

CONRAD AND COMMUNIST CENSORSHIP: THE STORY OF THE 28TH VOLUME OF THE POLISH EDITION OF CONRAD'S COLLECTED WORKS (1974-75)¹

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Abstract: Under the Stalinist regime which was foisted on Poland after the Second World War the printing of Conrad's works was not allowed, partly because his books had been popular with members of the wartime Polish Resistance and partly because of their cultural impact. Communist officials condemned Conrad on both aesthetic and ideological grounds: Conrad's individualistic ethic was incompatible with the collectivist tenets of communism, while the innovative nature of his prose exceeded the narrow framework of 'socialist realism'. Things improved after the political "thaw" of 1956, which saw the publication of *Lord Jim*. After the next "thaw" of 1970 the chances for the publication of a Polish edition of Conrad's collected works were greatly enhanced by the coming fiftieth anniversary of the author's death. The initiator and editor of this new Polish edition of Conrad's works – comprising 27 volumes – was Zdzisław Najder. Although the whole collection was published by the PIW publishing house between 1972 and 1974, some of Conrad's political essays and other texts were removed by government censors because of their anti-Russian and anti-despotic import. However, Najder eventually found a way to publish them. In the autumn of 1974 he went to the United States to give a series of lectures on Conrad and asked Wit Tarnawski – a Polish émigré living in Britain – to help him. Before returning to Poland, Najder collected the letters which he and Tarnawski had sent to each other. This correspondence is now kept at the Jagiellonian University Joseph Conrad Research Centre. Tarnawski enrolled the support of Andrzej Stypułkowski, who was the director of the London-based Polonia Book Fund. Together with Andrzej Pomian, Tarnawski acted as an intermediary between the publishers and Najder in order to safeguard the latter's anonymity. Stypułkowski had the idea of copying the graphic layout and artwork of the censored edition that had been published in Poland. The anonymous additional 'counterfeit' volume – entitled *Political Essays* – came out in the middle of 1975 and evoked a nervous response from the Polish secret police, who were unable to find any evidence to connect Najder with it. Copies of the 'missing' volume soon found their way to readers in Poland. It was only in 1996 that this 28th volume of Conrad's collected works was published in Poland – by the very same PIW publishers – and this time with Zdzisław Najder as the editor.

Keywords: Conrad's political essays, Zdzisław Najder, communist censorship, communism, Wit Tarnawski, Andrzej Stypułkowski, Polonia Book Fund, Conrad's collected works in Polish.

¹ J. Conrad. *Szkice polityczne*. Transl. H. Najder and W. Tarnawski [In:] *Idem. Dzieła*, vol. 28. London: (Polonia Book Fund) 1975. Cf. *Idem. Szkice polityczne*. Transl. H. Najder and W. Tarnawski [In:] *Idem. Dzieła*, vol. 28. Warszawa: PIW, 1996.

After the Second World War, the reception of Joseph Conrad's work in Poland was closely connected with the country's political situation. The communist authorities soon branded Conrad as a particularly dangerous author, partly because his books had been very popular with members of the wartime Polish Resistance – who after the war remained hostile towards the new régime foisted on Poland by the Soviet Union – and partly because of their cultural impact. The fiercest hostility towards Conrad came during the Stalinist period, which in Poland lasted from 1946 to 1956. Although his books were never officially banned (unlike those of postwar political émigrés), his greatest and most popular works could not be printed, which meant that prices of any existing second-hand copies of pre-war editions were very high indeed. Communist party officials condemned him on both aesthetic and ideological grounds,² criticizing what they referred to as his “cult of death”, his “moral nihilism”, his “sur-realism” and – among other things – his “servility towards shipowners and other capitalist exploiters”.³ Conrad's individualistic ethic was incompatible with the collectivist tenets of communism, while the innovative nature of his prose exceeded the narrow framework of ‘socialist realism’. It was small wonder, then, that the publication of *Lord Jim* in 1956 – complete with a commentary written by Jerzy Andrzejewski⁴ (who had been involved in reaching difficult compromises with the authorities and who was the model for Alpha in Miłosz's *Captive Mind*) – was hailed as an important harbinger of political liberalization and – at least temporarily – of a greater degree of freedom of speech.

The development of cultural life in postwar Poland depended on the various outcomes of power struggles within the ruling communist party. After the political “thaw” of 1956 the Polish general reading public once again had access to Conrad's greatest works. However, many of Conrad's books still awaited translation and publication. An opportunity came after the next “thaw” of 1970, which saw the appearance of some western goods in the shops and the return of American films to the cinemas.⁵ The chances for the publication of a Polish edition of Conrad's collected works were greatly enhanced by the coming fiftieth anniversary of the author's death, which was going to be commemorated by Conrad societies all over the world. The initiator and editor of this new Polish edition of Conrad's works – comprising twenty-seven volumes – was Zdzisław Najder. The whole collection was published by the PIW (Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy) publishing house between 1972 and 1974.⁶ The best of the existing translations were used and some works were re-translated or translated for the first time. This edition remains invaluable, as some of the Polish

² J. Skolik. “Conrad and Censorship in Poland” [In:] *Studia Neophilologica*. Ed. S. Donovan, Special Issue 2013, № 85, pp. 58-68.

