



ANDRZEJ WALICKI (1930–2020): HISTORIAN OF IDEAS, UPHOLDER OF HUMAN IDEALS

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Andrzej Walicki, the Polish historian of ideas, died in Warsaw on 20 August 2020. In 1964, at the age of thirty-four, he defended and published his *Habilitationsschrift*, a fundamental study of nineteenth-century Russian thought focused on the Slavophiles. The appearance of the English edition, *The Slavophile Controversy* (1975), brought him wide scholarly acclaim in the West. A related book, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, was published in Polish in 1973 and in English in 1979/80. In a 1981 review, Sir Isaiah Berlin judged them to be “quite simply, the best and most complete works in this field published in this century” (*Slavonic and East European Review*, 59/4: 586). In the 1970s Walicki produced a series of works on Polish intellectual history, culminating with another book in English: *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (1982). Over the next four decades there followed many more studies in the history of Russian and Polish thought, and also in Marxist thought and practice. At the time of his death his list of publications ran to well more than 400 entries (including 25 single-authored books and 25 edited books)—a record of accomplishment that made him one of the great European intellectual historians of his times, comparable to his colleagues Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) and Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009). In 1998 he was awarded the International Balzan Prize for History, and in 1990–91 he was a Guggenheim fellow. In 2005, Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski awarded him the Grand Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta.

Three weeks before Walicki’s death Timothy Snyder (Yale University) nominated him for the Prize of the Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej, known as the Polish Nobel Prize. In his nomination letter Snyder wrote, “It is fair to say that Andrzej Walicki has done more than any other Polish scholar to introduce major themes of east European intellectual and political history to a larger European, North American, and indeed Australian audience.”

Andrzej Stanisław Walicki was born in Warsaw on 15 May 1930. His father, Michał Walicki (1904–66) was a professor of art history and his mother, Anna Chmielewska (1905–81), was an adjunct professor of education and social work (social pedagogy). As a boy Walicki witnessed the horrors of wartime Warsaw. His father joined the Polish Home Army and worked as an intelligence officer; consequently, during the imposition of the Stalinist regime, he was arrested as an “enemy of the people” and spent five years in prison (1949–1954). Andrzej completed high school in Łódź and began undergraduate studies at the city’s new university in 1949. He planned to study philosophy, but for ideological reasons the regime closed

the philosophy program to undergraduates. Instead, Walicki enrolled in the Russian Studies Department, the only one open to him because he came from the wrong “social and family background.” Though the department was highly Stalinized, Walicki was attracted to Russian studies. His family had long ties to Russia and its culture, but the most important influence on him was Sergius Hessen (1887–1950), a remarkable émigré Russian philosopher who had moved from Prague to Warsaw in 1935 to take up the chair of philosophy of education at the Free University of Poland. Hessen boarded with Andrzej’s mother Anna, who also taught at the Free University. Thus Andrzej knew him from early childhood. After the war, both found themselves in Łódź, Walicki as a student and Hessen as a professor at the new university (first in philosophy, then in Russian studies). Hessen’s influence on Walicki was formative and lasting. From his first teacher he acquired a lifelong commitment to the study of liberal and humane values in culture, philosophy, and law. Decades later, he dedicated the last chapter of his magisterial *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism* (1987) to Hessen and still later (in 1999) he produced a Russian edition of his works.

In 1950 Walicki transferred to the University of Warsaw, where the Department of Russian Studies was no less Stalinist than in Łódź. He tried to maintain his intellectual independence through reading broadly in Russian literature and thought, as well in the history of philosophy. For this he was accused of the crime of “individualism” and subjected, in his words, to “brutal attacks and direct intimidation.” He wrote that his university years were the most difficult in his life. In short, he was a victim of Polish Stalinism. The “thaw” in the years following Stalin’s death brought about a marked improvement in Walicki’s personal fortunes—“all doors seemed to open,” as he put it. In 1955–56 he formulated a research program that he pursued for the rest of his life: the study of the history of Russian and Polish thought, and of Marxist thought and practice. He earned his MA and PhD degrees from Warsaw University in 1953 and 1957, respectively. In 1958 he became an adjunct (assistant professor) in the history of social thought at Warsaw University. Two years later he moved to the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, where in 1972 he was promoted to full professor. Together with Leszek Kołakowski and Bronisław Baczko, he was a leading member of the so-called “Warsaw school” in the history of ideas.

