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The PRL in Biographies: Preliminary Remarks

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These facts really occurred,
and there is no good reason not to speak of them.¹

I am disgusted and tired of this subject.²

It is trivial to say that the political history of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), and the question it raises, still remains the subject of an ongoing interpretational debate which, alongside professional historians, engages various participants of the broadly conceived public debate: politicians, lawyers, artists and "common" citizens. The highly divisive nature of these questions is highlighted by the biographies of individual, particular participants of PRL's history: both its key players, who have at some point in time had a significant and active role in shaping its form, and those who merely happened to live at the time, often on the margins of mainstream politics.

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- 1 Roman Graczyk, *Cena przetrwania? SB wobec „Tygodnika Powszechnego”* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czerwone i Czarne, 2011), 58–59.
 - 2 Opinion of Ewa Lipska quoted in Kalina Błażejewska, "Wszystkie twarze Adama Włodka," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, January 14, 2013.

Biography, which is one of the fundamental, ancient forms of historical writing, remains – puzzlingly – the rarest among the historiographic genres dealing with the period of the People’s Republic of Poland. Among the vast literature written on this subject, there is about a dozen books strictly fulfilling the requirements of the genre. This was pointed out in a debate that took place in 2008 at the “Rzeczpospolita” newsroom. Faced with reporters’ queries about the source of such a state of things, leading contemporary historians of PRL did not really provide an answer and quickly shifted the focus to other matters. I present this part of the discussion in full:

“Rzeczpospolita”: Why is it that among the myriad books on PRL, some of which are published in the series “In the Land of PRL,” there are no biographies? We lack a proper biography of Bierut, Jaruzelski, Michnik and Wałęsa. What is going on? These are all attractive subjects; through them it would be easy to reach those readers who value this way of looking at history.

Marcin Zaremba: Writing biographies seems to me to be something different from traditional historiographic work.

Andrzej Paczkowski: On the contrary! It is a traditional form of academic history.

Marcin Zaremba: But maybe it is as Paweł [Machcewicz – G. W.] said, that also in this respect there was a rupture of continuity. For if there is a substantial number of works written by Polish authors on some historical figures, then there are not many biographies dealing with contemporary history. Andrzej Friszke is working on a biography of Jacek Kuroń...

Tomasz Szarota: There is a biography of Berman, as yet unpublished, though awarded by the IPN.³

Since that time, few biographies of the people important in PRL history or, more broadly, the history of Polish communism,⁴ have been published. However, in no way can it be said that the rather disheartening state of affairs

3 Krzysztof Masłoń and Tomasz Stańczyk, “Czym innym jest pamięć, czym innym historia,” *Rzeczpospolita*, April 26–27, 2008. Panelists: Marcin Kula, Paweł Machcewicz, Andrzej Paczkowski, Tomasz Szarota and Marcin Zaremba.

4 Anna Sobór-Świdarska, *Jakub Berman. Biografia komunisty* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej. Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2009); Eryk Krasucki, *Międzynarodowy komunista: Jerzy Borejsza: biografia polityczna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009); Bogdan Gadomski, *Biografia agenta: Józef-Josef Mützenmacher (1903–1947)* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Tedson, 2009); Andrzej Paczkowski, *Trzy twarze Józefa Światły: przyczynek do historii komunizmu w Polsce* (Warszawa: Prószyński Media, 2009).

