The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Polish Political Geography

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The article presents an outline of the history of Polish political geography. Its development as a science in fact began in the nineteenth century and its golden age lasted all the way through to the fall of the Polish state in 1939. The loss of independence in the period 1939/1945–1989 also brought with it the fall of political geography in Poland. After 1989, along with the restoration of freedom of research in Poland, a new period started in the history of Polish political geography.

INTRODUCTION

Poland is one of many specks on the political map of the world, and one of the biggest within the borders of the European Union, but one which also possesses a singular location – between the two great millstones of European history: Western and Eastern Europe, Western and Orthodox civilisation, the Germanic and Eastern Slav nations, Germany and Russia. On this East-West axis Poland is protected by no geographical barriers (this fact was highlighted long ago by noted Polish geographers, such as Wacław Nałkowski in 1887) and thus has always been a country of transition, and at the same time, a bridge.

Poland's stormy history has had a decisive influence on the fortunes and interests of Polish political geography. In the year 966 Poland adopted Christianity from the West and as a result was lastingly integrated into its structure. Due to the parallel choice made by neighbouring Rus in 898 to adopt Eastern Christianity, a deep and irreparable division in the family of

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Slav nations took place, situating Poland at the very dawn of its history on the frontiers of the West and the East. In spite of significant territorial losses during the regional divisions of the medieval period to its German and Czech neighbours (the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, including the Kingdom of Bohemia, and the Teutonic Order), and certain territorial gains in the East, Poland maintained its basic political and territorial orientation towards the West all the way through to 1385. The situation then underwent a deep and radical change with the formation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a union which endured for 410 years. The Union of 1385 moved Poland’s centre of gravity to the East, and opened the way to a monumental contest between Poland and Russia for dominance on the eastern frontiers of Europe, ultimately lost by the former. The Polish state remained faithful to this eastern orientation until 1939, even though in the eighteenth century Poland disappeared from the political map of Europe for 123 years as a result of three partitions between Austria, Prussia and Russia in 1772, 1793 and 1795. Having recovered independence in 1918, Poland was again divided among its neighbours in 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War. Poland was the first country in Europe to reject Hitler’s demands, determined to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. However in 1945 it was restored in a different territorial configuration, reduced in size and once more reoriented towards the West within borders resembling those from the times of the European crusades, as a satellite of the Soviet Union. Nineteen eighty-nine brought independence without any change in the post-war borders, but within a few years a fundamental reconstruction of the political map of Central Europe took place – today Poland has completely different neighbours than it did a quarter of a century ago. All in all, Poland’s dramatic struggles over more than a thousand years both with and within the Central-Eastern European space, between the two great millstones of European history, suggest that political geography should be Poland’s national passion.3

The history of Polish political geography as a science can be variously periodised.4 The essence of every boundary, both in space as well as time, is a break in continuity. The most appropriate historical divisions for Polish political geography seem to be three periods with reasonably elastic boundaries. The first period lasted from around the mid-nineteenth century to 1939 and saw the birth and flourishing of Polish political geography as an independent subdiscipline of geography. The Second World War marked the end of this golden age. The loss of independence and the Sovietisation of life in Poland define the start of the second period – the fall, which however was never complete. Finally, 1989 brought with it democratisation of the political system and the restoration of freedom of research, thus opening the way for a potential new golden age of Polish political geography.
THE BIRTH AND ZENITH OF POLISH POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

In 1768 Karol Wyrwicz published his *Geografia czasów teraźniejszych* (“Geography of the present time”), where the term “political geography” appeared in Polish, perhaps for the first time (this was the first and only volume of an intended larger scale work). In it Wyrwicz gives three definitions of political geography. The most concise is that political geography sets out “the properties of each nation”. In a longer definition he states that “political geography is the description of the different types of rule established on the earth, which are: monarchies, kingdoms, republics, sovereign states etc.” And most extensively he states that political geography is “the description of everything arising from human invention, the Christian faith excepted which although it belongs to political geography is a work of divine establishment alone. Nevertheless political geography describes different kinds of government and rule, various rites of faith, languages, laws, customs, the external appearance and colour of the world’s inhabitants etc.” Then, in his *Geografia powszechna czasów teraźniejszych* (“General geography of the present time”) published in 1773, he wrote:

Political geography gives knowledge of the means by which safety may be maintained and civil associations made happy, as devised by wise people and used according to the diversity of countries, kinds of governments, and national inclinations, with the one exception of the Christian faith, for although it belongs to political geography . . . it is the work of God himself, and . . . [his] gift. Rites of faith, the shape of governments, variations in rule, laws of all kinds, sciences, arts, crafts, trade, and the industries of all nations, come under the purview of political geography.

The concept of “political geography” found a ready reception in Poland. In 1804 Józef Wybicki (known above all as the author of the words of the Polish national anthem) published a work entitled *Rozmowy i podróże ojca z dwoma synami* (“Conversations and travels of a father and his two sons”), where he used this term freely, and in 1806 published *Początki geografii politycznej wraz z początkami geografii fizycznej i astronomicznej, tudzież wiadomości politycznych* (“The fundamentals of political geography together with the fundamentals of physical and astronomical geography, and political knowledge”). And then in 1807 Stanisław Staszic published his work *O statystyce Polski* (“On the statistics of Poland”) for the first time, which exercised a significant influence on his contemporaries and was a clear promise of the birth of political geography in Poland. Included in Staszic’s work are themes such as the natural borders and international location of Poland, lasting peace in Europe, and a global state.

