



# A FEW WORDS ABOUT ANDRZEJ WALICKI

*Posted on March 1, 2021 by Piotr Nowak*



Every philosopher thinks one thought throughout his life. This thought usually comes in the form of separate words. Therefore, from the rich thought of [Andrzej Walicki](#), I will choose a few words which gather together, I believe, his thinking and his life, together with an attempt to prove that there are no pure concepts, that each of them is "bogged down" by life.

## **Russia**

Nineteenth-century Russian thought, as expressed in politics and literature, as well as Polish-Russian relations, is the central theme in the life of Walicki. Before becoming a world-renowned historian of ideas, he studied Russian philology at the University of Łódź, where he found himself, entirely by accident. In 1949, for political reasons, he did not get admittance into philosophy or Polish studies. A year earlier, they had imprisoned his father, Professor [Michał Walicki](#), an eminent art historian, and the children of those convicted, after the war, had most avenues closed to them, in many areas of social life.



Andrzej Walicki.

In the Walicki house, despite the Bolshevik threat, Russia itself was not hated, for Russia was carefully separated from Bolshevism. More than that, for the young Walicki, Russian literature and thought were an effective antidote to Stalinism. "I felt threatened not by 'Russification,' but by 'Sovietization,'" he recalled in later years. He admired Russia and felt at ease with it. We owe him wonderful works on Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and so many others. I think that in his creative intent, he sought to teach Russia about Russia. Since the Crow tribe could relearn their own long-forgotten "[Sun Dance](#)" from the Sioux, their opponents, so too the Russians can learn something about themselves from the Poles. "I am writing more for Russians than for Poles," we read in a letter by Walicki to [Czesław Miłosz](#), from December 1960, "although, I know that they will not be reading me. I would be happy if I could help the Russians regain their most valuable tradition, the lost and battered tradition of moral anxiety." (These letters are known as, "Encounters with Miłosz," but they have not been translated into English).

I myself have traveled to Russia many times with the same intention. From the Russians, I absorbed

things that would take me two lives to assimilate in a book, not to mention that someone would first have to point them out to me. Then I learned to place them within the Russian worldview, which was only possible in Russia. At the same time, I tried to stop them from thinking about their own cultural backwardness within Europe, warning them against the bane of “xero-modernization.”

My friend Yana Brazhnikova—I remember it very clearly—gave a lecture, at a conference organized at the Russian State University for the Humanities, in Moscow, about the national affiliation of philosophers. It was very interesting, but at the same time it detracted me from the great intuitions the lecture contained by frequent mention of the name, “Jacques Derrida,” a name that protruded from every second sentence. When I asked my friends about their concern with this whole postmodern business, I found out that when Derrida visited their university, he seduced them with the confession that it was only in Russia and thanks to the Russians that he understood that the words *drug* (friend) and *durgoi* (other) could actually be derived from the same root.

I argued that no postmodernism, or any other “ism,” is needed by the Russians to understand who they are. So sometimes the wonderful culture of Russia must be discovered even in opposition to it, especially against those who prefer others to their own. Such a perception of Russian affairs was familiar to Walicki, who believed that “the Russian intellectual elite cannot directly “jump” from Stalinism to Europeanism; that its heritage is too great and its historical experience too terrible and too important for humanity that it can ignored even for a moment; that Russians should think about fully assimilating their cultural achievements and experiences only when they return to their own roots, and reacquaint themselves with their own culture, only when they ‘peel back’ their tragic history.”

Andrzej Walicki has written many books about Russia. The most original of which are [\*The Slavophile controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought\*](#), and the most important is the synthetic [\*The Flow of Ideas: Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance\*](#). The latter work was a real challenge for experts in Russian social and religious thought. An outstanding Russian scholar, Grzegorz Przebinda, did a lot to outbid Walicki's masterful argument (“A dispute on God and Man in Russian philosophy”). Whether Przebinda managed to succeed is a topic for a separate discussion.

