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East Alterity: West Alterity. The Building of Polishness in Democratic Opposition Inteligencja*'s Historical Narratives (1976-1991)*

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Abstract

This paper explores Polish opposition intelligentsia's reflections on the relationships of Poland with Russia and the West, understood as the geographic and imaginary poles between which this country's ethos, fate and debates oscillated for the last three centuries. Conceived as an intersection between intellectual, cultural and political history of opposition to Communism, together with history of historiography, my proposal approaches the issue through the analysis of legal and underground oppositional publications written by a selection of intellectuals of the time (1976-1991).

The article focuses firstly on *inteligencja*'s views of its eastern neighbour. These include the parallels drawn between Poland's past and present situation in terms of dominion and submission, the complexity of distinguishing Russianness from tsarist and Bolshevik regimes in order to avoid nationalist hatred and promote understanding among peoples, or the historical and philosophical dilemma about whether things could have turned out otherwise for Poland regarding its current political situation in the Eastern Bloc, and the Soviet Union leaders' moral accountability for it.

Secondly, the paper deals with "the West", frequently considered an abstract whole in Polish discourses. Despite many intellectuals perceived Western European countries as the antithesis of what the USSR or Communism represented to them with respect to values, Polish views about the West were not always as positive as might have been expected. This phenomenon had to do with the differences between Polish and Western European historical experiences concerning freedom and suffering, as well as with Polish unfulfilled expectations.

In sum, oppositional narratives on Polishness through East and/or West alterity re-enacted old debates and undertook the question of (co-)responsibility. They could tend to reinforce history-based stereotypes, reinterpret them unfavourably or simply remain ambiguous. In any event, critical *inteligencja* wished that its message contributed to the redefinition of Poland's ethos and to the recovery of society's political agency from then on.

Keywords: Polishness, Oppositional *inteligencja*, Russia, West, 1976-1991

Point of departure. Theoretical and methodological framework[1]

History and history writing have been used for multiple ideological and political purposes in many places and moments, and communist regimes during the twentieth century were certainly not an exception to the rule.

In the Polish People's Republic (PPR)[2], authorities and pro-government media manipulated or concealed certain episodes of the past. Within academia, facts were forced to fit in the straitjacket of a narrowly-understood historical materialism submitted to the powers that be, especially during the Stalinist era (1948-1953). Soon afterwards, "national communism" took the lead, so that the legitimisation of the communist dictatorship was carried out through the appropriation of existing national historical narratives, commemorations and symbols from then on (Górny 2007; Stobiecki 2007; Zaremba 2001). It is not surprising, thus, that when critical voices were raised against the system, history became a recurrent topic of discussion and a hermeneutical weapon among dissenters as well (Álvarez González 2015).

The popularisation of alternative views on recent and not so recent national historical matters in Poland reached its zenith between 1976 and 1989, after fully-fledged opposition movements and ensuing underground publishing initiatives developed (Friszke 1994; Łabędź 1989; Mikołajczyk 1998). Quite a few of such counter-proposals actually had a very fruitful afterlife, for they became the basis of Poland's official historical narratives in the transitional and democratic periods (Bernhard 1993, 194-195; Kopeček 2012, 601; Wawrzyniak 2011, 134).

The immense majority of those discourses on the past were shaped in the intellectual circles of democratic opposition. Within my research, I have focused specifically on the texts elaborated by a selection of well-known oppositional figures who were professional historians and specialists in the Humanities, or devoted a substantial amount of pages to historical and philosophical considerations. Among the first, there are dissidents such as Jan Józef Lipski (1926-1991), Krystyna Kersten (1931-2008), Bronisław Geremek (1932-2008), Tadeusz Łepkowski (1927-1989) or Jerzy Holzer (1930-2015), while Adam Michnik (n. 1946), Stefan Kisielewski (1911-1991) or Czesław Bielecki (n. 1948) can be counted among the second group. The sources analysed consist mainly of essays and articles

published either openly or in the underground "second circulation" system (*drugi obieg*) (Sowiński 2011; Mielczarek *et al.* 2006; Skilling 1989).

The collective identity of a given group is formed by two different and closely-related aspects influencing each other. On the one hand, the group's idiosyncrasy, or what its members consider their own; on the other, its relation with different groups, or what its members consider alien.

