

does the interwar period not also provide counter-models to patriotic integration, for example if we consider how the management of cultural diversity and the state policy on minorities⁹ was conducted in Czechoslovakia or Estonia prior to 1939?

Finally, how virulent are these—alleged—answers from the interwar period to the current problem areas of cultural diversity and social integration within modern, information age societies? Do they really highlight a paradigm shift, are they, quite literally, “state-changing” ideas, or are they merely a byproduct of patriotic, post-factual thinking, part of an overheated, mob-building phenomenon occurring across social networks that we can disregard as the restless “spume” of daily politics thrown up by the tremendous and far deeper undercurrents of an irreversible process of westernization taking place within the *longue durée*? Or is the recourse to historical models integrating early 20th century rightwing thinking ultimately a transformation that has gripped both Western and Eastern European societies and therefore not a specific problem of Eastern Europe at all?

These are the questions we asked our colleagues from Germany and Eastern Europe to discuss with regard to their own, respective fields of work. The answers they gave will appear, in loosely chronological order, in the upcoming issues of the *Journal for East Central European Studies*.

Secondary Shocks: Poland's Two Transformations

Maciej Górny

The End of History 1.0

The readers of the last issue of *The Slavonic Review* in 1927 received a publication as interesting as it was late. The editorial board, recognizing that ten years after the Great War, it was time to start looking to the future more boldly, had launched a series of articles signed by prominent politicians from “Slavonic” countries. The former Russian Foreign Minister, Liberal Pavel Miljukov, fired the opening salvo. His essay contrasted two models of “Slavonic policy”. One of them deferred to tradition and was monarchical and conservative in character. The other was modern, liberal and democratic. Representatives of both trains of thought clashed in practically every country which Miljukov considered, but he viewed the case of Czechoslovakia as

⁹ HANS LEMBERG (ed.): *Ostmitteleuropa zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen (1918-1939): Stärke und Schwäche der neuen Staaten*, Marburg 1997; DAVID J. SMITH, JOHN HIDEN: *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State: National Cultural Autonomy Revisited*, London 2012.

paradigmatic (and at the same time, the most optimistic). For Miljukov, Karel Kramář symbolized the old Slavonic policy in that country; he was the first prime minister and former conservative pan-Slavicist (a politician who, as the author of the article put it, “clings tightly to a past that will not return”). The liberal wing had two iconic representatives: the patron of the left, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and the young and dynamic Edvard Beneš. Miljukov’s sympathies clearly lay with the liberals, as did his hopes for the future.¹

When the Russian politician’s article was published, there did not seem to be much cause for optimism about the future of Slavonic liberalism. A coup d’état had taken place in Poland in the previous year, and although many liberals explained that this was the only way to halt the victorious march of the extreme right, it did not bode well for the democratic future of the country. A few months after this issue of *The Slavonic Review* was published, the leader of the opposition, Stjepan Radić of the Croatian People’s Party, was shot in the Belgrade Parliament. His death from his wounds paved the way for the dictatorship of King Alexander. Bulgaria had been on an authoritarian course for several years by then and Miljukov did not consider the Soviet Union to have any role in the democratization of Slavonic policy, for which one can hardly blame him. The Russian’s moderately optimistic political analysis went straight from womb to tomb.

Yet there is no reason to make light of Miljukov’s short-sightedness or wring our hands over his misguided optimism. The editors expected him to evaluate the impact of the Great War on Slavonic policy, and this was exactly what they got: an analysis of new trends in cabinet politics during the period that culminated in the Paris Peace Conference. From this perspective, it may indeed seem that Central and Eastern Europe had been won over by liberal democracy based on the principles acknowledged not only by Beneš in Paris, but also by others such as Polish delegate Ignacy Jan Paderewski and even Roman Dmowski, until recently the leading representative of the pan-Slavic “politics of the past.” Miljukov’s error was not one of judgment regarding international politics, but of trivializing issues which contemporary political scientists considered to be non-political.

Transformation

What are the issues at stake? I will describe them very briefly, focusing mainly on Poland, although the problems experienced there did not deviate greatly from the regional norm. If we were to describe them in just one word, it would be transformation. The first stage was the devastation of the country through which the fronts forced their way several times. In 1915, machines and entire factories were first exported by the Russians moving eastwards,

¹ PAVEL MILYUKOV: The World War and Slavonic Policy, in: *The Slavonic Review* 6 (1927), 17, pp. 268-290.

fleeing the armies of the central powers. The new occupiers were not interested in restarting local production. They focused on exporting raw materials and labor needed by their own industries in the West. The beneficiaries of these activities included German and Austrian enterprises in the areas which became part of the Polish state after 1918. Industrial production was integrated into the war economy there and employment levels increased significantly. The overworked and underpaid laborers increasingly frequently went on strike. Most often, the response was violent—militarization of workplaces, forced recruitment of protesters, imprisonment and corporal punishment. This policy towards the working class began to change in the second half of the war, especially from the beginning of 1918. At that time, in parallel with the protests across German and Austro-Hungarian industry, a wave of strikes and demonstrations swept through the Polish lands, Galicia, Poznań and the occupied Kingdom of Poland. The wave no longer subsided.

