

**Bogusław Bakula**

ORCID: 0000-0003-0523-698X

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

E-mail: bakula@amu.edu.pl

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## **In Search of the Strength to Exist: Polish Literature of Criticism Between 1890 and 1914**

He shall live to see the day of Liberation,  
Who is liberated by his own will!

S. Wyspiański, *Liberation*, Act I, v. 405–406

### **Abstract**

The article describes the critical trends in literature and in socio-political thought known as the Polish Literature of Criticism (New Critical Order), which is part of the cultural heritage of the period from 1890 to 1914 that opposed decadent moods, the catastrophism of the end of the century, the cult of the individual and the modernist idea of art for art's sake. Literature of Criticism was a multifaceted movement that produced programs for national revival and the reconstruction of a conscious, multi-class Polish society. Playing a fundamental role in this process, the Literature of Criticism consisted of various phenomena, the most important of which included (using selected examples): 1/ literary works and views depicting non-institutional civilizationism, taking into account the emergence of increasingly moral and sophisticated forms of the state through the sacrifice of individuals and groups for higher spiritual values (Henryk Sienkiewicz and Bolesław

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Prus); 2/ works depicting the intelligentsia ethos of work and service to society (active patriotism of labour) as well as advancing the need to create a new collective ethic that respects the rights of the most vulnerable; works showing the struggle against imposed orientalisation (stereotypes) and national uprooting (Stefan Żeromski, Stanisław Brzozowski, and Edward Abramowski); 3/ works in which history and national myths are revised in the name of conquering the weakness of uncritical nostalgia for the heroic past (Wyspiański, Miciński, and Żeromski); 4/ writings showing various aspects of national and social solidarity or lack thereof, and postulating ethnic activism (Roman Dmowski, Adolf Nowaczyński, and Tadeusz Miciński), demanding a change in subaltern attitudes and, most importantly, self-improvement for the sake of the national future; 5/ literary attitudes demonstrating anti-passive, active attitude to the direct, soldierly struggle for a free homeland (Edward Słoiński and Władysław Broniewski). The Literature of Criticism, which integrated these literary and philosophical trends, was a vibrant phenomenon in terms of artistic and social and political values, as well as a coherent current if we look at the general principle of its existence. It stirred up internal debate on submissiveness to historical processes and social languor, held in the name of the free Poland as a supreme value. It was a platform where both a socialist and a nationalist, a representative of landed conservatism and a supporter of progress, a critic of a conciliatory political stance and a revisionist, a former civil servant and a fighting soldier-legionary could meet. After years of national crisis, writers, columnists, philosophers and the intelligentsia and other strata that followed them outlined and pursued a program of action that led to an active stance towards the challenges of history. Anti-colonial and pointing out directions for reconsidering the foundations of collective existence, including art in its broadest sense, and propagating an active attitude towards social and moral problems, the Literature of Criticism (New Critical Order) prepared several generations of Poles capable of shaping and fighting for state.

## **Keywords**

Literature of Criticism vs Aestheticism, Positivism in Polish literature, Stanisław Wyspiański, Stanisław Brzozowski, Stefan Żeromski, Edward Abramowski, Tadeusz Miciński, Roman Dmowski, Adolf Nowaczyński, Polish discourse

## **The rebellious subaltern**

The long 19th century in Central and Eastern Europe was marked by the dashed or unfulfilled aspirations of Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, as well as Hungarians, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs and other subjugated nations. For Poles, this history, which began with the demise of the state in 1795 and the derailing of hopes for its revival, had the most bitter taste. The amount of disappointments they suffered and defeats they had to endure was simply overwhelming. Poland, a large state and society living in the middle of Europe, was divided by belligerent neighbours, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and the provinces that had been torn away from it became the periphery of the partitioning powers. The attempts to regain sovereignty failed completely. For this reason, many embittered Polish patriots and defenders of freedom took part in European revolts, uprisings, as well as local and foreign wars. They were emigrants actively supporting freedom (Adam Mickiewicz), soldiers helping in the fight of other nations (Tadeusz Kościuszko, Kazimierz Pułaski, and Józef Bem), terrorists throwing bombs under the feet of tyrants (Ignacy Hryniewiecki), and revolutionaries (Józef Piłsudski). Anything that could, in their view, change the course of history in Europe, in the world, and awaken the national majority falling asleep in captivity was worth the effort. So they took part in the Napoleonic wars, fought in the war for the freedom of the United States, and later joined the legions of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Hungarian army of Lajos Kossuth, the war for the freedom of Italy in 1848, perished in the fights of the Paris Commune, and organized revolts in 1905. They sparked two national uprisings, whose failure turned into a nation-building myth, binding Polish societies strongly together across the borders of the empires. They were victims of mass persecution in Russian Tsar's

retaliation, the scale of which was previously unknown, as well as in Austria and Prussia.

These difficult historical experiences gave birth to the great Romantic literature and journalism of the émigré, and to a unique, defiant, underground Polish national discourse. They gave birth to the myth of the writer as the spiritual leader of the nation and the myth of literature as a surrogate state, which exists in the realm of historically charged symbols. Polish literature and political ideas showed a strong connection with the democratic European and national liberation tradition. In the second half of the 19th century, an intelligentsia originating from the landed gentry and the bourgeoisie was formed, also through literature, which determined the further cultural and spiritual development of Polish society. This young but rapidly growing social class, which was sometimes joined by Polonised Jews, had a distinctive sense of mission. It was defined by a bond with Polish national liberation and democratic history, a strong imperative to fulfil their duties to the nation and society that had not been completely fulfilled by any group until then, an aversion to social conservatism, as well as an attitude of openness to new ideas, and a belief in science and the power of education.

The work of the intelligentsia, especially after the anti-Russian uprising (1863–1864), which was defeated in a year, bore some fruit, but also made one realize that a homogeneous Polish nation may cease to exist in the long run if it ends with the efforts of a single, insufficiently crystallised social group. In the wake of the shock and massive Russian repression, it was in essence only a symbolic community to an extent that Benedict Anderson himself probably did not envisage, since it existed only in language and on paper, in literature. So it needed to be reawakened and strengthened, to prove that it was a unity not only in literary, political and philosophical works, and to revitalise the idea of its resurgence in separate class groups that poorly communicated with each other. It was the task of the intelligentsia to expand this imagined community as much as possible, by encompassing the people, the bourgeoisie and those members of national minorities who wanted to assimilate with Poles. The multifaceted dispute over the shape of the nation and the future state has so far taken place mainly among the social and

artistic elites. A large part of Polish society in rural and urban areas remained excluded from it. In the tumultuous year of 1905, Wacław Berent, author of the well-known fin de siècle novel *Próchno* [Rotten Wood] (1901), while discarding his decadent tone, asked in *Chimera*, in his article "Sources and Outlets of Nietzscheanism" about the attitude of his compatriots: "Why do only so very few manage to shoulder the heritage of the past and carry it with noble dignity anymore?" (1905, p. 134).

