

REVIEWS

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PROBLEMS WITH SEGREGATION. REFLECTIONS
AFTER READING WŁODZIMIERZ MĘDRZECKI'S
'RECLAIMED TRASH'

Book Review: Włodzimierz Mędrzecki (2022) *Odzyskany śmietnik. Jak radziliśmy sobie z niepodległością w II Rzeczypospolitej* [Reclaimed Trash. How we coped with independence in the Second Polish Republic], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 483 pages, ISBN 978-830-808-009-2.

Abstract: This review is devoted to one of the latest books by Professor Włodzimierz Mędrzecki. It provides a brief summary of the contents, taking into account, among other things, the economic issues present in the work. At the same time, problems with the correct presentation of Upper Silesian issues in the book were pointed out, both in the territorial context (difficulties in distinguishing between Upper Silesia and the Dąbrowa Basin), problematic context (concerning the Upper Silesian plebiscite of 1921) and the literature on the subject used.

Keywords: review, Second Polish Republic, economy, Silesian voivodship

<https://doi.org/10.14746/sho.2025.43.1.011>

Professor Włodzimierz Mędrzecki needs no introduction to lovers of 20th century history. This historian and anthropologist, affiliated with the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences (where he heads the Department of Social History of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries), has for years been researching the issues of historical ethnography and social history, with a particular focus on the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic (Mędrzecki, 2015;



2018ab). He has also co-authored history textbooks and exercise books for primary and secondary school students (Mędrzecki and Szuchta, 2001; Landau-Czajka and Mędrzecki, 2004), which, I believe, is important for his command of synthesis and his ability to build a “reader-friendly” authorial narrative.

The book referred to in the title was published in 2022 by Wydawnictwo Literackie in Krakow. In a commentary addressed to readers, the publisher briefly advertised the contents of the work, writing:

The Second Republic without make-up – the wonders and faults of the Independence dreamt up by generations. [...] Włodzimierz Mędrzecki disarms both the beautiful myths and the dark legends of the interwar period. He draws us into a story about the difficult beginnings of a country being rebuilt from the dismantled pieces: its shape, economy, culture and, above all, its society. It also shows the process of evolution from democracy to dictatorship and nationalisation of the state, as well as the international struggles that culminated in Poland being invaded from the east and west. It is a true, unretouched picture of a recovered homeland – much closer to contemporary realities than we might think. After all, our interwar forebears were, like us today, confused, full of fears for the future and embarrassed by the prevailing mess and the shallowness of political disputes... (Mędrzecki, 2022).

This announcement alone suggests that the book’s content is part of the current of historiography, which is close to Klio’s mission – the pursuit of truth, and which in the recent past found its manifestation in, among others, the books ‘Polska bez cudów. Historia dla dorosłych’ [Poland Without Miracles: History for Adults] by Maciej Górny (2021) or ‘Całkiem zwyczajny kraj. Historia Polski bez martyrologii’ [Quite an ordinary country: A history of Poland without martyrdom] by Brian Porter-Szűcs (2021).

Knowledge of the book’s content is also provided by the laudation accompanying W. Mędrzecki’s receipt of the POLITYKA 2023 History Prize in the ‘Popular Science Works’ category. The commentary read: “The past is a foreign country – even when we talk about our country’s past”.

‘Regained Trash...’ is both a solid synthesis of the history of the Second Polish Republic and a fascinating guide to a country that no longer exists. It is gone because, as a result of the Second World War, it lost nearly half of its territory and much of the cultural diversity that had been its essential feature. The depth of the socio-economic and cultural changes can only be seen when we juxtapose our present with a proper picture of the past. Włodzimierz Mędrzecki’s book gives us such a picture – both vivid and reliable. Written in rich and dense Polish, it depicts the civilisational conditions that defined the field of possibilities of government and the lives of ordinary citizens, the dramatic process of the emergence of a new state, the complexities of political his-

tory during the democratic and authoritarian phases of the Polish twentieth century. It highlights the country's deep internal diversity: ethnic, regional, economic and political, making it clear how different worlds its inhabitants lived in. In particular, he shows the realities of "local and petty Poland", which are too often discussed in a superficial way today, while the vast majority of the citizens of the Second Republic lived there ('Prof. dr hab. ...', 2024).