Walicki’s first book was *Osobowość a historia. Studia z dziejów literatury i myśli rosyjskiej* (Personality and history: Studies in the history of Russian literature and thought) (1959). In it he explored the conflict between ethical freedom and alleged historical necessity, showing how leading Russian thinkers and writers opposed the idea of historical determinism in the name of human freedom and moral responsibility. It was his first major effort to liberate nineteenth-century Russian thought from the strictures of Soviet ideological interpretation. In 1960 Walicki received a Ford Foundation fellowship for study in Great Britain and the United States. At the beginning of his trip he met Isaiah Berlin at All Souls College, University of Oxford. Their common approach to Russian thinkers such as Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen (especially on the problem of historical in-

evitability), and more generally to the study of the history of ideas (especially as a foundation for the empathetic understanding of different worldviews and for what Berlin called “value pluralism”), led to an intellectual friendship (and rich correspondence) that lasted until Berlin’s death in 1997. Walicki held visiting fellowships at All Souls College during the 1966–67 academic year and in autumn 1973. These facilitated the publication of his first two books in English: *The Controversy over Capitalism: Studies in the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists* (1969) and *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought* (1975). Similarly, a visiting professorship in history at Stanford University in 1976 led to the English edition of *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (1979, 1980).

The Slavophile Controversy powerfully exemplified Walicki’s approach to the history of ideas: the empathetic reconstruction of a worldview (in this case Slavophile conservative romanticism), with close attention both to the immediate historical-intellectual context and to philosophical problems transcending that context and having broad human significance. As Jarosław Dobrzański (Walicki’s one-time student and long-time interlocutor) wrote, “The imperative of empathetic understanding and the related belief that the human world—both the one available in direct experience and the one reconstructed in historical knowledge—is always multidimensional, multifaceted, and pluralistic were the two main maxims which guided Professor Walicki in his research, in his engagement with the world, and in his moral and civic commitments” (*Przegląd*, no. 35, 24–30 August 2020: 8–10).

In all his studies in the history of Russian thought, one problem especially engaged Andrzej Walicki: how Russian thinkers understood the human person, its freedom and dignity, its relation to community, society, and history. What Walicki came to value most in Russian thought was its defense of the human being against dehumanizing or depersonalizing ideologies, whether that defense took the form of the “autonomous individual” (in the case of the Westernizers) or the “integral person” (in the case of the Slavophiles). He appreciated both secular and religious ways of grounding the worth of the human person, which ways included, especially, the Christian personalism of the classic Slavophiles and of later Russian religious philosophers. This dual appreciation, which owed very much to his teacher Sergius Hessen, was at the heart of Walicki’s commitment to “value pluralism”—provided that the intrinsic, foundational value of the person was never put in question. Further, he fully appreciated that the person could realize itself only in various types of human community, including national communities. This helps explain his interest in romantic nationalism in the history of Polish thought. He sharply distinguished between a conception of national identity which commits itself to universal human values and an “integral nationalism” which sets itself against them. He made a similar distinction between Marxist communism and humanist socialism.

Two weeks before the imposition of martial law in December 1981, Walicki left Poland to take up a position as senior research fellow in the history of ideas at the Australian National University in Canberra. The main

product of his five years there was his book, *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism* (1987). The six philosophers he showcased were all devoted to the defense of the human person as an end-in-itself and to the importance of law in that defense. His masterful portraits of them reshaped our understanding of the place of liberalism in Russian thought, and in some respects our understanding of liberalism itself, insofar as he demonstrated the inner affinity of the foundational liberal values (human dignity and human rights) with metaphysical idealism and philosophical theism, in theorists such as Boris Chicherin, Vladimir Soloviev, and Pavel Novgorodtsev.

In late 1986 Walicki arrived at the University of Notre Dame, where he had been appointed to the O'Neill Professorship of History. Within ten years he published four books (in English), including the definitive liberal critique of Marxist communism in theory and practice: *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (1995). It was awarded the Wayne S. Vucinich Prize by the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. Walicki became professor emeritus in 1999. Before returning to Poland in 2006, he finished a new and greatly expanded edition of his *History of Russian Thought*. It was published in Polish in 2005 and ten years later in English: *The Flow of Ideas: Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance*.

Andrzej Walicki dedicated his life to recovering the best, most humane ideals of Russian and Polish thought and to enlisting them in the defense of human freedom and dignity. In this sense at least, he himself was one of the great idealists.¹

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¹ For biographical information, see Andrzej Walicki, *Encounters with Isaiah Berlin: Story of an Intellectual Friendship* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), and Gary M. Hamburg, "Closed Societies, Open Minds: Andrzej Walicki, Isaiah Berlin and the Writing of Russian History during the Cold War," *Dialogue and Universalism* (Institute of Philosophy, Warsaw University) 16/1–2 (2006): 73–79.