

Stereotypes in Polish Culture

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Abstract

Prejudices, stereotypes, hostile attitudes - they are all derived from a source. Some of them may ring true while some can make no sense. Still others are the result of historical or social events, not just part of someone's imagination. In this article we will discuss these phenomena in terms of Poland's relationships with some European countries. We will try to explain where the opinions come from, whether they can be regarded as true or not and how they have affected our cooperation with those countries. In addition to politics, we will also mention daily life, during which some prejudices can be damaging.

The main focus in this article is on the Polish-Russian, Polish-Czech and Polish-Hungarian relations and stereotypes which derive from them. The reasons for choosing those three countries were different. Many Poles hear about Hungary and their friendly attitude towards Poland thus we were curious to see where it derives from. We decided to write about Russia because our history seems rather complicated and we often hear similar opinions about them and Poles from foreigners. The Czech Republic was chosen for the opposite reasons – they are our neighboring country, although we do not know much about them. We will aim to explain political situations, social relationships and concentrate on certain historical events which changed or shaped the way we view these countries and affected their opinion about us - Poles. However, it is best to start with explaining what a stereotype is. A number of researchers have long been trying to account for it, although there is still a relative lack of a satisfactory definition. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it is “a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong” (Stereotype, 2020). According to Cardwell (cf. Walas, 1995), a stereotype is a fixed, overgeneralized belief about a particular group or class of people.

1. Hungary

To understand where stereotypes in the Polish-Hungarian relations come from, it is crucial to investigate some important historical matters.

The vast majority of both nations have positive attitudes when it comes to the Polish-Hungarian relationship. Andrzej Sieroszewski (cf. Walas, 1995) describes the stereotype of a Hungarian as shortened, simplified and evaluative.

The first person that was important for both Poles and Hungarians was Saint Adalbert of Prague. Thanks to him both countries were Christianized and could practice the Christian religion. For Poland, it was especially significant since it was the beginning of the nation (Sroka, 2015).

Another crucial historical factor are Polish rulers who ruled in Hungary and Hungarians who ruled in Poland. The first Polish king to sit on the Hungarian throne was Géza, the grandson of Bolesław I Chrobry – the first Polish king. He reigned from 1074 to 1077. After his death, the crown was given to his brother - Ladislaus, known in Poland as Saint Władysław Węgierski. He ruled from 1077 to 1095. He was Christian and contributed immensely to the spread of Christianity in Hungary (he was canonized in 1992) (Sroka, 2015).

One of the best known monarchs of Poland is Queen Jadwiga. She was crowned king, because the Polish law at that time did not allow queens to be rulers. She was the daughter of Louis I of Hungary - the preceding Hungarian ruler of Poland (Sroka, 2015). King Casimir the Great, who had ruled in Poland between 1333 and 1370, had not had a male descendant. He reached a deal with Louis I of Hungary which stipulated that if one of them died, the other one would become king in both countries (Rhode, 2020). It was a sign of great respect and trust. Jadwiga was very well educated and understood the political matters in Poland. Together with her husband, she established a new dynasty in Poland - the Jagiellonians (named after her husband, who was her successor).

The first person who mentioned a similarity between Poles and Hungarians was Gregory of Sanok in the 15th c. There was a dispute in Hungary in Jan Vitez's property, who at that time was the bishop of Oradea (a town in today's Romania). Gregory was asked to explain where Poles came from and his answer was surprising. He claimed that both Poles and Hungarians originated from the same place. His reasoning was based on the similarity between Poles and Hungarians, e.g. in fighting, religious views or politics (Sroka, 2015).

The saying "Pole and Hungarian cousins be, good for fight and good for party" was mentioned for the first time in Jan Zachariasiewicz's novel called *Sąsiedzi* (Eng. *The Neighbours*) in 1856. Today, this novel is not particularly popular, but the saying is still commonly known both among Hungarians and Poles. Unfortunately, there is no evidence when it was first used among people (cf. Walas, 1995, Csaplaros 1964).

