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‘MINESWEEPER’: IN REMEMBRANCE OF WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ (1956–2021)

Abstract

The article outlines the life and achievements of Włodzimierz Borodziej, a contemporary historian. Initially a scholar of the history of Polish-German relations, he became the secretary, and later chairman, of the Polish-German Textbook Commission. Then, he engaged himself in the history of diplomacy and international relations; the ‘Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne’ [Polish Diplomatic Documents] series was established at his initiative. He also occupied various official positions at the University of Warsaw and in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. In his final decade, he became interested in the history of Central and Eastern Europe. He also contributed to the creation of the permanent exhibition at the House of European History in Brussels.

Keywords: Włodzimierz Borodziej, Polish-German Textbook Commission, forced transfer, regional historiography

Włodzimierz Borodziej was born and raised in a family that had little time for frankness and openness. His mother, Łucja née Szargiel, was a Holocaust survivor, but few knew that.¹ The task of collecting testimonies to honour the nuns who saved her life adequately became one of the causes he devoted himself to in the final weeks of his life. His father, a First Department of the Ministry for Internal Affairs officer, was bound by professional secrecy. Since 1962, he occupied the post of resident intelligence officer in West Berlin, then, during the 1970s,

¹ Her interests focused on the history of education in Prussia; see Łucja Borodziej, *Pruska polityka oświatowa na ziemiach polskich w okresie kulturkampfu* (Warszawa, 1972). See also her articles and reviews of German-language publications, mostly featured in *Rozprawy z dziejów oświaty*.

in Vienna, and then again in Berlin. After his return, he climbed up the hierarchy in the Warsaw central, claiming ever higher positions within the Ministry. The aura of secrecy would not dissipate even after the death of both parents – their son would maintain it, showing little inclination to discuss family matters. As an adult, he was aloof, and in time, he became a source of trouble for his father in his professional capacity by joining the ranks of opponents of the real-socialist regime. His cooperation with the underground press and the *tamizdat*, and his friendships with Germans who intruded in Polish affairs and thus were persons of interest for the secret services of the Polish People's Republic – like Hans Henning Hahn – did not testify solely to Borodziej's nonconformity and steadfastness. These interactions had personal and familial subtexts, if not apparent to outsiders. As far as his friends and acquaintances were concerned, his family history only came to light for good (or, more likely, for worse) when it was used against him.

Having passed the final exam at the prestigious Viennese Gymnasium Stubenbastei, he began his studies at the University of Warsaw. Following a brief adventure with German studies, he moved to the Institute of History of the University of Warsaw, where he prepared a doctoral dissertation on German occupation policies in the Radom district under the supervision of Marian Wojciechowski. The work saw print in 1985.² Even before then, Wojciechowski, a long-time member of the board of the Polish-German Textbook Commission, recruited Borodziej – a mere doctoral candidate at the time – as secretary of the Commission. He was well-suited for the role due to his perfect fluency in German and his scholarly interests. Polish-German relations in the first half of the twentieth century came to the fore in discussions among historians during the 1980s. The topics discussed by the Commission reflected that tendency. Meanwhile, the young historian carefully monitored publications in both countries, as testified to by dozens of reviews published in Polish and foreign journals during the period.³

² Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Terror i polityka. Policja niemiecka a polski ruch oporu w GG 1939–1944* (Warszawa, 1985).

³ For a full bibliography of works by Prof. Włodzimierz Borodziej published in 1980–2016, compiled by Izabela Mrzygłód and Joanna Urbanek, see Jerzy Kochanowski and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds), *1956 (Nico) inne spojrzenie / Eine (etwas) andere Perspektive* (Warszawa, 2016), 459–90.

