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Rethinking the Tradition of the Second Polish Republic: The Legacy of the 1918–1939 Period in Poland after 1989

Rewizje tradycji II Rzeczypospolitej –
dziedzictwo dwudziestolecia międzywojennego
w Polsce po roku 1989

Abstract: The article serves as an introduction to the main problems related to the process of interpreting and reinterpreting of the legacy of the Second Republic of Poland after the breakthrough of 1989, principally including the issues of forming legacy discourses and their dynamics. It presents various strategies related to the phenomenon in question – both revisions and critical interventions, as well as reinterpretations and continuations, with inventive and reconstruction-based approach, with confirmation and deconstruction of stereotypes. The focus of interest was on the conditions underlying various ways of construction, valuation, and reconfiguring the image of the interwar period present both in literature, and in other cultural areas: language, film, theatre, and museum studies. The broadest field of reference for negotiation and communication of the legacy of the period 1918–1939 was considered to consist in social memory practices (particularly the conflict between affective memory and official memory policies) as well as transformations of collective identity and the attitude to Europeaness. Research questions included, among others, the following issues: How is the interwar past related to the projects of the present? Which trends raise the greatest interest and prove to be the most inspiring? What is the attitude of artists from different generations to the legacy of the Second Republic of Poland? In which genres of texts and in which areas of culture are images of the interwar period popular?

Keywords: the interwar period, legacy, literature, invention, tradition

Abstrakt: Artykuł wprowadza w główne problemy związane z procesem interpretowania i reinterpretowania dziedzictwa II Rzeczypospolitej po przełomie 1989 roku, w tym przede wszystkim w kwestie formowania się dyskursów dziedzictwa oraz ich dynamiki. W tekście przedstawiono różnorodne strategie związane z tym zjawiskiem – zarówno rewizje i krytyczne interwencje, jak też reinterpretacje i kontynuacje, nastawienie inwencyjne i rekonstrukcyjne, potwierdzanie i dekonstruowanie stereotypów. W centrum zainteresowania znalazły się uwarunkowania rozmaitych sposobów konstruowania, wartościowania, rekonfigurowania obrazu dwudziestolecia obecnego zarówno w literaturze, jak i w innych obszarach kultury: języku, filmie, teatrze, muzealnictwie. Za najszersze pole odniesienia dla negocjacji i komunikowania dziedzictwa lat 1918–1939 uznane zostały praktyki pamięci społecznej (zwłaszcza konflikt pamięci afektywnej i oficjalnych polityk pamięci) oraz przemiany tożsamości zbiorowej i stosunek do europejskości. Wśród pytań badawczych znalazły się między innymi następujące zagadnienia: W jaki sposób wiąże się międzywojenną przeszłość z projektami współczesności? Jakie nurty będą najwyższe zainteresowanie i okazują się najbardziej inspirowane? Jak ustosunkowują się do dziedzictwa II Rzeczypospolitej twórcy różnych generacji? W jakich gatunkach tekstów i w jakich obiegach kultury cieszą się popularnością obrazy dwudziestolecia?

Słowa kluczowe: dwudziestolecie międzywojenne, dziedzictwo, literatura, inwencja, tradycja

Undoubtedly, the last thirty-five years have produced a surprising number of “new explanations” – to use Mary Louise Pratt’s (2008) term – of the interwar period, as well as strategies for its certain reinvention. The articles published in this issue of *Postscriptum Polonistyczne* focus on precisely this phenomenon: a particularly intense presence of the interwar themes in post-1989 cultural texts and discourses. We ask a question about the forms of the process of interpreting and reinterpreting the legacy of the Second Polish Republic after the post-1989 transformation and about its relation to political, historical, and social changes, as well as to collective memory and identity transformations. The year 1989 is considered a turning point in the formation of knowledge about the interwar period, its image, and its narrative, which had a multidimensional and multidirectional impact on the reconstruction, negotiation, and construction of its values and cultural meanings. In the articles, we explore selected aspects and examples of this process. The analyses refer mainly to the interest in the Second Polish Republic in the humanities, especially art history, literary, and linguistic studies, as well as culture and the arts: literature, film, theatre, art, and exhibition practices. We are less interested in the political and social dimension of the phenomenon, although we are aware of its importance.