In *Próchno* [Rotten Wood], Berent showed the sources and forms of spiritual exhaustion of cosmopolitan elites rejecting the legacy of pro-independence ideas. Some of these elites, further abetted by decadent culture and literature streaming in from the West, spreading the popular cult of improproductivism in art, the end-of-the-century crisis, dandyism, Baudelairean gloom and catastrophist sentiments, created a distinct, albeit inert worldview and artistic formation that fit into the mould of modernism, which was a trend of aestheticisation and was averse to all utilitarian and civic discussions. However, the activity of this formation was necessary because it provided an alternative to the provincial, hermetic patriotism of the defeated. The autistic patriotism magnified the sense of loneliness on the one hand, and, on the other hand, produced an uncontrollable sense of fulfilment at the sacrificial altar, a feeling that arises in communities that live with trauma, and struggle with historical fatalism. For no one knew how to suffer so beautifully and powerlessly in their own literature and symbolic culture as the Poles. From there, it was even further to the necessary social and mental transformations that could culminate in a modern Polish society in the future. National culture needed other, more powerful, vivid and creative ideas than "the naked soul," "art for art's sake" and "Poland is the Messiah of nations" that could have triggered the reconstruction of shattered Polish discourse.

Between 1890 and 1914, writers and publicists, active intelligentsia supporting new currents in culture, and active national activists, applied a kind of shock therapy to a divided and impotent Polish society (Podraza-Kwiatkowska, 1985, p. 121). The new literature demanded that society return to an active attitude, and promoted ideals of strength and work, which were the seeds of the future.

The rebellious Polish subaltern was, according to this therapy, to undergo a transformation from the position of a colonised object to that of a conscious subject decolonizing its circumstances. This was voiced by the poet Tadeusz Miciński in the revealingly titled essay “To the Sources of the Polish Soul,” which became the title of a famous book about the need for a strong Polish identity as seen in the literature of the era:

To the sources of the Polish soul! This is the battle cry of Young Poland – not decadence, not a literary current imported from abroad, as various peddlers of literature foolishly repeat. It is a search for power, and finding it. (1906, p. 34)

### **Literature of Criticism (New Order of Criticism)**

These literary ideas and attitudes, partly involved in the awakening of society, in the creation of an intellectual atmosphere of dispute and resistance, is, to simplify things greatly, the legacy of the years 1890–1914, the period that literary historians call Young Poland. This epoch as a whole is stereotypically (especially in school textbooks) associated with the ideas of decadence, art for art’s sake, sexual desire, the “naked soul,” naive glorification of peasant life, improductivist psychology, and paradoxical praise of decay and hostility to the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the historical synopses of Young Poland do not sufficiently articulate the fact that ideas, works, and attitudes contrary to the aesthetising and escapist tendencies in modernism proved to be much more valuable for the future of the divided and weakened nation. Essentially, these ideas were conscious anti-Romanticism (which did not exclude an artistic fascination with the era of the national bards and of individual sacrifice), social utopianism, realism that negated aestheticism in its radical function, historical revisionism, cultural nationalism, patriotism of work above the divisions resulting from the partitions, and the idea of the unification of social classes on the path to the formation of a homogeneous nation.

I call this phenomenon the Literature of Criticism (or the New Order of Criticism). It is represented by writers from different generations and worldviews, for example, late positivists (Bolesław Prus),

revisionists of national history (Stefan Żeromski, and Stanisław Wyspiański), advocates of socialism (Stanisław Brzozowski), of cultural nationalism (Adolf Nowaczyński), and even of active struggle against tyranny (Andrzej Strug). Although internally antagonised, they formed a surprisingly distinctive whole in terms of their active attitude toward national reality, which had probably not been seen in this way before. The Polish historical literary self-stereotype, meanwhile, accentuates solipsistic modernism. It supposedly set the tone of the era. The opposite was true, as any reader of Polish literature, not its theorist who perpetuates the concepts of the alternation of literary paradigms, is aware. There were two parallel, non-alternative paradigms. The ideological antagonism between them, of course, did not preclude close historical, personal or even aesthetic ties between them. Many writers evolved by moving from aestheticism into Critical Literature, like, for example, Miciński, Staff, and Kasprowicz. Other major artists moved beyond aestheticism and musings on the “naked soul,” and saw the purpose of creativity in developing the ideas of the Literature of Criticism, which could not be forgotten even if aesthetic considerations were prioritised in the literary process. This was corroborated by the well-known researcher of the era, Kazimierz Wyka, who wrote in almost the first words of his fundamental work *Modernizm polski* [Polish Modernism] that “many of the great writers of Young Poland (e.g., Wyspiański, Żeromski, and Reymont) will not appear in the pages of this book at all” (1959, p. 3) and added that some of those authors will be mentioned only in a specific role that does not provide a basis for judging their entire output.

The branch of Young Poland, which aestheticised and distanced itself from the pressing problems of the collective, even became a symbol of kitsch and literary mannerism, moments after the change of the historical-literary paradigm in 1918, and was attacked and even ridiculed, although later scholars retracted many of the charges as misguided. It would disappear, leaving behind a few catchphrases and few valuable works. On the other hand, the Literature of Criticism, bringing together a number of antagonistic ideas, although basically overlooked as a great project, would capture the social imagination for decades, set the course and give meaning to the actions of the Polish collective. Going down this road,

it can be said that this current would prove to be a major ideological and literary backdrop for the entire 20th century, regardless of its turbulent and twisted history and changing ideological dominants. Simply put, it was a formative phenomenon for the entire century in Poland because, although it was composed of warring political attitudes, social views, literary and journalistic works, it turned national focus to one aim: the restoration of culture and the restoration of sovereignty. To this day, more attention is paid to the supposedly insurmountable internal differences than to the similarities of this project. Meanwhile, the Literature of Criticism functioned as a whole, although it was seen only as a broken mirror reflecting contemporary events. The shape of the modern nation and future state was being forged in a complex ideological dispute, which by no means refrained from discussing aesthetics. Writers of those years did not let their society slip into slumber, confident that much could still be done for the virtual, non-existent country. Because of this, Poles were spiritually and intellectually prepared for the emergence of a reborn state and defended it in 1920.

In the Literature of Criticism and adjacent trends, there are four strands of thought and creativity associated with lost independence and the need to rethink the national situation, to spark discussion about the concept of rebuilding society and even the state. The first can be associated with the late works and views of positivists who were already active beyond their era: Henryk Sienkiewicz and Bolesław Prus. Both writers unexpectedly ignited a polarising discussion among the public, not only in Poland, on the essence and importance of the state, which, in the country without independence, was a clear invitation to intellectual rebellion or, at the very least, to criticism of the contemporary times. Sienkiewicz published his novel *Quo vadis* in 1895–1896, while Prus published *Faraon* [*Pharaoh*], which also resonated internationally, in 1895. The fact that the most prominent Polish writers of their time almost simultaneously matured to address the great historical question of the existence and meaning of the state is an answer to the deeply hidden and rarely asked questions of the era. Both works created a space for discussion for generations of Poles that no one had dreamed of before, and laid the groundwork for spinning bolder reflections on the future.



The second strand of critical discussion in the literature and criticism of the time is represented, by way of example, by selected views and works of Stefan Żeromski and Stanisław Brzozowski who expressed ideas of working for society and criticism of national passivity. When it comes to socio-philosophical issues, the thought of sociologist and philosopher Edward Abramowski was close to these writers, although a historian of social thought would likely mention many other names, such as the socialist Ludwik Krzywicki or the mystic Wincenty Lutosławski, who based his ideas on the cult of literary romantic messianism.

