

Uncovering uncomfortable truths

History: Far From Straightforward



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Academia: I'd like to start by asking about the book you co-wrote with Laurence Weinbaum – *Heroes, Impostors, and Chroniclers in the Story of the Jewish Military Union*, published in Polish in 2011. How do you see its impact with the perspective of time?

Dariusz Libionka: It's hard to say. Many people have liked it, while many others don't really know what it's about; this is often the case with academic publications. Even before it was published, some scholars and authors took the information on board, and the tales created by the impostors began to fade away. And yet the names of these same people appeared in many press materials commemorating the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, even though they were simply deceivers. So, yet again, the brave members of the Polish underground were alleged to have entered the closed district and fought side by side with a non-existent Jewish squad.

You both agreed that working on the book was difficult, and – even more importantly – very depressing.

It was difficult, because while we had many sources at our disposal, reconstructing the history of deceptions and lies was a complex process. The materials are sparse, often self-contradictory, and usually incomplete. And it doesn't look as though there are any new sources left to be discovered. The finished book provides a certain framework, although I'm not convinced that it can be expanded any further.

As for why it was depressing, there were many reasons. For example, we realized that we still know

nothing about one of the most important moments of the Warsaw ghetto uprising: the battle at Muranowski Square. It's a major gap in history. We have some brief notes made by Germans (the Stroop report), by Poles and Jews, but they mainly suggest that someone saw, heard, or imagined something. The impostors described the whole incident in detail, but there are no accounts from anyone who was actually there. The image we have is that it was mainly the Jewish Military Union fighting, and all we really know is that people died – some within the ghetto, some outside its walls. This lack of knowledge is overwhelming. It shows what we often learn from studying the Holocaust: people simply disappear, and not even their names are preserved in memory.

We were also upset by the fact that we were dealing with extreme manipulation and deception. We knew that the Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust are filled by truth intertwined with lies, and that scores of people are wrongly assigned certain contributions or unfairly discredited. Attitudes of individuals are frequently generalized, but the things we discovered while studying the Jewish Military Union were far worse than anything we could have imagined at the beginning of our work.

What struck me the most after reading your book was the observation that, in reality, it is difficult to judge whether history allows us to set boundaries between what is real and what is false.

It depends on what we're talking about. Ascertaining facts is one issue; another – even more important – is the conclusions we reach on their basis. Unfortunately it is quite possible to use a few facts to draw conclusions that have nothing to do with reality. Truth can be regarded as something that doesn't explain things, but in fact brings further complications.

So how should the historian act in such situation in order to remain honest?

First and foremost, we must be accountable, and very careful. But getting back to the book – Laurence and I are both aware that it makes for difficult reading, but we also wanted to show how we reached our conclu-



Jakub Ostrowski

sions, the materials we used and the way we used them to disentangle the history which turned out to be extremely complex.

You mention caution; how do you maintain it, especially when using personal sources?

You mean autobiographical ones, as referred to by Prof. Jacek Leociak? This can be very problematic. In 1970, my tutor Prof. Krystyna Kersten published an extremely important text on using personal accounts as historical sources. She notes that historians must critique their sources - that they have a basic duty to assess and verify their materials. It is difficult to deny it is extremely tempting to transcribe what we hear or read in the belief that it is a faithful account of events. However, it is important to remember at least two issues that frequently overlap: subjectivism, and the passage of time. They still inevitably affect the memory of autobiographers.

You mean we should make the unpleasant assumption that anyone is capable of lying, whether consciously or not?

I wouldn't put it quite so harshly; I would call it re-interpreting events, or even simply forgetting certain events. I frequently discover things about my own life - undoubtedly important things - which I didn't remember and which I cannot place in time, not even to the nearest year.

Taking this into account, I try to mainly work with official documents and records, if at all possible. I believe them to be more accurate; they can be used to describe events and phenomena with a greater degree of ac-

countability. Whenever I draw upon autobiographical sources, I treat them the same as all other texts. Jan Tomasz Gross states that he has an affirmative approach to Jewish sources, but this statement has been misunderstood. I believe that what he means is that all materials must be read very carefully and critically.

And that we should strive to find as many sources as possible.

