

## **A Review of Recent Polish History Textbooks: Patrice Dabrowski, Brian Porter-Szűcs, Anita Prażmowska**

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### **COLLECTIVE REVIEW**

Patrice Dabrowski (2014): *Poland: The First Thousand Years* and Brian Porter-Szűcs (2014): *Poland in the Modern World. Beyond Martyrdom* and Anita Prażmowska (2013): *Poland: A Modern History*

As a student at Berkeley, I was once a graduate assistant in a history of modern Europe lecture seminar. The professor was a West Europeanist, although the themes of the seminar bridged both East and West. Throughout the otherwise well-taught seminar, I was struck by the lack of attention on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or its various permutations after partition. Indeed, Poland offers perhaps one of the best case studies to explore major themes of modern European (and global) history. It was a place where Christianization, the Enlightenment, nationalization and industrialization all took root in various (frequently unexpected) forms. In the twentieth century, particularly, Poland was not only a case study: it was the central theater in Europe where ideologies of various stripe fought each other in word and deed. While the country is usually only treated as a side note in history lectures, three recent publications reveal how central Poland can be in understanding European history. Each book offers different approaches to the grand narrative of this region, and all are revisionist when compared to the traditional story told by conservatives in Poland, even if they vary greatly in the degree of revision. They represent in a nutshell the various ways in which Polish history is being interpreted by academics and the society at large. The first book, by University of Vienna researcher Patrice Dabrowski, takes the first thousand years of Polish history; the second, by London School of Economics and Political Science professor Anita Prażmowska, begins in the nineteenth century; the third, by University of Michigan professor Brian Porter-Szűcs, focuses primarily on the twentieth century. The authors' point of departure arguably frames the way in which they tell the story of Poland.

Dabrowski's work is particularly relevant here: in her nearly 500-page work, she consistently highlights how the region reflected broader movements but also acted as a quirky outlier in European history. During the Reformation, it was one of the most tolerant powers despite being reigned by a Catholic king (137); two hundred years later, its king (thanklessly) defended the Viennese throne against Ottoman invasion (226); and

Polish legions suppressed Haitians' attempts at liberation under the banners of Napoleon in the belief that such actions would help their birth country regain independence (299). Throughout her story, she eloquently and succinctly describes the ways in which a mighty commonwealth's kings progressively limited their own powers out of the belief both that the nobility would act as guarantor of the state and that limiting the king's power "set the country on the road to modernity." (85) That the nobility and their guaranteed privileges would ultimately led to political unrest and partition was an unfortunate outcome for a state which was comparatively progressive. As she puts it, Polish history is one about "becoming a normal country" despite of (or because of) its "ghosts of the past." (456-457)

Prażmowska's work also focuses on becoming "normal." Since her point of departure is the partitions of Poland, however, hers is one about the fight for national self-determination. In this regard, one can consider Prażmowska's narrative more traditionalist in its approach: she emphasizes international relations and particularly great powers as they debated the "Polish question" over two hundred years. Her frequent use of the passive voice and undefined individuals—movements "emerge" and "some" people take side while "others" do not—gives the impression that forces are the actors themselves. Take this section on Poland before World War I:

A crisis was experienced by the Russian regime during the years 1904-1906. This marked a watershed in the stages which led to Poland becoming an independent state. Many Polish leaders, seeing the Russian Empire in trouble, believed this to be an opportunity to either forward the Polish cause or to at least weaken the staunchest enemy of Polish nationalism. The international crisis and the ensuing social and political conflicts raised hopes that Poland could become an autonomous region within the Russian Empire. The possibility of Poland securing independence was also considered. These hopes, invariably, led to heated debates and, with that, the more intense were the debates between various factions and groups. (55)

The reader will later come to understand that the debate was primarily between Piłsudskiites and the Endecja. Still, given the lack of internal subheadings in otherwise extensive chapters, one is frequently puzzled by whom the debaters and interlocutors were and can only conclude that larger forces were at work. That is not to diminish Prażmowska's extensive discussion of controversial issues: she places blame for Poland's lack of preparedness before World War II squarely on political infighting and shortsightedness, just as she highlight's Lech Wałęsa's disreputable anti-Semitism and lackluster performance in the early 1990s. (134, 239-241) Like Dabrowski, hers is one about a burgeoning nation-state trying to become a "normal" one despite larger forces and actors who disagree about the direction of the country.

For students with prior knowledge of Polish or European history, Porter-Szűcs's history of Poland is fascinating not only for its ability to tie in multiple and complex stories, but also for its generous treatment of conflicts in historiography. Most readers will be familiar with Porter-Szűcs's previous works on the rise of extreme nationalism in the nineteenth century, as well as his work on Catholic philosophy in modern Poland. His book on twentieth century Poland reveals his strengths in intellectual history, but also shows his ability to incorporate other strands of history into a comprehensive narrative. As the very title suggests, his is one which challenges traditional (and almost always nationalistic) interpretations of Poland that would suggest that the country was a victim of international politics. At times, he shows how Poland acted as strong force in the face of

its adversaries. Such is the case in his treatment of Polish armed forces at the start of World War II: he convincingly debunks the myth of a "German juggernaut [against] a Polish military fossil," showing how Poland held out nearly as long as France in the opening days of the War. (152-153) In other places, Porter-Szűcs reveals the disastrous politics of the Second Republic towards national minorities, and also challenges notions of communism as merely a "foreign" force in Polish politics. Divided into thirteen chapters, this book is particularly well-suited for the academic environment, where discussions of responsibility, victimhood and causality could be discussed in a classroom setting.

