

# Our New Battlefields



**MARCIN ZAREMBA**  
Institute of Political Studies  
Polish Academy of Sciences  
mzar@isppan.waw.pl

**The historian should try to understand the past and interpret it in such a way that people will want to read about it. I would not propose any other mission. And certainly the historian should never have a political axe to grind – says Dr. Marcin Zaremba**

**Academia: History. Does one write it, or describe it?**

**Marcin Zaremba:** *I do not see any contradiction here. In the UK, history books are regarded as literature. Let us recall that in 1953 Winston Churchill won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his memoirs. Here in Poland, following German historiographical models, historians publish boring, tedious dissertations aimed toward their fellow historians who will pass judgment on the work. They are rarely concerned with finding a readership. This would entail writing history that is "well told."*

**Writing nevertheless involves recreating something, describing something that has actually taken place. There is no contradiction here?**

*Maybe I'll answer in a different way. I am a supporter of an understandable sort of history, that is a history which looks to explain phenomena and social behavior. Currently I am looking at the genesis of the Solidarity revolution because it seems to me that you first have to wonder why there was a revolution in Poland, and then pose the general question: why do revolutions break out? The contribution of historians rests on their attempting to understand human behavior and social processes so as to be able to look at given situations from different perspectives: sociological, psychological, economic, and military. The more perspectives there are, then the more complete the picture is. Setting out history in this, as you say, descriptive sense, is in my opinion, all fairly arid territory. Information that a certain regiment moved from hill 579 to hill 580, losing three*

*soldiers on the way, provides the reader with very little. The historian should look to answer the important questions.*

This brings us to the role of the historian. Without historians we would not know what follows from particular historical facts. But on the other hand, their participation also opens up a certain room for manipulation.

*But the something similar can be said for journalists, who perform an ancillary function with regard to public opinion. Journalists must explain reality, whether it be social, economic, legal or sporting. They have access to information and must convey this information in a way that is understandable to everyone. We expect them to be objective. And if a piece is not objective, then they must clearly say that it represents their own opinion – then they are being honest. I think it's the same with history. Between the sources, the dusty old papers, and the reader stands the historian, who is expected to make some kind of intellectual contribution. After many hours spent delving about in the archives, they gather the information and produce an article or a book, explaining what happened, why, and what mechanisms were at play. From this the reader can arrive at some informed conclusions or points of view. However, I do not think that history has to be a teacher of life. That is simply not its function.*

**Prof. Marcin Kula in an interview for *Academia* magazine has said that the historian "is not there to enlighten the public, but should draw attention to elements that can help people understand a given situation." I understand that you share the same opinion?**

*Yes. The historian should try to understand the past and interpret it in such a way that people will want to read about it. I would not propose any other mission. And certainly the historian should never have a political axe to grind.*

**But history, especially in recent times, has been used in Poland for political purposes.**

*History has always been used for political purposes, and this applies not only to our country. Since the times of Suetonius and other Roman*

"People who participate in reconstructions form groups, meet one another, gain knowledge and develop really great skill at what they do. But what of those watching such reconstructions? What do such events tell them about history? I think nothing."



Krzysztof Ostrowski

historians, history was treated as an instrument. There were always court historians whose task it was to present a historical reality that was favorable to the ruler. Such was the role of Poland's first historian, Gallus Anonymus, given the task of writing the chronicle of the Piast dynasty. And from time to time, especially in more authoritarian systems, historians are called upon to interpret something in accordance with "the accepted version of events." But since the appearance of academic historiography which treats history as a science, the emphasis on historians writing "correctly" has decreased. Many scientists have chosen to give this short shrift, and even laugh at the very notion of it.

No doubt, however, since 2000, we have experienced a new wave of interest in history. Not only that: it has become the new battleground.

#### What are the reasons for this?

The year 2000 saw the publication of an important book: "Neighbors" by Jan Tomasz Gross. We learned from this book that we Poles were not saints, that Poles had done terrible things. It came as a shock. We had felt so proud of our own history. Always we had banged on the same drum "for your freedom and ours." We had nurtured a romantic image of ourselves as oppressed, noble victims. And here it turned out that this was not the case. Further studies by historians such as Barbara Engelking, Dariusz Libionka and Jan Grabowski posed the question as to whether in the time of the occupation on the territories of the General Governorship we had not killed or denounced more Jews than we had killed Germans. In the Warsaw Uprising 2500 Germans were killed, but the number of Jews denounced during the Nazi occupation could have been well over 10,000.

