

Crises of the Polish intelligentsia as debated after 1918 and 1989

Intelligentsia Twilight?



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Tracing the history of Poland's intelligentsia social stratum shows it to have constantly undergone institutional, social, ideological, and political crises

Polish political debate posited the demise of the intelligentsia three times in the 20th century: after 1918, 1944, and 1989. I would like to discuss the two different media debates about the crisis of the Polish intelligentsia which followed 1918 and 1989. My choice is driven by similarities of historical circumstance: the restoration of Poland's independence, the institutionalization of democracy, and the sudden acceleration of modernization. Within those debates, I am interested in the intelligentsia's attitude towards its own state and democratic politics – therefore I decided to omit discussing the intelligentsia following WW2, when Polish state institutions were not rebuilt under free conditions.

The end of WW1 was welcomed euphorically in Poland. Wartime trauma and the

ordeals of trench warfare that left deep scars in the mentality of Western societies were quickly replaced in Poland by the joy of regained independence. However, social enthusiasm rapidly ebbed away in the few months after Gen. Piłsudski arrived in Warsaw in November 1918.

The crisis of 1918–1939

Polish society had been plagued with unemployment, food shortages, and queues for a few years already, and nearly all of commerce was dominated by black market mechanisms. In 1918 the price of a stick of butter was the same as an intellectual's daily salary, while the earnings of a tenement building janitor exceeded those of a university professor. The early 1920s were characterized not only by ubiquitous high prices, but also by galloping inflation and paper/printing costs that increased on a daily basis. Publishing journals, buying books, and engaging in social life were becoming increasingly difficult. In 1917 the real value of white-collar workers' salaries was just 17.9% of those from before 1914, and the difference between the earnings of white-collar and blue-collar workers decreased dramatically. An engineer's pay had been 617%



Association of Polish Teachers of Public Schools – Board of Directors, 1924

PN Archives

of a manual worker's wage in 1914, but dropped to 177% by 1921. Doctors' or teachers' modest earnings were not enough to pay for rent, food and clothing.

The inflation of intellectuals' position after WW1 resulted from a combination of various factors. The traditional intellectual lifestyle entailed a "salon" style of politics; it was in this private space of intellectuals' salons that political events were discussed, made sense of, and given an internal hierarchy. Now faced with legal political parties, the parliamentary campaign machine, and the increasingly professional trappings of public political life in Poland, the cultural and political function of the traditional intellectual salon began to shrink rapidly.

The intelligentsia did not respect professional politicians, reproaching them for intellectual mediocrity, incompetence, and selfishness. One favorite anti-hero of such intellectual commentary was Wincenty Witos (leader of the Polish People's Party "Piast", one of the most important agrarian political groups), whom intellectuals simply considered "sly" and cynical. Moreover, they held that the new electoral law enacted in 1922 introduced a "supremacy of countryside over city" and was essentially anti-intellectual.

Losers and beneficiaries

The formation of the Polish state created the need to develop an expert civil service, the core of which was hastily brought in from Galicia, resulting in deep divisions. According to the 1921 census, there were 433,000 white-collar workers in Poland, including only 97,000 management personnel. A huge gap opened up between higher bureaucracy, management personnel, and the remainder of modestly-living civil servants. During the first months of state-building the Polish intelligentsia was faced with the fact that the entire community of white-collar workers had been divided into "losers" vs. beneficiaries of the transformation.

The first years of independence were a painful trial for the entire medical community. The socialist government introduced compulsory social and health insurance, laying the basis for a free healthcare model. Accusations began almost immediately, with "Judymites" (after Dr. Judym, a character from Stefan Żeromski's novel *Homeless People* who devoted his life to



altruism and positivism at the cost of personal happiness) blaming politicians for reducing the market value of doctors' services and destroying their moral authority and social standing. Teachers also counted themselves among the dissatisfied. The teachers' magazine *Głos Nauczycielstwa* published complaints of ill treatment by civil servants, low earnings and "life being nothing but a series of difficulties, hardships, and troubles."

The ensuing strikes and open conflict with the government naturally led to a rise in special-interest mentality. Budget-sector intellectuals decided that the best method of fighting for their own community's professional position was to have a hand in local and national government, and especially to form labor unions. Just as this crisis was being diagnosed, a new idea emerged to bind together the Polish intelligentsia under the new conditions: the mission of state-building. Historians widely consider such declared "pro-state" ideals to be connected with the enforcement of the hard-handed Sanacja movement's policies after 1926. In reality the pro-state ideology fell on what was already fertile ground, as the mission of public service to the newly-reborn Polish state had appeared much earlier among the intelligentsia.

