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## **POLISH DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE STATUS OF HISTORICAL SOURCES IN 1989–2019. SELECTED EXAMPLES AND APPLICATIONS**

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to present selected methodological threads of the discussion on the status of historical sources which took place in Polish post-war historiography. In the article, I present the concepts of the historical source formulated in 1957–1989, mainly by Gerard Labuda and Jerzy Topolski. Further in the text, I will present the discussion about Topolski's concepts and characterize the peculiarities of contemporary history as regards historical sources. In the light of the presented classification of sources, I will reflect on the status of the documents created by the apparatus of repression of the Polish People's Republic.

**Key words:** historical narrative, source, study of source texts, contemporary history

### 1. FOREWORD

In Polish historiography deliberations about the methods of a historian's work have been accompanied by reflection on the status of the historical source virtually since their very beginnings.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1815, Joachim Lelewel, in

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<sup>1</sup> The article was written within the framework of the Branch Research Project of the Historical Research Office of the Institute of National Remembrance in Poznań, *Metodologiczne i teoretyczne problemy badania najnowszej historii Polski* [The methodological and theoretical problems of the research on the contemporary history of Poland]. In the article, I use – modified and edited for the purposes of this publication – fragments of my two papers: Krzysztof Brzechczyn, “The Reliability of «Files» and Collaboration with the Security Service (SB) in Poland: An Attempt at a Methodological Analysis,” *Hungarian*

his *Historyka* (Principles of the research of history), proposed a division of historical sources into written sources, non-written sources, and tradition. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Polish historiographers knew the works of German authors, mainly Gustav Droysen and Ernst Bernheim. “L’Introduction aux études historiques” written by Charles V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos in 1897 has been translated into Polish fifteen years later.<sup>2</sup> Marcelli Handelsmann presented an approach independent from that of the Western researchers in his 1921 work *Historyka*<sup>3</sup> (Principles of history).

The Stalinization of Polish historiography after World War II also had an impact on the methodological reflection on the historical source: classical definitions and classifications were complemented, sometimes artificially, with proposals taking into account the influence of the Marxist theory. However, after 1956, the methodology of history – practiced in the analytical style – gradually gained scientific autonomy in Poland. In 1957, *Studia Źródłoznawcze. Comen-tationes* were first published (and they are still published today). According to the website of the publication, it has been devoted to “sciences auxiliary for history and the study of source texts, that is, to the classification of historical sources, the methods of research and criticism appropriate for particular types of sources, and the edition of historical sources.”<sup>4</sup> Still, as regards Polish historiography, the reflection on historical sources did not only take place in specialist journals – it also formed a part of the general methodology and theory of history. Among the most important concepts, there were Celina Bobińska’s, Jerzy Giedym’in’s, Wanda Moszczeńska’s and Jerzy Topolski’s works, devoted – wholly or in a significant part – to the theory of the historical source.<sup>5</sup>

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*Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (2014): 257–284 and Krzysztof Brzechczyn, “How Do Narratives Explain? A Comment from the Point of View of Poznań School of Methodology,” in *Towards a Revival of Analytical Philosophy of History: Around Paul A. Roth’s Vision of Historical Sciences*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Boston/Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2018), 148–165.

<sup>2</sup> Charles V. Langlois, Charles Seignobos, *Wstęp do badań historycznych* [An introduction to historical studies] (Lwów: nakł. Księgarni H. Altenberga, 1912).

<sup>3</sup> Marcelli Handelsmann, *Historyka. Zasady metodologii i teorii poznania historycznego* [Historyka. The principles of the methodology and theory of historical cognition] (Warsaw: Neriton, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See website of this journal: <http://studia-zrodloznawcze.pl/index.php?lang=pl> [access, october 26, 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Giedym’in, *Z problemów logicznych analizy historycznej* [On the logical problems of historical analysis] (Poznań: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961), Celina Bobińska, *Historyk, fakt, metoda* [Historian, fact, method] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1964), Wanda Moszczeńska, *Metodologii historii zarys krytyczny* [A critical overview of the methodology of history] (Warsaw: PWN 1977). Also it is worth to notice that Andrzej Malewski, Jerzy Topolski, *Studia z metodologii historii* [Studies on the methodology of history] (Warsaw: PWN, 1960) was one of the first book on analytical philosophy of history. Two chapters of this book are available in English: Andrzej Malewski, Jerzy Topolski, “The Nomothetic versus idiographic approach to history,” in *Idealization XII: Modeling in history*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009), 299–310, Andrzej Malewski, Jerzy Topolski, “On causal explanation in history,” in *Idealization*

The article, including the introduction to it and the conclusions, is divided into five chapters. In the second chapter, I present selected concepts of the historical source formulated in 1957–1989 by Gerard Labuda and Jerzy Topolski. In the third chapter, I examine Topolski's concepts formed after 1989 and the discussion they gave rise to. Chapter four contains a characterization of the peculiarities of historical source studies in contemporary history and the status of the sources created by the system of repression of the Polish People's Republic. It is worth noting that the political breakthrough of 1989 was not of special importance for the methodological reflection on the status of historical sources, and it is treated in the conventional manner in this text.

## 2. THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE HISTORICAL SOURCE IN 1957–1989

### 2.1. GERARD LABUDA'S DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF HISTORICAL SOURCES

For Gerard Labuda, a historical source was:

all the psychological, physical, and social remnants which are an outcome of human work and participate in the development of social life, thus gaining the ability to reflect that development. As a result of those properties (that is, being an outcome of human work and having the ability to reflect the development of social life), a source is a means of cognition which allows the scientific reconstruction of the development of a society in all its manifestations.<sup>6</sup>

Since in Labuda's concept, "sources are the outcome of the impact of the whole historical process,"<sup>7</sup> they should have the ability to reflect all its basic dimensions: the economic, socio-political, and cultural ones. A given historical source is to reflect that dimension of the historical process "with particular clarity" which had the greatest influence on the creation of that source. According to Labuda, sources are created in three ways:

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XII: *Modeling in history*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn. (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009), 351–381. On reception of Hempel's model of explanation in Poland, see: Krzysztof Brzechczyn, "Logical Empiricism and Logical Positivism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. by Aviezer Tucker (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 419, 425–426, Krzysztof Brzechczyn "Between positivism, narrativism and idealisation in Polish methodology of history," *Historiein*, 14, 1 (2014): 75–87.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki i nowej interpretacji źródeł historycznych z Postowiem* [An Attempt at a New Systematics and a New Interpretation of Historical Sources with an Afterword] (Poznań: PTPN, 2010), 44. In another version of his definition, Labuda defined the historical source as "all the material, psychological, and physical remnants which are both the creation and reflection, and a part of natural and social processes", Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 43–44.

<sup>7</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 24.

a) by the society influencing the surrounding conditions of living in a particular geographic environment, for the purpose of providing the material means of existence and of the preservation of the species, b) by the influence of one human being on another against the background of human productive, political, and cultural activity in a social environment, c) by the influence of the consciousness of a human being on the consciousness of another human being.<sup>8</sup>

Labuda classified sources into ergotechnical, sociotechnical, and psychotechnical ones, and tradition.<sup>9</sup> He used the auxiliary criterion of a division into direct and indirect sources, which he took from the traditional classifications of historical sources.

Since the ergotechnical sources were the outcome of human economic operations, they are to reflect that activity in a direct way, and the social and psychological activity – in an indirect manner. Labuda additionally distinguished demographic sources in that category – they reflect the biological conditions of human existence.

