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INTRODUCTION: TIME AND THE MODERN WORLD. STANDARDISATION, GLOBALISATION, PRIVACY

> There could be nothing better. Such an outrage combines the greatest possible regard for humanity with the most alarming display of ferocious imbecility. I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy. Starvation itself could hardly be dragged in there – eh? And there are other advantages. **The whole civilised world has heard of Greenwich.** The very boot-blacks in the basement of Charing Cross Station know something of it. See?'
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> The features of Mr Vladimir, so well known in the best society by their humorous urbanity, beamed with cynical self-satisfaction, which would have astonished the intelligent women his wit entertained so exquisitely. 'Yes', he continued, with a contemptuous smile, 'the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration.[1]

The above quote from Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* could suffice pretty well as an introduction to the current issue of Acta Poloniae Historica. Today, the idea of an attack on the Greenwich Observatory may seem like a quaint example of "nineteenth-century exotica", a vestige of a time so different from ours in its mores, modes of knowledge, and affective aspect. Yet, it was in the nineteenth century – to be more precise, in 1884 – that the Centre for Control over Time was located at the specific place chosen in a vote at the International Meridian Conference in Chicago. Participants in the event elected the Royal Observatory at Greenwich as the seat of the prime meridian, the reference for all measures of longitude; they also decided that the world would be divided into 24 time zones, each an hour away from

[1] Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent. A Simple Tale* (London–Toronto, 1923), 135.

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the other. Before then, in 1847, Great Britain adopted the Greenwich Mean Time as a standard for the railways, whose role in advancing the standardisation of time cannot be overstated. Crafting the world of his novel, Conrad brought up an actual event: in February 1894, a bomb exploded in the gardens near the Greenwich Observatory. The perpetrator, identified by the police as Frenchman Martial Bourdin, died, and the motives for his actions and his potential ties remained unclear. Constructing his expansive represented world, the writer fictionalised the real, providing a narrative form to a matter that had been growing in importance toward the end of the century: the advancing centralisation of the world meant that, compared to preceding centuries, it was now substantially easier to imagine a place whose destruction could propel a catastrophe of immediate global ramifications, the dismantling of the accepted order based on a social contract as much as on the brute force of an imperial ilk.

The texts collected in this issue address the vast change represented by the establishment of the order that Greenwich symbolised in different ways. It was an order by parts colonial, imperial, and private, based on science and the state, rooted in knowledge about nature and inscribed into the world of man and designed for his benefit.

The very idea of measuring time, of course, dates back further than the nineteenth century. However, it was not until then that something previously unimaginable happened: the standardisation of time and its global unification. In his *Time and Space*, Stephen Kern writes that around the year 1870, a person travelling between Washington, DC, and San Francisco would have to adjust their watch over 200 times if they wanted to keep it in line with the station clocks on the way. Railways attempted to resolve this issue by adopting regional time zones – for instance, cities on the Pennsylvania line ran on Philadelphia time, which was behind New York time by 80 minutes. However, by the end of the 1870s, there were still 80 such zones in the US alone, and even after the International Meridian Conference set the new standard, it was not adopted outright. Other countries implemented it piecemeal – Japan in 1888, Belgium and the Netherlands in 1892, Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1899. Yet, even at the end of the nineteenth century, telegraphic companies in China used Shanghai time, and people relied on sundials. Russia used various, peculiar local times – like St Petersburg time, 2'60"18"'7"" ahead of Greenwich. The new arrangement proved unpalatable for France, as the placement

of the prime meridian established, in a way, the centre of the new world order, advancing Great Britain's imperial pretensions in another area – an unacceptable proposition for French ambitions, effectively until the early twentieth century.[2]

"There was no clock in the whole village, but every house had a rooster that announced the waking hour in the doorway in winter", wrote Jan Słomka, a prominent peasant memoirist, describing the realities of life in Galicia in the 1860s.[3] The house clock he bought became a sensation across the village, a wonder of nature serving more to astound than to measure time. Those are also the experiences that we need to keep in mind when considering the pace (or rather, paces) of nineteenth-century modernisation. In a world of standardised time, life continued without timepieces, measured by other means, such as the rural rhythm or the rhythm of day and night, where the thing that mattered and was of most practical consequence was if it was light or dark (and if it was cold or warm – though the history of heating as a crucial factor in everyday life and work is a somewhat different subject).

Thus, the independence of local time gradually dissipated, overwhelmed by the time of the railway, the time of the telegraph, and the time of the factory. One is hard-pressed to identify here a 'cut', a change achieved from one day to another, especially since this – after all, ultimately successful – attempt to unify time in a global context opened up ever newer ways of thinking, expanding horizons on the micro as well as the macro level. Micro because the time colonised by the ruling powers became simultaneously private time, diligently measured using specially designed devices – home clocks and pocket watches. They were the material markers of prestige, and ownership of a watch implied the capacity to master time, social adulthood, and responsibility.

The popularisation of everyday measurement of time began precisely in the nineteenth century. The attention devoted in that century to minute intervals of time is balanced, after a fashion, by the vast temporal perspectives opened by archaeological and geological research.

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[2] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 10–12.

[3] Jan Słomka, *Pamiętniki włościanina. Od pańszczyzny do dni dzisiejszych*, 2nd edn (Kraków, 1929), 29.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, various remembrances of the ancient past discovered in droves in different corners of Europe and the world continued to broaden the horizon of human thought on the history of culture. Proofs of its persistence across millennia were being literally pulled out from the earth – Pompeii, Rosetta, Crete, the Ishtar Gate, and Gilgamesh, to mention just the most spectacular. Precisely – from *the Earth*, whose age was now being discovered by nineteenth-century science. From one decade to another, the history of the planet grew ever vaster: as the measure of its time gained in precision, its boundlessness and unintelligibility for the human person only increased.

The texts collected in this issue treat precisely this multidirectionality of the experience of time at the turn of the twentieth century. Błażej Brzostek writes about watches, these minute objects, as bearers of the virtues of the modern man; about the diligence with which time was being measured and about the belief that it might be controlled. Ties between the ways of measuring time, especially holiday time, and the institution that shaped the social constellations of everyday life, that is, school, are traced in the article by Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska. Augusto Petter and Agata Łuksza explore questions of the ostentatious 'ownership of time' and the relationship between designs of time and Orientalist projects. The texts that conclude this collection are devoted to expanding perspectives in the direction of archaeology (Katarzyna Ryszewska) and geology (Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Droździel). In other words, we put forward a cultural history spanning accounts of the illusion of precision and control and the recognition of their loss; it begins where the time of man meets inhuman measures.

Wrestling with questions of measurement and experience of time, all of the texts that comprise this issue also address a slightly different question: what exactly made the nineteenth century what it was, and how can that essence be measured and defined? Reflections around the category of time put a spotlight on the period as one tinged by a dramatic clash between delusions of control over the world of human experience and the natural world and the lack of capacity to execute it.

By the way, the Greenwich Observatory has recently ceased to play a regulatory role due to air pollution in London. Conrad's fictional secret agent proved, in fact, to be a faceless and shapeless phenomenon, as efficient as it is elusive. Like time itself.

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The concept for this issue came from the conference "'As Time Goes by"? Time as a Category of Measurement, Transfer and Experience in Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Europe', which took place at the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw (IKP UW) on 22–23 September 2022. The idea of the conference was our joint effort with Professor Iwona Kurz (IKP UW) and Professor Sven-Oliver Müller (University of Tübingen). I offer my sincerest thanks to them.