The aforesaid novel is not the only one in which the Polish-Hungarian relations are mentioned. The Polish-Hungarian friendship is also mentioned in Sándor Petőfi's poem "Armia Siedmiogrodzka", in Hungarian "az erdélyi hadsereg," from 1848, written right before the breakout of an uprising in Hungary. The leadership over the Hungarian army was given to Józef Bem – a Polish general and under his command Hungarians won many battles. Thanks to that, Bem became a heroic icon for Hungarians. His monument in Budapest is a symbol of peaceful demonstrations (cf. Walas, 1995).

Another example of this special bond between the two countries in literature are such collections of short stories as *Węgrzy* (1956) and *Przeprowadzka* (1967), written by Jerzy Stefan Stawiński and Jan Józef Szczepański, respectively. In both collections, Poles are shown as full of sympathy for Hungarians and as eager to help their friends in need. There are also some literary works in which Hungarians are described. One of them is a novel by Teodor Tomasz Jeż entitled *Szandor Kowacz* from 1861, where a Hungarian is shown as a handsome, tall and strong man who exudes courage (cf. Walas, 1995, Jeż 1898).

The political situation became complicated after 1956. Janos Kadar, prime minister of Hungary and the first secretary of Hungary's Communist Party (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020), considered this friendship dangerous (Walas, 1995). In the fall of 1956, the Hungarian Uprising broke out, which was a call for freedom and peace. It was ruthlessly suppressed by the Soviet army (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). In the meantime, Poles showed their support for Hungarians - poets, writers and journalists wrote about it, while ordinary people donated blood, food and clothes to be sent to Hungary. Neither Soviet nor Hungarian politicians liked it, and yet, Polish support for Hungarians uplifted common people.

The official dislike of the Polish-Hungarian relation was the beginning of negative Polish stereotypes. Hungarians were taught by the officials that Poles were lazy and reluctant to work. Since those stereotypes had already existed in other countries, it was easy to bring them to Hungary. This attempt was not very successful and the remaining stereotypes about Poles are mostly positive (Walas, 1995).

2. Russia

Poland and Russia share several centuries of history during which we had some ups and downs. However, it cannot be denied that our neighbor is a country that significantly influenced the history of Poland and left an imprint on it. Historical events and the memory of them affect myths and stereotypes. They are particularly permanent and influence the image of the Polish neighbor already at the early stage of school learning.

In the stories read by Polish children, Poland and Russia are shown to share common Slavic roots. In the legend of Lech, Czech and Rus, the founders of these three nations are brothers and travel together to find a place where they can establish their burghs (Chotomska, 2012). This could already tell us that our relations should be quite warm since we have the same, Slavic roots, but the reality is much more complicated. Although our relations are influenced not only by historical events but also by the media, our own experiences and the current political situation, it is the former that is a determinant. The image of Russia has been formed over the centuries. It is recorded in various texts and stored in the memory of Poles. To find out the reasons for Russian stereotypes and understand why such an image has become established, we need to reach for various sources, subjective and objective. Some stereotypes have faded, and some are still vivid (Handke, 2000).

The earliest “stereotype” of Muscovites was outlined by Mikołaj Rej, a Polish Renaissance poet, in 1568:

*“Moscow, we already know, what kind of men those are,
We know them by their traditions, We know them through conversations,
The serf, like a bird locked in a cage, can sing,
But he can’t express in words what he is thinking.”* (Uściłowicz, 2008, p. 28)

As it will be shown later in the text, the concept of Russia as “the cage”, existed even in the sixteenth century. Rej also described the serfs as stupid people with very little brains but at the same time quite clever (Uściłowicz, 2008).

2.1. Polish -Russian relations in the 17th and 18th centuries

The image of Poles in the 17th century manifests itself in diverse texts with some ambivalence depending on social groups, as well as the historical period. In Russia, at that time there was a dynastic crisis, and Polish kings tried to take over the Russian throne, although without success as strong opposition came from members of the Russian society.