After 1983 (that is, with Borodziej in attendance), at conferences in Augsburg, Nowogard, and Saarbrücken, the Commission deliberated on the Polish-German relations in the years 1919–32, 1933–45, and after 1945 – in other words, on subjects that lay within the scope of most of his scholarly work over the next two decades.⁴

The Textbook Commission long remained a significant arena for Borodziej's scholarly activity, mainly after he assumed co-leadership in 1997, replacing Marian Wojciechowski. During his term as chairman, the Commission addressed the problems that attracted the public opinion in Germany and Poland the most at the time: shifting borders, the expulsion of German populations, and collective memory in Poland and Germany.⁵ These were the subjects he was to devote much of his professional career. Borodziej's voice can be heard loud and clear in the heated debates of the 1990s and 2000s; from today's perspective, it is even more evident how consistent his positions were. He viewed the role of the historian as one of documenting and making sense of the history that became a bone of contention. Controversies amounted to nothing more than research subjects – such was the motivation for his reviews of scholarship on the expulsion of Germans.⁶ He took the same position in the heated dispute over Anetta Rybicka's dissertation on the Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit (Institute for German Works in the East), of which he was a reviewer.⁷ He defended the freedom

⁴ Antoni Czubiński and Zbigniew Kulak (eds), *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie: 1919–1932. XVII Konferencja Wspólnej Komisji Podręcznikowej PRL-RFN Historyków 11–17 VI 1984 r., Augsburg* (Poznań, 1990); Antoni Czubiński and Zbigniew Kulak (eds), *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1933–1945. XVIII Konferencja Wspólnej Komisji Podręcznikowej PRL-RFN Historyków 28 V – 2 VI 1985 r., Nowogard* (Poznań, 1988).

⁵ Georg Stöber and Robert Maier (eds), *Grenzen und Grenzräume in der deutschen und polnischen Geschichte: Scheidelinie oder Begegnungsraum? 28. deutsch-polnische Schulbuchkonferenz vom 3.–6. Juni 1998 in Frankfurt (Oder)* (Hannover, 2000); Paweł Migdański, Edward Włodarczyk, and Robert Maier (eds), *Problematyka przymusowych przesiedleń i stosunków polsko-niemieckich po 1945 roku jako przedmiot badań historycznych i praktyki szkolnej* (Szczecin, 2007).

⁶ The state of research on the post-war fate of Germans in Poland is documented in Włodzimierz Borodziej and Artur Hajnicz (eds), *Kompleks wypędzenia* (Kraków, 1998); see also Włodzimierz Borodziej, 'Historiografia polska o "wypędzeniu" Niemców', *Polska 1944/4–1989. Studia i Materiały*, ii (1996), 249–69; *id.*, 'Flucht, Vertreibung, Zwangsaussiedlung', in Andreas Lawaty and Hubert Orłowski (eds), *Deutsche und Polen: Geschichte, Kultur, Politik* (München, 2003).

⁷ Marek Wroński, 'Krytyka naukowa', part 2, *Forum Akademickie*, 4 (2006).

of historical research, seeking to moderate the anger of his appalled colleagues. Afterwards, he analysed the disputes and debates and explained them to experts in Poland and Germany.⁸

The assumption of the role of chairman of the Textbook Commission coincided with the inauguration of a major research project that Borodziej had conceived, co-directed, and executed. In 1997, a Polish-German team led by Hans Lemberg, a renowned expert in the history of Czechoslovakia, and Borodziej began an archival query in several dozen Polish archives. The work resulted in a multi-volume, bilingual edition of documents entitled *Niemcy w Polsce 1945–1950* [Germans in Poland, 1945–1950]. In the introduction to the first volume, the editors wrote:

Our goal was never to compile balance sheets of comparative suffering and pain, for such is not the historian's task. However, should the documents presented herein serve a deeper understanding of the complex subject of Polish-German relations – which is not without import for the entirety of Europe – should they aid in understanding the attitudes and actions from half a century ago, then shall the task the authors set for themselves be fulfilled.⁹

This calm, measured approach, which evoked vivid (and now well-forgotten) responses on both sides of the Oder River, earned Borodziej more recognition abroad than at home. It found expression in commissions from foreign publishing houses for books that would illuminate Polish history primarily to German readers.¹⁰ One among them, in particular – a broad overview of the history of Poland in the twentieth century – has remained fundamental reading for all German-speaking students of the history of Eastern Europe.¹¹ In 2002, Borodziej was recognised with the Order of Merit of the

⁸ See e.g., Włodzimierz Borodziej, 'Die Debatte um Kollaboration in Polen im Zweiten Weltkrieg', in Joachim Tauber (ed.), *"Kollaboration" in Nordosteuropa. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 2006), 342–52.

