

Polish Studies: Today and Tomorrow

Thursday 8 and Friday 9 September 2022

Abstracts

Thursday, 9.40-11.00: Unrest in partitioned Poland

Antoni Porayski-Pomsta, University of Cambridge

'Plebeian sociability and the state in the urban outskirts of Russian Poland (1880-1915)'

In my paper I will discuss the ways in which the imperial state managed suburban spaces in Russian Poland. The urban outskirts offer a particularly interesting context for analysis of the imperial confrontation with modernity because of their liminal nature, neither urban nor rural. The Russian state struggled to determine who the inhabitants of the suburbs were, what defined their boundaries, as well as how and by whom they were to be managed. At the same time, the suburbs were quintessentially modern spaces: rapidly changing, inhabited by migrants, and filled with factories and workshops. Using archival materials, I will discuss the suburbs as spaces largely left to their own devices. I will also look into the times when they were subject to limited state benevolence. At the turn of the century, however, this good will was shattered by growing politicisation of the lower classes. The suburbs became spaces of threatening political agitation, more violent and openly anti-tsarist than cities themselves. I will suggest that during the revolutionary period between 1904 and 1907 the poor began to claim imperial cities in a way in which they had already been claiming the outskirts. As a result, following the revolution, plebeian activities became a source of grave concern. My analysis of the projects of illumination will reveal new and persistent anxiety about plebeian sociability away from the state's gaze. The extension of city boundaries that took place throughout Russian Poland between 1907 and 1915 was an attempt finally to curb these rebellious spaces.

Natalia Gromakova, University of Aberdeen

'Polish public activity in the 19th century: the Galician dimension'

My current project focuses on the public and cultural spaces of Eastern Galicia (modern Western Ukraine) during the 19th and early 20th centuries which are characterized by dynamic changes that include all aspects of social life and accelerated the process of national self-identification of representatives of different ethnic communities living in the region. In contrast to the considerable amount of research that has been done already on the Poles in Galicia, I focus on a comparative study of the cultural heritage of the Ukrainian, Polish and Jewish peoples in Eastern Galicia aiming to contribute to the establishment of intercultural dialogue and the formation of a balanced memory policy as the basis of good neighbourly relations between Ukraine and Poland.

Modern social transformations led to the involvement of wider segments of the population in active participation in the life of society. The public activism of the Poles, which was based on the state-legal and socio-political traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, allowed not only to preserve their own ethno-national separateness, but also to build their own national project that met the requirements of the time. The growth of public activity of Poles, the creation of various cultural, political and socio-economic institutions contributed to the marking of their

own space of national identity, created numerous platforms for national unity in the conditions of a continuous struggle for the restoration of lost Polish statehood.

The Poles who came under the power of the Habsburgs, although they were aware of themselves as a part of the all-Polish social space, nevertheless had their own peculiarities of public activity, which were determined by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included the process of forming a modern national project, which meant the involvement of broad sections of the population in the struggle for the revival of the Polish state, the search for new ideological guidelines and forms and methods of activity, and the organizational and structural design of the Polish movement. External factors were the lack of their own state organization and the policy pursued by the Habsburgs in Galicia. And if during the first half of the 19th century the Poles' efforts were aimed at resisting Germanization and preserving their own dominant positions in the region, after the revolutionary events of 1848-1849 and especially after the defeat of the Polish January Uprising of 1863, an active search for cooperation between the Galician Poles and the Viennese government began. In the conditions of competition with the modern Ukrainian project, Polish public figures are trying to secure the support of the Austrian authorities. Platforms for cooperation with the government are the Imperial Parliament and the Galician Regional Diet, scientific and cultural centers, in particular Lviv University and the Ossolińeum, numerous Polish societies. Thanks to the activities of these institutions, the revival of Polish statehood will begin in Galicia at the end of the First World War.

