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The Image of Poland in Flemish Historical Literature in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

When considering the structure of the text and scrolling through the materials that were to be used to analyze Flemish historical literature and the image of Poland it conveys, I came across a short column by an anonymous author. He writes:

If you look at the history of Poland and the anniversaries of important historical events that the Poles celebrate, it is easy to see that most of them are, unfortunately, disasters. This is partly due to the dramatic history of Poland, and to some extent due to our mentality (which is shaped by history). Since the partitions, something that one might call a glorious defeat has been functioning [...]. This – you can probably call it already a tradition – is in a certain sense continued today. We celebrate the anniversaries of subsequent uprisings, which were usually disastrous. We celebrate the beginning of World War II much more visibly than the end of it.¹

These remarks are very accurate; indeed, I have myself repeatedly wondered about this imbalance. Both the Greater Poland Uprising and the Silesian Uprisings, of which we could be proud, are still treated as local

¹ <http://zobaczniewidzialnych.pl/polacy-jako-jedyni-swietuja-kleski/> (24 June 2021).

events. At present, before our very eyes, the image of the revolution under the banners of Solidarity, along with its heroes, which were admired by the whole democratic world, are succumbing to these fatalistic mills. If this victory can be turned into a defeat, it will be a sad irony of history.

Let us leave politics aside. I also professionally deal with the history of the industrial revolution in Poland. Warsaw has a monument dedicated to labor; it is the only one so far, and it dates back to 1825. It was erected on the construction of the Warsaw-Brest highroad. There is no monument in Poland dedicated to the great engineers building bridges, railways, and large industrial plants. There are commemorative plaques, but they are embedded locally and without publicity.

Returning to the main subject, in the Belgian capital, in Brussels, on Luxembourg Square, in front of the Brussels-Luxembourg train station, there is an extraordinary monument that was funded by Wilhelm Rau and is dedicated to "John Cockerill, the father of the workers." It is a faithful copy of the monument made and authorized by the sculptor Armand Cattier. The original, cast in 1870, was unveiled on October 29 in Seraing (Liège district) a year later and erected in front of the town hall. John Cockerill, the creator of Europe's largest steel and industrial facility, which has existed from the time of Napoleon to the present day, visited the Kingdom of Poland twice and invested large funds in the construction of a steel mill in Warsaw's suburb Praga; his right-hand man was Wilhelm Rau. In 1840, Cockerill died of cholera in Warsaw on his way back home from the Russian Empire, where he intended to make huge investments in the extraction and processing of ore.

Both figures are completely unknown except to a small group of industrial historians.

Before I present my research thesis, I will use data published by the Statistical Office of Flanders for 2019. They indicate that the Poles, after the Dutch, constitute the second largest group of foreigners living in this Belgian region; they have already overtaken the Romanians and the Moroccans.

In this context, it would be legitimate to ask a few questions about the Flemish state of knowledge of Poland and Polish history; what the Flemish can learn from reading in Dutch; and what Dutch speaking historians have written about the history of Poland. Do they duplicate the pessimism I described above, or do they have a different, positivist-optimistic vision of our history?

The same question could be posed in relation to the Polish diaspora, which has been constantly present in the landscape of the Kingdom of

Belgium and especially in the mining industry since the beginning of the twentieth century, where the local population speaks Dutch. However, the answer to this question merits a separate publication.

Let us return to the region of Flanders and the Kingdom of Belgium in the twenty-first century. Using such a narrow research approach, the writer has some trouble. Not only the Flemish speak Dutch. In the federal state of the Kingdom of Belgium, Dutch is the native language of more than sixty percent of the Kingdom's population. However, Belgium's northern neighbor is the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which together with the Republic of Suriname belong to the Dutch Language Union and speak the same language. All in all, over twenty-five million people in Europe and beyond speak Dutch. Works on the history of Poland in the Dutch language have been written and are still being written also in the Kingdom of the Netherlands; therefore, they can also shape knowledge about Poland among the other people using this language.

The theme of this text is the history of Poland seen from a Flemish perspective; i.e., the rather artificial procedure of dividing works written in Dutch according to the criteria of state borders, or according to their place of publication. In the latter case, this can be misleading because Flemish historians and graduates of Slavic studies also publish in renowned Dutch publishing houses. Fortunately for the author of this text, little has been written on the history of Poland, and the likelihood of error is low.

In the Kingdom of the Netherlands, most books on Polish history are contributory, although in many cases outstanding;² most of them concern the painful problems of the Holocaust and World War II.³ Many books that continue to be published are memoirs.⁴ Part of the publications concern the period of political transformation in Poland after 1989 and social changes,⁵

2 Geert Mak, *In Europa. Reizen door de twintigste eeuw*, Amsterdam, Atlas, 2004; Martin Ros, *Vergeten oorlog Polen Rusland 1920*, Soesteberg, Aspekt, 2003.