Avraamy Palitsyn in his work presented Poles almost only negatively: as the deceitful enemies of Russia. The Polish army was associated only with evil: both the purpose of the fight and its commanders were unholy. Poles occupied Moscow for a couple of years, and they were accused of introducing their own lifestyle, regardless of public opposition. The image of a Pole as enemy, invader, non-Christian, and not respecting Orthodox traditions was consistently shaped (Moczałowa, 2000). In many works, Poles appeared as heretics, outsiders, and even pagans, and this happened because their authors were mainly Protestants, not Catholics, and they had a different point of view. The Russian society was also brought up in the spirit of hatred of Catholicism, represented as a symbol of everything foreign. These events shaped the first Russian stereotype of a Pole – a dandy, Catholic, and at the same time a sneaky plunderer (Moczałowa, 2000).

Poles had an equally unfavorable opinion about the Russians. *The Diaries* by Jan Chryzostom Pasek are a great mine of information about Russians. In his work, there is an extract in which the author, unfairly treated to vodka of inferior quality, refers to the outrageous behavior of the perpetrator by calling him *grubianitas*, which is a Latinized version of the Polish word “grubiański”, whose meaning is close to the English word “boorish”. It meant that the Russians lacked in courtesy and manners and could not behave at the table. The diplomatic ceremony there was also in a deplorable condition. According to Poles, Russians were obsessed with respecting the person of the tsar. Pasek in his diaries wrote how he received a sheet of paper with titles of the tsar so that he could learn them (Pasek, 1836, p.113).

2.2. Polish -Russian relations in the 19th century

In the 19th century, Polish people did not hold much affection for the Russians, and strong dislike was the feeling that grew at that time. The clash of two cultures, Orthodox and Christian, could be the reason for the exacerbation of aversion. The Russians believed that the Orthodox religion was the only right religion that Slavs should practice. What is more, Poles were fascinated by the West, especially France and England, and they desperately wanted to be part of Western culture, although they were closer to the East and the Slavic roots. Poles deemed themselves to be admirers of democracy and excessive freedom, calling it “golden freedom”, while they considered Russia a lawless state (Giza, 2000).

During the partitions, many uprisings took place to break free from the Russian yoke. The Russian historian, Nikolay Karamzin, was known for his aversion to Poland and Poles. “Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia” (Zapiska o drevnei i novoi Rossii, 1811) is one of his books where he writes that Poland should not exist. He emphasized in his works that Poles were infidels and prone to betrayal, condemned them, disapproved of their service to Napoleon and deepened the hostility (Shkandrij, 2001). According to Russians, during the fighting of 1830-1831, Poles behaved like cowards and all commanders were inept. After the Kościuszko Uprising, a stereotype of a dishonest, duplicitous, hypocritical, and haughty Pole arose.

Before the Polish–Russian War of 1830–31, the idea of romantic Slavic brotherhood, known as Panslavism, existed, but after this historic event, it collapsed. Alexander Pushkin, an outstanding Russian poet, created a poem where he said that there would never be an agreement between the two nations. He was the first to note that Poland and Russia always fought against each other:

*For ages past still have contended,
These races, though so near allied:
And oft 'neath Victory's storm has bended*

*Now their, and now our side.
Which shall stand fast in such commotion
The haughty Liakh, or faithful Russ?
And shall Slavonic streams meet in a Russian ocean? –
Or it't dry up? This is point for us. (Pushkin, 1831)*

However, in Polish literature there was a stereotypical image of the enemy, who was usually Russian. Adam Mickiewicz used it, in *Forefathers* – his famous poetic drama – when talking about Senator Novosiltsev, and such references also appear in *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828), where the enemies and tyrants are old and look like monsters, and the defenders of the homeland are young and innocent. The tsar, in the opinion of the people in *Forefathers*, is a faithful disciple of Satan. In the works, the keywords are “victim, revenge, guilt and punishment.” Interestingly, Mickiewicz does not blame Muscovites for what the government does. He even writes the poem “To my Muscovite Friends”:

To my Muscovite Friends
*Do you remember me? Whenever my mind traces
The story of my friends' deaths, jailings and banishments,
I remember all of you, and your foreign faces
Possess, in all my musings, the rights of citizens (Mickiewicz, 2016 [1832]).*

3. Czech Republic

We should also take a closer look on Polish-Czech relations and the stereotypes that started to shape around the 18th century and are still present among people in both countries.