“‘Allow me,’ Yevgeny Pavlovitch was protesting warmly. ‘I say nothing against Liberalism. Liberalism is not a sin; it is an essential part of the whole, which without it would drop to pieces or perish; Liberalism has just as much right to exist as the most judicious Conservatism. But I am attacking Russian

Liberalism, and I repeat again I attack it just for the reason that the Russian Liberal is not a Russian Liberal, but an un-Russian Liberal." I think this passage from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* makes the point. There is no such thing as Russian liberalism. And, if there is, it has proved its utter irrelevance in the person of the "non-Russian liberal, Professor Gradovsky, a polemicist when it comes to Dostoyevsky, whom he commemorated in the *Writer's Diary*. So, if it weren't for Dostoyevsky, not a soul would have noticed his presence. Walicki's textbook is also silent about Gradovsky.

A separate thing is the matter of the law in force in the Russian Empire. It certainly seems to be something different from the legislative regulations adopted in Western Europe. Distrust of the excessive formalism of codes, spontaneity inherent in community behavior of the *Gemeinschaft* type, chronic disappearance of all forms, which is characteristic of the Russian feeling of reality; and, thus, the lack of any logical discipline.

All these factors have contributed to the formation of a direct bond between Russians, in which only the warmth and beat of the heart is important, and sometimes the antipodes of these states of mind. No wonder that in such conditions, there is no difference between a situation in which someone lends money to someone, and a situation in which it is just given to him. It was precisely this kind of difficulty that a certain Keller, a shady figure, a bit of a boxer, a bit of a drunk, was put before this kind of difficulty by Prince Myshkin. In a word, an adventurer who demanded a loan from the prince on unclear, quite fantastic terms.

Years ago, I read Quentin Skinner's instructive book *Forensic Shakespeare*, in which the author analyzes the statements of Shakespeare's characters in terms of judicial rhetoric. It turned out that many such statements could be applied in court practically unchanged. I think that with no less fascination, I would read the book, *Judicial Dostoevsky*, if it were written. But what do Lebedev's passionate court speeches have in common—with the idea of such a book—with the positivist legal system, which was slowly adopted in Russia, in a crippled form? Could the hysterical, "apocalyptic" philippics with which he appeared before the courts have anything to do with the liberal understanding of law as understood by the heroes of Walicki's book?

There is, however, another good reason why the book *With Dostoyevsky at Court* could be written. It was indirectly pointed out by Józef Mackiewicz in one of his letters to the editors of *Kultura*, when he wrote that "Emperor Alexander II, implementing his famous reform of the judiciary in 1864, issued at the same time a 'publication' which allowed for the publication of whatever was happening, or spoken in

court proceedings, without any deletions. And in the non-parliamentary, deprived of political freedom, autochthonous Russia, there appeared in print such speeches by lawyers, for which, not only in Soviet Union, or the People's Republic of Poland that they would all be put up against the wall or be sent to prison; and even in [Pilsudski's Poland](#), inevitably to [Bereza Kartuska](#). Naturally, individual freedoms that existed in the nineteenth century, and under the tsarist autocracy, today, in the age of collectivized thought, it is difficult even to dream of. But it's not about dreams; it's about saving the remaining margin."

And this is probably the essence of Walicki's book on the [Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism](#): saving the remaining margin.

## **Patriotism**

Reading Andrzej Walicki's [study on the particulars of Polish patriotism](#), which he published in 1985, left a permanent mark on my own awareness. I know that the author worked on his thesis at the beginning of the political transformation; but for me his views were perfectly clear already in the 1980s, when I read them, thanks to a brochure printed on a duplicator, the publisher of which was the [Solidarity Social Movement](#), "KRET."