It is difficult to disagree with the opinions cited. The author has included his considerations in 12 chapters. Their laconic titles – constructed decisively for a wide audience – generally reflect the content well. They deal with the creation of centres of power and the specifics of the inhabitants of Poland before 1918 and "at the starting point" ('Powrót na mapę' [Back on the map]); the main challenges faced by the society of the Second Republic and the disputes and compromises which surrounded them ('Polska, ale jaka?' [Poland, but what kind of Poland?]); the creation of the position of the Polish state on the international arena in the first period after regaining independence ('Być albo nie być' [To be or not to be]); the characteristics of the constituent parts of the reborn Poland ('Znaszli ten kraj?' [Did you know this country?]); the socio-economic situation at the threshold of reborn independence ('Społeczeństwo i gospodarka' [Society and Economy]); the beginnings of Polish parliamentarism ('Trudna próba demokracji parlamentarnej' [A Difficult Attempt at Parliamentary Democracy]); the circumstances and conditions of the so-called May Coup of 1926 ('Zamach' [The Coup]); the peculiarities of "sanacja" rule ('„Sanacja”, ale czy sanacja?' [„Sanacja”, but is it sanacja?]); the socio-political and economic difficulties of the end of the second and the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century ('Kryzys' [Crisis]); the realities of the "decomposition of the Sanation camp" ('Następcy Komendanta' [Successors of the Commander]); the final years of the Second Republic ('Ku nowej Polsce czy raczej chocholi taniec?' [Towards a new Poland or a rather dreadful dance?]), and finally the achievements of inter-war Poland, especially in the field of culture ('Co nam zostało z tych lat' [What is left of these years]). This is not to say that the structure allows one to follow chronologically from the events of November 1918 to the end of August 1939. Not at all, the themes touched upon are sometimes extended problematically, which is clearly signalled as early as in the first chapter, where a considerable passus is devoted to the process of establishing 11 November as a national holiday, and a significant part is a de facto attempt to explain (and not merely describe) to the reader the peculiarities of the society

of reborn Poland. The intermingling of content and chronology in the individual chapters may be somewhat surprising, but – as it seems – it is nevertheless beneficial for the understanding of the processes described.

Certainly, the language of the narrative remains an advantage for readers – accessible and interesting to read, without being overly “scientific” or “intellectualised”. At the same time, the author tries to explain even the tasks facing the historian in a non-trivial way. Referring to the question of Poland’s regaining of independence, he wrote, for example:

This event, regardless of the premises and conditions that can be defined and described by the scientific method, remains a fact that escapes any coherent compact and closed interpretation. Which, however, does not exempt historians from attempting to put in order a cosmos of events, coincidences, spells and oddities (Mędrzecki, 2022: 17).

Another advantage is the subject matter. Of course, the events and heroes of “great history” are present on the pages of the book, proponents of political history will find in it interestingly presented excerpts from the most significant events from the perspective of Polish history. But those reaching for the ‘Regained Trash’ will also be able to get a picture of “provincial Poland”, with its beauty and ugliness, joys and sorrows, events and peculiarities very different from the “Warsaw perspective”. Among the things worth praising, one should also certainly point out the fact that the author does not run away from topics that are sometimes assessed as difficult: anti-Semitism, workers’ protests in which demonstrators were killed by the forces suppressing them, the draconian punishments applied to strikers. It also seems important that the author clearly emphasises the existing discrepancies in the assessments of the events described, noting that these differences occurred years ago as well, but are still present today. As, for example, when he writes:

The assessment of the mass social protests in the Polish lands at the end of 1918 and in the first months of 1919 was very different and remains so today among historians and publicists (Mędrzecki, 2022: 74).

The author’s well-paced narrative is complemented by capsules containing biographical notes describing (but also evaluating) the most important “players” on the political scene of the time. of the political scene

at the time. Photographs, usually aptly selected and integrated with the text, also remain a good complement to the author's narrative.

