

Forum: Nation: M. Górny: Overdose: The Nation in Polish

Historiography

by Maciej Górny

Just on the verge of the new millennium, Polish historians and sociologists engaged in a lively debate over the concept of nation and theories of nationalism.¹ The controversy was triggered by an attempt of a purely „Gellnerist” interpretation of the „birth of a nation” by the Warsaw historian Tomasz Kizwalter. His book *O nowoczesności narodu. Przypadek polski* (On the Modernity of a Nation. The Polish Case)² starts with a resolute claim that neither the Polish historiography nor international scholarship has done justice to the complexity of the nation-building process in the history of Poland. What follows is a fascinating narrative starting in the Middle Ages and culminating in the early 20th century, more precisely in 1902, when the future leader of Polish integral nationalists, Roman Dmowski, published his seminal *Thoughts of the Modern Pole*. This is the moment, Kizwalter claims, when the modern understanding of what constitutes a „nation” finally arrived in Poland.

Quite interestingly, although his book almost never abandons a strictly scholarly tone, Kizwalter chose to underline how his topic resonates with the intellectual and political climate of the late 1990s. These lines surprise readers with their general nature: „Discussions concerning a vital part of a national tradition”, he wrote, „always have a broad intellectual, moral and emotional context. In present-day Poland, after many years of trying experiences, there is a widespread feeling that the Poles need universal philosophical and moral standards. This intellectual climate strongly influences the way in which the question of nation-forming is treated.”³

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²Tomasz Kizwalter, *O nowoczesności narodu. Przypadek polski* (On the Modernity of a Nation. The Polish Case), Warszawa 1999.

³*Ibid.*, p. 325.

The Modernity Debate and Its Aftermath

Indeed, Kizwalter’s bold and thought-provoking interpretation of the Polish nation-building process in the spirit of Ernest Gellner (with due homage paid to Józef Chlebowczyk and Miroslav Hroch, respectively Polish and Czech historians and theoreticians of 19th century nationalisms) did resonate. The book won much praise and triggered some polemics while it also generated interest beyond academic circles and—perhaps most importantly—inspired other authors to tread the path of theorizing and historicizing the Polish nation. Ten years after its publication, the oldest and most prestigious Polish historical journal, *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (published since 1887), initiated a discussion around Kizwalter’s book and three other volumes by Jarosław Kiliński, Jarosław Czubaty, and Nikodem Bończa-Tomaszewski, respectively.⁴ The opening statement, or rather a well-informed and sophisticated classification of theoretical approaches to the topic, was offered by Tomasz Stryjek, a specialist in the history of Ukrainian nationalism. The key question of the discussion forum was how Polish historians and sociologists deal with the modernity of the nation, particularly the Polish one.

Stryjek proposes to analyse them along the axis archaism-modernism and the other axis primordialism-modernism while, at the same time, referring to the study by Antonina Kłosowska, a Polish sociologist, whose interpretation of the Polish nation-forming may

⁴Tomasz Stryjek, *Wobec modernizmu i konstrukttywizmu – współcześni polscy historycy i socjologowie w potyczkach z kategorią narodu* (Facing Modernism and Constructivism: Contemporary Polish Historians’ Skirmishes with Nation as a Category), in: *Kwartalnik Historyczny* CXVI (2009), 4, pp. 73-104. The analysed works were: Jarosław Kiliński, *Wspólnota abstrakcyjna. Zarys socjologii narodu* (The Abstract Community. An Outline of a Sociology of Nation), Warszawa 2004; Jarosław Czubaty, *Zasada „dwóch sumień”*. Normy postępowania i granice kompromisu politycznego Polaków w sytuacjach wyboru (1795-1815) (The Rule of ‘Double-Consciousness’. Norms of Behaviour and Limits of Compromise of the Poles Facing a Choice, 1795-1815), Warszawa 2005; Nikodem Bończa-Tomaszewski, *Źródła narodowości. Powstanie i rozwój polskiej świadomości w II połowie XIX i na początku XX w.* (The Springs of Nationality: Creation and Development of the Polish Consciousness in the 2nd Half of the 19th and Early 20th Century), Wrocław 2006.

be called ethnosymbolic in the sense given to the term by Anthony D. Smith.⁵ Thus, the dividing lines were drawn between those historians who believed in the quasi-eternal character of the nation on the one hand, and those in favour of its modern or even constructed nature on the other.

