

Wartime Literature – Attempts at a Synthesis

Sławomir Buryła

Introduction

In this text, I take up a comparative study of wartime thematics within modern and contemporary literature. Until now, no work of scholarship has matched the momentum of Jerzy Świąch's monumental monograph in order to comprehensively analyse prose, poetry and drama pertaining to those "terrible times"¹² Before I move on to more detailed statements, I will note a few basic observations indispensable for a comparative study.

Over the last two decades, scholarship on World War II has been dominated by the dynamically evolving notion of the Shoah. From the moment of *Neighbors'* publication, Polish-Jewish themes have been the subject of constant debate on the radio, in the press, and online.³ Roughly this same moment also marks the emergence of Holocaust literature as its own distinct phenomenon. During socialism, this never occurred, given the prescribed narrative of the Polish nation as martyr. More recently, reflections on the Holocaust and its themes have become an autonomous field of scholarship. Its distinctness and significance are affirmed in the comparative study *Polish Literature of the Holocaust (1939–1968)*.⁴ On this note, two other holistic studies must be mentioned, both of which have interdisciplinary ambitions. *Consequences of the Jewish Genocide. Poland 1944–2010* combines perspectives from literary criticism, historiogra-

¹ The "terrible times" refers to "czasy pogardy," a phrase used in Polish to refer to the years of World War II (translating roughly to "times of contempt") (translator's note).

² J. Świąch, *Literatura polska w latach II wojny światowej*, Warsaw 1997. His own supplement to this monograph is *Nowy styl, nowe pióra. Antologia krytyki i eseistyki 1939–1945*, (ed. J. Świąch, A. Wójtowicz, Lublin 2015). In the introduction titled *Wojna z bliska i z daleka*, we read: "In our anthology we wish to use select examples to convey a comprehensive portrait of this writing." (p. 10).

³ See P. Forecki, *Od "Sąsiadów" do "Strachu". Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych*, Poznań 2010

⁴ *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)*, ed. S. Buryła, J. Leociak, D. Krawczyńska, Warsaw 2012. Efforts to follow up on this publication are still ongoing. The grant project *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1939–2015)* has been underway since 2016. Several researchers from various fields will contribute work under this banner. Professor Sławomir Buryła directs the team. There are also plans to begin work on a subsequent project in the near future, which will be a comparative discussion of themes of the Holocaust in Polish Literary Arts, from 1968 to the present day.

phy, cultural studies, political science and sociology.⁵ *Traces of the Holocaust in the Polish Cultural Imaginary*, published in 2017, ventures into perspectives from literary as well as visual arts.⁶

The fact remains that, with the exception of *Polish Literature of the Holocaust (1939–1968)*, the academic works mentioned above fail to satisfy the requirements of traditional comparative studies by exhaustively surveying the full spectrum of relevant issues. Moreover, they have no counterparts in scholarship on postwar writing that addresses these “terrible times.” From this field, the only examples we have at our disposal are books that cover the literary output of individual writers or, more frequently, books that describe specific aesthetic tropes within somewhat broader stretches of time (for instance, Anna Sobolewska’s study of psychologism),⁷ or isolate one aspect of the problems and motifs associated with the events of 1939–1945 (among them, portraits of September 1939 and the battle of Westerplatte).⁸

To this group of comparative texts we might also add at least three anthologies. The substantive anthology *Literature of the War and Occupation*⁹ was published in the 1970s. In *Modernity*, Świąch devoted ample attention to the prose and poetry of World War II.¹⁰ In 2011 *War and Postmemory* appeared.¹¹ A significant portion of the essays included in this volume discuss the “terrible times” through the prism of European literature. Certain authors contributing to the collection did not limit their focus to literary sources, but drew examples from film and literature as well.

The expansion of scholarship on prose and poetry of the Holocaust noted earlier can also be observed in aspects of wartime experience that have come into their own as fields. In this case, we find many phenomena that cannot be strictly segregated into Polish or Jewish fields. Arkadiusz Morawiec’s monumental monograph on literature of the camps speaks to this development.¹² If, during socialism, the fate of Polish Jews in the Nazi camps made up only a fragment of the literature of the camps (and of the war and occupation overall), then today, prose of the camps has become a subgenre that falls under prose of the Holocaust.

Polish-Jewish relations in the social imaginary have many conflicting and compatible aspects. Among these lies one aspect of the camp experience – the “death trains” that transported Jews and non-Jews together to the camps. Due to contributions by Raul Hilberg, Zygmunt Bauman and Enzo Traverso, to name a few, the train has become a synecdoche for the “dark

⁵ *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, ed. F. Tych, M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, Lublin 2011.