By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries Polish political geography was in the midst of its golden age, for which however it is difficult to locate an exact chronological starting point.
Perhaps it was even as early as 1807 with the publication of the previously mentioned work by Stanisław Staszic, or 1847 with *Polska – ogólny zarys przyczyn wzrostu i upadku dawnego państwa polskiego* (“Poland – a general outline of the causes of the rise and fall of the ancient Polish state”) by Oskar Żebrowski, or 1869 with *Historyczny obszar Polski* (“The historical territory of Poland”) by Wincenty Pol. However the best date would be 1887, which saw the publication of the eighth volume of the *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich* (“Geographical dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavic countries”), containing the entry *Polska. (Obraz geograficzny Polski historycznej)* (“Poland. [A geographical view of historical Poland]”) by Wacław Nałkowski, with which he began what was probably the most important dispute in the entire history of Polish political geography.

Designating the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (up to 1939) as the golden age of Polish political geography can cause controversy. However this evaluation is dictated by the significance of Polish political geography at that time in the life of the nation and the state, although not measured in terms of quantitative indicators such as the number of scholars, students, institutions or publications. Material, personnel and institutional opportunities for the development of a national school of political geography were extremely limited both at the time when there was no Polish state and Poles under Russian and German rule were subject to strong ethnic discrimination, as well as in the reborn state (1918–1939) hampered by poverty and the devastation caused by war. Nevertheless from the end of the nineteenth century through to 1939, unlike today, practically all of the most important Polish geographers were interested in political-geographical issues and published works in this field. In addition, Polish geographers initiated and contributed to some very important and high-profile political-geographical disputes in this period, frequently with an international dimension (the character of the territory of Poland, the ethnic structure of Central and Eastern Europe, etc.). They exerted an enormous influence on the fate of their country (above all, reference should be made here to the role of Eugeniusz Romer, for example, in the process of Poland’s reattainment of independence), and they also took up subjects vitally important to the welfare of the Polish state both at that time and in the future, such as Poland’s national borders, ethnic composition, and access to the sea – issues which found significant resonance with public opinion. This was an exceptional situation in the history of Polish political geography largely due to the dynamics of contemporary international relations and the associated opportunities for, and critical threats to, Polish society and the Polish state.

The emergence of Polish political geography was not merely the result of the development of political geography as a science in Europe (see Friedrich Ratzel’s *Politische Geographie* of 1897) and the European international situation. It also arose from the specific situation of Poland
in the nineteenth century: the recent fall and division of the state in 1772–1795 between Austria, Prussia and Russia; the depolonisation policies of the three partitioning powers; the continuing Polish aspirations for independence leading to numerous national liberation uprisings; and the national awakenings within the borders of the Eastern European ethnic patchwork. All of these factors created a favourable environment for political-geographical thought to emerge and prosper, which was both original and specifically Polish. After independence was regained in 1918 the development of Polish political-geographical research continued, stimulated not only by older factors (ethnic issues) but newer ones too – including the process (in 1918–1922 and after) of establishing and legitimising the borders of the newly resurrected state, the reintegration of a country which had functioned for over 100 years within the borders of three different state organisms, and the ever-increasing threats to the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity which ultimately led to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

Among the various national schools of political geography, that of Germany seems to be closest to the Polish school. This was in part due to the geographical proximity of both societies and the links that existed between their academic communities (for example, many eminent Polish geographers from the beginning of the twentieth century were disciples of Albrecht Penck, including Eugeniusz Romer, Stanisław Pawłowski, Jerzy Smoleński and Ludomir Sawicki). The above-mentioned Friedrich Ratzel was held in great esteem among Polish geographers and was considered by Stanisław Pawłowski to be the saviour of political geography, as he had not only marked out new directions for the discipline but could even be said to have rescued it from complete decline and ruin.13 In his diaries Eugeniusz Romer wrote of “the great German Ratzel”.14

There was, however, an additional reason why the concepts and theories of German political geography were taken up and adapted by Polish political geographers; namely the convergent preoccupations of the Polish and German schools of this subdiscipline of geography at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At that time, both were concentrating on national territorial issues and border questions.15 The similarity in approach was no mere coincidence. In 1917 Eugeniusz Romer argued that

in the vast . . . areas of Europe situated to the west of the Dnieper, the physiognomy of the land has aroused in its societies and national systems a single expansionist impetus, known above all from the history of Germany under the slogan: Drang nach Osten! This impetus has in fact dominated the entire history of Poland, and certain of its traits are also not lacking in the history of France.16

