

Eighth Polish History Competition

“Controversy in commemorating the past – monuments, cemeteries, patrons” 2003/2004

Report

The eighth round of the Polish history competition was announced by the Stefan Batory Foundation and the KARTA Centre in June 2003 and was entitled “**Controversy in commemorating the past — monuments, cemeteries, patrons**”. Research papers on this topic had to be submitted by February 20, 2004.

A total of 371 entries (213 team works and 158 individual ones) from 206 schools in 145 places from all over Poland and one from a Polish school in Vilnius (in Lithuania) were submitted. The majority (60%) of works came from western territories of Poland and Silesia. All in all 715 pupils (530 girls and 185 boys) participated in the eighth competition round.

The topic of this year’s competition was difficult to handle because the students faced a historical problem. On the one hand this limited the mass participation in the competition but at the same time it was a challenge for ambitious students and resulted in a big number of excellent works. The level of the competition was the highest so far.

The research papers mainly dealt with the following topics:

- renaming of streets, changing patrons of communities, schools, organizations, factories, theatres and other institutions.
- Destroying, rebuilding, replacing or demolishing monuments, changing their symbols or intention of commemorating; building new monuments or renovating the old one destroyed in another political context.
- Conflicts that arose as a result of vandalism on cemeteries
- Profanation of places of religious cult or national martyrdom
- Negligence connected with important events, i.e. disregarding the past and desisting from their commemoration.

The period of the Second Polish Republic (1918 – 1939) was recalled in the works as often as the Second World War (1939 – 45). Another group from those papers focussing on the Stalin period. Moreover the time after 1989 was of special interest for the students’ research work.

The works focussed on problems such as the Polish identity, the heritage of both Jewish and German culture (in particular in the western and northern territory of Poland), Polish-Ukrainian conflicts, Polish-Belarussian conflicts or conflicts with respect to religion — catholic, orthodox and unite churches (in the eastern territories). There were as well many references to diversified methods of materialising the memory (and its transition) after the downfall of communism.

The students analysed the role of the different parties, that were involved in a certain conflict: local communities, representatives of the government, self-government authorities and their representatives at all levels, social organizations, clergymen, journalists etc.

While documenting these processes, the students often left the role of impartial researchers and became involved in the arguments. Thus the authors happened to formulate very radical postulates against the authorities or undertook direct action in order to defend

places of commemoration (e.g. taking care after acts of vandalism on German or Jewish cemeteries or even making the attempt to renovate them, sometimes they even tried to find removed monuments or their hidden components discredited by historical interpretation). It can be said that in general the students showed respect towards the material, regardless of their origin, political context and patriotic „correctness”. Thus the authors’ tolerance and openness were reflected in their works as well as a sudden reluctance to intolerant attitudes of the older generations.

There were however some students, who confined themselves to the presentation of the scenery of neglected or vandalised structures. Some of them just catalogued monuments located in their surroundings (for example all monuments commemorating German soldiers — casualties of the First World War in Pomerania). Presenting the destruction of monuments that reflect the culture of different nations or religious groups and showing the indifference of the local communities towards such actions is often piercing but could not be treated as an evidence of an existing dispute as to commemorating the past (for example the liquidation of evangelical cemeteries, treated as German, in the seventies or the desecration of Soviet soldiers’ cemeteries in the eighties and nineties).

A Jury analysed and evaluated the works on two stages within three months. The Nominating Jury consisted of 14 historians, employees or associates of the KARTA Centre. The final decision about awards was taken by the Final Jury represented by Anna Radziwiłł, Hanna Świda-Ziemia, Władysław Bartoszewski, Zbigniew Gluza and Henryk Samsonowicz.

11 team-awards were granted and 9 individual ones – of the first, second and third stage. Moreover 22 teams and 16 individuals were awarded with book prizes of the first stage and 73 students of the second stage. All in all 131 works of 299 students were awarded or honoured what is the record number since setting up the competition. 13 awards were given to teachers who coordinated the works; those teachers who supervised the awarded or honoured papers were also honoured.

The awards were presented during the final ceremony on 4 July, 2004 which was held in the Royal Castle in Warsaw. The book prizes were sent by post. All participants and their tutors received certificates of participation and a comprehensive statement of the Jury along with abstracts of the awarded works. Moreover all participants received the announcement of the new competition round which will be conducted in 2004/2005 and is entitled “Everyday Life in time of break up 1944–45”.

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Competition Coordinator