As it turns out, a lot of different factors have had an influence on the perception of Polish-Czech relations. The main factors are historical events, literature, own experiences of people from both countries, and also politics and politicians. To understand how these stereotypes were shaped throughout the years, we need to go back to the late 18th century, when Russia, Prussia and Austria signed a treaty that partitioned Poland.

Austria acquired the regions in the south of Poland, known as Galicia. At that moment, Galicia became a part of Habsburg Empire, just like Austria and Hungary. Czech lands were also under the influence of the Empire, which resulted in migrations of Czechs to work in Galicia, which, at that time, was the poorest and the least developed part of

Poland. It was an amazing opportunity for Czechs, who were well-educated and enterprising people. Those who came to Poland were mostly doctors, professors, police officers, craftsmen and musicians. They did a lot to economically develop Galicia (Walas, 1995).

However, the very first Czechs, who came to Galicia, were “strict officials”. They were usually people unsuccessfully looking for a job in their home country, novice clerks, or people having problems with the law. In the Polish community, a stereotype (often true) of a conscientious Czech official appeared quickly, as well as a diligent Austrian citizen, to whom the national attachment of Polish society was alien. Thus, more and more difficulties in communication and problems between Poles and Czechs appeared (Kaleta, 2014). Czech officials created their own, modern administration, and Poles, who were not used to paying taxes, were outraged by the necessity to give their money to the state authorities (Walas 1995). That is when the first stereotypes about Czechs started appearing among Polish people. They saw Czechs as strict officials and submissive to those in power.

At the same time, many Czechs decided to join the Russian army. They idealized Russia and believed that Russians would help them gain independence. Polish people, who were terrorized by Russian invaders, felt betrayed by Czechs and started to see them as enemies and opponents of independent Poland (Kaleta, 2014).

However, thanks to the literature and well-known Polish writers from the 19th century, Czechs created many positive stereotypes about Poles, too. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski was so popular among Czech people that they did not consider him a foreign writer but their own. Later, Henryk Sienkiewicz became even more popular. His books were translated and published many times. His books led to the emergence of new stereotypes among Czech readers. They started to see Poles as people who always loved their homeland and were adventurous, brave, and chivalrous. This stereotype has actually survived to this day (Walas, 1995).

Relations between Poles and Czechs in the 20th century were very complicated. Lack of real knowledge about the other side caused some misunderstandings. Intellectuals, politicians as well as ‘ordinary’ people definitely too often relied on the stereotypes and that was the deepest root of the political quarrels (Przeperski, 2016a).

During the interwar period, Poles admired Czech organization and economic development, but on the other hand, showed contempt towards brutal Czech policy towards other nationalities of the region, naturally including Poles. But Czechs were, generally, no better. One of the most important Czech politicians, Tomas Masaryk treated the Polish state as a kind of ‘temporary state’. And from his opinions about Poles, Czechs developed many negative stereotypes, for example, about Poles being

focused too much on religion and entertainment rather than politics or important issues (Przeperski, 2016a).

Many stereotypes have disappeared throughout the years but still a lot of them exist among people in both countries. As it turns out, Polish people now do not have so many stereotypes about Czechs and, even if some of them are still present, they do not really affect the way Poles treat Czech people (Przeperski, 2016b). However, in the Czech Republic a lot of stereotypes from the 19th and 20th century have survived to this day. What is more, some of the new stereotypes appeared at the beginning of this century, and they were shaped by Czechs' own experiences of Polish-Czech relations. Unfortunately, many of these stereotypes are negative and most Czechs still rely on them. Latest statistics show that 17% of Czechs have a negative attitude towards Poles (Przeperski, 2016b). The most popular stereotypes about Poles among Czechs say that Polish people tend to be hypocritical and treacherous. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that the political relations between the countries are friendly, and Czech people living close to the Polish border often say that they do not imagine their daily lives without Polish friends. As it turns out, even these negative stereotypes present in Czech society do not have a big impact on everyday life and political relations (Przeperski, 2016b).

