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**WAWRO G. (ED.), SARNA R. (TRANSL.), 2012,**  
**ATLAS HISTORII ŚWIATA. OD 10 000 P.N.E. DO DZISIAJ\*,**  
**Poland, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Buchman, 33x26 cm, 512 pp.**

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This *Atlas* is the Polish translation of a volume prepared by an international team headed by Geoffrey Wawro from the University of North Texas and first published in 2008 by Millennium House of Elanora Heights, Australia (*Historical atlas. A comprehensive history of the world*) and then, in 2009, by Tandem Verlag of Potsdam. The volume has all the trappings of a monumental piece. To quote the Polish publisher, it presents “the most important events in human history from 10 000 BC until the present day”, constitutes “a collection of authoritative articles written by leading historians” and “a compendium of knowledge in the field of history, politics, culture and economy”, while “its detailed maps present historical events, social phenomena and economic transformations”, etc. The back cover blurb would suggest that one is facing a momentous achievement of unprecedented scientific value. The list of authors featured at the end mentions 45 people holding high academic and administrative posts at universities in America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. A recommendation like this should be tantamount to a guarantee that the Polish reader is gaining access to a unique publication. Indeed, at first sight, this seems to be true,

because the atlas contains a cornucopia of attractive illustrations, including reproductions of the world’s greatest artists, interesting photographs and more than 250 colourful maps.

On closer examination, however, a reviewer must experience an increasing feeling of disappointment. Step by step, evidence of ignorance and intellectual poverty come to light from behind a front of an impressive feast of colours and magnificent pictures. In the end, it is hard to find in this maze of illustrations, maps and text what the guiding concept and objective of the entire editorial effort may be. This is true of the historical, geographical, social and cultural aspects of the volume. The textual interpretation seems to be designed to supplement the illustrative part, its nature driven by a desire to showcase spectacular historical scenes likely to pull the reader in. This does not mean that much of the information in this volume should be dismissed as uninteresting or failing to add to the reader’s knowledge. Indeed, the numerous illustrations provide pleasant aesthetic impressions and can be viewed many times without boredom, while the selection of beautiful painterly masterpieces broadens our knowledge of the arts, even if the name of the author is often conspicuously missing. Put together, however, all these trappings constitute but a collection of

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\* Title of original English edition: *Historical atlas. A comprehensive history of the world.*

snapshots from the history of humankind rather than being connected by a binding concept.

On the positive side, the Atlas eschews the traditional Eurocentric view of world history. Numerous sections are devoted to Asia, Africa and the Americas, which have often been marginalised elsewhere as unimportant. It seems too that the authors wanted to be politically correct. When looking at their analysis of European history, however, it tends to be Western-centric. Countries such as Germany, France, Italy and the UK are highlighted excessively, while very little information or comment is available about Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic States and Scandinavia (with the exception of Denmark). This lack of balance tends to be characteristic of Western European and American historians and has been flagged, among others, by Norman Davies. Such matters, however, are not foremost in assessing the value of the reviewed publication, which aspires to being a compendium of historical and geographical knowledge.

As the reader delves deeper into the contents of the Atlas and examines it more carefully, it gradually becomes apparent that rather than being 'historical' or 'geographical' in nature, the volume is just a commercial product. The essential reason for its publication seems neither to break new ground in knowledge nor to apply new methodology, as there is nothing new in these two respects (except for the attractive appearance). The essential reason seems to be pure and simple: financial success, popularity and fame. There is merit in popularisation of knowledge, and for children, teenagers or senior citizens the Atlas might serve as a kind of a tourist guidebook to allow virtual travel in time and space. The volume is targeted primarily at readers with relatively low education and looking for a spectacular editorial format. In this respect it stands out with well thought-out aesthetics and a convincing format of delivery. Indeed, the impressive illustrations, graphics and photographs mixed in with colourful maps come out very well on glossy chalk paper. The average consumer on the book market will look favourably on this type of publication. The conspicuous package will also attract people who want to impress with their luxury book collections. It may also serve as an elegant gift. However, such commercial advantages do not tend to go together well with scientific value.

The illustrations are integrated with related text and there are chronological tables at the end of the Atlas. The written pieces are intended to explain to the reader historical processes in relation to territories and are in the form of boxes set directly into or next to reproductions, photographs and maps. The content of these boxes is typically of a fragmented or loosely connected nature without attempting to distil the essence of the processes. Very few of these texts explain the origins, causal circumstances and consequences of the change discussed. Still, despite their certain superficiality, these texts are much better than the maps. The explanations may be guilty of numerous simplifications and banality, but contain no discrediting errors.

