

## REPORTS

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### TOWARDS A STRONGER VOICE FOR POLISH SCIENCE: 20TH WORLD ECONOMIC HISTORY CONGRESS, LUND, 28 JULY – 1 AUGUST 2025

**Abstract:** The report concerns the XX World Economic History Congress (WEHC), organized by the International Economic History Association (IEHA), which took place in Lund from July 28 to August 1, 2025, on the theme “Equality & Sustainability Challenges.” The event was attended by approximately 1,140 researchers from 58 countries, representing various disciplines and theoretical and methodological approaches to economic history. The congress included approximately 250 sessions, competitions, discussion panels, a publishing exhibition, and integration events. Particularly noteworthy is the growing activity of Polish scholars – 26 researchers from Poland and 6 from the Polish diaspora participated in Lund, which is a record representation compared to previous editions. Poles co-organized several sessions on economic transition in Central and Eastern Europe, socio-economic inequalities, and the economic history of empires in Eastern Europe. One of these was organized for the first time by the Polish Association of Economic History. The papers were in line with the main themes of the congress, although the issues of the Central and Eastern European region were treated marginally. The author emphasizes the importance of a stronger voice for Polish economic historiography in the global scientific debate.

**Keywords:** World Economic History Congress (WEHC), International Economic History Association (IEHA), economic history, economic historiography, equality, inequality, sustainability, Polish Association of Economic History, Central and Eastern Europe, Poland

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Economic history, an interdisciplinary and multi-paradigmatic science, is one of the most dynamically developing social sciences. The importance and scale of the World Economic History Congresses (WEHC), organized since 1960 by the International Economic History Association (IEHA), is a tangible confirmation of this thesis. The status of our discipline is also reinforced by successive Nobel Prizes in economic sciences. The latest winners received the Nobel Prize for, among other things, economic history research: Claudia Goldin (2023), Daron Acemoğlu, Simon Johnson, James Alan Robinson (2024), Joel Mokyr (2025). Some of the winners have participated in the WEHC in the past.

During the Cold War, the IEHA and its congresses served as a platform for transnational and transdisciplinary cooperation across the Iron Curtain (Berg, 2015). Today, the WEHC is the most important economic history conference in the world, breaking down political, continental, and postcolonial barriers. This is a manifestation of the benefits of globalizing science (on the subject of the globalisation of historiography, see, for example Bębnowski, 2023a). From the very beginning, Poles have sought to actively participate in the congresses. During the communist period, this was difficult for political and economic reasons. Domestic research, although developing intensively, was not fully objective due to the ideological limitations of Marxism. Meanwhile, émigré studies developed more slowly than domestic science (Bębnowski, 2023b). After 1989, economic historiography entered a phase of multifaceted crisis, one manifestation of which was the poor representation of Polish scholars at the WEHC. Over the past few years, there have been calls to change this situation (Bębnowski, 2022).

The 20th anniversary edition of WEHC, held between July 28 and August 1, 2025, at Lund University in Sweden was a positive sign (XX WEHC, 2025). Under the theme of *Equality & Sustainability Challenges*, approximately 1,140 researchers from around the world participated in the conference. In approximately 250 sessions, they represented various disciplines (although most often history and economics), academic centres (from 58 countries), and theoretical and methodological approaches, oscillating around different timespaces, sources, and quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The program was enriched by competitions for the best poster and doctoral dissertation (in three categories: before 1800, 19th century, 20th–21st centuries), discussion panels, fairs of leading publishers (Cambridge Press, De Gruyter Brill, Princeton Press, Springer) and journals (“Business

History," "Cliometrica," "Economic History of Developing Regions," "European Review of Economic History," "Explorations in Economic History," "Journal of Economic History", "Scandinavian Economic History Review", "The Economic History Review") and cultural and integration events (Martins, 2025: 1, Table 1; see also XX WEHC 2025).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, both during the opening ceremony and most of the keynote speakers' lectures, strong liberal-leftist political references could be sensed.