The fall of the three emperors changed surprisingly little in this balance of power. In all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, individual social groups, sometimes even narrower interest groups, used these weapons with such frequency that strikes became almost the norm. This phenomenon also encompassed areas which the police and imperial armies had previously had under control, particularly in the countryside. This was despite the fact that wealthier farmers had no reason to complain about these hard times, but they were on strike. Sometimes, as in Mazovia at the turn of 1918 and 1919, the strike was a “black” one, which meant that farm workers stopped feeding cattle and swine. Anyway, sooner or later every employee in Poland had been on some strike or other. In January 1919, for instance, the bakers of Kielce stopped baking, which in turn aroused the hungry workers. In Kraków in March, the prisoners in Montelupich decided to protest, and the doorkeepers were on strike in Łódź for two weeks during the same month. Miners in the Dąbrowa Basin protested many times, in both 1919 and 1920. In December 1919 the Borysław oil district was on strike, and a few weeks later the Poznań officers were too. In February, they were joined by printers, as well as the tram drivers of Łódź. State workers, even the armed and uniformed ones, resorted to the same method of negotiation, as did the health service. In January 1919, socialist trade unions organized a protest in the mental hospital at Tworki near Warsaw, during which they stopped looking after patients. The surprised authorities were not able to immediately respond to the strikers’ demands, so they had to resort to emergency measures and send in troops to temporarily serve as nurses.²

In the first years of Poland’s independence, strikes—and the response to them—became routine. The response was to make concessions, especially in

² LUDWIK HASS: Robotniczy Pruszków w latach 1918-1920 [Pruszków Workers 1918-1920], in: *Odgłosy Rewolucji Październikowej na Mazowszu i Podlasiu*. Praca zbiorowa, Warszawa 1970, pp. 155-181, here p. 172.

terms of wages. This was the beginning of the second stage of transformation: inflation and hyperinflation. Economic historians see this as the embodiment of evil and most eminent economists of the interwar period held the same view. Even John Maynard Keynes had nothing positive to say about the inflation epidemic that hit Central and Eastern Europe after 1918:

“As the inflation proceeds [...] all permanent relations between debtors and creditors, which form the ultimate foundation of capitalism, become so utterly disordered as to be almost meaningless. [...] There is no subtler, no surer means of overturning the existing basis of society.”³

The young countries to the east of Europe were expected to contain the epidemic by joining the group of countries with “normal” economies. At the beginning of the 1920s, only a few lived up to the hope invested in them. The others, especially Poland, chose a different path, which was at the very least worrying for Western economists.

Until 1920, inflation of the Polish currency was justified by the wars that continued to be waged on its borders, especially with Soviet Russia. Later, however, worthless money was still being printed. The specificity of the Polish situation becomes clear if we ask the classic question: who lost and who gained? During the war years, this was not particularly difficult to answer: the costs of the war economy were borne by the hungriest workers (whether they were in employment or, increasingly, out of it) and by the lower middle class. The beneficiaries were mainly to be found among the wealthier peasants, who had the most sought-after goods, that is, food. Independent Poland very quickly ceased to conform to this pattern. The growing political power of the workers forced a number of concessions from employers and, above all, the state. Other social groups did not have such a strong bargaining position, which had an impact on the very original price structure and wage regulations. The term inflation brings to mind wages melting away and desperate people trying to spend as quickly as possible, because tomorrow the banknotes may be worth less than the paper they are printed on. In Poland, however, in many cases wages not only kept pace with inflation, but even overtook it. Automatic increases in the estimated cost of living index were often included in employment contracts. On the one hand, this ensured that employees did not lose the value of their pay, but on the other, effectively prevented a reduction in the money supply. Workers were also favored by the regulations on freezing rents. In a short period of time, inflation reduced the cost of renting a flat from one fifth to one hundredth of the average income of a working family. Combined with the new social legislation (eight-hour working day) and the announcement of nationalization, at least some sectors of industry were far from being the worst option for poorer people. “Ordinary” people were not only materially relatively well off; they also

³ Cited in NIALL FERGUSON: Keynes and the German Inflation, in: *The English Historical Review* 110 (1995), 436, pp. 368-391, here p. 389.

gained a sense of political agency. The authorities began to take their opinion into account. Admittedly, this was motivated by the fear of Bolshevism, but the reasons are less important than the results.