The reviewer has used each textbook in such an academic environment, and was surprised by some of the responses given by students after reading selections of the works. Some students with little knowledge of Polish history were overwhelmed by Porter-Szűcs's treatment of history. Without general knowledge of European events, and Poland's role in them, some will feel as if they are grappling with material alien to them: one needs to know the myths of martyrdom before you can go beyond them. In this regards, both Dabrowski's and Prażmowska's work is better for the novice. Many of my students appreciated the straight-forward way that Prażmowska presented history, being divided into traditional chronological categories and stressing international relations and internal diplomacy. Dabrowski has a writing style which includes numerous fables and jokes, and she usually meaningfully uses subheadings to highlight one theme in a particular era. To give but one example, Dabrowski emphasizes the comparison between the Poles and the Iroquois after the January Insurrection in 1863. She then describes—in many ways similar to her previous work on Polish memory culture – how intellectuals decided to use so – called organic work and positivism to ensure the cultural growth of a nation partitioned between three empires. (338-367) It should also be mentioned the degree to which she as well as Porter-Szűcs have included over two dozen maps and images to buttress their stories. Some students were frustrated by the lack of footnotes in Dabrowski's comprehensive study: while there is a bibliography for each chapter, she nevertheless fails to reference particularly interesting tales within her story. This is certainly the fault of the publisher (and its assumption about the desired audience), just as it is the publisher's error for the frequent grammatical and stylistic errors in Prażmowska's history of Poland. In comparison, Porter-Szűcs's work is exemplary, with frequent footnotes (even to primary sources) and comprehensive bibliographies accompanying each chapter.

Of the major themes discussed in all of the works, ethnic and national identity is one of the most important ones. One of the pitfalls in re-telling Polish history is depicting the country as one of "the Poles." These books do a fine job in underscoring the fact that to be a "Pole" was not a given fact, even if you were a Polish speaker or a Catholic. On the contrary, Polishness meant different things at different times, and until well in the twentieth century, many saw the "Pole" as a nobleman or burgher. At the same time, Ukrainian or Lithuanian speakers were frequently considered members of the Polish nation in previous centuries. Dabrowski lucidly describes how successive kings gave greater rights to the nobility to the detriment of "ordinary Poles." Such was the case under King Jan Olbracht Jagiełło in the fifteenth century, as well as under successive kings in dire straits to hold on to power. She also highlights how multiethnic the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was in the centuries leading up to the partitions. It is refreshing to read a history of Poland which goes into such detail concerning not only ethnically Ukrainian lands, but also the significance of Lithuania in creating the modern Polish nation. In contrast, one is struck by Prażmowska's ambiguity in her description of Polish history. Hence at one point, she

asserts that "the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been a multinational and multi-religious state in which the concept of citizenship was confined to those of noble rank." (2) Pages later, however, the variety of communities collapses: "national uprisings forced Polish communities and their leaders to assess the degree to which they were able to rally Poles to the call for independence." (13) Prazmowska's narrative presupposes a nation where there was none, and in so doing, has a tendency to evade more-detailed discussions of the complex ways that Polishness was defined by competing political actors. That does not mean that she does not problematize ethnicity in her history of Poland, rather that it does not appear front and central, as in the other two works. The treatment of the Jews during World War II or the actions of the Ukrainian population in the East, for example, is limited to a mere page respectively (145-146 and 165-166). While she does stress the anti-Semitic nature of the 1967-1968 revolts, post-War pogroms are surprisingly not discussed at all. In contrast, both Porter-Szűcs and Dabrowski go to great pains to emphasize the plight of Jews during the War and the way in which Polish society both protected and punished their Jewish neighbors. Porter-Szűcs extensively documents the ways which Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Germans had to fight against a usually nationalist front of actors in order to gain a voice. All the while he understands that not all Poles were xenophobic, nor that it was unique: speaking of the interwar years, he states that "Poland offered a microcosm of a much broader issue. All over the European continent – in the Basque region of Spain, in northern Ireland, in Silesia, in Volhynia, in the Balkans, and in dozens of other areas large and small – the concept of the nation-state was spreading into areas where it simply could not be applied." (141)

In many ways, all three works provide an important corrective towards People's Poland. Dabrowski serves as the best example. Her description of the last generation of Polish history is short, which is unfortunate given her ability to succinctly describe the debates in other eras. Nevertheless, she gives a relatively generous spin towards the People's Republic. Dabrowski does not fail to mention the repressive nature of the state – especially during Stalinism – but her depiction of life in late state socialism reflects a recent turn in historiography, according to which Poland was much more liberal than its neighbors. Prazmowska concurs in saying that the Gierek era was one of hope: "He was described as a communist without phobias about the West.... Gierek had a vision of Poland becoming a modern state." (200) Porter-Szűcs's work gives a thorough and rounded picture of the Polish economy, debunking stereotypes concerning the Polish economy and backing up statements with economic data. Clearly and accessibly written, he clarifies how relatively prosperous Poland was in comparison to most Third World countries, and in some cases even to the capitalist West. Still, since most Poles compared their living standards with the West, they felt as though theirs was a backward economy. Porter-Szűcs stresses in his work that in going beyond martyrdom, the reader is forced to see Polish history as one of debates where Poles are not only victims of foreign occupation. Indeed, there was much to laud about systems, even when they seemed comparatively backward.

Its precarious geopolitical placement on the periphery of both the East and the West does not make it peripheral in history; on the contrary, Poland offers a lens through which students can better understand the messy nature of modern history. All three of these works reveal how the past – even the distant past – is still being debated by historians and the population at large. Whether the significance of Catholicism or the role of Jewish merchants in the rise of the state, these authors are successful in delineating historical and contemporary debates in Polish history. While the authors largely agree that the main motif of Polish history is

the way in which leaders and communities pursued modernization and nationalization in the modern era, each writes about these topics in unique and fascinating ways.



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