

# CHRONICLE

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## Facing Changes and Expectations. Some Remarks on the 20th General Convention of Polish Historians

General Conventions of Polish Historians serve as a form of professionalisation of historical science and integration of the scholarly milieu. Since 1925, the event has been held under the auspices of Polish Historical Society [PTH].<sup>1</sup> But its history is even longer: the first Convention was organised by the Cracow-based Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences [PAU] on the 400th death anniversary of the chronicler Jan Długosz, in the year 1880.<sup>2</sup> There was enough time, then, to determine the canon of objectives and purposes, and the concept(s) of their institutionalisation. The Conventions provide the space in which the condition of historical sciences is debated, and methodological trends and orientations are presented, along with problems of education and popularisation of historical knowledge. To an extent, the Conventions reflect the current political situation, displaying in this context what is referred to as the social function of historiography.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, three points-of-reference can be discerned: continuity, changes, and challenges of the moment – all these aspects are reflected in the 2015 Proclamation of the 20th General Convention of Polish Historians [GCPH]:

We shall convene in Lublin on 18th to 20th September 2019, precisely fifty years after the 10th GCPH. The latter also took place in Lublin, which offers an incentive to reflect upon the changes that occurred during this period in Polish historiography as such, and upon the challenges we are facing today. A careful balance of achievements and failures of the past fifty years of academic historiography in Poland and the position it presently holds in European and

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<sup>1</sup> Established 1886 in Lwów/Lemberg, the Historical Society was renamed in 1924 as the Polish Historical Society. In 1947 it moved its Central Board office to Cracow and, nine months later, to Warsaw. Since 1887, the Society has been publishing its quarterly *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (fasc. 1 was edited by Ksawery Liske, the Society's chairman).

<sup>2</sup> See Feliks Kiryk, 'Historia Zjazdów', *Dziennik Polski* (2004), also available at: <http://www.dziennikpolski24.pl/artukul/1914248,historia-zjazdow,id,t.html> [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2020].

<sup>3</sup> See *Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich. Krótka historia*, a survey footage made on the occasion of 20th GCPH by the Polish History Museum [MHP]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uU9SCib-kJU> [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2020].

international science is still for us to be drafted – and the time has come to tackle the task finally.<sup>4</sup>

In reference to this postulate, Professor Jan Pomorski, who chaired the Organisational Committee, in the covering address *On the need for our community to self-reflect* explained the premises of the 20th Convention's concept expressed in the slogan 'A Great Change. History facing the challenges...', pointing among the latter the 450th anniversary of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 150 years of women's suffrage, thirty years of the 'Autumn of the Nations', and the change related to the coming of the age of internet and universal digitalisation.<sup>5</sup>

For the organisers themselves,<sup>6</sup> the first challenge was to alter the session formula, as first postulated at the previous edition, held in Szczecin. The structure of nine thematic sections and five panel sessions was finally adopted as forms of discussion around the big subject-matters of the time and current methodological issues. The debates were preceded by introductory papers (selected by the Organisation Committee following an open contest and rendered accessible via the Convention's webpage three months before the kick-off). Each of the key speakers was given fifteen minutes to present his/her arguments in the form of a multimedia presentation.<sup>7</sup> Let me recall the lead subjects of the respective sections:

- 1) Ancient History: Ancient and modern democracies: change or continuity? Endurance and revolutions in antiquity.
- 2) Medieval History: Ideas, concepts, and theories animating medievalist (early vs late Middle Ages) research in the last fifty years.
- 3) Modern History: Polish historiography of early modern age after 1989: an attempt at evaluation and guidelines for the future.
- 4) The Nineteenth Century: Nobility into modernity? Polish society in the face of nineteenth-century civilisation change.

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<sup>4</sup> See official website of 20th GCPH: [www.xxpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl](http://www.xxpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl), tab *Odezwa* [Proclamation] [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Jan Pomorski, 'O potrzebie środowiskowej autorefleksji. Założenia i podstawa programowa XX Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich', *ibid.*, tab *Założenia* [Assumptions] [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2020].