The authors chosen by Stryjek represented a broad selection of research approaches. Jarosław Czubaty's study on the loyalties of the Polish social elites in the early 19th century, not overburdened with theoretical reasoning as it is, represents a step further from Kizwalter's position into the direction of ethnosymbolism. Czubaty argues, based on a couple of examples, that a dual loyalty (towards current obligations such as the ruling monarch, and that to the Polish nationhood) characterized a whole cohort of early 19th century Poles, a claim Stryjek sees as overblown. Thus, the „rule of a dual conscience“ (as in the title of Czubaty's book) became a step on the road from feudal loyalties to a fully developed national identity.

The other protagonists of Stryjek's article were Jarosław Kiliński, a sociologist specializing in the history of Bohemia, and Nikodem Bończa-Tomaszewski, whose career-path led him later to become a successful manager in the IT sector. The former offered a radical departure from any form of primordialism, resolutely claiming that the nation is a relatively late product of politics. He also skilfully applied modern Western sociology to Eastern European realities. Bończa-Tomaszewski's touch was, on the other hand, basically free of any theoretical dimension (one of the participants in the *Kwartalnik Historyczny* debate characterized it as a „complete sociological vacuum“ which probably is a slightly malignant metaphor). Instead, Bończa-Tomaszewski claims that the only reality that corresponds to the „nation“ is of psychological and strictly individual nature. We may speak of national consciousness of an individual, understood as the product of his psychological development, but we cannot speak of any

⁵Antonina Kłoskowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni* (National Cultures at Their Roots), Warszawa 1996.

kind of group consciousness. Thus, any sociological research of this phenomenon does not make sense, according to Bończa-Tomaszewski who, himself, proceeds to analyse selected historical figures who, in a way, invented the nation for themselves. Stryjek's summary of the whole spectrum of new Polish nationalism research was that since the collapse of Communism, it has definitely moved towards modernism while keeping, in most cases, its distance from constructivist theory. Having presented selected approaches, he restrained from criticizing any of them in depth, his aim being to cartograph the research field rather than his own theory.

Two other specialists in the field delivered articles to the same issue of *Kwartalnik Historyczny* and offered their critical comments on Stryjek's take. Jarosław Kiliński, author of one of the books under review, convincingly proved his record as both a well-versed theoretician of sociology and a radical constructivist.⁶ His text concluded with a powerful constructivist coda which, from the perspective of merely a dozen years, makes one smile nostalgically: „It is not only a matter of being familiar with the achievements of science—it takes a childlike naivety to maintain a simple-minded attitude to the past, recreated in the national tradition, when its successive and violent revaluations are taking place before our very eyes [...] And the fear of contemporary humanism does not seem justified in any way. Has the victory of modernism undermined the existence of a nation? Would it have done so by introducing it into textbooks?“⁷

Michał Łuczewski, a sociologist, offered a no less energetic critique of the whole debate (and most of his Polish fellow-sociologists and historians to boot) by pointing to the supposed peripheral status of both: the books under discussion and the discussion around them. The names of some Western authors (notably Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm), quasi ritually referred to by all participants and authors,

⁶Jarosław Kiliński, O dyskusji wokół modernizmu i konstruktywizmu w badaniach narodu (The Debate on Modernism and Constructivism in Nation Studies), in: *Kwartalnik Historyczny* CXVI (2009), 4, pp. 105-116.

⁷Ibid., p. 115.

triggered a furious reaction by the young scholar. „GAH“, as he chose to shorten their names, while clearly signalling the ritual status of their presence in Polish historiography of the nation, gave lazy historians easy absolution for their hair-raising ignorance of the rich legacy of Polish nationalism studies. Florian Znaniecki, Józef Chałasiński, Stanisław Ossowski, or a generation younger Jerzy Szacki, all of them internationally renowned scholars of high standards, deserved much more credit and, most of all, serious discussion with their theories which not only predated that of the GAH but also capitalized on the specificities of the Polish and Eastern European historical development Łuczewski wrote: „[T]his imitation is in fact a selective imitation, and what is more, it is a delayed imitation, because those currents that are no longer popular and those discussions that have already resonated elsewhere reach us. [...] Polish science begins to look at itself from the point of view of Western theories, which ultimately leads to the fact that it forgets about its own achievements and is unable to offer its own creative research perspective. [...] When we forget about our own research tradition, we face the danger that not only will we start to assimilate from Western science what we ourselves once knew, but also that our reception will be delayed and selective.“⁸