The sociotechnical sources were formed as a result of the “social influence of a human being on another human being in family life, the relations of production, or in political or national life.”<sup>10</sup> That is why sources of that kind are to reflect the educated interpersonal relations in a direct way, and the economic and cultural human activity – indirectly. Within that group of sources, Labuda also distinguished sociographic (reflecting the interpersonal relations formed within the framework of the historically variable types of the division of labor) and institutional (revealing the interpersonal relations formed within the framework of the institution of social life) sources. The institutional sources were divided into familial (containing information about family life), ethnographic (reflecting the activity of a nation and social groups) and official (revealing the activity of the state). The official sources are “such remnants as were created as a result of or in relation to the operations of factors of power in a society, in particular, the institution of the state.”<sup>11</sup>

The psychotechnical sources are to directly reflect the process of the materialization of consciousness “for the purpose of registering one’s thoughts or transmitting them to other people.”<sup>12</sup> That is why sources of that type are to directly reflect the “participation of consciousness in the processing of the material and social conditions of existence”<sup>13</sup> and indirectly reflect an individual’s economic, social and political activity.

The fourth source category was called tradition. Its carrier is a living human being who directly reflects all the dimensions of the historical process at once.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 57–81.

<sup>10</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 64–65.

<sup>11</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 90.

In his classification, Labuda accepts the assumption of historical materialism that the economy plays a crucial role in the historical process and ultimately determines the other realms of social life. That is probably the reason for his conviction about the necessary relationship between the realm of the historical process, which contributed to the ‘production’ of the given source, and the ability of that source to directly reflect that realm. That substantial outlook on the nature of the historical process also has an impact on the definition of psychotechnical sources as registering human thought (consciousness) “which objectively reflects the contradictions present in nature, social environment, or one’s own thinking.”<sup>15</sup> That approach, however, seems to be too narrow. It would be better to assume that psychotechnical sources register human thought, regardless of what it refers to – contradictions or harmony in nature, society, and one’s own thinking – and regardless of whether that thought participates actively in the “processing of the material and social conditions of existence.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it would be better to assume that any sources used by historians for obtaining information about the economic aspect of the historical process, regardless of their genesis can be ergotechnical sources. In this case, the question should be asked why a given source is treated by historians in a given time and place as primarily an ergotechnical and not a sociotechnical or a psychotechnical source? The criterion of the division here would not be the activity of the given realm of the historical process in the “production” of the source but the degree of the ease with which the historian can obtain the information about the given aspect of social life from that source. Sources classified as ergotechnical (and/or sociotechnical, and/or psychotechnical) would contain information about the economic (and/or cultural, and/or political) aspect of the historical process, which it would be the easiest to extract with the use of simple questions of the what, who, where type. For example, indirect ways of inferring would have to be used to extract information about social and political life from ergotechnical sources.

While reconstructing the historian’s research work, Labuda proposed the following triad: the source fact – the historical fact – the historiographical fact. In the first phase, the historian tries to reconstruct the facts registered in the sources. As not every piece of information about a fact recorded in the sources is an adequate reflection of what happened in the past, the historian reconstructs, on the basis of the sources, the facts which he or she believes to be true, that is, historical facts. Labuda claims that “we reach that goal by presenting the events registered in the sources against the background of the whole historical process, which allows us to capture the causal and genetic relationship of it with other facts as well as its internal dynamics.”<sup>17</sup> During the

<sup>15</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Labuda, *Próba nowej systematyki*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Labuda, “O metodzie kształcenia młodych historyków” [On the method of teaching young historians], in Gerard Labuda, *Rozwój metod dziejopisarskich od starożytności do współczesności. Część I: Do schyłku XIX wieku* [The development of the methods of

third phase of research work, the historian uses the methods of abstraction, generalization, selection, typologization, hierarchization, and valuation to place the historical fact within the broader narrative whole. In this way, the original source facts or historical facts, placed in the historiographical synthesis, undergo so big a transformation that they can be justly termed historiographical facts.

## 2.2 JERZY TOPOLSKI'S DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF HISTORICAL SOURCES

According to Topolski:

a historical source is ... any source of historical cognition (direct and indirect), that is, any information (within the meaning given to that term in the theory of information) about the social past, wherever they are, together with what transmits that information (the information channel).<sup>18</sup>

Topolski distinguishes between a potential and effective source. A potential source is any source of a historian's knowledge about the past, while an effective source is the collection of information currently used by a historian.

In that concept, the credibility of a historical source is relative – dependent on the research question. For one research question, the source can be quite credible, while for another question – not so credible. Let us quote Topolski once again: “Thus, the key which triggers the mechanism of searching for source information (that is, searching for sources) is the research question posed for the source. Without asking such a question, the source will not «tell» the historian anything, it will remain silent even if the historian can read it. By asking those questions, based on – obviously – the historian's other knowledge (and methodological consciousness), the historian undertakes the initial modeling of the reality research.”<sup>19</sup>

When he characterized the information structures of the source, Topolski was inspired by Jerzy Kmita's concept of sign, in which a sign is defined as an activity or an outcome of a human activity which is a result of intentional communication of a particular state of things. Apart from signs, there are symptoms, which can be divided into humanistic and natural. Humanistic symptoms are human activities or their outcomes not intended by their creator to be used for communication. For example, smoke coming out of a chimney is

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historiography since the antiquity to contemporary times. Part 1: Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] (Poznań: WSZiB, 2003), 182.

<sup>18</sup> Jerzy Topolski, *Metodologia historii* [Methodology of history] (Warsaw: PWN, 1984), 324.

<sup>19</sup> Jerzy Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej* [The theory of historical knowledge] (Poznań: Wyd. Poznańskie, 1983), 257.

a symptom of the human presence in that house and of the preparation of a meal, but it is not intended to communicate anything.<sup>20</sup>

Topolski distinguished three layers of the information structure of a source. The surface layer of the information structure of a source is a set of “the information which can be extracted from the sources in the simplest way, that is, which is legible without the necessity of asking questions other than questions concerning directly the information in the information set.”<sup>21</sup> The questions are of the simplest what, who, when type. The sign layer of the information structure of a historical source is opened by asking the question what the information extractable with the use of those questions is a sign of. The symptom layer of the information structure when we ask the question what the information in the source is a symptom of.

The starting point for Topolski was the traditional division of sources into written and non-written ones and into direct and indirect sources. The presupposition behind that division is that direct sources are to ‘directly’ reflect the past reality, while indirect sources are to do that via an informant.

In the case of indirect sources, the informant is a chronicler, a diarist who informs the historian about a fragment of the past reality. Indirect sources must be examined with respect to their authenticity and credibility, that is, their internal critique. There are no such informants for direct sources because they themselves are a part of the historical reality. In this case, only the authenticity of the sources is verified.<sup>22</sup> Direct sources are not mediated by a third party, so the historian can directly (with the senses) examine the artifacts of the past used as sources. There is no need to check their credibility. In the case of indirect sources, there is a third-party intermediary (informant), which necessitates the verification of both authenticity and credibility.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, Topolski introduced an original division into addressed and unaddressed sources. He claims that addressed sources were created with the intent to communicate a given state of things, while non-addressed sources were not. In this case, the criterion of division is the fact of the existence or non-existence of the information relationship of the type: information sender – information channel – recipient between the creator of the source and the historian (or another recipient). The division does not concern the material layer of sources (the carrier of information) but the information included in the sources.<sup>24</sup> The addressed sources can be divided into certain categories, depending on whether they are addressed to:

(1) recipients of a source contemporary to the author – for example, letters, reports, announcements,

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<sup>20</sup> Jerzy Kmita, *Wykłady z logiki i metodologii nauk* [Lectures on logic and the methodology of science] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1973), 32–33 and 210–211.

<sup>21</sup> Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, 263.

<sup>22</sup> Topolski, *Metodologia historii*, 329, Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, 260.

<sup>23</sup> Topolski, *Metodologia historii*, 329.

<sup>24</sup> Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, 260.