Thus there was a convergence not only in the preoccupations, but also, at a very general level, in the sources of Polish and German political
Both societies were facing certain general problems of a similar nature at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Germany, for example, was faced by the political-geographical challenge of its political and administrative unification \(^1\), whereas the analogous problem preoccupying Poland was that of establishing an independent state by uniting three formerly partitioned territories and then re-integrating them into one state organism. In Germany expansionist ambitions aiming at forging new borders and a larger territory for Germany, whether in Europe or outside of it, gave a strong impulse to the development of political-geographical study. \(^1\) Likewise in Poland the issue of territory and borders was also significant, but in both defensive terms (e.g., protection against German expansionism), and offensive (discussion concerning historical Poland as stretching from the Oder to the Dnieper, in the context of the absence of a Polish state on the political map of Europe and the ethnic awakening in Eastern Europe). However it needs to be said that defensive and offensive categorisations are extremely difficult, ambiguous and open to question in their application to Poland at that time. They are often not mutually exclusive, as in the last case (see, for example, the clash in this period between the aspirations of the “newborn” self-aware nations in Eastern Europe on the one hand, and on the other, Polish national aspirations in the context of an eastward “Polish national sprawl”, combined with a legitimate Polish demand for the restitution of Poland within its borders of 1771). In both Germany and Poland, political geography served national and state interests, but unlike in Germany, from the early 1920s through to 1939, as a result of the Polish internal and international situation, the national school of political geography in Poland focused noticeably on defending the status quo in Central-Eastern Europe. \(^1\)

Ratzel’s *Politische Geographie* (1897) had yet to appear, when in 1847 the previously mentioned “Poland – a general outline of the causes of the rise and fall of the ancient Polish state” was published in Paris, the work of Oskar Żebrowski, a Polish émigré following the unsuccessful national liberation uprising of 1831. In this work Żebrowski postulated as conditions for the independence, power and success of nations (1) the ambition to subjugate a “natural area of land” and build there a “national unity” with the aim of forming the vital forces of the nation, and (2) maintaining balance between the vital forces of one’s own and other nations. He defined “area” as a piece of land which is separate from others and is a natural region. He maintained that taking control of such an area is a prerequisite of national strength, and whoever does so is then able to independently create a state. \(^2\)

Another far more important progenitor of modern Polish political geography was Wincenty Pol (1807–1872), professor of “General, physical and comparative geography” in the chair of geography established in 1849 at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, the second chair of geography in the world after Berlin (for political reasons it was closed in 1853 by the Austrian authorities). His work, *Historyczny obszar Polski* ("The historical
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characterised Poland according to dialects of Polish rather loosely distinguished by him. Pol was also an inspiration to later Polish geographers, for example, Eugeniusz Romer.

In 1887 what was probably the most well-known political-geographical dispute in Poland began. The controversy centred around the geographical leitmotif that should characterise the territory of historical Poland, understood then as the area between the Oder in the west and the Dnieper and Dvina in the east, the Baltic in the north and the Carpathian mountains in the south, and the consequences of this for the state and the nation on the threshold of the twentieth century. In formal terms the dispute was started in 1887 by Wacław Nałkowski (1851–1911) (it is worth noting that he is the author of the concept of geantropologia — a term analogous to and earlier than Ratzel’s “anthropogeography” of 1882). In the previously mentioned eighth volume of the “Geographical dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavic countries”, under the entry “Poland. (A geographical view of historical Poland)”, Nałkowski published his views on the geographical character of the territory of historical Poland. In his article Nałkowski drew attention to two issues. First, he highlighted the transitional (mainly on the East-West line) and nondescript character, devoid of individuality, of the territory of historical Poland. Second, he stressed that this transitional, nondescript character posed a permanent threat not only to the existence of the state, but also the nation itself. Nałkowski’s analysis seems reasonable and convincing even today, but at the time reaction to it was influenced by political factors — not only the simple non-existence of a Polish state as a result of the partitions, but also the atmosphere of national defeat following the failure of yet another uprising in 1863–1864. So it was hardly surprising that Nałkowski’s views on the geographical character of Poland met with vehement objection. His chief antagonist became Eugeniusz Romer (1871–1954), professor of geography at the University of Lwów and arguably Poland’s greatest ever geographer.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century Eugeniusz Romer did not just question the views of Nałkowski on the geography of Poland. Above all, he put forward his own alternative concept of Poland as forming a land bridge between the Baltic and the Black Sea, while at the same time constituting a separate and distinct geographical entity. Nałkowski’s subsequent polemics with Romer’s concept of Poland as a land bridge led to an evolution in his own views. Whereas at the end of the 1880s he saw the transitional nature of historical Poland as a flaw, representing the negation of its individual character, at the end of his life Nałkowski’s interpretation was totally different — the “transitionality” of Poland’s geography was now a virtue, individualising the territory of Poland.

This change in the assessment of Poland’s transitionality in the views of Waclaw Nałkowski blurred the point at issue between the two great geographers, which in essence had arguably concerned different ways of describing
the relationship between Poles and the environment, on the territory of historical Poland. Admittedly from the beginning, both Nałkowski and Romer strongly emphasised the significance of Poland’s natural environment in the context of the country’s history, but they assessed its impact differently. For a certain period the dispute between Nałkowski and Romer reduced itself to a debate over the relationship of the environment to the question of Polish independence. Romer firmly believed that in the struggle for an independent state, nature was Poland’s ally because it had assigned a particular place on the face of the earth to the Polish state, and for Poland to be erased from the political map was contrary to nature – and thus the rebirth of the Polish state was inevitable. Nałkowski meanwhile at first thought that nature was at the very least not conducive to Polish aspirations, if indeed it was not to be viewed as outright hostile – the will of the nation had to defeat nature, and to do so continually. It was only later that Nałkowski, as mentioned, revised his views, discerning in transitionality a feature which individualised the territory of historical Poland. It is worth noting that the views of the two geographers were not necessarily regarded as being mutually exclusive, an estimate that appears to be essentially correct.

