

Rozliczanie totalitarnej przeszłości (t. I i II)

Published: 09.01.2019

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The Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences published two books in 2017 as a result of the Polish-French scientific project "Punishment, Memory and Politics: Retribution for the Past after World War II", financed by the National Science Centre (NSC) in Poland. According to the first part of the introduction included in both volumes and prepared by project supervisor Andrzej Paczkowski, the participants sought to study "the scope of similarities and differences in the mechanisms, forms and pace of legal, political and symbolic settlements in various countries from the times of World War II until today" (p. 7). Another overall purpose was to investigate „the relationships between the characteristics of a given settlement process and the progression in the democratic consolidation of former dictatorial regimes" (p. 7). Paczkowski also expresses his hope that the research carried out by the Polish-French group of political scientists and historians would contribute to current discussions on problems that had been repeatedly raised in many publications, however selectively, without any general conclusions (p. 8). Nonetheless, the project supervisor did not provide his readers with a brief overview of the current state of the art including the titles of the most important studies on memory and settlements in order to prove its alleged incompleteness and deficiency. Thereby, the reader has to take his statements for granted without having been offered any convincing arguments.

According to Paczkowski, the obtained results should have a significant impact on education, public debates and contribute to an improvement of the „currently poor understanding for the history of post-communist countries in other parts of the world" (p. 8 f.). Furthermore, despite the abundant research output with regards to the difficult past of many countries (not only in Europe), knowledge on this topic is still incomplete. Therefore, the researchers aimed at „chang[ing] this state of affairs and initiat[ing] a debate on a more general level, based on an analysis of three cycles of settlements", which are: a) the problem of settlements with crimes of Nazi Germany and its allies, b) the collapse of dictatorships in southern Europe, Latin America and South Africa, c) the transformations of communist dictatorships after 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe (p. 8 f.). These initial assumptions are particularly wide-ranging, although one should take into consideration that both books are part of a larger whole – there are 34 articles mentioned in the final grant report. Some of them have just been submitted for print and will probably see the light of day in the near future, whilst others are already available. [1]

Each of the reviewed books contains four articles. The authors of the papers included in the first one approach the problem of settlements regarding the totalitarian past mainly from the Polish perspective (three articles): through the prism of institutions dealing with the punishment of Nazi and, after 1989, also communist crimes, analyzing the activities of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German/Hitlerite Crimes in Poland (Łukasz Jasiński) [2], controversies around the Institute of National Remembrance (Georges Mink), and dilemmas related to the de-communization process of public space in Poland (Bartłomiej Różycki). The first text in this book, however, concerns the problem of a common European memory based on debates in the European Parliament (Laure Neumayer). These are undoubtedly interesting studies, usually based on comprehensive sources (except Mink's text, which rather resembles an essay). However, Paczkowski fails to mention that two texts in the first volume are Polish versions of articles already published elsewhere in English. [3]. Instead, the only information provided is that these papers were read during a conference in Japan in 2015 (p. 10). In the second volume, the authors depart from the Polish context and analyze the attitude of Jews towards the crimes committed during the Holocaust (Paweł Machcewicz), Soviet activities aiming to punish traitors and collaborators during and after the Second World War (Andrzej Paczkowski) and the memory of civil war and right-wing dictatorship in contemporary Spain (Bartłomiej Różycki). In this case, the methodological assumptions might raise some justified doubts, despite the fact that they are pointed out in the second part of the introduction (p. 10). First of all, the authors have based their articles only on already existing literature without having accomplished any additional archival queries. Thereby, they focus on a description and simple presentation of facts, not on a more thorough assessment and analysis, not to mention the wider context and more universal processes exceeding individual case studies.

However, especially given the information provided in the introduction, the potential reader could expect a more universal and holistic approach to the problem, transcending the analysis of some isolated case studies dealing with individual countries or geographical regions. One could therefore demand an analysis of overall processes and trends that are important components of twentieth century history in its global dimension, and which had a huge impact on the reality we live in today. But this preliminary declaration, promising some general conclusions, has not been met eventually. Only the authors of the last article in the second volume, Bartłomiej Różycki and Amélie Zima, propose a slightly different approach – an interesting examination of the symbolic restoration of memory in European countries, based on the experiences of Poland, Spain and France. Although one swallow does not make a summer, it is worth highlighting this article as the only attempt to outreach individual case studies on a single country in favor of a broader approach. Moreover, it is hard to understand how these publications might contribute significantly to a better understanding of the difficult past of Central Eastern Europe and raise awareness for the topic among western scholars, if they are not published in English. This fact obviously narrows the circle of potential recipients to a more or less numerous group of Polish readers, and one could hardly consider it an effective way of disseminating knowledge about the history of Central Eastern Europe among a broader readership. Indeed, these remarks apply to the entire research project, although the publication of Paczkowski's article in a well-received book in western academic circles is an unquestionable achievement. [4]

Given this assembly of experienced and renowned researchers involved in the preparation of the publications, it comes as a bit of a surprise that the overall goals set in Paczkowski's introduction have not been achieved. In

this context, it is worth mentioning another research grant on memory politics and its role in democratic transformations, financed by the NSC. Its first published volume contained several analyses of case studies, whilst the second one dealt with an overall model including general conclusions [5]. What is more, both are available in English. Hence, it provides exactly the kind of methodology missing in the reviewed publications. Instead, what we received here is a collection of several interesting articles of renowned historians or political scientists, concerning settlements with the totalitarian past as the difficult legacy of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these publications should indeed reach a broader audience than the narrow academic circles, as they are written in an interesting and accessible manner, even if they do not contribute any significant new findings that are not available elsewhere already.

[1] A detailed list of all publications published or submitted is available at <https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/index.php?s=9855>.

[2] In fact, this is an expanded version of his other paper prepared for the aforementioned conference organized by the Institute of National Remembrance: Łukasz Jasiński: Wybrane aspekty działalności Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce (1963–1989), in: Patryk Pleskot (ed.): Wina i kara. Społeczeństwa wobec rozliczeń zbrodni popełnionych przez reżimy totalitarne w latach 1939–1956. Studia i materiały, Warszawa 2015, pp. 160-174.

[3] Georges Mink: Is there a new institutional response to the crimes of Communism? National memory agencies in post-Communist countries: the Polish case (1998–2014), with references to East Germany, in: Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity 45 (2017), nr 6, pp. 1013-1027; Laure Neumayer: Integrating the Central European Past into a Common Narrative: The Mobilizations Around the 'Crimes of Communism' in the European Parliament, in: Journal of Contemporary European Studies 23 (2015), nr 3, pp. 344-363.

[4] Andrzej Paczkowski: The Second World War in Present-Day Polish Memory and Politics, in: Manuel Braganca, Peter Tame (eds.): The Long Aftermath: Cultural Legacies of Europe at War, 1936-2016, New York: Berghahn Books 2016, pp. 287-301.

[5] Joanna Marszałek-Kawa, Patryk Wawrzyński, Anna Ratke-Majewska: The Case of the Republic of Poland, in: idem (eds.): The Politics of Memory in Post-Authoritarian Transitions, vol. I: Case Studies, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2017; vol. II: Comparative Analysis, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018.◆◆◆

Citation:

Prof. Paweł Duber: Review for: Andrzej Paczkowski (red.): Rozliczanie totalitarnej przeszłości: instytucje i ulice, 2017, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/en/node/6689#r7416>.

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