<sup>6</sup> The main organisers of 20th GCPH included the Polish Historical Society, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin [UMCS], John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin [KUL], and the State Archives in Lublin. The institutional partners were the National Remembrance Institute [IPN], the Polish History Museum, Polish State Archives, UMCS' Institute of History, the City of Lublin (as part of the 450th anniversary of the Union of Lublin celebration agenda).

<sup>7</sup> See the 20th GCPH's official website: [www.xxpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl](http://www.xxpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl), tab. *Referaty* [Papers] [Accessed: 18 Feb. 2020].

- 5) Interbellum 1918–39 and the Second World War: Do we need a new synthetic account of the history of interwar Poland? If so, how to do it? The national and universal dimension of the Polish WW2 experience.
- 6) Contemporary History after 1945: Post-war communist Poland. Duration and change. Communist Poland facing the world: typical, or unique? (1944–89);
- 7) Thirty Years after the Transition: ‘The Second War for the Past’. The past and its role in the transition process. External influences on the local transition.
- 8) Teaching History – Memory in historical education: ideas/notions, contexts, experiences.
- 9) Auxiliary Sciences of History: a New Research Perspective. From medieval documents/chronicles to electronic texts. Toward a visualisation of the past: image, sign, and in historical research.

Five plenary panel meetings have been designed to be a forum for discussion on the current status of historical science in Poland; it was also an experiment launched in order to check the potential for internal self-reflection, the starting point having been the question whether it does make sense to hold such General Conventions. The discussions opened with a panel session on the **Heritage of the Union of Lublin**, facilitated by Professors Hubert Łaszkiwicz (KUL) and Norman Davies (Oxford University), with foreign historians attending: Juratė Kiaupienė (Lithuania), Robert Frost (United Kingdom), Hienadz’ Sahanovič (Belarus), and Daniel Beauvois (France). The panel session crowning day one of the Convention was on the **History of Poland from a feminine standpoint**; the subject was considered along the lines of three crucial questions: (i) How to research the women’s history?; (ii) How to write a history of women?, and (iii) How to popularise and publicise the history of women? The concept was elaborated and the discussion facilitated by Dobrochna Kałwa (University of Warsaw [UW]), Agata Mirek (Catholic University of Lublin [KUL]), and Marta Sikorska-Kowalska (University of Łódź [UŁ]); the discussants were Teresa Kulak (University of Wrocław [UWr]), Andrzej Szwarz (UW), Maria Solarska (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań [UAM]), and Aneta Pieniądz (UW). Panel session three: **Which way to learn about the past? Polish historiography between the 10th and 20th Convention of PTH**, whose concept was prepared by Professors Ewa Domańska and Rafał Stobiecki, acted, in a sense, as a barometer of the condition of Polish historiography in the last five decades. The session’s second part focused on the current challenges to Polish historiography in the context of development of modern humanities, including deontological questions in face of social issues and historically-oriented policy after 1989. Panel four, entitled **History in public space. Historical museums**, was coordinated by Robert Kostro, Dariusz Stola, and Rafał Wnuk, historians who combine research with public history activities. Hence the conceptual

multidimensionality of the subject-matters in the consideration of the problems: How to show history in a museum?, and, To whom do historical museums belong? The point of departure was a reflection on the peculiar boom in museums and museology seen in the last two decades in Poland, and not shunning the controversies related to politics of memorialising and the global trend for a culture of commemoration and the ways it impacts the teaching of history. The latter thread appeared in panel session five as well, though in different contexts: **What kind of history Poles need today?**, whose participants were Professors Andrzej Nowak (Jagiellonian University, Krakow [UJ]), Rafał Wnuk (KUL), Wojciech Wrzosek (UAM), and Robert Traba, who acted as the facilitator. While the course of this particular debate is a separate topic, one may tentatively agree that a question about a 'need' for a history contains already a 'background noise' as long as it accompanies the historians' reflection during any historical upheaval, whereas the answers given on such occasions typically reflect a 'state of mind' and the community's consciousness.

