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## INTERWAR PERIOD IN POLISH HISTORY HANDBOOKS OF THE FIFTY YEARS (1945 – 1994)

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**Abstract.** The article presents the theoretical aspects of teaching Polish history at schools from 1945 to 1994. The author emphasizes that the Poles undeniably are a nation whose identity and national character have been shaped to a great extent by tradition and history education. It has been proven that the national character is formed in the course of history and the factors contributing to it may be easily recognized. When the national character manages to specify itself it tends to stability and rejection or assimilation destructive influence. It turned out that of great importance is that the national character is never exclusively unique or uncommon; it is rather a combination of widespread features typical for many nations. These two trends of historical influence existed side by side despite their contrary character which was especially clear within fifty years. The formation of the historical consciousness of the contemporary Poles has been proudly influenced by the image of the interwar period of 1918-1939. The author concludes that the expansion of history propaganda function did not result in a change in social awareness of history. People rejected the official history (even reliably presented facts) since they still had in mind the practice of the Stalin period and the faults of the recent history; instead, they resorted to 'private' history which was frequently based on books of the 19th-century authors.

**Keywords:** prevalent opinions, school documents, communist system, individuals of recent history, propagated ideas, official censorship, manner of history presentation, contemporary handbook, new handbooks.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitics of modern Poland caused that for many centuries history became an important instrument in the struggle for reigning over souls. That is why history became a compulsory school subject in Poland at the end of the 18th century before the appearance of the first in the world Ministry of Education (National Education Board). The influence of the state on the shape of school history education caused that history served the government's purposes. This trend was revealed in its most distinct shape within the last fifty years. Since this practice was not accepted by society three different flows of information about history were created:

- official (controlled by government or institutions connected within it, it combined strictly scientific, ideological, and even propaganda elements)
- common (based on oral tradition and family keepsakes)
- oppositional (instituted by the organizations of the democratic opposition, the Catholic

church, and other organizations, it was competitive with the 'official trend')

Coexistence and competition of the above flows of information about history resulted in the appearance of peculiar history consciousness typical for an average Pole of our time. Scientific investigations have proved its character to be described on one hand as victorious and on the other hand as martyrdom-like; that is to say memory of both power and great victories of Poland as well as of misery of the last two centuries preponderate in it. Domination of the common trend with the special significance of 19th. century historical novels which were written to comfort the Poles when our land was annexed to the neighboring countries is typical for this type of consciousness. In 1795 Poland was annexed to Russia, Austria, and Germany and until 1918 it had not existed as an independent state.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The image of the interwar period of 1918-1939 was substantially impacted by the following factors:

- the actual significance of this period for the Polish nation (realization of independence aspirations of six generations of the Poles, accession of Poland to democratic and modern European countries)
- apotheosis of the regenerated state by the historiography and publicists of the Second Republic
- the reaction of the society to the attempts of historiography and communist propaganda to discredit the achievements of the Second Republic,
- idealization of this period which in a time of restricted sovereignty of the country was recognized by the nation as a symbol of 'better years' and political freedom,
- search for a positive model of history made by post-communist governments, which led to the idealization of this period and denial of some negative aspects of this epoch.

For the simple reason that the above-mentioned facts should be better understood we shall first examine the description of Polish history of 1918-1939 as presented in school (so obligatory) history handbooks. The handbooks were written within fifty years when the political system called real socialism flourished in Poland.

Contrary to some prevalent opinions this period was not politically homogeneous. It may be observed concerning school education. The analysis of some school documents helped us to distinguish a few minor chronological items in it which are also internally diversified (Stepnik & Wróbel Lipowa, 1991):

- 1944-1948 – when the pre-war system of education practically existed although the struggle to control it had already commenced,
- 1948-1956 – was a period of the so-called 'ideological onslaught' when the school became an important instrument of ideological struggle,
- 1956-1989 – a period of slow and gradual school democratization,
- 1989-1994 – when a reform of school was attempted.

The first period of Polish after-war education was complicated to describe. At that time a new school system was being created based on the old one. The communists had to accept pre-war teachers, handbooks, and programs until they gained full political power and built a new system of education. Teachers interpreted the last history to the best of their abilities. Since the pre-war handbooks rarely described the history of the Second Republic (which was the present day then) the teachers appealed to their personal experiences, political opinions, common information, and other sources of this nature. With special reference to the language of science, pupils were given a not objective and idealized picture supplemented with common knowledge; the picture much

more expressed nostalgia and expectations rather than historical truth.