What Łuczewski had in mind became quite clear soon thereafter. In 2012, he published a voluminous study on the Subcarpathian village of Żmiąca. His book analyses the mindset of the local population seeking to depict their national identity. Żmiąca, though rather poor and located in the periphery, was not an accidental choice. It was where, in 1903, Franciszek Bujak, an economic historian, initiated sociological and economical research of the rural communities. At that time local peasants were very far from identifying themselves in national terms. What prevailed over anything else was their Habsburg loyalty paired with strong folk Catholicism and anti-Semitism. Most of these elements remained in place with the one crucial exception

⁸Michał Łuczewski, *Przeszłość i przyszłość polskiej socjologii* (Past and Future of Polish Sociology), in: *Kwartalnik Historyczny* CXVI (2009), 4, pp. 117-141, here pp. 125 and 128.

of Habsburg loyalty being replaced by Polish nationalism, which the local population believes to be theirs from times immemorial (hence the title of Łuczewski's book *The Eternal Nation*). Based on written sources in the opening parts of the book and well-used interviews in the latter part, Łuczewski's study shows how such a change could and did occur.⁹

Away from the Nameless One

Łuczewski's book did not go unnoticed not only due to its academic merits. The author himself did not hesitate to intensively popularize his study and to draw journalistic conclusions in numerous short texts that would not fit into his scholarly work.^[10] Yet, surprising as it may seem, no renewed debate on the nation and nation-building process occurred in reaction to his book. Nor has any other publication since generated professional interest comparable to the lively and sophisticated exchange in *Kwartalnik Historyczny*. If we look at the laureates of the main professional historical awards since 2012, no title seems to have continued along the lines drawn by Kizwalter, Czuby, Kiliński, and Bończa-Tomaszewski. During that time, many important and widely discussed topics engaged Polish historians, including such questions as the history of peasantry or Polish-Jewish relations. But the nation was not among them. On the background of a fairly lively and versatile historiography of a middle-sized European country, such a gap cannot go without some explanation.

This does not mean that, in the last decade or so, nationalism studies were completely absent from the field of interest in Polish historiography. To the contrary, this very period saw some remarkable works including one by Tomasz Stryjek. In his bulky analysis of the Serbian and Croatian identity discourses he, again, touched upon the-

⁹Michał Łuczewski, *Odwieczny naród. Polak i katolik w Żmiance* (The Eternal Nation. Polish and Catholic in Żmiana), Toruń 2012.

¹⁰Michał Łuczewski, *Nowa nauka mesjanizmu* (The New Teaching of Messianism), in: *Magazyn* 44 4 (2012), pp. 103-123.

ories of nationalism.¹⁰ Similarly did Olga Linkiewicz, a historian cum ethnographer who offered an innovative study of the fascinating process of radicalization of the Ukrainian peasantry in interwar Poland.¹¹ None of them, however, deals with Polish nationalism and the Polish nation-building process, an avoidance strategy I will come back to later. Neither did the protagonists of the debate in *Kwartalnik Historyczny*. Kizwalter's interest shifted towards other „great questions“ to which he devoted two books (on the idea of equality and on modernization), while the radically constructivist Kiliński moved away from nationalism studies to the history of sociology. Even research into the conceptual history of the nation (i.e., the history of the methodology of nation studies), recently presented by the Warsaw-based historian of ideas Maciej Janowski, closes in the interwar period and without conclusion.¹²

What has happened? To answer this question, we must go back to Michał Łuczewski's 2012 book or, more precisely, to how it was received by some of the brightest Polish intellectuals at the time. In general, his interpretation won much praise. A witty observer and empathic interlocutor, Łuczewski convincingly showed the process of turning Catholic peasants into Catholic Poles as an effect of a long-term action performed by multiple actors with the local clergy at the forefront. In his discussion of the main tendencies of nationalism theory, Łuczewski claims to take a middle road, being neither a consequent modernist, nor constructivist, let alone primordialist. What is startling, though, is the teleology of his vision of the Polish nation. The author obviously believes that the current state of minds—characterized by Catholicism, xenophobic nationalism, and right-wing sympathies as

¹⁰Tomasz Stryjek, *Współczesna Serbia i Chorwacja wobec własnej historii* (Contemporary Serbia and Croatia Facing Their History), Warszawa 2020.

¹¹Olga Linkiewicz, *Lokalność i nacjonalizm. Społeczności wiejskie w Galicji Wschodniej w dwudziestolecie międzywojennym* (Locality and Nationalism. Rural Communities in Eastern Galicia During the Interwar Period), Kraków 2018.