3 Dore van Duivenbode, *Mijn Poolse huis. Vakanties naar Auschwitz*, de Geus-Singel, Amsterdam 2018; Miriam Guensberg, *Held zonder vaderland. Mijn vader. Pools, Joods en bevrijder*, Amsterdam, Uitegeverij de Kring, 2019; Pauline Broekema, Helma Coolman met een bijdrage van prof. J. Th. M. Houwink ten Cate, *In het puin van het Getto. Het concentratiekamp Warschau*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2013.

4 *Polen: Verhalen van deze tijd. Bijeenbracht en vertaald door Karl Lesman*, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1989; Milo Anstadt, *Kind in Polen*, Amsterdam, Tiebosch Uitgevermaatschappij B.V., 1982; Milo Anstadt, *De verdachte oorboog. Autobiografische roman*, Amsterdam–Antwerpen, Uitegeverij Contact, 1996.

5 Stéphane Alonso, Thijs Papôt, *En nog is Polen niet verloren. Verhalen uit het hart van Europa*, Rotterdam, Uitgeverij Douane, 2014; Jeroen Kuiper, *Polen. Geen land*

often analyzed in the context of other countries.⁶ Fine literature is better represented. Here, the Dutch-speaking reader has a great selection.⁷ The criterion of historical monograph fulfills the book *One Thousand Years of Poland and the Netherlands*,⁸ written by the Hague-based art historian Lucia Thijssen. Although her primary interest is the art and culture of both nations, it provides a full overview of the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the political transformation in the twentieth century.

The Flemish Perspective

Flemish publications are more problematic because they are few in number and relate to various aspects of life in Poland, mainly culture.⁹ However, several excellent books have been written by Flemish Slavic studies scholars. At this point, I will mention only two authors, whose achievements I consider to be the most outstanding. The first is Johan de Boose, a doctor of Slavic studies at the University of Ghent. In 2004, on the eve of Poland's accession to the European Union, he published a book titled *All the Dreams of This World: A Sentimental Journey Through Poland*,¹⁰ which can be described as cultural and historical reportage. Frequently visiting Poland, the journalist De Boose decided to write a book that confronts these ideas about Poland with the realities of today. He spoke to artists,

van fietsers en vegetariërs, Amsterdam, Ambo|Anthos, 2018; Pierre Saraber, *Daar zijn de Polen! Op zoek naar een betere toekomst*, Soesteberg, Aspekt B.V., 2019.

- 6 Peter Michielsens, *Verworpen en ontwaakt. Hongarije, Polen, DDR, Tsjechoslowakije, Bulgarije, Roemenië, Joegoslavië, Albanië*, Amsterdam, Balans, 1990; Martin van den Heuvel, *Tussen hamer en aanbeeld. Polen en zijn burenen*, Haarlem, Becht's Uitgevers-Maatschappij, H.J.W., 2005; Ivo van de Wijdeven, *De spoken van Visegrad. De onbekende geschiedenis van Polen, Hongarije, Tsjechië en Slowakije*, Houten, Spectrum, 2018.
- 7 <https://www.allesoverboekenenschrijvers.nl/poolse-schrijvers-en-schrijfsters-auteurs-uit-polen/> (24 June 2021).
- 8 Lucia Thijssen, *1000 jaar Polen en Nederland*, Zutphen, De Walburg Pers, 1992.
- 9 Dieter De Bruyn, Kris Van Heuckelom, Gerard Rasch, *Bittere oogst. Polse poëzie van de twintigste eeuw*, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2000; J. Goavaerts, *Kraków. Culturele hoofdstad van Europa. Een gids*, Amsterdam, Wereldbibliotheek, 2000; Jerzy Rebeta (ed.), *België-Polen. Balans en perspectieven van onderzoek. Belgisch-Pools colloquium aan de Katholieke Universiteit Lublin 7–8 oktober 1977*, Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, Université Catholique de Louvain, Lublin, Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1988.
- 10 Johan de Boose, *Alle dromen van de wereld. Een sentimentele reis door Polen*, Amsterdam, Meulenhoff Documentair, 2004.

politicians, students, and “ordinary” people; read newspapers, fiction, and historical works; and wandered through abandoned regions on both sides of the Polish border. He expresses full admiration for the Polish state, which is a member of the European family. He reminds the reader that Poland was once one of the most tolerant countries in Europe with great journalistic and literary traditions.

A year later, another writer and journalist, Piet De Moor, wrote a book titled: *Country of Twilight: Voices from Central Europe*,¹¹ which is the fruit of a long journey through East-Central Europe, which he began twenty years ago when he visited cities such as Berlin, Budapest, Sarajevo, and Tirana. He spoke with many well-known writers, essays, philosophers, and historians. The result of the work is a collection of penetrating, erudite, and valuable texts in which the author combines his reflections with quotes from books and conversations with the inhabitants of these cities. It includes many difficult topics for Poles, including anti-Semitism and the murder of the Jews in Jedwabne.