⁹ Włodzimierz Borodziej and Hans Lemberg, 'Od redaktorów', in Włodzimierz Borodziej and Hans Lemberg (eds), *Niemcy w Polsce 1945–1950. Wybór dokumentów*, i: Włodzimierz Borodziej and Claudia Kraft (eds), *Władze i instytucje centralne. Województwo olsztyńskie* (Warszawa, 2000), 5–23 (quot. on pp. 22–3).

¹⁰ Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Der Warschauer Aufstand 1944* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001); *id.*, *The Warsaw Uprising of 1944* (Madison, WI, 2006).

¹¹ Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (München, 2010).

Federal Republic of Germany; in 2006, he received the Herder Prize (awarded by the University of Vienna); and in 2010, the Carl von Ossietzky Prize.

The stature Borodziej earned as a historian of Polish-German relations was also – or, instead, primarily – expressed in frequent invitations to deliver lectures, speak at conferences, and take part in sessions of advisory boards of various scholarly institutions and museums, as well as editorial boards of international journals, such as *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* or *Journal of Modern European History*. Since the 1990s, he mainly lived on the move, commuting along a route spanning his home, the Okęcie airport, and the wide world. His involvement in the operations of the Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin, whose Advisory Board he led and whose formation he had contributed to, served as a logical extension to the Polish-German aspect of his activities since his student days.

Borodziej's habilitation, published in 1990 by 'Aneks', an imprint of the Polish diaspora, broached another subject he would devote himself to until the end of his life.¹² The pioneering work analysed the fascinating period in the history of Poland's foreign relations when the state's policies were entirely dependent on the Soviet Union and yet retained a degree of independence. Naturally, the German question occupied pride of place within it. Immediately after receiving the inaugural *Polityka* Award for that study, Borodziej moved into public service. In 1991, he began work in the Chancellery of the Sejm as director of such institutions as the Office of Interparliamentary Relations or the Bureau of Research. After returning to scholarly work, he engaged in lasting cooperation with the Polish Institute of International Affairs [Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, PISM]. In 2001, he inaugurated a book series within the Institute, formulated its editorial practices, and devoted copious amounts of time and attention to it over the following two decades. 'Polish Diplomatic Documents' continue to appear systematically, though not in chronological order; they are justifiably a source of pride for the institution that publishes them, as well as for Polish historiography in general, a fact perfectly encapsulated in the announcement of the

¹² Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Od Poczdamu do Szklarskiej Poręby. Polska w stosunkach międzynarodowych 1945–1947* (Londyn, 1990).

series. As the brief, though solemn text proclaims, “[t]his series will ensure Poland’s entry into a narrow group of the most developed countries, which have followed the same path to reinforce their identity and political culture, the bases of their international policies, their international image, and their position in the world”.¹³ It is unlikely that anyone else put as much effort into ensuring that this declaration was not unfounded. The year 2005 saw the publication of the first volume (covering the year 1972), and one of Borodziej’s final stand-alone works was a selection of foreign newspaper articles from the period of the formation of the independent Polish state, produced with a team of young historians based on PISM’s diplomatic papers project.¹⁴ In 2014, President Bronisław Komorowski awarded Borodziej the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta in gratitude for spreading knowledge about Polish diplomacy traditions. Editorial work on the manuscripts of subsequent volumes of the ‘Polish Diplomatic Documents’ became a routine task for Borodziej; almost thirty would see print before his passing.