4. Stereotypes Nowadays

We have also conducted a survey among Polish students on national stereotypes about Russians, Hungarians and Czechs. The survey questions (in translation from Polish) were the following:

- Have you ever heard the stereotype about Russia/Russian? ___Yes ___No
- If so, what are they? _____
- Have you ever heard the stereotype about Hungary? ___Yes ___No
- If so, what are they? _____
- Have you ever heard a stereotype about Czechs? ___Yes ___No
- If so, what are they? _____
- Can you find that your views have changed based on the stereotypes you heard? ___Yes ___No
- If so, are they more tolerant or less tolerant? _____ more tolerant _____ less tolerant
- How often do you judge someone by stereotypes? ___always ___often ___rarely ___never

The aim of our survey was to learn what stereotypes about Czechs, Russians and Hungarians are the most popular among Poles, and if they truly influence the way Polish people assess their neighbors. This report analyses the results of the survey in which 30 respondents answered our questions connected with the topic.

Ninety percent of those questioned confirmed that they were aware of the existence of many stereotypes concerning the Russian people and were also able to enumerate many of them. As it turned out, most of the stereotypes were negative and presenting Russians in a bad light. Almost all respondents pointed out alcohol and a fondness for it in their answers. Responses mentioning poverty, aggressiveness and backwardness of the country appeared less frequently.

Slightly more than ninety-three percent of those surveyed did not know any stereotypes about Hungarian people. However, those who knew some of the stereotypes mainly enumerated very positive aspects of Hungarians. The responses mainly spoke of a friendly attitude towards Polish people.

Ninety five percent of people who participated in that survey were not aware of any stereotypes concerning Czechs. The rest of those questioned, however, wrote down very mixed stereotypes – half of them positive and half negative. Their sense of humor and language similarities were the most frequently quoted answers. The replies also spoke of the Czechs' negative attitude towards Poles.

Almost eighty-three percent of those questioned were sure that all the stereotypes they know have changed the way they perceive other nations. About 63% claim that the stereotypes they know have changed their views to be more tolerant.

Nearly seventy-six percent of the respondents claimed that they rarely let stereotypes influence the way they judge Russians, Hungarians, and Czechs. Also, seventeen percent of those surveyed said that they never judge others through stereotypes.

Overall, the results of this survey show that despite the existing stereotypes Poles are withdrawing from judging others and changing their views to be more tolerant.

5. Conclusions

Taking everything into consideration, the article has attempted to explain the most important factors that influenced the development of stereotypes concerning Hungary, Russia and Czech Republic. We presented the history of stereotypes that significantly influenced Poland's relations with those countries. In the past, as discussed in this article, stereotypes had a greater impact on people. Nowadays, as it turned out, there

are many positive and negative stereotypes present in Polish society, although they do not have such an impact on our approach to other nations, as shown in the survey. People are now influenced by education and raising awareness of the harmful influence of stereotypes on relations between people. Globalization has also contributed to the development of intercultural communication competence. Due to easy access to the Internet and social media, there is a possibility to contact other people, not necessarily paying attention to where they come from and focusing on common traits such as hobbies. Especially teenagers, who speak English, can verify if the stereotypes are well-founded. Moreover, mobility programs like Erasmus, educate young people about the culture of other countries, which makes the university stays even more valuable and allows them to develop intercultural communication competence.

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Justyna Warchol was born and raised in a small village in south-eastern Poland. Currently, she is attending the Carpathian State College and studying English Philology. Her love for this language increases every day. After completing her study, Justyna wants to be a teacher. She adores learning the history of Great Britain and her favorite period is the Wars of the Roses. She is also a great coffee and tea enthusiast. In her free time, she writes her own stories, which discuss issues related to feminism, politics and human emotions. Nowadays she is working on her first fantasy series and one day, with a little luck, she hopes to publish her works and will start a writing career.