Review Article

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Polish-Russian Difficult Matters[1]

It might have seemed that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presence at Westerplatte on 1 September 2009 and in Katyn on 7 April 2010 (after an earlier airing of Andrzej Wajda's film on the subject by the Russian TV channel Kultura), a presence which no doubt reflected the diplomatic efforts by the Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Matters, would have led to at least a perceptible easing (if not stopping) of the Russophobic propaganda pursued by some political forces and a large part of the media in Poland. The compassion shown by Russians after the Smolensk tragedy and a repeated screening of Wajda's *Katyn* (this time on channel two of Russian state television) offered hopes for a restoration of normalcy in Polish-Russian relations, both on the political stage and in the media.

Sadly, however, Jarosław Kaczyński's presidential defeat, an anti-government and anti-Russian campaign launched by his followers and, finally, the report of the Interstate Aviation Committee (Russian acronym: MAK), absolving the Russians of any responsibility for the crash, have combined to vitiate the efforts of many people of good will. In this climate who would be willing to focus on the publication of nearly 1,000 pages authored by Polish and

[1] A. D. Rotfeld, A. V. Torkunov (eds.), *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w relacjach polsko-rosyjskich (1918–2008)*, Russian texts translated by Katarzyna Rawska-Górecka, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, Warszawa, 2010, 907 pp.; Russian edition: *Bieliye pyatna – cherniye pyatna. Slozhniye voprosy v rossiysko-polskikh otnosheniyakh*, AspektPress, Moskva, 2010, 823 pp.

Russian academics? But Marian Wojciechowski was right when he wrote: "[The book] will open the minds of many people on both sides of the border, if only they are prepared to read it and pause for thought. It will demonstrate that even on the toughest historical issues, Polish and Russian intellectuals not only can talk but are in fact much closer than suggested by the Polish-Russian political temperature (especially several years ago, when bilateral relations were all but frozen)."[2]

The Polish-Russian Working Group for Difficult Matters was formally established in February 2002 during Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's official visit to Poland, but deteriorating Polish-Russian political and economic relations were hardly conducive to further dialogue. It was only after a February 2008 visit to Moscow by Prime Minister Donald Tusk that the Group resumed activities in its new makeup. It was now chaired by Professors Adam Daniel Rotfeld, former Polish foreign minister, and Anatoli V. Torkunov, rector of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University), with its membership comprising a host of scholars (historians, political scientists) and politicians. In addition to most members of the Group, the publication under review includes among its authors[3] also other academics, with only a few of them doubling as officials or politicians, and many known for their rich scholarly output, objective approach and friendly attitude to partners in a dispute. In particular, we should appreciate that the Kremlin consented to having in the Group Alexander Tretetsky of the Chief Military Prosecutor's Office of the USSR, who had pursued the Katyn investigation in 1990–1991 (only to be removed later, with the probe discontinued) and two "most ardent defenders of the Polish version of the Katyn crime" and even "Polonophiles," as they were described on the Russian internet: Inessa Yazhborovskaya, co-author of the book *Katyń. Zbrodnia chroniona tajemnicą państwową* (Katyn: A Crime

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[2] M. Wojciechowski, "Polska–Rosja. Przełamać nieufność i stereotypy," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4 December 2010.

[3] These are: Vladimir G. Baranowsky, Włodzimierz Borodziej, Nikolai I. Bukharin, Sławomir Dębski, Albin Głowacki, Andrzej Grajewski, Inessa S. Jazhborovskaya, Janusz Kaliński, Marek Kornat, Vladimir P. Kozłow, Natalia S. Lebiedeva, Artiom V. Malgin, Włodzimierz Marciniak, Wojciech Materski, Gennadi F. Matveyev, Daria Nałęcz, Tomasz Nałęcz, Mikhail M. Narinsky, Albina F. Noskova, Andrzej Paczkowski, Valentina S. Parsadanova, Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Jerzy Pomianowski, Andrzej Przewoźnik, Alexandr V. Revyakin, Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Władysław Stępniak, Boris A. Shmelov, Alexandr V. Shubin, Anatoli V. Torkunov, Leonid B. Vardomsky, Andrei V. Vorobyov.