³ S. Zabierowski. *W kręgu Conrada*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008, pp. 127-130, 163-165. Cf. J. Kott. “O laickim tragizmie (Conrad i Malraux)” [In:] *Idem. Mitologia i realizm*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1946, pp. 117-166. Cf. the entry “Kuznica” [In:] *Słownik Realizmu Socjalistycznego*. Ed. Z. Łapiński and W. Tomasik. Kraków: Universitas, 2004, pp. 114-117.

⁴ J. Conrad. *Lord Jim*. Transl. A. Zagórska. Warszawa: PIW, 1956.

⁵ For a discussion of changes in the communist party's policy on censorship see: S. Żak. *Cenzura wobec humanistyki*. Kielce: Wydawnictwo Pedagogiczne, 1996.

⁶ J. Conrad. *Dziela*. Ed. Z. Najder. Warszawa: PIW, 1972-74, vols. I-XXVII.

translations are still unique. The graphical design was by the neo-expressionist painter Zygmunt Magner, while Józef Miłobędzki was the marine consultant.

As the successive volumes of the collection began to appear, however, it transpired that there had been problems with the communist government censors. A note at the end of the translation of *Under Western Eyes* informed the reader that in the present edition the author's preface had been omitted.⁷ Zdzisław Najder's name does not appear (as that of the editor) in the volume containing *Notes on Life and Letters (O życiu i literaturze)*,⁸ from which the government censor had removed a passage in the *Author's Note* as well as Conrad's essays entitled *The Censor of Plays – an Appreciation, Autocracy and War, The Crime of Partition* and a *Note on the Polish Problem*. Plans not to include *Under Western Eyes* in the collection eventually had to be abandoned for fear of creating an international scandal. What the government censors objected to in these texts was the fact that their anti-Russian and anti-despotic import was then as relevant as it had ever been before. The message they conveyed was summed up in Conrad's preface to *Under Western Eyes*:

The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots.⁹

The intervention of the government censors led to a conflict between the PIW publishers and Zdzisław Najder, who refused to allow his name to be associated with the censored volume containing *Notes on Life and Letters (O życiu i literaturze)*.¹⁰ Despite these cuts, however, the collection as a whole is still of great value.

Najder then undertook to secretly publish the texts which had been removed by the Polish communist censors and thus complete the task which he had originally set himself. An opportunity came in the autumn of 1974, when he went to Palo Alto in the United States to give a series of lectures on Conrad. Wit Tarnawski – a Polish émigré who worked as a doctor in Britain and who was also a Conrad scholar¹¹ – agreed to work on the project with Najder. Before returning to Poland, Najder collected the letters which he and Tarnawski had sent to each other and left them for safe keeping with Leszek Kołakowski, who was then a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls' College, Oxford. This correspondence is now kept at the Jagiellonian University Joseph Conrad Research Centre.

Tarnawski had prepared translations of *Under Western Eyes* and the unfinished novel *The Sisters* for the edition of Conrad's collected works that had been published (and censored) in Poland. His first idea was to have the censored items published in "Kultura", which was then the most important Polish émigré journal. However, the

⁷ J. Conrad. *Dziela*. Ed. Z. Najder. Warszawa: PIW, 1974, vol. XII (*W oczach Zachodu*, Transl. W. Tarnawski).

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. XXI (*O życiu i literaturze*, Transl. M. Boduszyńska-Borowikowa, J. Miłobędzki).

⁹ J. Conrad. *Under Western Eyes*.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Tarnawski. "Zakazane szkice Conrada". *Kultura*. Paris, 1975, 1/328, 2/329, pp. 178-184.

¹¹ Cf. W. Tarnawski. *Conrad the Man, the Writer, the Pole. An Essay in Psychological Biography*. Transl. R. Batchelor. London: Polish Cultural Foundation, 1984.

editor (Aleksander Giedroyc) was then in the process of publishing the Polish translation of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. Tarnawski therefore turned to Andrzej Stypułkowski, who was the director of the Polonia Book Fund¹² – a London-based organisation which he had founded in 1959 and which published books that had been banned in communist countries. The Fund published books by authors such as Aleksander Wat, Nadezhda Mandelstam and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. During the 1980s it cooperated with various underground publishers in Poland.¹³ Together with Józef Retinger's biographer and secretary Andrzej Pomian, Tarnawski acted as an intermediary between the publishers and Najder in order to safeguard the latter's anonymity (in case Polish communist agents were able to collect intelligence there).

