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Entangled History

Since arriving as a doctoral student in Toruń in 1991 studying the history of Prusy Królewskie as an early modern borderland of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its entangled identities between Poland and Prussia, German and local culture, much has changed in Polish historiography on the subject. I continue to study the entanglement of Prussian, Polish and Lithuanian history, at the moment through the figure of Bogusław Radziwiłł who, like the *princes étrangers* in France, regularly travelled across multiple borders, changed old allegiances and acquired new ones. Like other transnational figures and families, he did so for economic, political and religious reasons, self-interest and criteria of kinship and patronage. In contrast to the views of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, which had a one-dimensional understanding of national 'belonging', in the early modern period multiple identities were the norm, and even conflicting allegiances did not exclude each other.

Over the last thirty years, among the successors of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of many nations and cultures, Poland's historians were quick not only to abandon Marxist doctrines but also to query an earlier nationalism which during the PRL period had gone into deep-freeze. In this endeavour, early modern historians played a particularly important role in giving Polish historiography a new impetus after 1990.

Ad 1. In contrast to the ideological concept of the *Historia Pomorza*, which (with the publication of the first volume in 1976) echoed the conflicts between German *Ostforschung* and Polish *Westforschung*, an attempt to introduce transnational perspectives has influenced newer works on the history of the German-Polish borderlands. A history of productive cooperation across the German-Polish borderlands in the early modern period should not be that contentious, as the Western borders of the Rzeczpospolita belonged among the most stable and peaceful of the history between 1525 and 1772.

Symptomatic for the writing of entangled history (*histoire croisée*, *Verflechtungsgeschichte*) are new approaches to the history of Royal Prussia. A recent one is *Prusy Królewskie. Społeczeństwo, kultura, gospodarka 1454–1772*, edited by Edmund Kizik who together with Jacek Wijaczka, Jerzy Dygdała and Sławomir Kościelak used interdisciplinary approaches to draw a subtle and sophisticated picture of the hybrid culture of multilingualism, coexistence of religious denominations and confessions, and the transnationality of families and kinship that characterised the Prussian-Polish borderlands. The same is true in the individual works of these authors: whether it be in the history of witch persecutions (Wijaczka) or the analysis of burghers' testaments and funeral cultures (Kizik), a new non-Marxist social and cultural focus has replaced a previous concentration on national conflict between imposed categories of 'Poles' versus 'Germans', and the emphasis on social conflict between allegedly 'working class', Catholic and peasant Polish speakers versus allegedly 'Germanised', Protestant elites in the Royal Prussian cities. This does not mean that historians have to create or idealise where there is real conflict — there are of course religious, social and economic crises, and rivalling loyalties — but a partisan perspective had to open up to the great varieties of local interests and cultures: and it did.

On the other side of the Prusso-Prussian border between Royal and Ducal Prussia, a new history of Brandenburg-Prussia also initiated a new discussion about the legacy of the Hohenzollern neighbour in the works of Andrzej Kamieński, who successfully resisted the attempt by German historians, such as Wolfgang Neugebauer, to relativise the disempowerment of the Prussian estates and their civic identity by an increasingly assertive Hohenzollern ruler during the seventeenth century. Among the younger generation of historians who benefited most from the fall of ideological barriers is also Krzysztof Mikulski whose deep knowledge of the urban and noble archives of Prusy Królewskie from the late Middle Ages to the seventeenth century has had a major impact on the social history of the region. Together with Jerzy Dygdała, Mikulski put the history of social elites back on the table, without belittling the achievements of Polish social history (especially on rural life) during the communist era, when Poland's adaptation of the *Ecole d'Annales* and the *longue durée* stood out from other historiographical schools behind the Iron Curtain.

