

Project description for the general public

For a number of years in Poland, insufficient knowledge of our country in Europe has been criticised, as have been negative stereotypes related to it, present or recurrent. At the same time, there are renewed appeals to promote Poland globally more efficiently. The large ignorance and ambivalence open up vast opportunities, at the same time, for a change of the image of Poland and the Poles. Given that historical knowledge constitutes a considerable foundation for the image of each country, it is worthwhile to study the relations and assessments of the past and what substrate they have created for assessing contemporary Poland and which stereotypes they have left as their legacy. Even a superficial review of accounts of various origin suggests that in Belgium the largely negative image of Poland under communist rule was accompanied by relatively much friendliness towards the Poles, thanks to generations of nineteenth-century migrants, diplomats of independent Poland, as well as opposition activists. The delivery of a project having as its objective to present the image of Poland as seen by Belgians will then facilitate recalling and making contemporary Francophone readers aware of that evidence of friendliness and brotherhood which proves that promoting itself Poland in Belgium meets with much openness rather than a wall of reluctance. Those two nations maintained friendly brotherly bonds dating back to the 1830 November Uprising regarded as an important factor ensuring independence as the Russian intervention against Belgium was prevented. Belgium then became a country where Polish insurgents were received with great honours and their leaders were given the honour of creating an army of the independent state. In the following century, both countries also shared similar policies related to their common neighbour Germany. In the interwar period, Belgium became a symbol as the first victim of the German aggression, a role that befell Poland after the Second World War. A number of international peace initiatives taken by both countries were inspired by just that emblematic role.

The post-war period is of special interest as the image of Poland as seen by Belgians has been developing in a more complex manner. Old friendships and official contacts translated into cooperation with the sizeable group of Polish émigrés, encompassing former politicians but also many intellectuals, who released from prisoner-of-war, concentration and labour camps decided against returning to their home country subjected to rapid Sovietisation. On the other hand, as the Polish authorities of the time were officially recognised, Belgian diplomats transmitted the notion of systemic transformation going on in Poland as well as the attitudes of Polish society towards the regime. Their reports are characterised by objectivity of judgement, as opposed to accounts of politicians and diplomats of great powers, thus offering a reliable picture of post-war Poland.

The research project proposed aims at bringing such circumstances seen in documents of the day closer to contemporary audiences, including in particular younger generations as well as stimulates posing a number of such research questions as: To what extent was the evaluation of Poland and the Poles influenced by interwar émigré circles and political migrants after the Second World War? How much did political refugees represent a strong lobby able to play the role of a quasi-diplomatic service during communist rule? What were the consequences of the presence of Polish intellectuals in Belgian cultural and social life? It is also intriguing to ask the question as to how the divergence in foreign policy objectives determined, inter alia, by the neighbourhood with Germany and the attitude towards great powers exerted an impact in communist times on the evaluation of the foreign policy pursued by the Polish People's Republic, given the fact that some cooperation attempts in that regard were made (e.g. support for Rapacki's Plan and Paul-Henri Spaak's visit to Warsaw in December 1963).

The existing knowledge concerning Polish-Belgian relations is largely insufficient yet valuable, if rare, works prove that the challenge is well worth taking and such research should be continued.