The costs of decisions to improve the living conditions of workers and peasants were naturally borne by property owners and landowners. This was perhaps the most radical of the regional variants of wealth distribution as a way of adapting to the new relations created by the war. The Poles learned to live this way. For several months in 1922 and 1923, it even seemed that an economy driven by inflation could get up to quite a speed. Credit, largely public, was difficult to obtain, but almost free of charge, as it was repaid in depreciated currency. Prices were rising, so products were also becoming more expensive. Furthermore, the value of the Polish mark decreased more rapidly abroad than it did in Poland, which made exports more profitable.⁴ The problem was, however, that Western financial institutions could only imagine investing in Central and Eastern Europe once the local economies had begun to resemble more common economic models more closely. Until this condition was met, there was no chance of attracting significant capital. The message from the West to the East at the time can be summed up as “there is no alternative.”

The Polish government has fulfilled the hopes invested in it and curbed inflation, making way for the third stage of transformation. The policy of austerity and strict monetarism, compounded by the Great Depression a few years later, shifted the balance of power in favor of the previous norm: vast stratification of income, high unemployment (and general deterioration of working conditions for workers) and such radical impoverishment of the countryside that some peasants completely dropped out of the monetary economy. The social advancement of peasants and workers was severely impeded. All this occurred at a time when Poland was gradually moving away from democracy and becoming an authoritarian state. When Miłjukov made his optimistic prediction for Slavonic policy, this authoritarianism was practically exclusively based on the personal charisma of the leader of the state, Józef Piłsudski. In the 1930s, however, when the Marshal became infirm (and even more so after his death in 1935), the power elite began to speak the language of the radical right wing, which was both anti-Semitic and totalitarian. The left, the most influential political force at the end of the First World War, was pushed out of power. Its room for manoeuvre was greatly curtailed by the unspoken (and sometimes spoken aloud) suspicion of ties with Soviet communism.

History does not generally repeat itself (or at least it would be better if it did not). Nevertheless, if I may fast forward a few decades, we can draw

⁴ MARIAN MAREK DROZDOWSKI: *Życie gospodarcze Polski w latach 1918-1939* [Economic Life in Poland 1918-1939], in: ANDRZEJ GARLICKI (ed.): *Z dziejów Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 146-175, here pp. 148-150.

some analogies between the two “zero hours” in 1918 and 1989.⁵ In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published his essay *The End of History and the New Man*. His theses are well known, and at least their basic outline is no less optimistic than Miljukov’s vision in his day. At the time, Central and Eastern Europe was once again undergoing a process of transformation, which as the Chicago School economists then wrote, consisted of a return to (neo-)liberal normality, to which there was no alternative. In Poland, that pioneer of post-communist transformation, a period of very high inflation had just ended, suffocated by a policy whose cost was mainly borne by workers in large factories. Although its economy had not been devastated by war, the decline of real socialism had left the country in a state of collapse. The last decade of the system has been characterized by the fear of worker rebellion, so with hindsight it seems even more surprising how small a role the workers played in the transformation. Their political significance had declined dramatically, while the standard of living of various strata of society was on the rise again. Finally, after a period of liberal stabilization, a political formation came to power, building an authoritarian system in Poland step by step, and political analyses indicate the growing influence of the extreme, anti-Semitic and totalitarian right wing on the rulers, who clearly lacked any guiding principles of their own.⁶ Meanwhile, the left was on the fringes of political life, burdened with symbolic guilt for the previous system.

Analogy or Repetition?

The similarities between both courses of events seem so great that they are impossible to ignore. The answer to the question as to how much of this was attributable to change, and how much to structural features of Poland or the whole region, is much less obvious. Does the repetition of certain patterns mean that the problems are also identical?

The initial answer is: clearly not. The deindustrialization and devastation of the country as a result of the First World War was on a completely different scale to that of socialist industry and privatization after 1989. Today’s authoritarianism still cannot compete with that of yesterday, just as today’s extreme right is barely a shadow of the interwar one. This is not only a difference in degree; it also concerns different phenomena. In no aspect of political, social or economic life can we detect a direct link between the present and the

⁵ Two guest editors of the *European Review of History* have recently drawn attention to certain parallels between the two transformations: FLORIAN KÜHRER-WIELACH, SARAH LEMMEN: Transformation in East Central Europe: 1918 and 1989. A Comparative Approach, in: *European Review of History* 23 (2016), 4, pp. 573-579.

