



**A Review of the Russian translation of MACIEJ GÓRNY,
WIELKA WOJNA PROFESORÓW.
NAUKI O CZŁOWIEKU (1912–1923).**

Warsaw: Instytut Historii PAN, 2014, 284 pp.

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Abstract: The text is a review of Maciej Górny's *Wielka wojna profesorów*. It gives an overview of the main propositions of Górny's work, and raises the question of how far scientific knowledge is influenced by the unscientific (nationalist, political, ideological) foundations of scholars' thought, and whether that influence can be eradicated. Both Górny's book and current events lead the author to melancholy conclusions.

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A Review of the Russian translation of **Maciej Górny**, *Wielka wojna profesorów. Nauki o człowieku (1912–1923)*.
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The text is a review of Maciej Górny's *Wielka wojna profesorów*. It gives an overview of the main propositions of Górny's work, and raises the question of how far scientific knowledge is influenced by the unscientific (nationalist, political, ideological) foundations of scholars' thought, and whether that influence can be eradicated. Both Górny's book and current events lead the author to melancholy conclusions.

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This book is about the role of intellectuals in the First World War. The author studies the evolution of scientific thought in the areas of geography, anthropology, psychology and psychiatry, in the sphere of research into national character, and what is now sometimes called "ethnopsychology". Members of learned communities thought it their duty to wage war on the enemy, not on the battlefield, but on the pages of books and journals. Maciej Górny's work demonstrates how the patriotic and nationalist underlay of learned works determined the conclusions drawn by researchers involved in the war of the spirit.

This was a catastrophe which, to my mind, Górny describes far too calmly, with an almost surgical dispassion. Anthropologists, psychiatrists and psychologists, and researchers into culture from Germany, France and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, applied their whole heuristic arsenal to defend the rights of their own countries and nations, to establish the justice of their war aims and to unmask the villainy, inadequacy and bestiality that were their adversaries' "natural" characteristics. The reader will soon be horrified to learn that practically none of the book's heroes were deliberately distorting the truth. No, that is how they really did see the world.

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It is not even a matter of honest error: they had not made any mistakes. By perfectly scientific methods they came to perfectly objective conclusions: by measuring skulls, questioning and photographing prisoners of war, analysing the structure of the soil and the relief of landscapes, observing the behaviour of people and the flow of rivers, the rival scholars in the “war of the spirit” could prove absolutely anything, depending on their national and political preferences. German psychiatrists could describe the hysterical nature and “feminine suggestibility” of the French, just as well as French psychiatrists could describe the effeminacy of the German neuroses that had literally possessed the enemy army (pp. 269, 279). Ethnicity helped to map the terrain, and geographical borders constructed ethnicity — so long as that matched the geographers’ national prejudices (p. 196, and indeed the whole of chapter 3). The inhuman phantasmagoria of these scientific outcomes finally allowed the war to be described as a fight “between hordes of dolichocephalic Teutons and a group of brachycephalic Celts.” This battle of the reptiloids was supposed to decide the fate of civilisation (p. 240).

As an historian I cannot help remarking that the role of historians in this confrontation was so unattractive and so evident that Górný did not devote much space in his work to this particular platoon of warriors on the spiritual front (p. 293).

In fact, the main reason for reading Górný’s book is not to convince oneself, all over again, of the social roots of “objective scientific” knowledge or of the political engagement of scholars. We know that anyway. In this sense the book does not add much that is in principle new to our understanding of how the world is organised. The history of “the professors’ war” rather produces, with its detailed analysis of ideas, a feeling of terror and insistently raises two important questions. Firstly, are we dealing with past errors long outgrown (growing pains, random mistakes... we learned brethren have many squeamish and inoffensive names for the messes that we have made), or are we faced with a map of the abysses that have never gone away and that we are liable to fall into at any moment? Secondly, if the organisation of science has not fundamentally changed, how can we avoid a further catastrophe?

From my point of view, the answer to the first question is obvious: we have been able to draw lessons from the past, yes, but: not in every case, not to every question, not in every country and not in every scientific community. It is obvious that the lack of freedom experienced by scholars in the humanities, where politically complicated topics are concerned, is only increasing, and the propagandist load upon them is growing. State structures aim to prescribe the correct approaches and evaluations in those cases

where the legitimacy of power depends on such evaluations. It is no accident that the latest Russian constitution (it would be short-sighted to call it the “last” one) defends *historical* truth, taking no notice of the most dangerous situation with biological or chemical truth and literally leaving physical truth, with its formula $E = mc^2$, to its fate. As is well known, top politician Vladimir Medinskiy, with his doctorate in history, affirms outright that the criterion of truth and scientific validity should be how any given historical propositions correspond to Russia’s national interests. Not only that, this is now the official basis of the teaching of history in schools. What can one say? The monstrous case of Russia is to a large extent an overgrown reflection of state-centred approaches to science. Much has been written and said about this, using the example of France, by Pierre Nora, head of the association *Liberté pour l’histoire*, affirming that legislators should not interfere with historical evaluations, since changing a state lie to a state truth does not really alter anything.

But Górny’s book is not only about that, although it does devote plenty of space to propaganda. Nora himself has said that his struggle for liberty of scholarly research was not always met with understanding among French scholars working in the humanities, because some defended restrictive laws, when passed by a left-wing government, while attacking similar measures passed by the right.¹ As we see, Medinskiy is not alone in the basis for his views. This is an important aspect of Górny’s book: a correct point of view is scientific and objective, and should be defended, and an incorrect one is not scientific and not objective. But in fact, being scientific and objective should be the criterion for being correct, and not the other way round, surely?

