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IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY OR IN HYSTERIA OF DEFENCE: REFLECTIONS ON J. L. GRANATSTEIN'S *WHO KILLED CANADIAN HISTORY?*

Résumé : Depuis des siècles les livres ont été les porteurs d'idées les plus efficaces et communs. Dans les années 1990, le livre *Who Killed Canadian History ?* de Jack L. Granatstein a soulevé une vive controverse au Canada et à l'étranger. En fonction d'un bref examen du phénomène du livre, l'auteur de l'article aborde un certain nombre de questions essentielles pour quiconque préoccupé par les devoirs civiques, par le patriotisme à petite et à grande échelle ainsi que par la liberté d'expression.

La première série de questions est à caractère plus universel : Pourquoi les livres sont-ils contestés ? Dans quelle mesure les auteurs sont-ils conscients du fait que leur livre deviendra controversé ? Pourquoi relever un défi d'écrire un livre controversé ? *Who Killed Canadian History ?* de J.L. Granatstein soulève aussi des questions plus concrètes comme : Quels sont les objectifs principaux qu'ont les auteurs pour rendre le livre discutable ? A quoi aspire l'auteur ? Et si le livre est-il bon de nos jours, comment le mettre en lien avec les préoccupations actuelles ou l'universalité est-elle un aspect essentiel ? Pourquoi un livre est-il considéré comme provocateur ? Par qui ? Quel sera l'impact du livre au Canada, si c'est le cas ? Quelles seront ses conséquences sur d'autres pays, par exemple sur la Pologne ou sur l'Europe « unie » ?

Every now and then, the worlds of science, politics, economy and society interlace and the outcome of such confrontations is usually intriguing, sometimes shocking, and occasionally provocative. Yet, above all, the results of confronting the realities of the academia, economic conditions, political stances and social expectations and trends bring debates and changes that are – in the long run – positive for all the interested. The story of J. L. Granatstein's *Who killed Canadian History?* seems a confirmation of the above.

Jack Lawrence Granatstein (born in Toronto in 1939) is one of the most renowned historians in Canadian academia. A graduate of Kingston Military College (BA), University of Toronto (MA) and Duke University (PhD), he served in Canadian Army, and – scientifically – was affiliated with York

University from 1975 until his retirement in 1995. He specialises in historical research and writing on current affairs (AIMS). Apart from being a skilled and inquisitive researcher, his polemic journalism as well as academic writing have earned him an opinion of an iconoclast. Controversial as his writing and views might appear, it seems undeniable that J. L. Granatstein cares about the Canadian affairs and has always been ready to "crusade" against the issues that he believes harmful for the country. That is how he actually understands patriotism.

And there is a lot to be contested. In the 1960s, Granatstein was an implacable critic of the Lester Pearson's administration, which he urged to pull the country out of NORAD; he advised more energetic Canadian investment and involvement in peacekeeping instead. In the 1970s, he firmly claimed that the decisions of Prime Minister Mackenzie King made in the 1930s-1940s, that resulted in drawing Canada into the US orbit and dismantling the British-Canadian bonds, were the only logical, strategically, economically and politically justifiable and – above all – beneficial and profitable for the country. Additionally, he was the one who largely contributed to the change of the black PR for PM Mackenzie King altogether. He kept arguing that – contrary to the then contemporary popular views – the long period of successive governments dominated by the Liberal Party did not harm Canada in any way. On the contrary, it was – Granatstein claimed – the period of growth, stability and prosperity (the views that made Granatstein extremely unpopular among historians such as Donald Creighton or Brian Nolan and their apprentices) (Owram 41, Buckner 126-130).

In the 1990s, he directed his research effort towards the military history of Canada. Simultaneously—and unsurprisingly—he 'turned his sword' against the federal government on the grounds that the Canadian army, and military affairs in general, had been neglected for years and tragically underfunded, which made it impossible to carry out the duties the military was supposed to perform. Also, the Canadian academia received its dose of criticism from Granatstein. He made himself hugely unpopular and fiercely criticized for spreading views that the Canadian research is by and large mediocre and substandard (Granatstein 66, Lerhe, Burley). Such a situation – in his view – was disastrous for the Canadian students who were receiving poor quality education.

Between 1998 and 2000, J. L. Granatstein was the CEO and director of the Canadian War Museum. He is considered the *spiritus movens* of the drive towards creating the new premises of the museum and the high standard of the exhibitions and museum archives (Ostow 189).

In 1998, J. L. Granatstein wrote *Who Killed Canadian History?*, the book which shook the Canadian academics, politicians, teachers, parents, students and businesspeople alike. The relatively inconspicuous A5 format book of merely 189 pages with eight chapters altogether has lived to have five revised

and updated re-editions between 1998 and 2013. What made the book so provoking and inspiring? How much relevant (if at all) it is nowadays?

