

### **Mes pierres de lune. Essai d'autobiographie professionnelle (= Organon 46)**

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It does not happen very often that scholars write their autobiographies. French historian Daniel Beauvois, however, was approached by the international review of the Polish Academy of Sciences *Organon* and the review *Nauka Polska* to write down his memoirs. According to Leszek Zasztowt, who wrote the preface to the book, Beauvois continued in the legacy of the famous Annales school. His research on Ukraine, Poland, Russia and Lithuania, especially on the relationship between gentry and peasantry, problems of education, as well as difficult and grievous questions of ethnicity, was met in Poland with sympathy, but also with criticism. In this regard, his autobiography appears, at least partially, as an attempt to explain how a Frenchman from Nord-Pas-de-Calais began to study the Polish borderlands (*Kresy*), their long-lasting myth, and why he described them in the manner that he did.

Beauvois starts his book with memories about his family, childhood and youth in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the mining region of France. Hundreds of thousands of Poles had emigrated to that region during the interwar period, so it was no surprise that he often encountered them in his daily routine. It was not, however, until he began his studies at the University of Lille that he developed an interest in Poland and Polish culture. There he studied Russian and Polish philology and started to conduct historical research. He even went to Moscow, where he indulged in his enthusiasm for Russia and socialism. The French historian also comments on how difficult it was to do research in archives at that time.

Soon thereafter, he became the director of the Centre de Civilisation Française (Center of French Culture) at Warsaw University. He developed his research about Vilnius University in the 19th century and met important and influential Polish historians. After a couple of years, he went back to France and began to work at the Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique (National Center of Scientific Research), where he wrote his habilitation.

Ukraine became his next research interest. He describes his archival research in Kiev and Leningrad, which again required a lot of patience. Thanks to Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian sources, he was able to retrace a large panorama of socio-ethnic relations from 1831 to 1914 in a region once inhabited by Poles, Russians, Jews and Ukrainians, where the influence of both nobility and tsarism intersected. In general, Polish historians admired

his works. However, some scholars did not agree with his extended vision of the *Kresy* as an area of conflict not only between Polish gentry and the Russian administration, but also between Polish gentry and Ukrainian peasantry. With his approach, Beauvois abandoned the sentimental idea that the *Kresy* had been a peaceful land free of ethnic conflicts.

In the following parts of his autobiography, he speaks about his work at the Sorbonne and the defective translations of his texts into Polish. At the same time, he attempted to issue various Polish-French publications, but not all ended successfully. However, none of this got in the way of his receiving a Doctor Honoris Causa from several Polish universities. He continued his work about Russian state power and Polish gentry in Ukraine, focussing on the period from 1793 to 1830, which completed his academic interests. Beauvois' three volumes were translated to Polish [1], Russian and Ukrainian, and, despite on-going criticism of his understanding of the *Kresy*, *Trójkąt ukraiński* was well received in Poland and continues to serve as inspiration for other historians.

The autobiography concludes with a list of his works and Beauvois' review: "La Pologne du XXe siècle vue par des historiens russes" (Poland in the 20th century in the eyes of Russian historians).

Beauvois entitled his memories "[his] moon stones", which can be interpreted as pieces from a distant planet – the Slavonic world. Through his rich and complex works, based on unknown and almost inaccessible sources, he could take part in it, and they filled gaps with regards to knowledge about Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus, an observation already made by Jerzy Giedroyc. *Trójkąt ukraiński* touched on the problem of the enslavement of Ukrainian peasants and attempted to explain subsequent conflicts (such as Wołyń) as the results of the preceding centuries of inequality and exploitation. For all historians of these times and regions, his works have become obligatory studies. His academic and scientific career can be characterized by a certain duality: his philology students in Lille were not aware of his historical publications, which in turn were very well known and appreciated in Poland.

*Mes pierre de lune* contains plenty of descriptions of relationships, details of conferences and articles. It shows how important it is that people who share similar views on research should maintain individual relationships and support each other in order to develop common ideas. What is more, it demonstrates how scientific relations between two or more nations can be arranged. Beauvois was a friend of Bronisław Geremek, Henryk Samsonowicz, Juliusz Bardach, Leszek Zasztowt, and Aleksander Gieysztor, and he spoke with great respect about his Polish and French colleagues, whilst being very critical of his detractors in science (like Jerzy Kłoczowski) as well as in administration (Jacques Ternier, a cultural counselor in Warsaw, and Bernard Michel at the Sorbonne). At the same time, he does not mention if there were any critics that helped him to improve his works. There are no descriptions of discussions and exchanges of views. He mocks the French's sentiment towards Russia, which resulted in the marginalization of research on other (Central) Eastern European countries. It appears that is why he wanted to make Lille a counterbalance to Russophile Paris.

Memoirs are a great testimony of how historical research was carried out during communism. Beauvois was interested in a "forbidden" subject. In order to discover the truth, he had to consult forbidden documents, in Soviet archives, some of which were the wrong ones. The reasons given for denying him access were at times absurd. Many historians can easily recognise their own toils in Beauvois' accounts. They reveal how a

totalitarian state tried to control its archives in order to influence its historiography. It is of great value that he speaks about the searching for and exploring of unknown sources to be used by historians. His experience shows how important it is to interpret documents and "question" them.

In this context it is a pity that Beauvois did not write more about his know-how as a historian. To read about how the philologist was carrying out his research and how he arrived at his main theses is highly interesting. Unfortunately, he reveals his secrets only with regards to the third part of his Ukrainian triptych. It would have been extremely valuable to learn more about the sources he used, but it remains to assume that Beauvois probably did not want to repeat the contents of his scholarly works. As a historian who looked at Polish history from a distance, he was able to see the problem of *Kresy* without any sentimental background. As his book is dedicated to other historians and scholars, more detailed passages about his works would have been of benefit for future generations and could also have explained his methods to his critics. This would have created a good balance with regards to the passages of his autobiography about conferences and personal relationships.

Furthermore, he does not reveal why he became interested in Poland and what attracted him to Polish history. Beauvois confirms his interest for the exotic with regards to the Russian language, but he never speaks in the same way about Polish. It is obvious, however, that Poland remained very important to him. This is especially visible when he describes how he helped interned colleagues from Wrocław University during martial law in Poland in 1982. But that was after many years of close relations. (It is important to note here that he never entered such relations in the USSR or in Ukraine.) Nevertheless, Daniel Beauvois gives interesting insight into the practice of historiography in a time when it was much more difficult to carry out this profession than it is today. The topics he was exploring remain difficult to tackle, which, paradoxically, confirms their timelessness.

[1] See Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński: szlachta, carat i lud na Ukrainie prawobrzeżnej 1793–1914*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS 2005.



**Zitierweise:**

PD Dr. Magdalena Heruday-Kielczewska: Rezension zu: Daniel Beauvois : *Mes pierres de lune*. Essai d'autobiographie professionnelle (= *Organon* 46), 2014, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/publications/mes-pierres-de-lune-essai-dautobiographie-professionnelle#r7201>.

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