

CHRONICLE

Acta Poloniae Historica

114, 2016

PL ISSN 0001-6829

Two Hundred Years of the University of Warsaw: A Summary Attempt

The year 2016 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the University of Warsaw [Uniwersytet Warszawski]. Yet, it was several years ago that the Chancellor Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow and Vice-Chancellors (at that time) began considering the form that the jubilee celebrations might take, and have been fervently discussing the issue with their close associates.

The opportunity is pretty unique indeed. While the two centuries of the University's tradition cannot make it one of the oldest Polish tertiary schools (apart from the Kraków Academy, renamed since the nineteenth century as the Jagiellonian University, the peer schools were formed in Wilno and Lwów, apart from the entirely private foundation of the Zamoyiski Academy [*Hippaeum Zamoscianum*] in Zamość), it does boast an unquestionable historical achievements. Universal tradition has it that an anniversary, especially if round and historically documented like the present one, is normally an opportunity to hold a celebration and solemnise. It should moreover encourage afterthought with respect to the jubilee celebrator's output and achievements, and provide an essential stimulus for planning the tomorrow. Indeed, a unique occasion has come to make fundamental declarations and new commitments.

And so is the case with the Warsaw University. Its managerial team are aware that jubilees have been devaluated nowadays, also due to their mass character – and that the time the interested party is ready to consider 'long enough' to become the reason for holding an anniversary celebration has been drastically reduced.

Among the ideas – not all of them necessarily original – of how to commemorate the anniversary, the idea to thoroughly describe, in a compendium manner, the history and the output of the University's communities in the past two hundred years has been proposed. To what an extent such a monograph, or a series of monographs, would be compendial, remained unclear. Professor Jacek Hołowka, one of the experts we have sought advice from, argued that everything which was really of importance and worth presenting on the occasion was comprisable within a single volume, all the more so that such would probably be the expectation of the reading public.

Resulting from a long debate, it was decided that a possibly comprehensive and, perforce, extensive formula, one that would summarise the multifold threads in the University's history and the social/societal contexts of the functioning of this particular school, should prevail. We have observed that

the complicated history in which our country and society was involved and entangled has imprinted a pronounced stigma on the vicissitudes of Polish higher, or tertiary, schools – as excellently exemplified by the history of the University of Warsaw. Moreover, the School's proud pedigree and uneasy history ought to be part of (a possibly) common knowledge, contributing to collective reflexion. And, the plans for the future, expected to be proposed at such a moment, ought to be based on reliable historical foundation. Lastly, an inspiration of the sort will not reappear soon.

We have thus approached the jubilee opportunity in a pragmatic way, resolving to establish a publishing series called *Monumenta Universitatis Varsoviensis* (MUV), which is meant to present the history of the University, its achievements, output, and importance to the society. A total of fifteen volumes forming the series summarise the research pursued in the recent years at the Warsaw University and in other scientific centres or institutions. In terms of subject-matter, there are three subseries: a three-volume *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* [A History of the Warsaw University]; *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* [Portraits of Scholars. Professors at the University of Warsaw], in six volumes; plus, another three volumes dealing with the development of the sciences pursued at the University. This body of volumes is accompanied by monographs on the Chancellors (Rectors), University-related buildings, and the University as portrayed by photographers.

A history of the University was first published in 1907–13; another historical description came out in 1981–2.¹ A new history, in three volumes, is being published presently, as part of the MUV series,² and encompasses the University's history in its entirety including the period after 1939, which was not taken into account in the 1981–2 publication and is intended by the authors to meet the modern reader's expectations to a larger degree than the older publications could do. Institutional and milieu-related changes on the various stages of the school's institutional existence (and inexistence), the political contexts of its functioning, the shaping of the lecturer/reader and student milieus, and the University's position in the life of the city and the county are the focus of the narration. For the thirteen-member authorial and editorial team, the relations between the University and the government, often abounding in tensions as they were, was of particular import,

¹ Józef Bieliński, *Królewski Uniwersytet Warszawski (1816–1831)*, 4 vols. (Warszawa, 1907–13); Stefan Kieniewicz (ed.), *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1807–1915* (Warszawa, 1981); Andrzej Garlicki (ed.), *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1915–1939* (Warszawa, 1982).