⁶ *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginariu kultury polskiej*, ed. J. Kowalska-Leder, P. Dobrosielski, I. Kurz, M. Szpakowska, Warsaw 2017.

⁷ For one example, see A. Sobolewska’s *Polska proza psychologiczna (1945–1950)*, Wrocław 1979.

⁸ S. Rogala, *Echa września 1939 w polskiej prozie literackiej w latach 1945–1969*, Kraków 1981; K. Zajączkowski, *Literatura w procesie kształtowania się miejsca pamięci po 1945 roku in Westerplatte jako miejsce pamięci 1945–1989*, Warsaw 2015. We might add that, for obvious reasons, Rogala’s book does not include in its scope literary texts from the last four decades. Their number has grown significantly since 1989. “September” now demands a new, up-to-date academic monograph. In my book *Rozrachunki z wojną* (Warsaw 2017) I discuss five texts with narrower scopes (treating themes of the camps and wartime motifs in the ‘56 generation).

⁹ *Literatura wobec wojny i okupacji*, ed. M. Głowiński, J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1976. From this volume, notable essays include Maria Janion’s *Wojna i forma*. See also: Janion’s articles devoted to wartime themes collected in the book *Placz generała. Eseje o wojnie*, Warsaw 1998.

¹⁰ J. Świąch, *Nowoczesność. Szkice o literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Warsaw 2006.

¹¹ *Wojna i postpamięć*, ed. Z. Majchrowski, W. Owczarski, Gdansk 2011.

¹² A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze. Fakt – temat – metafora*, Łódź 2009, p. 21.

side” of modernity.¹³ Wojciech Tomasik has written: “If the monument to the nineteenth century– the epoch of steam and electricity – has become the locomotive, then the following century, having gone into history as the age of totalitarianism, might be imagined [...] in the form of a cargo train whose terminal station is the Nazi Death Camp.”¹⁴

The deportations of the people of Eastern Europe, inconceivable in their scale, were likewise a product of Soviet social engineering. The “industrialisation” of death in the Nazi camps should not veil from us its widespread counterparts in a period characterised by the extermination of entire nations and social classes. The “death trains” managed to relocate vast swathes of people within the Soviet Union.¹⁵ Literature of the Soviet gulags is a testament to this history.¹⁶

A Crisis of Synthesis

One major feature of contemporary humanist thought is the tendency to limit one’s focus to a single text and to treat that text as a self-standing, autonomous object. Such is the legacy of poststructuralist and postmodernist thought. This legacy also drives the tendency to extract a work from its historical, social and political context, thereby impoverishing our image of work, now removed from the reality in which the writer, and by proxy the work itself, are anchored. Wartime literature, however – especially that which is rooted in personal experience – loses meaningful resources for interpretation when read with no regard for the author’s biography.

Why this crisis of synthesis? So many factors contribute. Let us identify just a few of them.

There remains no doubt that, unlike scholarship oriented towards micropoetics (the analysis of a single writer’s output, usually structured as a classical academic biography¹⁷) any work attempting a comparative overview requires an entirely new set of skills. A scholar at the dawn of her career or in its early stages cannot take on such a project. The time one must devote to reading necessarily exceeds the span of a few or even a dozen years. One must pursue these projects over the course of several-year studies.

An ever-growing volume of research attending to specific wartime motifs in our national prose, poetry and drama has always existed alongside this substantial bibliography. One might wonder why such an enormous body of material worthy of attention (including source literature and bibliographies) couldn’t be assigned to a team of seasoned scholars, each of whom would

¹³See R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New Haven 1961; Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca 1989, E. Traverso, *La violenza nazista. Una genealogia*, Bologna 2010

¹⁴W. Tomasik, *Maszyna na wystawie. Szlakiem Tuwimowskiej “Lokomotywy”* in: *Ikona nowoczesności. Kolej w literaturze polskiej*, Wrocław 2007, p. 235.

¹⁵T. Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010. To consider the trope of the “death train” as a sign of the similarity between Stalinism and Nazism requires but one crucial claim: two criminal systems exploited the spoils of modern technologies to realize their genocidal agendas.

¹⁶The most significant comparative study to date of these themes is Izabella Sariusz-Skąpska’s monograph *Polscy świadkowie Gułagu. Literatura łagrowa 1939–1989*, 2nd edition, Kraków 2002.

