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MICHAŁ PRZEPERSKI

DZIKI WSCHÓD

TRANSFORMACJA PO POLSKU 1986–1993

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AN OVERVIEW

Abstract

This text presents a critical review of Michał Przeperski's book *Dziki Wschód. Transformacja po polsku 1986–1993* (The Wild East. Transformation in the Polish style 1986–1993), which examines the social transformations in Poland during the final years of the communist regime and the initial phase of democratic governance.

Keywords: transformation, society, Poland

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Michał Przeperski, despite his young age, is a historian of established reputation. His books are part of the academic discourse and are appreciated by both specialists and general readers interested in contemporary history. Following the highly acclaimed and well-received biography of Mieczysław F. Rakowski (Przeperski 2021), the researcher, affiliated with the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish History Museum, has now turned to a subject that, until recently, has not been the focus of broader historical reflection beyond the realm of political history – namely, the period of transformation. This situation, however, is beginning to change, as evidenced by recent publications emerging from institutions such as the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce and the University of Rzeszów (see, for example: Miernik and Młynarczyk-Tomczyk 2023; Grata 2022). *Dziki Wschód. Transformacja po polsku 1986–1993* is, as the author states in the introduction, an attempt to present the experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s “up close, in all its complexity” (p. 13). As he has emphasised on multiple occasions, it was his long-standing interest in social history, inspired by the Annales school, that led him to undertake this topic – one that represents a clear gap in Polish historiography – by employing the methodological framework characteristic of the French historical tradition. At the same time, however, Przeperski distances himself from describing his book as strictly “academic”, referring to it on various occasions as “formatted in a form close to academic” (discussion of M. Przeperski’s book held on 27 October 2024 at the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw). What does this imply? Namely that the scholarly apparatus – particularly footnotes – was reduced to the necessary minimum. Nevertheless, all the fundamental principles of the historian’s craft have been upheld: the work is grounded in a broad and critically evaluated source base.

With regard to the sources, it is worth examining what the author has drawn upon in constructing the narrative. It is clearly apparent that his approach aligns closely with the findings published by sociologists and anthropologists working on the subject in the 1980s and 1990s. The works of Winicjusz Narojek (Narojek 1991; Narojek 1995), Mirosława Marody (Marody 1996), Hanna Świda-Ziemia (Świda-Ziemia 1994), among others, constitute an important point of

reference for Przeperski. It should also be noted that these are, in fact, among the few scholarly studies addressing this period – excluding, of course, the works of Antoni Dudek, which focus almost exclusively on political history. A further important element of the source base is the use of visual materials found online. Excerpts from news, entertainment, and advertising programmes are treated as equally valid objects of analysis. Archival sources have been used only sparingly – primarily materials from the collections of the KARTA Centre, along with selected reference numbers from the Archives of New Records, the Archives of the Council of Ministers, and the Qualitative Data Archive of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This will probably be one of the main objections raised by many historians. The press appears to have been similarly marginalised. Suffice it to say that *Trybuna Ludu*, the main newspaper of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party, is cited in the context of publishing the resolution of the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, while texts from *Gazeta Wyborcza* – a daily newspaper affiliated with the Citizens' Committee "Solidarity" and the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" between 1989 and 1990 – are not referenced at all. This omission is somewhat surprising, particularly in the case of the latter. I can, of course, understand that researching press materials may be cumbersome and time-consuming; however, in the digital era – when many archives have been digitised – identifying relevant material would arguably not have posed an insurmountable challenge. Another issue, of course, is whether material from the daily press would have significantly altered the overall picture. An excellent complement to the narrative, however, is the skilful incorporation of song lyrics that comment on the surrounding reality. The principal source for Przeperski, however, is accounts. And here, a degree of uncertainty arises. Only in the "Acknowledgements" does the author provide any indication of whom he interviewed, leaving the interested reader almost entirely in the dark regarding his interlocutors – aside from a brief note mentioning the use of interviews deposited at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The chronological framework of the book spans the years 1986 to 1993. For Przeperski, this particular period most effectively captures the specificity of the transformation. Following Mirosława Marody, he designates 1986 as the starting point – a moment when no significant change seemed imminent. Notably, this is also the year of the author's

birth. The closing point, 1993, is more symbolic in nature: it marks the withdrawal of Russian troops from Polish territory, the electoral victory of post-communist parties, and – perhaps most consequential for the future – the enactment of the Act on the Tax on Goods and Services and on Excise Duty. Viewed from this perspective, the major milestones of political history during that period – such as the Round Table Talks or the June 1989 elections – do not serve as primary reference points for the so-called ordinary Kowalskis and Nowaks, who were more preoccupied with their immediate circumstances than with political developments.

