
The total astonishment of the Polish intelligentsia¹

Anna Zawadzka, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Konrad Matyjaszek

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It has been our intention since the establishing of the journal to prepare an issue focusing on the Polish intelligentsia. The problem with the intelligentsia, however, is that it is eager to problematize everyone and everything except itself. Apparently, we have been affected by this very syndrome. While not all members of the editorial team are of intelligentsia background, we all work in an intelligentsia environment and therefore conform to its unwritten requirements. One of these requirements is the undiscussability of the intelligentsia. It is a group that produces a language that it subsequently uses to describe itself, thereby acquiring its noble origins and finding its *raison d'être* in its allegedly inherent mission to educate, to improve and to maintain the cohesion of the rest of society – both the popular classes and the modern middle class. As imagined by the intelligentsia, without its intervention, the „rest” of society is unable to become any kind of community – neither a community of the people, one of the state’s citizens, nor an ethno-national group. While drawing its power and social position from the feudal structure of a historical manor house (the style of which members of the intelligentsia like to recreate in their apartments and houses), the intelligentsia simultaneously wants to perceive itself as a descendant of the 19th century revolutionaries, of the “enlightened” Catholics carrying religious traditions into modern times, and of “cultured” nationalists²

1 The title of this introduction was derived from the Polish version of the book *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An essay in historical interpretation* by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2008, p. 215; this formulation is absent from the English edition: Gross, 2007) and concerns the astonishment of Polish intelligentsia at the presence of antisemitism in Poland. In her polemical commentary, Elżbieta Janicka emphasizes this “total astonishment” recorded by Gross, as she writes that “there is a section in *Fear* which I found exceptionally stirring, although, again, I do not agree completely with it, and I believe it needs to be expanded in a way that would modify its meaning. Pondering on Polish anti-Semitism, Jan Tomasz Gross asks the question about why the conscious were so unconscious, why the intellectual Polish elite was so totally astonished (p. 215). It is worth noting that they were similarly astonished in 1968; and in 1985, when Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* was screened; and in 2000, in relation to the knowledge on Jedwabne. In each of these cases they were ‘so totally astonished’ that one could even talk about the repeated ritual of ‘such total astonishment.’ Agnieszka Arnold, who revealed the Jedwabne massacre, ironically calls this phenomenon the ‘immaculate conception of the Polish elites’ [Janiszewski & Arnold, 2008, p. 20]” (Janicka, 2008, p. 246).

2 This genealogy was creatively attributed to the intelligentsia in Poland by Bohdan Cywiński, an opposition activist in Polish People’s Republic, a historian of ideas and a Catholic activist. In the early 1970s, in an attempt to unite the intelligentsia around the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK) that he was active with, Cywiński pointed to three historical sources of the Polish intellectual elite: left-wing anti-tsarist revolutionaries, moderate positivists, and nationalists from the National Democratic circles. In his *Rodowody niepokornych* [Rebellious lineages] (Cywiński, 1971), Cywiński wanted to see these three alleged sources of the modern intelligentsia’s iden-

who notice no connection between the “state-forming” writings of Roman Dmowski on the one hand and, on the other, the anti-Jewish pogroms of the interwar period, Polish collaboration during the Holocaust and, today, Poland’s state violence directed against Muslims. Members of the intelligentsia see no link between the feudal-ethnic community of the Poland’s majority group which they intend to build and the violence that the members of this very group institutionally employ to establish the boundaries of the nation and the state. Members of the Polish intelligentsia remain boundlessly and perpetually surprised and astonished by the past and present pogroms, murders, assaults and arson attacks committed by Poles, including those being members of the intelligentsia themselves, in the name of Poland and Polishness. Since there is no language that would allow a self-reflection, such surprise and astonishment remain the only admissible response.

