

Solarz, M.W. (ed.): Poland in the modern world: Atlas of Poland's Political Geography. Warsaw, University of Warsaw, Trzecia Strona, and Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies University of Warsaw, 2018. 248 p.

The map is a political tool (BATUMAN, B. 2010, 222–223) – if we take this now established position as a starting point then we can consequently see an atlas as a (geo)political toolkit. Accordingly, “maps are discursive tools socially produced to persuade others”, and as a representational tool the map has been utilised towards maintaining political power and constructing identities (*ibid.*, p. 222). Especially with the rise of nation-states, the map has emerged as a powerful sign of national unity and a cultural product materialising nationalist discourse (*ibid.*). Thus, the presentation of the national territory in the form of maps within textbooks and atlases serves for the rationalisation and naturalisation of the relationship between the territory and the people, provoking a sense of “territorial bonding” (HERB, G.H. 2004). Put differently, maps and charts fix and legitimise; they “produced, and are produced by arguments of legitimacy” (REYNOLDS, P.R.A. 2008, p. 72).

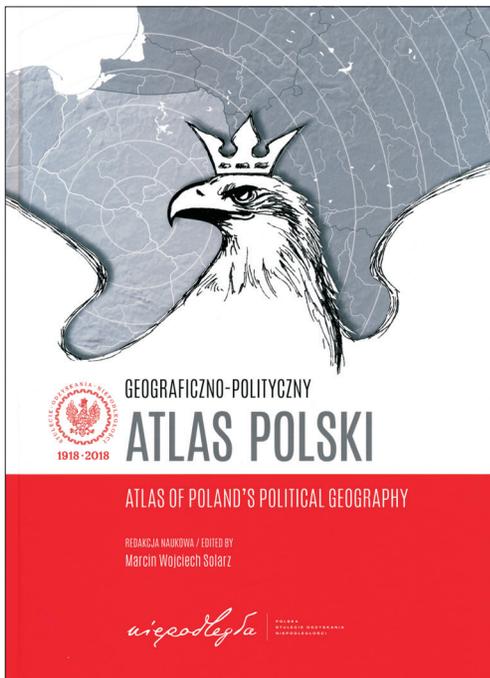
That critical perspective barely infiltrated the Atlas of Poland's Political Geography. This otherwise in many respects fine work fulfils a rather different purpose: it is part of this year's commemoration efforts in Poland to celebrate the centenary of the state's re-

gained independence (following its disappearance during 1795–1918). The importance of that event for Poles and others needs perhaps no detailed explanation here, but the background and explicit goal of the publication ought to be borne in mind while reading.

The title page is equipped with the official logo of the centenary, complemented with a line indicating that this work enjoys the “National Patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda to mark the Centenary of Regaining Independence” (p. 3). Apart of *Trzecia Strona* (a Warsaw-based publisher) the University of Warsaw and additionally the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of that university are indicated as the publishers, which provide the scientific quality – if less a critical approach – that such a volume requires.

The fact that the atlas begins with an introductory letter by Polish President Andrzej Duda (p. 6) further proves its significance as not just a pure academic or popular scientific undertaking: “this interesting scientific publication ... responds to enormous needs...”. Accordingly, the following quote reflects a view that probably many statesmen have of political geography: “I believe that this ... piece of work will become a stimulus for the development of political geography in our country, as this is a science without which no rational plans and forecasts concerning the future of Poland and Europe could be outlined”. According to the President, “until the mid-20th century this discipline had been developing freely... It undertook subjects that are of crucial importance for the Republic of Poland and its key interests”. Finally, Mr. Duda expresses his ardent hope that the atlas “will become one of the most essential pieces of reading to those who think, write and actively strive for the security and successful development of contemporary Poland” (*ibid.*).

The short prologue (p. 7) of editor Marcin Wojciech SOLARZ – Professor of the University of Warsaw – confirms that the publication was carried out “with a sense of obligation” to two anniversaries: “the first miracle of restored independence” and “the eve of the 30th anniversary of the second”. The fact that the regained independence of the Polish state is referred to as a miracle (not just here but also elsewhere in the book) is highly illustrative of the strong symbolic value ascribed to these events. One may add that comparing 1918 and 1989 can appear a little far-fetched (something the author alludes to later, on page 12), since despite the undoubtedly strong Soviet dominance over Poland during the Cold War the latter was still formally an independent state, which put it in a different situation compared to the Baltic Soviet republics, for instance.



Finally, the prologue informs that the European Union (EU) within its 2017 borders serves as the basic reference point for Poland in the international environment, which deserves two short remarks. On the one hand, from the perspective of the EU it can be reassuring that it remains the key reference point for Poland – in line with Polish public opinion, but somewhat in contrast to recent EU-scepticism among parts of the country's political establishment. On a more practical note, the strong focus on the EU – rather than Europe as a whole, or possibly some other space – has resulted in many maps on which countries like Norway, Switzerland, Serbia, Ukraine, etc. are missing. Yet Poland has intensive links with these countries as well (e.g. migration), and Eurostat has many data on not just EU Member States but also the candidates, as well as countries of the European Economic Area. Moreover, the atlas has not just worked from EU- or European databanks but others as well, such as the Human Development Index.