While the reasons for the book's chronological framework are explained quite convincingly, the reader learns what the titular Wild East signifies only between the lines. Naturally, the first association – reinforced by the cover illustration, which features the well-known cowboy motif – is the Wild West and the American pioneers venturing into an unfamiliar and hazardous environment. This image, originally the silhouette of Gary Cooper from one of the most iconic Western films in cinema history, *High Noon*, depicts a lone gunslinger before a duel; however, in this context, the figure holds a ballot rather than a revolver. This image was famously used on posters urging participation in the elections of 4 June 1989. Indeed, the author consistently strives to portray Poles during the breakthrough period in precisely this manner. On page 245, Przeperski writes: "In Poland in the early 1990s, the situation was extreme. Weak state structures and an atmosphere of permissiveness allowed both free expression of creativity and the emergence of pathological or outright criminal activities." Slightly earlier, he notes: "Citizens' sense of security was plummeting at an alarming rate. In January 1988, half of Poles believed that crime was on the rise. Polish streets were beginning to resemble the Wild West – or rather, the Wild East" (p. 83). Elsewhere, Przeperski observes: "There are freedoms, but also growing brutality and competition. It is the Wild East" (p. 158). It can thus be understood that, for Przeperski, the titular depiction of Poland during the breakthrough years is associated with a dramatic – both as societally perceived and borne out by hard statistical evidence (crime rates) – lack of security, an absence of clear rules, and the brutal nature of capitalism entering the country. This atmosphere is epitomised by one of the most notable Polish films of the period, *Psy* [Polish slang for police, "Pigs"] by Władysław Pasikowski. Public opinion polls clearly demonstrate that Poles did not feel safe and, moreover, struggled to comprehend the rapid changes taking place.

The book is composed of seven monographic chapters. This structure, chosen by the author, is clear and accessible. The opening chapter, titled “It Could Have Been Different,” offers a well-crafted synthesis of political history, effectively organising the key facts. However, Przeperski shows little interest in delving deeply into the political conflicts of the time. It is evident that he intended to establish a firm political and economic framework for the breakthrough years – a framework designed to support what I regard as the book’s greatest strength: the multitude of vivid and varied episodes that constitute the remainder of *The Wild East*. This latter part is, in turn, heterogeneous in character, encompassing chapters that are analytical, descriptive, and at times written with a journalistic flair. This is not a criticism, though the stylistic diversity can at times be somewhat striking. On the one hand, the narrative evokes the style of the excellent *Cięcia* (Leyk and Wawrzyniak 2019), a collection of memories from employees of enterprises privatised in the 1990s; on the other, it recalls *Duchologia polska* (Drenda 2016), which portrays the years of transformation through the lens of various artefacts – objects, customs, events – and even, though not included in the bibliography, *Znaki szczególne* by Paulina Wilk, a memoir of childhood in the late communist era (Wilk 2014). The entire work is very well written. Przeperski tells his story in vivid language, coining compelling terms such as “market Leninism,” “revolution of aspirations,” and “habitually socialist people.” He is unafraid to give space to his interlocutors – as seen in the excellent passages from the chapter “Revolution of Aspirations” – and quotes vivid, often highly entertaining episodes, such as the account of a real-life *Wielka Majówka* [The Grand May Long Weekend] in the late 1980s or the dispute between the Soviet consul and the Polish censor. The former refers to Krzysztof Rogulski’s well-known 1981 film, in which Rysiek, a teenage runaway from an orphanage, steals a million złotys and, together with Julek – a boy he meets by chance – embarks on an adventurous journey across Poland, spending the stolen money along the way. Przeperski recounts the real story of a certain Krzysztof Kamil Baranowski, a wanted conman who, whether consciously or not, appears to recreate the wild adventures of the two protagonists from *Wielka Majówka*. Equally compelling is the story of Marek, a journalist from various newspapers in Małopolska, who reported on a meeting between the youth of Bochnia and the Soviet consul. The report, which focused primarily on the accidents at the Chernobyl power plant, was not well received by the censors. The Soviet consul

spoke quite candidly about negligence and outdated technology. It was only through the personal intervention of a diplomat at the Kraków censorship office that the recording of the meeting was ultimately allowed to be published.