Thursday, 11.10-1.10: Tatar and Polish identities

Kelsey Weber, University College London

“I do it to show my culture”: dance, representation, and the body among Polish Tatars’

The Polish Tatars are a minority Muslim community who have lived on the Eastern borderlands of Poland for over 600 years, forming an integral part of the Polish nation despite maintaining distinct customs and religious practices. Previous research has focused on defining the community, questioning whether they form an ethnic minority, religious group, or a regional community, and examining how they have lasted as a distinctive group throughout the centuries despite assimilation pressures. Based on 18 months of doctoral fieldwork in the Podlasie region among the Polish Tatars, my work attempts to move beyond definitions based on the nebulous categories of ethnicity or religion, to get at the underlying tension between performative conceptions of belonging crafted through practices, and essentializing discourses based on blood ties as determinative of identity. I hope to bring these disparate views together by asking how bodily and affective resonances come to play in the crafting of belonging, focusing on the body as the locus of identity formation, solidification, and movement. My conference paper discusses dance within the wider context of questions regarding identity politics, analyzing the Tatar youth dance troupe Buńczuk, which is one of the most visible representations of Polish Tatars to the wider Polish population. I argue that the practice of dance is not only representational, but a practice that establishes and creates a community through bodily and affective flows. This study speaks to underlying issues regarding the (re)creation of traditions and how they speak to community building among minority groups.

Josef Butler, Kings College London

‘Polskość in Exile: Polish identity through the prism of the émigré milieu’

The literature related to the Polish community in post-war Britain often focuses on formal diasporic organisations, prioritising histories of cohesion over dissonance or individual expressions of identity. While the network of exile institutions referred to by Ziarski-Kernberg as the *alternative society* was crucial to the formation of a collective identity in exile, it must be acknowledged that many Polish émigrés did not engage with these organisations in a meaningful or sustained manner. In 1951 the Ex-Combatants Association, the most prominent Polish organisation in post-war Britain, had a membership of 14,510. This represented less than 10% of the total exile community, with the UK census of the same year showing 162,339 Poles living in exile in Britain. Not enough attention has been paid to representing the lived experiences of this hidden majority.

In this presentation I will explore manifestations of polskość in exile, understanding how a unique form of Polish identity developed in post-war Britain. I will investigate the formation of a collective identity, the importance of boundary markers of identity and the extent to which individuals within the émigré milieu identified with this shared vision of polskość. Therefore, I will utilise a source base that reflects the diversity of regional background, social class and gender within the community as a whole. I will acknowledge the role formal diasporic institutions played in creating spaces for polskość, while recognising the multiplicity of Polish exile identities expressed in post-war Britain.

Michał Garapich, University of Roehampton

‘Transnational populism and whiteness: what are we missing when talking about Polish immigrants’ post-Brexit uncertainties?’

Enthusiastic Brexit and UKIP supporters, Britain First members, EDL Polish Division, many ‘patriotic’ and nationalists local activists, including some on the extreme-right explicitly articulating white supremacist discourses - some Polish nationals in the UK are clearly attracted to organisations that can be defined broadly as far-right. Why is that? How come immigrants (or people with immigrant background) support anti-immigrant, anti-minority contentious politics in the UK? Is this a fringe minority, or rather a reflection of broader social and cultural developments within diasporic politics, Brexit-induced rise of normalized anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric, or something else? Why was Tommy Robinson, the leader of EDL, so keen on visiting Warsaw every 11th of November during the marches organised by Polish nationalist groups? And why have British cemeteries become the new ritual spaces of Polish diasporic nationalism?

This presentation will lay out the conceptual and empirical framework of a pioneering ESRC funded multidisciplinary project combining political anthropology, political science and discourse analysis looking into Polish nationals in Britain joining such political organisations. I will show how my previous work has contributed to approaching this challenging topic head on, questioning some established findings on how Polish migrants relate to racial and ethnic diversity in Britain. Taking a relational approach to a set of intersecting processes – Brexit-related social and cultural uncertainties, normalisation of far-right discourse in Polish politics and increasing economic problems in the UK contributing to constructions of antagonistic identity politics around culture, belonging and whiteness – I will shed light on what, to cite Jon Fox and Magda Mogilnicka, ‘integration through racism’ means for British politics and what it says about transnational politics in general.