The big chunk of the atlas can be said to be divided into five parts: an introductory text on the political geography of Poland and four chapters containing maps 'only'. I find the former easier – and hopefully more constructive – to comment. The chapter is titled "Poland – politics and space" (pp. 11–30) and is divided into five (unnumbered) sub-chapters: an (untitled) introduction; "The State"; "Location"; "Geopolitics"; and "Borders, territory, sovereignty". The chapter starts with two quotes, the first of which by Eugeniusz ROMER, the founder of Polish political geography, whose 1916 "Atlas of Poland" was the foremost cartographical work on the Polish territories cited by the Western Allies at the Paris Peace Conference (LABBÉ, M. 2018, p. 94). The second quote comes from a 1982 speech by Ronald Reagan in the British Parliament and ends with the sentences: "Poland is not East or West. Poland is at the centre of European civilization. It has contributed mightily to that civilization" (p. 11).

The introduction starts with several lengthy though illustrative quotes by political emigrant and publicist Karol Zbyszewski, the first of which is saying that the "boundaries between fields are more permanent than the borders of Poland" – cited as expressing "a profound truth" (p. 11). At least

[t]he Vistula has always been within its [Poland's] borders... The Vistula finds its faithful reflection in the character of the Polish people. Flamboyance without adequate means is seen in the nonsensical breadth of the Vistula which suffers a chronic lack of water; fickleness, inconsistency, hysteria – it switches channel constantly, lunging first here then there, one day ominous, and the next listless; these magnificent outbursts and ignominious downfalls – the Vistula rises, rushes with power, and a week later scarcely murmurs, languishes at every step on the shallows; this capriciousness, this continual, irritating pose of greatness, this lack of stability, this charm, this melancholy, this unpredictability ... these are what characterize the Poles and the Vistula. (pp. 11–12)

Whereas such geographical narratives and national self-images are fascinating to read, the academically or critically inclined reader may miss a certain distance to them by the author. That also goes for some of his own statements intended to emphasise the (relative) greatness of Poland: "Poland has a significantly larger population than other countries in the region (with the exception of Russia, Germany and Ukraine)"; or, "[w]ith the exception of its periods of eclipse Poland has consistently been a force to be reckoned with..." (p. 13).

A little later it is stated that "[t]erritorial and national lack of cohesion were key problems for Poland between 1918 and 1939. These were resolved after 1945 as a result of the redrawing of the borders of the Polish state, the accompanying population resettlement, and the assimilation policy pursued by the communist authorities" (pp. 13–14). I find this formulation problematic for more than one reason. One, if the verb 'resolve' is correct to use here at all, I would have at least put it in inverted commas. More crucially, the "national lack of cohesion" was "resolved" not just after but also during World War II... And following the war, Poland was one of the few countries where Jews were still harassed and, in some cases, even killed (cf. Gross, J.T. 2006). Finally, one may mention that the assimilation policy was described in the quote as having been pursued by "communist authorities" rather than Polish ones (both of which are correct, but the choice of terms is telling). Regarding the territorial lack of cohesion SOLARZ notes that

[w]ith the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasing dependence of Belarus on Russia, the "Suwałki isthmus" which separates the Kaliningrad region from Belarus has *de facto* become a new „Polish Corridor" akin to the Pomeranian corridor in its past forms (1657–1772 and 1918–1939). The last of these was a source of conflicts, and, in 1939, it was one of the reasons for Germany's aggression against Poland and consequently the outbreak of the Second World War. (p. 14, original emphasis)

It is true that the "Polish corridor" was a *casus belli* for Germany in 1939, although – as the author alludes to – it is hardly realistic to have been a key reason for attacking Poland. What is interesting (from a social scientific perspective) is not primarily whether the quoted fears and historical parallel-drawings are realistic or exaggerated, but the fact that they apparently continue to shape Polish geopolitical thinking. Illustratively, to SOLARZ "[i]t seems that contemporary Poland faces new challenges because after the reunification of Germany (1990) and the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia (1999), we are observing the renewed formation of the two poles of political power in the direct vicinity of Poland" (p. 20).

Elsewhere, it is stated that Poland "is now classified as a highly developed country" (p. 15). While there is

no reference indicated here, it is quite possible that Poland is nowadays ranked in this group of countries according to some – even established – indices such as the Human Development Index. In any case, a fading belief in the narrative of convergence between Europe's East and West, which characterised collective hopes up until about the 2008 economic crisis, means that few perceive Central and East European countries to be "highly developed". It is interesting that the editor himself recently published critically on the United Nations' designation of 'least developed countries' (SOLARZ, M.W. and WOJTASZCZYK, M. 2017) and yet adopts the same vocabulary for his own country uncritically.