in this respect has changed much. Looking from a metahistorical point of view,⁵ this state of affairs can be explained in the following way: the factual matter that makes up the lives of most of the figures that could be of interest to contemporary scholars of PRL lends itself with utmost difficulty to the kind of historiographic narrativity which they employ for the purpose of representing levels of events of a higher than the biographical order – in particular the national level. When treated with due diligence, in a comprehensive manner, it frequently does not fit within the dominant interpretative framework of twentieth-century Polish history, disrupting its inner consistency, subverting it even. Maintaining the stability of the predominant analytical paradigm and sustaining the legitimacy of the methods of narrating facts and defining concepts within that paradigm (the basic concept of communism, among other things) remain, in my opinion, the main reason behind the aversion some historians exhibit towards undertaking projects of a biographical nature.⁶ The biography of Jakub Berman by Anna Sobór-Świdarska, mentioned by Tomasz Szarota, and the biography of Jerzy Borejsza by Eryk Krasucki, both published in 2009, are currently the only notable attempts to deal with this issue, also, to a certain extent, from the metahistorical point of view. Let us recall the voluminous book, backed by a substantial archival query and annotated with more than 1600 footnotes, by Sobór-Świdarska. It was awarded a prize from the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – henceforth IPN). At the same time it faced strong criticism from several historians, including those associated with the IPN itself. Piotr Gontarczyk, for example, has accused the author of, among other things, tampering with facts, presenting untruthful interpretations, “contriving things absent from the documents and describing irrelevant and inconsequential episodes,” “overlooking that which is much more important.” Generally speaking, of elementary incompetence as a historian and the propensity for exonerating criminals:

What I see as an attempt by the author to obfuscate the true role played by Jakub Berman cannot culminate in any kind of considerable success. Too much is retained in the documents. The achievement of other scholars is too great, in this respect. It can be overlooked, twisted, or straightforwardly manipulated, as the author does in this case, allowing our

5 I refer to the tradition of analysis and interpretation of historiographic discourse represented by Hayden White and his disciples.

6 My more detailed study of this subject can be found in: „Biografia komunisty jako temat wypowiedzi historiograficznej,” in *(P)o zaborach, (p)o okupacji, (p)o PRL. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy dawniej i dziś*, ed. Hanna Gosk and Ewa Kraskowska (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 363–374.

imagination to run wild. The thing is, this has little to do with proper scholarship.⁷

In the present text, I would like to move beyond the field of historiography and look at the representation of lives of those who helped build and lived in the PRL in a wider context by investigating the rules of biographical (and autobiographical) discourse in the current public sphere, broadly conceived of. It is in this sphere where the question of presenting and interpreting those lives that were a part of the PRL incites emotions to a degree not usually seen among professional historians, who for sake of professionalism rather err – as was mentioned – on the side of caution when it comes to such pernicious approaches to the past. Emotions get involved, and sometimes even go through the roof, when biographies of individuals who are still alive and present in the public sphere, or those who for some reason are important to particular groups or factions, become the subject of scrutiny. In such cases, biographical disputes often run their course in the courthouse.

Therefore, to put it another way, I would like to propose as the subject of my preliminary investigation those rules (and forces that shape them) which determine what is said, and how it is said, on the subject of PRL biographies, while in no way hoping to reach any final conclusions. What can and what cannot be said about them. What can be seen in them and what cannot be seen. What is not allowed or welcome. The focus of my interest is placed on the current situation within a broadly conceived field of biographical representations of the past from the PRL period, and the rules of decorum that govern it, not to mention their source. These rules influence the current atmosphere surrounding PRL life stories and determine the intensity of the resulting debate and its permanent inconclusiveness.

An exemplary case of such an argument (one of many, but probably the most spectacular), was the case of the biography of Ryszard Kapuściński by Artur Domosławski⁸ and the stormy debate it unleashed, which, as it seems, was the biggest post-1989 public debate concerning a single book. What could have stirred such emotions?

The vision of Ryszard Kapuściński's life as presented by Domosławski was, in a self-aware and assertive way, positioned against the already established and accepted official portraits of Kapuściński. The integrational principle utilized in the book allowed for harmonizing within a single narrative those episodes, which were omitted, or at least diminished, in previous iterations

7 Piotr Gontarczyk, "Antybiografia komunisty," *Rzeczpospolita*, March 13-14, 2010.

8 Artur Domosławski, *Kapuściński non-fiction*, (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2010).

of the writer's life. Such episodes were considered inconsequential or non-essential for developing Kapuściński's biography and stature, and basically incompatible with the established narrative pattern, threatening its rationale. Domoslawski's book presented a coherent interpretive whole – narratively, ideologically, politically, ethically – that was pointed, clear-cut and radically different from the previous ones, affirmative in its overall evaluation of Kapuściński, although not without critical remarks.

