

The project „The History Poland Needs. Ten Debates on Polish PAsT” proposes an analysis of ten debates on Polish history from the Enlightenment till the 21st century that we find crucial for the formation of the Polish historical discourse. The problems they concerned have been addressed by subsequent generations of historians, essayists, and amateurs, and reinterpreted according to the changing ideological and methodological paradigms. In principle, these debates concern the kind of questions that cannot be answered univocally, despite new evidence, and new methods being introduced. One of the goals of our research, naturally, is to save an element of the past against oblivion: in this case it is the history of controversies and polemics on Polish history, including the arguments and ideas formulated in the process. Achieving this goal may improve our understanding of contemporary historical debates, which are typically but a continuation of the debates of the past, even though their participants, including historians themselves, do not necessarily realize that.

The aim of our project, except for reconstructing the history and dynamics of our selected debates, is to analyze the mechanisms and peculiarities of their functioning. This is why we have adopted a comparative approach that should allow us to identify and analyze the elements of their structure they share with each other. This is the only way to differentiate between their particular and individual aspects from those typical or constitutive for the Polish historical discourse, or perhaps for the mechanism of the historical debate in general.

What all debates in question certainly have in common is that they are all related to the problem of exceptionality of Polish history and the Polish historical experience. This idea is highly consequential methodologically and ideologically: it was the reason for pride or despair, or a source of confusion. It may be based on the assumption that all national histories are unique in principle, or on the idea of a standard historical way of development, which Polish historians typically associated with Western Europe. One of the questions this study addresses is the problem of interpretations of the idea of exceptionality and its consequences for conceptualizing and narrating Polish history.

The ten debates this study should address are the following. (1) The problem of exceptionality versus typicality of the Polish historical development in general, and particularly in light of its methodological consequences. (2) The so-called Jagiellonian controversy: the consequences and legacies of four hundred years of Polish expansion eastwards, and coexistence with the peoples of today Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia. (3) The so-called Piast idea, as a response to the Jagiellonian one, and the expression of the ideas of perennialism and indigeneity. (4) The noble democracy controversy – its exceptionalism, consequences, and assessments. (5) The meaning and consequences of the partitions of Poland-Lithuania. (6) The insurrection controversy, covering all attempts to resist Poland’s mightier neighbors militarily, from the eighteenth-century confederation of Bar, up to the anti-communist guerilla of the late 1940s. (7) The debates on collaboration, compromise, and other adaptation and survival strategies in the post-partitions era. (8) The debate on the reasons, nature, and causes of backwardness, addressing both the economic aspects and the peculiarity of the social structure. (9) Counterfactual scenarios as imagined solutions to Poland’s most troubling problems in the past. (10) The victimhood versus national guilt controversy, particularly concerning the post-1939 period.