The Leuven School of History

How do Flemish historians compare against this backdrop? An in-depth analysis of historical publications on Poland indicates that Flemish authors have identified the following problems as fundamental for the history of Poland: national uprisings (the November and January Uprisings of the nineteenth century) and subsequent waves of exiles; the liberation of Flanders by the 1st Armored Division of General Stanisław Maczek during World War II; Polish post-war immigration to Belgium; the Polish diaspora in Belgium; the successes of the 1989 political transformation; and Polish immigration, especially after Poland’s accession to the European Union and broadly understood Polish-Belgian contacts.

Although there are some important Flemish historians and Slavic studies scholars from other universities, the most important works on the history of Poland were written in Leuven, and their authors represent three generations of graduates of the city’s Catholic University. This fact entitles me to coin the phrase “The Leuven School of History.” Its most prominent representatives of two generations of historians are Professors Louis Vos and Idesbald Goddeeris. The third generation is represented by Machteld Venken and Kim Christiaens, who graduated from the Catholic University

11 Piet De Moor, *Schemerland. Stemen uit Midden-Europa*, Amsterdam, Van Genneep, 2005.

of Leuven and wrote doctoral dissertations under the guidance of Professor Goddeeris, who was a student of Professor Vos. Before I discuss their publications, I will outline their profiles.

Professor **Louis Vos**,¹² for many years employed at this university, gave lectures on the history of Poland, nationalism in European history, and modern history. He was a Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States and Radboud Universiteit in Nijmegen. His research focuses on the history of nationalism, the Flemish movement, and student movements. Under his guidance, Tom Junes wrote the influential doctoral dissertation *Generations of Change: Student Movements and Student Politics in Communist Poland*, a historical study of the Polish student movement under the Communist regime from 1944 to 1989.¹³

Professor **Idesbald Goddeeris**¹⁴ is a Slavic studies scholar and historian. He studied at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he defended his doctoral dissertation on the Polish political diaspora in the years 1830–1870 and 1945–1980.¹⁵ As a postdoc, he continued working on Polish migration but also researched solidarity with Solidarity¹⁶ as well as

12 Louis Vos (b. 1945) is a Flemish historian and professor emeritus at the Catholic University of Leuven. Profile and publications, see: https://web.archive.org/web/20070318102752/http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/geschiedenis/personeel/fiches/fiche_louisvos.htm (24 June 2021).

13 Published in 2015. Tom Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland. Generations of Consent and Dissent*, London, Lexington Books, 2015.

14 Idesbald Goddeeris (b. 1972) is a Flemish historian and Slavic studies scholar, and graduate of the Catholic University of Leuven. He was a visiting scholar in London School of Economics (2009) and University of Pennsylvania (2014). He lectured at the London School of Economics (2009) and the Universities of Pennsylvania (2014), Delhi, Mumbai, Kinshasa, Krakow, Irkutsk, and Calcutta. He is also a senior member of the Leuven Center for Global Governance Studies, where he coordinates Leuven India Focus, and is an expert on the History and Archeology Commission at the Foundation for Scientific Research (FWO-Vlaanderen). His research focuses mainly on the relations of Flemish (Belgian) society with other cultures and political regimes. He explores the stories of migration, European identities, transnational social movements, East-West and North-South contacts, secret communist services during the Cold War, development aid, and postcolonial heritage.

15 Published in three books: Idesbald Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach po II wojnie światowej*, Warszawa, Semper, 2005; Idesbald Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België 1945–1950. Politieke mobilisatie en sociale differentiatie*, Amsterdam, Aksant, 2005; Idesbald Goddeeris, *La Grande Émigration polonaise en Belgique (1831–1870). Élités et masses en exil à l'époque romantique*, Frankfurt am Main etc., Peter Lang, 2013.

16 Idesbald Goddeeris (ed.), *Solidarity with Solidarity. Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980–1982*, London, Lexington Books, 2012; Idesbald

the “Belgian files” at IPN (Institute of National Remembrance)¹⁷ and lectured on the history of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. In 2007, he became an Associate Professor (and a full Professor in 2017) and the chair of Colonial History. As a result, he has broadened his field of interest to include India and Congo. However, he has not forgotten about his first love, Poland, and he still conducts research on topics related to the nation.

Dr. **Machteld Venken**¹⁸ is a historian who was educated at Catholic University of Leuven, where she graduated in Slavic studies and obtained a PhD in the historical sciences. As a senior postdoctoral researcher, she worked at the Institute of Eastern European History of the University of Vienna. After working in Belgium, Poland, Austria, and Germany in 2019, she became a full Professor of modern transnational history at the University of Luxembourg.

On the following pages, I will discuss the achievements of these three generations of Leuven-based historians and the importance of their work for the perception of Polish history among Flemish and Dutch-speaking readers.

The White Eagle

The fundamental and only monograph on the history of Poland so far has been written by Professors Louis Vos and Idesbald Goddeeris. It is entitled *A History of Poland: The White Eagle's Fight*.¹⁹ Its first edition was published in 2000 and the most recent one is the third revised and expanded edition, which comes from 2011. The book consists of nine chapters with the following titles: 1. “Establishment Under the Piast dynasty (966–1386);” 2. “Poles and Lithuanians Under the Jagiellons (1386–1572);” 3. “Two Centuries of

Goddeeris, “Lobbying allies? The NSZZ Solidarność Coordinating Office Abroad, 1982–1989”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, n° 13 (3), 2011, pp. 83–125.