I lay aside the question of verisimilitude concerning the portrait presented by the biographer and the veracity of his interpretations. In this case, as always, these are elements subject to evaluation and debate. What I am interested in is the particular reception of Domoslawski's work. It is telling that in the course of the whole debate surrounding the book, the strategic interpretive innovation introduced by the author was barely recognized and comprehended. The author failed to rattle the well-established readerly habits, and his book was read in accordance with the prevailing modes of reception. Set against this matrix, Domoslawski's book presented itself to most partakers in the debate, against his intentions, as openly discrediting Kapuściński. This was greeted by some with visible delight and by others with disapproval, which in some cases turned into barely withheld outrage. The former treated Domoslawski's book as an unexpected, but welcome acknowledgement of their way of thinking about Polish history and its preeminent figures on his part. The latter saw it as an incomprehensible and disloyal assault on the stature of a great writer, an attempt to publicly discredit his persona, undermine his authority as an exemplary citizen and Pole, but also as a father, husband, and distinguished writer.⁹

The debate surrounding Domoslawski's book, despite its scale, achieved little in terms of changing its participant's outlook on the PRL period. On the contrary, it only hardened their previously held beliefs: polarized, yet intrinsically interlinked, and, at their core, constituting a single interpretive framework.¹⁰

The fundamental thesis of this text is that the contemporary state of affairs in the field of biographical representations of the PRL is the result of a broad, fundamental conflict of two basic attitudes towards the history of

9 My more detailed study of this subject can be found in "O Domosławskim i jego krytykach," *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2011): 279-288; also published in *Opowiedzieć PRL*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2011), 210-220.

10 In the sense given to this notion by Stanley Fish. See Stanley Fish, *Interpretacja, retoryka, polityka: eseje wybrane*, ed. Andrzej Szahaj, trans. Krzysztof Arbiszewski et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2002).

Polish communism which evolved after its fall, closely corresponding with two conflicting ideas of the political (defined by Chantal Mouffe as “constitutive of human societies”¹¹) that shaped the Polish political scene after 1989. First, there is the notion of consensual politics, which promotes acting towards the communist past on the basis of so-called reconciliation;¹² the other notion is that of antagonistic politics,¹³ oriented towards the so-called cleansing within the historical sphere. The tension between them structures the space of contemporary public discourse and, by placing its participants within an interpretive framework, determines their forms of expression and their understanding of what others say.

The first of the above-mentioned hegemonic strategies, inclusive and assimilative in a certain sense, views the communist and PRL historical heritage, at least in its particular manifestations, as an impediment in reaching so-called “national accord.” The second strategy, exclusive and segregational in its character, fuels the rationale behind a confrontational political agenda which monopolizes all legitimate claim to power (including symbolic power). These general attitudes are in turn transformed into two practical, conflicting “historical politics” with their distinctive terminologies, practices and institutions. And in particular, with incompatible frameworks for the so-called revision of the communist past, they provide diverging hierarchies and presentations of historical facts, not to mention contrasting strategies of narrating both collective and individual past.

The first of the scrutinized attitudes concentrates on promoting everything that enhances the construction of a community that is as inclusive as possible. It focuses on showcasing the identity of its members, with the aim of building cohesion and neutralizing the previous political conflict. This, on the one hand, entails a preference for those facts, historical figures and events that can be introduced into a narrative which encourages social consensus by means of a comedic strategy – a history of unification after overcoming the obstacles and threats disrupting social unity; a tale of a superficial and inessential difference and regained identity. Such a broad, all-encompassing narrative is capable of accommodating a large number of participants of the Polish communist past, although not all of them. It validates, for example, dissident

11 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

12 Attempting to overcome the we/they relation and constituting a “harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble,” Mouffe, *On the Political*, 10.

13 Based on a friend/enemy relation: «they» are perceived as putting into question the identity of the «we» and as threatening its existence (p. 16). It is worth underlining that Mouffe is skeptical of both introduced concepts as conflicting with the idea of a (well-functioning) democracy.

biographies (of the so-called revisionists) and legitimizes the participants of the 1989 accords (of the so-called Round Table), who were representatives of the former government. On the other hand, adjusting past events to fit in a conciliatory macro-narrative must inevitably make certain facts, questions, or problems taboo, or at least trivialize them. This “adjustment”¹⁴ of the past by means of omissions, reductions and retouches, leaves representations structured in a manner which makes them vulnerable to critique or attack.