¹²Maciej Janowski, A Real Brain Twister, or, How to Outline the Evolution of the Concept of Nation between the Enlightenment and the Year 1939?, in: *Acta Poloniae Historica* 122 (2020), pp. 5-29.

in the case of most inhabitants of today's Żmiąca as it became—tells a lot about the final destination of the Polish nation-building as a whole. He does not claim that „the eternal nation“ has been with us since the beginnings of Poland but rather that „the eternal nation“ is an effect of a long evolution. And most interestingly, in his journalistic articles Łuczewski tends to embrace such an outcome of the process which he believes to be at its final stage.

It was precisely Łuczewski's „end of history“ perspective that evoked critical responses from economic historian Jacek Kochanowicz and philosopher Andrzej Walicki.¹³ Both concentrated on his belief in the final and „eternal“ nature of local nationalism which, in Łuczewski's mind, was predestined to dominate in the future, too. Such was not the Poland Walicki or Kochanowicz would like to live in (and they will not as both, sadly, have passed away). Kochanowicz wrote: „Probably in relation to the whole country in the material sense the author is right, because many Poles seem to share views close to the national-Catholic ideology. At the same time, however, if the people he examines really believe that the Polish nation is something eternal, then they believe in nonsense. If, at the same time, they affirm the identification of the national community with Catholicism and exclude from it people who are not Catholics, such views should be described as reactionary or obscurantist rather than conservative. Comparative studies on the processes of nation-building show that not only their mechanisms (market, roads and geographical mobility, school and literacy, churches, army...), but also ‘points of arrival’ can be very different, to mention more civic and more ethnic ideas of national bonding. Thus, the Beskid [part of Outer Western Carpathians, MG] variant of the national idea—the belief in eternity and the inclination to exclusion—is rather a road leading to a dead end than an ideal

¹³Andrzej Walicki, *Odwieczny naród. Czyżby?* (Eternal Nation. Really?), in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 23 February 2013; Jerzy Kochanowicz, *Narodowy zaulek. Michał Łuczewski. Odwieczny naród. Polak i katolik w Żmiance* (The National Cul-de-sac. Michał Łuczewski. The Eternal Nation. Polish and Catholic in Żmiana), in: *Stan Rzeczy* 5 (2013), pp. 280-286.

type of realization of this idea. Going beyond the case of Żmija, one can acknowledge the positive role of Catholic-national ideology in the resistance against communism, but at the same time one can have very serious doubts whether it is a good basis for building a sense of community in a free, democratic and open society".¹⁴

What strikes me in this lengthy quotation from Kochanowicz, a rather disciplined economic historian, is his serious and moralistic tone. It is rather uncommon for a reviewer of an academic book to think about its implications for open society and the quality of democracy, as is the case here. Walicki's reaction was no different. Obviously Łuczewski hit the raw nerve of Polish liberal and open-minded intellectuals.

Reality Bites

The reason for these atypical reactions was, most probably, that Łuczewski's findings caught up with the Polish political reality. Since the watershed of the 2010 plane crash at Smolensk the xenophobic and exclusive nationalism of the Żmija type gained ground rapidly and, since 2015, became the normative concept of the party which increasingly permeates Polish governmental structures. Łuczewski's diagnosis (and Kochanowicz' fear) became reality.

Since that time, and notably since the advent of the right populism that dominates Polish politics, „nation“ has invaded almost every single sphere of social life. Most of the newly created institutions bare the badge „national“, with some old institutions renamed to better fit the current newspeak. Whenever such rebranding would not work, national symbols do the trick. A recent decision of the ministry of education and science obliged public institutions to hang out tables with state symbols informing about all publicly funded investments. Thus, it is probably hoped, a visual response to the all-present blue EU tables will be established. The nation is also constantly on the lips of state and party functionaries, in school curricula and in media.

Inflationary use of the term and of nationalist symbols is definitely the most striking element of the right populist government as it virtually hits from every corner.