Nałkowski’s assessment of the geographical character of Poland is based on a convincing reading of the consequences of its location on the European plain between the previously mentioned great millstones of European history. Meanwhile Romer’s bridge concept depends on Poland not only having access to the coasts of two seas – the Baltic and Black Sea – but also playing an intermediary role in this territory. In a civilisational sense Poland has undoubtedly always played the role of a two-way street, although rather exclusively East-West than North-South, but a Polish presence on both the Baltic and the Black Sea during the Polish state’s more than one thousand years’ history is very debatable. Nevertheless, for all the criticisms which it is possible to direct at Romer’s concept of Poland as a bridge, it can by no means be ignored. Debate concerning the geographical character of Poland lapsed soon after the Second World War due to the loss of independence and the imposition of a totalitarian political system. (Probably the last polemical text to be published on this subject was an article by Romer from 1946 whose title posed the dramatic question “Was Poland a ‘transitional land’ up to 1939?”)

Significantly however, the transition-versus-bridge contrast still continues to be present in Polish thinking about Poland and Europe. The concepts advanced by Nałkowski and Romer still at least subconsciously define the framework of discussion on the international implications of Poland’s geographical location and Polish foreign policy. It is also possible, however, that they are just a further reflection and generalisation of Polish society’s thousand-year political experience of Central-Eastern European space, which is permanently and objectively present in the Polish consciousness. In terms of international reality, the concept of the transitional character of Poland’s
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territory can be viewed as drawing attention to its constantly endangered independence, while the bridge concept calls on Polish society and the Polish state to be active in the Central-Eastern European space. In political practice, the view of the character of Polish territory in Nałkowski’s concept can be argued to have borne fruit in two ways. First, it resulted in the programme for the construction of a strong state, ethnically dominated by Poles (see the so-called incorporation concept for the reconstruction of the Polish state after the partitions, advocated by Roman Dmowski [1864–1939], an influential leader of the Polish nationalist movement. This concept was only partially implemented in the period 1918–1939). Second, we have the present programme of Poland being strongly rooted in the political, economic and military structures of the West (see contemporary Poland’s determined choice of and support for European integration and NATO). Romer’s bridge concept seems to be in line with ideas associated with interwar Poland’s most important politician, Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), and his supporters; federalism (the construction of a system of states between Germany and the USSR to provide mutual support and guarantees of sovereignty), the Promethean concept (supporting centrifugal forces in Russia/the USSR), and the Intermarium concept (advocating a “Third Europe” – a block of states between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas led by Poland). The same harmony with Romer’s concept can arguably be seen at present in, for example, the strong support given by the Polish government to the “Orange Revolution” in the Ukraine in 2004/5 or even in the active involvement of the Polish president Lech Kaczyński (1949–2010) on behalf of Georgia during its conflict with Russia in 2008. However it seems that although Poland has remained a transitional land with all the good and bad consequences of this, it still does not know whether it can or indeed wants to be a bridge – of course not between the Baltic and Black Seas, but as in past times between East and West.

The First World War and the rebirth of the independent Polish state were an unusually strong stimulus to political-geographical research in Poland. During the war itself Eugeniusz Romer immersed himself in Polish political geography, resulting in a work which was key to Polish independence, his *Geograficzno-statystyczny atlas Polski* (“Geographical-statistical atlas of Poland”) first published in 1916. In 1919 Romer was the chief Polish geographical expert at the Paris peace conference. With the advent of independence, universities in Poland started to develop and expand. As a result, in the interwar period (1918–1939) there were a number of important Polish academic centres at which political-geographical studies were pursued. These included the geography departments at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lvów (E. Romer, J. Wąsowicz), the University of Poznań (S. Pawłowski), the University of Warsaw (S. Lencewicz) and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (J. Smoleński), as well as the oldest Polish institution of higher education for economics – the Szkoła Główna Handlowa (the Warsaw School of Economics) (J. Loth). During this period not only...
detailed and outline studies were produced, but also the first two Polish textbooks on political geography, dealing with exclusively Polish subject matter (S. Pawłowski, *Geografia polityczna Polski* [“A political geography of Poland”] as part of the book *Polska współczesna* [“Contemporary Poland”], first published in 1923, and with at least five editions by 1939), and political geography in general (J. Loth, *Zarys geografii politycznej* [“An outline of political geography”]).

In its golden age Polish political geography also gave birth to some interesting and original concepts and reflections, unfortunately often now forgotten. For example, in his inaugural lecture for the academic year 1932/1933 entitled “On the renaissance of political geography”, Stanisław Pawłowski (1882–1940), rector of the University of Poznań, touched on such issues as:

- globalisation (“despite everything however the world is moving towards the creation of one culture on the earth”);
- the clash of civilisations (“countries with old cultures will defend themselves against Europeanisation... Eastern cultures will resist these tendencies [towards Europeanisation – author’s note] – of that there can be no doubt”);
- global problems (“who knows whether the moment won’t come when mankind will run out of land, if not for graves, then for... cradles”);
- sustainable development (“there is one earth, and one mankind on the earth. ... Man will never be able to forget that he is an inhabitant of the earth”);
- regional integration (“certain economic unions of states are possible and the groundwork for these is being laid. Economic unions will be followed by political unions, and joined to this the idea of large federal empires to replace the former sovereign national states”);
- a world government (“weak... aspirations to the distant goal of one state on the earth are beginning to stir”); and
- universal peace on a global scale (“political geography as a science... through its research into the world’s relationships, is preparing the ground for the moment in the history of mankind when the long-awaited peace on earth arrives”).