Leaving Germany aside, the two geographical entities that most contributed to shape the ways of being and attitudes of the Poles and their *inteligencja* were Russia/the USSR and the West. The latter, of course, is not a single state or nation, but is very frequently regarded as an abstract whole in Polish discourses, covering at least Western European countries, and sometimes also the U.S. or North America. Polish relationships with the "East" and the "West" according to opposition *inteligencja*, thus, is the topic of the present paper, and will be approached under the combined premises of intellectual, cultural and political history of opposition to Communism, as well as history of historiography (Hernández Sandoica 2004; Southgate 2010).

The most traditional and restrictive sense of the term "intelligentsia" refers to thinkers who enjoy certain social prestige, behave critically towards political power and, above all, assign themselves the mission of representing moral values and national interests in public (Domański 2008; Mikułowski Pomorski 2005; Sdvizhkov 2011). In the Polish case, this conception dates back to the Romantic nineteenth-century nation-building process, when *inteligencja* came to be not only the creator of patriotic myths, but also a myth itself from then onwards (Babiuch-Luxmoore 1989; Törnquist Plewa 1992; Jedlicki 1997; Ifversen 2010).

On the other hand, one of the strongest elements within Polish culture since that period is the notion of Poland's tragic destiny, which feeds off the misfortunes, failures and defeats undergone by the country since Partition times (1795-1918)[3], and comprises many of the mythical images devised by *inteligencja* (insurrection and conspiracy, Poland as "the Christ of nations"…) (Domańska 2000). This idea implied not just regarding Poland as a victim of history, but believing that such history had been usually imposed on the Poles from abroad, to suit other countries' interests and territorial ambitions.

If those conceptions of *inteligencja* and Poland's evolution are put together with a third concept, "democratic opposition", Polish opposition intellectuals could be seen as "twofold victims". First, because they would be the representatives of a "nation-victim" according to tradition; and secondly, because they would also be potential victims themselves, due to the dangers and risks that their socio-political commitments implied in a dictatorial context like the communist period (death sentences, deportations, gaol, dismissals, beatings, threats, emigration…) (González Calleja 2008, 261-292; Friszke 1994, 583-590; Szwajcer 1992).

This is closely linked to the "Theses on the Concept of History" developed by Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), especially as interpreted by the philosopher Reyes Mate (Mate 2006). According to him, Benjamin's theoretical and epistemological work would concern the "defeated" and the "victims of history", and may be understood as a warning about the dramatic consequences of so-called "progress" imposed by the "winners" of history. Only the "defeated" who perceive the danger, that is, a threat to the existence either of an individual or of a whole people and its traditions, can experience the "revelation" and catch a glimpse of the whole picture of history. That picture would include myriads of past forgotten victims, and would thus speak about frustrated pasts (*pasts-that-didn't-take-place*). Those "defeated" would have acquired full consciousness of their own historicity through action, by claiming justice and demanding memory for the victims. And by challenging the version of the past foisted by the victorious upon the rest of the population, they would be able to carry out a political and hermeneutical revolution based on morality.

Interestingly, Messianism is a fundamental element not just in Polish cultural tradition, but also in Benjamin's "Theses" and thought (Domańska 2000; Löwy 2003, 11-36, 169, 172). His personal view of it was based on the philosophical (rather than religious) conviction that the "defeated", whether dead or alive, are waiting for a worldly redemption that will give a meaning to their past suffering (Mate 2006).

Russia and the Soviet Union

For those who relied on freedom of speech to earn their livelihood, as intellectuals did, the dictatorial form of the Polish state between 1947 and 1989 was harmful and worrying enough in itself. However, the fact that the system was fostered by and dependent on the Soviet Union lent completely different connotations to the situation, given the centuries-old turbulent relations between Poland and Russia. In this respect, the most traumatic episodes and landmarks engraved in Polish collective memory before the communist period concerned the Partition times, the Polish-Soviet War (February 1919-March 1921) and the Katyń massacre (April-May 1940)[4], among others.

In the eyes of many Poles, the origins of the PPR lay clearly in the military aggression of a foreign power. As a result of this, Poland had been forced to respect the USSR's interests to the detriment of its own since the end of the Second World War, so that the Russian problem remained as central and applicable in Polish life as in the nineteenth century, regardless of what official media said, critical intellectuals argued (Holzer 1990, 9, 48-49; Łepkowski 1983, 21-22).