(2) posterity in general – inscriptions on headstones, documents which confirm someone’s rights,

(3) a historian – diaries written with that intention.<sup>25</sup>

By criss-crossing the two divisions, we obtain the following typology of sources:

the intention – or lack thereof – to communicate the existence or lack of the existence of an informant	Addressed	Unaddressed
indirect	indirectly addressed (an article published in a daily newspaper)	indirect unaddressed (a personal diary)
direct	direct addressed (an Egyptian pyramid)	direct unaddressed (pyramid scaffolding)

Because of the addressed source authors’ intention to communicate something, the sources have an element of persuasiveness directed toward their recipient, and they already contain an interpretation of the information they impart. For that reason,

historian who wants to extract information from such sources must interpret the sources, that is, carry out the interpretation already included in the source. Examining the credibility of the informant – that is, considering whether the informant is telling the truth in the given case ... does not suffice here.<sup>26</sup>

The active role of a historian in the search for source information was called – controversially – the ontological and epistemological creation of the past, that is, including the knowledge about the past in the individual and social consciousness. In Topolski’s words:

Obviously, the past exists objectively as something that happened, but without its reconstruction it would not exist for people, and it would not be able to influence human actions through people’s consciousness of their history. In such a case, there would only exist an influence of the past of which they would not be aware.<sup>27</sup>

Topolski introduced the concept of searching for sources which encompasses the discovery of new types of sources possibly containing the information

<sup>25</sup> Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, 260.

<sup>26</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej* [How to write and understand history. The secrets of historical narration] (Warsaw: Rytm, 1996), 341.

<sup>27</sup> Jerzy Topolski, “Historyk i źródła” [A historian and sources], in Jerzy Topolski, *Marksizm i historia* (Warsaw: PiW, 1977), 45. For more information about Topolski’s concept of ontological spaces, see Krzysztof Zamorski, *Dziwna rzeczywistość. Wprowadzenie do ontologii historii* [A strange reality. An introduction to the ontology of history] (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008) 251–259.



looked for by the researcher, the constitution of sources by creating a set of question, and interpreting the source information extracted in that way.

Brygida Kürbis was sceptical about the possibility of “creating new historical sources” contained *explicite* in Topolski’s concept. In her view, “there is a risk entailed in making use of the term «creating sources», even with the reservation that it is only done in the epistemological realm. The reason for that is that it could suggest that history does not only aspire to reconstructing the past (a cognitive goal) but also to transforming it (that is, to add content that did not exist in the first place).”<sup>28</sup> Such a transformation of the past is not its reconstruction, according to the accepted methodological and theoretical assumptions. For Kürbis, a historical source exists objectively, and “we learn all the time to read it better, to analyze the multiple layers of its form and content, to explain them in the context of the tissue of human history.”<sup>29</sup> Based on medieval research, Kürbis distinguished three stages of working with sources: heuresis, critique, and interpretation. She defined heuresis as “finding, collecting, and describing everything that is to constitute the source foundation for the reconstruction of the past.” Within the second stage, she distinguished external critique, internal critique, and examining the authenticity and credibility of a source. In the interpretation stage, the information extracted from a source is transformed into historical facts and composed into larger wholes: “sources should verify and complement one another; only the sum of the verified source messages makes it possible to reconstruct what really happened, where, when, and how (with a naturally different degree of certainty and with the hypothesis confirmed to a smaller or greater degree).”<sup>30</sup>

### 3. THE MOST IMPORTANT MOTIFS IN THE REFLECTION ON THE HISTORICAL SOURCE AFTER 1989

#### 3.1 NEW KINDS OF SOURCES IN METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The political breakthrough of 1989 was not a crucial caesura in Polish methodological reflection, and even less so in the methodological analysis of the status of historical sources.<sup>31</sup> In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there appeared studies which characterized and

<sup>28</sup> Brygida Kürbis, “Metody źródłoznawcze wczoraj i dziś” [The methods of studying sources yesterday and today], in *Cztery eseje o źródłoznawstwie* [Four essays on the study of source texts], ed. by Rafał Witkowski (Poznań: PTPN, 2007), 105; also see Edward Skibiński, “Projekt źródłoznawstwa według Brygidy Kürbis,” *Historia Slavorum Occidentis* 1(2) (2012): 11–21.

<sup>29</sup> Kürbis, *Metody źródłoznawcze*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> Kürbis, *Metody źródłoznawcze*, 110.

<sup>31</sup> Krzysztof. Brzechczyn, “Historiografia dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku wobec innych nauk społecznych (na przykładzie psychologii). Refleksja metodologiczna i postulaty

analyzed the specificity and usefulness of new types of sources – such as photography<sup>32</sup>, films<sup>33</sup>, the Internet, comics<sup>34</sup>, collective and individual memory,<sup>35</sup> human emotions and psychological personality<sup>36</sup>, or the documents

badawcze” [The historiography of contemporary history after 1989 and other social sciences, with the example of psychology. Methodological reflection and research postulates], in *Klio na wolności. Historiografia dziejów najnowszych po 1989 roku*, ed. by Marcin Kruszyński, Sławomir Łukasiewicz, Mariusz Mazur, Sławomir Poleszak, and Piotr Witek (Lublin: IPN, 2016), 171.

<sup>32</sup> See Agata Barzycka, “Fotografia jako źródło historyczne. Wybrane problemy” [Photography as a historical source. Selected problems], *Historyka* 36 (2006): 105–118; *Foto-historia. Fotografia w przedstawianiu przeszłości* [Photo-history. Photography in presenting the past], ed. by Violetta Julkowska (Poznań: IH UAM, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Marek Hendrykowski, *Film jako źródło historyczne* [Film as a historical source] (Poznań: Ars Nova, 2000), Dorota Skotarczak, *Obraz społeczeństwa PRL w komedii filmowej* [The image of the society of the Polish People’s Republic in film comedy] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2004), Dorota Skotarczak, *Historia wizualna* [Visual history] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2012), Piotr Witek, “«Rozbite lustra historii. Rozmyte ślady historii.» Metodologiczne problemy audiowizualnej koncepcji źródła historycznego” [“Broken mirrors of history. Blurred traces of history.” Methodological problems of the audiovisual concept of the historical source], in *Historyk wobec źródeł. Historiografia klasyczna i nowe propozycje metodologiczne* [The historian and sources. Classical historiography and new methodological proposals], ed. by Jolanta Kolbuszewska and Rafał Stobiecki (Łódź: Ibidem, 2010), 91–106, Barbara Żurek, “Film fabularny w funkcji alternatywnego źródła do historii codzienności – teoretyczne rozważania na przykładzie kina moralnego niepokoju” [Fiction film in the role of an alternative source for the history of everyday life], *Historyka* 44 (2014): 115–128.

<sup>34</sup> Michał Słomka, “Polski komiks obyczajowy i historyczny jako źródło do badań społeczeństwa PRL” [Polish cultural and historical comics as a source for research on the society of the Polish People’s Republic], in *Współczesność i przyszłość nauk humanistycznych. Problemy i perspektywy badawcze*, ed. by Daniel Ciunajcis, Michał Kierzkowski, and Grzegorz Klonowski (Poznań: IH UAM, 2008), 59–64.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Michał Kierzkowski, “Oral history – audiowizualna reprezentacja przeszłości” [Oral history – an audiovisual representation of the future], in *Współczesność i przyszłość nauk humanistycznych. Problemy i perspektywy badawcze*, ed. by Daniel Ciunajcis, Michał Kierzkowski, and Grzegorz Klonowski (Poznań: IH UAM, 2008), 119–133; Marcin Kula, *Między przeszłością a przyszłością. O pamięci, zapomnieniu i przewidywaniu* [Between past and future. On memory, forgetting and prediction] (Poznań: PTPN, 2004), Michał Kierzkowski, “Oral history a najnowsza historia Polski. Biografia polityczna legendarnego przywódcy «Solidarności» do 1988 roku” [Oral history and contemporary history of Poland. A political biography of a legendary leader of Solidarity until 1988], in *Uwikłania historiografii. Między ideologizacją dziejów a obiektywizmem badawczym*, ed. by Tomasz Błaszczak, Krzysztof Brzechczyn, Daniel Ciunajcis, and Michał Kierzkowski (Poznań: IPN, 2011), 132–132, Patryk Pleskot, “Oral history w badaniu najnowszej historii politycznej – garść refleksji (na dwóch przykładach)” [Oral history in the research on contemporary political history – a few reflections, with two examples], *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 9 (2019): 137–157, Marek Woźniak, “Kiedy pamięć staje się źródłem historycznym. Historycy wobec tradycji ustnej” [When memory become historical source. Historians towards oral tradition], in *Historyk wobec źródeł. Historiografia klasyczna i nowe propozycje metodologiczne*, ed. by Jolanta Kolbuszewska and Rafał Stobiecki (Łódź: Ibidem, 2010), 79–89.