² Tomasz Kizwalter (ed.), *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1816–1915* (Warszawa, 2016); Piotr M. Majewski (ed.), *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1915–1945* (Warszawa, 2016); *idem* (ed.), *Dzieje Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego po 1945* (Warszawa, 2016).

as was the life situation, views and attitudes of the student community. Any history of a university must be founded upon the institutional aspect. While not neglecting this issue, the authors have decided to place the histories of the people in the foreground. The students have taken a more prominent position compared to the older studies: the institution, science, teaching and the academia were previously discussed quite at length, whereas students were featured if they had happened to become outstanding graduates.

With Polish universities or colleges, of particular importance are the political aspects of their functioning, given the turbulent history of Poland in the modern period. Wars and occupations oftentimes broke up the continuity of the nation's life; the society, or at least a considerable portion of it, was frequently in acute conflict with the authorities, which were either alien or subservient to a foreign power. These factors have strongly influenced the history of Warsaw's university.

Its beginnings date back to the Duchy of Warsaw, an ephemeral Polish state created by Napoleon – the date Warsaw saw the opening of a School of Law and Administrative Sciences and a Medical School. The University was finally set up in 1816, after the Kingdom of Poland, subordinate to the Russian Empire, was formed. Based on the French higher school pattern and the German university model, the new school soon became an important hub of education for Polish intelligentsia. In 1831, following the defeat of the November Insurrection, the University was closed down: the Russian imperial authorities believed that its existence was detrimental to the control of Polish territory. As a result, semi-higher schools operated for more than thirty subsequent years in Warsaw. The Main School, established in 1862 as a product of favourable political conditions in the first years of the reign of Tsar Alexander II, was not named a university but in fact functioned as one. The School was attended by people who were to play an essential role in Poland's intellectual life. In 1869, a few years after the January Insurrection of 1863–4 was suppressed and Russification tendencies intensified in the Russian policy, the School was transformed into an Imperial University of Warsaw, with Russian as the language of instruction. Poles have mostly disregarded this formation, not considering it part of their academic tradition. However, the authors of *Dzieje ...* considered it erroneous to neglect or marginalise this particular phase in the University's history. The Imperial University maintained a relationship with the life of Polish society: Poles formed a majority of its students for a long time, and there were some Poles (although their number steadily decreased) among the academics. Russian-Polish relations in that period cannot be discussed without considering the history of Warsaw's Russian-speaking tertiary school. The Imperial University also deserves attention as one of the Empire's universities: although not a top one, it boasted some achievements. In 1915, the University was evacuated to Rostov-on-Don, where it operated for less than another two years as a 'Warsaw' one.

Volume 2 of *Dzieje ...* covers the period from the reactivation by the German occupational authorities of the University of Warsaw, in 1915, with Polish as the language of teaching, up to 1945. With First World War over and Poland rebuilt as a state, the University became the Second Republic's largest tertiary school – with some 1,000 students attending in the academic year 1915/16 and approx. 9,000 in the 1930s. The University developed under tough material circumstances; the changes taking place within it testified to a modernisation of the society and to the conflicts pervading it. Female students joined the community and grew in number as time progressed (from 9% of all the students in 1915/16 up to 42% in 1938/9); intensifying anti-Semitic sentiments caused a dropping percentage of Jewish students instead (51% of all the students registered as of 1915/16 into 14% in 1938/9).

The Second World War threw the University into the most unthought-of circumstances. The German authorities prepared the ground in their occupied territories for the emergence of a racist empire. The genocide of the Jewry was accompanied by actions designed to reduce the rest of the local populace to a non-qualified labour force: Polish higher and secondary schools were closed down, and extermination of the local intelligentsia began. In spite of the prevalent terror, the University of Warsaw operated in conspiratorial conditions; it incurred severe losses during the German Occupation – with hundreds of teachers and students losing their lives, and the buildings, equipment and collections severely damaged and destroyed.

The third volume of work in question tells a story of what happened after 1945. While in the interwar period the relations between the University and the government were not entirely smooth, the 'real socialist' decades made the situation extremely difficult in this respect. In the latter half of the forties, the academy was getting rebuilt and, simultaneously, experienced the effects of the solidification of the Stalinist system, as the whole of Poland did. With Stalinism, the science and university-level education experienced severe intellectual and moral detriments; on the other hand, the new regime supported (even if mostly inefficiently) the material development of the higher education system and the intellectual/educated stratum was gradually regenerating.