Based on some indirect sources (diaries and memoirs) one might conclude that the years in question were presented differently. Most frequently following pre-war ideals of education appealed to national (which recognized the idea of the nation as having superior moral and social value) and civic (which proclaimed the cult of the State and Józef Piłsudski as its leader and which prepared young people to service to the State rather than to live in the State). Continuity of historical tradition, Messianism proclaimed to recognize Poland as the Christ of Europe and bulwark of Christianity, anti-communism, the cult of State and Nation, appreciation of the role of some outstanding individuals (especially of J. Piłsudski) and theory of the two enemies of Poland (namely the Soviet Union and Germany) constituted the most significant traits of the picture of the Second Republic.

The above-mentioned way of history presentation may be justified by the difficult after-war reality. A great number of teachers associated the discussed period with the best years of their youth, in peace and hope, the time for growing rich and gradual development of the revived 1918 State. At the same time, the pre-war years were deprived of numerous discomforts endured immediately after the war, for example, poverty, both family and political in-stability, lack of complete independence, uncertain future, and decline of traditional values. To take the argument further, the interwar period denied everything that the war or its consequences had caused.

This type of history description had little in common with the contemporary manner of teaching although it affected the historical consciousness of an after-war generation of Poles, the majority of whom did not accept the Yalta conference. A considerable number of well-educated people shared this mythological view of history. The declared views on history distinguished people of the new system (we) from their opponents (they). Since the trend to be in the opposition constituted a frequent element of the Polish political scene within the last 50 years the range of so perceived picture of Polish history was significant.

When the communist system became firmly established history went into the harness of the official ideology leading the interpretation of past events to absurdity. It may be proved by the way of presentation of the Second Republic; society perceived the Republic as a symbol of independence and national features. The communists endeavored to render this crucial period repugnant to society by the interpretation of the past in history handbooks, the purpose of that was to make the society perceive all the alterations conducted by the Communist party as considerable progress (Hoszowska, 2002). By the instructions of some party leaders, the Second Republic had to be a negative point of reference as contrasted to the after-war order.

The above tendency is demonstrated in the work of Kormanowa (1953), who came from the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1944. The author, an important official in the Ministry of Education, treated all symbols of Polish history unceremoniously. She refused to accept, for example, the participation of Poles in the War of Independence of 1918 attributing Polish military operations to the activity of the Austrian intelligence service. She attempted to persuade the readers that the revival of Poland was due to the communist revolution of 1917 in Russia. Despite its leftist character the first government with Ignacy Daszyński as its Prime Minister was called 'counter-revolution sabotage of wealthy classes'. Any progress was associated with the Left Wing whereas the worst intentions were imputed to the Right Wing. The pre-war governments were supposed to base themselves upon military and police terror and sweated labor of workers and peasants especially those of Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Belorussian origin, which additionally justified the annexation of the Polish territory to the Soviet Union after 17th September 1939. Polish domestic rule was described dramatically though not always reliably, terror, arrests and confiscations spread all over the country. Ż. Kormanowa wrote in her book: oppositional newspapers were closed, and police shot at demonstrating workers. Fascist organizations grew up rapidly. There existed nine of them although they were named differently. The Polish-Russian War of 1920 was

not presented as an attempt of Russia to spread communism over Europe but as an attack of Polish imperialism upon the peacefully oriented Soviet Union. J. Piłsudski's aims at strengthening governmental power in Poland were described as a fascist coup encouraged by London which commenced the fascist dictatorship in the country. The parallelism between the Second Republic and fascism was discerned almost everywhere. A good example of this process is the amendment to the Polish constitution made in 1935 which was described as the legalization of the fascist system in Poland. Similarly, the Polish-German non-aggression pact signed in 1934 was perceived as an alliance with Nazi Germany. Oddly enough, however, the alliance with the Soviet Union did not bring any negative connotations. Neither did Stalin's withdrawal from the above agreement. The fact of the evacuation of government abroad when Poland faced the simultaneous attack of Soviet and German armies was shown as a disgraceful escape and symbolic end of a hostile and deceitful State.

What is more important, the handbooks attempted to prove that the Second Republic was fictitiously democratic as the multi-party system was created for the bourgeoisie to hold sway over the nation. Allegedly, some fascist and ultra-rightist groups were supposed to hide under the names of contemporary political parties. Thus for instance Polish Peasant Party was recognized exclusively as the party of well-to-do peasants; Polish Socialist Party was treated as the treacherous and troublesome, most faithful mainstay of fascist dictatorship; Christian Democratic Party was supposed to represent evidently reactionary and fascist elements.

