

Timothy Snyder

Introduction: In Poland Ideas Always Counted Most

For many of those from beyond Poland who chose to study its history, the ideas counted most. Since modern cultural forms emerged in a setting without political sovereignty, ideas seemed to matter more in Poland than in other European countries. Why, after all, was sovereignty lost? In the debates about reforming the old Commonwealth, who was right and who was wrong? Should a Polish state be restored, and if so in whose name, by what means and in what form? When politics demands so much from ideas, where can the thinker find a non-political place of respite? Are there nonpolitical ideas? Can members of the intelligentsia simply be intellectuals? For historians of my generation beyond Poland who learned the Polish language, these and other questions were addressed, in the 1970s and 1980s, in a hugely impressive manner studied by a certain generation of Polish historians: Leszek Kołakowski, Jerzy Szacki, Jerzy Jedlicki, Andrzej Walicki and a number of others. After 1989, the history of ideas fell into the background of historical research. In a period that was oversupplied with historical certainties, and for generations sated with ideology, the idea of history as questioning lost its popularity.

The return to the history of ideas, promoted by this series and by this book, is welcome not only in and of itself, but as a challenge to other forms of historiography. Intellectual history is inherently methodological, since a chronicle of what could be thought is also a chart of what could be imagined, and thus at least a suggestion of what was thought to be, and perhaps even was, possible. Since all historians, not just intellectual historians, have to work within the world of the possible as well as the world of the actual, such an illumination is of general significance. In Marek Cichocki's presentation of the idea of Poland "between east and west," for example, geopolitics becomes a kind of geo-psychology. Polish history, as Cichocki argues, begins not at all with a confrontation between east and west, but rather at a moment of contact between the Christian south and the pagan north. In this sense, Poland is an entirely typical European country, and Polish identity could function without the sense of being "in

between.” The idea of twin dangers (or opportunities) arriving from east and west emerges only with the partitions of the late 18th century.

This geo-psychological sense of identity, when seen as historically contingent rather than deterministically fatal, helps to enlighten a number of arguments in the essays that follow. When the world is conceived as a matter of a choice between east and west, then it is always possible to become disillusioned with the west and choose the Russian east (or, in the second half of the 20th century, to do the opposite). In the 19th century, at a time when most of historical Poland was under Russian rule, the choice of Russia against the west was a development rather more common than we might think, as a number of chapters illustrate. If the division between east and west is itself a historical artifact, it will at some point lose its salience. As several other chapters suggest or explicitly argue, it could make sense to return Polish history to an axis of north and south—in the 21st century, a global rather than a European north and south.

Łukasz Mikołajewski’s presentation of Aleksander Wielopolski is a straightforward example of the logical possibilities of the east-west dualism, with just a hint of global history in the backdrop. Wielopolski, though recalled as the main advocate of an agreement with Russian imperial power in the early 1860s, was not so different from many other Polish noblemen of his generation in his initial ideas. He was an advocate of the uprising of 1830–1831 and at the time wrote very critically of the Russian Empire. It was the slaughter of Polish gentry in Galicia in 1846 that turned him against the west: the Habsburg monarchy, in permitting or planning such a crime, had demonstrated its hypocrisy as a Catholic and a European power. In this analysis loyalty to estate, to fellow *szlachta*, or the nobility, leads to strategic conclusions. Russia should punish Austria and Poles should serve Russia as loyal partners and help spread an improved form of Slavic and Christian culture around the world.

Wielopolski’s ideas about the future of Russian-Polish partnership were quite wide-ranging, but they did not include the modern element of an ideological conception of time or progress. The definition of the Polish nation had been settled—the *szlachta*—the only question was its orientation. This distinguished Wielopolski from Roman Dmowski, who in a later period was working within a world of ideas in which social change was seen to be natural and inevitable. For Dmowski, argues Grzegorz Krzywiec, the world was social Darwinian, and the weak were to perish and the strong were to thrive. In this apparently deterministic and scientific account there was a place for the intellectual. Powerful individuals were needed to instruct the Polish nation and indeed to carry out a “nationalization of the masses,” so that Poland could struggle against others at full strength. Dmowski’s anti-Semitism, in Krzywiec’s account, is consistent throughout; it is difficult, however, to separate convictions from tactics. Did Dmowski think that hatred of the Jews was the best way to nationalize the masses? Or was Dmowski actually convinced (as was Hitler) that Jews really were the source of all ideas that led people away from the natural struggle? In

either case, very little of Dmowski's thinking was original. Krzywiec cites as his original contribution the fully critical treatment of Polish political history: but here, too, there were certainly precedents.