The old Poles—says Walicki—had the best political system in Europe. It was so perfect that people were afraid to change anything in it. "A nobleman in the farmstead equal to the voivode"—it was repeated—equal before God, but more importantly—equal before the law and against others like him. After all, evil does not sleep, and if there is something as perfect as a system of noble democracy that combines the features of direct democracy with a system of political representation, there will be something or someone that will disturb the smooth functioning of the whole organism. And it was precisely for fear of the inevitable political change that the institution of the veto was introduced in the Republic of Poland. It did not open the way to the madness, as we were persuaded in the People's Republic of Poland in history lessons. The veto was a means of defense of ancient republican values, taken by Poles straight from the Romans. "The requirement of unanimity prevented this danger, although it also limited the freedom of reformatory actions of the Sejm. But that was also the point. The right of veto was not supposed to guarantee the independence of the court from an individual. On the contrary, it was a guarantee of the inviolability of the system, treated as a perfect expression of the collective wisdom of the nation."

As many as 10 percent of Poles, mostly identified with the nobility, took part in the political life of the time. Considering that in England it was only in 1832 that the number of those entitled to vote was 3.2 percent, and under the last King [Louis Philippe I](#) it was only 1.5 percent of the politically active French, Poland's position in Europe, measured by the degree of active participation in public affairs was very high. In other words, in the 17th and 18th centuries, Poland was the freest country on the whole continent. And it was freedom "in the state," which was different from negative freedom, freedom "from the state." This negative freedom, organizing the space in which capitalism could be born, was incomparably smaller in Poland (only in Russia it was not there at all). In countries such as England and France, ordinary people had more freedom to move from place to place than people in Poland; they also had greater freedom in disposing of their property, and even—due to the media market emerging in Europe, in which the modern citizen was raised—greater freedom in using words.

Rigid adherence to conservative republican values made Poland mediocre, secondary, more primitive, uncompetitive and non-modern. Does that make it worse? It depends on who is looking at what and how they evaluate it. If the correct direction of human activity is to conform to the "emerging," mercantile values, Poland, through its love of republican freedom, got on the wrong horse and history very quickly condemned it. Walicki writes about it as follows: "There was, however, also the other side of the coin. The republican-democratic tradition existed in Poland without capitalism and without individualist-liberal values favoring capitalist modernization. Poland has not passed through the school of the Puritan work ethos; its nation-building elite (the nobility and then the intelligentsia) did not develop 'bourgeois' virtues, such as thrift, frugality, did not learn to treat individual economic activity as a higher calling and to respect the successes achieved in it."

After all, Walicki forgets to add that the same capitalism, obviously linked to [Amalthea's horn](#), spat out miasmas that became the source of all modern plagues, with communism and anti-Semitism at the forefront. A state which ignores civic values in its act of self-determination must refer to values alien to the republican spirit—money and ethnos. "Whether we like it or not—we read in the traditions of Polish patriotism—in the 20th century, and especially in its decline, there can no longer be any doubt that all over Central and Eastern Europe, modern nations were formed on a linguistic and ethnic basis—cultural, and not on a historical and political basis, and that Poles are also no exception in this respect."

With Poland regaining its independence in 1918, everything began to fall apart: the republican love of freedom was transformed into fanfaronade and national megalomania; and 19th-century Polish

messianism became an instrument of spiritual and political control over the newly emerging nations with whom Poland used to make the Commonwealth. "Thus, the combination of the heritage of noble democracy with the heritage of Romanticism," writes Walicki, "strengthened the psychological maladjustment of the Polish national elite to the necessary process of economic modernization."

My Russian colleague, Taras Szijan, also pointed to the meanderings of Polish patriotism. We had a conversation on this subject while taking the Moscow metro. I told him with nostalgia about the old, strong Poland, which gave the "Russkis" small comfort. A colleague, undaunted by the typically Polish megalomania, replied that there was no Poland back then—there was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and it was probably not the same. I had to admit he was right. Then, lowering his voice, he began to tell how proud he was to be a Russian and that the USSR was still Russia, maybe a little lame, but still Russia. Then I said something like this: "If you are so proud of it (our conversation in Russian was heard by a few outsiders), why are you whispering it to me?"

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*The [featured image](#) shows "Prayer before the Battle of Ractawice," by Józef Chełmoński, painted in 1906.*