¹⁷For some prototypes, see: A. Całek, *Biografia naukowa: od koncepcji do narracji. Interdyscyplinarność, teoria, metody badawcze*, Kraków 2013.

focus on one piece of the whole. This is a strategy we should take seriously in the face of such a giant and dispersed set of sources awaiting analysis. Collaboration between many scholars fluent in the source materials (including scholarship on World War II from both history and literary studies) would be a necessary prerequisite for any successful overview.

The dearth of comprehensive studies broken down into parts is also a consequence of the beloved mode of the case study. This is evident not only in literary and cultural studies, but in historiographic research as well. Our moment is characterized by an emphasis on microhistories, not macrohistories. What's more, the methodologies of historiography, literary studies and cultural studies alike have all witnessed a recent turn towards animals, things and oral history¹⁸. Literary history recedes to the background against these new focal points.

The crisis of synthesis must also be linked with several aspects of contemporary society. The last few decades have witnessed a distinct turn away from the “*longue duree*” perspective and the subsequent dominance of the contemporary moment and an ahistorical approach. We can observe a tendency to think beyond historical and cultural contexts. This can only be the newest development in the aftermath of the postmodernist thesis on the twilight of great narratives. Discussing transformations among younger scholars of the human and social sciences, Terry Eagleton has written the following, not without his signature irony:

What is sexy instead is sex. On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East.¹⁹

If we agree, in spite of all this, that synthesis is still feasible, compelling for readers, and in fact sorely needed, we must then tackle the question of its composition. Perhaps we ought to develop comparative overviews on different grounds – for instance, using a classification system that is not based in genre, movement or literary group, but is instead thematic. A number of distinct thematic rubrics seem appropriate. At this point, I would like to name one of them: an analysis of the concept of masculinity in the prose and poetry of World War II. Although few things coincide in culture more obviously than masculinity and war, it was only recently that a monograph addressing these concepts together appeared.²⁰ Its author, Tomasz Tomasiak, built out this monograph only using texts from the “Art and Nation” generation. Polish prose and poetry from the socialist period have not yet received their due attention.

¹⁸See also: *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na te współczesnej humanistyki*, ed. E. Domańska, Poznań 2010.

¹⁹T. Eagleton, *The Politics of Amnesia* [in:] *After Theory*, New York 2003, p. 2.

²⁰T. Tomasiak, *Wojna – męskość – literatura*, Słupsk 2013. Tomasz Tomasiak's groundbreaking book reveals meaningful cognitive contexts for scholarship on the experiences of the occupation and the front: namely, the Home Army generation and the conditions that led to its formation. The myth of the Home Army youth culture must finally be reconciled with the myth of “Jewish wartime kids”. On a symbolic level, the “Jewish wartime kids” invoke those days of the chosen nation's military glory, while the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is narrativised as a test of manhood and the transcendence of the stereotype of innate cowardliness, and not as a testament of military success. On the other hand, their biographies often use those of the Home Army youth as their template. I have written about this more substantially in my essay *Żydowski Kolumbowie* in the book *Tematy (nie)opisane* (Kraków 2013). On the subject of comparative views of the category of masculinity in a wartime context, I must also mention Wojciech Śmieja's recent book *Hegemonia i trauma*. See: W. Śmieja, *Hegemonia i trauma. Literatura wobec dominującej fikcji męskości*, Warsaw 2016.

Any author undertaking a synthesis of the relationship between masculinity and war must include the years 1918–1939 in the scope of his study. Adolf Rudnicki pitches militaristic and pacifist worldviews against one another in his book *Soldiers (Żołnierze)*. In *The Measure of Suffering (Miara cierpienia)* Józef Wróbel describes this novel as follows:

War is necessarily a trial for both soldiers and for the society that cultivates those small myths so harmless for everyone but society itself, unconsciously glorifying its own weakness and fascinated by that which lies on the surface, deceptively – the careful, impartial reader might reach such conclusions. We will have to pay for this anachronistic daydream, for the retardation of civilisation, the lack of coherent vision of the nation as a whole, and the lack of a protocol for raising and educating the modern individual and collective.²¹

Yet deeper analysis must go even further, reaching back to Sarmatian and romantic traditions. The soldier and conspirator of “those terrible times” is the heir of the historical knight, the Sarmatian warrior, the ulan of Napoleon’s legions. In the mid-thirties, however, he was promoted to the highest rank: propaganda broadcasted him as the very figure of masculine identity formation.²²

A thematic overview therefore seems appropriate. We must, however, remain cognizant of all its inherent risks. The main risks are as follows – in discarding chronological order, we lose a record of the most diverse political factors that informed the way we spoke of the war during socialism. Of course, we can always put together a thematic monograph that still takes chronology into account.