Covered by State Secrecy), Warszawa, 1998, and Natalya Lebedeva, the author of *Katyń*: *Prestuplenie protiv chelovechstva* (Katyn. Crime against Humanity), Polish edition: *Katyń. Zbrodnia przeciwko ludzkości*, Warszawa, 1998, who had received her degree of habilitated doctor in Poland. There are perhaps no "Russophiles" among the Polish membership of the Group, but a friendly attitude towards the Russians (even if not to Soviet communists) has been displayed, at least, by Jerzy Pomianowski, editor of *Novaya Polsha* magazine; Sławomir Dębski, editor of the *Yevropa* quarterly; and Ambassador Jerzy Bahr.

It is not by coincidence that I have distinguished between Soviet communists and the Russians. I was actually surprised by the title of the publication and I deplore the absence of any philologist or ethno-psychologist among its authors. As it happens, mutual prejudices and misunderstandings often come as a result of poorly chosen wording. I would, therefore, like to register my protest against the publication's Polish title, which reads (in English translation): Blank Spots: Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations (1918–2008). While, with some reservations, I might accept the Russian version, *Slozhniye voprosy v rossiysko-polskikh otnoshenyakh*, which unambiguously refers to relations between states, not peoples (the notion of *rossiysky* applies to the multi-ethnic state, not the Russian ethnos), and which leaves out the 1918–2008 timeframe, I cannot agree with the identification of the ethnic Russian and the Soviet in the Polish version. The Polish language does not make a distinction between *russky* and *rossiysky*, but it does distinguish between things Russian and things Soviet. The title should thus read: Difficult Matters in Polish-Soviet and Polish-Russian Relations (1918–2008). Why do we forget that the Soviet state was led until 1953 by a Georgian, Joseph Stalin, or that the Soviet security service was established by a Pole, Feliks Dzierżyński (Felix Dzerzhinsky), who controlled it until 1926? He was followed as the head of the secret police by: another Pole, Wiaczesław Mienżyński (Vyacheslav Menzhinsky, until 1934); a Jew, Genrikh Yagoda (until 1936); a Lithuanian, Nikolai Yezhov (until 1938); a Georgian, Lavrentiy Beria (until 1953); and a Russian, Sergei Kruglov (until 1956). Why is it, then, that the Stalinist—communist, Soviet—crimes are blamed exclusively on the Russians? Alexander Solzhenitsyn for decades campaigned for things Russian not to be identified in the West with things Soviet. Sadly, this proved to be a lost cause, also in post-communist Poland.

In the reviewed publication, the "non-ethnicity" of inter-war Bolsheviks was sensibly taken up by Alexandr V. Revyakin: "By conviction and by world view,

Soviet diplomats were Marxists and communists. It was natural for them to distinguish people based not on ethnicity but on position within society (their proclivity for 'class analysis' is clearly reflected in diplomatic correspondence). And another reason why there could not be any 'collective' bias against Poland and Poles was that those diplomats themselves came from various nationalities (those of them mentioned most frequently in the present study are: an Armenian, a Bulgarian, a Jew and a Ukrainian)" (p. 112). Theirs was a "class" enemy. They threw into the dustbin of history the "bourgeois" notions of nation and nationality, bearing in mind that "workers of the world" were to unite in a classless society.

This explains the excitement I felt a year ago when reading an interview with Adam D. Rotfeld in the *Przekrój* weekly, just ahead of the Katyn celebrations (30 March 2010—why is that text not available online?!). In the interview, the co-chairman of the Polish-Russian Working Group for Difficult Matters and member of NATO's Wise Men group twice emphasized that "it was not a crime of the Russians, but of a criminal regime, whose victims, alongside Poles, included Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews and many other nationalities in the USSR." In his opinion, Katyn, as a "place of mutual pain," "might help reach *rapprochement* and reconciliation," but this "requires that an elementary truth be realized: Poles were murdered not by Russians but by a criminal regime, the enemy of Russians and Poles alike." The professor stuck to this view after the Katyn celebrations (Wednesday, 7 April): "Importantly, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has told Poles in unequivocal terms that the Stalinist regime committed crimes against Poles, against Russians and against representatives of other nationalities in the Soviet Union, that there had been a sequence of repressions which led to forced collectivization, extermination of the Russian intelligentsia, officers of the tsarist army and officers of the Polish Army. And that there is no excuse for those crimes. To me, the sense of what I have heard is that a crime such as in Katyn, where Polish victims lie alongside Russian victims, should unite our peoples, instead of dividing them."[4]

After those comments by our chief diplomatic specialist on Russia, I had problems understanding why the Katyn speech by Putin was followed by seemingly open-minded journalists' statements on Polish radio and TV to the