Many factors have contributed to the importance of interwar heritage. First of all, it was a period of rapid, profound, and complex social and

national transformations related to the regaining of independence, the development of modern technologies, the era of modernism in literature, art, and architecture, the formulation of pioneering theories in philosophy, including new concepts of the subject, as well as the circulation of a characteristic set of historiosophical ideas, especially catastrophic ones, or nationalist concepts in the 1930s. However, these are not the main reasons for the current interest in this period. It seems more important that the interwar period is so recent a past that it remains within the framework of community experience and communicative memory (Assmann, 2013). This gives rise to many discourses: family and official ones, relating not only to historical versions of the past, but also to the knowledge remembered or handed down from one generation to the next and the group memory affective memory. After 1989, these discourses gained a voice in cultural texts and activities ranging from the production of expert to popular knowledge, from historical studies to political journalism, from biographies to family histories, from high literature (historical fiction), to popular genres (such as crime novels, historical romances, or sagas), from museum exhibitions to historical reenactments and reconstructions, from symphonic concerts to amateur performances. The strong presence of interwar themes in literature is also linked to the emergence of a group of writers specializing in these themes and often publishing scholarly and popular science or literary texts. Many of them publish their works in thematic series and in the press, while also posting on internet portals and media.

Texts devoted to the interwar period are written in response to the book industry boom and readers' interest in the recent past. It is, therefore, difficult not to use contemporary theories of heritage and cultural memory, which, so to speak, attempt to grasp the phenomena analyzed. Particularly important here are theoretical proposals that treat tradition and heritage as dynamic phenomena, characterized as processual and being in constant movement, on the one hand, as a specific resource subject to repeated ordering and selection, and, on the other hand, as a process of assigning meanings, evaluation, and communication (Smith, 2006). The theories of the invention and projection of tradition,

its inventive aspect (Eric Hobsbawm), and the more recent functional or even performative approach to heritage (Smith, 2006) are also inspiring for our studies.

The notions of redefinition and reactivation, which are essential for these theories, became particularly relevant in the period following the transformation of 1989. Contemporary images of the 1920s and 1930s can only be discussed while keeping in mind the strong influence the PRL (People's Republic of Poland) era had on the perception of the interwar period in Poland. When analyzed from a contemporary perspective, the PRL period have seemed an inevitable break from tradition. This is clearly indicated by the fact that the period after 1989 is referred to as the Third Polish Republic, directly related to the Second Polish Republic, while treating the years 1945–1989 as a kind of hiatus. We should not forget that the official PRL's attitude to the interwar period varied before 1989: it was different in Stalin's time, different during the post-1956 period, and different in the 1970s. However, the interwar period heritage, in particular when it comes to the leading role played then by the intelligentsia and capitalism, was negated or marginalized by default through state-inspired actions aimed at creating artificial folk culture, with deliberate references to the peasant origins of the vast majority of the society. In particular, the prevailing official discourse discredited the principles of capitalism and democracy associated with the pre-war period. The role of certain social groups during the interwar period, such as the aristocracy, the intelligentsia, and the Jewish bourgeoisie, was also omitted or shown in a bad light by the official propaganda during the PRL period.

Notably, the model of modernity adopted by the communist camp was critical of its Western variant, reducing the concepts of modernity to a narrow doctrine glorifying the progress of socialism contrasted against the Western "bourgeois backwardness." The state historical policy of the PRL clearly denied the legacy of the 1918–1939 period and erased some of the events that were crucial to the emergence and the end of the Second Polish Republic, respectively: the 1919–1921 war and the Soviet Union's invasion of 17 September 1939. This official, ideologized

discourse of remembrance came into conflict with the social counter-discourse based on the still vivid communicative memory. The nostalgic approach, which mythologized the interwar period, drew a parallel between interwar Poland and the way of life in western countries after the Second World War. As a result, the dialectic of idealization and criticism of the interwar period in the time of the PRL involved tensions and conflicts between different forms of social memory while, in the generational memory, the assessment of interwar Poland was often contrary to that presented in the discourse of the communist state authorities.

