

**Thaddeus V. Gromada, editor. *Oskar Halecki, 1891-1973: Eulogies and Reflections*.** Preface by Jerzy Wyrozumski, Tatra Eagle Press, 2013. 80 pp. \$7.99, paper.

In 2013, a slim, self-published work appeared under the title *Oskar Halecki, 1891-1973: Eulogies and Reflections*. This work is a collection of the eulogies and brief reflections of former students and colleagues of the late Polish-American historian Oskar Halecki, and it is edited by a former student of Halecki—the former director of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America, Thaddeus Gromada. The eulogies were given forty years prior to the publication of this book, at the time of Halecki's death, and at least three of the contributors have themselves passed away since then.

Gromada remained in close contact with his mentor, Halecki, until the latter's death, and he published Halecki's final work posthumously (more on it, below). So, perhaps, the publication of this somewhat quixotic, 80-page book dedicated to Halecki can be explained as stemming from a certain nostalgia on the part of its editor. Overall, Halecki is little regarded and little read by current historians of modern Poland, Ukraine, and Eastern and Central Europe. When historians of Halecki's generation are cited, a situation usually occurs that is similar to the treatment of Pope Formosus (d. 896) by his successor, Pope Stephen VI, who exhumed Formosus's body from its crypt and proceeded to place the corpse on trial for heresy and other crimes. Present-day North American historians are largely unconcerned with the niceties of canon law, but some postmodern inquisitors were happy to indict historians that came before them for many new forms of heresy: nationalism, racism, sexism, white privilege, and so on. In the United States, Halecki was labelled, quite early on, as an apologist for Polish nationalism. William H. McNeill, the late doyen of world history, wrote *Europe's Steppe Frontier, 1500-1800* in the 1960s, utilizing only a single work on the history of Poland (and none on the history of Ukraine)—namely Halecki's *History of Poland*, which McNeill claims to have consulted merely as a handy example of excessive nationalism. While *Europe's Steppe Frontier* may well be the worst book ever written in English on the early modern history of Ukraine—a work whose signal accomplishment was to ignore the significant role of both the Cossacks and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—the charge against Halecki is one that appears to have been widely accepted, without dissent, in English-speaking academia. After all, what can one expect from a Polish-American émigré historian who was a Catholic and an anti-Communist? Thus, we might imagine that Halecki and a book dedicated to him forty years after his death could be safely passed over without further comment.

Yet, this would be a mistake.

For historians of the lands between the Baltic and Black seas, Halecki's work remains of enduring interest and value. It demonstrates an abiding appreciation for, and understanding of, the multiconfessional, multilingual, and multicultural character of this region. The authors of the eulogies in the book give an indication of the breadth of Halecki's influence, as the list includes Americans, Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians. During Halecki's lifetime, he himself produced scholarship in English, Polish, French, and German.<sup>1</sup>

Halecki's father, also named Oskar, came from the Polish gentry of Galicia, yet he spent his adult life in Vienna as an army officer in the service of the Habsburg Empire. His mother was a Croatian noblewoman. The younger Oskar was born in Vienna, where he also attended school. Prior to World War I, his father sent him to the Jagiellonian University in Kraków to undertake advanced studies, which he completed in 1913. There, he married a fellow student of history, Helena Szarlowska, the daughter of a well-known scholar with Lithuanian roots. Thus, one could say that Halecki began his life as a "Habsburg" Viennese and ended up a "Jagiellonian" Pole. By 1920, when he published his first major work—a study of the Jagiellonian union—vital aspects of Halecki's personal journey had mirrored that of the region itself.

Halecki took on Polish identity as a young man—in Kraków, in a Habsburg context, on the cusp of Polish independence. The Kraków historians with whom he studied and conducted research had already developed an acutely critical view of Poland's past, seeing the failure of the old Commonwealth as indicative of the country's political weakness and immaturity. The city was also the centre of the *Młoda Polska* cultural movement, which often presented a highly jaundiced view of the nation's failings, but also a rather Romantic view of its potential. The entire context of Halecki's early life and work was precisely the opposite of the type of "blood and soil" nationalism that many appear to have thoughtlessly assumed constituted his perspective on the past.

In the interwar period, Halecki was best known as a Byzantine historian and for his interest in late medieval and early modern relations between the Orthodox and Catholic churches. His first works focused on the Jagiellonian union; efforts to restore communion between the Eastern and Western churches; and the Crusade of Varna. Significantly, during this period, Halecki blended his academic work with a ten-year stint at the League of Nations in

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<sup>1</sup> A preliminary effort to reassess Halecki's legacy has been undertaken in Poland (see Dąbrowska). Also, Chodakiewicz's work represents one of the few recent attempts by a North American scholar to make use of the intellectual framework discussed in this review.