17 Idesbald Goddeeris, *Spioneren voor het communisme. Belgische prominenten en Poolse geheim agenten*, Tielt, LannooCampus, 2013; Idesbald Goddeeris, “Secretive Spies or Ordinary Clerks? Polish Communist Intelligence Services in Brussels, 1975–89”, *Dutch Crossing*, n° 39 (3), 2015, pp. 246–260. For more, see <http://lirias.kuleuven.be/cv?Username=U0005862> (24 June 2021).

18 Machteld Venken (b. 1980), historian, graduate of the Catholic University of Leuven, she was a doctoral student of Professor Idesbald Goddeeris, under whose direction she wrote a thesis entitled *Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organizations, War Memories* (published: Frankfurt am Main–New York, Peter Lang Verlag, 2011).

19 Louis Vos, Idesbald Goddeeris, *Een geschiedenis van Polen. Se strijd van de witte adelaar*, Leuven–Den Haag, Acco, 2011.

the Nobility of the Republic (1572–1763);” 4. “Reformation and Destruction (1764–1815);” 5. “Romantic Poland: The Uprisings (1815–1864);” 6. “From Organic Work to Party Formation (1864–1914);” 7. “The Origin and Fall of the Second Republic (1914–1944);” 8. “The Polish People’s Republic (1945–1989);” and 9. “The Third Republic (1989 – Present),” which includes subchapters on Solidarity in power (1989–1993); “Pendulum Democracy (1993–2005);” “Segregated Society;” “Integration in Europe;” and “Will the White Eagle Fight? (2005–2010): Polish Culture After Communism.”

Periodization alone reveals much about the view of Flemish historians on Polish history. While the titles of the first two chapters correspond to classic Polish periodization of history, the third, about the republic of nobles, may evoke different associations. While in the Netherlands a republic (the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands) operated around the same period, it was merchant and Protestant. Instead, we are dealing with a time of a freedom of nobles, sometimes leading to anarchy, a kind of parallel state, but functioning within the monarchy. The Dutch-speaking reader will quickly find out that this is a misleading analogy.

And what we call the period of Poland in captivity, the partitions of 1772, 1773, and 1795, as a result of which Poland was not independent until 1918 (described in three subsequent chapters), is for the authors of the book a period of reforms leading to the decline of Poland. I applaud the emphasis on reforms, but the conclusion that the reforms lead to collapse may evoke mixed feelings. It is more accurate to separate the national uprisings of the nineteenth century and organic work. The remaining chapters correspond to native periodization. These are my overall impressions of the list of chapters; I will now deal with the details.

Among the historical events that supposedly testify to the close Polish-Belgian relations are the Polish November Uprising and the Belgian Revolution of 1830. The Polish historical literature is keen to see a close relationship between these events, mainly in the fact that the Russian army was stopped from marching on the rebellious city of Brussels. The Russian army, commanded by Ivan Paskiewicz (1782–1856), which was busy suppressing the November Uprising in the Kingdom of Poland, could not fulfill its obligation designated in the Holy Alliance of 1815²⁰ and intervene

20 The Holy Alliance (also called the Grand Alliance) was a coalition linking the monarchist great powers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. It was created after the final defeat of Napoleon at the behest of Emperor Alexander I of Russia and signed in Paris on September 26, 1815.

in favor of King Willem (1772–1843), who was through marriage related to Anna Pavlovna, the sister of Tsar Alexander I (1777–1825).

The authors devote only a few sentences to this problem in the subsection “From the Congress Kingdom to the November Uprising (1815–1831),” in which they present the views of the Polish side; however, they are not convinced that it was the Polish uprising that saved the Belgian revolution.²¹ They recall that the position of the Russian Tsar was weakened during a conference in London, where France and Great Britain reached an agreement in granting Belgium independence before the news of the uprising reached London. Meanwhile, victories on the battlefield were not the decisive factor; instead, the fact that the Tsar did not receive the support of Vienna and Berlin was critical.

The next subsection, entitled “The Political Activities and Cultural Flourishing of the Diaspora,” concerns the period of Polish Romanticism and is very sensitive to Polish national identity. The authors basically give a full description of the so-called intellectual currents of the Great Emigration.²² They also devote attention to the diplomatic activities of the Czartoryski camp centered on the Hotel Lambert²³ in Paris and its plans for an independent Belgium. The Flemish reader can learn about Polish officers in the Belgian army and the role played by General Jan Skrzynecki²⁴ in it. In the section on the socio-economic development of the Polish lands under the three partitions, I feel dissatisfied in the description of the development of industry, especially in the first stage of the creation of Congress Kingdom, which lasted from 1815 to the mid-nineteenth century.