Thematic panel sessions held by the 20th Convention's institutional partners was an important agenda item. On 17th September, a seminar was held, as part of proceedings of PTH's Ethics Commission of Warsaw and the Lublin branch of PTH, discussing the ethics of historical research and debate around the newly-drafted historian's code of ethics. The Warsaw branch of the National Remembrance Institute [IPN] coordinated the sections dealing with research into Polish independence-oriented emigration in the period 1945–90 and aspects of Central Eastern European transition, attended by foreign historians. A panel session held by the Supreme Directorate of State Archives deliberated on the issues of modern archival science in public space and historical research. Also, a Forum of Historical Journals, with a debate on today's condition and perspectives of paper periodicals, was held under the auspices of the Institute of History, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University [UMCS], Lublin.

The bulletin *Gazeta Zjazdowa*, edited in collaboration with the artistic institution Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN of Lublin, whose thematic issues were published on each day of the Convention, is worthy of mention.<sup>8</sup> An edition of *Pamiętnik XX PZHP w Lublinie [Proceedings of the 20th PZHP in Lublin]*, containing the papers delivered at the sessions and debate contributions, is forthcoming; its presentation is scheduled at the World Congress of Historical Sciences in Poznań in August 2020.

Let me recall one more occurrence that took place during the Convention opening ceremony: Andrzej Duda, President of the Republic of Poland, decorated the historians of merit with State distinctions and subsequently,

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<sup>8</sup> The links to the bulletins are available at [www.xpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl/2019/09/25/gazety-zjazdowe](http://www.xpzhp.umcs.lublin.pl/2019/09/25/gazety-zjazdowe) [Accessed: 20 Feb. 2020].

following the event's tradition, addressed the attendees.<sup>9</sup> He would mention a "community-building and State-forming role of history" and the historian's duties in this context. The speech was clearly kept in the spirit of the Strategy of Polish Historical Policy as announced in November 2015, which, in a programme-oriented manner, contrasted a historically-oriented policy against a 'cosmopolitan ideology' and the 'end of history' paradigm. Professor Tomasz Schramm, chairman of the Polish Academy of Sciences' Historical Sciences Committee, took the floor afterwards on behalf of those decorated and reminded the attendees that the role of a historian is not to do a historical policy but to pursue reliable scientific research as well as education based on such research.

In this light, the results of the 20th GCPH are worth considering. In the first place, this Convention has demonstrated the feasibility of a new organisation formula regarding the agendas of thematic and plenary sessions (opening papers commissioned and made available beforehand; coordinators from different academic centres; priority of discussion) and the accompanying events focused on non-standard forms of education and popularisation of historical knowledge in the space of public history ('Countless Histories' Festival, doctoral projects at the poster session, applications offered by new communication technologies). The historians' community has accepted with satisfaction the care about highlighting the pluralism of research lines in historical science and the readiness to encounter diverse contexts and orientations in modern humanities, as reflected in the topics addressed at plenary panel sessions. An important, though secondary, thread was the debate on instrumental use of history under a State-supported historical policy and commemoration culture, the latter also being quite instrumentally used by the State authorities. In this context, a turn has been perceptible in the self-reflection of the historians' community with regard to the ways in which historians function in today's society. It was expressed by the statements that could be posed, or overheard from some of the attendees or organisers, in the final moments of the Convention.

So, what do the significant changes in history mean, and why are they significant? How to study, teach, and commemorate or memorialise them? The above-quoted Proclamation points to a change that is characteristic of our time in relation to what is referred to as the digital revolution, summarised as "To be 'e-', or not to be: that is the question". The minuscule 'e-' appearing in the most common prefix of our day refers to new technologies – that is, information, computer, Web technologies – in the area of electronic communication, calculation cloud services, social media, and the R&D sector.