The second of the showcased attitudes is oriented in the opposite direction: at the foundation of a tragic vision of Polish society that it depicts, lays a conviction of a divisive, insurmountable and permanent conflict. Composed of facts supposed to prove the irreducible, essential differences between antagonistic groups, it turns into a story of a superficial and fraudulent identity of a bogus community, and the final dissolution of its structures. “Lustration” as a specific modality of historical representation becomes a basic tool of differentiating, “we” from “they,” of exposing the enemy within – a primary weapon of an unfinished and ongoing anti-communist insurrection for independence. As much as the first of the described strategies tries to achieve an interpretive scaling-down or diminishing of the tensions and divisions that make up the history of Polish communism (its genesis and subsequent course) in the name of social unity, the second strategy upholds the actuality of those tensions, transcribing the former conflict onto the present. An “eternal” communism (functioning beyond space and time), and the communists of yore, who are somehow still present in the social fabric, are cast in the role of a “constitutive outside,”¹⁵ becoming the negative precondition of Polish identity; and anticommunism (after communism) becomes the cornerstone of politically motivated identity projects.¹⁶

Historical falsehoods on the one hand and disastrous outcomes for contemporary public life on the other are, in blunt terms, the outcome of the discursive configuration outlined above. Domoslawski’s book was just another one in a long line of its victims. Defying both aforementioned paradigms of interpreting PRL history, not adjusting the past, but instead proposing a new

14 I use this term after W.G. Sebald. See Winfried Georg Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2004), IX.

15 Mouffe, *On the Political*, 15.

16 See publications of the Kraków based Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej: Bronisław Wildstein, *Dekomunizacja, której nie było czyli Mistyfikacja triumfująca* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2000); Jacek Kloczkowski (ed.), *Antykomunizm po komunizmie* (Kraków: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2000); *Antykomunizm polski: tradycje intelektualne*, ed. Bogdan Szlachta (Kraków: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2000).

reading of that past, it was deemed a lustrative endeavor and, as such, praised by some, discredited by others.

This goes to show how hard it is, even twenty years after the fall of PRL, to formulate a public statement pertaining to that past (individual or collective) in a form that is neither an accusation nor an apology, without playing the part of a prosecutor nor an advocate. Even if we attempt to circumvent these dualities, either the language itself will fail us, or, in the rare instances when we manage to sidestep its trappings, the public will still misread our work. This exposes the extent to which contemporary debates on the subject of Polish communist past is governed by the very same logic of loyalty and treason, adherence and apostasy, destructive to democratic politics, which was present from the very beginning of that history and active until the late 1980s. These values have, in truth, been strongly internalized by both sides of the political and historical disagreement, and this is only confirmed by subsequent iterations of this conflict, which always unfolds along the same lines. The fervent attacks on Domoslawski's book were, as a matter of fact, also motivated by the desire to shield its protagonist from condemnation and exclusion from the public sphere, and the accusation of national apostasy.

I do not want to delve into considerations of whether the dismantling of the PRL could have gone better than it did. The turn of events in countries that found themselves in comparable historical circumstances as our own – disentangling themselves from a dramatic, conflicted past as in Italy, Germany, or Spain, which was comparatively most similar to our own case – casts doubt upon such scenarios. Although in each of these countries, the details of the process were different, revealing a unique chronology and dynamic, its basic components have remained the same: “the politics of forgetting” and “the politics of memory.” On the one hand, endeavors leading, in the name of political pragmatism, to the cooling down and neutralization of conflict; on the other hand, an ethically motivated reassessment and historical reckoning, often intensely embroiled in contemporary politics (as well as generational conflicts). Poland's specificity seems to lie in the fact that both these mutually exclusive strategies have flourished concurrently in the same period. As of now, there is little to indicate that they have lost their appeal.

Translation: Rafał Pawluk