<sup>36</sup> Tomasz Ochowski, Tomasz Pawelec, “Historia psychologiczna a problematyka źródeł” [Psychological history and the problem of sources], in *Historyk wobec źródeł*.

(denunciations or reports of the Security Service) created by the system of repression of the Polish People's Republic – in historical research and the construction of a historical narrative. However, if we can try to evaluate it globally, the discussion about the new types of sources did not indicate the need to formulate a new definition or classification of sources but the need to enrich the set of the historian's research tools to enable more comprehensive use of the information obtained from the new types of sources in historical narration.

Krzysztof Pomian distinguished new types of sources or new readings of the sources which had been used in historical research: natural products, things, linguistic signs, and semiophores<sup>37</sup>. Pomian classified blood, human skeletons, and human, animal, and plant remains – which can be useful for reconstructing human beings' natural environment and biological structure – as natural products.<sup>38</sup> He called things all the objects collected or created by humans and used by them as tools. Language signs are the languages used by contemporary societies, which preserve the original meanings of words, customs, and beliefs. Semiophores are objects believed to be, "in the given society, carriers of meanings, that is, [objects] created and exhibited in such a way that they attract the eye, to the exclusion of any other functions or preserving, additionally, the utilitarian function."<sup>39</sup> Semiophores include works of art, liturgical objects, banknotes, decorations, equipment, etc. Thanks to their dual nature, they can be used as tools or artifacts which communicate some content.

Tadeusz Buksiński tried to systematize the procedure of the interpretation of written historical sources, which he believed to be an activity separate from the internal and external critique of the source<sup>40</sup>, related to other types of interpretation used in the humanities: dogmatic interpretation and research interpretation in the open and closed versions. The open interpretation, prevalent in literary studies, consists in the multiplication of readings of the problematic and ambiguous fragments of the text. The closed interpretation, prevalent in historical and social science, is aimed at identifying the ambiguous parts of the interpreted text and proposing a more precise interpretation than the alternative

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*Historiografia klasyczna i nowe propozycje metodologiczne*, ed. by Jolanta Kolbuszewska and Rafał Stobiecki (Łódź: Ibidem, 2010), 39–78; Michał Podśędek, "Empatia jako narzędzie historyka – możliwości i ograniczenia wykorzystywania empatii w badaniu przeszłości" [Empathy as the historian's tool – the possibilities and limitations of using empathy in researching the past], *Historyka* 49 (2019): 387–402.

<sup>37</sup> Krzysztof Pomian, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci* [History, science and memory] (Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2006), 98.

<sup>38</sup> For more information on this topic, see: Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* [Nekros. An introduction to the ontology of the dead body] (Warsaw: PWN, 2017).

<sup>39</sup> Pomian, *Historia*, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Tadeusz Buksiński, *Zasady i metody interpretacji tekstów źródłowych* [The principles and methods of the interpretation of source literature] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1991), 17–18.

ones. Historical interpretation, then, belongs to research interpretation in its closed version. It is also peculiar in that it confronts the interpreted source with the reality outside of language.

Buksiński distinguishes four dimensions of the interpretation of a historical source: syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and social. The syntactic interpretation consists identifying the literary genre and examining the style and language of the source. The aim of semantic interpretation – a historian’s basic tool – is to study the relationship between the reality outside of language and the meanings and senses one can find in the source. The pragmatic dimension of a source interpretation is a collection of the senses it has been endowed with by its authors and the identification of the factors – of which the authors are unaware – which have influenced the process of the creation of the source. The social dimension of the interpretation of a source is the analysis of the influences exerted by it in the cultural (for example, its influence on other written sources), socio-political, and socio-economic spheres.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2. FROM THE SOURCE TO HISTORICAL NARRATION

In the 1990s, Topolski continued to theorize about history, and he included the proposals of authors working in the areas of postmodernism and narrativism in his reflections. Still, it should be emphasized that it Topolski created those theoretical categories which enable the dialog with new trends in historiography before 1989.<sup>42</sup>

Topolski’s paradox of historical narration can be helpful in presenting his theory. In his view, if a narrative is to be treated as a conjunction of all the tasks it contains, then the conjunction is true when all the components are true. However, in the case of a historical narrative:

- 1) the truthfulness of all constituent sentences does not warrant the truthfulness of the whole narrative,
- 2) a historical narrative may remain true even if some of its constituent sentences are false, and
- 3) a greater proportion of true constituent sentences in narrative  $HN_1$  in comparison to narrative  $HN_2$  does not guarantee a greater degree of the truthfulness of narrative  $HN_1$ .<sup>43</sup>

Topolski assumes that a historical narrative ( $HN$ ) consists of historical sentences ( $HS$ ), sequences of historical sentences ( $HSS$ ), and historical images ( $HI$ ). Historiographical sentences and sequences of historiographical sentences com-

<sup>41</sup> Buksiński, *Zasady i metody interpretacji*, 49–52.

<sup>42</sup> To learn more about Topolski’s views on knowledge from sources, see Paweł Gałkowski, *Poznawanie dziejów czy wytwarzanie historii? Jerzego Topolskiego przemiany poglądów na uprawianie historii* [Learning about history or creating history? Jerzy Topolski’s changing views on the study of history] (Poznań: FIJK, 2019), 126–152.

<sup>43</sup> Jerzy Topolski, “Conditions of Truth of Historical Narratives,” *History and Theory* 20 (1981): 51.

prise articulated parts of a historical narrative, while a historiographical image is a non-articulated part of such a narrative (Topolski 1987).<sup>44</sup>

Topolski distinguished three layers of a historical narrative:

- a) informative (factual) ( $S_1$ );
- b) persuasive-communicative ( $S_2$ );
- c) theoretical-ideological ( $S_3$ ).<sup>45</sup>

The theoretical-ideological layer determines the two other layers of a narrative: “the deep layer of a narrative is a dynamic mechanism which imparts that narrative its structure and determines the choice and the configuration of the item information which the historian has at his disposal.”<sup>46</sup> Topolski describes the relationships between those three narrative layers with the use of metaphors: of an iceberg, a genetic code, and a tree.

The text itself is treated in that analysis [...] as a [...] tip of the iceberg. All that which latent and non-articulated (or often articulated fragmentarily) forms a more or less coherent system that controls narration and ultimately yields that which emerges at the surface, that is a text.”<sup>47</sup>

“Likewise, a human being depends in its shape and features on his genetic code, but he is not a more detailed repetition of that code.”<sup>48</sup>

[...] Now  $S_3$  can be compared to the roots and the trunk and the branches that is all that on which the shape and the kind of the tree depends. I have written earlier that some sentences in a narrative refer to the trunk, other to the branches, still other to leaves.<sup>49</sup>

In a more explicative mode, the author mentions three mechanisms of maneuvering narration through the theoretical layer. This is done by selecting information from sources and outside of them, putting them in a hierarchy, and composing them into a narrative whole (sequences and images). A historian only partially reveals his or her theoretical assumptions in the theoretical layer.