All of this demanded discussion and debate but was met with resistance and rebuttal. Then fresh historical writings began to appear. The right wing had to find their own answers to this narrative, their own description of the past, that of a suffering Poland. In this context, the

"accursed soldiers" became topical once more, and at this point the idea of lustration was suggested: a process which entailed peering into files on people and making public their terrible past. And this was all to show that the roots of today's Third Republic may lie in the communist-era dungeons.

The tragedy of Smoleńsk also presented another opportunity to finesse history. As represented by the notion of a return to old myths, rituals, and the ceremony of national mourning, a new interpretation of "Katyn" was proposed: that of the Polish elites who died in our times and in the past. In the end, if you look at the history of right-wing parties of the past, they have no heroes. They quarreled with Lech Wałęsa, with the majority of the leaders of the revolutionary period of Solidarity and the opposition of the 1980s. The history of the opposition in Poland, whether we like it or not is revisionist, liberal, and left-leaning, and this is because it boasts heroes such as Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, and Bogdan Borusewicz. In view of this, references to the past were needed – a hero, a rootedness. It required a search for legitimacy in history.

**What you are saying convinces me that history is like plasticine, which can be molded for one's own ends. And so where lies the truth?**

*It is the task of the historian to get as close as possible to the truth.*

**But as usual, can an ordinary person who is not a historian make sense of all this?**

*History is not easy as it is composed of many factors, themes, and interpretations. The explanation for all this is made all the more difficult because we do not have a comprehensive set of documents and testimonies. We cannot go back in time. The older the history, the greater the distance to the truth. The more recent the story, the more accounts and sources we have – which means that this distance decreases. But you are right: readers of historical texts can find themselves greatly confused when they*

## Of what use is history?

*read in a newspaper that the Warsaw Uprising was a great moral victory, and then they read in another newspaper that it was an unmitigated disaster and an unforgivable mistake.*

**And what roles in the formation of knowledge about history are played by all sorts of historical re-enactments and reconstructions, which have become so popular in recent years?**

*I would not say "all sorts of." Have you ever seen such reconstructions about weavers in Łódź?*



Jakub Ostrowski

**Above left (p. 23):** No. Reenactment of the Battle of Łomianki (1939)

**Above:** Staging of the Battle of Warsaw in Ossowo (1920)

*Or about a Jew from the seventeenth century selling something from his cart?*

**No.** That's because reconstructions only ever focus on battles.

*Yes, at least 95% of them. Well, you can say that some of these reconstruction are simply looking to evoke powerful emotions, and are shameless in their doing so. This is perhaps an unkind interpretation on my part, so I'll make no further comment. I would point instead to a sociological interpretation: that historical reconstructions look to build a sense of community. People who participate in reconstructions form groups, meet one another, gain knowledge and develop really great skill at what they do. But what of those watching such reconstructions? What do such events tell them about history? I think nothing.*

**In 2010, a reenactment was acted out of the liquidation of the ghetto in Będzin. Why do you think it was organized? To generate the kind**

**of participation and identification that would change how the history of the Jews in occupied Poland is perceived?**

*Research shows that a large proportion of Polish society knows a lot about the Holocaust. The fact that such an reenactment is made is deserving of a certain appreciation. On the other hand, there is something that I would call the mystery of death. Putting it on public display raises an aesthetic disgust. It would be better to read a poem by Herbert or view a work of art in the form of a film than to watch a reconstruction or reenactment.*

**Let us go back to Gross's book. You contextualize the work in respect of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's formulation: "an obsession with innocence." Why do we possess this trait?**

*We are not the only ones with it. I think the French and the British have it, too. In the Polish case, this obsession is strongly derived from our Romantic code. Romanticism told us that we might have our various sins and ills, but at the same time we were the "Christ of Nations," and that in the nineteenth century we carried the banner of freedom (whilst conveniently overlooking the serfdom of the peasants). During World War II, we were a country without a Quisling. This interpretation, very strong in the communist era, became fixed in our minds. We are convinced that no one ever betrayed anyone, never collaborated - people just struggled. This cannot be true, as only 3% of Polish society belonged to the underground.*

*The remainder just wanted to survive, although for many this hope was tragically thwarted. And then there was the communist era, where the past was presented in such a way as to legitimize communism. Hence the existence of untold histories and the keeping of archives under lock and key. We also had to contend with an absence of intellectual exchanges with others.*

*Little wonder that we did not understand Jews who associated Poland with mass graves and suffering. We responded: "We are innocent, those 'others' on the margins of society are to blame for Jedwabne." But the historian should look at all this with a dispassionate eye. And this is probably the most important postulate of historical research: we cannot be defenders of the good name of the Polish people, as history is meant to be research-based work, and should not be placed at the service of ideology or propaganda.* ■

Interview by Katarzyna Czarnecka