⁶ Rafał Pankowski, a specialist in Polish fascism, has described the problem quite early as right-wing extremism in Poland (Willy-Brandt-Lesung, October 2012), URL: http://www.feswar.org.pl/fes2009/pdf_doc/Prawicowy_ekstremizm_w_Polsce.pdf (2018-06-04).

interwar period. Paradoxically, this is evidenced by the efforts of the Polish right wing to evoke such associations. This is attempt to bask in the reflected “glory” of something that they do not represent at all. Neo-fascists parade under banners with symbols used by Polish fascists, and the ruling party tries to associate itself with Piłsudski’s Sanation regime. These historical citations are as far removed from the originals as the charisma of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński is from that of the First Marshal. In reality the extreme right, like the shift towards authoritarianism, is a transnational phenomenon, both in practice and in the theory and ideology on which it is based. None of these forces represents native “tradition” to a greater extent than any other (even liberal) political group. This can be seen even in the smallest details (from the point of view of the authorities; the subjects have a different perspective on this) and specifically in the Polish details, such as their attitude to abortion and sex education. The general perception (also in Poland) is that the restrictive anti-abortion law and the consistent curb on knowledge about sex in public schools are manifestations of the power of Catholic morality. Yet Agnieszka Kościańska proves that they are backed by an adaptation of foreign (mainly American) conservative ideology. The authors of the standard Catholic textbooks on “family life” do not speak with the voice of Polish bishops at all, but rather impose foreign ideas on them (and us):

“Their publications are not very different from similar foreign ones. Although they write a lot about the global sexual revolution storming the gates of the Polish nation after the fall of the Iron Curtain, they hardly notice the problems typical for our region and barely refer to the otherwise extremely rich local Catholic tradition.”⁷

If we consider this problem from a historical perspective, it is not surprising that traditionalism feeds on ideological imports. Jerzy Jedlicki writes about it in the excellent *Świat zwyrodniały* (Degenerate World), showing that the language of opposition to modernization is as borrowed as the ideology of modernization itself.⁸ The political elites are using both to mobilize masses that are neither as progressive as the liberals would like them to be, nor as conservative as the right would wish.

The second answer to the question as to whether the two transformations of the 20th century created the same problems is yes. Both were accompanied by real social tensions, resulting from a similar sequence of events. This similarity is not so much a matter of facts and figures as of feelings and social moods. The First World War and the beginning of independence gave the majority of citizens, especially workers and peasants, a sense of their own

⁷ AGNIESZKA KOŚCIAŃSKA: Zobaczyć łosia: Historia polskiej edukacji seksualnej od pierwszej lekcji do internetu [Elk Sightings: A History of Polish Sex Education from the First Lesson to the Internet], Wołowiec 2017, e-book, p. 125.

⁸ JERZY JEDLICKI: A Degenerate World, transl. TRISTAN KORECKI, Frankfurt am Main 2016; Polish version: IDEM: Świat zwyrodniały: Lęki i wyroki krytyków nowoczesności, Warszawa 2000.

agency. The authorities were genuinely afraid of them, which was reflected both in the progressive social legislation of the Second Republic of Poland and in the inflationary economic policy I discussed at the beginning of this article. The transformation took away this sense of causality, contributing greatly to the feeling of disappointment with independence which was often noted by observers of political life in Poland at that time. The last decade of real socialism has also begun with a huge rise in the status of workers, represented by the free trade union. Martial law inflicted the first blow to this, while the final capitalist transformation took political power away from the workers.

Given their social impact, one can say that both transformations were revolutionary in nature. Both also created huge amounts of frustration for the people who were given (or rather fought for and won) the right to decide about themselves, and who then saw this right drastically limited. The consequences of revolution affect everyone, not only the “victims of the transformation,” because everyone (including the beneficiaries of the transition) experiences uncertainty and instability to some extent. This uncertainty and frustration was inherent in society in both interwar and contemporary Poland. From time to time (and to varying degrees) it is a force which one of the political factions of the elite manages to mobilize. And it gives an edge to the ideological disputes that these elites are engaged in. In short, the shape of the two Polish transformations does not necessarily influence the content of the changes taking place in politics, but it does affect their form, exacerbating and radicalizing disputes.

This juxtaposition of two transformations shows that observers of the violent and chaotic movements in Polish politics should not succumb to the temptation to draw superficial comparisons. Nobody actually lives in the past, even if they call themselves the proud and only heirs to it, or parade around in historical uniforms. It is worth looking for deeper cultural, social and economic analogies, however. We should not simply restrict ourselves to stating that fascists still parade through the streets of Warsaw today, but think about where they came from.

Although historical analogies do not determine which ideology or party will come out on top, when, or for how long, they do shape the general climate and style of politics. In the case of both Polish transformations, they prove that revolution (and both transformations were revolutionary in character) is rarely a one-off event. It is more than likely to be accompanied by aftershocks.