The Social Imaginary

In putting together an overview of wartime literature, it becomes necessary to emphasise the relationship between text and the social imaginary. Henryk Markiewicz has named some possible points of reference. He refers to:

[on one level] the interpretation of literary works [...], literature’s effect on its own further development as a tradition. On another level – and this intersects with the history of literary culture – certain problems arise, such as: 1) the social spectrum and stratification of possible readers; 2) the scenarios surrounding literary communication and the institutions associated with them; 3) the readers’ motives and preferences; 4) various forms of identifying, interpreting and evaluating literature; 5) variations in the reception of literature as contextualised in the whole scope of the reader’s life; 6) literature’s influence on other symbolic fields; 7) transformations literature brings about in the readers’ ideology, mentality and lifestyles.²³

²¹J. Wróbel, *Miara cierpienia. O pisarstwie Adolfa Rudnickiego*, Kraków 2004, p. 226. The myth of the Home Army youth must finally be reconciled with the myth of the “Jewish wartime kids”.

²²In the protocols for rearing children formulated in the 1930s – those promoted in schools and those emerging from literary tradition – a militaristic tendency stands out. Everything associated with the soldier’s legacy was singled out as valuable for bringing up children. An emphasis on masculinity was also symptomatic of the ongoing militarisation of culture (T. Tomasik, *Wojna – męskość – literatura*, p. 165–166). Tomasik’s study, titled *Mitologia męskości w “Kamieniach na szaniec” Aleksandra Kamińskiego*, does a good job of documenting the formation of a system of authorities and values taking place in the 1930s. Tomasik aptly recalls that “it was to serve the purpose of a textbook for young conspirators and infiltrators, but after the break-up of the Grey Ranks in November of 1942, it became required reading throughout Military Schools for little scouts aged 15–17, engaging in small sabotages”. (T. Tomasik, *Wojna – męskość – literatura*, p. 214).

²³H. Markiewicz, *Dylematy historyka literatury*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 1986, issue 4, p. 19–20.

From the perspective of wartime themes and their carved out place within social consciousness, points four, five, six and seven must be taken seriously for any future monograph.

No one will dispute the critical impact that the “terrible times” had on the consciousness of Poles. Two significant monographs that came out in the last decade – Marcin Zaremba’s *The Great Anxiety (Wielka trwoga)* and Andrzej Leder’s *Dreamt Revolution (Prześliona rewolucja)* – explore a wide range of wartime experiences crucial to the formation of self identity and stereotypes. The first publication analyses the impact of the Nazi occupation on morality and mentality, while the second explores the occupation’s relationship with issues of economic and social development, without trivialising these issues.²⁴

In the mid-1970s, Janusz Sławiński claimed that “War has shaken our whole system of literature; it was a watershed moment that, through its whole multitude of consequences, still wields its influence on literary consciousness.”²⁵ Only a more detailed inquiry might allow us to refine the answer and outline more precisely the range of necessary analyses. What question do I have in mind here? This is the question of what we must call the “traces of the war in the Polish cultural imaginary”.²⁶ *The Traces of the Holocaust in the Polish Cultural Imaginary* provides a template for future work. Its authors define the scope of their research as follows:

The trajectory of the Holocaust’s traces on the Polish imaginary does not only run towards themes and phenomena tied to the Holocaust as a historical event. Also of interest is their circulation among various forms and exchanges of culture, including literary and scholarly texts, press releases, films and television shows, plays, sound recordings and images shared on the Internet, messages on online platforms and street graffiti. These diverse forms and cultural mediums interact with communities of memory – one’s family, peers, and ethnic, religious and class categories.²⁷

The research scope defined here is remarkably difficult to act upon. If we take “*The Traces of the Holocaust in the Polish Cultural Imaginary*” as a template for a publication that would identify all “traces of the war”, then we would have to reckon with a much larger body of source materials than a book with similar ambitions focused on the Holocaust. To be more precise, this undertaking would entail tracing all manifestations of the war in theater, the press, literature, film, and the wider sphere of popular culture. This task would not only be enormously time consuming; it would be downright unfeasible. Our objective should therefore be to mention (reference) not all images that come directly or indirectly from those “terrible times”, but those that are the most meaningful (and these do not always coincide with the most artistically compelling) and the most symptomatic, in an effort to assemble a map and guidebook for literature, theater, film, and popular culture associated with World War II.²⁸

²⁴M. Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*, Kraków 2012; A. Leder, *Prześliona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*, Warsaw 2014.

