

Urban communities in East-Central Europe (ca. 1850–1914)

The project is aimed at analysing urban society in all the three partitions of the Polish lands during the nineteenth century, between the ‘Spring of Nations’ and the outbreak of the World War One (1848–1914). It will look at the inner workings of the urban communities, into which the society was then divided. These communities included the ethnic, estate-based, religious and confessional, professional and class-related, local and neighbourhood groups, as well as more modern voluntary associations, established during this period. It will argue that the allegedly premodern community is a category that should be employed more widely not only on the studies of the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, but also the industrial society of the nineteenth century. The towns and cities to be researched will include larger and smaller urban centres: Warsaw and Łódź in the Russian, Lviv and Kolomiya in the Austrian, and Poznań and Toruń in the German partition.

The research will delve into the inner workings of these communities, the activity and narrations produced by their leaders (the official ones and those who acted only incidentally as the groups’ leaders), places deemed as important for these groupings (historical sites, commemorative places, monuments, or simply houses or specific parts of the cities), and lastly to the visions of the shared past that were produced and that were often unidentical with the visions showcased in more mainstream and celebrated books or commemoration practices. The communities in question were – as the hypothesis goes – overlapping, non-hierarchical, and had in fact more loose boundaries than the groups’ leaders were ready to admit. One of the important questions to be answered will be the real character of urban society: a coherent whole or more an aggregate of groups? The aim of the project is also to look at the strategies employed by urban activists, the character of each community, its permeation by members of other communities and its influence on the local politics. It will be possible by investigating, among others, local and confessional press, official community reports, memoirs, personal acts in archives, as well as sources showing the ‘outer gaze’ on these groups: official government data and reports.

The research will rehabilitate the local and the particular in the urban history of the Polish lands, something that is often lacking in the major works on the theme. By doing that it will to some extent make it more comprehensible, ‘tamed’, and more ready to be reconciled with the higher-scale national historical discourse. And, last but not least, the resulting manuscript of a book will have the potential to show new ways of practicing urban history, not only in Poland.