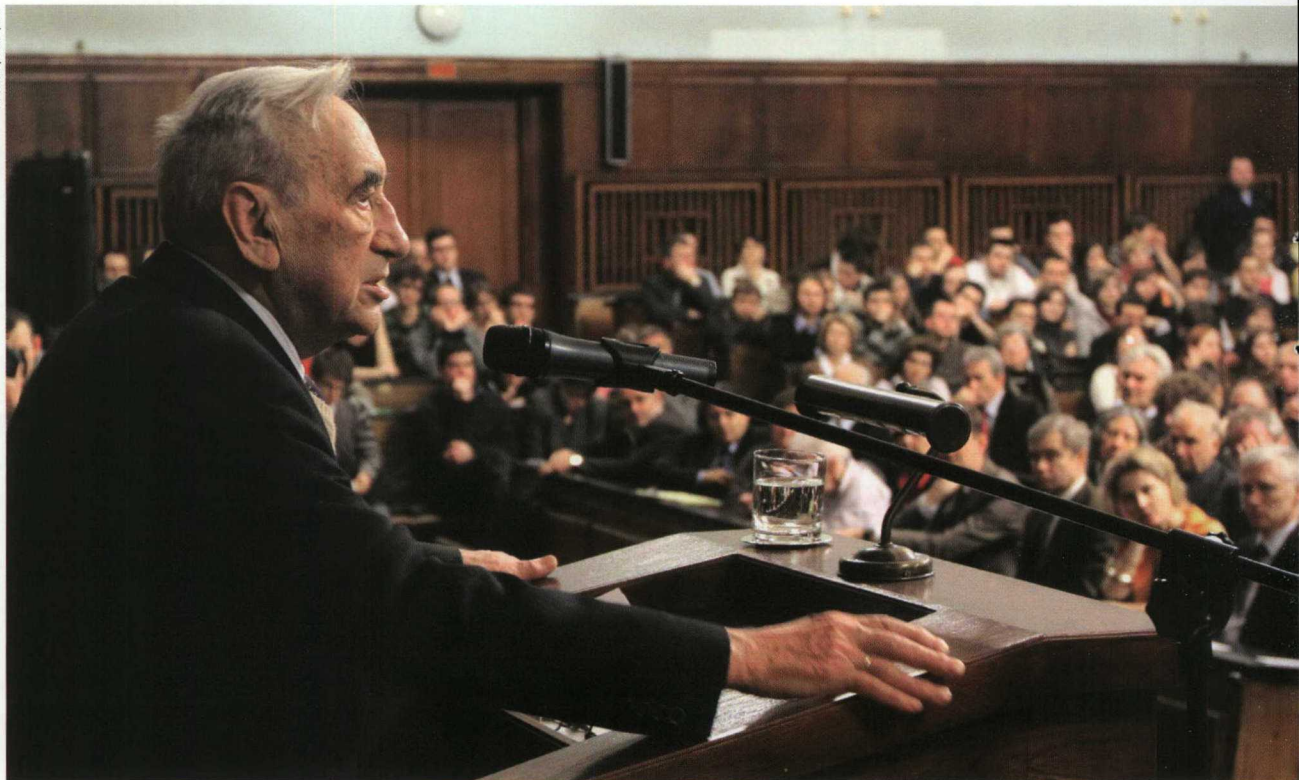
Intelligentsia after 1989

The outbreak of WW2, followed by decades of Communism, managed in many places to weaken or even completely disrupt intellectual traditions, both political and social. However, the break in continuity was not final: books by

Demonstration by doctors from a Warsaw hospital in June 2007. Protest signs read: "I want to earn as much as a bathroom tile layer" and "Save yourself, support doctors"

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Pawel Supernak/PAP



Tadeusz Mazowiecki, first Prime Minister of the Third Polish Republic between 1989-90, delivers a lecture devoted to the "Round Table talks" at the University of Warsaw, January 2009

such intellectuals as Bohdan Cywiński, Adam Michnik, Marcin Król and Wojciech Karpiński played a major role in reviving the intellectual tradition within democratic opposition circles in the 1970s and 80s.

Paradoxically, the next wave of discourse about the intelligentsia as a social stratum making its exit from the historical stage followed the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. A portent of this first appeared during the break-up of the Solidarity camp, the "war at the top" and the first presidential election in 1990. Candidates included the legendary Solidarity leader, Lech Wałęsa, and the distinguished democratic opposition activist and then-serving Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. The election took place in an atmosphere of confrontation and political tension between these two Solidarity figures. Meanwhile, Stanisław Tymiński, an unknown newcomer from Canada, managed to surpass Mazowiecki and secure a place in a runoff round against Wałęsa. His shocking electoral success gave rise to a kind of rhetoric which has since entered the language typically used to depict the Polish political reality: the notion that since 1990 the Polish intelligentsia has lost at every turn and its social influence is shrinking. The same year the weekly *Polityka*

published an article by Wiesław Władyka, a historian and political commentator, where he announced the intelligentsia's impending end and the arrival of an era of experts and professionals. Two years later, an article by Teresa Bogucka entitled "Inevitable normality" ("*Nieuchronna normalność*") appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, arguing that the golden era of the Polish intelligentsia had inevitably passed and that normality – meaning democracy and the free market – was forcing a thorough change of social structure and the intelligentsia's definitive disappearance.