Thursday, 2.00-3.20: Jews and Jewishness in communist-era Poland and beyond

Janek Gryta, University of Bristol

'Between emigration and withdrawal: memory work as an example of Jewish agency in Gierek's Poland'

This paper aims to problematize the scholarly consensus on the Polish-Jewish past in two ways. It focuses on the Małopolska region and on Gierek's tenure to offer a new narrative on Jewish life and attempts to commemorate the Holocaust in Poland.

First, it moves away from the existing paradigm which depicts the Jewish life in Communist Poland as a story of decline and passivity where the only option at exercising agency was migration. Rather it uncovers the traces of Jewish agency and attempts and building Jewish life in the 1950s and the 1960s. It considers an ambitious programme of memory work created jointly by the religious and secular organisations and suggests that this was a programme answering the needs of the living as much as it was commemorating the dead.

Second, this paper draws scholarly attention to the forgotten Jewish monuments commemorating the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy per se erected as an outcome of the aforementioned programme. Reaching out from regional centres and encompassing local sites of killings, those memorials challenged the Communist memory work which tended to omit the Jewish suffering. They marked the villages, towns and cities with references to the Jewish past. They have successfully prevented it from disappearing. By mapping these memorials, this research highlights the scale of the Jewish memorial project. It also challenges the existing interpretations of the Holocaust memory

Rachel Moss, Boston University

'Skrzypek as synecdoche: Polish-Jewishness in *Fiddler on the Roof*'

From a theatre company's public protest against losing their performance space, to a themed restaurant, to the final moments of an outdoor Jewish culture festival event, *Fiddler on the Roof* (Skrzypek na dachu in Polish) shows up in Poland in unexpected moments. In historicizing and examining its long history of performance in Poland, this paper theorizes the ways in which *Skrzypek* as a performance and cultural touchstone has come to be a stand-in for engaging with Polish-Jewishness in Poland today. This paper will highlight the performances' many forms throughout that history: from its prewar Jewish context that hewed more closely to Sholom Aleichem's original stories, to the postwar translation and performance of the American musical in the turbulent early 1980s, to the post-transition opening of the Anatewka restaurant in Łódź, and beyond. Furthermore, this paper will explore the ways in which elements of the theatre piece have come to encapsulate certain intangibles of Polish cultural heritage, specifically stemming from its Jewish past. The musical is an important entry into the long-standing field of performances of Jewishness in Poland over the past century, which collectively perform a broadened Polish narrative that includes the country's now-lost multiethnic past. More broadly, *Skrzypek* is a vivid representation of the pre- through postwar continuum of Polish performances of Jewishness in Poland, that, in examination, display how Jewishness has been taken up over time and in changing political contexts to redefine Polishness in various moments.

Thursday, 3.40-5.00: Migration in Wielkopolska today

Izabella Main, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

'Medical experiences and access to healthcare of immigrants in Poznań and Wielkopolska Region'

The paper will present a planned research project concerning healthcare-used by immigrants residing in Poznan and smaller towns of Wielkopolska region: the barriers and challenges they face and strategies they use to take care of their health and wellbeing. It is based on a preliminary fieldwork with migrants, members of civil society organizations supporting migrants, local authorities and healthcare providers. The comparison will be drawn between experiences of people residing in larger and smaller towns as well as among people of different legal and social statuses: economic, educational and forced migrants and many intermediary categories. The leading questions are: how the medical experiences and access to healthcare differs for migrants and native Poles, what are the areas of exclusion and inclusion, what are the strategies people use to get the access to the best care they envision, and what are the roles of municipalities and CSO actors in solving public health concerns.