Yes, but this can be problematic. Before the year 2000, hardly any historians made use of the accounts held at the Jewish Historical Institute, even though there are thousands. The main sources were Polish, written later and frequently constructed to fit specific agendas. Even historians claimed that there were no texts apart from Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna's "Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej" ["He is from my homeland"] - a collection of accounts by Poles, put together during the 1960s. Of course this is a valuable, classic publication, and yet it does present a slightly simplified, narrowed view.

Simplifications, schematic thinking... don't we become accustomed to that in the course of our school education?

Yes. The way the education system is set up is that it doesn't usually pose questions; instead, everything gets simplified, with serious issues presented as stereotypes following a convenient interpretation of events.

You show that we should - even must - think differently. You also scrutinize the Polish underground during the war and in the years that followed. Are you not afraid of being accused of trying to put stains on something held sacred?

No, I am not. I am not positing any extreme or groundless theories. I simply strive to approach all problems from many directions and weigh up different accounts. But let's agree on one thing: I don't only study controversial issues, but instead I look at all attitudes of the Polish underground to the Holocaust. And this is an extremely diverse topic; some issues are understood better than others. This is also the origin of my interest in the conspiracies within the Warsaw ghetto and the contacts with the Home Army [AK].

Of course, when it comes to the AK, there have also been historians - not even those with rightwing political leanings - who claim that even discussing some of its activities does stain a reputation that should remain immaculate. Or they claim that it is too early, and even if there had been any inglorious incidents,

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they occurred on the margins, that they were simply mistakes and minor distortions. And yet the deeper we dig into source documents, the more we find that the partisans – including the Home Army, the National Armed Forces, and even communists – were frequently not allies to the Jews in hiding, but in fact they may have escalated the danger they were in. People bearing arms, simply speaking.

Much has been written on this subject. Previously – when the paradigm of collective Polish and Jewish memories still existed – it was countered with the argument that Jewish historians use accounts given by victims of the Holocaust, who by definition are more subjective and make accusations with no foundation in truth. This is because there was a Polish “truth” that things were really different. Unfortunately there are numerous Polish accounts from the time of the occupation that are extremely disturbing. They mention savage attacks going as far as the murder of individuals for one reason or another. I appreciate that some people may not like it, that they may ask: what do we need this for?

It's understandable; it isn't easy to accept situations that debunk beautiful myths. However, there is another interesting problem: is it possible to define the moment at which it isn't too soon to discover truth, even if it is uncomfortable?

I believe that when it comes to the underground, it is already too late, although I admit this is also a good moment. During the communist era, we had no access to many historical sources, and there were other issues to discuss – many gaps in our knowledge. During the first years after Poland regained its full independence in 1989, when the archives were first opened, historians were mainly concerned with studying the behavior of Poles during the communist era. Perhaps the time for more in-depth study of topics which had hitherto been regarded as unimportant has finally come. I don't know; perhaps those against studying certain aspects of how some territorial structures of the Home Army functioned believe that the veterans should no longer play a part; that they should pass away, then perhaps we can finally settle any concerns. There is the renowned case of one of the commanders of the Home Army unit operating near Kielce, Barabasz. Schools have been named after him, even though his subordinates committed crimes against Jews who were in hiding. He even stood trial after the war – the accusations weren't fabricated, and they are not being questioned. Recently, one of Barabasz's comrades-in-arms spoke out in public about this, risking being removed from his veterans' association. And of course we heard the usual argument: it is too soon.

The paradigm of Polish and Jewish collective memories no longer applies, but there are collective Polish and Jewish histories. Will these boundaries ever become blurred?

Never. Or at least not in the foreseeable future. Even on the academic level, and even if we ignore the questions of interest or emotions of individual groups. It is quite clear that Israeli historians see the Holocaust differently than German scholars, and those in turn differently than Polish researchers. From the Israeli perspective, studying Nazi structures, decision processes and dealing with the perpetrators comes secondary to the history of the victims. On the other hand, in Germany the culprits are considered the most relevant, while here in Poland we pay the most attention to our own position in the situation. The dilemmas of the factions of the Polish underground, or the attitudes of the population during and after the war – these are all important issues for us, but not for the other nations. And there is nothing wrong with that. Of course the fact that people from Israel tend to focus their attention on the suffering of the Holocaust victims doesn't mean that they disregard all other issues – simply that they consider them less relevant.