The academic year 1957/8 saw some 6,000 students attending the Warsaw University; by the late sixties, the number hit approximately 12,000. After 1956, the totalitarian ambitions of the communist party abated; yet, there was no chance that the authorities would quit their political and ideological control over the University's life. The conditions of doing science, teaching and studying did improve; in combination with a relaxed totalitarian pressure on the society, this provided the soil for the appearance in the academic milieu of ideological 'revisionist' trends and, thereafter, first manifestations of political opposition. March 1968 saw student protests staged at the university campus, In 1980, the University's staff and students multitudinously joined the Solidarity movement.

The year 1989 marked a decisive caesura in the University's post-war history. The collapse of 'real socialism' thoroughly altered the conditions in which the academy functioned, and posed new responsibilities for it. On the one hand, the previous restrictions and political/ideological pressures disappeared; on the other, the University had to face and adapt to the new realities in which much could be achieved but it required considerable effort for a success to come. The country in the early nineties was rising from a deep crisis, its political and economic system was subjected to a transition. University-level schools had pretty restricted means at their disposal, with which they had to face a rapid inflow of students: in the first years of the twenty-first century, the number students registered with the Warsaw University reached 55,000. The requirements of European integration and inclusion in the European Higher Education Area posed another serious challenge.

These problems are covered by the last chapter of volume 3, whose author, avoiding proposing his own judgment, lists the major dilemmas and challenges being faced these days, in the century's second decade, by a capital-city academy having to cope with its mass-scale educational obligations concurrent with ambition to provide elitist education, in relation with top-level scientific research. The University aspires to become an important research centre countrywide and internationally; at the same time, it strives for significantly improving its image and position in the world education market.

The other subseries, entitled *Portraits of Scholars ...*, is divided into three volumes (and as many as six books or tomes) presenting, in a chronological and alphabetical order, portrayals and achievements of the academic instructors enjoying the highest authority and active with the University in the years 1816–1915, 1915–45 and in the post-war period.³ With diverse narrative forms used – essay being predominant – a total of 333 portraits of the most eminent professors are shown, some of these portraits having been commissioned for the project, others existing before and now used for the purpose. Most of the authors are former disciples who with time achieved a rank in the academia comparable to the position of their masters.

³ Marek Wąsowicz and Andrzej Kajetan Wróblewski (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1816–1915* (Warszawa, 2016); Piotr Salwa and Andrzej Kajetan Wróblewski (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1915–1945. A–Ł* (Warszawa, 2016); *idem* (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1915–1945. M–Ż* (Warszawa, 2016); Waldemar Baraniewski, Wojciech Tygielski, and Andrzej Kajetan Wróblewski (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego po 1945. A–K* (Warszawa, 2016); *idem* (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego po 1945. L–R* (Warszawa, 2016); *idem* (eds.), *Portrety uczonych. Profesorowie Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego po 1945. S–Ż* (Warszawa, 2016).

These portrayals of eminent men were penned by outstanding authors: a concept that has enabled to illustrate the ups-and-downs of the consecutive generations and the academic continuity of interests, accomplishments and attitudes. In the milieu of physicists, for instance, it was preserved across generations: the essay on Stefan Pieńkowski is written by Jerzy Pniewski, his disciple who became an outstanding professor with the University; the reminiscence of Pniewski was compiled in 1991 by his student Janusz Zakrzewski, an eminent professor too, who has been portrayed by Jacek Ciborowski, his once-student and presently the University's professor. The earliest of the texts reprinted is dated 1848: it is, namely, an essay written by Józef Belza on Franciszek Armiński, the astronomer and founding father of the University's Astronomical Observatory. The most recently submitted text, commissioned on a fast-track basis, is about David Shugar, the founding father of the University's biophysics, who died in late October 2015; the author is Ryszard Stolarski, once a student of Shugar and presently head of the Department of Biophysics within the Faculty of Physics. Another advantage of the editorial concept is preservation of the old, essayistic-style and interesting forms of discourse, as apparent in the pieces that are written from quite a private perspective and leavened with anecdotes; the original spelling has moreover been preserved.