Pawłowski was an attentive observer of international reality who drew attention to important global processes at their origins. These processes are key to describing the world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, although of course Pawłowski did not employ modern concepts developed only in the second half of the twentieth century.

Finally, the development of geopolitics in Poland before 1939 requires some comment, especially in light of the close interaction between the Polish and German academic worlds. It seems that in the period 1918–1939, Polish
geographers dealing with political geography had a predominantly critical attitude towards geopolitics, probably dictated above all by the aggressive direction it had taken in Germany. Eugeniusz Romer by contrast had a complex relationship to geopolitics as, on the one hand before 1939 he used the term freely and, it seems, identified political geography with geopolitics and even developed a concept which may be regarded as geopolitical (Poland as a land bridge). However, in his diaries, written in hiding from the Germans in the years 1942–1943 when at risk of execution, Romer wrote with reference to the period 1935–1939,

> It was with downright contempt that I leafed through the products of that science which had supposedly been newly discovered, above all in Germany, the so-called geopolitics. . . . Geopolitics was, in fact, political propaganda, which under the careful form of scholarship and seemingly scientific methods was in reality intended to serve the principle: «Calumniare audacter».

Perhaps however, Romer’s attitude to geopolitics had undergone reevaluation only during the Second World War.

THE FALL OF POLISH POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Nineteen thirty-nine is one of the most important watersheds in the history of Poland, marked by the double aggression of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR. Poland was the first country in Europe to resist Hitler, but the price paid for this opposition was huge. The immediate effect of defeat was the loss of the independence gained just twenty years earlier and the division of the country between Germany and the Soviet Union more or less along the line of Poland’s current eastern border. Resistance in 1939 was rooted in a determination to defend Polish independence and territorial integrity. At the end of the Second World War in 1945, Poland – from the very beginning a member of the victorious anti-Nazi coalition – was deprived of sovereignty for nearly the next half century, experienced Soviet totalitarianism in its national life, and was reduced in size and moved west in violation of the principle of the self-determination of nations. Thus the fate of Polish political geography was determined by the post-war balance of power in Europe, and the crisis of the discipline in Poland was caused by purely external factors resulting from the collapse of the Polish state in the war years 1939–1945. The fall of Polish political geography after the Second World War was by no means due to a lack of interesting and important research subjects – these were in abundance. In the new international situation there was simply no room for a great many political-geographical questions, let alone
for certain responses. Loss of independence internationally and a totalitarian system internally inevitably led, at the least, to a far-reaching curtailment of political-geographical research in Poland.

Nineteen thirty-nine definitively closed the golden age of Polish political geography, although its subsequent demise occurred neither immediately, nor fully and finally. Initially political-geographical work was continued in exile, as well as underground in German- and Soviet-occupied Poland. At first to some extent the war actually had the effect of spurring on political-geographical studies in Poland, if only due to expectations that the borders would be redrawn at Germany’s cost when victory finally came. In the first years after the war, in a Poland now reduced territorially and forcibly brought under communist rule, interesting political-geographical works were still being published, for example, on the new territorial shape of the Polish state or the subject of borders in general. The war years did nevertheless bring severe losses to Polish geography and political geography (the murder of S. Pawłowski, S. Lencewicz, J. Smoleński and others). But the marginalisation of political geography in Poland took place as the direct effect of the hard political realities of the Cold War, the political ice age in which Central Europe was enveloped from 1945 to 1989. Political geography must freely ask questions about the links between geographical space and politics, but 1947 marked the final delegalisation of pluralistic political life in Poland. Any form of political activity other than within the structures of the totalitarian state brought with it repression, initially long imprisonments and even death sentences (in the political trial of one Polish geographer the prosecution’s case included the subject matter of academic texts written by the accused).

