Entangled Science? Relocating German-Polish Scientific Relations


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Beyond reception
transformations of the German historical ideas in the Polish historiography before 1914

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One could assume (as certainly I did when I started my study of history of historical thought) that the Polish, Czech and Hungarian 19th century historiography, so much exposed to the German cultural influence, would develop as a sort of poorer copies of the German original. With much surprise I discovered this is not the case. Both the Polish historiography and the Czech and Hungarian ones, collected musters of historical thinking and of explanatory structures from the German, French, English, as well as ancient Greek and Latin historiographical traditions and each of them created a model of its own that reassembled various threads and used them in a different context. The processes of these transformations are interesting to look at, as the permit us to leave the simple dichotomy of producer versus receiver of ideas. While nobody questions the central position of the German historiography in 19th century Europe its rule was not uncontested and the smaller historiographies were able to build their own distinct models of historical thinking.

The German 19th century historiography, due to various philosophical influences, was dominated by historicism and by interest in the problem of state. The growth of (say) the Prussian State in Droysen and other historians of the Prussian School of history was presented as an instance of broader historiosophical process with clear Hegelian undertones. In the Polish (and in Czech) historiography the state never found such central place. In the period of Romanticism both Lelewel and Palacký extolled the idea of the people above that of the state, thus being closer to French or British historiography (Guizot; Macaulay) than to the German one. Historicism in the Polish thought of that epoch was influential but the older ideas of the Enlightenment “pragmatic” historiography (Robertson, Hume, Gibbon) never died out. Somehow paradoxically, for the democrats and liberals of the Romantic generation the implicit “presentism” of the Enlightenment historiography was more attractive that the seemingly detached Rankean historicism.

The era of historicism came with the second half of the 19th century: with the Warsaw and Cracow historical schools in the Polish case, the Jaroslav Goll School in the Czech case. In these two cases, however, historicism was closely – much more closely than in Germany – connected with Positivism which gave it a specific flavour. Thus, the early 20th century reception of the German Methodenstreit around Karl Lamprecht fell in the Polish and Czech lands on a different soil, much more accustomed to the positivist-scientist paradigm than the German historiography grounded in the idealist philosophical tradition.

Finally, the national independence was a more pressing problem than in Germany (I mean an intellectual problem, not political). So was the problem of backwardness (variously defined, usually without using this word). The problem of the historical role of the state, accordingly, had a different function than in the German case. It was grounded less in the idealistic historiosophy and more in the Enlightenment-positivist vision of the state as a carrier of modernization. With the late 19th-early 20th century conservative pro-Habsburg historians (e.g. Michał Bobrzyński in Poland, Josef Pekař in Bohemia and Gyula Szekfű in Hungary) the stress on the state rather than nation as a central factor of history was a way to stress a distance from the radicalism of the Romantic historiography.