Some highly respected personages of recent history were treated in a similar manner. J. Piłsudski, who struggled for independence and hence was loved and worshipped by society, was presented in a false light. He was referred to as an agent of the German intelligence service and Western imperialism, as a nationalist, and friend of the aristocracy. Ignacy Paderewski, a well-known pianist, a friend of American president Thomas Woodrow Wilson and a delegate to the Versailles conference, was considered to be an adherent of Western imperialists. Roman Dmowski, the leader of the National-Democratic Party, was referred to as a member of the politically bankrupt party whose political plans were associated with tsarist imperialism. J. Back, the Foreign Minister whose strong opposition to the German ultimatum was still remembered, was called a supporter of Hitler whereas. Wincenty Witos, the greatest peasant politician of that time was considered to be the Prime Minister of the landowners. It may be safely said that Lenin and Stalin, the new idols, were to replace the hitherto popular personages.

In the handbooks of the Stalin period the greater part of the society, that still remembered the pre-war years, could not discover their own history and they found this fact offensive. As the result, a kind of didactic dualism appeared in those days. Students learned one version of history to meet the school requirements and fairly different views on past events for their own needs. The consequences of that were disastrous for the Polish nation. As was the case with the annexation of the Polish territory (1795-1918) the Poles ceased to identify themselves with their own State and its official history. Ineffective work, theft of common property, emigration, and boycott of law became widely accepted practices. Nowadays we have to pay a high price for this attitude towards the State. The handbooks, of the discussed period, were to accomplish the aims of Soviet policy in this part of Europe, which may be proved by the admiration for Russian inner and foreign policy, stubborn description of West Ukraine and Belorussia (occupied by the Soviet army on 17th September 1939 when Poland opposed to German attack) as Polish colony and the approval of the assassination of Polish communist leaders in 1938. The result of this practice was quite the opposite. When the communist system flourished in Poland, the major part of the society felt aversion both to the system and the Soviet Union manifesting at the same time a friendly attitude to Western democracies, especially the USA. The society was often unaware of this attitude as it expressed inner protest against this special manner of historical interpretation.

In 1956 the political thaw appeared in Poland. The repressive system was slightly altered

although there was still much to do to reach democracy. During the subsequent years, this change was reflected in the history handbooks whose form and content were different. The official opinions were revised and numerous offensive epithets disappeared. The ideology presented in the handbooks, however, remained unchanged. The most significant aim now was to manifest the superiority of socialism to capitalism and of common property to personal one, to advocate the change of political system, and to demonstrate both the importance of the Leftist Party and the Soviet Union as a model of State. Thus the communist government did not resign from its influence on history teaching. History ceased to deceive literally although it did not reveal the whole truth and it often resorted to manipulation. Not only were some insignificant facts (especially those which emphasized the positive role of the communists or discredited bourgeois democracy as confronted with people's democracy) exposed but also misleading suggestions, insinuations, or mere concealment were frequently accepted.

In connection with this history of the Second Republic bore its significance. It was to demonstrate the harsh reality of capitalism as contrasted with a pleasant socialistic reality. In spite of the definite ideological line forgery, simplification or untrue interpretation of facts did not appear anymore.

The Second Republic was described in a more complicated though inconsistent manner. This form of state was treated as the outcome of many events, for instance, J. Piłsudski's military operations, the success of Polish delegates at the Versailles conference, and the favorable political situation. The most important fact, however, was the activity of the revolutionists. In the course of time, the range of those factors increased but one element remained unchangeable; students asserted that the above-mentioned elements were significant only due to the Soviet revolution and revolutionary trends in Europe. A whole range of merits was attributed to the Leftist Party while the Right Wing was criticized for its expectant attitude. That was due to the increasing power of the Leftists. After 1956, apart from the communists, social democrats and more radical peasant party members were considered to belong to the Leftist Party. The achievements of these groups were neglected and some outdated epithets, for example, Moraczewski – ultra-rightist socialist were referred to them (Orski & Sternik, 1966). These illogical words (associated with the language of the communist government) tended to dwindle the confidence of the society in official history. Generally speaking, the Second Republic as presented in the history handbooks after 1956 was still shown as not a democratic and fascist dictatorship-oriented country, in which the workers and peasants bore the costs of the venturesome policy of the middle class. It was a country with a poor economy and weak military forces, full of conflicts among national minorities (Frelek, 1968). The social classes ruling Poland from 1918 to 1939 imputed the attempts to broaden the Polish territory from sea to sea (the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea). They were also falsely accused of police terror, the creation of some concentration camps, and governing against the will of society. In the course of time, the range of victims was reduced only to the communists. Now the War of 1920 exemplified political fuss. It was allegedly provoked by the Polish government that wanted to gain or regain economic power in the country which envisaged the danger of revolution. The handbooks avoided the question of what way these unpopular groups managed to acquire and hold power in a democratic state. The main factor retarding the decline of the state - as we can find in handbooks - was parliamentary or out-of-parliamentary opposition, especially Polish Communist Party. To protect the country it declared numerous strikes which were - according to the authors - remedies for everything even for the defense of democracy and peace in the country. The irrational and anti-Russian policy of the Second Republic was a recurrent idea, similarly, aggressive policy towards Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and national minorities in the country exposed Poland to long years of economic recession and resulted in unreal alliances with West-European countries, which in September 1939 appeared to be tragic since France and Great Britain divested themselves of their obligations and Poland was exhibited to German aggression. Soviet aggression of 17 September

