particular importance in today's world of neoliberal ideas, where so many citizens and so many politicians have lost their bearings. Does the reality of today have much, if anything, in common with the world from before 1989? What have been the effects of the 1989 revolution on our contemporary world? Who are the winners and who are the losers of the transition processes having taken place? These are some of the questions posed for discussion at the twelfth edition of the forum.

The opening address was delivered by Maciej Górny. The discussion was subsequently facilitated by Włodzimierz Borodziej of the University of Warsaw's Institute of History and the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena, Germany; Borodziej has to his credit numerous publications on East-Central Europe and former Eastern Bloc countries; in the 1990s he acted as Director General with the Chancellery of the Sejm (Lower House of the Republic of Poland's Parliament). The invited panellists were Philipp Ther of the University of Vienna, author specialising in contemporary history, including *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa*, a book analysing the reasons and effects of the 1989 transition in Europe (a Polish translation was published on the eve of the forum, an English translation will appear in 2016)¹; Michal Pullmann, head of the Institute of Social and Economic History at the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, author of a book on the 1989 events *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*², which triggered a hot debate in his country; Rafał Woś, journalist economic commentator with *Polityka* weekly, author of *Dziecięca choroba liberalizmu*³, a book expressing a critical stance toward the course of the transition developments in Poland.

The panellists, each from his peculiar angle, revisited the issue of the political and economic transition of 1989 – the course it has taken, its role, effects and results. Philipp Ther argues in his book that the political transformation reached beyond East Central Europe⁴, as process that has affected the continent in its entirety, establishing the neoliberal discourse in a dominant position. This particular doctrine played an enormous part, at least temporarily, in the economic policies pursued by Eastern and Western countries alike. Using the local sources, Ther portrays the situation of specified

¹ Philipp Ther, *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* (Berlin, 2014) [published in Polish as *Nowy ład na starym kontynencie. Historia neoliberalnej Europy* (Warszawa, 2015)].

² Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* (Praha, 2011).

³ Rafał Woś, *Dziecięca choroba liberalizmu* (Warszawa, 2014).

⁴ For a review, see *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 111.

countries of what was the Eastern Bloc from the inside, in a sense. His interlocutors were authors focusing on major aspects of the transformation having taken place in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic and in Poland, respectively. Michal Pullmann analyses in his book the decline of communism in Czechoslovakia, emphasising that not only violence had been essential to the system's sustainability: there prevailed a sort of consensus between the authorities and the society, based upon a ritual language that structured the social and public life.⁵ In the conclusive part of his study, Pullmann finds that what he calls a linguistic consensus, which finally broke down in 1989, reappeared anew in the 1990s and presently its new form can be identified, founded upon slogans or keywords such as market, fulfilment of individual opportunities, or genuine labour. The book has aroused stormy debates in the Czech Republic, its author being charged with clearing the communist regime from blame. Rafał Woś's publication has, in turn, triggered much controversy in Poland. The book analyses the weak points of the transition in his country, focusing largely on the labour market and its deficiencies such as low wages and high unemployment. Woś's analysis is no less critical with respect to the style in which privatisation has been carried out locally and the method used by the Third Republic in tackling the heritage of communist-era industrialisation. Common to these three studies is their authors' concern about democracy. As we may learn from the political transition experience, free market does not have to be its immediate prerequisite.

Włodzimierz Borodziej's vigorous facilitation effort has made the discussion vivid, and helped highlight the serious differences in interpreting the facts of transition. The discussion focused, altogether, on four major aspects. One session – let us call it 'Follow-on/No follow-on' – debated on the possible continuities in the functioning of the countries before and after 1989. The debaters pondered whether 1989 was a 'Zero Year', the point as from which all began being built anew or, perhaps, the structure of the social and economic capital before 1989 formed the basis for the reforms and changes that took place afterwards. It can be concluded based on the arguments proposed by the panellists that all of them can see elements of continuity before and after the transitional moment of 1989; rather than defining it as a 'zero hour' moment, they would point to a continuum identifiable in certain aspects of society or economic life. Philipp Ther argued that the year 1989 is possibly definable as the starting point only for the sphere of politics and reforms. In turn, Rafał Woś strongly argued there was no 'zero hour' whatsoever, since elements of follow-up are discernible in social and economic activities.