The beginning of the book was quite a shock for the society; the readers were informed that

> 66 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds failed the 1997 Dominion Institute National History Survey
> 61% did not know that Sir John A. Macdonald was our first English-speaking prime minister
> 55% did not know that Canada was founded in 1867
> 95% did not know that 1837 was the date of the Rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada
> 92% did not know the year of the first Quebec referendum
> 33% knew Remembrance Day commemorates the end of the First World War
> 35% knew the significance of D-Day
> 14% knew why Lester Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize
> 5% knew that 1837 was the date of the Rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada
> 10% were able to identify the Quiet Revolution
> 34% knew the Acadians had been deported in the 18th century
> 30% thought Normal Rockwell was Canadian
> 20% thought Allan Ginsberg was Canadian
> 17% claimed Tennessee Williams and Andy Warhol as our own
> 11% knew Sir Frederick Banting had won the Nobel Prize in medicine for discovering insulin
> 16% were able to identify Marc Garneau as the first Canadian in space (Granatstein 12-13).

In that view, the first point that the author made is that, as for the knowledge of national history, Canada sinks in ignorance and negligence. To Granatstein, such state of affairs was worrying, shocking, harmful and – above all – shameful. The main concern in this respect is that history was being either excluded or – at best – reduced to ridiculous levels in school curricula, regardless the level (Granatstein 16-17). What history was being exchanged for – Granatstein blared – was a bunch of multi-disciplinary collages of social studies (Granatstein 33). This step is perceived as harmful and irresponsible as it caused in Canadian students the loss of clear view and sense of direction in receiving their national pride and identity (Granatstein 17).

Yet another scandalous procedure, as Granatstein saw it, was the maniacal application of political and sexual correctness to writing and teaching Canadian history (Granatstein 24). The eradication of history was being done

at the expense of the heritage and cultural accomplishments of the – definitely most influential and shaping the country identity– Anglophone majority. For Granatstein, it was unthinkable to sacrifice Anglophone achievements in history teaching and research (by far dominating) for the sake of satisfying or handicapping the Canadian minorities and misunderstood multiculturalism (Granatstein 85-89). Radical as the statement might seem, it indeed is difficult to disagree when Granatstein's postulates it is nonsensical to propagate the contribution and significance of the indigenous peoples or Canadian women in shaping the history of 18th or 19th century Canada, as that was made mainly (if not exclusively) by white, English-speaking males. Uncomfortable as it may appear, the scientific truthfulness and simple decency requires to present things within the right proportions – which, according to Granatstein – purposefully disappeared from schools.

In such circumstances, the author concludes that history is a subject too important to ignore. No matter how practical and down-to-earth sciences and technical education are, losing their past, nations lose their future – as Granatstein alarmingly points out (153). He highlights a number of easily identifiable negative outcomes of such an approach the most striking being the slow and unyielding assimilation of immigrants. The newcomers to Canada do not assimilate since they are not offered any comprehensible, coherent and attractive set of what might be referred to as a 'set of Canadian values, traditions, ideas and way of life'. Instead, they are being fed with the values of e.g. Canadian Inuit, Canadian Blacks' traditions, Asian-Canadian women concepts or ideas of a Francophone way of life. The 'pulverisation' of Canadiannes into ridiculous bits like the above makes the immigrants lose any idea of becoming a Canadian whatsoever. Thus, for Granatstein, Canada is no 'melting pot' but a 'Canadian mosaic' with all its mess and confusion (91).

The aforementioned political correctness seems to have dominated the Canadian education, which – in Granatstein's eyes – was most strikingly noticeable in history teaching (147). He quotes situations in which – commonly rather than incidentally – studying conflicts and wars was perceived as violence glorification. He deplores the fact that wars were being eliminated from curricula on the grounds that the realisation that it was e.g. Germans or the Japanese that initiated war in certain areas of the world might be an unpleasant shock and a reason for unjustified shame for the representatives of the two minorities. Another example by Granatstein – the avoidance of teaching on the conscription issue and the related crises in 1917, 1942 or 1944 on the grounds that it is just opening old wounds: both unnecessary and harmful to Franco- and Anglophone unity (as if any such thing had ever existed). The cardinal bit of evidence of the collapse of the Canadian history teaching system appears for the author the fact that one may graduate form a Canadian university and earn their MA in history NOT

studying the History of Canada for a single day (Granatstein 33).There is too little teaching of Canadian history in Canada (Strong-Boag 284). To sum up, with no proper history awareness, no realisation of the fundamental facts and truths in Canadian history, the national unity seems a myth.

