

**T**here is a war being waged – a war for Ukraine’s independence and for Poland’s security, a war for the future of Europe and freedom’s place within it. A parallel struggle is under way for the future of Russia. Can this future even be conceived of without imperialism? Can Poland exist without freedom? What is the heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and what is that of Moscow, the Third Rome? These are the questions I seek to answer in this book. To this end, I explore the history of Poland and Russia’s neighbourly relations, beginning in a time pre-dating the very existence of these names, and ending in the present day.

Freedom and despotism are not separated by geography. They are impulses inscribed into human nature. However, over centuries, history creates and retrospectively depicts the conditions that either suppress freedom or allow it to flourish, and reinforce despotic methods or subvert them. This is one of the conceivable histories of Polish-Russian relations. [...]

When we think of Polish-Russian relations, the events that inevitably come to mind are the most recent and tragic ones surrounding the 2010 Smoleńsk catastrophe and now Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine. But there are also events linked to the reopened wounds of twentieth-century history: World War II, the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, and the subsequent occupation of its eastern territories. We then ask ourselves these questions: To what extent can we attribute the unambiguous historical culpability of one side of the conflict – the Soviet side – to Russia and Russians? To what extent were Russia and Russians among the vast number of victims of the communist system between 1917–1991, during the period of existence of the ideological construct known as Soviet Russia, and later the Soviet Union? Vividly and painfully drawing our attention to Polish-Russian relations, these twentieth-century events reemerge with particular force at moments such as the signing of the joint letter from the Polish bishops and Patriarch Kirill I on the reconciliation of the Polish and Russian nations, at the Royal Castle in Warsaw in August 2012. It was a beautiful but difficult message – and, sadly, one thoroughly undermined by the Russian co-author’s longtime service in the KGB (code name Mikhailov, beginning in 1972), who has used his authority as head of the Russian Orthodox Church to support every imperialist act of aggression perpetrated by Moscow, up to and including its latest attack on Ukraine.

The purpose of history is to ponder the meaning of the burden we Poles and Russians have inherited from our shared past as neighbours, and the meaning of the perhaps unfinished mission that persists in our mutual relationship. When we think about our difficult heritage – the one the bishops mention in their letter, thankfully leaving it to historians rather than granting

hasty absolution to such a complicated past – we often wonder: Could things have been different? Could we have lived more harmoniously with Russians, whom we regard, after all, as a brotherly nation? [...] More than anything else, we share a bond of language: we are “Slavic brothers” in a linguistic heritage with common roots. Perhaps we could have built a different sort of relationship on this plane, and maybe our shared history would have unfolded differently. [...]

I dedicate this book to the memory of Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Vladimir Bukovsky and Georgi Vladimov, three brave Russians with whom I had the honour of crossing paths; to the memory of those who dared to fight for freedom in their homeland and in its historical neighbours.

Excerpt translated by Arthur Barys



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**ANDRZEJ  
NOWAK**

Born 1960

*Polska i Rosja. Sąsiedztwo wolności i despotyzmu*  
[*Poland and Russia: Neighbours in Freedom and Despotism, Tenth to Twenty-First Centuries*]

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#### Selected books

*Między nieładem a niewolą*, 2020

*Kłeska imperium zła. Rok 1920*, 2020

*Dzieje Polski*, t. 1-4 (2014-2019)

*O historii nie dla idiotów. Rozmowy i przypadki*, 2019

*Niepodległa! 1864–1924. Jak Polacy odzyskali Ojczyznę*, 2018

*Metamorfozy Imperium Rosyjskiego 1721–1921. Geopolityka, ody i narody*, 2018

*Putin. Źródła imperialnej agresji*, 2014

Nowak is a historian, university professor, publicist and the author of over 20 books and almost 200 papers published in joint publications and journals.

#### Foreign language translations

Andrzej Nowak’s texts have been published in Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and the USA.

#### Selected awards

Catholic Publishers’ Association Award FENIKS (2018)

KLIO Award for the best history book of the year (2015, 2016)

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Award (2015)