In Marcin Król's presentation, the Kraków conservatives known as the *Stańczycy* faced dilemmas that were not so different from those of later, modern ideologues. They presented history as material for study rather than legend for emulation, and thus characterized political thought as a kind of dialectic between tradition and reason. The past was real but it was not sacred; the mind was powerful but it needed history as its raw material. This raised the question, of course, as to just who had the duty and the right to draw conclusions from the past. If misunderstanding history led to disasters such as the partitions, then its understanding could not be confined to scholarly circles. But who else could be trusted, and when? Could Polish society itself be educated? If so, when and how and more to the point, whom? If the Polish *szlachta* was capable of tremendous historical error, for example pointless uprisings, then mustn't others be allowed to correct these mistakes?

The conservatives of the Hotel Lambert in Paris, argues Król, also faced this problem. Maurycy Mochnacki was aware that social difference was real and that social conflict could prevent political progress. The leading classes of Polish society, even if or perhaps especially if they are conservative, must work to avoid social conflict. But to do so requires knowledge of, and perhaps even engagement with, social groups beyond the *szlachta*. So conservatism, despite appearances, offers no easy escape from the basic problems of reconciling national and social change over the long 19th century. Even conservatism requires action at some point: but what action and by whom and in what precise circumstances?

Here Król seems to want to connect political conservatism (the subject of one of his essays) with political Romanticism (the subject of his other essay). In an extensive and interesting discussion of Józef Kalasanty Szaniawski, Król stresses that this early conservative supported Romantic poetry and literature, on the grounds that it must lead inevitably, despite as it were the intentions of the writers themselves, to a conservative position. But chez Szaniawski, whom he clearly admires, Król stresses the notion that one should only do what is possible. But here, if one reads the two essays together, Król seems to draw a conclusion that would perhaps surprise Szaniawski: national uprisings are possible. In other words, the criterion is not the possibility of the success of the uprising, but rather the possibility of the uprising itself. In a "Europe of boredom and imperialism," as Król memorably puts it, action to overcome spiritual degradation is required. Precisely on the conservative ground that spiritual matters precede material ones, actions that require spiritual commitment and extend virtues across generations are necessary. In this context Król returns once again to Mochnacki for the argument that Romanticism determines what a nation is.

Romanticism itself has its historical sources, and in the Polish case some of these are of unusual interest. Alongside Szaniawski (1764–1843) as presented by Król, Joachim Lelewel (1786–1861) as presented by Piotr Laskowski is the most interesting individual figure in the volume. Lelewel was the teacher of a number of political Romantics, as well as, argues Laskowski, the source of the fundamental idea of the Polish left. Laskowski begins from the premise that the left should be defined in Marxist terms as the opponents of capitalist exploitation, but that the left itself must correctly understand Marx. As Laskowski presents the matter, the identification of the historical proletariat with the social group that was to bring revolution was of a contingent and not a necessary character in Marx's analysis. There might be such a social group, but it need not be the proletariat. This is of course a familiar move—from Lukács to the social historians of the 1970s, countless thinkers have explained that the proletariat can be replaced by an elite or by other oppressed groups. What Laskowski seems to want to show is the legitimacy, in Marxist terms, of Lelewel's political vision—which is interesting enough without the Marxist detour. Lelewel believed that Slavic peasants demonstrated the possibility of communal socialism. Feudalism was artificial and need not be durable. It could be removed, in the interest of Poland itself, without capitalism and a revolution against capitalism. Thus a revolution could take place without modern concepts or indeed modern transformations. Indeed, as Laskowski argues, as soon as the commune was touched by capitalism, these kinds of arguments ceased to make sense. But, he maintains, Lelewel should be seen as an inspiration not only of Polish Romanticism but of Russian anarchism and left-wing Zionism. In this last case, the community that is to exemplify socialism is not drawn from the historical past but invented—Jews were not to return to some communal past to build the socialist future, but were rather to reinvent themselves in the countryside as socialists.