1994 was still called a justified military operation aiming at the defense of Ukrainian and Belorussian minorities. The official censorship did not allow them to write more about the assassination in Katyń and the numerous deportations of Poles to the Soviet Union. The achievements of the Russian state as contrasted with many misfortunes of the Second Republic were still widely popularized. Holding the Russian system of law and nationalized agriculture and industry up as models the handbooks intended to realize the political purposes of the People's Republic of Poland. A significant novelty of that time, however, was the revelation of some negative facts of Soviet history which were just called distortion. The cult of Stalin, his brutal way of governing, and the assassination of Polish communists in 1938 may be taken as good examples of the above tendency. However, the form of history description was such that it made individual politicians responsible for all negative facts; the system remained exclusively just and fair.

The lies, that were a common practice in history handbooks of the Stalin period, might be still found, although the number of them decreased as the years went by. The more contemporary books were the less deceit they contained. In the middle of the 70s, a clear turning point was observable. The history handbooks still contained a deceitful idea of the fascist dictatorship in pre-war Poland; the evidence to support it, however, was less convincing. Let us take as an example one of the authors who tried to persuade the readers that the development of fascist ideology in Poland might be proved by the growing interest of the Poles in Italian fascism. None knows if this statement was written by mistake or if it rather reveals the ignorance of the author. In the middle of the 70s the word 'dictatorship' replaced the notion 'fascism', which radically altered the meaning of the facts. After 1956, numerous new facts and true statements appeared in the handbooks, although specific commentary on them blackened the picture of the epoch. It was written, for example, that the constitution of 1921 was fairly democratic but immediately afterward it was added that the democratic principles of the constitution did not meet the needs of real life in the Second Republic. It was also imputed in the handbooks that the years following the May Revolt of 1926 were prosperous, but this prosperity was only possible due to a morally ambiguous fact of capturing the coal market after the strike of British miners. In the new handbooks of the discussed period there appeared some achievements of pre-war Poland; it was a good nation, however, that was recognized as their author while all actions of the 'bad government' always resulted in political failures.

Popular individuals of recent history were treated in a more tactful manner. The new handbooks were still not impartial and they were subject to various kinds of manipulation. Thus they presented I. Paderewski was a great pianist rather than a politician and J. Piłsudski, the actual creator of the republic was a providential man of the middle classes. J. Piłsudski's way from the Leftist Party to the Conservative one was defined as a betrayal of social ideas. W. Witos was spoken about as a popular peasant party member not a politician of the first rank. Minister Beck was no longer accused of betrayal of the country; it was rather the political system that was responsible for the defeat of the Polish army in September 1939. Hardly ever were the offensive adjectival phrases used. The communist idols, however, were still promoted; now the so-called 'kind communists' (for example Marian Buczek, a political prisoner who immediately after being released from prison in September 1939 participated in the defense of Warsaw) replaced such leading figures as Feliks Dzierżyński.

A whole range of propagated ideas failed to achieve their aims. A good instance of this failure is the main emphasis on the weakness of the capitalistic economy in which overproduction resulted in a recurring crisis, it did not appeal to a Polish consumer who became accustomed to goods shortage. Descriptions of goods abundance evoke a friendly attitude toward capitalism rather than its criticism. This tendency was sometimes due to the authors' in-competence, more frequently, however, it was purposeful as probably was the case of the description of the Polish Temporary Revolutionary Committee the Soviet agency created in 1920 during the offensive of

Budionny and Tu-chaczewski's army. The author drew more attention to the dates of the agency's origin and fall rather than to its program and intentions. The discussed manner of history presentation prevailed as long as Red Army was stationed in Poland. Nowhere else was the rejection of the official history either by society or the official author found.