21 Co-author Idesbald Goddeeris organized an extensive conference on this subject, during which Polish historians presented their point of view. See Idesbald Goddeeris, Pierre Lierneux (eds), *1830, insurrection polonaise, indépendance belge / Poolse opstand, Belgische onafhankelijkheid*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Bruylant-Academia, 2001; Idesbald Goddeeris, *La Grande Émigration polonaise*, op. cit.

22 The Great Emigration (Polish: Wielka Emigracja) involved the emigration of thousands of Poles, particularly from the political and cultural élites, from 1831 to 1870, after the failure of the November Uprising of 1830–1831, among others.

23 Jerzy Adam Czartoryski (1770–1861), a Polish prince, found himself in exile after the fall of the November Uprising in 1831. In 1833, he settled in Paris, where he bought the Hôtel Lambert. He headed the party bearing the name from its headquarters. This party and A. Czartoryski supported the anti-Russian policy of European countries, as well as revolutionary and national movements, seeing in them the possibility of rebuilding Poland.

24 Jan Zygmunt Skrzynecki (1787–1860) was a Polish general and Commander-in-Chief of the November Uprising (1830–1831). He was a general of the Polish and Belgian armies.

The authors write about the development of industry after 1864; i.e., the year of the fall of the January Uprising and the abolition of serfdom in the countryside, referring to the industrial revolution that took place in England or Belgium. Generally, this view is correct, although the construction of railway lines, a real engine for economic development, had taken place much earlier. This first stage of the industrial revolution in the Kingdom of Poland was a period of domination of the Polish steel and railway industry in the whole of the Russian Empire. It would be weakened only by the Tsar's introduction of an internal customs tariff for goods from the kingdom in 1841. The Flemish reader loses the opportunity to learn that among the pioneers of this revolution was the famous Cockerill family, Belgian industrialists.

The authors conclude their reflections on the period of the Second Polish Republic with a strong statement: "Poland's death in 1939 was not a natural death; it was a murder." The period concerning People's Republic of Poland contains the basic facts of its existence, with a strong emphasis on dissident movements and the birth of independent trade unions. The chapter concerning the Third Polish Republic ends with 2010. A summary of the rule of the Law and Justice party will certainly find a place in the next edition of the book.

To sum up such a brief analysis of this important and very well-edited book, I am convinced that it is a highly recommended for Flemish readers. I would like to add at this point that this book should be read together with the other texts written by Professor Goddeeris, which provide an in-depth analysis of the most important threads of the book and reveal an excellent knowledge of the history of Poland by this author. Most of them are available in Polish, but some of them have also appeared in English, French, and Dutch. Perhaps in the future this author in the volume of collected works will decide to translate some of these into Dutch.²⁵

25 Idesbald Goddeeris, „Belgijska solidarność z Solidarnością”, in: Małgorzata Świder (red.), *Polityka i humanitaryzm 1980–1989*, Toruń, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2010, pp. 81–105; Idesbald Goddeeris, „Tradycyjna historiografia a historia społeczna – przepaść do zasypania: nowe możliwości badań nad polską Wielką Emigracją”, in: Michał Baczkowski, Tomasz Gąsowski, Andrzej Nowak, Zenon Piecha, Bogdan Szlachta (red.), *Widziane z zewnątrz*, Warszawa, DiG, 2011, pp. 33–51; Idesbald Goddeeris, „Wielobarwne polonofilstwo i całkowita neutralność. Belgijskie reakcje na polskie powstanie 1863 roku”, in: Eugeniusz Niebelski (red.), *Rok 1863 w kilku odstępach*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo KUL, 2016, pp. 117–131; Idesbald Goddeeris, „Międzynarodowa Organizacja Pracy i NSZZ Solidarność”, in: Paweł Jaworski, Łukasz Kamiński (red.), *Świat wobec Solidarności 1980–1989*, Warszawa,

Nevertheless, the book *A History of Poland: The White Eagle's Fight* provides a detailed, well-balanced account of Polish history. Like any Polish reader, I was subconsciously looking for references to threads that are milestones in Polish historiography for Polish-Belgian relations. There are only a few of them and, presumably, this is due to the European perspective of authors who put more emphasis on facts than emotions. The authors' objectivity allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Emphasizing such relationships violates a certain order, because it requires determining a reader's attitude to a given event. Furthermore, the border between the propagation of knowledge and national propaganda is delicate.

Of course, as a reader, but also as a professional historian, I am disappointed with the lack of small references that have objective value and make history more easily digestible, such as references to a street named after Albert I, King of the Belgians²⁶ in Warsaw (which existed only in 1934–1945), visits of Belgian monarchs and artists to Warsaw, etc. However, these are insignificant minor details.

In the Footsteps of General Maczek's Soldiers

Machteld Venken chose to deal with another, equally fascinating piece of Polish history. Her PhD thesis *Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organizations, War Memories* was published in 2011. The book focuses on recording and analyzing the war experiences of immigrants who came to Belgium because of World War II, including former soldiers of the 1st Armored Division of General Stanisław Maczek.²⁷ The author

Wydawnictwo IPN, 2013, pp. 224–241; Idesbald Goddeeris, „Polska migracja w Belgii i inicjatywy solidarnościowe w latach osiemdziesiątych”, in: Patryk Pleskot (red.), *Za naszą i waszą Solidarność. Inicjatywy solidarnościowe z udziałem Polonii podejmowane na świecie (1980–1989). T. 2: Państwa europejskie*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IPN, 2018, pp. 218–257.