The "curse" of half-sovereign states and protectorates did not belong thus to the Polish past: it was part of the present too. So it was pointed out by Leszek Moczulski or Czesław Bielecki; the latter, for instance, drew a parallel between the Grand Duke of Russia Constantine Pavlovich (1779-1831), commander-in-chief of the forces of Congress Poland (1815-1915)[5], and general Wojciech Jaruzelski (1923-2014), the prime minister responsible for the imposition of the Martial Law in the country (December 13, 1981-July 22, 1983) (Bielecki 1982/1984, 55; Jandiszak *et al.* 1985, 30).

Bielecki and Tadeusz Łepkowski considered that Poland's "big brother" had always feared the Poles' independent spirit, democratic traditions and aspirations:

> … the most important reason why the Russians have refrained from an invasion [to Poland, C.A.] is their historical knowledge about our attachment to imponderables, their certainty about our resistance. (…) it is mainly us what discourages them, not Carter, Reagan or the conference of Madrid 1980.
>
> (…) The masters of the Soviet Empire realize that 'panska Polstsa'[6] can be the beginning of the end of their colonial expansion. Already today nothing foretells peace in Vietnam, Angola and Afghanistan, so it will be worse for Russians if there arrives one more, this time white, mutinous colony. (Bielecki 1980/1984, 39; also Łepkowski 1983, 13)

Colonial theories concerning Russian dominion over Poland appeared occasionally in some oppositionists' narratives (e.g. Holzer 1990, 11). Nevertheless, the main point of Bielecki's argument was that, far from being helped from abroad, the Poles were somehow being aided *from the past*. According to him, the Black Legend of fearlessness and ethical rebelliousness that their ancestors managed to weave had built a kind of magical, protective psychological "barrier" around Poland, so that invaders would think twice before risking an incursion. This was, at least, what many critical and unsatisfied Poles were prone to believe as part of their process of empowerment, especially before the Martial Law period. At the same time, *inteligenci* were indirectly telling their readers what Poland was like in contrast to their Russian neighbour (freedom-submission); or more precisely, how Polish inhabitants would like to be and be perceived.

With a view to avoiding xenophobia and nationalist hatred, some left-winged Polish intellectuals strived to distinguish Russianness from Communism-Bolshevism, or the former tsarist regime. Other oppositionists, however, deemed the Russian nation and system of government a consistent whole. For Bielecki, Bolshevism was the outcome of centuries of corruption, enslavement and exaltation of mediocrity; that is, of the alleged weaknesses of the Russian nation and its supposedly typical features: primitivism, impotence, lack of organization and irresponsibility (Bielecki 1983/1984, 69-71).

Opposition *inteligencja* sharing that view considered that these negative characteristics were due to Russia's position between Europe and Asia. Such belief was not new: it developed back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so that by making Russia or Eastern Europe the homeland of backwardness and barbarianism, the importance and advances of Western Europe (to which many Poles claimed to belong) were highlighted (Wolff 1994; Wolniewicz 2013). In this respect, Tadeusz Łepkowski and Jan Józef Lipski observed that the hatred, mistrust and fear felt in Poland towards its powerful eastern neighbour mingled with an unjustified feeling of superiority and disdain. It looked as if the Poles had assigned themselves "the mission of conveying the heritage of the developed West to the backward East. Probably even more", Łepkowski hinted, "if we sense, *sotto voce*, that our 'Westerness' is by no means complete" (Łepkowski 1983, 19; Lipski, 1981/1996, 49-50).

In Polish oppositional discourses, the Soviet Union's Eurasian nature is associated with Eastern Christian-Byzantine traditions, but also with "an Orient which is further away from Europe in geographic and civilization terms", Jerzy Holzer wrote (Holzer 1988, 7; also Holzer 1990, 26; Billington 2012, 388-389; Figes 2010, 188-190, 435-537). For example, Russian despotic forms of government were linked to the Chinese Empire and the Mongol Khanates (Skrodzki 1989, 2). Not even Lipski, one of the intellectual champions against Polish nationalism, xenophobia and megalomania of his time, denied the existence of a two-faced reality in Russia. Nevertheless, he insistently encouraged his readers to differentiate between the country's Western European values or democratic traditions, like Orthodox Christianity and the Decembrists'[7], and that which had nothing to do with them: the tsarist and Bolshevik regimes (Lipski 1981/1996, 50-52; Lipski 1988, 30).