The third strand in the debate of the time, which consumed the national past in the name of a creative future, is bound up with the playwriting of Stanisław Wyspiański and the prose and dramas of Tadeusz Miciński. It contains, along with many ideas of the representatives of the second trend (Żeromski, Brzozowski and others), clear concepts of revising Polish history and culture, including the demythisation of national tradition amid the dispute with Polish romanticism, mysticism and the concept of art reduced only to local issues. Overcoming the inert weight of tradition, stimulating the viewer, sometimes with shock on the stage or in novels, preparing them to confront a living and ruthless history was a response to the decadent cries of the “naked soul” à la Stanisław Przybyszewski, the slogans of art for art’s sake and the vulnerability of the idealized world of sentimentalisation of the folk. It was not art for art’s sake, but the art of the will to exist through the reappraisal of illusions and weaknesses.

The fourth strand is formed by the ideological and artistic ideas of the proponents of nationalist ideology, Roman Dmowski and Adolf Nowaczyński, co-shaping Polish cultural nationalism, which was non-institutional and critical of the condition of the Polish nation and its relations with other nations in Europe. Roman Dmowski, in his critical work *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka* [Thoughts of a Modern Pole] (1903), placed many demands on his compatriots that they would have to meet in order to catch up with other European societies. In addition to the rationalist current of nationalist thought, it is worth pointing out the current of messianic national philosophy, which is also partly tied to Slavophilism. Its eminent representative in that

period was August Cieszkowski, a thinker who came from Poznań, i.e. a part of the former Republic of Poland annexed by Prussia. Cieszkowski described himself as a continuator of the thought of Bronisław Trentowski (Freiburg) and Karol Libelt (Poznań) who also originated from the same strand of nationalist and Slavophile thought.

In the literature of the early twentieth century, which is closely related to the course of World War I, it would be easy to distinguish another current of creativity and thought, this time associated with the armed combat of the Polish legions and, in general, with not only military, but also ideological efforts designed to awaken patriotism, appeal to the national community, and show the way to the rebirth of the state. This current, arguably the fifth in the historical sequence, goes beyond the time frame adopted here, but since it refers to the literary tradition of liberation it seems directly connected with the previous quarter century. The literature produced during World War I was also the direct backdrop for post-1918 works depicting the struggle and the emergence of the state.

### **A new state?**

The rivalry between *Quo vadis* and *Pharaoh* was not only a matter of literary, but also of worldview differences. There is no denying that the attitude to Henryk Sienkiewicz's writing divided not only literary critics. There were essentially two tendencies in evaluating the work of the author of the *Trilogy*: those who adored the writer and were enraptured by his vision of the past, supporters of tradition, who saw in his works the medium of perfect Polishness, and a much smaller group who noticed the oversimplifications, and the shallow patriotic idealisation. According to sociologist Józef Chałasiński, there were two factions of the Polish intelligentsia (readers of literature) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which fundamentally influenced the national consciousness (1997, pp. 87–88). The first, usually originating in or revolving around landed gentry circles, was stuck in the space of national solipsism and national adoration and placed emphasis on the role of patriotic-Catholic identity, class distance and conservatism, albeit while preaching the need for work and

sacrifice. The second, radical group, with democratic or socialist leanings, rebelling against conservative traditions, but not abandoning its romantic pedigree, sought to expand the area of dialogue. Chałasiński recognized Sienkiewicz and his works, as a symbol of the conservative ideology of the noble-land intelligentsia. In 1905, Sienkiewicz was awarded the Nobel Prize, which seemed to confirm the validity of the stance represented by the writer in the eyes of a fairly large social group. Of course, Sienkiewicz did not stand for extreme aristocratic conservatism like Józef Wyssenhoff (a literary apologist of the old noble epoch) or Count Stanisław Tarnowski, a member of the group of so-called Galician Stanczyks, loyalists to the Viennese court, who advocated giving up the dream of independence, while firmly criticising aristocratic democracy with its *liberum veto* and national uprisings.

The novel *Quo vadis*, which tells the story of the pending demise of the Roman empire as a result of the emergence of true Christians of Western Slavic origin within its borders who know the truth about God and spread it, could be interpreted not only as a clever literary idea that was calculated to gain easy popularity in the world, but also as a thoughtful, allusive political text referring to the importance of the religious factor in history. It is, after all, a novel about suffering, messianism and spiritual defiance, which was to bring freedom to the oppressed because they believed in the meaning of the suffering of Christ Crucified. The torment of Christians, killed on the altar of humanity, and their courage in proclaiming the Truth, could hint allusively at the suffering of the religious Polish nation. Sienkiewicz's simplistic, rough-hewn mysticism was irrelevant to the novel's many followers, whose universal message, critical of the power of imperial evil, made it popular outside Poland as well. Rome, would fall because of Nero's madness, but the Christians would remain and the future belonged to them. Nero's decadence would turn the republic into a world of bankrupt values, but Rome would change for the better under the influence of the Christians and manage to survive only because of them. Christians would not conquer Rome militarily, they would transform it spiritually: this is important. In this process the author highlighted the historical role of Slavic Christians. It is mainly their suffering that would represent the hope for a better future for

the world. It is significant that the young Roman nobleman Vinicius matured to a new religion, and thus a new understanding of his reality through love, under the spell of a beautiful slave girl, a Christian Slav.

Almost five more centuries would pass before the empire would be fully suffused with the spirit of God and before it would completely collapse, to be reborn in a new form. The beginning has been made, however, and it was initiated by Jewish, Christian apostles and Slavic slaves. This is reminiscent of Adam Mickiewicz's messianic concepts, which Sienkiewicz, sating the pain of the enslaved, shifts symbolically to the beginning of Western civilization, the dawn of Christianity in Europe. *Qui vadis* was thus read as messianic and contemporary story about a new Poland, reborn thanks to God and the suffering of the Poles, which will rise on the ruins of a decaying empire. No one needed to be reminded that this empire lay in the east.

Published in book form in 1897, Prus' great novel about the state, *Pharaoh*, was an intellectual turning point not only for the brilliant writer, who moved from commenting on contemporary times, especially in his famous *Weekly Chronicles*, *Lalka* [The Doll], in his short stories, to a broad historiosophical reflection, and sketched a vision of the state and political disputes disguised as the portrayal of the transformations of ancient Egypt. *Pharaoh* a continuation of the positivist debates of the 1870s to the 1890s on social problems and individual attitudes, and also foreshadows future discussions about the state that will take place in the literature of later periods. Prus asked a fundamental question that historically had still not been answered by the numerous and, despite the historical calamities, still influential leadership class in Polish society: what is most important in the process of rebuilding a strong state? What is more important in history: the well-being of the leadership elite, who are able to guide the other classes into the future (the Egyptian priests), or the well-being of the general public, especially the common people, who represent the largest social stratum in the state, but are disenfranchised and destitute, and whose prosperity could guarantee the real power of the state. *Pharaoh* is, by and large, a story about the art of governance, about the difficult choices that rulers must make to save their tottering political creation. All the while the question of the plight and behaviour of the peasants, who suffer

misery due to excessive taxes and may become a third force led by people who do not respect the existing division of roles in the world, looms in the background.