Although Najder was in the United States, he was able to exercise full control over the editorial work on the supplementary volume of texts which had been removed by the communist censors – including the matter of the title. Stypułkowski himself was very enthusiastic about the project and wanted to get the volume published as soon as possible. It was he who had the idea of copying the graphic layout and artwork of the censored edition that had been published in Poland. Émigré publishers often used counterfeit book covers to allay the suspicions of customs officers and border guards. This time, however, they were going one step further by supplying a “missing” volume which had been cut by the government censors. The hope was that copies of the ‘counterfeit’ volume would eventually begin to circulate in Poland, thus allowing readers to acquaint themselves with Conrad's position on important political issues that were as relevant in the 1970s as they had been half a century earlier.

It was also decided that the translations and the volume itself would be published anonymously in order not to endanger Najder – who would be returning to Poland – or the relatives of other people involved in the project. Another argument in favour of anonymity was the fact that the uncensored volume was in effect a pirate edition of one of the volumes which had been published in Poland.¹⁴ The concomitant atmosphere of conspiracy and mystery which surrounded the venture was also seen as a factor that would boost sales in the Polish émigré market and excite interest in Poland itself.¹⁵

The choice of title for the ‘counterfeit’ volume was also dictated by marketing considerations. It was hoped that a certain number of copies at least would find their way to readers in Poland. On the one hand the title had to be appropriate and inviting, while on the other it had to be neutral enough not to arouse the suspicions of Polish

¹² Najder and Stypułkowski may well have discussed the matter of publishing the censored essays earlier – at a Conrad conference held in Canterbury in the August of 1974. Cf. Z. Najder. “Nota wydawnicza” [In:] J. Conrad. *Szkice polityczne*, ed. cit., p. 77.

¹³ R. Habielski. *Polski Londyn*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2000, pp. 134-135. Cf. the entry “Polonia Book Fund Ltd.” [In:] *Encyklopedia Polskiej Emigracji i Polonii*. Ed. K. Dopierała. Toruń: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2003, vol. II, p. 118.

¹⁴ The copyright protection on Conrad's works expired in 1974. What was being copied or ‘pirated’ was the graphic layout and artwork of the collection published in Poland. Cf. W. Tarnawski's letter to Zdzisław Najder, 25th November 1974.

¹⁵ Wit Tarnawski to Zdzisław Najder, 10th December 1974, 26th February 1975, 5th March 1975.

customs officials. One idea was to publish a separate ‘contraband’ edition that would be easier to smuggle into Poland. Various titles were considered, mostly highlighting the unusual character of the publication: *Joseph Conrad’s banned / censored essays*, *Essays by Joseph Conrad which have not been included in the official Polish edition of his collected works*, *Joseph Conrad’s Political Essays*,¹⁶ *European Essays* ...¹⁷ In the end, the title *Political Essays* was chosen, as it best conveyed the subject matter and also hinted at the reasons for which it had been censored.

Being the publisher, Stypułkowski’s main task was to find the money that was needed to get the volume printed and distributed. These initial problems were solved thanks to the generosity of an anonymous Conrad enthusiast who offered to finance the whole venture.¹⁸ The translation of Conrad’s preface to *Under Western Eyes* was that which Wit Tarnawski had published in London in 1955, while the other texts were translated by Halina Carroll-Najder. Despite financial and health problems – not to mention letters going astray while they were being forwarded – all the most important matters were settled before the Najders returned to Poland in the March of 1975.

The supplementary 28th volume came out in the middle of 1975 and evoked a nervous response from the Polish secret police, who were unable to find any evidence to connect Najder – who had recently been to the west coast of the United States – with the London publishers. Police agents arranged for two well-known members of the world of culture to ask Najder if he had had anything to do with the ‘counterfeit’ publication, but on both occasions he coolly denied having had any connection with it. At the same time, however, he received indirect confirmation of the successful propaganda effect that the émigré edition of the essays was having in Poland.

From a legal point of view, the PIW (Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy) State publishing house was powerless to hinder the publication of the ‘counterfeit’ volume. The only recourse it had was to try and persuade the artist Zygmunt Magner – who had designed the collection’s graphic layout – to take legal action against the London publishers for having plagiarized his work. Despite the offer of substantial financial incentives, Magner flatly refused – no doubt in protest against the curtailment of free speech in Poland.

Surprisingly, it was only in 1996 that the supplementary 28th volume of Conrad’s collected works was published in Poland itself – by the very same PIW publishers – with Zdzisław Najder as the editor and a note explaining the circumstances surrounding its publication. From then on the Polish general reading public once again had access to everything that Conrad had ever written: the censorship of Conrad’s works in Poland had at long last come to an end.

Translated by R. E. Pyplacz

¹⁶ Wit Tarnawski to Zdzisław Najder, 24th December 1974.

¹⁷ Wit Tarnawski to Zdzisław Najder, 5th March 1975.

¹⁸ Wit Tarnawski to Zdzisław Najder, 24th December 1974.

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