The Solidarity Movement of 1980 initiated further handbooks corrections which were coerced by both the political and social situation of the country as well as some spectacular actions such as, for example, burning of handbooks at school or their replacement by those edited in a conspiracy (Mikołajczyk, 1998). Alternative programs of education were also created at that time. Consequently, the handbooks abandoned a bad tradition of achieving political purposes. However, the choice and form of handbook content still did not damage the alliance with the Soviet Union or other communist countries.

As the political innovations are reflected in the system of education with delay it was in the last two years that we could recognize essentially different attitudes to the pre-war period in the history handbooks. A few competitive handbooks and programs of education were allowed at that time although they had to be approved obligatorily by the Ministry of Education.

The best contemporary handbook which contains information about the pre-war period was written by Radziwiłł and Roszkowski (1994). It meets the European standards of history recognized as a scientific branch. The handbook describes Poland in the background of different aims where everything has its value and the strongest is always right. The revival of Poland and two decades of its impedance were shown as the result of the combination of the international situation and activity of the Poles themselves who established the foundations of the state mainly on the authority of Marshal Piłsudski and the principles of social solidarity contemporary.

The handbook refers neither to pre-war history books nor to popular history that satisfies the needs of society. The authors unemotionally focus their interests on essential processes rather than on particular facts. Polish traditional virtues such as patriotism, honor, bravery, self-sacrifice for the country, and attachment to Catholic Church were emphasized while some shameful facts such as, for example, inability to reach a social agreement, autocratic government within years following 1926 or persecution of the opposition were not avoided. The handbook demonstrates the state as the emanation of the nation of that time and an integral part of Europe and the processes undergoing it. It was not democratic though it aimed at democracy. In comparison to Germany and the Soviet Union, the Polish regime may be recognized as moderate. It was in a position to decide about itself and to control the ultra-leftist or rightist party members. The period from 1918 to 1939 is both an inspiration and an admonition for the contemporary Poles. It depends on many factors what lesson these experiences will teach us.

A distinctive feature or rather a fault of this book is the fact that apart from giving information about the history, it tends to comment on older handbooks. That is why it contains many facts about the Polish-Russian conflict which is accompanied by the will to demonstrate the well-known process of social solidarity. Thus the handbook offers everyone something interesting. Sociological investigations will demonstrate to what extent it will influence awareness of the history of the Poles.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, the expansion of history propaganda function did not result in a change in social awareness of history. People rejected the official history (even reliably presented facts) since they still had in mind the practice of the Stalin period and the faults of the recent history; instead, they resorted to 'private' history which was frequently based on books of the 19th-century authors. That in turn influenced their way of behaving in everyday lives.

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Вaгнер Барбара. Міжвоєнний період ( 1945-1994 рр.) у польських підручниках з історії періоду цього п'ятдесятиріччя. *Журнал Прикарпатського університету імені Василя Стефаника*, 10 (1) (2023), 159–166.

У статті представлено теоретичні аспекти викладання польської історії у школі у 1945 – 1994 рр. Авторка наголошує, що поляки – це нація, ідентичність якої сформована політикою та історичною традицією, однак національний характер важко визначити однозначно. Доведено, що національний характер ніколи не буває унікальним чи екстраординарним; скоріше – це сукупність спільних рис, характерних для багатьох народів. З'ясовано, що протягом описаних п'ятдесяти років на освіту в школах впливали різні тенденції. Важливим був образ періоду 1919-1939 років, коли польський народ відновив свою незалежність. Після Другої світової війни комуністи використовували викладання історії в школах у своїх політичних цілях і пропагували своє бачення польської нації. Авторка приходить до висновку, що звуження функції пропаганди історії не призвело до зміни суспільного усвідомлення історії. Люди відкидали офіційну історію (навіть достовірно викладені факти), оскільки все ще мали на увазі практику сталінського періоду та вади новітньої історії; замість цього вони вдалися до «приватної» історії, яка часто базувалася на книгах авторів 19 століття.

**Ключові слова:** панівні думки, шкільна документація, комуністична система, постаті новітньої історії, пропаговані ідеї, офіційна цензура, спосіб викладу історії, сучасний підручник, нові підручники.