In the 1990s, Topolski introduced a new distinction, into base source information and base sentences. In historical research, the past and the historian are linked by historical sources used by the historian to observe/study the bygone world. The historian interprets the available sources. In the case of direct sources, the given object is defined and placed in a more general class of objects from the past. In the case of indirect sources, the historian reinterprets the interpretation of the past presented by the source author:

<sup>44</sup> Jerzy Topolski, “Historical Narrative: Towards a Coherent Structure,” *History and Theory* 26 (1987): 75–86.

<sup>45</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 97–111. For a discussion of the application of Topolski’s categories to Lelewel’s works, see Violetta Julkowska, *Retoryka w narracji historycznej Joachima Lelewela* [Rhetorics in Joachim Lelewel’s historical narration] (Poznań: IH UAM, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Jerzy Topolski, “A Non-postmodernist Analysis of Historical Narratives,” in *Historiography between Modernism and Postmodernism. Contributions to the Methodology of the Historical Research*, ed. by Jerzy Topolski (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 37.

<sup>47</sup> Topolski, *Non-postmodernist Analysis*, 14–15.

<sup>48</sup> Topolski, *Non-postmodernist Analysis*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Topolski, *Non-postmodernist Analysis*, 82.

we could say that the less narrativized the source ... the “closer” we can place it to the past reality. In this way, it turns out, direct sources, although they apparently represent the past, are not at all “closer” to it than indirect sources which can contain reports on direct observation.<sup>50</sup>

The base sentences containing base information are characterized by low concentration of interpretation because they pertain to clearly defined, single events from the past. For that reason, they are widely accepted by professional historians and become an element of greater narrative wholes. In Topolski’s words:

our information and base sentences are the material (but not “bricks”) of a narrative. They can be used for constructing various narratives, which means that in the end, if different narratives can be built from the same base information, the decisive factor in that endeavor is the historian’s interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

In the chapter titled “Base Information as a Realistic Alibi for Narration,” the author makes the following – frequently discussed – statement:

when we consider the historian’s access to the past, we can see that, in a way, that “access” (not explicated yet) can only be ensured by base information. I call them the realistic alibi of historical narration but not its realistic reference in the sense reference is understood (despite the overall ambiguity of that term) in positivist semantics.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, Topolski polemicalizes that sources can reflect reality while also being a trace of it. He writes:

metaphorically speaking, sources (or, rather, the base information extracted from them) provide the historian with ‘contact’ with the past reality (that set of facts ordered chronologically and bound structurally. That contact can only be interpreted as “point” contact via the base information which speak directly about individual facts.<sup>53</sup>

In Topolski’s opinion, that contact “does not, however, give grounds for the application of historical narration to the classical concept of truth.”<sup>54</sup> It would be more useful to reach for Hilary Putnam’s concept of internal realism or the concept of coherent truth where the truthfulness of a narrative is “determined by an adequately carried out cognitive process and a consensus of a communicative community (in our case: the communities of professional historians.”<sup>55</sup> Let us once more quote Topolski:

<sup>50</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 379.

<sup>51</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 381.

<sup>52</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 383.

<sup>53</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 384–385.

<sup>54</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 385.

<sup>55</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 385.

A historical narrative can be true or false – but not in the sense of corresponding to the past reality; rather, in the sense of being endowed with a status on the truth–falsehood spectrum by a communicative community, that is, by people speaking the same language, with the same conventions, and a similar – even if only generally so – understanding of the world.<sup>56</sup>

Topolski's theory was a stimulus for further discussion about the role of sources in historical research and the construction of a historical narrative. Wojciech Wrzosek radicalized Topolski's moderate position presented in *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię* (The writing and understanding of history).<sup>57</sup> First, Wrzosek used the metaphor of alibi not only with regard to the base information obtained from indirect sources but also in reference to all categories of sources.<sup>58</sup> According to Wrzosek, in his use of the metaphor of contact, Topolski did not go beyond the boundaries of the understanding of the role of sources in classical historiography:

Regardless of the highly specialized and sophisticated procedures enabling the so-called access to the studied reality, which are often mediated to a great degree, the historical source – according to the classical historian – allows us to reveal/reach the studied reality and, in this way – according to classical opinions – achieve the truthfulness of the historical research, that is, find out the truth through the historical cognition.

Regardless of the participation of the learning entity, extra-source knowledge, language, narration, discourse – which complicate that vision of historical cognition – the classical position on the role of the sources presupposes some kind of access the source gives to the so-called reality outside of sources.<sup>59</sup>

Wrzosek claims that in classical historiography, the mere determination of the credibility and authenticity of the source is to guarantee that

the information from that source, that is, the source data which are later used to create a narrative about the past, decisively ensure the authenticity and credibility of the historical statements, historical narration, and, consequently, the historical truth written with the capital *T*.<sup>60</sup>

In Wrzosek's proposed approach:

the reality legalized in historians' imaginings is taken (and has to be taken because there is no other choice) as reality itself, that is, the past reality. It is a specific thought representation of the presumed reality. It is a result of the collected imaginings about the nature of things

<sup>56</sup> Topolski, *Jak się pisze*, 385–386.

<sup>57</sup> Wojciech Wrzosek, “Źródło jako alibi realistyczne historyka” [A source as the historian's realistic alibi], in *Historyk wobec źródeł. Historiografia klasyczna i nowe propozycje metodologiczne*, ed. by Jolanta Kolbuszewska and Rafał Stobiecki (Łódź: Ibidem, 2010), 23.

<sup>58</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 24–25.

<sup>59</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 31.



past, their importance, and probability, ennobled by the research community. The pool of historically possible states of things in a particular imagined epoch, in the given time and place, so to speak, determines whether the state of things from the source is within its boundaries.<sup>61</sup>

It is only the communal knowledge of historians that decides what can be viewed as sources and how can sources be verified and interpreted:

the point of reference in the procedure of the verification of source data is the communal knowledge of historians [emphasis mine – K.B.] which determines what can be put in the domain of “historical truth” [...] It is the area of “remaining in truthfulness”, silently and consciously accepted by the community of historians, that determines the historical dimension of the objective world.

That world must encompass the state of things established in the source in order for that source to be verified and, once it has been verified successfully, to be included in the historical narration about the given fragment of the past.<sup>62</sup>

Wrzosek believes that an artifact must first be recognized as a source, that is, it has to be potentially able to confirm the communal knowledge of historians, and “having been successfully, intersubjectively verified by the research community,” the source is subjected to the standard procedures of internal and external critique. The information extracted from such sources become an element of the corpus of academic historiographical knowledge. Generally speaking:

Let us then form the principal thesis that what referring to sources does is, rather, legalize the previously, persuasively accepted assumptions about the nature of historical cognition and makes the narrative image of the past more credible by decreeing that reaching of the past. A historical source has a rhetorical function in the act of persuading historical theses, but it does not provide an empirical justification of those thesis, which is a common belief.<sup>63</sup>

The traces of the past put in that role act as fetishes in the cultivation of the past – which is what the historical thinking is, including the specific form of historical thinking practiced in so-called scientific-academic historiography. In the thinking game of historical reflection, they play the magical role of the carrier of the past. Objectified and ennobled in collective memory or participating in the historiographical operation, they function as relics, elements which justify our contemporary visions of the past and the cultivation of the past.<sup>64</sup>

That proposal was debated by Dariusz Sikorski, whose polemic included three – at times closely interrelated – lines of questioning: (i) which interpretation of Topolski’s concepts and sources of his inspiration is adequate, (ii) what the historical research practice, with the accompanying methodological conscious-

<sup>61</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 61.