26 Albert I, (Albert Leopold Klemens Maria Meinrad, 1875–1934), King of the Belgians 1909–1934, hero of World War I, an avid mountaineer. He died during one of the lonely trips to the Belgian Ardennes. In 1834, to commemorate his role in the World War, Niecała Street in Warsaw, near the Saxon Garden and the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs office, obtained his name. As part of the new order after World War II, the street returned to its previous name.

27 Stanisław Maczek (1892–1994), general of the Polish Army, honorary citizen of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the city of Breda. Commander of the 10th Armored Cavalry Brigade, and in February 1942 the 1st Armored Division. The 1st Combat DP route led through France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. A division under General Maczek liberated Belgian cities such as Ypres, Ghent, and Passchendaele.

studied the process of the integration or exclusion of former soldiers from the cultural field, which we can call “the memory of war.” She made use of the accounts of twelve former soldiers of the 1st Armored Division out of only twenty such veterans who were living in Belgium at the time.

Her path to Polish culture is also interesting. While learning to play the violin, she was intrigued by mysterious letters next to the staff in the scores. When she learned that it was Russian, she picked up a Russian dictionary and deciphered their meaning. “Not much later after that, I borrowed a book about Poland,” she writes, “and there has been almost no time since that for me not to surround myself with books and music from Central Europe. These two passions led me to the Catholic University in Leuven, where I graduated in Slavic studies and obtained a PhD in the historical sciences. During my many years of exploring Central and Eastern Europe, I realized the historical similarities between the worlds on both sides of the Iron Curtain.”²⁸

She set herself the goal of bringing to the historiography of this part of Europe a critical comparison of the similarities and differences between its peoples. After receiving a doctorate, she obtained a research grant from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which she implemented in 2009–2013. It was entitled: *The Post-War Fate of Soldiers of the 1st Armored Division Commanded by General Stanisław Maczek in Poland and Belgium: A Comparative Analysis*. The effect of the project managed by Machteld Venken was the publication of the Polish-language book *The Soldiers of General Maczek: Experience and Memory of War*,²⁹ together with two historians, Jarosław Pałka and Krzysztof M. Zalewski.³⁰ The authors’ interest rested in the war experiences of “Maczek’s soldiers” reported in a direct biographical narrative, supplemented by their further post-war fate, which largely determined their war biographies.³¹ Therefore, the work

28 <http://www.machteldvenken.com/> (24 June 2021).

29 *Żołnierze generała Maczka. Doświadczenie i pamięć wojny*, Gdańsk-Zakrzewo, Wydawnictwo Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, Replika, 2013, p. 419.

30 Jarosław Pałka (b. 1973), historian, secretary for the Substantive History of the Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Center and with Krzysztof Marcin Zalewski (b. 1979), historian and sociologist.

31 Related publications: Machteld Venken, „Międzynarodowa i lokalna mobilizacja żołnierzy byłej Pierwszej Polskiej Dywizji Pancерnej w Belgii w latach 1947–1970”, *Pamięć i sprawiedliwość*, n° 17, 2011, pp. 333–351; Machteld Venken, „Konstrukcja i recepcja pamięci zbiorowej wśród polskich dywizjonistów w Belgii. Zimna wojna w praktyce”, *Przegląd polonijny*, n° 33, 2007, pp. 41–62; Machteld Venken, „Herinneren in een (eens) verdeeld Europa. Consistentie en veranderlijkheid in getuigenissen van oud-strijders”, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie*

fits into the formula of oral history, in which biographical stories also become an act of generational exchange; i.e., communication memory.³²

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Kim Christiaens,³³ recently appointed Director of KADOC-KU Leuven, the Documentation and Research Center on Religion, Culture and Society, is a specialist in social movements (trade unions, solidarity organizations, NGOs on human rights, etc.) and the Cold War and religion in the twentieth century. He has authored a number of works devoted to the Polish Solidarity movement in a comparative context³⁴

en geschiedenis, n° 92, 2014, pp. 527–544; Machteld Venken, „De mobilisatie van Poolse oud-strijders in België, 1947–1972. Een andere visie op Poolse migrantenorganisaties”, *Brood en Rozen*, n° 3, 2012, pp. 22–45; Machteld Venken, „Van onzichtbaar naar zichtbaar: van communistes tot slachtoffers en baboesjka’s. Gewezen Ostarbeiterinnen in België”, *Historica. Vereniging voor Vrouwengeschiedenis*, n° 3, 2010, pp. 15–20.

32 „Pamięć kulturowa i pamięć komunikacyjna”, in: Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (red.), *Pamięć zbiorowa, i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Kraków, Universitas, 2009, p. 26.

