

Review: A.V. Torkunov; A.D. Rotfeld; A.V. Malygin; M.M. Narinsky (eds): Blank spots - black spots: difficult issues of Russian-Polish relations

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REVIEWS



Белые пятна — черные пятна: сложные вопросы в российско-польских отношениях / под общ. ред. А. В. Торкунова, А. Д. Ротфельда; отв. ред. А. В. Мальгин, М. М. Наринский [Blank spots — black spots: difficult issues of Russian-Polish relations /eds. A. V. Torkunov, A. D. Rotfeld, A. V. Malygin, M. M. Narinsky]. М.: Аспект Пресс, 2010. 823 с.

The history of Russia-Polish relations in the 20th century was complicated. It was full of blank spots that still provoke heated discussions in civic and academic communities. Giving rise to different interpretations of certain episodes, they, however, do not constitute the primary reasons for disaccord between Poland and Russia. A greater dissonance and distrust in relations between the two countries was compounded by crimes, inhumane in their cruelty, and lies about them. Lies always lead to distrust, which is a poor basis for good relations. The book under review is an attempt to overcome this distrust, bereaving Russian-Polish history of biased and ideology-driven interpretations.

This book is truly unique since it was written by a team of Russian and Polish scholars — members of the Russian-Polish Group on Difficult Issues. The history of the 20th century Russian-Polish relations was divided into periods described from two points of view. This approach makes a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the history of Russia-Polish relations, since it makes it possible to look at problems from different perspectives. The book addresses a significant number of difficult issues; let us focus on some of them.

The book opens with a chapter compiled by G. Matveev, D. Nałęcz, T. Nałęcz on the initial period of the relations between Poland and Soviet Russia. The authors pay special attention to the war of 1919—1920 and emphasise its relation to the Civil war in Russia, the outcome of which depended, inter alia, on the events taking place in Poland. This point of view is shared by many contemporary Polish historians¹; however, Russian works on the issue hardly adopt this point of view.

The chapter also focuses on the destiny of the captive Red Army soldiers, which is often brought up in Russian social and political discourse as “anti-Katyń”. The authors stress that the war losses of Soviet Russia cannot be established due to the absence of trustworthy data, but, according to their estimate, approximately 80,000 Red Army soldiers were held captive by Polish army. Many of them died of diseases, malnutrition, blood loss, and exposure. More than 30,000 captives joined the anti-Soviet troops led by S. Pet-

¹ See, for example: *Garlicki A. Józef Piłsudski: 1867—1935*. Kraków, 2009. S. 334—335.

lyura, A. Salnikov, etc. There were those who decided against returning home. But the authors emphasise that neither the Polish, nor the Bolsheviks executed prisoners of war, and the notion “anti- Katyń” emerged in the late 1980s as an attempt to mitigate the effect of the Soviet rejection to recognise the Katyń massacre.

The pages of the book serve as a platform for an interesting discussion between Polish and Russian historians on the efficiency of the equal distance concept, which the Polish government was guided by in the interbellum. The Polish scholar, W. Materski stresses possible complications of violating this approach. W. Materski’s point of view is opposed by another Polish historian, S. Dębski, who maintains that Poland’s mistake was not in the fact that it pursued the equal distance policy, but in the country’s leadership failure to implement it in full. S. Dębski tries to explain the Polish foreign policy of the time by the aspiration to act individually in international relations, and the aggression against Czechoslovakia was a demarche aimed to undermine the attempts of England and France to reach accord with A. Hitler. That means that the mistakes made by Polish diplomacy, from the author’s point of view, were not of a strategic, but rather a tactical nature.

The Russian scholar, M. M. Narinsky, starts a polemic discussion with the Polish historians, writing that Poland of the 1930 did only theoretically pursue the equal distance policy, in effect being involved in cooperation with the German government. The author proves it by referring to the country’s policy during the Czechoslovakia crisis maintaining that the Polish leadership expressed solidarity with Hitler’s Germany. However, it is worth noting that M. M. Narinsky’s approach is quite similar to the interpretation of Poland’s foreign policy given in Soviet historiography².