In Adam Michnik's opinion, the hybrid character of Russia had been whipping up an equally schizophrenic feeling in Polish thought since the late eighteenth century. The long-lasting dilemma "to befriend, or to mistrust?" was based on a fundamental doubt:

> … what was the character of the conflict between the Poles and Russia? Was it part of the conflict between two nations, of which one was the bulwark of Western civilization, and the other the incarnation of Asian barbarianism, or was it also part of the universal struggle for freedom against despotism? (Michnik 1987, 167)

According to Michnik, the national notion had usually prevailed over the transversal one. However, he considered that the duty of intellectuals in the PPR consisted in reminding their fellow citizens about the ancient fight for liberty and rights taking place in Russia, and making them understand that the Russians were the intellectually and spiritually captive people *par excellence*. It was therefore necessary to pay tribute to the unsubmissive intellectual

Russia, who challenged the moral nastiness of his/her own system from Pushkin's times onwards (Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, etc.) (Michnik 1987, 168, 176; Michnik 1984, 86-87; Michnik 1983, 239, 242-244; Michnik 1978/1987). In this way, the image of the nation-victim and the ethos of the "defeated" and the repressed, with which the Poles felt so identified, could actually pave the road towards mutual understanding with the Russians. At the same time, the idea that intellectuals must take care of timeless ethical matters, go beyond stereotypes and challenge harmful, nationalist fallacies contributed to fuel *inteligencja*'s own myth (Michnik 1987, 181-182).

Nonetheless, present-day practical and political motivations were never left aside by Polish oppositionists, especially by the mid- and late 1980s. It then became increasingly clear that the transformations taking place in the Soviet Union, whether stimulated by Gorbachev, society or critical circles, could bring about very important changes for the rest of the countries of the Eastern Bloc too. To look for answers together and co-operate with each other was the single way out. Without falling into hatred, a stand should be taken against Poland's and other nations' submission to Moscow. According to Polish intellectuals, this balanced position would enable their country to become a kind of "bridge" between Eastern and Western Europe (Lipski 1981/1996, 51, 56; Lipski 1988, 30; Holzer 1988, 8-10; Łepkowski 1983, 22).

Krystyna Kersten's way of approaching the Russian question was a different one. Along her historical research, it took the shape of a personal statement, a struggle and an accusation, besides a reminder for Polish society.

In her works on the Second World War and postwar periods (1943-1948), she wondered whether Poland could have escaped becoming a communist satellite country, and aimed to refute the widespread Polish conviction about Poland having been betrayed and "sold" by the West to the Soviet Union in the Yalta Conference (January 1945). She argued that the area of Soviet dominion in East-Central Europe had been decided beforehand to a good extent, due to the priority given by the allies to military goals above political and economic ones, as well as to Stalin's previous plans and the effective occupation of the territory by the Red Army during the War. Ironically, in doing so she came very close to acknowledging fatalism in the form of geopolitical determinism, and even once described present-day geopolitics as a "curse" (Kersten 1987, 20-21; Kersten 1986, 12-16, 21-22; Kersten 1989, 7-9, 15-35, 70-71, 242). In the light of this unescapable condition, Kersten ended up recognizing the powerlessness both of Polish political actors, in spite of their multiple positions and attempts, and of Western allies, which she nevertheless questioned from the start and approached thoroughly in order to understand them (Kersten 1987, 17-20, 224; Kersten 1989, 30, 158, 240-244).

But the author's main concern lay elsewhere. Unlike the supporters of the "myth of Yalta", who blamed the West categorically for Poland's setbacks, another inquiry throbbed in Kersten's arguments: what about the USSR? It is at this point where her hesitation and personal struggle can be appreciated. On the one hand, the documents proved, and she actually believed, that in the midst of the War the Soviet Union had already decided that Poland's future would be communist or simply would not be. On the other, the sources also showed, and her democratic moral imperative told her, that Stalin had many chances to reconsider his decision and think, for instance, about "finlandization"[8], the last one probably being the application of the Yalta Agreement, which she described as a "crossroads" (Kersten 1987, 183-184; Kersten 1989, 9-12, 69, 91-92, 97-98, 244). But *he did not*. And she wanted to make that point especially clear, in the conviction that a change in the Poles' perception and understanding of the past would involve a change of attitude towards the present and future (Kersten 1987, 10; Kersten 1989, 8-9, 16, 244).