Nor should one press the hoariness of the concept of “objectivity”. Of course, when we speak of being scientific and objective, we are, in some manner, entering upon the slippery slope of relativism, into a confusing and complex labyrinth with numerous “turns” — linguistic, anthropological, and so on. But this is not much help either. Relativism is all very well, but radical feminism will pulverise anyone whose utterances might be read as not in accord with the affect of gender equality. And what relativity can there be in the endless quarrel among Russian students of the revolution and Civil War, where it is still — a hundred years later! — important whether the author of the research is for or against the Bolsheviks? Not to mention the logic of backwoods statesmanship, in which the state is always right and state interests always have priority, never mind whether it is the Kievan / Kyivan state or the Mongol state, Ivan the

¹ Lozinskaya A., ‘Pyer Nora: “Istoriki ponyali, chto zakony — ochen opasnaya veshch’” [Pierre Nora: “Historians Have Understood That Laws Are a Very Dangerous Thing”], *Uroki istorii* [History Lessons], 2010, May 31. <<https://urokiistorii.ru/articles/per-nora-istoriki-ponjali-chto-zakony>>. (In Russian).

Terrible in the Kremlin or Vladimir Ulyanov. Here, the correct point of view is substantially more important than any other. Moreover, this correctness is very sincere, and may depend on a multitude of circumstances, personal, socially significant, ideological and, in general, irrelevant to the aims of scholarship.

I am not talking about how much in scholarship depends on the pragmatics of academic life with its schools, connections and statuses. In this sense academic life may be described as a combination of loyalties, by no means necessarily false, and often completely genuine. Górný's book reminds us that if one follows the way of loyalty in scholarship — no matter to what, whether it be to an academic school or to some ideologeme, the prestigious mainstream or belief in state interests — the result is evident: sooner or later there will be nothing left of scholarship, all that will remain is loyalty. In the particular case examined in Górný's book, an extremely bloodthirsty loyalty.

This, then, is the point where one should think about the second question raised by Górný's book: what to do about it all? How can one protect oneself, if neither the method whereby the research is conducted, nor the researcher's intentions are capable of defending science from Bacon's idols? If the humanities are built into social reality and can at any moment throw all their intellectual might and authority behind the justification of metaphysical entities or ideological vacuities, and at the same time demonstrate their unshakeable assurance of the correctness of the positions put forward, is there any chance of restraining us from that?

The experience of the twentieth century, and of our own time, tells us one thing: the humanities do not possess any remedy that guarantees a cure. It matters not whence the impulse comes — from the field of funding or of social approval, sincere patriotism or the thirst for recognition by one's colleague — we must remember that we are always capable of backsliding. The greatest danger here is forgetting the danger. And Górný's book is in itself a remedy against forgetfulness...

There is, of course, a time for everything. All the above was written before 24 February 2022. It would, of course, have been a fine thing if this review had been published then. Then it would have been possible to theorise about cases from the past and think about how much I had left out of my discussion, how much I had exaggerated, how I had traduced scholars in the humanities, including those of my own country, for the sake of rhetorical effect. But really, is everything so hopeless? Has not the tragic experience of the twentieth century taught us to be more cautious in what we say about nations and races? Have not many of the questions that animated the heroes of "the professors' war" simply been removed

from the sphere of scientific discourse — such as the question of national characters and their masculine and feminine features? Are not those approaches that used to appear perfectly correct now regarded as hopelessly out of date? We do not, after all, search for the basis of “the national soul” in the shapes of skulls. Has not the inoculation of constructivism delivered us from the nationalist absolute?

Alas no. As we know, practice is the criterion of truth, and the practice of the past months has shown that the mouldy rubbish has not gone anywhere. No sooner had we lifted the lids of our rocket silos than out crawled national character and natural frontiers and the effeminate adversary whose feminised nature leaves him no hope of victory.

For example, in June 2022 at the Trades Union University in St Petersburg the annual Likhachev Readings (this was their twentieth year) were taking place. One of the papers read, among many others, was G. M. Birzhenyuk’s “The Situation in the Ukraine. An Attempt at a Conflictological Analysis”. I shall quote from this text, which is full of material germane to our discussion: “On the mental plane the Ukraine is significantly different from Russia, and discussions of the similarity and brotherhood of the two peoples will change nothing at this level. [...] Their [the Ukrainians’] general features are childishness, carelessness, anarchy, lack of respect for themselves or for their environment, provinciality, niggardliness, inconsistency and so forth. In Russia such qualities are hardly ever encountered in the mass consciousness.”¹ End quote.

It is remarkable how time is determined according to space. Back in my schooldays it was customary to say “Stone-Age people” about the Australian Aborigines. It seemed that this was just an empty phrase, but now we really have gone back in time a hundred years, with Professor Birzhenyuk in the lead. Does that mean that all the world will be living in the twenty-first century while we shall be re-living the twentieth? One would prefer not, of course, but here, as a certain politician said, “whether you like it or not...” And though we don’t like it, we may regretfully note that to a large extent our hopes have been in vain. The fact that a person speaks in the name of science means nothing. Neither method nor institutions have helped us. And yet again the most solid supports of knowledge remain the most fragile and the most subjective: conscience, human conscientiousness and the scholar’s intellectual honesty.

Unfortunately Maciej Górny’s book, an entirely historical work, has become a topical, indeed indispensable, piece of research into the

¹ The text may be downloaded from the Likhachev Readings webpage: <<https://www.lihachev.ru/chten/2022/plen/>>.

roots of our own era, and, to all appearances, will retain its relevance far into the future, because it is important for conscience, conscientiousness and honesty that we should constantly be reminded of their existence, even if only by means of examples relating to an era when those principles were completely abandoned.