So, simply put, you think we should accept that objectivism is something unrealistic in history?

Yes. I think that history will always focus on individual nations. Of course people have tried to take a different approach. Timothy Snyder's “Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin” analyzes the crimes perpetrated between the 1930s and the end of the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe by the Nazi and communist regimes. The author strives to blur the boundaries between national historiographies, instead taking a more general view. He poses different questions and stresses different issues. The book was extremely successful, and yet for me regarding the history of this part of Europe as a whole is an artificial construction. I remain unconvinced.

Let's get back to your own work. Some people accept your work on controversial subjects, while others have defaced your car with images of the swastika and pelted your house with stones and petards...

I think the attacks are linked with something else, though. I also act as an expert witness; I have written extensively on the subject of the activities of neo-Nazi circles and the extreme right. I think it's more to do with that, because I don't really believe that Nazis from Katowice or Wrocław have actually read my books.

My impression is that you get such abuse for your work as a whole, not unlike Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, leader of the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre. There have been attacks on his home, while last year the city was plastered with posters bearing his photo stylized on the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, the flag of Israel and bearing captions such as “Patriotism as a thought crime! Multicultural newspeak!” Szymon Pietrasiewicz, founder of the studio of socially engaged art “The Districts”, has also been a target. His campaign “Lublin for all”, including the idea to place images of Jews, black people and local supporters of the “Motor” football club on public transport tickets, brought about a demonstration by football hooligans. There were calls, “Get out of Lublin, Pietrasiewicz!” and the campaign was eventually abandoned. Do they stir such powerful emotions because they are more visible in Lublin than they would be in Warsaw?

I don't know. How about the Independence Day protests in Warsaw on 11 November? Some of the protesters were not locals, but it is likely that the core group were supporters of the Warsaw football club “Legia” and some small groups of extremists desperate to associate themselves with the newly-formed National Movement, the National Radical Camp and All-Polish Youth movements. Another issue is that in small towns and the countryside, primitive neo-Nazism as a way of perceiving reality is a serious problem.

When we take note of such incidents it is difficult not to ask whether we really learn anything from history.

It seems not, or at least not much. However, there are also many positive phenomena which can largely counterbalance the nastiness, brutality, the lack of scruples and responsibility. But they aren't visible on a daily basis.

We notice other things, though. Let's recall recent events: in February, masked individuals invaded the University of Warsaw and interrupted a lecture by Prof. Magdalena Środa. At the University of Radom, there was an attempt to disrupt a meeting with *Gazeta Wyborcza* editor-in-chief Adam Michnik... The boundaries of acceptable aggression are shifting, and not just out on the streets.

Yes, but this needs to be analyzed in a broader, European context. From my observations and the materials I am sent for assessment it appears that the processes of radicalization are progressing. This is happening everywhere – small towns are as likely as Gdańsk, Wrocław, or Katowice to be home to relatively powerful neo-Nazi structures. We can console ourselves by the fact that we have not yet witnessed any real violence – we are some way from being Germany or Russia.

You say: “not yet”?

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that sooner or later Poland will have her own Breivik. ■

Interview by Katarzyna Czarnecka

Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze. Wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego (“Heroes, Impostors and Chroniclers in the Story of the Jewish Military Union”), by Dariusz Libionka and Laurence Weinbaum, Polish Centre for Holocaust Research, Warsaw 2011.

The first section of the book – “Deconstruction” – presents how the history of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and of the Jewish Military Union itself has been manipulated. Revealing falsehoods and distortions sheds light on the dangers of making research subservient to certain historical policies and agendas, as well as highlighting the tragic effects of wanton personal ambition. The second part – “Reconstruction” – is an attempt to retrace the actual activities of members of the Revisionist Zionists (Hatzohar) and the Betar Movement. Drawing upon previously unknown materials found in Polish and Israeli archives, the authors present new interpretations of documents and accounts well known to scholars. They discuss the activities of revisionists under the Soviet occupation in Vilnius and the Nazi occupation in Warsaw between 1939-1941; they go on to highlight the broad context of creating armed resistance in the Warsaw ghetto and use it as a background to introducing the relationships between the Jewish Military Union and the Jewish Combat Organization, contacts between revisionists and the Polish conspiracy, events from the uprising, and what later became of surviving members of the Jewish Military Union.