The Polish "myth of Yalta" contained a dangerous assumption. It was that of regarding the Soviet Union as a kind of implacable, pre-programmed automaton that could not be deterred from controlling Poland. This had contributed to a bitter, disappointed and resigned view of Polish history and, by extension, of the present time, which did not encourage Polish society to challenge communist rule or improve things. Contrary to this idea, Kersten reminded through her arguments that Soviet decision-makers and their Polish long arm could have behaved otherwise back in the 1940s, and hence *did* have a choice beyond intransigence. Such "re-humanisation" of the communist leaders enabled Poles to hold them morally responsible for the fallen, the defeated, the repressed, and for the situation of submission of Polish society as a whole.

In conclusion, Kersten's reflections contained three premises. First, not to take for granted that things had to turn out as they finally did. The inevitability of certain "given" facts, such as geographic location, had to be assumed, but not those dependent on human will, especially bearing in mind that the USSR had had the leading voice in wartime negotiations since 1943. Secondly, to identify those ultimately accountable for frustrated chances, unfulfilled commitments and past crimes. This was necessary to exercise the moral right to claim justice, and to demand a better future where there would be no room for such outrages. And thirdly, not to allow the "winners of history" to succeed in their hermeneutical goal (i.e. communist authorities establishing their version of past events), so that society's wounds could heal and the Poles managed to advance.

The West

In the texts of many Polish opposition intellectuals, Western European countries were regarded as the cradle of liberty, rights, democracy and justice; that is, as the antithesis of what the Soviet Union or Communism represented to them. However, Polish views about the West were also considerably critical for two main reasons, whose origins can be traced back to Partition times (Törnquist Plewa 2002).

The first reason had to do with the differences that some Poles perceived between Polish and Western European modern historical experiences, especially concerning the degree of freedom and suffering. According to this, Poland had remained faithful to European ideals and kept a more essentialist position in the continent, due to the hardships and national catastrophes it had undergone. On the contrary, Western European countries living in more favourable circumstances had slid into materialism and excessive pragmatism, which led eventually to a crisis of values. A proof of this was, for instance, the excessively conciliatory position of Western governments towards Nazi Germany, which had boosted Adolf Hitler's territorial ambitions during the interwar period. The latest of those impasses was taking place right then, in the Cold War period. In the opinion of Polish intellectuals, as well as of other East-Central European oppositionists like Václav Havel, Western European countries had ceased to fight for a free world. They did no longer realize that the values they symbolised required a nonconformist attitude and many sacrifices in order to be preserved; sacrifices which, ironically, only East-Central Europeans had been ready to make, given their continual exposure to existential danger (Micewski 1978a; Micewski 1978b; Bielecki 1979b/1984, 17-18; Kisielewski 1983; Łepkowski 1983, 41-42; Havel, 1993/1997, 137-138).

In relation to this, the metaphor of Poland having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil appeared from time to time in Stefan Kisielewski's texts.

Not only did it convey the loss of innocence of the Eastern Bloc countries due to their geopolitical conditions, but at the same time suggested the moral far-sightedness of its inhabitants. In other words, their capability of calling a spade a spade and pinning down the essentials of good and evil, instead of being in a tangle with technicalities, as it apparently happened in the West (Kisielewski 1976; Kisielewski 1983, 138). The burdensome past and present of East-Central Europeans appointed them bearers of a universal warning message, in a similar manner to Walter Benjamin's marginalised subject-agent, who is oppressed, becomes indignant and protests (Mate 2006, 20-21). East-Central Europeans reminded their Western partners about an inconvenient, neighbouring reality that proved that progress had not meant real progress for all after the Second World War, and that, in a way, the Eastern Bloc countries had lost their independence and freedom in the name of "peace". In Kisielewski's view, the first step to overcome that situation was to admit its existence, and the second, to promote a free dialogue without prejudices between both parts (Kisielewski 1976).