<sup>64</sup> Wrzosek, *Źródło jako alibi*, 38.



ness. is; and (iii) which interpretation (classical or non-classical) of historians' research practice is more adequate.

In my presentation, I will omit line (i), which belongs to a different problem.<sup>65</sup> Sikorski considers Wrzosek's reconstruction of the classical and non-classical historiographical research methods to be too simplified and, if taken literally, inaccurate because:

we would not find a theoretician of history claiming that historians have actual access to the past, especially that that access (in the realistic sense) would have to be guaranteed by sources. Moreover, it would be hard to find a practicing historian with a similar outlook – I, for one, do not know such a historian.<sup>66</sup>

Sikorski writes that a historian undertaking a critique of a source first determines if the source is legitimate. However, determining the degree of source credibility – which is critical for using the information from the source in historical narration – is a different matter. It is done by comparing the source with other sources and “our (that is, historians’) visions of the epoch or problem.”<sup>67</sup> The nature of such findings, though, is never absolute or constant. They can change with the appearance of new sources or interpretations of the sources used before.

It seems that one cause for misunderstandings is somewhat laconic and frequently metaphorical style of Wrzosek's article which was first read as a paper during a 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of Polish Historians held in 2009 in Olsztyn, and the fact that the author consciously exaggerated his theses for rhetorical effect. We could defend some of Sikorski's accusations – the stage of constructing, on the basis of source data, alternative narratives with a more or less credible status admissible within the framework of the discourse assumed by the community of historians – given an appropriate development and explication of Wrzosek's metaphors.

<sup>65</sup> For more information about Topolski's methodological thought, including the question whether we could speak about one or two Topolskis, see the sizable literature on the subject: Ewa Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna. Krytyczne studium narratywizmu i humanistyki zaangażowanej* [Existential history. A critical study of narrativism and engaged humanities] (Warsaw: PWN, 2012), 86–94; Szymon Malczewski, “Metodologie Jerzego Topolskiego” [Jerzy Topolski's methodologies], *Historyka* 49 (2009): 89–120; Jan Pomorski, “Jak uprawiać metodologię historii? Wokół koncepcji Jerzego Topolskiego” [How to study the methodology of history? On Jerzy Topolski's concepts], in *Światoołgłady Historiograficzne*, ed. by Jan Pomorski (Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2002), 11–22; Jan Pomorski, *Homo Metahistoricus. Studium sześciu kultur poznających historię* [Homo Metahistoricus. A study of six cultures learning about history] (Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2019), 17–92; Rafał Stobiecki, *Historycy polscy wobec wyzwań XX wieku* [Polish historians and the challenges of the 20<sup>th</sup> century] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, 2014), 341–373; Ewa Domańska, “Jerzy Topolski's Marxist Anthropocentrism,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 15, 3, (2021), in print.

<sup>66</sup> Dariusz Sikorski, “O źródle jako realistycznym alibi historyka, czyli o wyobrażeniach metodologa historii na temat roli źródeł w pracy historyków” [On a source as the historian's realistic alibi, that is, the vision of the methodologist of history of the role of sources in historians' work], *Studia Źródłoznawcze* 51 (2013): 169; also see 170.

<sup>67</sup> Sikorski, *O źródle jako realistycznym alibi*, 170.

Be that as it may, in my commentary, I would like to point out another problem. Both Topolski and Wrzosek stress the role of the consensus of the community of historians in the creation and determination of socially reliable historical knowledge. The authors, however, differ in their conceptualizations of the creation of that consensus and, consequently, its role in doing research. Topolski is a proponent of bottom-up process of creation of the historiographical consensus, while Wrzosek postulates a top-down one.

In Topolski's approach, a key element of the bottom-up consensus is base source information because the risk of divergent interpretations of such data is minimal, so they can become the foundation of at least a minimalist image of the past accepted by the whole community of historians (or a great majority of it). In that sense, the base information extracted from sources constitute an incontrovertible – because virtually free of the risk of reinterpretation – 'alibi' for the historian. Still, Wrzosek is also right when he says that any source can aspire to the role of an alibi. When we use the metaphor of an alibi, it is worth noting that in an evidential process, we distinguish between strong (incontrovertible) and weak (controvertible) alibis. In Topolski's conceptual network, base sentences – which entail a minimal risk of interpretation – would be a strong alibi, and sentences which can be interpreted in many (although not limitless) verifiable ways would constitute a weak alibi. For example, correctly applied heuristic procedures exclude the determination that *Mein Kampf* expresses Adolf Hitler's liberal views and the essay *On Freedom* – John Stuart Mill's fascist views. To sum up, according to Topolski, historians' consensus is formed from the bottom up, in the course of extracting base information from sources and determining the correctness of the applied heuristic procedures.

In Wrzosek's view, the previously created communal knowledge of historians determines or silently accepts one common or a certain (finite) set of images of the past, a source base which confirms that image set (or one selected image), and the heuristic procedures. As the knowledge is somehow a given, sources are only referenced for persuasive and rhetorical purposes.

Neither of the authors has sufficiently described the mechanism of inclusion of new historiographical knowledge by the professional world of historians (Topolski) or into the communal knowledge of historians (Wrzosek). Both the professional world of historians and the communal knowledge of historians can be understood in a global or local (national) way. What is more, the community can be divided into specializations (on the basis of periods and problems). Therefore one can say rather about worlds than one world. Also, the relationships between the cognitive and non-cognitive values (for example, ideological, therapeutic, social, etc.) can differ.<sup>68</sup> Even if the communal

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<sup>68</sup> See e.g. Aviezer Tucker, "On the «strudel and apples» theory of historiography: A reply to Chris Lorenz," *Historiein* 14, 1 (2014): 91–92, Rafał Paweł Wierchośławski, "Antinomies, Multiple Realities and the Pasts," in *Towards a Revival of Analytical*

knowledge of historians is dominated by cognitive values, that does not mean a complete lack of influence of non-cognitive values. Furthermore, particular historians can accept various paradigms or make diverse theoretical assumptions, which has an impact on the determination what a source is, how it should be interpreted, and how one should form a narrative whole from that information.

An ideal community of historians may be dominated by cognitive values, but the real one has numerous ties to the social milieu; political power, business, and secular and religious priests.<sup>69</sup> The influence of that environment may lead to the marginalization or even exclusion of a heuristically correct narrative from the communal historical knowledge if it infringes upon the social interests of political, economic, and spiritual classes. Was the lack of the recognition of the Katyn massacre – an NKVD crime – by the Soviet historiography a proof that the murders did not take place? In that case, the degree of consensus was indeed very high because any historian blaming NKVD was either sent to a lager or, in the best possible scenario, had to find a different profession.

The last issue to be discussed is the paradox of self-reference. A new interpretation of a fragment of the past can be included in the communal knowledge of historians if its correctness, with respect to the methodology and the subject matter, is recognized by professional historians. One condition for that is the recreation by the historian of not the actual – because Saint Augustine taught us that would be impossible – but some past state of the communal knowledge of historians that would include their methodological and substantive ideals of scientific work. However, those methodological and substantive ideals accepted by historians themselves become a component of the past. However, according to Wrzosek, the past cannot be recreated. Thereby, it becomes impossible to recreate the part of the past which includes historians' communal knowledge pertaining to decisions about methodological correctness. Hence, there arises the question what the author of a new interpretation should assume. If it is not possible to recreate a fragment of a past state of the communal knowledge of historians, then the mechanism of the accommodation of new interpretive proposals in the communal knowledge of historians is at least dysregulated.<sup>70</sup>

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*Philosophy of History: Around Paul A. Roth's Vision of Historical Sciences*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Boston/Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2018), 167–174.

<sup>69</sup> See Chris Lorenz, „A reply to my critics,” *Historiein* 14, 1 (2014): 98–103; Andrzej Radomski, „Historiografia w postnowoczesnych, liberalnych demokracjach” [Historiography in postmodern liberal democracies], in *Światoogłady Historiograficzne*, ed. by Jan Pomorski (Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2002), 189–206.