Ad 2. The history of social elites deserves a special mention here. Some of the most important impulses for the history of the magnateria, especially in Lithuania, come from the work by Urszula Augustyniak, whom I consider one of the most eminent and influential historians

of Poland today. She adopted the history of patronage which in English and French historiography in particular had been opening up new insights into the history of elites, especially the early modern nobility and aristocracy, which asserted its power not just by being rich, but by building influence through client networks. She successfully demonstrated the inner workings of these networks in political and military practice in the first half of the seventeenth century through the lens of the archives relating to Krzysztof Radziwiłł. Another fruitful approach is Marzena Liedke's focus on kinship in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which includes demographic methods, marriage patterns and strategies among magnate families, which links a fresh look at practical kinship policies of the magnateria with older socio-economic historical traditions which made an international reputation for Polish historians since the late nineteenth century. The Białystok School is rightly famous for its work on social behaviour and demography and ties in with a Polish version of microhistory which should get better international exposure. Part of this effort is also the historical demographer Mikołaj Szołtysek and his monumental 2015 work on family systems and kinship co-residence in Poland-Lithuania.

In Poland the history of social elites took off in the 1990s and led to a useful reassessment of the stereotypes of the 'magnateria' and of the social elites in the cities, not only on the basis of socio-economic factors but also the history of differing political cultures of early modern societies. A new generation, in the footsteps of the Wrocław school of Sejm history under Stefania Ochmann-Staniszevska, has continued to provide insights into the praxeological differences between the consensual political system of the Rzeczpospolita and hereditary monarchies or duchies such as Hohenzollern Prussia, which over time undermined the estates' participation in legislation, jurisdiction and taxation. Without a microscopic look at how the participatory bodies of the Rzeczpospolita, including local courts and taxation systems worked in reality, the contrast to more centralised constitutions could not have been worked out so clearly if historians had only followed the rhetorical power of szlachta speeches and Baroque oratory. Instigated by influential figures such as Józef Gierowski, a close analysis of the political agency of local sejmiki and regions has continued under the leadership of Jolanta Choińska-Mika, Andrzej Zakrzewski, Wojciech Kriegseisen, Edmund Opałiński, Andrzej Rachuba, Henryk Lulewicz and many others. The downside of this focus, however, is a certain deficit in the research on monarchy and its influence in Poland-Lithuania's political structures. Only relatively recently have studies on royal factions tried to fill this gap

(e.g. Mariusz Sawicki, *Stronnictwo dworskie w Wielkim Księstwie Litewskim w latach 1648–1655*, Opole, 2010).

Moreover, Poland should not forget neither the accomplishments of the pre-1990, nor the pre-1945 period in historiography. In an interview between Peter Oliver Loew and Robert Traba in 2015, Traba rightly pointed out that many innovative cultural, anthropological and sociological approaches to history have a long tradition in Poland, reaching back before the Second World War. Memory studies (Stefan Czarnowski, Florian Znaniecki), the analysis of identities (Marceli Handelsman, Stanisław Herbst, Stanisław Kot, Benedykt Zientara) and micro-history (although not under that name) were practiced and – under the influx of Anglo-Saxon and French models – often forgotten in their pre-1945 or PRL forms. Internationalisation would be better served not just by attempting to imitate Hayden White but to foster more comparative history, by embedding Polish-Lithuanian history into wider disciplinary frameworks. This would be particularly useful for my own interests in rulership, legislation and noble society in Prussia. There is only a very small number of historians who occupy that space, while historians who draw other comparisons, e.g. with Muscovy/Russia, with France or England, are much more numerous. In some cases, such comparisons are still driven too much by the legacies of the old Cracow school of history which emphasised the failings of the Rzeczpospolita rather than its force of persistence. There is a place for positioning the mixed form of its constitution into an international context of republicanism which preserved civic ideas of the political nation through a surprisingly lasting union of many nations and cultures. We have seen important contributions to this effort by Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves.