The situation changed substantially after 1989. The elimination of the ideological discourse of the PRL from social communication opened the way for new, also ideologically biased, discourses on heritage. After the fall of communism, the PRL era began to be treated as an obstacle to the proper development of society and culture, blocking democracy and inhibiting civilizational growth. What proved to be fundamental was the very gesture of purging and emptying the period of the PRL (Walas, 2003). This approach included the aporetic vision of 1989 as a moment of newness and revival: the beginning but also the return to the state from before the communist takeover. For this reason, the fascination with the interwar years can be read as a manifestation of the belief that the immediate restoration of the continuity of tradition is possible not only in the dimension of time but also in the dimension of space – through the recovery of the lost ties with western Europe. The return to the interwar period thus also contributes to the identification with European values and the consideration of historical, ideological, and political narratives based on them.

Following 1989, major changes were introduced in the system of cultural activity: political top-down censorship was abolished, the technical capacity of the publishing industry was improved, and the central political management over the system of state cultural institutions was in fact decentralized. All this paved the way for the emergence of a new cultural infrastructure: a pluralistic system of private, local institutions representing different ideological options. The free market started to operate with the aim of satisfying the needs of consumers of cultural

goods. The knowledge of the interwar period proved to be one of these goods, and its production involved literary, film, theatre, and museum institutions.

A large market segment includes popular science works and historical essays designed for a broad audience, which are rich in works presenting outstanding personalities and various dimensions of the interwar “everyday life and extraordinary events,” customs, material culture, every day and culinary practices characteristic of various environments. Its expansion was encouraged by the new tendencies in historiography, which shifted the focus of interest from the political stage and power games to the cultural-social background and individual experience. In recent decades, historical knowledge has also begun to circulate in the new media, mainly on specialized web portals (e.g. *Niepodległa*, *Twoja-Historia.pl*), blogs such as *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne* (The interwar period), and social media.

An important part in the process of knowledge production after 1989 is also played by the literature of various circuits, which reconstructs and creates images of the interwar period. The mimetic, reconstructive dimension of the representation of interwar reality is emphasized by many authors: from Szczepan Twardoch and Michał Witkowski to Paweł Rzewuski and Tomasz Duszyński. Biographies, autobiographies, documentary sagas, historical crime novels, historical fiction with regionalist touch, family sagas, or romances set in the Eastern Borderlands play an essential role among the genres. As a rule, they present the interwar period against the background of processes that took place before 1918 and continued after 1945, while the introduction of broader temporal contexts encourages an approach to the interwar period from a perspective that emphasizes the continuity of tradition.

In literary criticism, the desire to restore the broken continuity was, paradoxically, accompanied by the aim of marking a new beginning, a longing for a literary work that would function as a founding work for the new era (Jarzębski, 2016). There was a general expectation of a result of a similar rank to Stefan Żeromski's *Przedwiośnie* [The Coming Spring] (1924), and the new literary groups entering the literary

scene were compared to those responsible for the literary changing of the guard in the early interwar period (Stala, 2009). However, hopes for a spectacular artistic breakthrough were soon dashed, and the model of an artistic revolution that accompanied the regaining of independence and the establishment of a new art of a free Poland, familiar from the interwar period, could not be realized.