While only 7 researchers from Poland participated in Paris, and the average number of participants between 1990 and 2022 was 12 (Franaszek and Bębnowski, 2023: 266, chart 1), as many as 26 scholars from Poland and 6 from the Polish diaspora participated in the congress in Lund. By Polish diaspora researchers, I mean Poles affiliated with foreign universities. Taking into account only representatives from Poland, this placed us 13th in the Top 25, after countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Germany, the USA, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, China, and Finland. The Polish group was the largest from Central and Eastern Europe. The next places after Poland were taken by the following countries: Belgium, Denmark, Austria, South Africa, Uruguay, Norway, Argentina, Hong Kong SAR of China, Canada, India, Taiwan, and Romania. The Warsaw School of Economics was ranked 14th in the Top 20 list of the most represented institutions (Martins, 2025: 1–3, figures 1–2). During the 20th WEHC, our activities focused on organizing separate sessions.

One of such sessions, entitled *Equalities and Sustainability Challenges in Transition: Economies in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989*, was organized for the first time by the Polish Association of Economic History (a member of the IEHA since 2022), what was announced in the academic press long before the congress ('Polski panel...', 2024). It was organized by Damian Bębnowski from the University of Łódź (main organizer), Piotr Franaszek from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Tadeusz Janicki from the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (President of the Board of the Polish Association of Economic History), and Cecylia Leszczyńska from the University of Warsaw. In addition to researchers from other Central and Eastern European countries, the panel included Łukasz Dwilewicz, Wojciech Morawski, and Iryna Shandra

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Igor Martins from Lund University, secretary of the 20th WEHC, for providing a detailed report from the congress.

from the Warsaw School of Economics (paper: *The Starting Point of the Transformation. In a Circle of Shortages, Rationing, and Privileges. Polish and Ukrainian Experiences*), Damian Bębnowski (paper: *Property Rights and the "Slowing Down Transition": Poland and East Germany at the End of the Communist Era*), Lucyna Błażejczyk-Majka from Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (paper: *Agriculture of Central and Eastern European Countries During the Political and Economic Transition Period: A Public Statistics Perspective*), Piotr Franaszek (paper: *Activities for the Sustainable Development of the Polish Steel Industry at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries: The Case of the Steelworks in Kraków*), Cecylia Leszczyńska (paper: *The Banking Systems of Central European Countries and Their Role in Economic Transformation*), and Dariusz Grola from Angelus Silesius Academy of Applied Sciences in Wałbrzych (paper: *Activities and Achievements in the Field of Sustainable Development through the Application of CSR and ESG Policies by the Industrial Concern KGHM Polska Miedź SA in the Years 2004–2024*).

Two other panels also deserve to be called Polish sessions. The first one was co-organized by Marcin Wroński from the Warsaw School of Economics: *Charting Uncharted Territory. Filling the Blank Spots on the Map of Historical Inequality*. It referred in separate parts to pre-industrial and industrial economies. The speakers were: Piotr Guzowski and Radosław Poniak from the University of Białystok (paper: *Economic Inequality Among the Ruling Class of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [16th–18th Century]*), Mikołaj Malinowski from the University of Groningen, and Marcin Wroński (paper: *Income and Its Distribution in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [c. 1790]*), Rafał Wiktor Kowalczyk from the University of Łódź (paper: *Development and Inequalities in the Development of the Extractive Industry in Tsarist Russia Using the Example of the Country's Largest Heavy Industry Centres: Dabrowa Basin and the Southern District in Ukraine until 1914*), Katarzyna Wagner from the University of Warsaw (paper: *Wealth Inequalities in the 17th-century – Big Cities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an Example of Using the Early Modern Tax Sources*), Szymon Antosik from the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (paper: *Long-Term Social Cost of Adverse Conditions in Early Life: The Case of Poznań, 1830–1900*), Marcin Kamecki from the University of Warsaw (paper: *Occupational Structure in the Lands of Modern Mazovian Voivodship in 19th Century*), Julia Kondratowicz from University of Warsaw (co-author: Marcin Wroński, paper: *Regional Disparities in Abortion Rates in Communist Poland. Examining the Influence of Past Abortion Experiences*

on *Current Attitude towards Access to Abortion*), Michał Kopczyński from University of Warsaw as with Sławomir Kozieł from Hirszfeld Institute of Immunology and Experimental Therapy in Polish Academy of Sciences (paper: *Inequality in Physical Stature: the Case of Young Men in Poland in the 20th Century*), Piotr Koryś and Maciej Tymiński from University of Warsaw (paper: *Regional Inequalities in Post-War Poland [1946–1996]*) and Maria Minakowska from Dr Minakowski Publikacje Elektroniczne (co-author: Marcin Wroński, paper: *Intergenerational Mobility over Nine Generations: Poland 1800–1984*).