Anne White, UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

'Gender, class and strategy in Polish return migration to smaller cities: a case study of Kalisz and Piła'

My project 'Poland as a country of "emigration" and "immigration"' investigates how Poland's identity as a country from which many people migrate influences its transition to becoming a 'country of immigration'. It is based on fieldwork in three cities of c. 100,000 population, former regional capitals in Poland's most prosperous regions, Mazowieckie (Płock, 2019) and Wielkopolskie (Kalisz and Piła, 2021-2). Medium-sized cities combine features of 'big city' and 'small town'. At recent PSG events I focused on presenting the perspectives of my Ukrainian interviewees; at this conference last September I discussed, using examples from Płock, why medium-sized cities should attract migrants. This year's presentation is based on my interviews with Polish return migrants and circular migrants in Kalisz and Piła. I examine how the cities are losing their status as 'cities of (international) emigration' in the eyes of middle-class inhabitants who have the impression that international migration has slowed, or even stopped. Like residents of Polish metropolises, they often view 'migration from Poland' as a young people's event post-2004. My paper also discusses the convictions of working-class informants and female circular migrants that Kalisz and Piła are still very much 'cities of emigration'. The paper explores informants' thoughts on why they returned from living abroad, permanently or temporarily, adopting an intersectional livelihood strategy approach to consider the roles of class and gender. Unlike returnees to big cities like Poznań, the regional capital, informants did not see Kalisz and Piła as places of great economic opportunity for themselves, although they agreed that there were many factory jobs attracting migrants from abroad. Nonetheless, most returnees considered quality of life to be higher in the smaller city.

Friday, 9.00-11.00: World War II war crimes and international justice

Wojtech Rappak, Polish University Abroad, London

'Jan Karski: the story and the history'

I have recently (2021) obtained a doctorate in history from UCL for research on Jan Karski, the Polish wartime courier who is often thought to have brought news about the extermination of the Jews to the West. My supervisor was Professor Antony Polonsky. The doctorate forms part of a larger research project aimed at publishing a book on this important historical figure. I am currently completing the final phase of this project by examining how the story of Karski the celebrity witness was developed many years after the war. My research seeks to marshal the historical evidence, if any, which supports the story.

My doctorate examines Karski's 1942 clandestine mission from Warsaw to London, it ends with Karski's meeting with Roosevelt on July 28 1943. But there is much more to say about Karski after that. In 1978 Claude Lanzmann persuaded Karski to talk about his wartime experiences. The eight-hour Karski interview was added to the hundreds of hours of other interviews and was edited down to just over 40 minutes in Lanzmann's 9-hour film masterpiece on the Holocaust, *Shoah*.

There is no doubt that during the war, Karski was deeply concerned about the Jewish tragedy. But an examination of original wartime documents clearly shows that the primary purpose of his wartime mission was the fate of post-war Poland. He remained deeply concerned about Poland until his death in 2000 but in 1981 he declared that he finally saw the Holocaust through Jewish eyes, and as a practicing Catholic he saw it as 'humanity's second original sin'.

Michael Fleming, Polish University Abroad, London

'Polish jurists and international justice during the Second World War'

International jurists, gathered in wartime London, advanced understanding of war crimes through a range of different fora, such as the London International Assembly and the International Commission for Penal Reconstruction and Development. In this presentation, I privilege the activities of Polish jurists in order to shed light on the legal entanglements and legal flows which underpinned the development of legal knowledge on war crimes during the Second World War. I show that flows of information from the Polish Underground State to the Polish Government in Exile helped transform news of atrocities into awareness of war crimes. Drawing on the documentation of the United Nations War Crimes Commission and the Polish War Crimes Office, I discuss a selection of charge files to illustrate how engagement with these under-appreciated sources may inform scholarship on the Second World War, the Holocaust and the early Cold War. I also suggest that the work completed by the UNWCC and the Polish War Crimes Office may be of assistance to jurists seeking to prosecute those responsible for recent and on-going war crimes.