Besides the international situation, analysis of the causes and course of the demise of political-geographical research in post-war Poland usually highlights three works which functioned as intellectual shackles on Polish political geography in the period of the communist dictatorship. The first of these is a 1956 book by the philosopher Jakub Litwin entitled Szkice krytyczne o determinizmie geograficznym i geopolityce (“Critical sketches on geographical determinism and geopolitics”) in which he condemned four unusually important and influential Polish geographers (E. Romer, S. Pawłowski, J. Loth, S. Srokowski) for the political-geographical part of their work, described by him as geopolitical. Litwin’s conclusions signalled that there was absolutely no assent to political-geographical research in Stalinist Poland. The second text was of a more modest character; it was only an article, but was published in an important and influential Polish geographical journal – Przegląd Geograficzny (“Polish Geographical Review”). It was written by the geographer Mieczysław Fleszar. Today it seems that the negative impact of this article could be said to have been exaggerated, particularly as it gives the impression of inconsistency. The article was published in 1958, that is after a measure of liberalisation in the political system had taken place following the end of the Stalinist period and the political unrest of
1956, but also at a moment when repression was once again intensifying. So we may assume that the article has its origins in the spirit of the thaw, which is confirmed by the author’s keen interest in political-geographical issues, his recognition of the existence of political geography and appreciation of its usefulness. At the same time however, Fleszar distances himself from political geography, arguing that it is not a discipline equal to physical geography and economic geography, it does not have its own permanent field of research or its own research methods, and the attempts to draw theoretical conclusions on the basis of political geography have led to negative effects in the form of geopolitics. However, the most direct and damaging intellectual blow struck against Polish political geography arguably came from a third publication, or rather series of publications with practically the same content, authored by Stanisław Leszczycki, a very significant figure in post-war Polish geography. What was probably the most disturbing aspect of this was his diagram of the division of the geographical disciplines and their connections with other disciplines, first published in 1962, which made no mention of political geography. In a direct way, which both captured the imagination and was easily memorable, he had formulated the message that in the geographical family there was no place for political geography.

The fall of Polish political geography after the Second World War was however never complete. The loosening of the political stranglehold after Stalin’s death meant that from the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, works on political geography started to appear in Poland (e.g., some interesting works by Andrzej Piskozub), and the term political geography could be found in the official names of some research centres. Thus, for example, from the second half of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, the University of Warsaw possessed initially a Department of Regional and Political Geography and later a Department of Social and Political Geography. There were also three very important political-geographical texts published in Poland before 1989 by University of Warsaw scholars. In 1964 the Czasopismo Geograficzne (“Geographical Journal”) published a review article by Józef Barbag entitled O miejsce geografii politycznej w systemie nauk o ziemi (“On the place of political geography in the system of earth sciences”) which it is possible to interpret as a polemic against the previously mentioned diagrammatic division proposed in 1962 by Stanisław Leszczycki, who, it is worth mentioning, was also a professor at the University of Warsaw up to 1970. Then, in 1971 a textbook by Józef Barbag was published under the title Zarys geografii politycznej (“An outline of political geography”, later changed to Geografia polityczna ogólna – “General political geography”) and reprinted in 1974, 1978 and 1987. It was the first general political geography textbook to have been published in Poland since 1925 and remained virtually isolated on the publishing market all the way through to the 1990s, that is, for the entire period of the communist dictatorship. An important text due to the scope of its readership was another
review article by Stanisław Otok, dealing with the history and current state of Polish political geography. It was published in the Political Geography Quarterly in 1985 as part of a series of articles entitled “Political geography around the world”. However all these texts bore the mark of the political restrictions arising from Soviet domination in Poland. All in all, in the period 1945/1947–1989 few works were published in the field of political geography. Those that were, dealt with rather secondary issues and their content as a rule was negatively affected by the ideological straitjacket imposed on them. As a result, post-1989 Polish political geography has had to deal with what is in fact an almost fifty-year gap in academic research and discussion.

CONTEMPORARY POLISH POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY – A RENAISSANCE?

The period 1939/1945–1989 constituted a real temps de malheurs, a time of trouble and confusion in the history of Polish political geography. Nineteen eighty-nine was a watershed not just for Poland itself, but also for political geography in Poland. Yet the question must be asked whether this opportunity has been taken full advantage of, and whether we in Poland are at least on the threshold of another period of prosperity for political geography.

The 1990s certainly enabled Polish political geography to develop freely, unfettered by political restrictions. Since that time political-geographical studies have been undertaken at several geographical research units in Poland, but at first two clearly led the way – Warsaw (in particular the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation at the Polish Academy of Sciences) and Łódź (until 2013 the University of Łódź was the only Polish university to have a separate research unit specifically dedicated to political geography – the revival of political geography in Łódź dates back to the mid-1970s). In Warsaw, Marcin Rościszewski and Piotr Eberhardt have come to the forefront (the latter has authored a large number of books and articles relating to ethnic issues, the borders of Poland and geopolitical questions), and in Łódź the leading figures are Marek Koter and Marek Sobczyński.

The regaining of independence and the democratisation of the political system have opened up great possibilities for the development of political geography in Poland, but they have also brought some threats. With regard to the opportunities, after 1989 it became possible to conduct research into the international position of Poland (the millstones of European history are still turning), and into its borders and borderlands (see, for example, Piotr Eberhardt, “Poland and Her Borders. Episodes from the History of Polish Political Geography” [in Polish]). Previously, Soviet domination had almost excluded these issues from scholarly discourse – alignment with the Soviet Union with all its political and territorial consequences was not open to question. In addition, it was only after 1989 that electoral geography
could become a subject of study (see, for example, Mariusz Kowalski, “The Electoral Geography of Poland. Spatial Differences in Polish Electoral Behaviour 1989-1998” [in Polish]53), because democracy in the People’s Republic of Poland was a sham with no room for free, accurate and pluralistic elections – so research into electoral geography made no sense. In this connection it is worth noting that interest in issues relating to electoral geography was also present in Poland during the period 1918–1939.