Włodzimierz Borodziej began the new century as a renowned historian and leading expert in Polish-German relations, well-connected and rich in experience gained while working at the Chancellery of the Sejm. After 1999, he spent three years as the vice-rector for international affairs at the University of Warsaw. 1999 saw the publication of the German edition of *Terror i polityka* [Terror and Politics], noted among experts and in major German media outlets.¹⁵ The groundbreaking study in post-war Polish-German relations, *Niemcy w Polsce*, appeared concurrently in Poland (2000–1) and Germany (2000–4). If this were not real life but a piece of fiction, the rules of the art would demand that this harmonious picture be shattered.

In 2002, the *Arcana* magazine featured an article entitled ‘Casus profesora Borodzieja a stan polskiej historiografii’ [The Case of Professor

¹³ *Komunikaty Redakcyjne Serii Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Komunikaty_PDD (Accessed: 21 Jan. 2022).

¹⁴ Włodzimierz Borodziej, Joanna Brzegowy, Bartłomiej Gajos, Nina Hetmańska, and Marta Laskowska (eds), *Prasa zagraniczna o Polsce. Listopad 1918 – luty 1919* (Warszawa, 2018).

¹⁵ Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Terror und Politik. Die deutsche Polizei und die polnische Widerstandsbewegung um Generalgouvernement 1939–1944* (Mainz, 1999). One enthusiastic review, by Josef Henke, appeared in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (11 Oct. 2000).

Borodziej and the State of Polish Historiography].¹⁶ Its author, a German historian of Polish origin employed at the time at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw (and currently director of the newly founded Jan Karski Institute for War Losses), expressed his indignation at the German edition of Borodziej's dissertation. As a reminder, the work used the example of the Radom district to analyse the system that allowed Germans to control vast territories using relatively paltry police and military forces in occupied Poland during the Second World War. A seemingly uncontroversial subject in the post-1989 reality; yet, Bogdan Musiał's criticism focused on what he perceived as an erroneous assessment of the Borów massacre, where a unit of the National Armed Forces [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ] murdered more than two dozen Communist partisans from the People's Guard [Gwardia Ludowa]. The execution drew the condemnation of nearly the entire Polish underground, and most scholars share Borodziej's views in that regard – yet, that seems to have had little effect on the critic. In his next move, Musiał shifted from the Borów affair, following a line of reasoning that he was to revisit repeatedly, every few years, on the pages of Polish newspapers. The argument dictated that Borodziej, a true heir to traitors of the fatherland, used his father's and his academic advisor's contacts with the Communist secret police to gain access to the corridors of power and various unearned benefits. Furthermore, in an apparent absence of more reasonable arguments, Musiał deployed the assessment of the Borów massacre as proof positive that Borodziej continued the anti-Polish activities of the Communists.

What prompted Bogdan Musiał's resentment, I can only guess, though perhaps it might not prove all that difficult. The tone of his diatribes and the striking contrast between the weak charges and the harsh judgements they were supposed to betoken a robust emotional investment and a personal involvement in the matter – of course, the assessment is reaffirmed by the very recurrence of the critique, even more entirely bereft of content and ever more venomous, if that is even possible. In 2008, Musiał reared his head up again on the pages of the daily *Rzeczpospolita*, charging that the collection of documents published by Borodziej and Lemberg ascribed the initiative for the

¹⁶ Bogdan Musiał, 'Causus profesora Borodzieja a stan polskiej historiografii', *Arcana: kultura, historia, polityka*, xlvii-xlviii, 4–5 (2002), 303–12.

expulsion of Germans after 1945 to Poles.¹⁷ The last entry in this series of interventions, published in the *wSieci* weekly, met with an uncharacteristically vocal rebuke from the historical community.¹⁸ In 2016, almost two hundred historians signed an open letter defending Borodziej and a handful of other scholars of contemporary history whom Musiał accused of “spreading German propaganda”.¹⁹

How those attacks affected Borodziej, I could not tell, for he was not one to eagerly discuss his mood with others. In any case, his home archive contains both copies of Musiał’s diatribes and the private and open letters of support from colleagues and students from Poland and abroad. It is much easier to assess the impact the accusations had on his public image and perception. I think that Musiał’s relentless campaign turned Borodziej into a symbol of the hostile community of liberal historians. Yet, he did not aspire to that kind of stature, and it did not reflect his approach to history and politics. Simply put, he viewed it as misguided and unjustified. His surprise at the irrational and inadequate responses of the Polish right to the permanent exhibition of the House of European History in Brussels encapsulates his convictions in that regard.