The subsequent session focused on the role of human capital in the formation of a new system after 1989. Based on the differing arguments put forth

⁵ See the present issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica* for a review on the book.

by the discussants, it may be inferred that, overall, the human capital potential amassed in the communist time has to an extent been taken advantage of after 1989 but has been squandered as well, in many aspects. The evaluation of these developments is based upon the perspective of viewing the problem: whether the focus is on the individuals who have benefited from the transition or on the situation of those who have lost the most as a result of the political, economic and social change – or, of the deindustrialisation process. The beneficiaries and the losers of the transition in Poland was a contentious issue for the disputants in the third session, which might be called ‘The winners/The losers’. The discussion developed at this point mainly between Woś and Ther. Whilst the latter argued that Poland’s economic standing look rather sound against its peers, the former counter-argued that the debates or discussions taking place these days have been overly concentrated on the success stories rather than adequately dealing with those who fell on hard times. Pullmann suggested, however, that it would be difficult to decide with certainty what a successful outcome is and what is not, speaking in terms of economic affairs. Of importance, to his mind, is that a new consensus has taken shape after 1989 which is constituting a ‘good new world’ – the attitudes taken towards it by the society being a fascinating focus for research, along with what the society believes in, and why. The panellists discussed quite at length the foreign direct investment (FDI) made in Poland and the related profits and losses. Ther and Woś offered, again, their different views on the topic – with the Austrian scholar positively evaluating the phenomenon and its influence on the development of Polish economy, and his Polish colleague criticising it based on adverse effects on the country’s economic situation. The Polish authorities, Woś argued, should have assumed a different stance with respect to FDI, with a more focused and precise policy, resolving upfront which spheres of the economy, in specific, could be ready to accept the inflowing foreign investment, as opposed to the unprepared areas, this in order to balance or rationalise the national and social cost of the venture.

An open panel discussion came as the last item on the agenda. The audience was offered an opportunity to interact with their comments or questions to the panellists. The contributors mainly focused on aspects of continuity of the processes of before 1989 and thereafter; the role of rural areas and agriculture in the transition; the issue of historicity of the process under debate; the language accompanying the political and economic transitions; and, a moral evaluation of the transition. In his concluding speech, Borodziej commented on the course of the discussion and summarised the questions and remarks voiced, emphasising that the thorough changes seen in a revolutionary time like the 1989 transition are usually unfair. In his opinion, the process was completed in Poland in the year 2004, whereas the transformation in the sphere of civil society or human capital will still last many years. In conclusion, Miloš Řezník, director of the German Historical

Institute, briefly summarised the discussion and thanked the audience as well as the panellists.

From the Polish perspective, which extends to the researchers and to everyone who has been personally affected by the process in question, it is extremely important that Western scholars have contributed to the research on these issues and can identify changes stemming from the processes occurring in East Central Europe after 1989 and taking place also in West European countries. Representatives of science and mass media have met at the Debate, which appears to be a fact of importance. Their diverse views, from analytical to a bottom-up (or, public-discourse) perspective could thus meet and become apparent. As it has appeared, the latter approach tends to encourage unambiguous and radical appraisals.

In sum, as many meetings of this sort as possible should be organised, to my mind. They offer an opportunity for the Polish public to become acquainted with outside views on some important historical questions and processes that concern, and indeed influence the lives of every one of us, our everyday reality. The invited guests can be asked about the questions preoccupying them; their studies or statements can be commented upon. The debate cycle named after Lelewel seems, all in all, to be quite a good formula for exchange of thoughts and experiences. On an occasion like this, it is made apparent that Polish affairs essentially contribute to international discourse.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Aleksandra Kmak-Pamirska