After the collapse of the Eastern bloc it also became possible to investigate ethnic and religious diversity without restrictions, not only in Poland, but also in the territories that had functioned within the borders of Poland up to 1939 but were then swallowed up by the USSR and are today located within independent Lithuania, Ukraine and the last dictatorship in Europe, Belarus (see, for example, numerous texts by P. Eberhardt). Since 1989, questions concerning the territorial integrity of Poland and its administrative system have also become increasingly important in connection with the presence and aspirations of ethnic and regional minorities, and the birth of autonomous-separatist movements (for example, in Upper Silesia). Another new and important area of research, which unfortunately has up until now been poorly explored by Polish geographers, is the analysis of the political language of public space. For more than the last hundred years Polish public space has been a battlefield for partitioning and occupying powers, Polish authorities, and various ideologies, and this is reflected in architecture, spatial planning, “monument policy” and geographic nomenclature. An outstanding illustration of this situation is the capital, Warsaw, whose public space forms a convoluted political and ideological urban and architectural patchwork which is fascinating to the political geographer. From the end of the nineteenth century up to the First World War, Warsaw’s public spaces were intensively Russified by tsarist Russia; in the interwar period they were given a form which affirmed the independence and power of the revived Polish state; during the Second World War Nazi Germany planned to deplete and then redevelop Warsaw into “a German city”; and finally after Warsaw’s destruction, the communists attempted to recreate the Polish capital as “a socialist city”.

The 1989 watershed which opened the way for the restoration of local government, rapid socio-economic change, cross-border cooperation and European integration, in consequence also revitalised, renewed or even initiated such fields of research as, for example, issues relating to local and regional cooperation and integration (such as Euroregions) and the administrative division of the country. (Research into the administrative structure of the country took place both in the period 1918–1939 and 1945–1989. Ultimately in 1999 a major reform of the administrative division of Poland was undertaken in which a three-level division replaced the previous two-level division and there was a fundamental reduction in the number of administrative units at the top level from 49 to 1651.)
Political geographers in Poland are also interested in the global division of the world between the rich North and poor South, and among other things, have undertaken various analyses of its political aspects (see “North-South, Commemorating the First Brandt Report: Searching for the Contemporary Spatial Picture of the Global Rift”55 and “The Communist World From Dawn Till Dusk. A Political Geography Perspective”56), including the strongly politicised “geographical nomenclature” used in the language of global development (see “Third World. The 60th Anniversary of a Concept that Changed History”57). In addition, the years since 1989 have seen the development of political geography research, and educational and popularisation projects of a more general nature. One outcome of this has been a number of publications in Polish, including textbooks,58 a terminological dictionary,59 and the extensive theoretical study “The state and dependent territories. A political-geographic perspective”.60

Apart from geographers, representatives of other disciplines are also active in Poland within the domain of political geography and have published works sometimes to a large extent devoted to political-geographical themes. Such authors include political scientists (see in Polish, for example, “Geopolitics in the political thought and the practice of Latin America”61), legal scholars (see in Polish, for example, “States and Territories. A Study in International Law”62) and historians (see in Polish, for example, “A history of Poland’s eastern borderlands and borders, from the earliest times to 1945”63). Worthy of particular note are two atlases issued in Polish by a geographical publishing company. They contain a great deal of political-geographical content, even though they are compiled by historians (see “Poland since 1944. Modern history. Politics. Society. Economy”64 and “Displacements, expulsions and escapes, 1939–1959. An atlas of Poland’s lands”65).

As mentioned earlier, after 1945 and the loss of independence and Sovietsisation of national life, geopolitics received unambiguously negative connotations, even becoming a pretext for the restriction of academic freedom, including in particular political-geographical research. With the restoration of independence at the end of the Cold War, broadly speaking two attitudes to geopolitics developed in Poland – affirmative and critical. Some representatives of the former are a circle of apparently fervent supporters of geopolitics, including a number of scholars, centred on the non-governmental Institute of Geopolitics in Częstochowa, founded in 2007. In this circle, geopolitics is regarded as an interdisciplinary science currently undergoing a renaissance on practically every continent, and destined “to play the role of one of the leading fields of knowledge able to elucidate the complicated processes taking place in contemporary global political relations”.66 The most influential figures in this tendency seem to be Leszek Moczulski, a former radical right-wing politician and author of a book regarded as a Polish classic on the subject of geopolitics, “Geopolitics, Power in Time and Space”,67 as well as the noted contemporary Polish geographer,
Piotr Eberhard, already mentioned several times in this article. The development of interest in geopolitics in Poland after 1989 is likely in part a reaction to the restrictions that existed during the period of communist dictatorship. The popular image of geopolitics as a discipline which offers its adherents the possession of true wisdom about the mechanisms which rule international politics is another factor, as is the desire of many to find simple solutions to complicated problems. However, the most important factors are Polish history and the position of Poland on the political map of Europe. The popularisation of geopolitics in contemporary Poland also seems to have been given significant impetus by the figure of Zbigniew Brzeziński, the Polish-born national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, who is well known in Poland as an author and is considered a great authority on international affairs.