The exemplary vision of a state that, despite internal conflicts, is able to unify and steer clear of the most dangerous reefs, eliminating political extremes, would demonstrate that in history growth is achieved not only through internal revolutions and great wars. Reason, and by extension political pragmatism, must be the cornerstone of successful development. Ultimately, two things are at stake: society and the state. The category of the nation, in view of the obvious internal ethnic divisions (Egyptians, Jews, Phoenicians, desert peoples, etc.) is not crucial, as in *Quo vadis*. When writing about the state and society, Prus shows the classic struggle of the antagonistic major forces of history, which if united can save this particular state, society and civilization. The most important issue is the survival of civilization, which is represented by the wisdom of the priestly caste and Egypt as a whole. Egypt is eternal because of the treasures of wisdom that are stored and cultivated, not because of this or that temporary historical faction. Prus chooses, like Sienkiewicz, a vision of the future in which the good of future civilization (Szaruga, 1999, p. 38), including Poland, will triumph. Arguably, the most significant thing about this story is that it poses a question that had not been asked for a long time, a question about a new state. That of the possibility of a state emerging and rising on the ruins of the existing order, perhaps capitalizing on the values of the past, but essentially taking its own spiritual and political course in history.

Both old positivists posed a problem the solution of which was beyond the reach of their generation. Surprisingly, the ideological and fictional conclusions of their novels both envisioned future states as theocracies (a state of priests in Prussia, a state of popes in Sienkiewicz). These ideas were not picked up in the secularised world of 20th century politics. Great writers such as Stefan Żeromski, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, Andrzej Strug, and Zofia Nałkowska would return in the 1920s and the 1930s to the notion of building a Polish state without the religious factor.

### Empty symbol or self-work?

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the word “Poland” was an expression without a political designer, although it was very firmly anchored in artistic and political practices. On the other hand, practically speaking, the Polish lands became marginal territories of the three partitioning powers, their “borderlands,” which had little influence on either the economy or the politics of the centres. Preventive censorship, de-Polonisation of culture, and anti-Polish economic policies were put in place in each of the partitioned states, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. Austria-Hungary was the most liberal state, where Poles had considerable opportunities to make a career in politics, culture or the economy, and the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria and the Grand Duchy of Cracow, where they resided, enjoyed some freedom as autonomous territories. Poles living in the eastern and northern territories of Prussia and later the German Empire, which pursued a restrictive policy of Germanization and of limiting Polish economic activities, had the fewest opportunities for development. The “longest war in modern Europe,” as the title of a well-known television history series from 1979–1981 read, was taking place. It was a bloodless, more than a century-long struggle between Poles and Germans in economy and culture activities. This struggle shaped a commitment to economic values, tenacity, perseverance, pragmatism, and collaboration between social classes and strata among some Poles. In the future, the region would play a major role in the unification of the Republic.

The Russian Empire, which seized the largest area of the former Polish state, had an ambivalent attitude toward the Polish issue. This area, stretching historically as far as the Dnieper River and the Wild Fields, although multinational, for it historically belonged to Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians, was distinguished by its unique peculiarities resulting from multiculturalism and the rapid development of competing national identities that entered into disputes with each other and into conflicts with the hegemonic power, the Russian Empire. It was here that all Polish anti-Russian armed uprisings erupted, and ended in defeat (1794, 1830, 1863, 1905). Residents of this territory, first known as the Congress Kingdom

(after the Congress of Vienna in 1815) and, after the defeat of the January Uprising, as the Vistula Country, constituted the most numerous Polish population, part of which was slowly integrating into the empire, although the most radical liberation and anti-Russian movements, leading national forms of resistance, evolved within it. These lands suffered the greatest human casualties from failed uprisings. It was also here that a strong Russification campaign was carried out and inter-ethnic antagonisms were stirred up on a large scale. Despite this, generations that were most determined to fight for independence in the future, and most prepared for it in terms of political consciousness, grew up in the Russian partition, although their members did not take a direct part in government, as did, for example, Poles in Austria-Hungary.

Overcoming determinism that was pushing Poland into political and national oblivion, as well as the idea of a great deed – a momentous creative act in any area of social life – permeates the novels, dramas, and journalism of Stefan Żeromski and Stanisław Brzozowski. Especially the broader literary work of Żeromski was in tune with the ideas of activism, progress, work, ethics, and opposed the inertia of decadence and catastrophism that reigned in parts of the literary community. It represents the seeds and great realisation of the idea of Literature of Criticism. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska wrote that the writer's attitude was a "heroic demand for moral fortitude, inner freedom, sacrifice and dedication" (1985, p. 128). Żeromski's work was associated with the ideological transformation of Polish society, occurring in conjunction with the demise of part of the landed gentry, the massive growth of the working class and the progressing emancipation of rural areas, and especially with the emergence of the intellectual, a person who repudiates social egoism and is sensitive to new intellectual and spiritual currents. It was these people, resisting national apathy, who worked selflessly in villages, devoting themselves to the education of the people, and who founded institutions in the cities to help the poor, as well as sports and paramilitary organizations such as the Sokół Gymnastic Society (1867), which was legal in Austria-Hungary, and illegal in Russia, the secret Union of Active Struggle (1908), the Polish Military Union

(1908), and the legitimate organizations Strzelecki Association and Strzelec. In Cracow, Wincenty Lutosławski established the Eleusis association (1902), with the goal of educating youth according to the national and ethical principles combined with the veneration of national romantic poets. The Polish scouting movement was established in Galicia at the initiative of the local intelligentsia, which also operated illegally in Russia. The patriotic and military celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald (1910), as well as the 100th anniversary of the death of Prince Józef Poniatowski in 1913 in Galicia were momentous events. There were many more similar events of lesser stature. The founding of the Slavic Society and the magazine *Świat Słowiański* [The Slavic World], in 1905 which was active until 1914, reveals efforts to transfer the so-called “Polish question” to a broader arena, where similar tendencies of binding one’s own national independence to that of other Slavs, especially Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks and Croats, were emerging. The founders of *Świat Słowiański* [The Slavic World], scholars-humanists Marian Zdziechowski and Feliks Koneczny were both leading figures of the liberal-conservative current that did not fall into the traps of radicalism of left-wing thought (the revolutionism of Piłsudski) or nationalist thought (cooperation with Russia by Dmowski).

After the defeat of the November Uprising (1830–1831), Zygmunt Krasiński called Poland a country of “graves and crosses” that replaced and tragically symbolised freedom. This image of bereavement and helplessness was even more powerful for Poles after the lost January Uprising (1863–64). Meanwhile, in the activities of writers, publicists, founders of numerous patriotic and national, educational, and scientific organizations, actively supporting the Literature of Criticism between 1890 and 1914, the goal was to go well beyond this formula, not to encapsulate Polish history and Polish fate in it. No longer graves and crosses, but work and positive deeds were to define what was Polish for the future.