²⁵J. Sławiński, *Zaproszenie do tematu [in:] Literatura wobec wojny i okupacji*, ed. M. Głowiński, J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1976, p. 15.

²⁶“The imaginary is not so much the content portrayed by the media or of one of many collective memories, but the social framing defined by recognisable signs and practices that carry certain axiological connotations for identity”. The authors of *Traces of the Holocaust in Polish Culture* define the imaginary thus. (p. 14).

²⁷*Ibid*, p. 14.

²⁸Of course, the subject of the war remains to this day a great challenge for us, as does the subject of the Holocaust.

The Question of Periodisation

One uncertainty that the authors of this future overview must navigate is the matter of periodisation. When does the postwar history of Polish literature begin? Literary history tends to take the year 1945 as the beginning of the postwar period. However, the position that summer (July) of 1944 marks the beginning of modern literature has become more and more prominent.²⁹ In his study *Watershed? 1944–1948 in Polish Literature*, Dariusz Kulesza argues that 1944 “marks not only the beginning of Polish postwar literature, but the end of the literature of World War II”.³⁰ In attempting to articulate the quintessential character of wartime writing as it appears here and now, Kulesza assigns a meaningful role to the so-called “Generation of Columbuses [generacja kolumbów], youths coming to age during the occupation, emphasising how distinct their artistic legacy appears against the backdrop of the generation that preceded them (we might also add that the biographies of the Home Army youth and from the “Art and Nation” circle are specifically and intentionally named here). The advent and tragic departure of its representatives form the bookends of wartime prose, poetry and drama.

We can mention one more argument for focusing on the year 1944. Texts created and published beyond the Eastern front in territories liberated from Nazi occupation came about within a new, altered reality. It would be worthwhile to identify its many features, but most important is the existential scenario of the writer at work in a world that has already witnessed catastrophe. Thus the solidified message *post factum* in lieu of *hic et nunc*, as seen in the poetry of Baczyński or Gajcy. This did not fail to impact the form of the medium.

When did the war come to an end? To put it simply, this is not a matter of political qualification or of finally resolving the old argument over the eighth or ninth of May. Nor is this a matter of some established truth that armed activities in fact halted worldwide on September 2 of 1945, when Japan formally signed its surrender. On Polish soil, on the level of psychological truth and its surrounding landscape, in particular between the years 1944/5 and 1948, the war persisted. The intensities of the Nazi occupation kept surfacing into rough reality. Poland’s people did not feel at all safe.³¹ In small towns and villages, bands of thieves, marauders and criminals prowled. After the communists took power, a domestic war prevailed. Until the end of the 1940s, the independent underground remained active. Everyone waited expectantly for the outbreak of the third world war (these hopes were rekindled with the Korean conflict)³².

In tracing the events in Europe in the months following liberation, Keith Lowe gives his text the characteristic title of *Savage Continent*. As Lowe claims, “the story of Europe in the immediate postwar period is therefore not primarily one of reconstruction and rehabilitation – it is firstly a story of the descent into anarchy.”³³ Unfortunately, “there is no book in any language that describes the whole continent – east and west – in detail during this crucial and turbulent time.”³⁴

²⁹See T. Drewnowski, *Próba scalenia. Obiegi – wzorce – style. Literatura polska 1944–1989*, Warsaw 1997; S. Stabro, *Literatura polska 1944–2002*, Kraków 2002.

³⁰D. Kulesza, *Przełom? Lata 1944–1948 w literaturze polskiej*, [in:] *ibid.*, *Dwie prawdy. Zofia Kossak i Tadeusz Borowski wobec obrazu wojny w polskiej lat 1944–1948*, Białystok 2006, p. 349.

³¹For an example, see M. Grzebałkowska’s collected reportage, *1945. Wojna i pokój*, Warsaw 2015.

³²For one example, see Z. Woźniczka, *Trzecia wojna światowa w oczekiwaniach emigracji i podziemia w kraju w latach 1944–1953*, Katowice 1999.

³³K. Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, New York 2012, p. xvii.

³⁴*Ibid.*

We can state the question directly: does the postwar period in Europe (the period beginning in May of 1945) belong to the history of wartime literature?