33 Kim Christiaens, Prof. Dr, is the Director of KADOC-KU Leuven, the Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society (since 2017). His research and publications focus on transnational social movements, NGOs, and globalization during the Cold War, Europeanization, human rights history, and contacts between Europe and the Global South. https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/english/1_KADOC/13_who/list_employees/00060307 (24 June 2021).

34 Selected publications: Kim Christiaens, Idesbald Goddeeris, *Competing Solidarities? Solidarność and the Global South during the 1980s*, in: Artemy Kalinovsky, James Mark, Steffi Marung (eds), *Alternative Globalizations. Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, pp. 288–310; Kim Christiaens, Idesbald Goddeeris, „Solidarność a Trzeci Świat. Część I. Chrześcijańsko-demokratyczna droga do Ameryki Łacińskiej”, *Dzieje najnowsze*, vol. 50, n° 1, 2018, pp. 281–308; „Część II. Taktyczne sojusze z kluczowymi ruchami lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku”, vol. 50, n° 2, 2018, pp. 247–272; Kim Christiaens, „Międzynarodowa Konfederacja Wolnych Związków Zawodowych i Światowa Konfederacja Pracy wobec powstania, zawieszenia i delegalizacji NSZZ Solidarność w latach 1980–1989”, in: Paweł Jaworski, Łukasz Kamiński (red.), *Świat wobec „Solidarności” 1980–1989*, Warszawa, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2013, pp. 210–224; Kim Christiaens, Idesbald Goddeeris, *The East versus the South. Belgian solidarity movements with Poland and Nicaragua during the early 1980s*, in: Robert Brier (ed.), *Entangled protest. Transnational approaches to the history of dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Osnabrück, Fibre, 2013, pp. 173–197; Kim Christiaens, “The ICFTU and the WCL: The International Coordination of Solidarity”, in: Idesbald Goddeeris (ed.), *Solidarity with Solidarity. Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980–1982*, Lexington, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, 2010, pp. 101–127.

and wrote his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor Idesbald Goddeeris.³⁵

“Cadres Decide Everything”

These famous words of Joseph Stalin³⁶ in relation to the situation in Flanders seem to be the most accurate here. What can be said about the future of research on the history of Poland in Flanders in the coming post-pandemic era? Taking the current interest in Polish at Flemish universities as a starting point, it does not look too optimistic. The peak of interest in our country is already behind us. Even existing researchers and friends of Poland have transferred their interests to other countries; Asia, especially China, is particularly fashionable today. Interest in the United States and Germany remains the same. Perhaps the effects of the economic collapse caused by the pandemic will attract researchers to South America, where the humanitarian disaster is no less spectacular than in Africa?

Currently, a student in Flanders has only one university dealing with Central and Eastern Europe to choose from: the Catholic University of Leuven (CUL), where until 2018 there was a recruitment for the Master in the language and regional studies program: Slavic and Eastern Europe,³⁷ in which courses in Russian and Polish were offered with the possibility of specialization in one of these regions. The linguistic aspect of the courses included language learning, consecutive translation, and the possibility of choosing Polish as a third foreign language. Kris Van Heuckelom,³⁸ Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts, Department of Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, does research into the Polish language, literature, and culture.³⁹ He

35 “Orchestrating Solidarity: Third World Agency, Transnational Networks and the Belgian Mobilization for Vietnam and Latin America (1960s–1980s)”, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2013. https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/en/system/files/edition_data/articlepdf/Doctorat_Christiaens_Jaune_2013_4_reduit.pdf. (24 June 2021).

36 *Zastolnyje rieczy Stalina. Dokumenty i materiały*, sost. W. A. Niewieżyn, Moskwa, Sankt-Petierburg, 2003.

37 https://onderwijsaanbod.kuleuven.be/opleidingen/n/CQ_50268877.htm#activetab=diploma_omschrijving (24 June 2021).

38 <https://www.kuleuven.be/wieiswie/en/person/00034373> (24 June 2021).

39 He published, among other: Kris Van Heuckelom, “Getting even and becoming equal. Warsaw through the European lens (1980s–2000s)”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, n° 9 (1), 2018, pp. 47–62; Kris Van Heuckelom, Bram Van Otterdijk, “Pathways into the past. Framing the Polish People’s Republic in two recent road films (*Ida* and *Ticket to the Moon*)”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, n° 8 (3), 2017, pp. 266–282; Kris Van Heuckelom, Iwona Guśc, “Songs of Home (and Away):

teaches courses in cultural history of Poland, Polish literary and visual culture, Polish literature, and the translation of essayistic and specialist texts.

Odisee University of Applied Sciences, the merger of Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUBrussel or HUB) and Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven, currently offers bachelor's and master's degrees in literature and linguistics, including applied linguistics, synchronous translations, and multilingual communication.⁴⁰

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Another large Flemish academic institution, Ghent University, admittedly boasts that the program of Eastern European languages and cultures is the only academic Slavic program in Flanders, where language and culture are combined, but this only applies to two Eastern European languages and there is no option to study the Polish language. In the first semester it is Russian, and beginning in the second semester students can choose from South Slavic languages⁴¹ (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Bulgarian, or Slovenian).