[4] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 8 April 2010.

effect that Russians had murdered Poles at Katyn. Similarly, I now have problems comprehending why Professors Rotfeld and Torkunov failed to ensure that the title of their work did not identify the Russian with the Soviet—and my confusion is all the stronger given that Nikolai I. Bukharin, in the chapter "Poles and Russians: Mutual perception of each other," wrote: "Contemporary Russia is still the subject of outside attempts to impose upon it a guilty conscience for all the historical sins of Stalinist totalitarianism. The paradox is that the Soviet Union is no longer there, but Russophobia has grown to large proportions outside Russia" (p. 760). In the next paragraph, he went on: "It should be remembered that Soviet totalitarianism caused great harm not only to the Russian people, but to Poles and others too. Consequently, the tragic chapters in the history of Soviet-Polish relations should be remembered by Russians as well as Poles. The victims of the Katyn crime must not be assigned to Polish memory alone. They are also part and parcel of the memory of the Russians" (p. 760).

Nikolai Bukharin is a young man, so little wonder that while talking about the obligation of Russian memory he feels no responsibility for communist crimes. In his vocabulary, he clearly distinguishes between the Soviet reality, for which he bears no responsibility, and the Russian reality with which he identifies. This is not the case, however, with Gennadi Matveyev, the "specialist in Polish affairs" known from Soviet times. To this "statist" historian, the notions of *russky,* Soviet and *rossiysky* are synonymous. At one point he refers to the 1919–1920 war as a "Polish-Russian armed conflict" (p. 61; in the Russian version, on p. 29, this reads "*polsko-russky vooruzhonniy conflict*," meaning an ethnic conflict); elsewhere he talks about a Soviet-Polish war (p. 65). Actually, Matveyev attempts to strip the conflict of its Bolshevik features, arguing that "since the very beginning of the April campaign in Ukraine, the Soviet side sought to portray its activities as defence of the ethnic Russian territory (*russkoy territoryi*) against a foreign aggressor" (p. 72). The historian thus leaves out the Soviet class-specific "anti-bourgeois" propaganda of the time—with its messages such as "We fight against the nobles, not against the Polish working people!"[5]—in order to present the Polish-Bolshevik war as an ethnic conflict rather than as an attempt to "liberate the working masses from oppression by the Polish lord." Sadly, Soviet Russia is for Matveyev nothing else than his ethnic Russia.

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[5] See A. de Lazari, O. Riabov, *Polacy i Rosjanie we wzajemnej karykaturze*, Warszawa, 2008.

This is explained by Nikolai I. Bukharin in the following way: "Positive reminiscences of the Soviet Union have taken deep root in the historical awareness of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of the Russian Federation (*rossiyanye*). The USSR survived for 70 years, and in a bipolar world that was the time of Russia's maximum power ever yielded. Therefore, the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been the gravest trauma for Russian citizens. In his address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in April 2005, Vladimir Putin said that 'destroying the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe' of the 20th century. And so the umbilical cord with the Soviet past could not be radically severed in the new Russia. Many elements of the past have become an integral part of the new Russian identity. It is no coincidence that in a 2008 opinion poll, the Name of Russia project, the first place was assigned to Grand Duke Alexander Nevski, who had been proclaimed a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church, and that its actual winners proved to be Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. … Russia has yet to part ways with Soviet history, unlike some independent states which formerly were Soviet republics. Indeed, there has been no radical reinterpretation of the history of the USSR from the nationalist standpoint, even if that history is now taught somewhat differently, in a way that is more modern and more in line with the requirements of our times. Revision of the Soviet historical narrative is a gradual process" (p. 757).

A sentimental view of the Soviet era and attempts at defending Stalin's policies can also be seen in Valentina S. Parsadanova's contribution about the war period (1941–1945). Her tendentious approach is well reflected in this sentence: "Polish politicians did not care for the life of Soviet soldiers—and their own soldiers, too" (p. 404). This is to justify the failure to come to the aid of fighters in the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944. It is true that Parsadanova goes on with this passage: "Stalin, who yielded absolute power, could issue any order, following the maxim that the end justifies the means. But in 1944–1945 geopolitical considerations were of paramount importance for the Soviet authorities. Granting assistance to an uprising that targeted those considerations was against Moscow's state and political interests" (pp. 440–441). The first cited sentence, however, clearly implies that, in contrast to Polish politicians, Stalin "did care for the life of Soviet soldiers." Hence Parsadanova's purportedly "scholarly" conclusion comes as no surprise: "Taking a scholarly approach to the question of politicians' responsibility for the decisions taken, we will find that the responsibility for the death of 200,000 Warsaw residents lies, first and

foremost, with Polish politicians who had planned the uprising and called on Poles to fight without having their decision agreed first with the Soviet high command" (p. 405).