A prime focus of the book is the beginning of World War II. So, S. Dębski places the responsibility for unleashing the war with the participants of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, without downplaying Hitler’s role in it. However, S. Dębski’s opinion that it was not only Germany, but also the USSR that violated international agreements and performed an act of aggression against Poland, is fully justified. This point of view is shared by N. S. Lebedeva, A. Przewoźnik, and A. Głowacki, whereas M. M. Narinsky maintains that the tactical benefit derived by J. Stalin from the deal with A. Hitler in 1939 turned to be a strategic defeat for Russia in 1941.

Another important issue is the repressions of Stalin’s reign. W. Materski points out that, since 1931, they were instituted, *inter alia*, against the Polish residing in the western regions of the USSR. However, he stresses that the Soviet leadership was guided by rather class than national considerations, since the Polish were not taken in by Soviet propaganda during collectivisation maintaining their political views and cultural individuality keeping a safe distance from socialist ideas. This point of view is supported by the Russian historian, N. S. Lebedeva, who emphasises that repressions against Polish prisoners of war and civilians were not a coincidence, but rather an

² Istorija diplomatii [The history of diplomacy], Vol. 3, *Diplomatija na pervom etape obwegu krizisa kapitalisticheskoy sistemy* [Diplomacy at the initial stage of general crisis of the capitalistic system], Moscow, p. 765.)

element of sovietisation and depolonisation of the territories annexed in the autumn of 1939. So the opinion that Stalin's repressions rested not on the national, but political and social considerations is shared by Polish and Russian researchers. It eliminates the opportunity for interpreting Stalin's repressions as genocide in the framework of international law, but makes it possible to class them as a crime against humanity.

Special attention in the book is paid to the history of the Katyń massacre. N. S. Lebedeva, A. Głowacki, and A. Przewoźnik prove conclusively that it was administered by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) at the order of the political leadership of the USSR. In spite of the rules of international law, after Eastern Poland had been occupied, captive Polish soldiers were under the jurisdiction of NKVD; more than 20,000 of them were placed in camps and later executed. A. Przewoźnik points out that most of the executed captives did not belong to the professional military personnel. They were people of different nationalities and civic occupations who became the first generation brought up in independent Poland. As I. S. Yazhobrovskaya emphasises, the Katyń case has not been concluded from either legal or moral and political perspective and remains a sore point in the bilateral relations.

Special attention is paid to the post-war governance of Poland. A. F. Noskova believes that it depended not only on the Polish leaders, but, even to a greater degree, on the leaders of anti-Hitler coalition, who monopolised the right to shape the destiny of smaller states. Poland was to become a member of the socialist bloc with the USSR exerting direct and strong influence on its politics and economy. However, as W. Borodziej stresses, in 1949—1955, the Soviet leadership did not have a developed long-term policy towards Poland, everything was decided in the "manual mode". At the same time, the Polish historian, A. Głowacki, when considering the positive effect of Soviet intervention into Polish affairs — the elimination of unemployment, the extension of the network of healthcare institutions and a better access to education, art (cinema, theatre, and libraries) emphasises that, in general, the soviet transformations in the post-war governance of Poland were accompanied by squandering of natural resources, a decrease in productivity and living standards, poorer labour discipline, suppression of Polish culture, eradication of traditional political institutions, and the spread of snitching and distrust.

A serious problem, according to the authors of the book, was the economic aspects of further development of Poland and its relations with the USSR in the period of "people's democracy". A. F. Noskova stresses that the Polish economy of that time was based on compulsory control and political distribution of capital investment in favour of means of production and defence industry, which stifled consumption delineating internal borders of its existence. The Polish researcher, J. Kaliński stresses that, until 1949, the USSR, resting on the arbitrary rule of Soviet high-rank military officers, exploited Polish economy by imposing a system of prices and transactions different from the world market.

The USSR facilitated the development of heavy industry and the military industrial sector in Poland. As the Polish economist, Stanisław Gomulka, wrote, in the 1950s, the country enjoyed a considerable trade surplus in agricultural goods and subsoil resources, which made it possible to import more technologically advanced goods. Over the years of high industrialisation and urbanisation rates in Poland, the internal demand for agricultural goods, raw materials and subsoil resources for the growing industries was increasing much faster than their domestic production³. It resulted in the increasing dependence of Poland on the supplies of raw materials from the USSR and entailed a huge deficit in trade with the Union. But, as A. F. Noskova and W. Borodziej write, Soviet-style industrialisation and the forced rejection of the Marshall Plan was a payment for the recognition of the Polish border stretching along the Oder. Such economic system could not contribute to improving the welfare of the population and, hence, was not a promising model for the country's further economic development.