What deserves to be emphasised and assessed positively is the way in which economic threads were presented, from which the author did not escape, skilfully and frequently weaving them into the entirety of the deliberations. The economic threads are clearly visible already in Chapter II, where, among the basic challenges, the author pointed out the issues of "building a national economy that will give the Polish state the possibility to fulfil the key tasks for society" (Mędrzecki, 2022: 43). In at least three chapters (*Spółeczeństwo i gospodarka* [Society and Economy]; *Kryzys* [Crisis] and *Ku nowej Polsce czy raczej chocholi taniec?* [Towards a new Poland or a rather dreadful dance?]), the economic theme is dominant, although not the only one taken up. Here, too, the author does not limit himself to merely describing and presenting information about the past. Nor does he show an idyllic picture, nor does he hesitate to portray history critically – as when he writes:

For reasons that have not been reliably analysed to this day – neither in relation to Poland nor on the scale of the Central European region – the countryside has adopted a position towards the processes of shaping the modern market economy that can be described as an attitude of "resistance and coexistence" (Mędrzecki, 2022: 142).

But above all – it explains to the readers the complexity of the processes, explains (although not always justifies) the choices and decisions made in the interwar reality, as well as the reasons for the heterogeneity of economic transformations or resistance to modernisation, undertaken, among others, by numerous national minority communities. Here, too, he pays considerable attention to "local and small-scale Poland", among other things explaining the reasons for the poverty of many citizens of the Second Republic, but also the difficulties in building a "state-wide economic circuit and its modernisation" and the importance of the impact of economic weakness on the radicalisation of social sentiment, especially in the south-eastern part of the state (Mędrzecki, 2022: 174–179).

The picture presented can hardly be considered an example of "pride pedagogy". And this is true both when the author describes the economic situation of the early 1930s.

After the "Brest elections", the economic situation continued to deteriorate, unemployment was rising, any reserves from the good times had long since been used up,

and the actions of the authorities, advertised as real support for society, turned out to be illusory. The division into a relatively few circles maintaining a relatively good material situation and the rest sinking into poverty was becoming more and more apparent (Mędrzecki, 2022: 345),

the realities of the rural population in 1935

As at the beginning of independence, more than half of peasant farms [...] did not provide the basic subsistence for the farmer's family, so the necessary supplement to the family budget was additional income from permanent or casual work, sale of forest produce or handicrafts. Their absence made it impossible to meet financial obligations to the state, threatened the progressive decapitalisation of the farm and, in extreme cases, malnutrition. The tragedy of the situation of this huge group of the population was that it was virtually impossible to imagine the possibility of its real improvement (Mędrzecki, 2022: 391),

as well as describing the creation of the Central Industrial District

the realisation of the CID did not achieve the two most important goals assumed at the beginning. It did not provide sufficient material support for the army, nor did it become a factor triggering spontaneous, accelerated economic and civilisational development of the region, not to mention the whole country (Mędrzecki, 2022: 396).

This does not mean, however, that there are no words of approval in the book – such words appeared, for example, in relation to Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski's draft 15-year investment plan of 1938, and W. Mędrzecki also pointed to other historians' opinions on the balance of economic changes in the period 1935–1939: a generally positive one (albeit “without a breakthrough”) by Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski, and a rather similar one presented by Janusz Żarnowski with regard to the growth of the technical and economic level of industry.

And finally it is time for a “spoonful of tar in a barrel of honey”. The perceived weakness of the author's narrative is linked – which in total does not surprise the writer of these words – to the presentation of realities relating to territories which in the past were not part of the Russian and Austrian partition, especially the description of the specificity and distinctiveness of the “former Prussian district” (cf. Wapiński, 1980: 58–59). The difficulty can already be seen in the citation of the literature – one of the basic works devoted to the interwar Silesian Voivodship, *Województwo śląskie (1922–1939). Zarys monograficzny* [Silesian Voivodship

(1922–1939). Monograph outline], was edited by Prof. Franciszek Serafin and not, as stated in the work, Prof. Antoni Barciak (Mędrzecki, 2022: 466). The problem with the narrative is evident in the semantics used – the author interchanges the names Silesia and Upper Silesia quite freely (although only the latter should be regarded as correct in the context of the realities described). The awkwardness is also evident in the positioning of Upper Silesia/Silesia in the narrative. The description of the lands of the so-called Polish Upper Silesia (which comprised part of the plebiscite area and the fragment of Cieszyn Silesia granted to Poland) in the subsection entitled “former Prussian partition” may be regarded as symbolic, even though Silesia had never belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and could not therefore have been taken away from it as a result of the partitions. The caption under the illustration on page 129