Parsadanova's article is, in my view, the most Soviet-style contribution in the whole book. The "Great Patriotic War" remains the most sacred reminiscence for Russian history policy, and Russian historians cannot be expected to overstep in their statements the boundaries of official interpretation. That is something that only artists can afford. Wojciech Materski, in his polemical text, obviously presents a diametrically different, negative assessment of Stalin's policies during the war. And when summing up the question of political responsibility for the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, he cites Vladimir Vysotsky's powerful "Travel Diary:"

> We wanted to cross the Vistula, on the march, any possible way,
>
> And everybody wept being told "*nelzya*."
>
> It's a thing of the past now, but the memories
>
> Keep wounding the heart like a shrapnel:
>
> Powerless sobs of our Red Army fighters,
>
> And that frontline, its advance so shamefully halted.
>
> Why did the armies stay put for sixty three days
>
> Watching the uprising bleeding?
>
> It was our trump card, they say, our game
>
> To let the West know who was right and who was not.

"The historical facts are incontrovertible, but they may be interpreted in a variety of ways," Adam D. Rotfeld and Anatoli Torkunov write in the introductory chapter (p. 11). We should be neither surprised nor outraged by different interpretations of the same historical events. A joint Polish-Russian history textbook is unlikely to be produced ever. We ourselves often see our own history differently, especially the causes of our failures and defeats, and the multi-ethnic inhabitants of the Russian Federation are less likely still to reach agreement here, especially that until not long ago they were divided over their flag, national emblem and anthem. A simultaneous publication in Poland and Russia, in one book, of various interpretations of historical facts and assessments of our mutual relations is indeed a momentous event. Knowing that our partner

in dialogue perceives things differently helps understand his point of view and not see him as an enemy.

To Fr. Józef Tischner, "dialogue is when people leave their hiding places, get closer together and begin talking to each other. The beginning of dialogue, i.e. leaving the hiding places, is a big event indeed. … Genuine dialogue is founded on a certain premise that must be accepted by both parties, whether explicitly or tacitly: neither you nor I are able to learn the truth about ourselves if we stay far apart from each other, imprisoned within the walls of our apprehensions. We must look at ourselves from the outside—me through your eyes, and you through my eyes—and in a conversation we must compare what each of us saw. Only then will we be able to find an answer to the question: What is the true picture of ourselves?"[6]

I doubt if A. V. Torkunov has read Tischner, but I am positive that, together with A. D. Rotfeld and other contributors to the publication discussed, he opted for a practical realization of the idea of honest, loyal dialogue. Well, I might be put off a bit by the title of the introductory chapter, co-authored by Rotfeld and Torkunov: "A Search for Truth." It should be borne in mind that Tischner distinguished "three kinds of truths" [sacred truth, alternative truth, and bull truth—ed. note] and if we admit that the same fact can be interpreted differently, then we are close to Tischner's second, alternative, truth (*tyż prawda*). I believe that "A Search for Consensus" would have been a better rendition of the sense of the introductory chapter. Otherwise, how can we find truth in the reply to the questions posed by Albina F. Noskova: "Did the Soviet Army bring liberation or Soviet occupation? Did Poland win or lose the war?" (p. 439). Her answer is unequivocal: "The country's liberation from the Nazis by the Soviet Army and the Polish Army was a victory, delivering the Polish peoples from extermination" (p. 439). One can hardly imagine a Russian who would think otherwise and accept the Polish "truth" about new enslavement. But it is easy to imagine a consensus in assessing this issue, along the lines proposed by Noskova:

"Asking another question is in order: Given the differences in Soviet and Polish elites' respective perceptions of both countries' national interest and *raison d'état*, was it at all possible at the time that a country liberated by the army of a state run by a different ideology and with a different social system

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[6] Fr. J. Tischner, *Etyka solidarności*, Kraków, 1981, pp. 15–16.

could truly take its fate in its own hands? A reply to this question was furnished in the spring of 1945 by Hungarian writer Sándor Márai: 'At the price of unprecedented sacrifice, the great nation reversed the tide of history…. To all those persecuted by fascism, that young soldier brought deliverance from Nazi terror. But he could not bring them freedom, because he himself had none'" (p. 440).