In Flanders, therefore, the Polish language can currently be studied only at KU Leuven (this year, Slavic studies have been discontinued for economic reasons). As of the 2019–2020 academic year, the only Polish History course available for university history students will be offered in the following year. At the HUB campus in Brussels, Polish can be studied in applied linguistics and with the Bachelor of Arts in the “Foreign languages” group (Polish as a second language), in the “Atelier Vertalen” module (which consists of three language paths, including two Slavic languages, Russian and Polish, allowing students to obtain a Master and Bachelor

Ethnically-Coded Diegetic Music and Multidirectional Nostalgia in Fiction Films About Polish Migrants,” *Necsus. European Journal of Media Studies*, n° 5 (2), 2016; Kris Van Heuckelom, „In Holland staat een huis. De uitbeelding van Poolse immigranten in recente Nederlandse speelfilms”, *Internationale Neerlandistiek*, n° 2, 2015, pp. 113–140; Kris Van Heuckelom, “Z tkaniny do tekstu. Autoreferencyjność w twórczości Brunona Schulza i Erwina Mortiera”, *Ruch literacki*, n° 4, 2014, pp. 469–484; Kris Van Heuckelom, “Londoners and Outlanders: Polish Labour Migration through the European Lens,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, n° 91 (2), 2013, pp. 210–234; Kris Van Heuckelom, Dieter De Bruyn, “Metarefleksja artystyczna i zależność między sztukami w polskim modernizmie – prace graficzne i literackie Brunona Schulza”, *Teksty drugie*, n° 6, 2013, pp. 286–305.

40 <https://www.odisee.be/nl/talenthogeschool> (24 June 2021).

41 <https://www.ugent.be/lw/nl/toekomstige-student/infomomenten/infodag2020/oetc.htm> (24 June 2021).

of Arts) and Bachelor of Arts for translators in the module “Atelier Vertalen,” according to the language of the bachelor’s program.

What’s Next?

On September 30, 2019, Flemish premier Jan Jambon established a coalition of the N-VA, CD&V, and Open Vld parties. In their coalition agreement for the years 2019–2024, one of the points was the decision to set up a committee consisting of an independent and pluralistic group of scientists whose task would be to draw up a list of pillars of Flemish culture, history, and science, which would be used in both educational and integration programs for immigrants. The Jambon government has named this the “Flanders Canon,” which will strengthen Flemish identity and help the Flemings understand “who we are and where we come from.”⁴² The originator is Flemish charismatic politician Bart De Wever, leader of the Flemish center-right party New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, N-VA). As might be expected, this project sparked a discussion that evokes emotions and varied reactions, from acceptance to complete negation. Seeing the consistent and decisive actions of the N-VA party, one should expect a reduction in government spending on promoting the knowledge of the history of other countries in Flanders and leaving it to their national cultural institutes, which in the case of the Polish language has been done for years by the Polish Institute in Brussels (Institut Polonais – Service Culturel de l’Ambassade de la République de Pologne à Bruxelles). The Institute organizes exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, book promotions, book translations, and coordinates scientific and cultural exchanges.

Is It That Bad?

The speech of Philippe I Coburg, King of the Belgians, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Belgium in World War II, delivered at the Polish cemetery in Lommel on 29 September 2019, gives hope. “During the six years of World War II, over six million Poles lost their lives, and five million foreigners died on Polish soil,” said the king in his speech and added:

Poland has gone through the most terrifying trials. Its population has been halved; its territory has been amputated; and its political system has been

⁴² <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/31742>, pp. 17, 21, 25–26 (24 June 2021).

kidnapped. Wherever possible, your Polish countrymen continued to fight and showed exceptional courage. In their own country, they constituted the greatest resistance movement in Europe. Outside of Poland, they created several corps, which were determined to participate in major battles abroad. In the same period, other Polish compatriots helped liberate Belgium. I pay tribute to many Poles whose blood was also shed here for us. Belgium remembers Poland.⁴³

Is this image shaped by Flemish historians? As the above analysis has demonstrated, this is certainly the case. In addition to these, the resilient Polish diaspora and veterans have an influence on the preservation of the memory of Polish miners in Belgian Limburg and the Polish liberators. During the anniversary events, many Flemings will certainly reach for the publications of the above authors or receive them as a gift from their Polish neighbors. Will the latest wave of economic immigrants from Poland after joining the European Union and opening labor markets benefit from the achievements of the Flemish authors? I think so. This can already be seen in the activities of social forums that want to share knowledge about Poland, its history, and its literature in their own language with their friends in Belgium.⁴⁴

43 https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20190929_04635222 (24 June 2021).

44 Stichting Literatura, <https://poolseliteratuur.nl/category/koop-dit-boek/>; [Pisarzemowia.nl](https://www.pisarzemowia.nl); Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pisarzemowia>; <https://www.allesoverboekenenschrijvers.nl/poolse-schrijvers-en-schrijfsters-auteurs-uit-polen/> (24 June 2021).