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<sup>9</sup> The presidential patronage of GCPH is a tradition that dates back to the interwar years, starting with 4th Convention in Poznań (1925) which was held under the patronage of President Stanisław Wojciechowski.

As researchers, teachers, archivists, museum staff, and, lastly, ordinary users, we have to do with IT data engineering systems (incl. visualisation and analytical statistics techniques); digital humanities call today for expertise also in such fields of applied history.

What is of importance in history teaching? This question was an indispensable element of the Convention's all five panel sessions. The point was not some grand anniversaries or great changes in historiography or methodology: it was about a heuristic and deontological principle expressed once by Antoni Mączak: "I am positive that questions should be posed more daringly, and more ambitiously".<sup>10</sup> Every time, in a new situation (particularly, political situation), one has to consider what should a 'daring' and 'ambitious' question, or approach toward a matter, organisation or problem mean. The organisers of the 20th Convention made it apparent that the challenge formulated by Professor Mączak was one of the watchwords or mottos for them. However, with the time that has passed, the historian's liberty and responsibility seem to have been the major issues. We can repeat Witold Kula's memorable response to the question, whether the historian is at liberty to do everything: "... There are limits, somewhere, to what historians can do ... history is a customs officer who would never let falsified commodity through". On the other hand, "the point is, every chapter of history shall be written down".<sup>11</sup> The thing is, namely, that in spite of the victors' endeavours to cover the tracks and silencing uncomfortable details – for instance, in the name of a 'pedagogy of pride' – the historian, if loyal to his or her calling, is vigilant, 'unforgiving', and aware of the harsh truth that historians are there to describe the history. Hence, the aforementioned confrontation between representatives of political power and a historian is back with us; together with it, the question arises, what sort of history the modern society actually needs? Separation of science from a historical policy is one thing; reflection on the historical policy in reference to social functions of history is a topic for the next series of historical debates and disputes. We know, based on our experience, three 'plans' for a historically-oriented policy: the affirmative one, the critical one, and a plan for civic education. All three, so far as they are matched in the appropriate (even if, quite possibly, uneven) proportions, have the potential to build social capital. However, in the scientific discourse, a given system of values or an object of worship or contempt can never be an object of belief or scorn, or disdain, but just an object of research and study.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Antoni Mączak, *Historia jest we mnie* (Warszawa, 2004), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Witold Kula, *Rozdziałki* (Warszawa, 1996), 61, 83, 249.

<sup>12</sup> I am referring here to Timothy Snyder's statement: "The nation is here neither an object of faith nor an object of fun, but an object of study"; see Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven–London, 2003), 'Introduction', 11.

As regards any sort of confrontation in the field of historical policy itself, one can repeat, after Dmitri Volkogonov, that instead of blind patriotism, what we do need is the truth.

And, thirdly: in the time of new information technologies, fragmentation owed to specific expertise areas, interdisciplinary dissipation, and 'projectosis' as a canonical approach, do the historians need General Conventions anymore? As Jan Pomorski wrote in the 20th GCPH's covering address, "they are not some 'golden fleece expeditions' where one communes with top-notch historical science and seeks answers to the fundamental questions. We have been participating in the Conventions for many years, complaining about overloaded programs, frequent lack of innovative and in-depth papers, permanent scarcity of time, and lack of stimulating discussions. And, we agree to that, as a community".<sup>13</sup> The organisers of the Lublin Convention decided to deny this approach fundamentally; instead, as the tradition suggested, they used a new formula to propose a reflection of the new orientations in historical sciences, along with topical subjects in the social debate. This was reinforced by the assumption that General Conventions keep up the obligation to hold current debates, disputes and reflections – as a principle whose continuity will hopefully be maintained in the future. All the more so that the number of problems related to the changes of our time – in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres, including technological and scientific ones – will be increasing.

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<sup>13</sup> Pomorski, 'O potrzebie środowiskowej autorefleksji'.