Didn't that hit the nail on the head? And how close it is to what Tischner wrote: "The first condition for dialogue is the 'capacity to empathize' with the Other's point of view. This is not just about compassion, but also about recognition that the Other, from his viewpoint, is always a bit right. No one goes into hiding on their own, they must have some reason—and this reason has to be recognized. The first words in dialogue contain the admission: 'you certainly are a bit right.' And this is followed by other words, no less important: 'certainly, I am not always right myself.' With those admissions, both parties in a way transcend themselves, seeking a common, one and the same point of view. Consequently, while taking up dialogue, I am ready to make the personal truth of the Other a part of my own truth, and to make the truth about myself a part of the Other's truth. Dialogue is an exercise in building reciprocity."[7]

This reciprocity-building can be found especially in the contributions by Andrzej Przewoźnik and Natalia S. Lebedeva dealing with the Katyn massacre. Lebedeva's summing-up part reads as follows: "The truth about the Katyn tragedy is key not only to the families and friends of those murdered, but also to the peoples of both countries. Feeling the others' pain as one's own and determination not to allow a repetition of something similar in the future is the only way to build a bridge over the Katyn precipice. And it is important not to allow that bridge to be destroyed from either side" (p. 359).

This is a message which, I believe, applies to the whole book. None of its authors—even those whose views we do not accept—could be denied good will, a sense of compassion or willingness to reach agreement.

It is not possible to discuss all the texts, as that would require writing another book. Let me only point out that the Russian contributions reveal the extent of the "de-Sovietization" of Russian interpretations of history. As for the Polish authors, they largely follow the traditional, independence-focused approach;

[7] *Ibidem*.

they are decidedly less critical than the Russians towards Polish politicians in the pre-war period, in the emigration, and in more recent times; and they are more critical towards all things Soviet/Russian. The Russian authors are not so unequivocal, whether towards themselves or towards us. They are prepared to recognize not only our "strong cultural affinities" (p. 110), but also a host of "ideological paradigms determining the similarity of Russia and Poland" (p. 694).

Artiom V. Malgin, who is probably the youngest author (a factor not without importance here), counts among such paradigms the following: "an overblown perception of one's own role on the international arena; viewing neighboring countries as being in need of, and often actually asking for, guidance and supervision from either Moscow or Warsaw; referring to oneself with a copious abundance of notions such as morality, spirituality, suffering, martyrdom or heroism; … deeply rooted mythical concepts of history whose correspondence to reality is partial and which undoubtedly shape this reality; … an irrational perception of one's own country as something specific and exceptional, as a power" (p. 694). These are surprising pronouncements from a contemporary Russian, aren't they? None of the Polish authors brought themselves to such levels of "positivist" self-criticism and openness.

"Russia and Poland are afraid of recognizing their mutual similarities," Malgin goes on, concluding that "grotesque and … unobjective historical stereotypes dominated in the relations between Russia and Poland over the past 15 years" (p. 695). He does not attempt to justify Russian policy, apportioning blame and mistakes to both sides, including "a steady downplaying of the role the USSR/Russia in the victory over fascism, or the anti-Katyn campaign that negates obvious historical facts" (p. 696). He is merciless towards history policy and towards "the politicos sponging off the tragic chapters of our common history" (p. 699) on both sides of the border.

It may be true that A. V. Malgin has not spent much time researching in archives and does not have the historical knowledge which his older colleagues from the Group for Difficult Matters have accumulated over decades, but his advantage is that he is not biased against anybody and the past has not imprinted any stereotypes upon him. What interests him more than history is the future, where he sees the sense of Polish-Russia relations. But here, too, his approach is sober and positivist: "Russia-related questions may account for between a third and a half of all of Poland's foreign policy issues. It is unlikely that Poland could

reach, even for a brief while, the same importance in Russia's foreign policy" (p. 701). And yet he concludes his contribution on political relations between Russia and sovereign Poland with this important observation: "Thanks to good relations with Poland, Russia may reach many of its European policy objectives. It is important that this be understood and brought to advantage" (p. 717).

If the young Russians (both *russkiye* and all *rossiyanye*) share this position, our mutual relations will finally reach a state of normalcy, and the Polish-Russian Working Group for Difficult Matters will recede into history as an example of honest dialogue and rational bridge-building. May this indeed prove to be the case.

Translated by Zbigniew Szymański