The author is taking a political stand (which is by no means *per se* illegitimate) in saying that "in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was presumably no alternative route to effective systemic transformation by which the high social and economic costs could have been avoided" (p. 15). There are of course alternative approaches to this question (*cf.* BUCHOWSKI, M. 2001), and the socio-economic costs could likely have at least been mitigated. SOLARZ too is trying to nuance the overall picture by providing some critical remarks that I find praiseworthy:

... it cannot be doubted that Polish success came at a price. Among the ills that Poland has experienced are mass emigration, a demographic catastrophe, social injustice and deindustrialization... the prioritization of special interests over those of the community... We present Poland as a model for democratic transformations... but shouldn't low voter turnout and deep political division in society rather prompt a very critical assessment of the quality of Polish political life, of the Polish political elites and ourselves as citizens? These and other ruptures require speedy and careful remedy, to be carried out first and foremost by the elites of free Poland. (p. 15)

The sub-chapter "Location" makes clear that Poland's situatedness "on a flat and open plain without any natural barriers" has been seen as its most important geopolitical characteristic, translating into numerous threats and challenges but also some opportunities (p. 16): "[f]rom the moment of its birth, Poland has been a borderland country squeezed between the querns of great worlds which here intersect and collide" (p. 17). I am missing a reference to Oskar HALECKI (1980) here, but we get acquainted with other historical Polish thinkers such as Piotr Grabowski and Wacław Nałkowski.

According to SOLARZ, "Poland's place on the map of Europe can be described using the comparison of an hourglass. Poland occupies the narrow tube connecting two large glass spheres which, on opposite sides, contain Western and Eastern Europe, Europe and Asia..." (p. 17). One may criticise this metaphor for assuming an image of Europe without Hungary, Southeast Europe, and Scandinavia. Numerous are

the cities, regions, and countries in Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond) that claim to be *the* intersection of West and East...

I personally find the sub-chapter "Geopolitics" the most interesting, and perhaps also less emotionally loaded than the other sub-chapters. This section introduces the reader to three key Polish geopolitical meta-concepts historically developed. The first of these may by now seem familiar: the narrative of 'Poland as a transitional land' emphasises the "indeterminate character" of Polish territories – i.e. lacking physical geographic borders – that poses a permanent threat (p. 20).

The second concept envisions "Poland as a bridge country" between the Baltic and Black Seas, an area which Nałkowski saw as "a separate and distinct geographic whole ascribed to Poland" (p. 21). SOLARZ writes that this narrative "encourages the Polish state to develop activity in the bridge region and seek the role of leader of the smaller countries located between Germany and Russia" (*ibid.*). I find it strange that neither Piłsudski's interwar concept of *Intermarium* nor the much more recent Three Seas Initiative is mentioned here, both of which clearly followed the logic of 'Poland as a bridge' – their meagre results notwithstanding. In any case, "Poland's actions in support of Ukraine in 2004–2005 and after 2013" (p. 22) are mentioned.

The third narrative characterises "Poland as a bulwark of Christendom, the West, Europe" – as "a shield which protects a certain community of states, variously defined in different periods, but which in general can be described as Western Europe" (*ibid.*). Importantly, "[t]he Polish bulwark concept is currently being manifested in Poland's fulfilment of the obligations arising from its location on the eastern borders of the European Union and NATO" (p. 23).

The remainder of the book is as mentioned a collection of maps, divided into four chapters by the following titles: "International relations"; "The state"; "Society"; and "Development". Apart of the minor criticism I made above regarding the EU-centric maps, there is little constructive input I can provide (I am sure the atlas will also be reviewed by a cartographer). The maps appear carefully done, in high quality, providing excellent visuality. It is progressive that some maps were included on gender and socio-economic inequalities (pp. 140–144), even if all these maps compare disparities between EU-countries i.e. none within Poland. As I made clear in the beginning of the review, I tend to miss at least some critical remarks on the exercise of mapping in general, but that would have been in place more in the text part rather than on the maps.

Despite the critical remarks formulated here, I overall find the Atlas of Poland's Political Geography a great achievement. I believe it could function very well as an introduction to Polish geography, history, or to Poland more generally; in academic courses or for a broader audience; thanks to its bilingual character, in Polish- and English-language environments

alike. While this volume is understandably a Polish project, at least some regional parallels could have been drawn: a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe are celebrating their centenaries this year. Moreover, geopolitical narratives such as the ‘Christian bulwark’ are by no means unique to Poland, but also exist in other countries of the region and beyond (TAZBIR, J. 2005). It was less surprising to learn that a fear of Russia is vivid in Polish geopolitical thinking, but more so that German reunification in 1990 can still be referred to as a challenge, despite strongly improved Polish-German relations ever since (BALOGH, P. 2014, 25–27). Indeed, one is unlikely to see the Bundeswehr marching across the Polish border for other reasons than shared NATO-exercises within the foreseeable future. But continued presence of various fears and an enhanced need for security, stability, and peace are some of the reasons why political geography should continue to be studied. Thus, a toast is in place to the next one hundred years of Polish geography: *Sto lat!*

PÉTER BALOGH¹

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¹ Central and North Hungarian Research Department, Institute for Regional Studies, CERS, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: Balogh.peter@krtk.mta.hu. Research for this publication has been supported from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund (NKFI) grant nr. 124543 (program: PD_17), and by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.