### **Work and labour**

Representatives of the Literature of Criticism were debating the gap between Polish society and the civilizational transformations



taking place in Western Europe. Both in Prus's *Weekly Chronicles*, *Pharaoh*, as well as in the short stories and novels of Żeromski, in the journalism of Stanisław Brzozowski, in the thought of Abramowski, and Krzywicki there is a similar perception of the lethargy of Polish society, the majority of which was disinclined both to any idea of a national uprising and to rapid and lasting changes in other fields. The changes that were tolerated were proposed by the Warsaw positivists as part of activities described as grassroots work and organic labour, and did not satisfy the ambitions of the figures and groups most committed to promoting social development. In the writings of Prus, Żeromski, and Brzozowski, and even in those of Sienkiewicz (who supported countless patriotic causes) and Polish social philosophers, the criticism of a society that was paralysed, yet quarrelsome and intolerant, was accompanied by demands to raise its intellectual capital, initiate widespread educational activity, and introduce a firm ethos of work and responsibility. It is not without reason that already radical critics of the time of stagnation after the collapse of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863–1864 (such as the positivist Aleksander Świętochowski) used deprecating terms in their journalism about not only social circles, such as the conservative landed gentry, who collaborated with the invaders to protect their estates, but even the Catholic clergy, most of whom were, by the way, uneducated and generally represented the interests of the authorities.<sup>1</sup> A sizeable group of intellectuals, social and political activists (including Abramowski) and scholars (including Krzywicki) promoting technical and social progress was then formed. Their understanding of progress had to do with class transformation, that is, it mainly focused on the emancipation of the peasant strata and the working class, as well as scientific and technical advances, and progress in hygiene, education, and equality. Again the demand for educational work resurfaced, as it did during the Enlightenment and in the aftermath of the January Uprising, but not in the strict sense of educating the people, but of empowering them with stronger

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<sup>1</sup> This is topic is broadly discussed by Beauvois in the work *Ukrainian Triangle. The Nobility, the Tsar, and the People in Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev, 1793–1914*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2005.

worldview, as well as philosophical, moral, political and especially economic arguments. Regardless of the political orientation between the 1905 Revolution and World War I, demands for the restoration of the national bond between the three sections of the once divided homeland were becoming bolder.

Abramowski now deemed the most important tasks to be research, public activity and dissemination of the new idea of social ethics. In such works as *Zagadnienia socjalizmu* [Issues of Socialism] (1899), and *Etyka a rewolucja* [Ethics and Revolution] (1899), he drew attention to the essential role of ethical shifts in the social processes of self-organization and change in human morality as well as the need for moral revolution to take precedence over social change. Between 1898 and 1900, Abramowski, like many other intellectuals with various outlooks on social issues, was involved in the work of self-education circles and clandestine classes that spread independent education and pro-independence ideas. As a socialist, he espoused active struggle against the Russian state wherever possible. Here his views were close to those of Józef Piłsudski. The Polish socialist wrote this almost prophetic declaration:

We declare a fight against the Russian government for the freedom of Poland and for the freedom of every person in Poland. For let us not think that anyone will give us freedom without ourselves. Even if the Russian people were to win it now from the Tsar, they would win it for themselves, not for us, and Poland... would still remain a slave to whatever new government Russia would create for itself. (Abramowski, 1986, pp. 178, 180)

In 1904, he published the famous treatise *Socjalizm a państwo* [Socialism and the State]. In this work, he voiced criticism of state socialism (and the state itself) and called for a stateless organization of society in the form of free associations, and trade unions. Abramowski was opposed to the introduction of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which would carry with it a new apparatus of coercion and violence. He accurately predicted that the socialist state would expand its bureaucratic apparatus and become a system of exploitation. The philosopher proposed stateless socialism, drawn

from the thoughts of European utopians of the 19th century, as a counterweight to state socialism. Such ideas, quite common at the end of the century, found their way into literature and journalism, and generated serious discussions. They also influenced the writings and activities of Stanisław Brzozowski. Abramowski's influence on Polish writers continued into the second half of the twentieth century, and was discernible, for example, in the oeuvre of Maria Dąbrowska.

When musing on national apathy, Brzozowski used the term "infantile Poland" in a famous analysis titled *Legenda Młodej Polski* [The Legend of Young Poland] (1910, pp. 57–102). He played one of the leading roles in bringing into existence the Literature of Criticism and the concept of the deed and work associated with its ideology, which entailed the obligation to raise national self-consciousness (the individuals work on him/herself). Representatives of different ideologies, not only proponents of socialism, but even critical, cultural nationalists, adherents of the reformation of Catholicism and liberal conservatives, were able to come together on such a viewpoint. In his novel *Płomienie* (Flames) (1908), the author portrayed the spiritual evolution of a Polish intellectual who matures into a revolutionary activist revolted by the feudal mentality of his landed family. The protagonist of the novel, Michał Kaniowski, leaves this community, which he accuses of mental indolence, religious zealotry, narrow intellectual horizons and lack of prospects for growth. He eventually joins the Russian terrorist organization Narodnaya Volya, and readies himself for an assassination attempt on the tsar.

In *Legend of Young Poland*, which appeared two years later, Brzozowski's concept of labour is moral and intellectual. The author appeals to the imperative to work for the benefit of the collective, which should be educated to increase its social sensitivity, but most of all he argues that intelligent individuals, who are able to take responsibility for themselves and the nation, should perform prudent deeds. Brzozowski's novels and essays, including the articles collected in *Filozofia czynu* [The Philosophy of Labour] (1903), and the *Legend of Young Poland*, provided several generations of leftist intelligentsia with food for thought and inspiration. With his concept of the heroic individual and the momentous intellectual deed done for society,

Brzozowski came close to the work of Stefan Żeromski, viewed as the conscience of his era and of the upcoming independence.

In his classic novels and short stories, such as *Doktor Piotr* [Doctor Peter] (1895), *O żołnierzu tułaczu* [On the Vagrant Soldier] (1896), *Szyfowe prace* [The Labors of Sisyphus] (1897), *Ludzie bezdomni* [Homeless People] (1900), and the dramas *Róża* [Rose] (1909) and *Sułkowski* [Sułkowski] (1910), Żeromski portrayed the unbridgeable gulf that had emerged after centuries of serfdom between the nobility and the people, between the spirit of liberation revolt and the humiliation and despair of the defeated, between hope and political illusion, and then between the self-seeking attitude of the landed gentry and urban bourgeoisie and the actions of the self-sacrificing young intelligentsia, as well as former freedom fighters and conscious representatives of the people. His positive, though mostly downtrodden literary heroes, the unrepentant intelligentsia of landowner origin, stood in the way of the social majority, which sought stability after decades of insurgency and repression, and had already given up on cultivating pro-independence attitudes. At the end of his life, Żeromski asked this most important question, to which not only he lacked an answer: in which direction would the protagonist of his last novel *Przedwiośnie* (The Spring to Come) (1924) go? To fight for new, unknown times, marching at the head of a rioting mob, or to temperately build the country, while inheriting the existing status quo, including regained independence and a multitude of social conflicts?

Detested by conservatives of various stripes for revising Polish historical and social myths in the late 19th century (including his novel *Popioły* [Ashes], 1902, which debunked the Napoleonic myth), Żeromski wrote within the current of anti-colonial and identity reflection. His protagonists who represent the intelligentsia are social hybrids breaking out of conventional patterns of behaviour, faithful to the idea of service, provoking those around them to unjust acts of aggression, misunderstood, and rejected. Their personal defeat in life is supposed to serve as a social catharsis. In 1920, the writer openly condemned the Soviet attack on Poland and rejected any suspicion of sympathies for communism.