<sup>70</sup> An analysis of the mechanisms of the marginalization of interpretations of certain past events (Lech Wałęsa's collaboration) which – for various reasons – do not align with the communal knowledge of historians was presented in Andrzej Zybortowicz, „Strategie unieważniania prawdy: na przykładzie dyskusji wokół książki Sławomira Cenckiewicza i Piotra Gontarczyka o Lechu Wałęsie” [Strategies of canceling the truth, with the example of the discussion about Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Piotr Gontarczyk's book about Lech Wałęsa], in *Oblicza przeszłości*, ed. by Wojciech Wrzosek (Bydgoszcz: Epigram, 2011), 431–466.

#### 4. THE PECULIARITIES OF HISTORICAL SOURCE STUDIES IN RELATION TO CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

##### 4.1. THE METHODOLOGICAL STATUS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

After 1989, Wojciech Wrzosek and Andrzej Paczkowski tried to characterize the methodological peculiarities of contemporary history. Wrzosek notes that “the history of the distant past does not differ significantly from that of contemporary times with respect to the search for truth. In my opinion, the differences between them are not significant enough to justify ascribing a special methodological status to one of them.”<sup>71</sup> Contemporary history is characterized by openness and by fluidity of boundaries. Although we can determine/propose an event as the beginning of the historical period we are living in, we cannot predict when it will end. According to Wrzosek, “the close future and the present are still coming into existence, and it is difficult to evaluate the significance of the analyzed phenomena before the end of that process.”<sup>72</sup> He adds that we do not know “all the historical outcomes of the analyzed events, so we do not know their historical dimension and meaning.”<sup>73</sup>

Still, there are some differences between studying contemporary history and earlier periods. For Wrzosek, the hallmark is the historian’s emotional and axiological engagement in the research on contemporary history. Many a time, the historian is a witness making use of his or her own memory while describing events as well as selecting them and devising a hierarchy of them. Moreover, Wrzosek notes, certain spheres of life are self-censored and/or subject to a cultural taboo. Besides, while not all sources (personal data, reports of the secret police) are accessible, some types of them (for example, press releases, internet) are available in excessive quantities.<sup>74</sup>

The latter issue is analyzed in detail by Paczkowski who notes that the appearance and popularization of electronic media and audiovisual records necessitates the use of new ways of determining their authenticity and credibility. Still, Paczkowski considers that to be but a “technical” issue. He points to another problem: the new forms of recoding the past are much more precise than the traditional ones – for example, a cassette recorder record of a meeting of a body is more exact than a protocol made by the secretary. A video record allows one to analyze, among other thing, the body language. Paczkowski observes that:

some documents of the new type, then, are much veracious than documents in the traditional form, which makes it possible to learn about such aspects of the studied event (for example,

<sup>71</sup> Wojciech Wrzosek, *O myśleniu historycznym* [On historical thinking] (Bydgoszcz: Epigram, 2009), 123.

<sup>72</sup> Wrzosek, *O myśleniu historycznym*, 116.

<sup>73</sup> Wrzosek, *O myśleniu historycznym*, 116.

<sup>74</sup> Wrzosek, *O myśleniu historycznym*, 116–118.

participants' words or movements) as are not recorded in other types of sources. That allows the researcher to find out more about the past, but it is also very likely to flood him or her with details. It encourages one to escape interpretation for the sake of a passive description or quote mania as well as to trust the source more easily as, after all, it is – literally speaking – so precise. All of that takes away from and role and significance of intellectual imagination and promotes literacy.<sup>75</sup>

Another characteristic of the historiography of contemporary history is the possibility of using the memories of witnesses of history. In Paczkowski's words, "contemporary history is that part of the past which can be studied and learned about from the relations of the living witnesses or participants of the events"<sup>76</sup>. However, that definition – based on methodological considerations – creates shifting boundaries for that period of history. It is believed that the dividing line would be the exchange of a generation (that is, 20–30 years) or the death of the last witness of the events – the moment from which the historian does not have to confront his or her reconstruction of the fragment of the past with the individual or collective memory of the participants and witnesses of the described events. For Paczkowski, the caesura should be the "end of a distinguishable event or series of events, the passing or ending of a phenomenon."<sup>77</sup> For Poland, that would be the year 1989. Consequently, Paczkowski distinguishes between contemporary history (1944–1989) and current history (after 1989) which is happening now, before the historian's eyes, and is an unfinished process.

Jakub Karpiński postulated applying the approach of institutional historical behavioral studies to the study of the Polish People's Republic. In that perspective, the researcher would be interested in collective agents, that is, in the actions and messages of state institutions. Since the insight one can gain in their internal functioning is limited, the historian should attempt to present the operations of those institutions and their impact on the environment "without looking inside."<sup>78</sup> It is, off course, possible to infer the internal dealings by observing the external undertakings. The author used the metaphor of an observer of a biological organism who makes guesses about what happens inside an organism on the basis of external symptoms. Karpiński opined that "historical behavioral studies does not preclude the formulation of hypotheses about the internal

<sup>75</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, „O osobliwościach badań nad historia najnowsza” [On peculiarities in research of current history], in *Historyk wobec źródeł. Historiografia klasyczna i nowe propozycje metodologiczne*, ed. by Jolanta Kolbuszewska and Rafał Stobiecki (Łódź: Ibidem, 2010), 165.

<sup>76</sup> Paczkowski, *O osobliwościach badań*, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, "Historyk dziejów najnowszych wśród źródeł" [The historian of current history among sources], in *Historia dziś. Teoretyczne problemy wiedzy o przeszłości*, ed. by Ewa Domańska, Rafał Stobiecki, Tomasz Wiślicz (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 89–90.

<sup>78</sup> Jakub Karpiński, "Czarna skrzynka (o pisaniu powojennej historii Polski)" [The black box. On writing the post-war history of Poland], in *Wykres gorączki. Polska pod rządami komunistycznymi* (Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2001), 510.

functioning of particular institutions and the interrelations (cooperation) between them, but it should be remembered that those are hypotheses.”<sup>79</sup>

Sometimes, historians do have access to sources created by the party apparatus or the system of repression which contain information about the inside dealings. Some examples of that are the Smoleńsk party archive taken away by Germans in 1943, the party documents revealed during the Prague Spring, or the documents of the censors of the Polish People’s Republic smuggled out by Tomasz Strzyżewski. Another danger of contemporary history is the unequal availability of sources about the activity of various social groups. Sources tell us plenty about political processes or intellectuals’ dilemmas (the “domestic disgrace” or “captive mind”), but not about everyday life and difficulties experienced by ordinary people. Karpiński posited ethnographic studies of the communist society and describing such everyday practices of it like queuing habits, the supply of daily life products, or bribing.<sup>80</sup> In 1990, Karpiński noted: “The archives of the Ministry of Interior and Administration could reveal a lot about the attitudes of ordinary people. Had documents not been destroyed there, we could find out what was tracked down and denounced.”<sup>81</sup>

#### 4.2 THE PECULIARITIES OF THE DOCUMENTS OF THE APPARATUS OF REPRESSION IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORICAL SOURCE STUDIES

When the Institute of National Remembrance was founded in 1998, and the documents created by the apparatus of repression of the communist state were made available to researchers (since 2000), it became possible to carry through Karpiński’s postulate<sup>82</sup>. The possibility of use of the sources created by the repression apparatus in historical research was a kind of novelty in historiography not only Poland but in other Central and Eastern European countries. According to Paczkowski:

<sup>79</sup> Karpiński, *Czarna skrzynka*, 511.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Dariusz Stola, “O dalszy rozwój badań nad socjalistycznymi praktykami społecznymi. Uwagi o stanie i możliwości refleksji nad charakterem PRL” [For further development of studies on socialist social practices. Notes on the condition and possibilities of the reflection on the nature of the Polish People’s Republic], in *Obrazy PRL. O konceptualizacji realnego socjalizmu w Polsce*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Poznań: IPN, 2008), 131–142, Rafał Paweł Wierchosławski, “Problem opisu i interpretacji rzeczywistości społecznej czasu przeszłego niedokonanego, czyli jak badać dzieje PRL?” [The problem of the description and interpretation of social reality of the unfinished past, or, how to study the history of the Polish People’s Republic], in *Obrazy PRL*, ed. by Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Poznań: IPN, 2008), 127–129.