Nation is also implicitly present in the contemporary Polish historiography up to the point of criminalizing the alleged offences of the nation's honour. The law of 26 January 2018 provided for the „introduction of a new type of offence consisting in attributing to Poles or the Polish State responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the German Third Reich“. Such an offence was introduced by Article 55a.1 of the penal code according to which it would be prosecuted to publicly and against the facts attribute to the Polish Nation or State co-perpetration of Nazi crimes or other crimes against humanity. Under international pressure the attempt at censorship on an international level failed but this has not discouraged the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice) government. Currently a group of historians faces charges of alleged slander raised by a far relative of a village official whose wartime record has been characterized by them as mixed (he hid Jews, but he also probably robbed and perhaps even killed some of them). The claimant, an old lady, enjoys generous support of an extreme right organization which, in turn, benefits from public funds. In February 2021, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, the authors of the historical publication in question, were found guilty of slander and obliged to apologize to the relatives of the incriminated person. Yet the demand of a financial compensation has been dropped. Most importantly (at least from the point of view of my topic) the jury declined to accept „national pride“ as a personal right which ought to be secured by law. As I was writing these words both sides prepared to the second trial. In the meantime, the latter has been brought to a conclusion. It amounts to the rule (which should be pretty obvious to most historians) that freedom of research trumps the claimant's overblown accusation.

This is just one example of a tendency that gradually turns being a historian into a dangerous profession. The list of topics that may have repercussions for one's career is rather short, Holocaust being

¹⁴Kochanowicz, *Narodowy zaulek*, pp. 284-285.

probably the muddiest terrain. Neither the nation-building process nor theorizing about nation figures are among such dangerous themes. Their conspicuous decline from the agenda of Polish historians is not a matter of direct political intervention or even just of a fear thereof. It seems to be rather an expression of disinterest or even distaste for a concept that increasingly invades public life in Poland.

More and less entertaining expressions of a national fixation are not restricted to the politics of history, though. To illustrate their omnipresence in popular culture might be of some help. Given the irrational underpinnings of the „eternal“ nation, the metaphor of zombie, the (eternally) living dead, seems quite fitting. In 2012, the year Michał Łuczewski's book appeared on the market, Igor Ostachowicz, a member of the liberal government from 2007 to 2014, published a well-received novel *Noc żywych Żydów* (Night of the Living Jews). The story shows a contemporary Varsovian who incidentally discovers undead Jews in the basement of his residential block in the formerly Jewish quarter of Muranów. As the increasingly surrealist plot thickens, the Jewish zombies and their gentile saviour are forced to fight against the forces of evil that successfully mobilize the Poles against the Jews.

Ostachowicz's novel, a much better piece of literature than this short summary might show, can be seen as a reaction to the Polish public debate of the early 2000s. His main motif, Jewish resurrection, mirrors the country's preoccupation with Jedwabne and the question of Polish co-responsibility for the Shoah. One might say that matters of especially deep and broad public concern (as the racial question had been in the classical example of George A. Romero's movie) cannot escape „zombification“. No wonder that the (Polish) nation itself finally shared the same fate. In 2019, Jacek Dehnel, one of the most talented writers of the younger generation (born 1980, approximately 6 months after Łuczewski) published a novel *Ale z naszymi umarłymi* (But Not without Our Dead). The story told therein is based on an idea of distinctly Polish zombies who, unless they just kill for fun, turn

people into Poles by biting them. Initially the Polish undead are not aggressive but subsequently they turn against traditional enemies of Poland to smash them under the leadership of long-dead historical commanders. Meanwhile the whole country watches with satisfaction how Polish banners are being hanged, albeit by a dead hand, on Kremlin. Their military exploits are accompanied by growing nationalist paranoia among the living while almost nobody seems to take into account what must inevitably come at the end. Finally, having conquered the world, the Polish zombies put aside their patriotism and finish off Poles, too. In the Afterword, Dehnel admits to have cherished the idea of Polish zombies for a longer time. Yet, to turn these phantasies into a narrative an impulse was needed: „Over these years, however, what is the central theme of the story—the gradual growth of nationalism, its epidemic rise, the normalization of the language of violence and sick fantasies—has begun to materialize before our eyes“.

In short: while historians left the nation behind at least for the time being, the nation keeps haunting Polish popular culture.

Conclusion

Given the towering position of the nation in current Polish political and cultural life, it may come as a surprise that there has been no continuation of the now twenty-years-old theoretical debate. Or should it really surprise anyone? Perhaps it is precisely the inflationary usage of the word in the last decade that discourages historians from revisiting the conceptual debate around a nation? It is not to claim that fear of the possible consequences keeps them away from such a „controversial“ topic. To be sure, there are other areas, such as Polish-Jewish relations, where historians face direct political interventions. What makes the nation a less-than-popular research topic is, in my analysis, the process it underwent: the process of banalization. Claimed with and without reason, purpose, and sense, the nation simply lost the force of attraction it had had two decades ago. I suppose, to put it bluntly, that what inspires the present historians' disinterest in the

topic is the same reality that pushed Jacek Dehnel to write his novel.
An overdose.