Laskowski's assumption that Marxism matters but that the agent of social change is flexible allows him to portray Rosa Luxemburg sympathetically. What might seem to be a basic weakness in her thought, her inarticulate attraction to an undefined proletariat, can seem like a virtue if we assume that Marxism is correct and that its correct interpretation requires vagueness about the salvational class. Laskowski dismisses Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, Luxemburg's most interesting Polish opponent, as a nostalgic pragmatist. But it is precisely as a Marxist, and one much more engaged than Luxemburg with theory, that Kelles-Krauz revealed some problems of Luxemburg's Marxism, and, relatedly, her usefulness for the contemporary Polish left—a connection that Laskowski is concerned to make.

Whereas Luxemburg, like Laskowski, assumed that some social class or other, some human group or other, would be the revolutionary class, Kelles-Krauz went a step further and subjected Marxism to Marxist analysis. It was of course true that at a certain political moment that proletariat would seem

like the savior of humanity; at other moments other groups might make the same impression. But Marxism itself teaches us that these perceptions, like all others, flow from social history. Marxism cannot therefore produce automatic answers to the question of liberation; it is a method of political thought, not a substitute for political thought. Thus Kelles-Krauz, unlike Luxemburg, was a political thinker. He did not rely, as did she, on the two rhetorical weapons of global abstraction and faith in the masses.

In some of his most interesting work, Kelles-Krauz used Marxist premises to argue that the development of modern nations was to be expected as a consequence of capitalist industrialization. This argument, which Laskowski does not mention and which Luxemburg ignored, became something like a consensus among students of the question about a century after the dispute between Luxemburg and Kelles-Krauz of the 1890s and 1900s. Whereas Luxemburg was doctrinaire on national questions, Kelles-Krauz was the dissenter when he claimed that socialists had to think about the nation and consider it as a political reality. He predicted, correctly, that Ukrainian and Jewish national identity would emerge on historical Polish lands.

Thus the global level of analysis, which Luxemburg favored, was not in and of itself a resolution to anything. Laskowski is correct that her responses to what she saw as local European deviations all flowed from her basic conviction that all history was global. But globalization, as Kelles-Krauz argued, meant the spread of all styles of modern politics in various permutations, including the national. Thus Lelewel could be the source of a version of socialism characteristic of left-wing Zionism. But this could not be the end of the story. Left-wing Zionism, in Poland and then in Israel, was also a form of nationalism. The kibbutz could not bring an idea, be it nostalgic or progressive; it could only supplant and inspire other social forms. The modernization that Jewish settlement brought to the Middle East accelerated nationalism generally in the region. It was precisely because Kelles-Krauz was a Marxist political thinker that he argued in favor of gradualism; since politics has many and unpredictable parts, the best that can be done is to imagine the next stage. His theory of retrospective revolution, the other part of his body of work that Laskowski mentions, was most likely a contemplation precisely of Lelewel. In other words, a genealogy of the Polish left that accepts Marxist categories and begins from Lelewel might just as easily pass through Kelles-Krauz as through Luxemburg; and in any event a prescriptive history of the Polish left should probably consider Kelles-Krauz on his own terms and not just from Luxemburg's polemical perspective.