Borodziej was involved in devising the museum and went on to head its Academic Committee. The task set before him was to formulate a narrative that would combine the extremely diffuse experiences of all continent nations. One might expect such a narrative to evoke a vivid dispute, pitting against one another various ideas of Europe, the challenges of the imperial aspect of its current proclivities and past endeavours, the unyielding spectre of anti-Semitism, as well as racism. Yet, upon the opening of the museum, the Polish right came out in full force, searching through the exhibition for signs of the presence or absence of elements of Polish historical education. Borodziej saw no point in this attitude toward the common history – frankly, neither do I.

His involvement in the formation of the museum in Brussels coincided with another intellectual adventure whose significance for

¹⁷ Bogdan Musiał, ‘Niewinny Stalin i źli Polacy’, *Rzeczpospolita*, ‘Plus-Minus’ supplement (1 May 2008).

¹⁸ Bogdan Musiał, ‘Triumf niemieckiej propagandy’, *wSieci* (8–14 Feb. 2016).

¹⁹ “Lista targowiczán i folksdojczów”. Historycy bronią dobrego imienia kolegów badających stosunki polsko-niemieckie’, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (12 Feb. 2016).

Borodziej's personal and professional life cannot be overstated. Beginning in 2010, he spent six years co-directing the Imre Kertész Kolleg (IKK) in Jena with Joachim von Puttkamer. This research institute, funded from the German budget, operates (still – it is scheduled to close in 2022) as part of the Käte Hamburger Centers network, focusing on contentious issues in the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe. The narrow core of full-time collaborators has been supplemented with over one hundred scholars from all over the world, developing their work on specific subjects and within collaborative endeavours in the IKK during long-term scholarships – the fruits of their labour being published in the 'Routledge History Handbook of Central and Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century' series, co-edited by Borodziej. For six years, he divided all the time that he could spare between Warsaw – where he continued to teach and conduct a doctoral seminar at the Institute of History of the University of Warsaw, together with such figures as Marcin Kula or Jerzy Kochanowski – and Jena. He ceased to be an expert only in Polish-German relations during that time. Inspired by new readings and especially conversations within the international community of the Institute in Jena, his interests broadened significantly. In his contribution to the jubilee volume for Hans-Jürgen Bömberg, published a little over a month before Borodziej's passing, the Warsaw historian offered the following self-appraisal:

Naturally, Germany and Poland remain important to me, but so do Czechia and Hungary, the states of the former Yugoslavia and Romania. Finland has also become important to me in the past year. This interest in the region has palpably outweighed my investment in purely Polish-German issues. But even when reading about countries like Ireland or Spain, which I had not previously studied, new viewpoints open up – in comparative perspective.²⁰

This loose-jointed statement in an interview with the editors of the volume perfectly encapsulates the evolution of Borodziej's research interests. In his final decade, he became a genuinely European historian, seeking to gain a broader outlook and identify historical analogies that could help understand, especially that which seems exceptional and

²⁰ Włodzimierz Borodziej, 'Jetzt ist ja eigentlich Schluss mit dieser traditionellen deutsch-polnischen Geschichte', in Markus Krzoska, Kolja Lichy, and Konstantin Rometsch (eds), *Wende, Wandel, Weitermachen? Nachfragen zur Geschichtswissenschaft der 1990er Jahre in Deutschland, Polen und Europa* (Paderborn, 2021), 64–86 (quot. on p. 83).

inimitable. In this period, *Nasza wojna* [Forgotten Wars] was written; one of its volumes saw print in 2014, the other in 2018 (a second, single-volume edition appeared in late 2021).²¹ I had the pleasure of joining him in writing this book and discussing it with readers. These discussions showed me that Borodziej was repeating something new and fresh, not merely in the Polish-German context, but with the whole of Europe in mind.