The idealization of the interwar period is matched by approaches that seek to debunk and demythologize it. The post-1989 period offers many different readings of the interbellum. At the extremes of the spectrum are nostalgic images that valorize the past and critical images that offer a historical, social, ideological, or political revision of the period. The first extreme is represented, among others, by the works of Stefan Chwin, Paweł Huelle, and Jacek Dehnel, who depict the interwar period as a cultural formation, the values of which were lost or destroyed in the course of history. Czesław Miłosz was one of the first to voice his criticism by publishing *Wyprawa w Dwudziestolecie* [An Excursion through the Twenties and Thirties] in 1999, in which he stated bluntly: “My aim was to show the internal contradictions of this state” (Miłosz, 1999: 7). Miłosz represented the generation of eyewitnesses to the period, continued the earlier ideological disputes, and introduced motifs demythologizing the Second Polish Republic that were already present in his earlier works, such as *Rodzina Europa* [*Native Realm*, translated by Catherine S. Leach] (1959) (presence of fascist groups, aggressive nationalism). The critical social and political approach to the 1920s and 1930s is also present in the prose of various literary circuits created by younger writers who make the social inequalities, ethnic conflicts, or political struggles characteristic of the period an essential factor in their protagonists’ stories. The combination of these factors can be seen, for example, in Szczepan Twardoch’s *Król* [*The King of Warsaw*, translated by Sean Gasper Bye] (2016) where they form a framework for the actions of the main protagonists. Such motifs are often used in popular fiction, which uses contrast, opposition, and conflict as basic structural principles. Misunderstandings, the fate of lovers divided by their national origins,

and crimes committed out of ethnic hatred represent various dimensions of the polarization of the depicted social world.

In historical literature, the nostalgic perspective includes, among other things, the presentation of social environments destroyed by the Holocaust and the postwar transformations. This history is erased from social consciousness in the process of “sleepwalking the revolution” (Leder, 2014). However, the critical approach with a solid social dimension has recently been reinforced by the effort to write Polish history from a new perspective: as a people’s history (Leszczyński, 2014). Moreover, it is sometimes combined with satisfying the need for sensation. Critical-sensationalist tendencies are represented, for example, by works such as *Epoka milczenia. Przedwojenna Polska, o której wstydzić się mówić* [The Era of Silence. Prewar Poland We Are Ashamed to Talk About] by Kamil Janicki (Janicki, 2018), which addresses sexual crimes, incest, pedophilia, and human trafficking, or – by the same author: *Seryjni mordercy II RP. “Będzie wam u mnie jak w raju”* [Serial Killers of the Second Polish Republic. “You will feel like you are in heaven at my place”] (Janicki, 2020).

The dichotomy of idealization and criticism is broken by the multi-dimensional, complex images that point to the inscrutability of the times. The novel *Złodzieje bzu* [The Lilac Thieves] by Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, for example, presents the reality of the interwar Eastern Borderlands from the perspective of a child who remembers the joys and sorrows of the home near Lvov, the friendships and conflicts with their Ukrainian neighbors, the rhythm of life and death in the family and among friends (Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, 2019). In order to create such a picture, popular historical publications use panoramic or cross-sectional perspectives, which allow them to present different positions of people belonging to different social classes and national groups, the diversity of customs, different living conditions in the country and on the manor, in large cities and small towns, of the nobility, artists, military, and industrialists. (This is how Maja and Jan Łoziński construct their many popular science books about the interwar period).

