

Marcin Czyżniewski

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland)

## Introducing Polish History to Understand Poland's Present

**Book Review:** Jarosław Kłaczek, Andrzej Radzimiński & Stanisław Roszak, *The History of Poland. A Nation and State between West and East*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek 2014 (pp. 315). ISBN 978–83–7780–857–3. Price: 42.25 PLN.

The Authors declared that the book's objective is „to combine both scientific and educational qualities, as well as enable researchers and students to establish contact with the history of both the nation and the state” (p. 13). They tried „to show the whole panorama of political, social and cultural events in a clear and intelligible way” (p. 14). Presentation of a nation's history is difficult and risky task. Wrong selection of facts or inappropriate proportions (usually for the benefit of times and events that interest authors the most) could be dangerous. Even a greater risk is writing the history of own country for a foreign Reader. It is possible to omit the context of events, which is clear and obvious for natives. Fortunately, this book is not a translation of a publication previously published in Polish. The Authors wrote it from the beginning, thinking about foreign Readers and with the necessary caution.

This book describes the entire thousand-years history of the Polish state and society. It is divided into three parts: *In the Middle Ages* by Professor Andrzej Radzimiński, *The land and the people 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century* by Professor Stanisław Roszak and *In the reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* Professor Jarosław Kłaczek. This division is not characteristic for Polish historiography and it does not reflect traditional periodisation. It has a technical nature and it helped to divide roles between three authors. In fact, one of its strengths

is that story is narrated by different authors, even if it has caused differences between chapters; e.g. Kłaczko is very detailed, while Radziwiński is more general.

The reviewed publication is not a textbook. It includes academic stories by three outstanding historians. They wrote about periods of their research expertise, referring to years of their scientific work. What is important authors narrated the plot on their own way; e.g. Radziwiński used extended collection of sources on Polish medieval history, presenting the most important documents, manuscripts and incunabula.

The title includes a phrase “the nation and the state” – this division is crucial for the historiography of the nation which had to survive without own state. The Reader learns not only about the development of state institutions and political history but also about the history of people, society and non-state institutions (like the Roman Catholic Church). But there is another part of the title: “between the West and the East”. The Authors wanted to present external influences on the Poland’s development and to show how the nation’s history looks like in the comparative European context. However, this comparative aspect should be extended as it is limited to a small number of issues.

The Authors presented facts not assessments, they did not try to reconsider the history or to interpret it. The book was planned to be an introduction to Polish history for a foreign Readers and – perhaps – a very first source of knowledge on it. In the introduction authors stated that „many of the motifs shown in this book evoke to this day lively reactions and arguments” (p. 14). Where this is necessary, the authors indicate that there are different interpretations and assessments of facts, e.g. in the section on the 1944 Warsaw Rising.

The book presents milestones in Polish history. Only in some points the authors should describe some issues more extensively: there is no section on the Teutonic Order, yet its meaning in Polish history cannot be underestimated (what is surprising when we notice that Radziwiński is leading expert on the history of that organisation), the description of the Constitution of 1791 is limited and there is no broader context of Polish-Russian relations that should be introduced to the Reader. However, it is difficult task to describe a thousand years on just 300 pages.

In the book there are some inconsistencies in translations of Polish names, titles or phrases. Authors use “the Second Peace Treaty of Toruń” (p. 95) or “the Second Peace of Thorn” (p.107). Moreover, there is “Wenceslaus III” but “Wacław, duke of Mazowia”; there is Latin form “Casimirus”, but Polish “Henryk”; there are four different versions of the name Władysław – “Władysław the Short”, “Wladyslaw Jagiello”, “Vladislaus II of Opole” and “Ladislaus of Posthumous”. It would be easier to establish set of rules, not to repeat forms and translations previously used in English-language literature.

Using abbreviations based on (translated) names in English seems to be odd or incomprehensible. In the book there is “SNC” (instead of Polish KRN), “PUWP” (instead of PZPR), “WDC” (instead of KOR) and even “MRCM” (instead of ZOMO). It is useful to translate names, but using these acronyms is pointless, as the abbreviations like PZPR, KOR or ZOMO are used in the literature more often than full names, and they have symbolic significance in Polish historiography.

It is said that the history is a prerequisite for understanding the present. This is especially valid for societies and states, which – *no lens volens* – re-live the history and consider it as a reason of problems or failures. I am sure that without the knowledge on history it is impossible to understand Polish society, its choices and its way of reasoning. Therefore, the reviewed book is valuable position for the foreign Reader, as it explains Poland's history in a very comprehensive way and it fulfils its objectives – it presents nation's history, symbols and emotional association that are crucial to understand contemporary Polish politics.

#### References:

Kłaczek, J., Radziwiński, A., & Roszak, S. (2014). *The History of Poland. A Nation and State between West and East*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

#### Author

Professor Dr Hab. Marcin Czyżniewski

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Department of Eastern European Studies. Contact details: ul. S. Batorego 39L, 87–100 Toruń, Poland; e-mail: marcin.czyzniewski@umk.pl.