

CHRONICLE

Acta Poloniae Historica

129, 2024

PL ISSN 0001-6829

INNOVATIONS OF THE PAST: 70 YEARS OF POLISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

On 22–24 November 2023, the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences hosted the conference ‘Innowacje przeszłości: 70 lat historiografii polskiej’ [Innovations of the Past: 70 Years of Polish Historiography], both in person and virtually. The three-day event featured nine sessions, over 20 papers, and a panel discussion on social history. In celebration of the Institute’s 70th anniversary, the organisers aimed to explore the development of historiography in post-war Poland through the lens of innovation. The rather intriguing and paradoxical name of the academic event, which at first sight combined the seemingly contradictory concepts of ‘past’ and ‘innovation’, proved highly pertinent and reflected the spirit in which most of the participants conducted their deliberations. It also reflected the point of view of the participants, which was to perceive the nature of historiography as quite dynamic and open: it is not only loyalty to tradition but also admiration for new trends and the desire for innovation that have characterised the development of Polish historiography over the past 70 years.

The first day started with a session focused on the history of culture. Halina Manikowska (Polish Academy of Sciences) and Hanna Zaremska (Polish Academy of Sciences) delivered a presentation on the monographic study of the cultural history of medieval Poland. They provided an extensive overview of the project, starting from its inception in the 1950s with the layout of the book, and culminating with the publication of the final volume entitled *Kultura Polski średniowiecznej XIV–XV w.* [Culture of Medieval Poland, the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries] in the 1990s. One question that attracted particular interest and provoked a lively discussion among the participants was the influence of German and French historiography on Polish scholars. Following this, Jacek Banaszekiewicz (Polish Academy of Sciences) presented his reflections on and memories of the Institute of History, offering light-hearted criticism of the generation of his teachers – Brygida Kürbis, Henryk Łowmiański, and Gerard Labuda. His paper sparked a lengthy discussion among the attendees. The session concluded with a presentation by Piotr Okniński (University of Warsaw), who traced the evolution of the concept of “medieval urban culture,” as depicted in the works of Polish historians over the past 70 years.

The next session encompassed a broad spectrum of topics, delving into migration issues, minority studies, and the complexities of global history.

Participants were presented with pivotal moments in the history of Polish migration studies and the contemporary challenges confronting the field, as outlined by Dariusz Stola (Polish Academy of Sciences). Insights were also provided into the nuances and dynamics of Polish historical memory regarding the Holocaust and the Jewish communities in small Polish towns, as presented by Anna Landau-Czajka (Polish Academy of Sciences). The session additionally shed light on key debates within English-language historiography of the Indian Ocean Region as subjects of scholarly inquiry, explicated by Marek Pawełczak (University of Warsaw). Subsequent discussions revolved around the problem of formation and disintegration of academic networks established by Polish historians before 1989, coinciding with the onset of the country's socio-economic transition. Andrzej Turkowski (University of Warsaw) elucidated this phenomenon through the lens of the development of studies on dependency and backwardness.

In contrast to the previous session, which focused on the development of specific historical disciplines, the final session of the first day of the conference, entitled *Historia oddolna* [Grass-Roots History], focused on the current landscape of Polish historiography. Barbara Klich-Kluczevska (Jagiellonian University) gave an overview of developments in Polish historical anthropology over the past decade. She was followed by Małgorzata Praczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University), who discussed the theoretical challenges inherent in environmental history and the study of human interactions with non-human entities. It is worth noting that the papers in this session generated a long and wide-ranging discussion. Various themes emerged along the way, including the subjecthood of the scholar, artificial intelligence, and nature as a historical source.

The second day of the conference proved to be exceptionally interesting, with a total of four sessions. The day began with keynotes by professors Jan Pomorski (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University) and Rafał Stobiecki (University of Lodz). Professor Pomorski devoted his entire talk to a thorough examination of the legacy and influence of Marxism on Polish historiography, while Professor Stobiecki touched briefly on this aspect, reflecting more broadly on the nature of the history of historiography. The significance of Marxist influences on the development of history as a scholarly discipline in Poland over the past 70 years emerged as a central theme in the discussion that followed the presentations. The exchanges revolved around the relative impact of ideological influences (or lack thereof), and the degree to which they shaped historical perspectives and methodologies.