The task, meant to reconstruct the academy's Areopagus of the most eminent scholars, scientists and professors, has proved difficult to deliver, owing not to a scarcity of materials or competent authors but to the procedure of selection of the figures worthy of presentation. Inevitably limited, the competencies of the team members have collided with the diversity of the academic disciplines and their singular appraisal criteria; added to that is the obvious subjectivism in the evaluations formulated within the respective academic milieus. Hence, a possibly extensive consultation was carried out, initially somewhat formalised but less formal later on, which nevertheless could not disperse all the doubts.

The formal criteria such as membership with scientific corporations or the person in question appearing in encyclopaedic compendia could not serve as a conclusive panacea. While – not quite surprisingly – such criteria were found to be of some use with respect to the exact and natural sciences milieu, they could have proved unreliable with humanists or representatives of social sciences, many of whom pursued their activities in opposition to the official structures and consequently were possibly prevented from entering the distinguished academia circles and their names were not necessarily mentioned in encyclopaedias or biographical dictionaries. Consequently, there was some room for arbitrary decisions, and the science editorial team is responsible *in corpore* for their choices. While not waiving this responsibility, we would probably not miss the point by stating the errors, if any, will be corrected in a future, for the University's pantheon will go on expanding.

The major accomplishments of the University's scholars by scientific area are discussed in separate volumes, split into exact and natural sciences, the humanities, and social sciences. This exercise appeared to be particularly difficult as it was necessary to evaluate the elaborations and studies, discoveries and findings made in the more or less remote past; on the other hand, it is, quite clearly, a tough task to summarise the achievements of the most recent period, especially if those responsible for them are still active with the academic community. It also appeared pretty problematic to find authors who would have been ready to embark on the objectively difficult and risky challenge to synthetically present and evaluate the achievements of their own milieu in at least a few interrelated disciplines. So far, the task has been fulfilled for exact and natural sciences only (and there is no coincidence in it).⁴

A guide to the University's Chancellors – *Poczet rektorów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* and the study entitled *Uniwersytet Warszawski i fotografia 1839–1921. Ludzie, miejsca, wydarzenia / University of Warsaw and Photography, 1839–1921: People, Places, Events* (a bilingual Polish-English edition)⁵ are also designed to be part of the series. Forthcoming (finishing editorial touches are underway) are volumes discussing the accomplishments of the University people in humanities and social sciences. Under preparation is also a conceptually original volume presenting the buildings and edifices; obviously, discussed is the architecture of University buildings (and the gardens too!), with the historical changes they underwent and their spatial deployment/location and the functions they have fulfilled, also changing in time.

If someone is willing to describe the *Monumenta Universitatis Varsoviensis* as a 'stilted' project, such a description is possibly acceptable due to the series' size, its multithreaded and compendial character. The Authors and the Editors have spared no efforts to avoid any bombasticity or stiltedness in the narrative and style, placing a bet instead on diversity of forms, views and takes, in order to encourage and facilitate the perception of such an extensive 'piece of reading'. Whether they have succeeded is perhaps too early yet to judge.

trans. Tristan Korecki

Tomasz Kizwalter and Wojciech Tygielski

⁴ Andrzej Kajetan Wróblewski (ed.), *Nauki ścisłe i przyrodnicze na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim* (Warszawa, 2016).

⁵ Robert Gawkowski, *Poczet rektorów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego* (Warszawa, 2016); Danuta Jackiewicz, *Uniwersytet Warszawski i fotografia 1839–1921. Ludzie, miejsca, wydarzenia / University of Warsaw and Photography 1839–1921: People, Places, Events* (Warszawa, 2016).

The Hero Fortress Revisited. Controversies over the Brest Fortress

Minsk's museum of the Great Patriotic War was inaugurated in the Belarusian capital in 2014. Its heroic architecture symbolises how the history of the war that began with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 remains almost unchanged. The museum literally tells this story under a Soviet flag. The red Hammer and Sickle can be seen flying over the Dome of Victory far beyond the 'Minsk – Hero City' complex. The message conveyed by the museum's narrative is "we will not let anyone take our great victory from us". The exhibition *The Heroic Defence of the Brest Fortress in June 1941* presents a core of the myth of the Great Fatherland War created under Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s. It is sumptuously illustrated with 3-D videos and artefacts from Brest.