A critical attitude to geopolitics is found among a rather diverse spectrum. International relations scholars who emphasise strategic studies make up one group of critics. The leading and best-known representative of this group is Roman Kuźniar (currently also an adviser on international relations to the Polish president) who recently wrote that

at present, however, geopolitics after years of existence in the political discourse of the great powers in the first half of the 20th century, rather as an ideology than a genuine research approach, is vegetating on the edges of the science of international relations. It is rather a kind of self-taught alchemy than a respected tendency within international studies. Thinking in purely geopolitical categories is an anachronism.68

In a text written a few years earlier, Kuźniar stated with equal pointedness that “firstly, the usurpative demand made by geopolitics (and its proponents) that it be accorded the rank of an academic discipline is entirely unjustified. And secondly, geopolitics as a political strategy whose foundation is geographical determinism is bad politics and leads nowhere”.69

A second group critical of geopolitics centres around another noted Polish international relations scholar, Edward Halizak, who rejects geopolitics on account of its anachronism and proposes that international relations be analysed within the framework of geoeconomics, a discipline that is very new to Poland70 (however critics object that geoeconomics is “the mirror image of geopolitics, and as a result unfortunately reproduces its restrictions and anachronisms”71). There is also at least one more group critical of geopolitics, which like the other two is associated with the University of Warsaw, but unlike them represents the discipline of geography. This group opposes the ideas advocated by modern Polish enthusiasts of geopolitics with regard to political geography – its marginalisation and the restriction of its field of interest only to the examination of the influence of politics on the geographical environment without also considering the impact of the reverse.72
CONCLUSIONS

And so what is the state of Polish political geography at the beginning of the twenty-first century? It is hard to give an unequivocal answer to this question. There are those who claim that after 1989 and the recovery of freedom, Polish political geography entered a golden age, but their optimism seems exaggerated. Certainly the malaise of Polish political geography in the period 1945/1947–1989 has been overcome and it is attempting to take advantage of the opportunities given by the restoration of freedom of research (we can observe the multiplication of new publications, conferences and talented scholars). However, here it is worth looking, for instance, at the Polish database, “Scholars”, run by the state Information Processing Institute, which is fairly credible and complete, although admittedly imperfect (the database includes records of dead scholars and those no longer active; the choice of specialism is purely discretionary; it is possible to choose more than one specialism and there is no quantification of the relative participation of a given specialism in the scholar’s total activity or output; not all scholars who in fact work within political geography declare it as their specialism). According to “Scholars”, in mid-2012 there were only about forty-five scholars, including no more than forty geographers, who declared political geography as their academic specialism. Putting it another way, only about 2% of Polish geographers and about 0.03% of all Polish scholars included in the database signalled a political-geographical interest. These numbers are probably too small to be able to defend the thesis of the full recovery of Polish political geography.

It is regrettable that political geography still seems to have the status of the “lost child of the geographical family” in Poland. This can be seen, for instance, in the refusal to recognise its autonomy from socio-economic geography within the framework of human geography, which is of great significance in the context of the academic career model which operates in Poland. Furthermore, of the sixteen geographical centres in Poland at university or research institute level, a separate research unit devoted to political geography can be found at only two: the University of Warsaw and the University of Łódź. Another problem and danger for the future of Polish political geography is that political scientists and international relations scholars, who in Poland are more numerous and “richer” in students than geographers, and especially political geographers, treat political geography only as purely propaedeutic knowledge. And finally, contemporary scholars with political-geographical interests are not engaged in any major disputes, and their influence on the shape of public affairs, except for the previously mentioned reform of the administrative division of Poland at the end of the twentieth century, seems limited.

All in all it seems that the most effective recipe for the opening of another golden age of Polish political geography, which will leave no
doubt as to the reality of its existence, is that which was formulated in 1958 by Mieczysław Fleszar, paradoxically during the communist dictatorship: “Political geography as knowledge concerning the state in the widest possible sense, if it is to be a living knowledge, connected to society, at least the enlightened, reading part, would have to deal with the most urgent issues facing the country. It would have to react to events taking place both within the country as well as around it.”

What then does the case of Polish political geography finally teach us? First, political geography can exist and develop fully only in conditions of freedom, both internally and internationally. Second, if political geography should and does teach us anything, it is above all that in the world of political-geographical phenomena and processes, nothing remains forever – states fall, borders undergo changes, and even ideal systems degenerate. Third, “If of history they say that it is «the mistress of life», then of geography they should say that it is «the director of life». . . . Thus he who forgets geography in moments decisive for the nation and the state, may expose public affairs to severe failures and painful losses”.

NOTES

7. Ibid., p. 2.
8. Ibid., p. 97.
11. S. Staszic, O statystyce Polski (Kraków: Drukarnia Gröblowska 1809).


31. Ibid., p. 170.

32. Ibid., p. 172.

33. Ibid., p. 171.

34. Ibid., p. 170.

35. Ibid., p. 172.

36. Ibid., p. 172.


41. Sobczyński, ‘Historia geografii politycznej’ (note 5) pp. 228.


44. Sobczyński, ‘Historia geografii politycznej’ (note 5) pp. 228.


70. R. Kuźniar, ‘Geoekonomia, czyli chybiona próba paradygmatu’ (note 68) p. 100.
73. Babbag, ‘O miejsce geografii politycznej w systemie nauk o ziem’ (note 49) p. 357.
74. Fleszar, ‘W sprawie badań nad geografią polityczną w Polsce’ (note 15) p. 103.
75. S. Pawłowski, ‘Rola geografii w życiu narodów’, Czasopismo Geograficzne 17/1 (1939) p. 2.