The construction of the image of the 1920s and 30s through cultural texts and practices can be described as a multi-layered and multidirectional mapping process. It involves spatial approaches that reconstruct the map of interwar Poland and restore the erased borders as well as the process of exploring the territories that did not belong to the Second Polish Republic but were part of PRL. The first of these strategies is implemented in the reportage *Wymazana granica. Śladami II Rzeczypospolitej* [The Erased Border. The Traces of the Second Polish Republic] by Tomasz Grzywaczewski, which looks back on the map of interwar Poland that is still present in the memory of the people who thus create a “border that breathes, thinks, and feels” (Grzywaczewski, 2020: 10). The said strategy is also implemented by the prose of the Eastern Borderland or by regionalist crime novels that introduce protagonists in the space of Lvov or Vilnius (Marek Krajewski, Paweł Jaszczuk). Another strategy can be observed in novels set in Breslau, Danzing, and Zoppot, with the history of these cities revealing they belonged to other states (works by Marek Krajewski, Krzysztof Bochus). Particular interest in literature and popular texts is given to the Eastern Borderland and other borderlands, including Silesia, portrayed in the novels by Szczepan Twardoch (*Drach, Pokora*) [Drach, 2014; Pokora, 2020]. After 1989, borderland cities such as Lvov acted as protagonists of rich nostalgic memoirs and historical descriptions. The social maps of the 1920s and 30s still functioning today range between images of the elite and the margins, the privileged and the excluded, political and artistic circles, and the criminal world. They also take into account national and gender factors. One of the most important trends of the post-1989 transformation period is the emergence in the public debate of the issues of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, to which literature contributed significantly. These issues are addressed by the authors who are both, renowned and revered by the public, such as Szczepan Twardoch, Piotr Szewc, Mikołaj Łoziński, Joanna Olczak-Ronikier, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, Agata Tuszyńska, or Monika Sznajderman, and authors of detective novels (Tomasz Duszyński, Paweł Jaszczuk) or popular romances (Magdalena Witkiewicz, Beata Agopsowicz), who present images of Jewish, German,

Ukrainian, or Armenian environments. Multicultural and multi-ethnic motifs are included in exhibition practices (e.g. the exhibition *Żyd, Pole, artysta* [Pole, Jew, Artist] at Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej [Museum of Modern Art] in Łódź, 2009) and in the repertoires of musical bands (e.g. Hańba). Another trend was the growing popularity of women's issues. It manifested itself, among other things, in historical/herstorical research, biographical studies (biographies of political and social activists, artists, scandalists, and murderers), or the expansion of popular literary genres featuring female protagonists (romance, women's prose).

Scholarly research on the interwar period outlines several characteristic orientations after 1989. One of them is to fill in the "blank spots" and address issues previously forbidden by censorship. This includes, for example, the history of the interwar right-wing movements, their leaders, and the creators of culture associated with this political camp. Another topic was the Eastern Borderland, which today is described not only from the perspective of political or social history (Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *Inteligencja polska na Wołyniu w okresie międzywojennym* [Polish Intelligentsia in the Volhynia in the Interwar Period], 2019), but also using methodologically new approaches, such as environmental history (Sławomir Łotysz, *Pińskie błota. Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [The Pinsk Marshes. Nature, Knowledge, and Politics in Polish Polesie until 1945], 2022). Another clear trend is the reinterpretation of social problems that had been already studied before 1989, yet then presented from an ideologized perspective (*Oblicza buntu chłopskiego w II Rzeczpospolitej doby wielkiego kryzysu 1930–1935* [Faces of Peasant Rebellion in the Second Polish Republic during the Great Depression of 1930–1935] by Piotr Cichoracki, Joanna Dufurat and Janusz Mierzwa (2019). New discussions also included questions of interwar forms of modernization, and the corresponding vision of modernity (The *Metamorfozy społeczne* series edited by Włodzimierz Mędrzecki). The socially engaged modern avant-garde art of the interwar period is referred to here (exhibition *Teresa Żarnowerówna (1897–1949). Artystka końca utopii* [Teresa Żarnowerówna (1897–1949). An Artist from the End of Utopia], Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, 2014).

Moreover, the scholarly interest in the interwar period is characterized by a precise rhythm of anniversaries: it increased in 2008–2009 and 2018–2019. The years 2008 and 2009 inspired the comparison and searched for parallels between the two double decades: after the restoration of independence and the transformation. At that time, interesting works were published in many different fields, comparing two dual decades or defining the period 1989–2009 as a new double decade, for instance: *Pisarstwo kobiet pomiędzy dwoma dwudziestoleciami* [Women's Writing Between the Two Double Decades] by Arleta Galant and Inga Iwasiów (2011). Retrospective art exhibitions from the 1920s and 30s were organized: *Dwudziestolecie. Oblicza nowoczesności 1918–1939* [The Interwar Period. Faces of Modernity 1918–1939] (2008, The Polish History Museum at the Royal Castle in Warsaw) and *Wyprawa w Dwudziestolecie* [An Excursion through the Twenties and Thirties] (2008, The National Museum in Warsaw). In 2018 and 2019, in turn, interest in the restoration of independence and the early 1920s intensified (e.g., the anniversary publication *Niepodległa wobec języka polskiego* [Independent Poland and the Polish Language] edited by Renata Przybylska, Barbara Batko-Tokarz, Sylwia Pręczonek-Kisielak (2019) and historical films *Piłsudski* (2019), and *Legiony* [Legions], 2019). The new readings of the period presented often projected contemporary problems onto the era. It must be pointed out that such temporal relationships are only one of many reasons for the continuing interest in the period. For one can speak of the temporal aspect in another sense. The interwar period is sometimes presented as a synecdoche: for example, where the holistic picture is either the 1930s or where the entire period is perceived through the cliché of the 1920s.