However, new research is putting cracks in this firmly established image. One author undertaking such work is the German historian Christian Ganzer. He is writing a PhD at the University of Leipzig on the history of the defence of the Brest Fortress and its commemoration in Belarusian museums. He has published a new book entitled *Brest, Summer 1941. Documents, Materials, Photographs*.¹ With the help of a German-Belarusian team, Ganzer hunted down documents concerning the first weeks of Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. The 723-page work contains German, Soviet and Polish documents organised into three sections: i) Military Operations, ii) Conditions in the City, and iii) the Beginning of the Terror. These are printed in the original language and, where necessary, translated into Russian. A comprehensive appendix comprises comments, abbreviations and an overview of all the documents. The collection enables scholars in the Russian-speaking world and beyond it to reconstruct meticulously events in the Brest Fortress from the Soviet and German perspectives. The document collection's great strength lies in the breadth and depth of the material. It contains not only materials from the military command and party leadership, but also numerous personal documents of soldiers, policemen and local residents from the time of the Second World War itself. The book ends with witness statements from the West German trials of members of the Police Battalion 307.

The collection with documents from archives in Freiburg, Berlin, Minsk, Brest and Moscow first came out at the beginning of 2016 in Russian with the Smolensk publisher Inbelkult. The materials demonstrate that the battle for the fortress, which lay directly behind the demarcation line between the Soviet Union and Germany created by the Hitler-Stalin pact, did indeed

¹ Christian Ganzer *et al.* (eds.), *Брест, лето 1941 г.: документы, материалы, фотографии* (Смоленск, 2016).

last eight days. However, the numbers of German soldiers killed and Soviet prisoners taken also indicate that the image of a fight to the last man and the last bullet requires revision. Most Red Army men gradually gave themselves up after the Wehrmacht subjected them to massive artillery bombardment and propaganda over loudspeaker. This clearly contradicts the Soviet interpretation of a heroic defence to the last gasp. At the same time, the documents give insight into the German operation and Soviet reaction. Thus, members of the Wehrmacht were certainly surprised by the intensity of the defence by the remaining Soviet soldiers.

The collection is not content simply to document the events in and around the fortress. It fundamentally shifts the perspective on 'Brest in Summer 1941' through the reference to the murder of thousands of Jews in the outskirts of Brest at the beginning of July 1941. This did not have a place in the Soviet narrative of the beginning of the war. In a separate essay, Bernd Robionek portrays the murderous activity of the Police Battalion 307 in Brest as the beginning of the end of Brest's Jewish community.

Ganzer and his team comment upon every document with painstaking notes and supplement the volume with texts that contextualise the materials. The manuscript should have already been printed at the end of 2015 by a Belarusian printer. Its management stopped the printing in the last minute, officially due to a technical problem, unofficially because the Belarusian people were not yet ready for the book. The Minsk publisher Valera Bulhakaŭ found an alternative near Moscow. Because there are no border controls between the Russian Federation and Belarus, the books could make their way to Minsk without hindrance. The 1,000 copies were imported in a trailer on the back of a private car.

The publication of the collection of documents is a milestone for research on the first weeks of the German occupation of these regions, which were part of the Polish Republic up to September 1939 and then occupied by the Soviets. However, they did cause a minor commotion in Belarus: it was to be expected that Christian Ganzer would be subjected to attacks for publicly dissecting a state myth in an authoritarian state. But, it came as a complete surprise to observers in Minsk that it was possible to present the collection in the museum of the Great Fatherland War. The director, a retired general who had headed the Belarusian Suvorov Military School, accepted responsibility for the presentation. As a result, Ganzer could offer up the collection for discussion in the hallowed halls of World War commemoration. The publisher Valera Bulhakaŭ understood this as a sign of a small thaw. He knows what he is talking about: only three years ago, he burned a large portion of his own historical books in Belarusian at a secret location in order to avoid prosecution for forming a criminal organisation. Bulhakaŭ had in the past often printed books on the territory of the Republic of Belarus.

During the presentation in March 2016, there were, alongside historians, avowed admirers of Stalin and veterans' representatives. There followed the expected public denunciations of 'bourgeois propaganda'. This signalled the go-ahead to attack Ganzer personally in the state press. Nevertheless, an event planned in the Brest regional library went ahead. To date, Bulhakaŭ has sold the first issue and is preparing a second one.

trans. Christopher Gilley

Felix Ackermann