In her paper entitled *Biografistyka. Co się zmienia, co zostaje* [Biographical Studies: what changes, what remains] literary scholar Grażyna Borkowska (Polish Academy of Sciences) also highlighted the continuing influence of the past on contemporary contexts. Her talk focused on the history of the Polish Biographical Dictionary [*Polski słownik biograficzny*, PSB], outlining evolving

perspectives of historians as to its purpose. Borkowska additionally considered possible alternatives, such as the notion of subject-specific reference works, including those dedicated to specific professions in Poland, such as physicians or mathematicians. Throughout her presentation, she provided compelling insights into the conceptualisation of an “ideal” biography and the corresponding features of an “ideal” biographical dictionary. In addition, Borkowska addressed the contemporary challenges facing historical biography [*biografistyka historyczna*] within the Polish scholarly landscape.

The session that followed, entitled ‘Historia Ameryki Łacińskiej w badaniach polskich historyków’ [The History of Latin America in Polish Historical Research], provided a case study illustrating the trajectory of a historical research trend that flourished in Poland between the 1960s and 1980s, subsequently waned, and is now experiencing a resurgence. Speakers recounted the activities of Tadeusz Łepkowski’s seminar, which served as the cornerstone for the Department of the History of the Americas, Africa, and Asia at the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences (as detailed in Ryszard Stemplowski’s, Jagiellonian University report). In addition, the session led to interesting discussions on the perspectives of Polish scholars on the notion of “people/nation” in Latin American studies (Małgorzata Nalewajko, University of Warsaw), as well as insights into the current state of historical research into Latin America in the Polish academia (presented by Rafał Reichert, University of Warsaw).

The sessions of the second day of the conference culminated in a fascinating one-and-a-half-hour discussion on the social history of Poland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The panellists, including Katarzyna Sierakowska (Polish Academy of Sciences), Dobrochna Kałwa (University of Warsaw), Natalia Jarska (Polish Academy of Sciences), Tadeusz Epsztein (Polish Academy of Sciences), Dariusz Jarosz (Polish Academy of Sciences), and Maciej Janowski (Polish Academy of Sciences), provided concise overviews of most interesting themes and trends from the perspective of the past 70 years, which they found especially noteworthy. Their presentations reflected on studies of the history of Polish peasants, intellectuals, landowners, and women, as well as broader explorations of the social history of interwar Poland. They also discussed the evolution of social history in Poland and the contemporary challenges facing historians in this field. Throughout the discussion, audience members enriched the dialogue by sharing their own experiences and reflections on the topic. This interactive exchange underscored the importance and timeliness of the topics highlighted by the panellists and reaffirmed their continuing scholarly relevance.

The final day of the conference featured two panels, each offering non-trivial insights into historical research perspectives and methodology. The first panel focused on the presentation of the Department of Historical Atlas. Bogumił Szady (Polish Academy of Sciences) delved into theoretical considerations

surrounding the impact of the ‘spatial turn’ on Polish historiography. Meanwhile, other panellists, including Tadeusz Epsztein (Polish Academy of Sciences), Adam Zapała (Polish Academy of Sciences), and Beata Konopska (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University), presented the results and progress of their research efforts, highlighting potential avenues that digital and cartographic methods can open for historical research. The panel discussion provoked a lively exchange of views among the participants, which showed how interesting and uncommon the presented approach is.

The final session of the conference was devoted to the history of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Urszula Augustyniak (University of Warsaw) presented her insights into current trends in the study of aristocratic culture, drawing comparisons with earlier trends in Polish historical scholarship. Andrzej Zakrzewski (University of Warsaw) and Piotr Guzowski (University of Białystok) presented two substantive papers that shed light on research by Polish scholars focused on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and on the influence of prevailing European trends, such as the *École des Annales*, on Polish historians.

Unfortunately, the limitations of the Chronicle prevent us from fully capturing all the thoughts and ideas expressed during the conference. In his closing remarks, Maciej Górny, Deputy Director of the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, expressed the organisers’ intention to have the proceedings of the conference published. It is hoped that this effort will be successful and that the conference results will be made available to a broad audience of scholars.

Proofreading Antoni Górny

Oleksandr Pestrykov

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5433-2989>