Much more criticism is merited by both the content and the graphical convention adopted in the maps. The reviewer's assessment of these is clearly negative in the case of nearly all the maps. The extent of state territories and phenomena of a political, social and religious nature are shown as colours or patterns, the boundaries of which very often fail to match the reality they are meant to illustrate. Distortions are frequent, typically a result of ignorance or of excessive generalisation. Spatial shifts in the order of 100 to 200 kilometres one way or another do not seem to matter much to the authors, and even the definitions of state borders are not treated very scrupulously. A similar approach is evident in the chronology, where 10 to 50 years of difference is not a matter of principle. Cases of such discrepancies are not rare. Also geographical names are often found not where they should be located, and sometimes they fail to meet terminological and onomastic requirements. Generally the maps lack topographical precision and attention to detail. They follow bright colour schemes showing large areas in different colours, where only the size and simplified shape is supposed to illustrate the political or geographical phenomena in question.

In a volume spanning so long a period, i.e. from the advent of history until today, periodization has to play an important role. Historians tend to use certain established landmark dates to split history into periods. For example, the history of the 19th century is normally discussed from the outbreak of the French Revolution until the beginning of the First World War, while that of the 20th century tends to be dated from 1914 to 1989. The year 1492 is also often seen as opening a new

era in history. The authors of the Atlas chose a far more schematic breakdown, simply using the regular timeline with centuries (e.g. 1301-1400, 1401-1600, etc.). One may wonder whether the former approach might have been more opportune.

At this point it makes sense to mention the opportunity that has been lost, as the Atlas went through a process adapting it to the Polish market. One must regret that the editors responsible for it failed to hand the volume to competent Polish reviewers and use their comments to improve the text and the cartography. No such effort was made, and the Atlas has been published true to its original. Perhaps the multitude of inaccuracies and errors was not realised if even matters related to Poland seem to have escaped the eye of the Polish editors. The borders of historical Polish territories are almost always distorted on maps of Europe, while the surprisingly few mentions of Poland are rather banal. Only three historical Poles are named, seemingly at random, i.e. Boleslas III Wrymouth, St. Stanislas and Wojciech Jaruzelski, while the names of Nicolaus Copernicus, Józef Piłsudski, John Paul II and Frédéric Chopin, to name but a few, are conspicuously missing.

Polish historical atlases have a long and illustrious tradition marked by quality content and cartographical precision. The excellent *Wielki atlas historyczny* (Great Historical Atlas), published by Demart and edited by such top historians as Janusz Tazbir and Wojciech Roszkowski, is still in print. While it represents a different approach that does away with art and photography, historically and geographically it is nothing short of brilliant. In this circumstance the decision to publish an atlas of such a low standard of cartography and contents could only have been justified by marketing purposes. Perhaps the publisher expected that the glitter would paper over all the deficiencies while the number of copies sold would handsomely reward the expense made. This may well turn out to be the case, because reservations of specialists are only of symbolic meaning.

It is beyond the scope of this review to cover all the maps and textual interpretations. A sample of a dozen maps primarily with regards to Poland will suffice to illustrate the scale of creative nonchalance on the part of the authors of this international creation that is being handed to the Polish reader.

One may as well start from the cover, which features a map of the Duchy of Warsaw that must

have been intended as the showcase of the Atlas. Skipping over the rather imprecise course of the borders, the Duchy never went beyond the Niemen River or bordered with the Confederation of the Rhine across the lower Warta River. While maps of the antiquity can be forgiven for their inherent imprecision stemming from the fragmentary nature of the sources, from the Middle Ages onwards European borders tend to be known rather well. Nevertheless, the dependent territories on a map of the Frankish Empire (814 AD) reach to the Oder River, including today's Lower Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia, a broadly defined Dalmatia and much of Hungary (p. 110). A political map of Europe in 843 features the name 'Poland' (p. 111).

On a map concerning a subsequent stage in history (the late 13th century), the Polish territory is so distorted that it fails to match its borders at any particular date (p. 135). On another map, eastern Mazovia belongs to the then non-Christian Lithuania (p. 155). But the peak of historical incompetence comes on a map of Europe in 1400, where the name 'Poland and Lithuania' is placed in the basin of the Pripyat River, Polonia Minor belongs to Hungary up to the confluence of the San and Vistula Rivers, while the Teutonic State reaches to Lake Ladoga (p. 167). To compound these mistakes, the physical base map used for the purpose features reservoirs on the Volga and Dnieper rivers and the Volga-Don canal, all built during the Soviet period in the 20th century. The same base map crops up on many other historical maps. Other base-map problems also include the river network, which can be astoundingly inaccurate. For example, in Poland the Warta River begins in Częstochowa, turns north near Kostrzyn and ends in the Szczecin Lagoon. The Oder River is a tributary of the Spree River and joins it near Berlin, while the San River bifurcates with the Dniester upstream from Przemyśl.