Like Dmowski, or for that matter like Wielopolski or Szaniawski, Luxemburg based her political hopes on the Russian Empire. Like advocates of conservative and nationalist politics, she hoped for an alliance of Polish and Russian political forces within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Her assumption was that the Russian Empire was as permanent as the capitalist stage of history, and would serve as a best possible incubator for the socialist revolution. When

such a revolution actually came, however, she opposed it, on the entirely correct grounds that it was being made not by the masses but in their name. This was a crisis for the left—radicals had to choose between the Leninist deed or a social democratic reconciliation, and some, such as Luxemburg herself, were murdered by reactionaries. But the Bolshevik Revolution was also a crisis for Polish political thinkers of other orientations. The end of the Russian Empire removed a traditional pole of Polish political thought, ending the possibilities and not just the threats that thinkers of all orientations could associate with Petersburg. Given the omnipresence of Marek Cichocki's eastern pole of thought, at least as a kind of refuge or placeholder, the association of the Bolshevik Revolution with catastrophism is easier to understand. For conservatives, the threat of revolution no longer came from the west; it was present in the east. It was not simply that Bolshevism seemed like a threat to almost all rival political orientations; it also destroyed Russia as a zone for the projection of possible collaborative futures.

Jan Skoczyński's essay on catastrophism is most interesting and effective as a presentation of the Polish global historians of the 20th century who sought and fought other logics of intellectual integration in a world in which the Soviet Union had proved to be possible. A century after Lelewel was instructing Polish students in Vilnius (such as Adam Mickiewicz) about the salvational potential that lay within the Russian past, Marian Zdziechowski was instructing Polish students in Vilnius (such as Czesław Miłosz) about the catastrophic potential of the Soviet present. Mickiewicz wrote of Lelewel in 1822: "LELEWELU! rzetelną każdy chlubę wyzna / Że ciebie takim polska wydała ojczyzna / Na świętym dziejopisa jaśniejąc urządzie / Wskazujesz nam, co było, co jest i co będzie." Exactly a hundred years later, Zdziechowski published his *Europe, Russia, Asia*, which Miłosz, writing in 1943, acknowledged as prophecy. In the year 2000, Miłosz would add: "Nieubłagany ciąg zagłady i narodzin, Magnificencjo / Długo trwała moja nauka powściągnięcia siebie / Bardziej od Ciebie przebiegły, poznałem moje stulecie, udając / Że znam sposób i zapominam o bólu."

Miłosz's judgment seems final: at the end of a century that began with Bolshevism, a total pessimism seemed like the starting point for thought. Yet a good deal has changed in the last fifteen years. The framework of Polish history itself seems uncertain. In different ways, Mikołajewski and Laskowski suggest that it would be useful to shift Polish history from a framework of European east and west to one of a global north and south. Though this is persuasive and fruitful as historical method, Cichocki's psychic geopolitics of east and west is surely still dominant in Polish thinking today. When Polish left-wing activists today try to think globally, they sometimes get no further than Russia, portrayed as a bulwark to the reactionary American or European order. When Polish right-wing activists try to think globally, they sometimes get no further than Russia, portrayed as a bulwark to the revolutionary American or European order. For the time being, this is marginal.

Yet given that east is much more significant in Polish intellectual history than is generally assumed, these essays, taken together, pose an interesting question about the future. If history is any guide, Polish thinkers who feel betrayed or disappointed by the west might look for inspiration to the east. At a moment when the European Union is in crisis, and when younger generations of Poles take the benefits of belonging to the European Union for granted, such a turn should not be excluded. Poles are now so accustomed to seeing themselves as “Europeans” that the potential for such a transformation is perhaps underestimated. A conservative like Wielopolski wanted Russian revenge upon a hypocritical west, a nationalist like Dmowski sided with Russia over a frightening west, a socialist like Luxemburg could only think on the grand scale of a Russian Empire. Now the Soviet Union is gone, and an imperial Russia has returned. Its core ideology seems to be a kind of nihilist provincialism, and its propaganda offers something for everyone who dreams of destruction. The Russian goal of destroying the European Union, for example, appeals to the far right and the far left, if for different reasons. To the far right Russia proposes a partition of Ukraine, to the far left resistance to NATO. The moment that the Russian idea that the West is “decadent” extends beyond the extremes is the moment that Russia itself returns to Polish thought. The history of ideas demonstrates that present convictions are very often based upon fluid substructures, and that the horizon of possibility is broader than it seems.