The experience of political and economic post-socialistic transformations in Russia and Poland attracted considerable interest of scholars. First of all, the authors stress the differences in the ideological reference points of Polish and Russian ruling classes. The Polish political elite of today stemmed from the dissident circles of the times of the "people's democracy" and was closely connected to emigrant intellectual communities, having inherited their ideological concepts. The modern Russian establishment exhibits ideological connections to Soviet nomenklatura, which ignored dissident ideas. Perhaps, it affected the rate and scale of political and economic reforms in the two countries. In Poland, reforms commenced earlier than in the USSR. It had a positive effect on the further economic development of Poland. Moreover, as L. B. Vardomsky stresses, the Polish leadership was better at counting money and did not engage, unlike the USSR, in ideological charity.

In Russia the problem of shortage of qualified and flexible politicians became acute in the 1990s. According to V. G. Baranovsky and B. A. Shmelev, Soviet economy was managed by Soviet economists, who could not imagine any other administrative methods than those developed by Gosplan. The new Russian elite did not want to use the old methods and could not use the new ones. Later, it became evident that Poland and Russia followed different paths of political and economic development: the former chose the liberal market model and the latter — authoritarian oligarchic capitalism.

An urgent question for the authors of the book is what kind of bilateral relations Poland and Russia develop today and what will become of these relations in future. The scholars emphasise that, today, Poland follows the path of establishing a liberal democratic state and participates in global and regional integration processes. The Polish society entered the 21st century having solved the problems of political, historical, and ideological legacy. In Russia, the situation is different: desovietisation did not take place, and the

³ *Gomulka S.* Specific and systemic causes of the Polish crisis, 1980—1982 // *Stanisław Gomulka i transformacja polska: dokumenty i analizy 1968—1989 / pod red. T. Kowalika.* Warszawa, 2010. S. 917.

democratic traditions are very weak. According to N.I. Bukharin, up to 50% of Russian nationals still identify themselves as Soviet people. Thus, it is easy to understand the scholars' concerns about the fact that the current Russian governmental elite increasingly recognises and emphasises the connection between Soviet and Russian foreign policy. It raises concerns that Russia does not want to abandon the totalitarian past and nurtures an image of a successor to the communist state that rested on secret services. This fact had a negative influence not only on the development of Russian society, but also Russian-Polish relations, since the international community is increasingly convinced that Russia is changing on the outside remaining a Soviet state on the inside⁴.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the book under review is the first comprehensive research work on Russian-Polish relations in the 20th century that sets out to describe their history without intentional distortion and reaches accord on difficult issues. The book addresses acute and relevant topics giving rise to discussion and outlines possible topics for further research. There are some contradictions in the description of historical events given by Polish and Russian authors, but these contradictions are openly expressed and do not reveal any conflict nature. One can easily notice that the scholars from both countries recognise a close connection between history and politics and aspire to fairly treat the problem of Russian-Polish relations and agree that further study will definitely require granting the other party access to the national archives and telling the truth. The book will be of interest not only for specialists in international relations but for all those interested in the history of Russia and Poland.

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Росийско-украинское пограничье: двадцать лет разделенного единства: монография / под ред. В. А. Колосова, О. И. Вендиной [The Russian-Ukrainian border area: twenty years of disrupted unity: a monograph / eds. V. A. Kolosov, O. I. Vendina]. М.: Новый хронограф, 2011. 352 с.

Transborder cooperation between Russia and the neighbouring countries is a relatively new research topic for Russian economic geographers. Firstly, it can be explained by the fact that it is only after the collapse of the USSR, when the barrier function of the border weakened and the contact one increased. Secondly, it relates to global trends towards the expansion of trans-

⁴ *Wałęsa L. Moja III RP. Warszawa, 2007. S. 137.*