On another map, Kiev is located at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains and Legnica at the foot of the Alps (p. 148)! The town of Świdnica can be found on the eastern side of the Oder River (p. 257). On two maps the western Polish borders are faulty, e.g. much of Polonia Major is left outside Poland (p. 170 and p. 171). It is hard to comprehend why the current European political borders are overlaid on a map of the extent of a plague epidemic in the mid-19th century (p. 173) and on the map of the Reformation in the 16th century (p. 201). On yet another map the name 'Holy

Roman Empire' extends eastwards far beyond the town of Łomża (p. 175).

Serious reservations can be raised over a map of the Reformation (p. 201). The territories of modern Finland, Estonia and Latvia (except Latgale) that had converted to Protestantism are painted the same colour as Eastern Orthodox Russia; an area of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania up to the Dnieper River is marked as a territory where the Reformation is gaining followers; Bohemia is marked as purely Catholic; and the name Lithuania is placed close to Warsaw.

On a map illustrating Russia's gains in Poland during the period 1667-1795, the authors were so generous as to even include the city of Lviv (p. 271). They were a trifle hasty here, as it was only the Soviet Union that finally clinched that city after 17 September 1939. A map of pre-First World War borders is surprisingly accurate, but some errors can still be traced (p. 353). The Grand Duchy of Finland finds itself separated from the Russian Empire; Warsaw is on the Drwęca River near the German-Russian border (!); and there is the name 'Poland', while whatever there was of this country belonged entirely within the Russian Empire under the names of the 'Kingdom of Poland' or the 'Congress Poland'. In 1914, the eastern front did not run through Poznań (p. 358). On one of the maps Warsaw is on the Bug River (p. 374), while on a map depicting political borders in the early 1990s there still exists Eastern Prussia (p. 375).

In a serious ahistorical methodological and factual blunder, the authors limit themselves to using solely the modern European political map when illustrating political events that took place much earlier, when boundaries were substantially different. This happens on maps of the eastern front of the First World War (p. 361), of the results of the Munich treaty (p. 371) and of the Barbarossa plan where, additionally, Warsaw is located in the town of Małkinia (p. 374). A map illustrating changing political borders between 1939 and 1945 simply does not exist.

The distortions and errors of a cartographical nature are very common. This review has focused virtually on Poland and its neighbours. A cursory glance suggests that similar factual distortions also plague other areas of the world. Additionally, one may note rather naïve explanations and section titles which, to put it mildly, could be regarded as controversial.

Towards the end of the Atlas there are chronological tables. The choice of entries must be regarded as accidental, sometimes bordering on grotesque, as they mention infantile facts while overlooking landmark events of global importance. Evidence of this can be found for example during the periods such as Tsarist Russia, Migrations of the 20th century, the Career of Adolf Hitler, the Second World War, etc. There is no mention of the beginning or the end of both World Wars, the Versailles Treaty, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the wartime Conferences in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, or Hitler's invasion of the USSR. But the year when Hitler first met Eva Braun is duly noted.

The Atlas reviewed here was conceptually intended to introduce the history of the world and to highlight breakthrough events in time and space. Whether it has achieved its purpose is difficult to judge. Indeed, on the one hand, we receive a colourful panorama of a multitude of historical events depicted in an exceedingly evocative manner, illustrated with hundreds of colourful reproductions and maps, which will leave no reader cold. On the other hand, however, the Atlas is plagued by distortions and discrediting errors.

It has to be admitted that the Atlas offers much in the way of history and geography, such as a myriad of highly interesting facts that had an influence on the history of humankind from the stone age to the present. For numerous readers with little historical knowledge it might provide an incentive for further study. In this sense the Atlas can be said to popularise historical and geographical knowledge. Indeed, its effect on the emotions and imagination can be useful for elementary school pupils. For older students, however, it is rather not recommended, because its simplified vision of the world may promote ignorance. In a wider framework the Atlas provides evidence against uncritical one-to-one translation into Polish of works of dubious scientific value. At the very least, two proper reviews and a careful editing process would have been required to iron out factual errors and place appropriate comments on matters which are debatable.

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