Everyone in Poland seems to believe in the intelligentsia’s leading role and to perceive it, alongside the Catholic Church, as the only legitimate dispenser of meanings, the moral compass and the monopolist of knowledge. The intelligentsia sees itself in such manner too and, taking advantage of its privileged position, it engenders the conviction about its exceptional mission in other social groups. Apart from carrying obvious political consequences, such process also brings an awkward contradiction into the academic field. The ethos of truth-seeking meets head-on with the ethos of responsibility. The outcomes of such encounter come to light every time the representatives of the intelligentsia protest against revealing knowledge on the crimes perpetrated by Poles against the Jews, arguing that “the society is not yet ready.” Thus the arrogance of the intelligentsia is made manifest: its conviction that it can shape the knowledge of “ordinary people” according to the intelligentsia’s own conceptualizations of “ordinary people” ; its elitism, which is socially legitimized to such an extent that the intelligentsia does not even attempt to conceal it; its confidence that it represents the common good as the only group capable of rising above its own interests. Without a doubt, one such interest is the protection of the intelligentsia’s own image.

A series of zealously replicated assumptions concerning Polish antisemitism guard the image of intelligentsia, ironically encapsulated by Sylwia Chutnik’s phrase: “the countryside is Jedwabne, the city is Żegota”³ (Chutnik, 2009). The dispute about these assumptions recurs in every significant Polish debate about the Shoah, starting with

tity as equal, presenting the same merit and therefore not necessarily requiring a critical analysis, except for his call for a multi-faceted revision of the approach to Christianity and Catholicism (Cywiński, 1971, p. 12). According to Cywiński, “various ideological outlooks were formed in this [intelligentsia] environment. These outlooks contained different variants of social radicalism that was shared by a considerable part of Polish intelligentsia, and formed new concepts of national irredentism. Idealism, commitment, and social service had a different meaning for social activists and educators with positivist origins than for socialists, who were designing a revolution, and for the future founders of the national camp, who also emerged from these [intelligentsia] circles” (Cywiński, 1971, p. 10). Andrzej Walicki sought a similar multi-element genesis of the intelligentsia, taking a center-left perspective. Similarly to Cywiński, Walicki saw the foundation of the intelligentsia as a social formation in the works of Alexander Herzen and the Russian Narodniks; in the Polish context he wanted to see this formation as a product of messianists from Poznań and Greater Poland, of positivists from the Russian-controlled Kingdom of Poland such as Karol Libelt, and of socialist activists such as Stefan Żeromski, Stanisław Brzozowski and Edward Abramowski (Walicki, 2004a, 2004b).

3 Jedwabne is the name of the town in north-eastern Poland where a group of Polish Catholics perpetrated a mass murder of Jews in 1941; the Jedwabne massacre is the most well-known case of Polish collaboration in the Ho-

the discussion triggered by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors* (Gross, 2000; English edition: Gross, 2001),⁴ and ending with the most recent debates: on the collective work *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night without an end. The fates of Jews in selected districts of occupied Poland] published by the Polish Center for Holocaust Research (Engelking & Grabowski, 2018),⁵ and on the two-volume monograph by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* [Under a curse. A social portrait of the Kielce pogrom] (Tokarska-Bakir, 2018).⁶ As a result of founding the Holocaust discourse on a false attribution of guilt based on ascribing antisemitic atrocities to the popular classes, the intelligentsia, who govern this discourse, can avoid discussion of the propaganda produced by well-established groups that disseminated and practiced antisemitism. After all, were the prewar National-Radical Camp [ONR, Organizacja Narodowo-Radykalna] and All-Polish Youth [Młodzież Wszechpolska] not themselves intelligentsia groups directing their message to the popular classes? Did the intellectual elite not encompass at least some representatives of the interwar Catholic Church, who at best tolerated antisemitism, "treating it in terms of a 'healthy impulse,' a 'defense mechanism' or 'self-defense'" (Libionka, 2009, p. 20), and who in great many cases openly encouraged antisemitic violence? As Dariusz Libionka writes further on, "from the point of view of the vast majority of the secular and monastic priests, whether they sympathized with the nationalist camp or not, the solution of the 'Jewish question' was among the major challenges that the Polish state faced" (Libionka, 2009, p. 20). Was it not the intelligentsia who created by the dozen antisemitic magazines such as *Wieniec*, *Pszczółka*, *Rola*, *Niwa*, *Przyjaciel Ludu*, *Strzecha*, *Pod pręgierz*, *Pająk*, *Mały Dziennik*, *Rycerz Niepokalanej*, *Placówka* and *Szaniec*? Why then the astonishment and outrage, if the values conveyed to the popular classes came back to their originators, taking shape of the brutality of the people, who in any case committed the acts of anti-Jewish violence together with their intelligentsia "patrons"?