Opposition *inteligencja* believed that Western societies could draw several lessons from the experience of East-Central European inhabitants in the last decades, in what could be described as a kind of Messianic, redemptive process. First, they could know how Bolshevik totalitarianism worked from the inside. Secondly, the West could receive moral guidance in order to step out of the materialistic spiral it was swirling in, and retrieve the principles that it was about to lose. Thirdly, the West could also inspire in the communal spirit of Poland's recent protests and opposition initiatives, like Solidarity[9]. For Bronisław Geremek, that spirit suggested the building of a fairer, more equal and fraternal European *polis* in order to overcome the crisis of democracy in the continent. And fourthly, Poland could act as a cultural and civilizational intermediary between Western European countries and communist satellite nations (Lipski 1988, 30; Beylin, Bieliński and Michnik 1979, 2; Micewski 1978a; Geremek 1987, 6; Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe 1979/2004, 199).

Such arguments show Polish intellectuals' conviction that East-Central Europe was not a mere receptacle of Western ideas and inventions, but had important things to offer in exchange, in the aim to be taken on account as an equal partner and be considered just as European as the West.

The second reason for criticism discussed in opposition *inteligencja*'s texts had to do with the disenchantment and unfulfilled expectations of the Poles regarding the West.

In Tadeusz Łepkowski's opinion, the hope of being unselfishly aided by Western countries when their nation was in peril dated back to Napoleonic times[10], and had become a heavy burden in Polish minds and perceptions. For the great Western powers, as for any other country, national interests are the major priority, if not the single. Poland would therefore be just one more token in the international board, and political actors only helped each other when it was convenient for them and expected to receive something in exchange. Regardless whether he deemed it unfair or not, Łepkowski considered that the Poles should assume the real rules of the game in order not to experience further disappointments (Łepkowski 1983, 20).

Since past experience had proved that seeking for foreign aid had always rendered poor results, intellectuals considered that Poland's survival strategy should definitely change. The Poles should begin to help themselves before asking others to help them out. Western public opinion or a favourable international context could provide them support at some point, but they were changing circumstances. Independence and freedom had to be built from the inside, within each and every citizen (Michnik 1984, 86; Michnik 1985/1987, 94).

In one of his better-known essays, Czesław Bielecki compared Poland's situation at the end of the 1970s with that of a peculiar internment camp. Its "guards" and "watchmen" (communist authorities) had lost confidence, while the "prisoners" (the rest of the Poles) were not afraid of the former anymore. But no-one thought things could change; prisoners comforted themselves instead by wishing that somebody else would come to rescue them someday. Until it gradually dawned on them that they had to free the camp for and by themselves (Bielecki 1979a/1984, 9).

To rely on the "powerful" was a mistake, *inteligencja* thought, for who could be more powerful in the defence of Polish independence, rights and freedoms than the Poles themselves? However, this did not mean they were completely alone in their struggle. In the international field, they had to speak up first about their difficult situation in order to break the ice of the Cold War, and then spur their Western partners to make a move as well (Bielecki 1979b/1984, 21-22; Łepkowski 1983, 4; Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe 1979/2004, 196).

Thus, opposition intellectuals' formula to make the Poles overcome their emotional and psychological dependence on the West contained two counterbalanced measures. On the one hand, to play down the importance of Poland in the international arena. That is, to insist on the fact that Poland was not the centre of the world and of others' concerns, and that foreign offices had never operated on idealistic premises, but on realism and home interests. On the other hand, to boost the morale and self-assurance of their fellow countrymen, and make them focus on what they could be capable of if they tried. In short, they readjusted the object of Polish pride, hopes and strength.

Conclusion

Oppositional narratives on Polishness through East and West alterity were based on a powerful moral component that materialised in different forms.

To start with, the images of Russia were complex and manifold. Some intellectuals focused on the country's hybrid Eurasian nature or on the perverse reciprocity of Bolshevism and Russianness. Others set Russian cultural heritage apart from the pulse of violence and despotism of its rulers. Some preferred to talk about Russia's alleged fixations. Others pointed out that the Russians and the Poles actually had similar defects and tendencies (inferiority complex, doubts about Europeanness, democratic movements against despotism…). Some strived to avoid simplifications while claiming the ethical superiority of universal issues over national(ist) quests. Many were looking for international rapprochements and collaboration between countries to do away with the forty year-old division of Europe. Finally, others put the spotlight on the moral accountability of Soviet leaders for the outrages committed in Poland during the Second World War and the genesis of the PPR.