Jenny Grant, Queen Mary University of London

'"The Least We Can Do": Gunnersbury and the weaponisation of Katyn memorials in the late Cold War'

The unveiling of the Katyn Memorial at Gunnersbury Cemetery in 1979 represented the culmination of nearly a decade of campaigning and fundraising by the Katyn Memorial Fund. As with any memorial, however, the ostensible act of commemorating the dead was beset by more secular considerations. This paper will explore how the opportunity to erect a memorial to the victims of the Katyn Massacre was seized upon by a number of actors and for a number of

motives. Since the discovery of the mass graves in 1943, the fact of the Katyn Massacre had created a schism in the British, Soviet and Polish alliance, and the ongoing failure of the British government to investigate the massacre resulted in an ongoing sense of betrayal among the post-war Polish population of the UK.

The choice of wording and imagery on the memorial inescapably identified the Soviet Union as the perpetrators of the crime. In the first place, therefore, the memorial could be wielded as a Cold War weapon against the reputation of the Soviet Union by both the British Conservative Party and the worldwide Polish diaspora. Secondly, it could serve as a means of identifying ideological bedfellows: right-wing newspapers fiercely criticised the Labour Government's failure to send ministerial representation to the unveiling. Finally, it was intended to raise awareness of the massacre among the British public in the hope of securing an official British investigation into the crime, in order to secure both justice for the victims and resolution for their families. That it inspired similar memorials worldwide attested to the potential usefulness of memorialisation as a weapon for the otherwise powerless Polish diaspora.

Friday, 11.10-12.30: Language and literature in exile

Juliette Bretan, University of Cambridge

“Words beyond the life of ships dream on”: Conrad, language and foreignness’

In a letter to his friend, Edward Garnett, in October 1907, Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad – who had, by that time, lived in the UK for over a decade, and a well-known writer – expressed his disdain at public opinion of the age, which often cast him as a ‘sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English’. Conrad’s lexical foreignness was a frequent feature of reviews of his books, and accounts of his life in Britain, in the early twentieth century. In part, this can be attributed to his late adoption of the English language, which he only learned as an adult, and which he struggled to use fluently in speech or writing; many critics, including Michael Greaney, have noted how the subject of Conrad’s prose appears to continually elude the reader through its obscurity, informality and slipperiness.

Yet Conrad’s fiction does not completely take a sceptical position about language: for he is equally interested in the complexities opened up by language, or by the use of different languages in tandem. His prose – especially his 1901 short story ‘Amy Foster’, about a Central Eastern European (possibly Polish) immigrant – contains examples of language crossover; with implications, both positive *and* negative, for the progress of narrative, community-building and identity. In fact, this also became a form of linguistic experimentation adopted by authors, including HG Wells and Malcolm Lowry, who draw on Conrad to explore familiarity and otherness in their own writings.

Ola Sidorkiewicz, University of Oxford

‘Playing Chopin backwards: Stefan Themerson’s General Piesc as an unholy émigré’

In this paper, I analyse the literary works of Stefan Themerson, with a particular focus on his short story *General Piesc* (1976), in the light of Themerson’s relationship to the tradition of Polish émigré writing. I first introduce the historical context for the development and prevalence of the Romantic paradigm in the Polish literary tradition, and particularly the tradition of émigré writing. I do so in order to outline the discourse against which Themerson negotiated his identity as a *littérateur*, and specifically as a Polish writer in emigration. I outline Themerson’s theoretical reflections on art and nationality, with an emphasis on his perception of artistic production that is free from the social obligation as imposed by the Romantic paradigm. For Themerson, the key to overcoming that paradigm is his choice to write in a language other than Polish. To illustrate this process, I move on to the analysis of *General Piesc*, written in English by Themerson which can be seen as reckoning with the Romantic paradigm. I point to some of its elements that reflect Themerson’s relationship with the Polish émigré circles in London which, on the one hand, define his main protagonist, and, on the other, invite his critical engagement. Focusing on a set of techniques employed by Themerson in the portrayal of *General Piesc*, I show how the figure of the émigré is always externally constructed, and how their mode of resistance to this lies in a series of performative gestures which can rupture it from within.