## Revisions of national myths and self-stereotypes

Adam Mickiewicz, while penning *The Books of the Polish Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage*, presupposed that emigration would have the leading role in shaping the future of Poland after the defeat of the November Uprising (1830–31). A free thought about the future state should take shape among the émigré population, and cadres capable of leading the nation on its path to regaining a free homeland should also be formed here, he wrote. According to the greatest Polish poet, the fall of Poland was a harbinger of its future rebirth, as well as of a new Christian awakening of Europe and humanity.<sup>2</sup> The playwright Stanisław Wyspiański, Poland's leading theatre figure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was vehemently critical of these para-religious views, although no one can deny that his work is a continuation of Polish Romanticism and alludes to the work of Mickiewicz. Several decades later, Wyspiański acerbically summed up the lack of national solidarity in his dramas *Warszawianka* [Varsovienne] (1898) and *Wesele* [The Wedding] (1901). In *Noc listopadowa* [November Night] (1904), he exposed overwrought patriotic rhetoric, powerlessness, and lack of will to win. In the drama *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation] (1903), he criticised the restrictions on artistic freedom, and in *Leleweł* [Leleweł] (1899) and *Legion* [Legion] (1900) he criticized the misapprehension of sound national ideas based on pragmatic rather than messianic premises. The conclusions that could be drawn from *Wesele* [The Wedding] may have led many viewers to embrace an attitude of social dialogue and a desire to prevent the relapse of internal, bloody conflicts. Wyspiański put Romantic messianism to a historical test, from which it emerged challenged, but not discarded. Konrad from *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation] mocks messianic illusions and the illusion of art built on an authoritarian injunction to blindly serve the national cause. However, in order to propose a different vision of art, of the

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2 In his mystical poem *The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage* of 1832, he wrote about "the days of European Confederation," and added the following words in a passionate message to Polish emigrants: "The empires have rejected your stone for the European edifice, and this stone will become the cornerstone and head of future construction; and on whom it falls, he will crumble, and whoever stumbles on it will fall and not rise." (Mickiewicz, 1955, pp. 54–55).

theatre, he needs romantic genius and strength of spirit. The things that were important in Brzozowski's work, i.e. the demands for achieving mature self-knowledge and responsibility in collective affairs, were very close to Wyspiański's views. *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation], in which Wyspiański expressed many critical views on art, the nation and the state, occupies a special place. During a discussion about art and the freedom of the artist, the Director (a character in the play) makes harsh comments about contemporary society: "half noble souls, half faith with half virtue," but the words of the main character of the tragedy, Konrad, referring to the modern state, open to national plurality, inspire a new political vision:

After all, every nation is different from the state. A nation has only the right to be a STATE. And the state, in turn, is able to accommodate all, in a common province (1972, p. 410).

Tadeusz Miciński, in his novels, dramas, prose poems and essays, followed a similar path of creating an imagined community through highly critical judgments about his contemporary Poles. Hailed as the chief mystic of his era, and seemingly estranged from current affairs, in his second incarnation Miciński was a social critic and ideologue of national activism. His novels *Nietota* [Nietota: The Book of Tatra mystery] (1910), *Xiądz Faust* [Priest Faust] (1913), the drama *Termopile polskie* [Polish Thermopylae] (1914) essays such as *O spuściźnie duchowej* [On the Spiritual Legacy] (1899), *Do źródeł duszy polskiej* [To the Origin of the Polish Soul] (1906), *Fundamenty nowej Polski* [The Foundations of a New Poland] (1906) emanate the same spirit as the literary works of Wyspiański and the essays of Brzozowski, although in terms of style they are marked by Young Poland expressionism and exaggerated emotionality. As an activist and teacher, Miciński was an advocate of the strength of spirit, a teacher of the nation, a man committed to the national cause, a critic of doubt, weakness, disheartenment and betrayal. "The religion of labour" is what he has in common with the thought of Brzozowski, the heroism and sacrifice of his literary heroes with the prose of Żeromski, the worship of the nation and caution against revolution with the thought of Dmowski, and historical revisionism with Wyspiański. More than

anything, he was guided by a desire to overcome national infirmity. His criticism of sham patriotism in his essays is ruthless. In 1899, in the Cracow *Życie*, he wrote:

You – patriots – so animatedly discoursing at breakfasts about what should be accomplished in our country!..

You – brothers – biting each other like dogs – over a bone! – You hateful – small-minded – cabots! [1899, no. 7]

Tadeusz Miciński continued his critique of historical thought in his drama *Termopile Polskie* [Polish Thermopylae] (1914), which tells of the fall of Poland. The collapse caused by internal chaos and scheming of neighbouring countries is depicted as a consequence of historical scenes unfolding in the mind of Prince Józef Poniatowski, who is drowning in the Elster/Elbe River, and defending with his troops the retreat of Napoleon's army according to the motto: "God has entrusted me with the honour of the Poles!" This surreal idea of rewinding the tape of history in the head of a dying man makes it possible to transform a traditional drama into a frenetic pageant of scenes, whose arrangement has a special logic that follows the work of the imagination, and only then the historical order. This offers the author the opportunity to highlight those events of the past that stand out due to their clarity and consistency. The motto of the main character's conduct is: "Poland is not founded on compromise!" The work is reminiscent of the great Romantic dramas in terms of its open plot construction, visionary tone and uncompromising judgments made against many historical figures of the European political scene. In the process, Miciński dispels the myth-ridden Napoleonic history and dismantles the myth of the short fate of the Duchy of Warsaw as a chance to revive Polish statehood.

### **Nation, nation**

In Central Europe, nationalist ideas belong to two traditions, incidentally originating from religious beliefs: that of the nobility and that of the peasantry. At the dawn of the 20th century, these two traditions began to converge, and grew in importance as did the

religious factor, ethnic and economic factors, such as anti-Semitism and economic rivalry between ethnic groups. These themes were picked up by Stanisław Szczepanowski, author of several novels, and mainly a politician in Galicia, as well as a scientist-chemist and founder of the Polish oil industry, in his pamphlet *Idea polska wobec prądów kosmopolitycznych* [The Polish Idea vs. Cosmopolitan Currents] (Lviv, 1901). Szczepanowski was an advocate of a national Christian church supporting the nation in its fight against foreign influences. He took a critical view of the Vatican's condemnation of national uprisings and the collaboration of the Catholic clergy with the authorities of the partitioning states. The socialist Stanisław Brzozowski dedicated his *Filozofia romantyzmu polskiego* [Philosophy of Polish Romanticism], published posthumously in 1924, to him.

The famous text by Roman Dmowski, *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka* [Thoughts of a Modern Pole] from 1903, repeatedly reprinted and commented on, had far more resonance. This is one of the most important social texts of the Literature of Criticism of the early 20th century. First of all, *Thoughts of a Modern Pole* is a well-argued treatise on the passivity of Poles and their backwardness in all areas of European life. Dmowski was very critical of the level of national self-knowledge, solidarity and of what he referred to as "national morality," applying it critically to the growing acceptance of the non-existence of the nation within the borders of its own state:

Our national morality, with a certain idle sentimentality, today consists mostly in the complete absence of active love of our homeland, and the political views of our enlightened public are unusual, they differ from the political views of other nations in that they lack the basis of all healthy politics, namely, the national instinct of self-preservation. We are a nation with a distorted way of political thinking (*Myśli nowoczesnego...*, p. 20)