On the other hand, Polish *inteligencja* sought moral acknowledgement from Western countries for being up to the task of preserving European principles in very adverse circumstances. They wanted to share their defeats, but also their latest oppositional successes, in order to give them a redemptive meaning and feel part of a "trans-Berlin-Wall" European community. At the same time, they wished to avoid old pitfalls concerning Poland's reliance on foreign aid. By speaking about and overcoming the barriers present in the Poles' perceptions, intellectuals made their compatriots gain confidence in their own capacities and encouraged them to find solutions to their socio-political situation for themselves.

In conclusion, historical narratives on Polishness through otherness re-enacted old debates and undertook the question of (co-)responsibility. They could tend to reinforce history-based stereotypes, turn them around, reinterpret them unfavourably, or simply remain ambiguous. In any event, critical *inteligencja* hoped that its message contributed to the redefinition of Poland's ethos and to the recovery of society's political agency from then on.

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Bio-note

Cristina Álvarez has recently defended her Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *History in the Making. Opposition* Inteligencja *in Poland (1976-1991): Self-Perceptions and Discourses on the Past*, supervised by Elena Hernández Sandoica and José M. Faraldo (Department of Contemporary History, Universidad Complutense de Madrid). She has been awarded several grants by the Spanish Ministry of Education, and research stays in Warsaw and Budapest. She speaks English, French and Polish fluently, and some German and Hungarian as well. She has published in *Acta Poloniae Historica* (2014) and her forthcoming articles include "*The return of the new*: Polish opposition intellectuals' reflections on the course of time (1976-1991)", delivered during the 2015 Conference of the International Society for Cultural History. Her research interests comprise intellectual and cultural history, East-Central European communist past and Polish opposition movements.

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[1] The following essay is a brief account of part of my Ph.D. dissertation, which is devoted to the role played by history in Polish opposition *inteligencja*'s discourses (see Reference List).

[2] From 1945 to 1952, Poland's official name was "the Polish Republic" (Rzeczpospolita Polska); after the adoption of the new Stalinist constitution in 1952 it changed to "Polish People's Republic" (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa). I will use the abbreviation PPR from now on when I refer to it.

[3] E.g. stifled uprisings like November 1830 and January 1863 in the nineteenth century, together with the strikes, protests and ensuing repressive waves of PPR times (June 1956, March 1968, December 1970, June 1976), the Nazi invasion in September 1939… Also unsuccessful reform attempts like May the 3rd Constitution (1791), or October 1956.

[4] Mass executions of more than 21,000 Polish citizens (army generals and officers, policemen, intellectuals and other civilians) conducted by the USSR People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs in the Katyń Forest, near the city of Smolensk (nowadays Russia).

[5] The Kingdom of Poland or Congress Poland were the Polish lands under control of the Russian Empire since the Congress of Vienna (1815), becoming officially part of its territory from 1867.

[6] i.e. Poland.

[7] Decembrists were liberal and progressive members of the Russian Empire army who, deeply affected by their experiences in the military campaigns against Napoleon, founded different reformist patriotic societies. The most moderate demanded the abolition of serfdom, equality before the law and a constitutional monarchy, whereas the most radical supported the establishment of a republic and the redistribution of the land among the peasants and the State. Their "Decembrist" name (*Dekabristy* in Russian) refers to the revolt they started up in December 26th 1825, when they refused to swear allegiance to the new tsar Nicholas I. The uprising was violently suppressed by loyal troops that same night.

[8] Finland was neutralised by the Soviet Union by conciliatory means. It was Moscow's ally in foreign affairs, and at the same time a non-communist sovereign state able to develop economically and culturally in a freer way than the satellite countries of the Eastern Bloc.

[9] The Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (NSZZ "Solidarność") was founded in the Gdańsk shipyards on September 17, 1980. It was not only the first legal trade union not controlled by the Communist Party in the countries of the Warsaw Pact, but a broad social movement demanding changes and improvements in the PPR system which reached around 10 million members. Despite having to work in the underground after the establishment of the Martial Law, Solidarity became the leading oppositional interlocutor in the Round Table talks that took to the first partially free elections in Poland (June 4, 1989).

[10] Napoleon founded the Duchy of Warsaw from the partitioned Polish territories ceded by Prussia in the Treaties of Tilsit (1807). In spite of the hopes of Polish émigrés in France, it did not imply a gradual recovery of sovereignty, but rather the constitution of a client state of the First French Empire. It was occupied by Russian and Prussian troops in 1813 and officially divided between the two countries in the Congress of Vienna (1815).