Friday, 1.30-3.30: Politics and law

Dominika Pszczółkowska, University of Warsaw

‘Are they building a “second Ireland” in Poland? Political remitting by Polish migrants and return migrants from Ireland’

Despite the significant body of literature on migrations after the European Union enlargements of 2004 and 2007, including on social remittances, a subcategory – political remittances – are only now starting to receive attention. This paper – based on 34 interviews with Poles active in the transnational space between Poland and Ireland, supplemented by a survey of Poles in Ireland (n = 503, CAPI, 2018) and a press query – presents research on (broadly defined) political remittances. It explores the conditions in the country of origin and destination which facilitate or hinder political remittances, the kinds of political remittances Polish migrants to or from Ireland transfer, and how these are transmitted. These are found to concern three main spheres: 1) the perception of minorities (ethnic, national, sexual); 2) the transparency of government and closeness of representatives to citizens; 3) the cooperation between the authorities and other actors to achieve local economic development. The paper argues that political remitting in the Polish – Irish transnational sphere can be treated as an example of much broader phenomena taking place between countries of the European Union, especially those linked by large migration waves. It demonstrates that, contrary to what much of the literature suggests, political remitting takes place not only between countries at very different stages of economic and political development.

Aleks Szczerbiak, University of Sussex

‘Abandoning the “conservative anchor”? The Polish Civic Platform's changing attitude towards the religious-secular divide’

This paper examines the liberal-centrist (at one time, liberal-conservative) Civic Platform (PO) grouping which, along with Law and Justice (PiS), has dominated Polish party politics since 2005. It shows how - in an attempt to broaden its appeal beyond simply being a pro-market, right-wing liberal party - in the mid-2000s Civic Platform tried to position itself as a moderate social conservative grouping and develop a more religiously-informed dimension to its ideological profile. The paper shows how, invoking religious ethics as a source of values in the axiological sphere, the party shifted in the direction of Christian Democracy. However, it also shows that, as part of a deliberate strategy of diluting its ideological profile, Civic Platform subsequently downplayed both its economic liberalism and its religiously-informed social conservatism.

Agnieszka Kubal, UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

‘Queer Coalition? The crisis of justice in Poland and the LGBT rights before the Polish courts’

Polish judges are known for their formal legalism in decision-making; after 1989 they often saw themselves as the ‘mouthpieces’ of the law (Galligan and Matczak 2007) highlighting their resistance to any form of outside interference in their everyday work. Since 2015 the judges in Poland, as a group, have found themselves under a direct, often existential threat from the executive following the different attempts at reforming the justice system (Gregorczyk-Abram, Kieszowska-Knapik et al. 2020). My paper asks: has the political pressure judges found themselves under influenced their decision-making toward other marginalised groups? I answer this question with regard to a particular case study: the rights of the LGBT population in Poland. LGBT people, whilst being some of the most legally excluded social groups in Poland

(ILGA 2021), use the courts in Poland and strategic litigation in particular to stand for their rights. Drawing on interviews with human rights lawyers, LGBT activists and judges this paper concludes that while no tangible trend in jurisprudence could be distinguished, there has been a qualitative change in the relationship between the judges and the LGBT lawyers. To account for this change I make use of the term 'queer coalition', originally developed by Alexander Kondakov (Kondakov 2017), to capture this 'fluid and unstable political form that rapidly takes shape to challenge an existing inequality, only then to disappear or transform into another instance of political resistance.'