With the good of the nation in mind, Dmowski makes scathing summaries of the condition of the nation and attacks Poles for laziness, overindulgent fantasizing about past greatness, "idle sentimentalism," and disinclination to diligent work. He wants to prepare them for the challenges of the Western civilization, from which



the Poles, he believes, significantly diverge. He anticipates a great conflict, for which his compatriots, in his view, are not prepared. Aware of all the limitations that stood in the way of the development of Poles in the 18th and 19th centuries, he does not excuse their mistakes, criticises national solipsism, anachronisms of collective life, especially the existence of obsolete feudal forms and a dismal economy. He creates the figure of a conscious citizen-landowner, industrial capitalist, intellectual, peasant, whose work contributes to the growth of collective prosperity. In the process, he rejects the leftist ideas of a classless society, which were promoted by a group of socialists, including Abramowski. He sees opportunities to transform the social masses that hitherto did not understand each other, although they spoke a similar language and lived in a common territory, into a conscious and cohesive nation. This is the great task that Poles, if they are to survive, must face. Any ideas of modernisation that emerged in the West could also benefit the Polish nation, Dmowski argued. This was especially true of the economy, because it is in an economically strong society that he saw the germs of a strong nation. Like Prus, Sienkiewicz, but also Abramowski and Brzozowski, the author of *Thoughts of a Modern Pole* appreciated the state-building role of the nation rather than the opposite. In the conditions of non-existence of the state, the work on national identity, in his opinion, must be particularly intense. A nation that neglects education and identity development will perish sooner or later.

Dmowski's text is a national manifesto, which could be signed by representatives of various ideological orientations on certain general points. It does not include nationalistic insults or political accusations that were typical of this author's texts after 1918, targeted at Jews, Germans or Ukrainians, socialists, democrats, etc. It is a constructive example of the socio-political facet of the Literature of Criticism, just like Abramowski's writings. It contains a wealth of rationalist proposals, for example, regarding the error of mechanically reproducing romantic slogans about Poland as the Christ of nations or about the messianic role of Poland as the restorer of civilization. Like the works of most authors promoting nationalist slogans, *Thoughts of a Modern Pole* also features the illusory

idea of a Slavic federation, presumably under the auspices of Russia, capable of defending the Slavs from Germanic onslaught. Dmowski's activism stems from a position of curbing anti-Russianism in favour of pan-Slavic collaboration and finding a place for oneself in the multinational empire of the tsars. Dmowski proclaimed "ethics of civic action," which he understood differently than his ideological opponents, Abramowski or Brzozowski, as he based it on the religious (Catholicism) and ethnic grounds. These, according to him, are the foundation of Polish civic identity. Dmowski's "new patriotism" took shape amidst a constant struggle for survival, in which the strongest nations win. Through working on themselves, Poles must be among those victorious nations, even if they do not currently have their own state.

Representatives of the intelligentsia and national currents debated the reasons for the collapse of the state and the possibility of its revival. So they asked: what is necessary for Poland to be reborn one day? Who should modern Poles be, who and what should they support, what should they beware of, who should they unite with in the fight for the common good, for the civilization standard, which the Poles lacked so much? The insightful analysis of the causes of Polish calamities in the last century, containing a list of tasks that the Poles had to undertake and complete in order to be included in the circle of modern European nations, was the pinnacle of cultural and critical nationalism at the same time, whose height Dmowski, as an ideologue of Polish nationalism and an advocate of collaboration with Russia, never surpassed in his further actions and works.

Another contribution to the current of reflection on the state and the citizen is Adolf Nowaczyński's rationalist-historical drama *Wielki Fryderyk* [The Great Frederick] (1910). The writer and publicist, who was inclined towards nationalism, ushered in a language closer to the political problems of the day, and showed, drawing on the example of Prussia, the genesis of the German state and its connection with the fall of Poland. The author pondered the mechanisms of state politics, while analysing the actions of a prominent individual in the history of the nation. In his drama, he portrayed the Prussian king Frederick II, called the Great, the

main initiator of the expansion of the Prussian state at the expense of the Polish state, who was almost obsessed with “the Polish threat.” Frederick revealed himself to be a shrewd, ruthless and foresighted political player who transformed weak Prussia into a strong, military state capable of changing the course of history in Europe. In Nowaczyński’s assessment, nationalism, political cynicism, the ability to cleverly exploit conflicts, and an uncompromising desire to strengthen one’s own state were key qualities of this ruler. These were not negative traits, because they served to realize the Darwinian idea of winning the struggle for survival, which the author harkened to. Nowaczyński was therefore not surprised by the calculated anti-Polish policies of this ruler which were motivated by the will to survive. On the contrary, in the nations’ struggle for survival, the dreadful personal qualities of Frederick, representing the Prussian ethnos and his political goals, could seem a remedy for the historical predicament of the Poles. In his drama, Nowaczyński did not neglect to indicate the German stereotypes that shape the attitude of Germans (the Prussian-German state) toward Poles: *polnische wirtschafft* and *polnisher Reichstag*, as well as the need to reverse them. The latter stereotype, arising from the chaos, corruption and inability of the Polish parliament of the time to make decisions, which contributed to the downfall of the state, was especially striking in Frederick’s ironic argumentation advocating the destruction of the Republic.

On the eve of the Great War, Nowaczyński’s drama suggested other solutions leading to freedom than social revolution or religious transformation. According to the writer, the Polish subaltern did not necessarily have to follow the path of Spartacus in order to achieve its goal in particular. The wrong course of history could be reversed by national wisdom, resourcefulness and merciless discipline overcoming chaos. Even more important, according to him, were the awareness of goals, clarity of action, foresight, shrewdness, pragmatism, and the ability to use the power of the subjugated Slavs. Frederick, including especially his ruthlessness and cynicism towards Poland and the Slavs, was supposed to illustrate the value of political pragmatism in consciously achieving national, Polish goals.

### Literature in the confines of war

Rethinking the historical circumstances of the collapse of their state, participation in major wars, conspiracy, rebellion, insurrection, revolution – Poles explored every opportunity to turn back the course of history in the 19th century. Despite this common fate (shared defeats) they did not form a unity at the end of the 19th century. The code of those reconciled to historical defeat and the code of those who rebelled were quite different. Certainly, armed combat was not the only way of moving into the future, although part of Polish society shared the belief of Adam Mickiewicz, voiced when he was forming new legions in Italy, in 1848, that Poland could be won only by military action, by weapons.

The years of the Great War, 1914–1920, are special for Polish literature both as a subject and as a period when a new outlook for the chance of independence was being born. For liberated Poland, WWI ended in a conflict with the Bolshevik armies between 1919 and 1920, so the European war lasted two years more. The Poles won the war against the Soviets against the wishes of several neighbours, unaware of the deadly threat. They suffered horrendous losses, but the joy of “regained garbage” (a term used by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski in his novel *General Barcz*, 1922) dampened the pain. This extraordinary course of history became arguably the most important literary theme of the era.