In addition to the interest in the interwar years due to anniversaries, we may also observe some long-term phenomena. There are tendencies that sometimes deliberately reveal different degrees of mediation while depicting the period. Michał Witkowski comments on this process from a literary point of view in the epilogue to his novel *Tango*, set near Drohobych in 1930: “The main difficulty is that (...) we deal with the past exclusively through cultural texts, mainly novels, films,

diaries, and photographs. This carries the risk of creating (...) ‘literature from literature’, producing a vision not of a reality actually lived, but of its conventional perceptions (...)” (Witkowski, 2022: 524). Without attempting to establish an exhaustive typology, it is possible to point to three directions of such intermediations. One is the interwar period, which is presented in literature from the perspective of the PRL and in the framework of affective memory. An example of this is the novel *Mercedes-Benz* (2001) by Paweł Huelle, where the car produced in the PRL, the Fiat 126 (known as “small Fiat” in Poland), becomes the equivalent of the pre-war Mercedes owned by the grandfather of the narrator. Intermediations are both literal and metaphorical: on the one hand, they are formed by the films of photographs, the photos placed in the book, and the recorded memories; on the other hand, they are created by the shades of memory and the humor that illuminates the past. The second direction is best represented in the prose of Piotr Szewc. Here, the narrative empathically restores the consciousness of the pre-World War II era and the Holocaust, signaling to the recipient the inevitability of the approaching evil (*Zmierzchy i poranki* [Sunsets and Daybreaks], 2000, *Bociany nad powiatem* [Storks over the Powiat], 2005). The third direction is represented by novels that offer visions of alternative history, in which the counterfactual narrative is constructed in such a way as to place the interwar period at the center of attention (texts by Jacek Dukaj and Ziemowit Szczerek discussed in this volume).

Thus we can see that, over the last thirty five years, the interpretations of the interwar period have already acquired their own dynamics and history, both in art and literature, and are intensely present in scholarly research. This also shows the great susceptibility of the period to contemporary trends and turns in humanities. For example, the interest in interwar feminist thought was increased radically. The appreciation of the pioneering character of the ideas at that time, acknowledging the role of emancipation activists, publishing new editions of their works (here an important part of the research of Ewa Kraskowska, Agata Zawiszewska and Agata Araszkievicz), showing the role of women in science and social life (Anna Żarnowska, Dobrochna Kałwa). This recognition of the

importance of feminist thought is undoubtedly one of the most robust accents contributing to the presence of the interwar period in our time.

In conclusion we need to point out several fundamental issues:

The reflections on the interwar period are inscribed in the current discussions on the question of modernization, modernity, modernism, and Europe. Both scholars and artists refer to this context. An example of such relationships can be found in the exhibition opened in July 2022 at the National Museum in Kraków, entitled *Nowy początek. Modernizm w II RP* [A New Beginning. Modernism in the Second Polish Republic].

Contemporary methods of representing the interwar period combine affective memory and ideological criticism, invention and reconstructive approach, confirmation and deconstruction of the existing stereotypes. Such a fluctuation of perspectives, multiple versions, and ambiguity of the image of the period inspires a discussion. It contributes to the continued attractiveness of the period for both researchers and the wider society.

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