Several aspects of the book attracted significant enough attention among professional scholars to justify the belief that it might eventually lead to a shift in our shared understanding of the early twentieth century in Central and Eastern Europe. When we set about defining our boundary dates in 2014, the years 1914–18 seemed firmly etched in the collective memory. Today, after only a few years, it is much more common to hear that the Great War ‘obviously’ began before the summer of 1914 (by which time the Balkans had already seen two years of continuous bloodshed) and ended much later than the autumn of 1918 (when many soldiers in Eastern Europe changed uniforms – and, occasionally, official languages – and continued fighting). This perceptual shift is mainly due to Borodziej – and it is unlikely to have been his only such contribution.

Not so long ago, the fall of empires and the formation of independent states used to be depicted as a national revival, a new beginning and a radical departure from the realities of the past. We strove to prove that this deliberate image is entirely false – that the process that Central and Eastern Europe began to undergo in the autumn of 1918 should rather be perceived as a political transformation that bore multiple similarities to the changes that occurred in the region after 1989. And like all the out-of-tune, one-dimensional accounts of the post-Communist era, the previous descriptions of the transformation after 1918 falsified a complex reality. We believed that our perspective had been gaining support with increasing numbers of people – just as another topic included not only in our work but also in several other

²¹ Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza wojna*, i: *Imperia 1912–1916* (Warszawa, 2014); ii: *Narody 1917–1923* (Warszawa, 2018); *eid.*, *Nasza wojna. Imperia 1912–1916. Narody 1917–1923* (Warszawa, 2021). The first volume has been translated into English; see *eid.*, *Forgotten Wars: Central and Eastern Europe, 1912–1916, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare*, transl. Jasper Tilbury (Cambridge, 2021).

new studies of the first years of independence, namely, the violence that became endemic in the vast expanses of Central and Eastern Europe after the few years of war, turned into a tool for social communication. The contours of this phenomenon in Poland and its nearest vicinity have drawn the interest of scholars other than us – Jochen Böehler, Rudolf Kučera, Ota Konrád, and Tomas Balkelis.²² I hope that the joint effort of us historians will make it harder for people to go on telling old wives’ tales of the immaculate conception of this or that fatherland.

Włodzimierz Borodziej always valued level-headed discussions about facts above emotional disputes, and history has repeatedly proven this attitude fruitful both for academic and public discourses. His dissertation told a story that clashed with the official narrative of the Polish People’s Republic, which described the noble struggle of an entire nation against the Nazi occupier. Later on, when Polish opinion-makers devoted inordinate amounts of attention to the provocative statements of Erika Steinbach, driven by the fear of the potential political fallout of the formation of the Centre Against Expulsions, he led a team of collaborators in pursuit of the truth about these expulsions. In time, the grumbling of the expected storm dissipated; the fruits of his labour remain.

In his contributions to the exhibition of the House of European History, as well as to *Nasza wojna* and other lesser studies from his final years, another aspect of his approach to history came to the fore. For him, the past was an object of interest, a source of new discoveries that justified the effort to understand them in the broadest context possible. History as a catalogue of artefacts one must display in the right way for outsiders to see, in alignment with a national policy, was foreign to him. Hence his somewhat subdued response to the clamour of Polish critics of the permanent exhibition in Brussels, indignant at the absence of particular figures or symbols. Another Polish historian with truly broad horizons typified this attitude to the past by likening it – not without malice – to a storeroom “where you can acquire this or that trifle at a bargain price”.²³ Like Witold Kula, Borodziej preferred

²² Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Cesty z apokalypsy. Fyzické násilí v pádu a obnově střední Evropy 1914–1922* (Praha, 2018); Jochen Böehler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921. The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018); Tomas Balkelis, *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2018).

²³ Witold Kula, *Wokół historii* (Warszawa, 1988), 386.

to think and write about history beyond the storeroom – and he had the courage, knowledge, and skill to do so.

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