So far, the only public discussion about the intelligentsia that was honest, courageously self-reflective, and that investigated the subject against the historical backdrop, occurred in 1945–1946, in the wake of Poland's communist revolution. It was initiated by Józef Chałasiński's essay *Społeczna genealogia inteligencji polskiej* [The social genealogy of the Polish intelligentsia]. By beginning (the Polish version of) the current issue with Chałasiński's text, we propose its reassessment. At the time of its initial publishing, this text sparked numerous polemics and commentaries on the pages of *Kuźnica*, and also

locaust. "Żegota" was a codename for the Council to Aid Jews (Rada Pomocy Żydom), an organization of the Polish underground in German-occupied Poland [translator's note].

4 See Elżbieta Janicka's commentary to *Neighbors* by Jan T. Gross (Janicka, 2008).

5 See Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's polemical commentary (Tokarska-Bakir, in press-a).

6 See volume one of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's study *Pod klątwą* (Tokarska-Bakir, 2018, pp. 296–299), where she addresses this topic and her polemic with Małgorzata Szpakowska and Marcin Żaremba (Tokarska-Bakir, in press-b).

Więś and *Przegląd Socjologiczny*.⁷ That debate did not focus much on the intelligentsia's responsibilities in the new social order nor on the so-called "new intelligentsia," but rather it was about the origins and the history of the extant intelligentsia. Although the Polish intelligentsia perceived itself as an ahistorical formation (as previously did the historical gentry), Chałasiński argued that "a cultured individual holds a definite place in a society; this place is historically grounded in many ways and there is nothing absolute about it" (Chałasiński, 1946, p. 15).

Antisemitism as a fundamental component of the Polish identity that the intelligentsia is nevertheless unable to address is discussed in Konrad Matyjaszek's interview with Aleksander Smolar. In 1973–1990, Smolar was the editor of the émigré socio-cultural quarterly *Aneks*. From its very beginning, *Aneks*'s editorial team were subject to an informal ban that prohibited them from problematizing the antisemitic components of Polish culture and discussing antisemitism as it affected the team's members, the majority of whom had been forced to emigrate from Poland during the antisemitic purge of March 1968. Yet in the 1980s, *Aneks* published a series of significant texts that identified and analyzed antisemitism as Poland's problem. As Smolar implies in the interview, the fact that many members of the postwar Polish intelligentsia denied the existence of racist components of Polish culture was rooted also in the "constitutive elements of Polish identity, where the Romantic myths of both heroism and suffering plays a fundamental role." Smolar adds that for many members of the intelligentsia "it is very difficult and, in a sense, dangerous" to critically investigate the exclusionary and violent elements of the Polish majoritarian identity because "it can lead to fragmentation of identity, without making it easier to construct a new, more open one."

This issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* also features a conversation between Kate Korycki and Anna Zawadzka, focused on the subject of social mobility towards the intelligentsia. Korycki and Zawadzka discuss the characteristics of this process, the benefits it brings, the costs it generates and the enormous risk associated with the very act of talking about such mobility within the intelligentsia circles. The discussion's departure point is constituted by two books: *Returning to Reims* by Didier Eribon (Eribon, 2013) and *The end of Eddy* by Édouard Louis (Louis, 2017). Both Eribon and Louis analyze their own experiences of intersectional discrimination aimed at both their gay identity and their popular class backgrounds – and they do so employing the sociological toolkit drawn from academia. Korycki and Zawadzka discuss also the subject of acknowledging one's own experience in practicing social sciences, a gesture that has the power to reveal the biographical particularities which are otherwise normalized and universalized in the intelligentsia's narratives.

A key section of this issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* is constituted by Katarzyna Chmielewska's text *The intelligentsia and the Holocaust. Dispensing the image*. Chmielewska writes that the

⁷ Renata Szwarc endeavored to recount and summarize this debate, as well as to collate a bibliography (Szwarc, 1947, pp. 282–288).

patronizing tone that paints an utterly false image of the role of the intelligentsia and ignores historical realities is not an incidental occurrence but the dominant discourse, whereby the intelligentsia can not only avoid being accused of antisemitism and engagement in the Holocaust but also be cast *a priori* on the side of the Jews' helpers. This tale of the intelligentsia about itself conceals its role, distorts the image of the past, and blurs concrete events and realities to produce a flattering image of the guardian of morality who takes the right side and bears witness. The intensive moralizing, taking advantage of the power of authority in blurring the past, and indicating others as the sole perpetrators allow one to speak not only about symbolic violence but about, firstly, a "diluted" politics of memory which is not implemented by state institutions and for the purpose of a single campaign, nor by a single, identifiable and clearly delineated entity, but constitutes a prolonged process; and, secondly, about a permanent way of forming the framework of public discourse which is not directly associated with political authorities, the government, a certain ministry, or any particular agenda, but with the habitus of the intelligentsia. Not only does this framework determine the conditions for presenting the past and decide what is presented and what is ignored, but it also shapes the members of the intelligentsia as subjects who can only undertake the effort of critically analyzing their own practices with great difficulty, surpassing in a way their own cultural condition (Chmielewska, 2018).

The historical foundations of the intelligentsia's narrative are examined in another key text published in the current issue, Elżbieta Janicka's analysis of Maria Kann's 1943 pamphlet *Na oczach świata* [Before the eyes of the world] (Kann, 2003). Janicka reviews one of the chronologically earliest accounts of the Holocaust, penned by a member of the Polish intelligentsia as the Holocaust was being perpetrated. Yet in Kann's account, the antisemitic characteristics of Polish culture remain unchanged, as if nothing was happening. The text by Kann demonstrates that for a member of the intelligentsia feeling responsible for the Polish community – perceived in exclusionary and racist categories – the wellbeing of this community was a supreme good, and the only objective. As Janicka argues,

In *Before the eyes of the world*, the concern for the reputation of Poland and Poles constitutes a priority which is clear and understandable from the point of view of the publisher, i.e. an agency of the Polish Underground State, namely the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Home Army's Headquarters. After all, the Polish Underground State aspired to represent the dominant group and its interests, both in Poland and abroad. Indeed, Maria Kann's pamphlet *Before the eyes of the world*, as earlier Zofia Kossak-Szczucka's flyer *Protest*, served in fact as an export product. Defining the stakes in terms of image, however, does not give a convincing explanation why so much effort was extended to sustain antisemitic ideas and phantasms. In other words, why did the fate of antisemitism prove more important than the fate of Jews? Why did the Holocaust not become a sufficient reason to initiate a fight against antisemitism? Furthermore, why did antisemitism prove a parameter which could not have been suspended, even if only for the duration of the Holocaust? (Janicka, 2018b).

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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Totalne zaskoczenie inteligencji polskiej

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

Authors: Konrad Matyjaszek, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, & Anna Zawadzka, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.

Correspondence: kmatyjaszek@ispan.waw.pl; j.tokarska-bakir@uw.edu.pl; anna.zawadzka@poczta.fm

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