In order to determine the canon of works to include in the scope of our overview, it is imperative to first reach a consensus on when the war in fact ended. Does Jerzy Andrzejewski's *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*) belong in this canon? Or should we focus instead on texts relating the achievements of brave soldiers and the fate of the resistance and its conspiracies? How about those texts whose action begins during the occupation but continues a number of years beyond Hitler's yoke? Introducing chronological borders here (May 8 1945) seems somewhat absurd. It intrudes on the internal coherence of the text. Take Włodzimierz Kłaczyński's *Ash Wednesday* (*Popielec*), for instance, or perhaps Roman Bratny's better known *Columbuses. Born in 1920* (*Kolumbowie. Rocznik 20*). In these cases and several others, proceeding by these rules would mean displacing excellent novels to the margins, as an afterthought. This list includes Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski's *Ring from a Horse's Hair* (*Pierścionek z końskiego włosia*).³⁵

Should we instead include as an *appendix* to this future synthesis– or perhaps as a subsection of the work's main narrative thread – the history of the concentration camps in operation after 1945, in which the communists persecuted political enemies from within their own ranks and from Germany? Should we then include texts from the press, such as Marek Łuszczyna's piece of investigative journalism titled *Small Crime* (*Mała zbrodnia*)?³⁶

As a final note, the authors of this future monograph must define their criterion of selection (beyond the chronological framework). What kinds of work should they consider? Perhaps only those that take the "terrible times" as their primary cognitive horizon and fundamental theme? Or should they also include works for which war is but one of many central motifs? Should they not draw from texts whose references to the occupation are concealed behind a facade of metaphor and parable?

War – Censorship – Communism

Research on literature of the war and occupation has much to benefit from the in-depth research undertaken at Warsaw's New Records Archive (in Polish, AAN). Their laborious and time-consuming projects deserve special attention, for they give us a chance to observe the artistic and conceptual articulations of the "age of the gas chambers" in a fuller light, encompassing a fuller spectrum of material. Attentive exploration of the censors' archives has certainly enriched our knowledge of the war, allowing us to draw out themes historically prohibited by the communist repressive apparatus.³⁷ The database of the Central Bureau for Managing Press, Publishing and Entertainment (in Polish, GUKPPiW) now stored at the AAN, poses a daunting challenge to the scholar.³⁸ We still lack precise knowledge of its contents. In

³⁵A. Ścibor-Rylski, *Pierścionek z końskiego włosia*, Warsaw 1991.

³⁶M. Łuszczyna, *Mała zbrodnia. Polskie obozy koncentracyjne*, Kraków 2017.

³⁷For one example, see K. Budrowska, *Przeszłość ocenzurowana. GUKPPiW a obraz historii Polski w literaturze lat 1945–1958* [in:] *ibid*, *Studia i szkice o cenzurze w Polsce Ludowej w latach 40. i 50. XX wieku*, Warsaw 2014, p. 35–40.

³⁸See P. Krasoń, *Akta Głównego Urzędu Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk w zasobie Archiwum Akt Nowych* [in:] *Literatura w granicach prawa (XIX–XX w.)*, ed. K. Budrowska, E. Dąbrowicz, M. Lula, Warsaw 2013.

fact, we know very little about what kinds of prose and poetry on World War II were censored and to what degree – not to mention those that were fully “reworked” by the employees of the GUKPPiW.

Kamila Budrowska’s *Held by the Censor (Zatrzymane przez cenzurę)* is a guidebook to the world of authors and works condemned to nonexistence.³⁹ Not only does Budrowska recount the obligatory “Mysia Street” approach to wartime issues (materials deemed sensitive or inappropriate by the censors for any number of reasons); she also expands and revises our map of postwar Polish literature of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Her monograph includes vast examples withheld from publication, such as Rajmund Hempel’s play *Days of Terror (Dni grozy)*, and Nadzieja Drucka’s *Junk room (Lamus)*. Of course, the issue of censorship is not confined to these short years. Subsequent decades also witnessed the confiscation of texts depicting wartime experience. To this day, we lack precise data on the subject. We must also bear in mind that the volume of texts withheld from publication is considerably outnumbered by those texts that were “reworked” by the censor, which is to say, edited and modified in various ways to obey the prescriptions and notes issued from Mysia Street.