The second session, entitled, *Economic and Social Challenges in Transformation Research in East Germany, Poland, and Ukraine: Uniformity, Sustainability, or Diversity*, was co-organized by Konrad Walerski and Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast from the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), as well as Sławomir Kamosiński from Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz. The following papers were presented during this session: *The Role of Social Sciences in Interpreting and Remembering the Transformation as Institutional Change* (Konrad Walerski), *The Word as a Tool of the Economic Game Governments with Entrepreneurs: The Case of Poland from 1945 to the Present Day* (Sławomir Kamosiński), and *From Socialism to Capitalism: The Impact of the Socialist Environment on Entrepreneurial Strategies in Poland, Germany, and Ukraine* (Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast).

Other Poles also took an active part in other panels, including: Piotr Guzowski (session: *Credit and State Formation in Northern and Eastern Europe, C. 1500–1800*, paper: *Royal Credit During the Jagiellonian Reign in Poland, 1386–1572*) and Anna Sosnowska from the University of Warsaw (session: *Crossing the Iron Curtain: Transfer of Ideas Between the East and West During the Cold War Era*).

Also noteworthy is the representation of Polish diaspora researchers affiliated with foreign universities. Mikołaj Malinowski co-organized the panel *The New Economic History of Empires in Eastern Europe*, where he delivered a paper entitled *Political Economy of State Failure: Understanding the Gradual Decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*. He also gave other presentations, including: *Income and its Distribution in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (c. 1790)* (co-author: Marcin Wroński, session: *Charting Uncharted Territory. Filling the Blank Spots on the Map of Historical Inequality: Pre-industrial Economies*) and *An Overview of New Population Estimates for Eastern and Central Europe, 1650–1900* (session: *The Imperative for Accurate Historical Population Estimates for Economic History Research, a Maddison Project Session*).

Marcin Lukasiewicz from Leipzig University co-organized the session: *Adaptability and Resilience in African Business History*. He presented a paper entitled *Settlers, Sterling, and Sanctions: German Money Printers and the Political Economy of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence* (co-authored by Tinashe Nyamunda from the University of Glasgow). Adam Brzezinski from the London School of Economics gave a paper entitled *The Rise of Neoliberal Narratives* (session: *Values, Ideology, and Sentiment in Economic History*), while Arthur Starzec from University College London gave two presentations: *Inland Navigation Infrastructure in France and Britain, 1700 to the Present: New Data and Metrics* (co-authors: Alexis Litvine from the University of Cambridge and Christophe Mimeur from the University of Cergy) and *Switching the Engine On: the French and British Road Networks in 1910 and 1930* (co-authors: Alexis Litvine and Thomas Thévenin from the University of Burgundy), both spoke during the session *New Directions in the History of Transport and Long-Run Economic Development*. The panel *Industry and City Growth: Evidence from Asia and Europe* was organized by Aleksandra Dul from the University of Cambridge. She presented a paper entitled *Cities Born of Coal: Urbanization of Upper Silesia in the Late 19th Century*. Anna Grodecka-Messi from Sveriges Riksbank participated in the session *The Formation of National Credit Markets: Bank Branches, Financial Networks, and Banks of Issues, 18th–20th C.* with a presentation entitled *Central Bank Liquidity Support, Bank Lending, and the End of Currency Competition* (co-author: Xin Zhanga from Sveriges Riksbank).<sup>2</sup>

The papers presented by Polish scholars were in line with the main themes of the 20th WEHC, which included, in particular, issues of inequality, economic sectors, state transformations, and the 19th–20th centuries. Regional specifics, such as transition, were also taken into account. Similar observations apply to sessions (co-)organized by domestic and Polish diaspora researchers. This is all the more important given that the issues of Central and Eastern Europe were marginally treated throughout the congress (Martins, 2025: 2–4, 8). The anniversary edition of the WEHC in Lund was another positive example of the value of striving for a stronger voice for Polish science. This also

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<sup>2</sup> The above information is based on the official *Conference Programme...* (2025). During the conference, a mobile application was available, which provided updates on the list of presentations and panels. However, I was unable to fully determine whether all Polish participants spoke at their sessions.



applies to the study of economic history, given the achievements of Polish economic historiography, which include the work of domestic and Polish diaspora historians and economists. Time will tell whether this positive trend will continue during the 21st WEHC, scheduled for 2028 in Montevideo, Uruguay (XXI WEHC, 2025), although this may be a major logistical challenge for many.

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