Importantly, Przeperski does not yield to the fashion of idealising the 1980s and 1990s or the nostalgia that often accompanies it. He consistently and dispassionately highlights the absurdities that marked the end of the Polish People's Republic and the beginning of the Third Polish Republic. As it transpired, political transformations did not immediately translate into changes tangibly experienced by ordinary Poles. To put it bluntly: changing the country's name did not alter its essence. However, one fundamental shift did occur: with the fall of communism, Poles regained their state, and from that moment onward, they became responsible for it.

Przeperski strives to avoid judging his characters through the lens of the decades that have passed since the transformation, as well as the hindsight we now possess regarding its consequences. Marcin Zaremba's observation in his recent book is pertinent here: "Not everything that seemed obvious 'after' was obvious 'before'" (Zaremba 2023, p. 23). Przeperski follows this approach, and rightly so. He repeatedly stresses that "[...] we must resist the temptation to project onto Poles from thirty-some years ago what we know today" (p. 20) and reminds the reader that "this is what we know today" (p. 372). At times, however, Przeperski appears to fall into the very trap he cautions against. This is evident, for instance, in his discussion of aspirations in chapter four, where he addresses the phenomenon of supermodels from the early 1990s. His reference to the "nightmarish aesthetics of 'heroin beauty'" (p. 198) reflects a perspective that is clearly shaped by hindsight. At that time, concepts such as body positivity were virtually unknown, and aesthetic standards – then as now – changed in cyclical fashion. Poles of that era, eating American fast food (or merely dreaming of it, as such establishments were just beginning to appear in major cities), were certainly not conscious of healthy eating habits. The downplaying of Polish sport in the 1980s – expressed, for example, in the phrase "[...] Polish sportsmen sometimes achieved success" (p. 12) – is arguably not entirely justified. While it is understandable that the author aims to convey the prevailing sense of despair at the end of the Polish People's Republic, figures such as Zbigniew Boniek (a prominent player for Juventus and Roma), Waldemar Legień (1988 Olympic judo champion), Lech Piasecki (winner of the Peace Race and 1985

world champion), as well as the successes of Polish football teams in international competitions – such as the bronze medal at the 1982 World Cup and the legendary cup matches of Widzew Łódź in the 1982/83 season – serve as examples suggesting that the portrayal of sporting misery may be somewhat overstated.

Perhaps the most striking omission in Przeperski's book is the near-complete neglect of the transformation of the rural areas and the changes that affected its inhabitants. The author himself refers to the countryside as a "shock absorber of changes" (p. 217), but only briefly alludes to its role. Recent publications, such as *Zboże rosło jak las* by Bartosz Panek (Panek 2024), demonstrate that this topic is highly significant and perhaps even crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the Polish transformation as a whole. The role and presence of the Church during the period under discussion is also scarcely addressed. It is reasonable to assume that many Poles turned to this institution in times of hardship. Why, then, is there no mention of John Paul II's pilgrimages to Poland in 1987 and 1991? It is surprising that these events, which formed a significant part of the experience of the majority of Polish society, are absent from the narrative. Also absent is any mention of Anatoly Kashpirovsky, who was extremely popular at the time, along with other similar figures. Poles looked to healers with hope partly because state institutions, including those responsible for healthcare, were neither efficient nor reliable enough to provide a sense of security in this regard. The inclusion of this aspect would, in my view, enrich the *The Wild East* narrative. Moreover, the addition of detailed statistical data on various phenomena would undoubtedly be beneficial, as it would allow for their hierarchical organisation and potentially highlight their significance more clearly.

To sum up, the overall assessment of Michał Przeperski's book, despite the reservations outlined here, is very positive. The author has accomplished his task by portraying the period of transformation and capturing its diverse hues – even if, particularly in the sections concerning the late 1980s, the narrative predominantly employs various shades of grey.

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