As Budrowska argues, scholars of modern literature have much more to accomplish than extensive labor at the archives. The “nonexistent” history of Polish literature (that which never had a chance to come into existence) remains an untold story. Even if we do not expect to recover masterpieces from among the texts seized by the censor, it goes without saying that the confiscation of so much material had a critical impact on the development of Polish prose, poetry and drama addressing wartime themes. Budrowska writes: “The significant suppression of literature devoted to World War II and the Holocaust [...] amounts to a squandered opportunity.”⁴⁰ Somewhat earlier in her text, she aptly points out that these texts had no opportunity to “catalyse new styles, shed light on new themes, propose innovative strategies, or inspire their readers”. Of course, it is no easy matter to assess these things in hindsight: “we can not make good [...] on these losses – they can never be correlated with their time.”⁴¹ And do all the texts that were censored, modified or redacted not amount to another such loss – though on a different scale? How would the public discourse have developed if they had gone to print in the form originally conceived by their authors? What would a literary history that accounts for such things look like? Without doubt, the engineers behind such a history would have other questions to reckon with and other concerns to articulate than those visible to the scholar who only has “reworked” texts at her disposal.⁴²

Today, no comparative overview of wartime themes would be possible without thoroughly investigating the archives of the GUKPPiW along with public awareness of the mechanisms of censorship. For political reasons, so many aspects of wartime experience were off-limits to artistic reflection. Hanna Gosk, describing the “spheres of silence” in socialist-era writing, has stated that: “Finally, the great postwar narrative framework of occupation-era heroism and

³⁹K. Budrowska, *Zatrzymane przez cenzurę. Inedita z połowy wieku XX*, Warsaw 2013.

⁴⁰Ibid, p. 115.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²See. M. Fik, *Cenzor jako współautor*, [in:] *Literatura i władza*, ed. E. Sarnowska-Temeriusz, Warsaw 1996.

Polish martyrdom is not the context for the everyday, existential, not-so-heroic experiences of those ‘terrible times’ – the age of the gas chambers, the banality of evil that relativised the roles of victim and executioner, as Tadeusz Borowski conveyed in the stories collected in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen (Pożegnanie z Marią)*.⁴³

A separate issue is self-censorship driven by suggestions and prescriptions articulated directly or indirectly – often simply integrated into common knowledge – that dictated how one ought to discuss Polish-German, Polish-Jewish, Polish-Russian or Polish-Ukrainian relations.⁴⁴ It becomes rather difficult (if not downright impossible) to determine the extent to which artists’ judgements expressed their own authentic beliefs or conveyed the unconscious, internalised effects of what was and what wasn’t permitted.

The issue of communist censorship indirectly alludes to the matter of writers’ archives. These archives are studied and made use of to different degrees. In the case of popular and celebrated authors, there are rarely texts leftover that have not yet gone to print. There nevertheless remains a substantial set of lesser-known writers whose legacies do not garner interest from scholars or publishers. We do not really know what awaits us within the manuscripts they left behind. In preparing a comparative overview of literary history, we would therefore have to compile all available information on the archival resources of individual authors and the unpublished texts accessible in their estates.

Revisiting the War

The recent public debate on the occupation and the postwar period that affected so much of society has not yielded a great volume of academic texts. To the contrary, its results have been rather uneven. Recent achievements in Polish historiography addressing World War II have significantly outnumbered their counterparts in cultural and literary studies.

We can revisit thematics of the war and occupation in a number of ways. We can – by way of laborious research – scrutinise and analyse lesser-known texts, or turn our focus to themes and problems not yet discussed. We can seek out new methodologies (perhaps following paradigms from the field of *Holocaust studies*, where scholars have been applying new intellectual approaches to their subject for years).⁴⁵ We can revisit emblematic works and authors alongside forgotten ones in order to refresh our interpretations with new questions. New methodologies always offer new ways of perceiving texts that often seem to be “closed cases”.

We must revisit the war, however, with an awareness of the shifts both in our own view of the past, and in the nature of contemporary war. Świąch has drawn attention to a fact that impacts the form of any future monographic project. This is the matter of the new kind of war. Today,

⁴³H. Gosk, *Co wiedziała proza lat 40. XX wieku?*, [in:] *PRL – świat (nie)przedstawiony*, ed. A. Czyżak, J. Galant, M. Jaworski, Poznań 2010, p. 234.

⁴⁴For more on self-censorship, see K. Budrowska, *Literatura i pisarze wobec cenzury PRL 1948–1958*, Białystok 2009.

⁴⁵Perhaps the newest trend in Polish reflections on the Holocaust is *animal studies*. See: P. Krupiński, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?” *Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, Warsaw 2016.

unlike in earlier periods, war has lost the former sense that had always been ascribed to it, and which some thought ordered it and lent it sense, because now, war appears as a phenomenon that is fundamentally impossible to represent and comprehend. In the first case, we can simply acknowledge the fact that among contemporary images of war, we are hard pressed to find any that allow us to reconstruct a full picture. We have no single example that is adequately representative of war. Our images will always be fragmentary and incomplete.⁴⁶

This argument does not run counter to the legitimacy of a comparative overview, nor does it insist that the experience of the occupation and the camps cannot be represented at all. Instead, it points to the need to reflect upon the factors informing any holistic overview. Currently, the media portrays those “terrible times” as chaotic, disjointed and hostile to rational discourse (in prose, Leopold Buczkowski’s *Black Stream (Czarny potok)* conveys this perfectly). Any monograph should introduce some small dose of order into this disorder.