Impending demise?

Bogucka's thesis was picked up by other political commentators and initiated a debate about the Polish intelligentsia's demise. Numerous commentaries claimed that the emergence of the intelligentsia as a social stratum had been anomalous in itself, coming about because Poland had lacked a state to support modernization, a strong middle-class and well-developed capitalism. Its role – judged in various ways but generally positively – therefore ended with the fall of Communism, when Poland regained the opportunity for a pro-Western political and economic orientation. The fashionable catch-

phrase "return to normality" was understood mainly as an elimination of the economics of shortage, growth of the free market and filling of shop shelves. In a broader, social sense, "normality" meant an aspiration to restructure society, reducing the overgrown strata of peasants and intelligentsia.

The second half of the 1990s saw the phrase "budget-sector intelligentsia" enter the language of political commentary, mainly thanks to *Gazeta Wyborcza* commentator Witold Gadomski. The term described not simply a social group, but rather a certain attitude: people resistant to the challenges of their time, unmotivated, passive, unused to independence and flexibility. It was applied to various professional groups, to a smaller or greater extent dependent on the state: school teachers, university lecturers, scientists, librarians, doctors, nurses, and the lower-ranking civil servants – all of them attributed with exceptional class-based selfishness, special-interest mentality, and an attachment to petty, self-absorbed concerns.

The theory of the intelligentsia's demise was preceded by a characteristic social diagnosis, optimistic for the country (economic growth, improving standard of living, increased investments) yet pessimistic for the intelligentsia. Thus the intellectual class interests were seen as juxtaposed against the interests of society as a whole, and the "budget-sector intelligentsia" became a major obstruction to the modernization of the state.

Continuity and change

The same motifs can be discerned in the discussions regarding the crises of the intelligentsia of the Second and Third Polish Republic: disappointment, followed by an aversion to current politics and a feeling of loss of cultural hegemony. Therefore these discussions bring out fundamental differences not only in terms of how intellectuals described their own social layer, but also in terms of its new mission. The intelligentsia of the interwar period was heavily involved in state-building, and a large part of the group considered the building and formation of state structures to be a part of the intellectuals' mission. The contemporary intelligentsia, on the other hand, is characterized by a reluctant attitude towards the Polish state. At the threshold of the Second Polish Republic the priority was the building

of state structures, while after 1989 it was the creation of a free market according to a specific political project.

These differences in the attitudes of Polish intelligentsia at each threshold of regained independence shaped the debates regarding the ensuing crisis of the intelligentsia. According to political commentators from the 1990s, the "budget-sector intelligentsia" should come to realize that from a social perspective it is simply superfluous. This notion of the intelligentsia's redundancy and the predictions of its downfall may be regarded as new, characteristic traits of contemporary debate.

Only rarely has a significant mark been made in the world of political commentary by opinions of scientists researching the transformation process in Poland, who have viewed it as possible for the intellectual ethos to become reconciled with the role of "professionals," as discussed by Henryk Domański and Andrzej

Both sociological and historical analyses show that there is no fundamental conflict between intelligentsia and the state

Rychard, and for a modern social group to emerge that would not have to become a copy of the Western middle class. Sociological research has shown that, despite popular opinion, the humanist intelligentsia, referred to in the media as the most "repressed," gained the most from the economic changes after 1989.

There are many indications that ethos and intellectual tradition are lasting values in Polish public life. Poles' attachment to the intellectual tradition stems largely from the fact that the intelligentsia, like no other social layer, assures them a feeling of continuity of political tradition and the continuation of a specific cultural style. It seems that in the wake of the widely touted abdication of the Polish intelligentsia during the 1990s, it is currently undergoing a quiet restoration. ■

Further reading:

- Jedlicki J. (2006). Przedwczesny pogrzeb inteligencji: Debata o inteligencji [Premature Funeral for the Intelligentsia: Debate on the Intelligentsia]. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10–11 July 2006, p. 24.
- Domański H. (1998). *Śmierć inteligenta* [Death of the Intellectual]. [In:] Śpiewak P. (Ed.). *Spór o Polskę 1989–99. Wybór tekstów prasowych* [Debating Poland's Condition 1989–99: Selected Press Articles]. Warsaw: PWN.