Historians of Polish literature single out soldiers’ output (the literature produced by Piłsudski’s legions; by Polish military troops formed on various sides of the Great War, France, Russia, Austria and Germany; and written during the war with the Soviets) of WWI as proof of resistance to apathy and to lack of faith in rebirth. They also list later literature, especially prose, written retrospectively, in which the history of the war transitions seamlessly into a story about the defence of the recovered state and vice versa. This often happens in a single work, as in Bronisława Ostrowska’s prose novel *Bohaterski miś* [Teddy Bear, the Hero] (1919), Eugeniusz Małaczewski’s soldier’s short stories *Koń na wzgórzu* [The Horse on the Hill] (1922), Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski’s famous novels *Generał Barcz* [General Barcz] (1923), and Andrzej Strug’s slightly later work *Pokolenie Marka Świdy*

[The Generation of Marek Świda] (1925). However, these novels are not as relevant as the wartime prose of Stanisław Rembek, *Nagan* [Nagan], 1928; *W Polu* [In the Field], 1937) and Stanisław Strumph-Wojtkiewicz *Pasierb Europy* [The Stepchild of Europe], 1936), depicting the epic struggle of the Polish soldier fighting for a free homeland through the sacrifice of blood also spilled on foreign battlefields and fronts.

Traditionally, poets played no small role in the period. Let us mention, for example, two authors representing different styles, but a similar patriotic message, which was critical of the war as such, but not of the idea of defending the homeland. These are Edward Słōński, a poet of the legions, widely recited and idolised in his time, then almost completely forgotten, and Władysław Broniewski, a leftist, then communist poet, who, also like Słōński, was a soldier in Piłsudski's legions and a participant in the Polish-Bolshevik war. This poetry, therefore, was consumed by an obsession with the national "deed" (*Literatura polska 1918-1975*, 1975, p. 229) wrote Ryszard Przybylski, a deed that could bring triumph or perdition, in keeping, incidentally, with the spirit of the uprisings revived during the war and the growing hopes for restoration of independence.

The most famous Polish poem of World War I, *Ta, co nie zginęła* [She who has not died] by Edward Słōński, which recounts the tragedy of a Polish soldier who was forced into fratricidal combat on behalf of the powers occupying Polish lands, ends with an optimistic passage:

When I'm awake I see  
and every night I dream,  
That SHE WHO HAS NOT DIED,  
will rise from our blood.  
("She who has not died," 1914)<sup>3</sup>

A few years later, twenty-year-old soldier Władysław Broniewski penned a poetic recollection about the war for Poland against the Bolsheviks, and described the departure of his friends to the front:

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3 Quoted from: [https://poezja.org/wz/Edward\\_Slonski/30619/Ta\\_co\\_nie\\_zgine-la](https://poezja.org/wz/Edward_Slonski/30619/Ta_co_nie_zgine-la) [accessed: 20.01.2023].

Battalions, squadrons and regiments were marching east,  
fine rain was sealing the drowsy eyes of the soldiers,  
wet mud was sloshing on large and small wheels,  
murky water was flowing from soggy ruts.

Apart from the objection to death and the sorrowful mood, the poet also voiced rebellion and the will to win:

O let this heaven suffocate and destroy me,  
I will not bow before it – I protest and call.  
("Młodość" [Youth] from the volume *Windmills*, 1925). (1977, pp. 10–11)

We should add that the war against the recent Russian hegemonic power, now draped in a red banner, was a culture shock for the entire society. During their march westward in 1919–1920, the Bolshevik armies, which torched every single blade of grass, and counted on the support of the masses, provoked strong resistance from the Polish working class and peasants. It is this new value added to the idea of independence, which was not found in excess before, that determined the victorious end of the war. Its stake was the survival of an independent state. The Bolsheviks did not rally the masses of peasants and workers by invading a reborn Poland. In fact, they never succeeded in winning them over, although Poland after World War II was ruled by a regime that considered itself to be a representative of the so-called "popular strata." Proof of this is the workers' revolts against the communist regime in 1956, 1970, 1976, as well as the history of Poland's worker-led "Solidarity" movement that began in 1980.

## Conclusion

The years 1890–1914 were, on the one hand, a time of social and economic stagnation (interrupted by the events of 1905 in the Russian Empire), and, on the other hand, a time of the emergence of many outstanding literary works, political texts, and manifestos of profound importance for the national debate, for the future of society and the country being rebuilt after 1918. Despite censorship and other restrictions, there was a debate on the new national discourse and,

most importantly, the rebirth of Poland. Until and during the outbreak of World War I, there were heated and even fierce disputes on the subject, with intellectual and military arguments, banking once on the people, once on the intelligentsia, once on alliances and once on one's own path to freedom, but most of all on national integrity and solidarity.

The Polish discourse underwent an internal, positive transformation between 1890 and 1914, resulting from a rethinking of Polish modern history. The Literature of Criticism, which played a fundamental role in this process, consisted of various phenomena, the most important of which were 1/ works and views advocating non-institutional civilizationism, taking into account the emergence of increasingly moral and sophisticated forms of state through the sacrifice of individuals and groups for higher spiritual values (Sienkiewicz and Prus); 2 / works depicting the intellectual ethos of work and service to society (active labour patriotism), as well as arguing the need to create a new collective ethic that respects the rights of the underprivileged; the works showing the struggle against the imposed orientalisation (stereotypes) and national uprooting (Żeromski, Brzozowski, and Abramowski); 3/ works in which history and national myths are revised in the name of overcoming one's Polish weaknesses, such as uncritical nostalgia for the heroic past (Wyspiański, Miciński, and Żeromski); 4/ writings showing various aspects of national and social solidarity, or lack thereof, and calling for ethnic activism (Dmowski, Nowaczyński, and Miciński), demanding a change in subaltern attitudes and, first of all, self-improvement in the name of the national future; 5/ literary attitudes demonstrating anti-passive, active attitude to that challenge of history, which was the direct, soldierly struggle for a free homeland (Słowski and Broniewski). The Literature of Criticism, which integrated these literary and philosophical trends, was, if one looks at the general principle of its existence and influence, a coherent current. It was marked by a spirited dispute with submission to historical processes and with internal social torpor, held in the name of the free Republic as a superior and non-negotiable value. This was a platform where both a socialist and a nationalist, a representative of landowners' conservatism and a supporter of

progress, a critic of a conciliatory policy and a revisionist, a former Russian *poputnik* and a fighting soldier-legionary could meet.

During the years of national crisis, writers, publicists, philosophers and the intelligentsia and members of other classes who were following them outlined and implemented a program of action that led to taking an active stance towards the challenges of history. Anti-colonial and indicating directions for rethinking the foundations of collective existence, including the arts in the broadest sense, and promoting an active attitude towards social and moral problems, The Literature of Criticism (New Critical Order) prepared several generations capable of fighting and rebuilding the new Polish state.

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**Bogusław Bakuła** – professor of Polish literature and comparative studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He deals with Polish literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well as with Ukrainian, Belarusian, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Russian literature. Between 2004 and 2019, he was the founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Porównania* [Comparisons] devoted to issues of comparative literary studies and interdisciplinary studies. He is the author of *Skrzydło Dedala* [Daedalus' Wing], *Szkice, rozmowy o poezji i kulturze ukraińskiej lat 50.–90. XX wieku* [Sketches: Conversations on Ukrainian poetry and culture in the 1950s–1990s] (1999), *Historia i komparatystyka. Szkice o literaturze i kulturze Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej XX wieku* [History and Comparative Studies: Sketches on the Literature and Culture of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century] (2000), and co-editor of the collective work *Dyskurs postkolonialny w współczesnej literaturze i kulturze Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* [Postcolonial Discourse in Contemporary Central and Eastern European Literature and Culture] (2015). Most recently, he has researched and written an introduction to Józef Wittlin's novel *Sól ziemi. Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze* [The Salt of the Earth: A Story of a Patient Infantryman] (2022).