The ‘Saturn’ mine in Czeladź. Silesia’s industrial landscape was far from the nationwide norm, above all because, although there were industrial plants elsewhere too, they were usually only small islands among the agricultural landscape. In Silesia, factory shafts and chimneys and industrial architecture stretched all the way to the horizon (Mędrzecki, 2022: 129),

which – in principle – is supposed to refer to Upper Silesia, but was exceptionally inaccurately illustrated by a mine from the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie [Dąbrowa Basin area]. But a clear testimony to the difficulty of describing can be shown by referring to two passages. The first quotation was to present the circumstances of the organisation of the plebiscite:

Under the terms of the peace treaty, the plebiscite documenting the will of the inhabitants of Upper Silesia to belong to the state was to involve more than 1.9 million people, living in an area of almost 11,000 square kilometres. According to pre-war statistics, more than 1.2 million of them declared Polish nationality, but all structures of state and economic power in the area were in German hands (Mędrzecki, 2022: 100).

On the surface, there is nothing wrong in the narrative; however, the “pre-war statistics” cited by W. Mędrzecki are the results of population censuses conducted in the German state (in the area of the Opole region) (in this case the census of 1 December 1910, announced by the Reich Statistical Office two years before the outbreak of the First World War). In these censuses, the census takers did not ask about nationali-

ty, but “only” about the language spoken at home (the so-called *mutterspreche*). In this sense, the figures are correct, only with regard to the censused language declarations: 1,258,138 people declared Polish (or most likely its dialect variety), of whom 1,169,340 reported Polish as exclusively spoken (Golachowski, 1950: 122). However, putting an equal sign between the declaration of nationality and language is an abuse.

The second quote I would like to cite concerns the conduct of the plebiscite vote itself and its interpretation. Włodzimierz Mędrzecki wrote:

The vote was held on 30 March 1921. It was attended by 1.2 million people, more than 700,000 of whom voted in favour of Silesia becoming part of Germany and 480,000 of whom voted for the Republic of Poland. The Polish side considered the results of the vote to be unreliable, primarily because of the participation in the plebiscite of some 200,000 people declaring a place of birth in Silesia, but living in other regions of the Reich, who had been dragged in by the German organisers of the plebiscite campaign. The Poles also refused to accept the fact that a large group of autochthons, declaring at the time of the census that they belonged to the Polish national group, had opted for belonging to Germany (Mędrzecki, 2022: 103).

Leaving aside the equating of the plebiscite area (which, *nota bene*, was not even identical to the historical Upper Silesia) with Silesia and the incorrect date given (in reality, the vote took place on 20 March 1921), the cited passage contains at least two more debatable issues.

The first questionable one is the opinion that “the Polish side considered the voting results unreliable”. I have written about this in the past, certainly the expectations of the activists of the Polish Plebiscite Commissariat (the body set up to coordinate the plebiscite action) were much higher than the announced results, and they were probably accompanied by disappointment, but the reason for the outbreak of the Third Silesian Uprising seems different. To repeat his own statement: It remains obvious that there was widespread dissatisfaction and disappointment among those involved in the whole process of preparing for the vote (this also applies to Korfanty himself, who, it seems, believed to the very end in a more favourable result, giving victory to the Polish side).

But this was not what caused the third of the Upper Silesian uprisings. For it was triggered by fears that the disputed territory would be divided up disproportionately to the results of the vote. The German

side demanded that the entire plebiscite area be returned to Germany, while the Polish side (on behalf of Korfanty) proposed the demarcation of the border (referred to as the so-called Korfanty line), which placed 60 per cent of the Polish territory in the territory of the Republic of Poland. The Polish side (on behalf of Korfanty) proposed a demarcation of the border (referred to as the so-called Korfanty line), which placed 60% of the plebiscite area and 70% of the population in the Republic of Poland and ran through the westernmost areas where the Polish side had gained an advantage in the vote, without taking into account the so-called German islands east of this line. The Polish plebiscite commissioner (Korfanty – M.F.) had already unambiguously warned those responsible for the demarcation of the border earlier, e.g. in an interview with *The Manchester Guardian* of 3 March 1921, when asked whether the pro-Polish inhabitants would accept the region remaining in Germany, he replied:

“Certainly not. If Upper Silesia remains German, then there will be a Polish uprising”. In a situation where, in the public space in April 1921, rumours of a border demarcation project authored by the British and Italian commissioners (Percival and Marinis¹) appeared, in which they were to propose the inclusion in Poland of only the Pszczyna and Rybnik poviats and scraps of the Bytom, Katowice and Tarnogórski poviats (without the industrial part), the threat of another insurrection became real (Fic, 2024: 476–477).

A similar comment can be made about the passage referring to “the participation in the plebiscite of some 200,000 persons declaring their place of birth in Silesia but living in other regions of the Reich”. It is a fact that the so-called emigrants (not only persons born in the plebiscite area and living outside it, but also persons otherwise connected with the area subject to the plebiscite decision) took part in the vote, which was strongly opposed by the Polish side. However, their vote was not considered – per se – by the Polish side as unreliable (although propaganda attempts were made to point to their role as “tongue in

¹ They were a Briton, Harold Franz Passawer Percival, and an Italian, Alberto de Marinisa Stendardo di Ricigliano, two members of the three-person (the third being Henri Le Ronda from France) leadership of the Inter-Alliance Commission for Government and Plebiscite [*Commission Interalliée de Gouvernement et de Plébiscite de Haute Silésie*], the equivalent of a government in a plebiscite area, which undertakes actions belonging to the autonomous countries (opening consulates, issuing postage stamps, establishing a judiciary).

cheek”), rather their presence (the German side brought more than 182,000 such people to vote, the Polish side about 10,000) was treated as one of the most dangerous elements of pro-German propaganda. One Polish activist, Ludwik Ręgorowicz, described their presence as follows:

housed in small numbers in hotels, they stayed mostly with relatives and acquaintances, bringing with them masses of propaganda blotting paper, gifts and money. Thus began at once the agitation inside the houses among relatives and acquaintances, an elusive but extremely effective agitation, for which there was no means of counter-propaganda. [...]. Korfanty consoled us that we would digest the émigrés, but it turned out that they not only constituted a powerful mass of voices, [...] but that it was also a great agitation machine (Ręgorowicz, 1976: 34).

Finally, the final passage that “the Poles also refused to accept the fact that a large group of autochthons, declaring at the time of the census that they belonged to the Polish national group, were in favour of belonging to Germany” – in fact, the perceived discrepancy between the mother tongue used and the plebiscite preference was a testimony to the Polish side that there was no simple translation of the linguistic situation in the region into national identification. As historians Piotr Hnatyszyn and Guido Hitze aptly commented on this situation:

The practically entirely Polish-speaking, nationally indifferent group of the population that decided on the outcome of the plebiscite was not guided in its choice by a national feeling, but much more by a regional feeling, against which national categories play a secondary role. The mindset of this population related to the area and the region, so that the decision itself resulted from a complex motivation in which material and social issues, historical arguments, their own future prospects, cultural-religious interests, sentimental memories and also an underdeveloped sense of connection with the state formed a highly complex conglomerate of factors (Hnatyszyn and Hitze, 2008: 20).

* * *

In general, the way the book is structured is well illustrated by the introduction to the last of the chapters, in which W. Mędrzecki wrote:

The bitter reflection on the preparation of the Polish state to defend its independence at the start of the Second World War, as well as the long catalogue of issues and problems that could not be solved from November 1918 to September 1939, should not obscure the fact that the Second Republic had undeniable successes to its credit (Mędrzecki, 2022: 429).

In its pages, the author charts both the successes achieved and the failures suffered. These shortcomings do not prejudice a low opinion of the book as a whole; Mędrzecki's book is undoubtedly an interesting read, allowing one to spend a useful amount of time acquiring new knowledge about the past of a century ago. Let us add that an attentive and open-minded reader will find many references to the present day on the pages of 'Reclaimed Trash', and from time to time will feel not only joy, but also anxiety. The taste of this reading is definitely bittersweet, but well, such is the past. Let's hope only the past...

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