Finally, I recommend an extension of the study of political culture to include the history of symbolic communication and the cultural history of politics. There are some developments in European historiography that could benefit Polish history-writing through a more intense and critical reception: approaches that might attract more attention in Poland are works by Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Jeroen Duindam, Mark Hengerer, André Krischer, Christophe Duhamelle, Beat Kümin, Andreas Pečar, Yvonne Kleinmann and others. They all explore questions of legitimacy. How did rituals and procedures create legitimacy for rulers and the ruled, for citizens interested in participating in civic, public political and legal processes, and the justification of early modern citizenship? Many of the negative features such as magnate self-interest, the power of factions, the opposition to royal prerogatives, the spectacle of urban or magnate displays of prosperity and influence, can be deconstructed by the tool-kit

of the cultural history of politics. It also encourages interdisciplinary engagement, which some scholars in Poland have applied with great benefit. They cross disciplinary boundaries, e.g. between literary studies, art history, philosophy, anthropology and political history (Dariusz Chemperek, Mariola Jarczykova, Aleksandra Ziober, Tadeusz Bernatowicz, Stanisław Roszak, Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Anna Kalinowska), just as practitioners of micro-history have recently drawn inspiration from anthropology and sociology (Maria Cieśla, Jolanta Choińska-Mika, Michał Ptaszyński, Tomasz Wiślicz, Dariusz Kołodziejczyk).

Ad 3. Over the last twenty years, Polish historians have reached out with a new interest in the history of the non-Polish members of the early modern Rzeczpospolita. One of the most interesting and instructive projects of historical syntheses was the project led by Jerzy Kłoczowski at Lublin with the invaluable contribution of Andrzej Kamiński (Georgetown University), which produced volumes on Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine — alas none on the history of Prusy Królewskie, nor on a history of the Commonwealth's Jews, the Scots, the Cossacks or the Tatars. For every community the history of the Commonwealth has a different shape and meaning, and it is the multiplicity of these perspectives that needs to be captured and discussed again and anew. The borderlands are important zones of friction and transition that can help binding these perspective together in a meaningful way. They also assist in preventing fragmented 'national' viewpoints from being put next to each other without dialogue. Most importantly, microhistories of areas that are hard to label as 'Polish' or 'Lithuanian' have to find a space in larger syntheses of the history of the Rzeczpospolita: for example, the histories of Podlasie or Żmudź, or the history of Drahim, Pilten or Courland should have a place here, just as Wielkopolska, Małopolska, Lithuania or Ukraine. To avoid fragmentation, it is the task of synthesisers to draw out what made these communities negotiate co-existence, just as David Frick, for example, did when he investigated the co-existence of the numerous communities of early modern Vilnius as a microcosm of the Rzeczpospolita as a whole.

Ad 4. In the Poland of 2020, the most important task of historiography is not to become the servant of any political masters — from whatever party or belief-system. This is not the same as asserting 'objectivity' which is so often stressed in methodological texts added to applications submitted to the NCN. Poles know better than almost any other nation — and my view is that they share that with Germans — the danger of history being instrumentalised and distorted for propaganda. What is crucial for democracy and its pre-condition are well-informed and

critical citizens. Not all governments like well-educated citizens. They are demanding and uncomfortable to govern. But if we take the virtues of mixed and well-balanced government, fundamental liberty-preserving laws, and the multiplicity of voices that need to be heard in a democracy seriously, then there is nothing better and healthier than historical debate. It is the strength of historians to understand both sides of an argument — not to accept them both as equally convincing and relative, but to see strengths and weaknesses in each of them. This prevents oppression and preserves a level of pluralism that no society that calls itself free can evade.

This is the best measure of service that historians can provide. Perhaps a historian who, like me, left her homeland and most often writes about the history of other nations and not her own, cannot argue for a national history, and I will not. I think that the category of nation is a historical one itself. I find myself often pleased when there are successes in other countries and communities that I know well and where, in their midst, I have lived. This does not make me, in the words of Theresa May, a citizen of nowhere. I am genuinely interested in the plurality of cultures in borderlands, in the paradoxes that often arise in families where different branches of a family display conflicting loyalties. It is the historian's duty to step back and explain humanity from the sources of history, just as it is the task of other disciplines to explain humanity through theology or biology or psychology, etc. The strength of history is that there is a history of everything, all disciplines included. Hence historians count it as a success when, starting from the history of their own field or nation, they can transcend these restrictions and write about history in a way that is relevant and that speaks to people beyond their nation.