Switzerland. He organized, and later headed, the League's International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. A firm believer in the League's mission, Halecki was a committed internationalist. That internationalism, however, was not of the Comintern variety, but, rather, it emphasized the notion of cultural affinities between nations as the true basis for cooperation. His was a distinctly Christian internationalism, which viewed the disparate nations and cultures of Europe as autonomous members of a single family, though a rather extended and estranged one.

Halecki's profile in the West as a historian of Poland came about somewhat accidentally. When World War II broke out, Halecki was at a conference in Switzerland. Unable to return home, he went to Paris and, later, to New York, thus avoiding the terrible fate of his colleagues at the Jagiellonian University. At the time, there were simply no academic historians in the United States who were specialists in Polish history. By default, the task of writing a history of Poland, at a time when it was in the centre of the trauma that had engulfed Europe, fell on Halecki. *A History of Poland* was published in 1943, and it constituted the first serious history of Poland in English. As such, it was reprinted several times and proved formative for historians of East-Central Europe who were educated at American universities in the years following the war. Nevertheless, it was a somewhat popular work, written largely without scholarly apparatus. (Although Halecki was cut off from access to many of his primary sources, he had committed to memory so many late medieval and early modern documents that his American students recalled with amazement his ability to lecture without notes for hours, quoting primary sources verbatim.)

However, despite the popularity of *A History of Poland*, Halecki's primary interest was what he saw as the two major cultural fault lines of Europe's past. One of these ran through the Italian Piedmont, Switzerland, and the Rhine/Burgundy region. Halecki devoted particular attention, though, to the Intermarium, between the Baltic and Black seas. These lands were vital parts of Europe and, counter to the standard Cold War view, could not be lumped in with the history of Russia. Although Halecki tended to exclude Muscovy from his notion of Europe, Kyivan Rus', Piast Poland, and Árpád Hungary were as much a part of Europe as Plantagenet England. If, during Halecki's lifetime, the essential unity of Europe was artificially obscured by the Cold War, the division of Europe into East and West had its tragic beginnings in the split between the Eastern and Western churches. For Halecki, that split need not have been as permanent or deep as it later became. Efforts to repair the breach, even in the face of Seljuk and, later, Ottoman pressure, were legitimate and might have succeeded. The Crusade of Varna and the Union of Brest represented the road not taken. Although Halecki admired the intellectual and cultural achievements of the Eastern-

rite Catholic Church that emerged in the wake of the Union of Brest, one gets the sense from him that the Union was a tragic missed opportunity on all sides, especially given the religious tumult that was then convulsing Europe in the wake of the Reformation.

Halecki's final work, *Jadwiga of Anjou and the Rise of East-Central Europe*, was published posthumously in 1991, and it parallels his own biography in some ways. Jadwiga's short but eventful life and reign brought together Latin-rite Poland and Hungary with Eastern-rite Ruthenia and pagan Lithuania. Jadwiga's life, in some respects, mirrored Halecki's own: a Hungarian princess with a Bosnian mother and from a family line with deep roots in France, Jadwiga became the titular ruler of Poland owing to decisions made by her father and great uncle (the kings of Hungary and Poland, respectively). Her fateful choice to accept a marriage to a pagan Lithuanian prince whose subjects were largely Orthodox East Slavs, created one of the most intriguing and important political entities in European history (and one that gave rise to the wellsprings of Halecki's own cultural identity).

The development of the Jagiellonian space in East-Central Europe represented a rejection of the narrower crusading ethos of the Teutonic Order and of the centralizing tendencies of Muscovy. It gave birth to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—an imperfect but surprisingly enduring country, which allowed for significant differences in culture and faith under a limited central government. Modern historians, unable to fit the Commonwealth into their restrictive intellectual templates, remember it anachronistically. They recall its fall on the cusp of the nineteenth century but forget that it had endured for four centuries and had dominated the region until the mid-1600s.

It would be a pointless intellectual parlour game to imagine how Halecki might have viewed developments in Europe from the time of the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978—the rise of Solidarity, the collapse of Soviet Communism, the independence of Ukraine, the problems of post-Communism, and the current crises facing the lands of the Intermarium. The latter region's bonds to Moscow cannot be ignored or merely dismissed as the baggage of past autocracy and totalitarianism. Those bonds are more than political and economic. Nevertheless, despite the strength of those bonds, the region's connection with Europe is quite powerful. Viewed through Halecki's eyes, the "desire for Europe" that was so evident in the streets of Kyiv in the recent past is something more than a wish for material prosperity. The cultural unity of Europe that Halecki's work describes is not a ghost of the lost Commonwealth but a concrete reality, even more so now than in his lifetime.

This small book is a very personal tribute to Halecki, but it does not provide the reader with a fuller and deeper assessment of Halecki's life and work. Such an assessment is long overdue.

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