<sup>81</sup> Karpiński, *Czarna skrzynka*, 513.

<sup>82</sup> On the condition of the establishment and the functioning of similar institutions of remembrance in Central and Eastern Europe, see: Krzysztof Brzechczyn, “Transitional justice, politics of memory and patterns of collaboration in Eastern Europe: a review article,” *East European Politics* 37, 1 (2021): 183–185.

operational documents” contain information ... of intimate nature; some confirm a person’s breakdown or reveal the motivation behind the consent to being an informant. A certain part – it is difficult to say how big exactly – of that type of documentation, then, concerns the dark (informing) or hidden (intimate information) side of biographies which have not yet ended in the places of eternal rest and even of biographies of people who are active in public life.<sup>83</sup>

The specific use of those documents can be questioned from the moral and legal perspectives. There is no good solution to that problem. There have been many voices in the ongoing discussion which emphasized that the documents created by the Office of Public Security and later by the Security Service constitute an entirely new and separate data source.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, if we applied Labuda’s classification to them, we would see that denunciations and the documents of the Security Service based on those denunciations are sociotechnical sources or, to be more precise, official sources. In Topolski’s classification, they would be indirect addressed sources. The denunciation prepared for the Security Service as an indirect addressed source belongs to category (1), that is, it is addressed to a recipient who is contemporary to the author of the source (information). Thus, we have defined the closest type for the denunciation of the Security Services. The difference with respect to genre consists in the restriction of the number of source recipients. The indirect addressed sources can be divided into unrestricted and restricted indirect addressed sources – as an extension of Topolski’s classification of sources. The first type could be exemplified with an article in a daily newspaper, available to every person who knows the language of the publication. Another necessary classification would be that into indirect sources addressed to an audience restricted, for various reasons, by the author of the source, whereby both the group of recipients and the method of its delineation could be determined in different ways.

The restrictive element can be the source language – for example, articles in *Studia Logica* are available for anyone who has filled in the reverse side and ordered the publication in an appropriate library, but it is questionable whether the highly formal language of the texts is understandable for every reader. Another method of limiting the audience is the manner of the distribution of the source. State documents with the heading “top secret” are not characterized by refined terminology – after all, they must be understandable for democratically elected rulers – but access to them is strictly regulated. In an extreme case, the source is only addressed to its creator (for example, an intimate diary), and it becomes an unaddressed source. In such a case, it would be better to replace the dichotomic division into addressed and unaddressed sources with a division

<sup>83</sup> Paczkowski, *O osobliwościach badań*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> See: Krzysztof Brzechczyn, “Problem wiarygodności teczek i opartej na nich narracji historycznej. Kilka uwag metodologicznych” (The problem of the credibility of files and of the historical narration based on them. A few methodological remarks), *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 12 (2012): 73–74 and Krzysztof Brzechczyn, The Reliability of “Files”, 268–271.



graded depending on the number of recipients for whom the creator intends the source.

In the light of Topolski's source classification, we approximate the status of the secret collaborator's denunciation: it is an indirect addressed source intended for a limited set of recipients. A secret collaborator creating a denunciation (whether handwritten or not) was convinced that the collaboration with the Security Service will remain secret and that the author will remain anonymous for third parties as well as, most importantly, for the people who were the subjects of the denunciation. The collaborator might even be convinced that the information is only intended for the case officer in the Security Service.<sup>85</sup> When the set of recipients was clearly defined, the specific language could make it hard to read (decode) the source information. Topolski distinguished the code of the informant's ethnic language, the code of the language of the epoch (terminological), the psychological code, and the code of the writing (graphic). In the case of the documents of the Office of Public Security/ Security Service, we are dealing with the terminological code, a sort of a language that one has to be able to understand and decipher.<sup>86</sup> That feature is not limited to police denunciations – it characterizes all addressed (in a limited way or otherwise) indirect sources which contain *explicite* or *implicite*, its creators' world view.

<sup>85</sup> A secret collaborator might have been convinced that he or she only imparts information to the functionary of the Security Service, but from twenty to thirty people in the office knew about the registration of the collaborator and had access to the denunciations – see Zbigniew Nawrocki's account in Zbigniew Nawrocki, "Co kryją teczki? O tajnych współpracownikach bezpieki z Andrzejem Chojnowskim, Grzegorzem Majchrzakiem, Zbigniewem Nawrockim i Tadeuszem Ruzikowskim rozmawia Władysław Bułhak" [What is hidden in the files? Władysław Bułhak's conversation on the secret collaborators of the secret political police with Andrzej Chojnowski, Grzegorz Majchrzak, Zbigniew Nawrocki, and Tadeusz Ruzikowski], *Biuletyn Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* 3 (2005): 15–16.

<sup>86</sup> Łukasz Kamiński, "Lingua securitas," in *Wokół teczek bezpieki. Zagadnienia metodologiczno-źródłoznawcze*, ed. by Filip Musiał (Kraków: IPN, 2006), 393–399; Andrzej Paczkowski, *Bardzo krótki słownik wywiadu* [A very short dictionary of the intelligence], in *Wokół teczek. Zagadnienia metodologiczno-źródłoznawcze*, ed. by Filip Musiał (Kraków: IPN, 2006), 399–404; Filip Musiał, *Podręcznik bezpieki. Teoria pracy operacyjnej Służby Bezpieczeństwa w świetle wydawnictw resortowych Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych PRL* [Secret political police coursebook. The theory of the operations of the Security Service in the light of the publications of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Polish People's Republic] (Kraków: IPN, 2007), 325–352; Danuta Jastrzębska-Golonka, "Język dokumentów resortu bezpieczeństwa w latach 1944–1956" [The language of the documents of the Ministry of Public Security in 1944–1956], in *Aparat bezpieczeństwa w perspektywie antropologii organizacji i antropologii władzy*, ed. by Robert Klementowski, Kamila Mikołajczak, and Jarosław Syrynek (Wrocław–Warsaw: IPN, 2020), 157–185; Małgorzata Misiak, "Język dokumentów Służby Bezpieczeństwa – rekonosans badawczy" [The language of the documents of the Security Service – a research reconnaissance], in *Aparat bezpieczeństwa w perspektywie antropologii organizacji i antropologii władzy*, ed. by Robert Klementowski, Kamila Mikołajczak, and Jarosław Syrynek (Wrocław–Warsaw: IPN, 2020), 186–203.



## CONCLUSIONS

Polish reflection on the historical source itself belongs – to use Paczkowski’s periodization – to the contemporary period of the history of historiography in Poland. For that reason, it is an open phenomenon which does not lend itself easily to a summarization. Three characteristics of it should be indicated in the first place, namely: continuity, Innovativeness, and openness. The methodological reflection on the historical source contained critical references to predecessors’ findings as well as discussions about new proposals. The methodological discourse in the post-war period was influenced by Marxism, but after 1956, under the influence of analytic philosophy, mainly the Lwów–Warsaw School and Popperism, the amount of dogmatism in the research decreased steadily. That is why Polish methodological reflection on the historical source was open to dialog and the reception of achievements made abroad, as well as capable of conceptualizing the usefulness of new source types, which appeared in the public space at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century, in historical research.

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