Several other cognitive consequences for a comparative overview come from the trajectory of the contemporary humanities:

Today, more and more advocates have been won over to the position that we have no direct access to the past (in this case: the past of literary and cultural history), and that the processes of reception do not so much obscure the past as they become its reference points and the means of its conveyance; within these processes, texts continue to operate, generate and develop new meanings.⁴⁷

Of course, as this scholar argues further on, the vantage point from which we view the past is neither the best one nor the only one. This campaign does not dwell on this point: it instead questions whether or not a narrative of the past – one that integrates and imparts order – is possible.

Let us finally highlight, among the many ongoing changes that shape our current vision of war, a few that are linked to the great interval of time that now separates the scholar and his individual contributions from the “age of the gas chambers”.

As in the case of authors dealing with wartime themes, for scholars, the historical vantage point from which you view the events of 1939–1945 is always meaningful. To use a rather clear example – in the year 1989, we look back on the war through changed eyes. Alongside the ever-growing volume of publications and the discovery of new historical facts (or the revelation of already-known facts from new perspectives), our approach to the past changes in response to debates circulating in our time, as well as the emergence of new methodologies within the humanities. It is clear that generational differences play a significant role in shaping our image of war, as well as the matter of whether or not this historical moment formed a chapter in our own biography, or whether we were born much later and relate to these issues – as horrifying as they may be – as mere sources. Of course, this does not mean that the scholar born later has less to say on the subject. It suggests, rather, that his older colleague’s perceptions of the war are real but unverifiable.

⁴⁶J. Świąch, *Nowoczesność*, p. 192–193.

⁴⁷R. Nycz, *Możliwa historia literatury*, “Teksty Drugie” 2010, issue 5, p. 170.

Finally, I will comment on methodology and composition. I argue in favor of the traditional model of the monograph, despite its many drawbacks. This is preferable to the dictionary or encyclopedic model.⁴⁸ Two requisites for any comparative overview of motifs associated with World War II are, firstly, a narrative history embedded in socio-political contexts, and secondly, a genealogical perspective that lends the text a sense of cause and effect. This monograph would have to represent one text against the backdrop of many other (earlier) texts, and simultaneously refer to traditional or emergent devices for discussing the experience of the war.

One issue addressed in this essay cannot be disputed. Without negating the need for more narrowly-focused research, we must make a strong case for publications attempting a holistic overview of wartime themes in Polish literature. Organizing works along the axis of time allows us to take into account their reception, as well as the evolution of the way in which we discuss the time period of 1939–1945. Examining one text in the company of many others allows us to observe – more cohesively – the full spectrum of artistic tools, the trajectory of their evolution, and the course of changes shaping the way we relate to war. Reading through the prism of other texts also allows us to identify the advent of new aesthetic and cognitive concepts. For these reasons, reading Jerzy Krzysztoń's *Stone Sky* (*Kamienna niebo*) and Miron Białoszewski's *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* from the perspective of the processes of literary history illuminates Krzysztoń's impact on Białoszewski's "civic" portrait of the Warsaw Uprising.

The holistic perspective also offers us a chance to re-evaluate the canon and to choose new points of emphasis: to appreciate works that were passed by or entirely ignored by their readership, and to revisit lionised books through critical eyes. It just so happens that we are only now in a position to do justice to works that were historically silenced for political reasons or due to errors in critical reception or popular readership. All of these aspects make a strong case for scholarship that steps beyond the territory of a single text and its horizon.

⁴⁸Ibid, p. 170.

KEYWORDS

Polish 20th-Century Literatura

SYNTHESIS

ABSTRACT:

This article presents the current state of studies on literature of World War II. The author sets this against the backdrop of the substantial scholarship on literature of the Holocaust. The author analyses the possibilities and conditions for putting together a comparative monograph on Polish poetry and prose addressing World War II.

comprehensive overview

World War II

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Sławomir Buryła – Graduate of UMK in Toruń, Professor at the Institute of Polish Studies and Speech Therapy at the Warmińsko-Mazurski University in Olsztyn. He works on contemporary literature, editing, and popular culture. He recently published *On the Holocaust (Wokół Zagłady)* (Universitas 2016).
slawomirburyla@wp.pl |