Not only does J. L. Granatstein point out the pathologies in teaching/learning history, but he also sets out to name and shame the culprits. In his view, the main evil power behind the disastrous state of affairs is the "multicultural mania" and its enthusiasts (Granatstein 85-115). To make it clear, he openly claims he is not against a variety of views, debate, challenging different versions, acknowledging and crediting whoever has been meritorious in the country's history. He does, however, object to replacing the "architects" of Canadian history, present and future with figures and events of secondary or tertiary influence on the Canadian history and manipulating the society into believing it was them who built the modern Canada. Thus, ignorance of history is costly and dangerous.

Who exactly are the "multicultural mania" enthusiasts? For Granatstein they form two main groups, overlapping occasionally. The first are the Marxist historians, who apply to Canada (for Granatstein, a truly and fully North-American state and nation) the European, 19th century research methods, views and values. They misshape the history of the country so that it fits their frame of research and immediate, particular career-making interests. The other group seems the feminist historians and gender studies researchers, who are primarily concerned with gender, equality of the sexes and perceive historical processes as a constant challenge or test of power and influence between the males and females.

Sadly, to Granatstein, it seems that the decay that starts on the primary level, continues through secondary education and culminates at universities, has gone all too far. Sadly, even more, the political correctness disease seems to have affected all the responsible decision makers: politicians, educational bureaucrats, academics, schoolteachers, parents and – finally – students. In the book, all of them receive their separate dose of criticism.

Although, according to the author, not all Canadian historians are of Marxist or feminist background and beliefs, everybody seems responsible for the decay of the system. For one, the academia in general does little to counteractthe trend or to at least slow it down (Granatstein 175-176).For two, the Canadian historians fragmented their science to ridiculous extent (Granatstein 75). Many of them write for a few peers who care to have their colleagues' books (as the actual reading of those is problematic); academic writing has no relevance for or contact with the outside realities, has no commercial value – in the positive sense (Granatstein 77). The language is overdone, pompous, sophisticated and unattractive (Granatstein 70). Thus, no wonder historical books have low readership and little (if any) popularity. As

long as history is not going to become appealing for the masses, it is not going to be popular, liked and worthwhile (Conrad et al. 16-17).

However, and here Granatstein additionally fuelled the flames, the above cannot be achieved as long as the professional selection for the teaching posts is going to be negative (Clark 6). Like in many other countries, teaching does not appear the most attractive, socially acknowledged and profitable career. Many of those who take it – according to the author – do so due to lack of alternatives (Clark 8). That additionally deepens the crisis, as history is frequently taught by people who do not like teaching, dislike the subject, do not understand history themselves and are simply frustrated with their fate.

As could easily be predicted, Granatstein quickly found supporters, or at least people of similar views. In his *The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are*, Andrew Cohen fully agrees with Granatstein joining his lament on the lack of federal standards in education and history teaching (55), the cost of Canadians' ignorance of their own history. Cohen's understanding of citizenship and patriotism seems similar to Granatstein's concepts. As for the lack of a uniform policy and common vision of history teaching on the federal level, Granatstein was supported by Rudyard Griffiths in his *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto.*

The opponents of Granatstein's stance emphasized the Canadian multi-culturalism as a national identity builder and cement of the social tissue. They claimed it is more effective and less radical a means for integration of the immigrants and milling all the minorities together. Thus, stressing historical grievances, conflicts and traumas is – according to Granatstein's critics – unwelcome. That approach is abstract to Granatstein; he considers it ineffective, wrong and misleading. Yet, he would not be an experienced scholar if he had not offered a way out. He claims that there is a solution to the situation; it is the political history. Being himself a political historian, Granatstein believes that such an approach to history and present politics creates the elements of national identity. And that seems crucial as most researchers in history, social and political studies agree, Canadians have quite a considerable problem with self-identification. Through effective, unified and coherent teaching of history – Granatstein postulates – it can be demonstrated to the students that history is a practical science with multitude of everyday implications and applications (Clark 6-7). One of the main points that Granatstein makes is that the investment in the restoration of history to its proper position as a school and academic subject should be a top priority to the authorities on every level since – as he frequently emphasizes – history is the biding agent of society and creator of national identity (Clark 8-9).

What is more, the book offers much more than pure critic and lament over the situation. The already meant low standards of teaching history andthe suggested changes in that respect are clearly laid out. The author puts them in

a list of nine steps necessary for improvement, thus being constructive rather than frustrated (Granatstein 45-46).

Clearly, such views met resistance and polemics. J. L. Granatstein's adversaries resort to other arguments to question the author's perspective. Primarily, some scholars deny the collapse of history as such (Strong-Boag 285). They claim that the new shapes and aspects of history, such as social history, gender studies etc., are a result of the natural course of things (Stanley 80, 82). It seems – they claim – perfectly natural that the approaches, perspectives and interpretations devolve with time and more and more research findings. Moreover they suggest that such a trend is not "made in Canada" (Conrad et al. 32), but it seems to be a worldwide trend stemming from the growing complexity and multidimensional character of the modern reality (Stanley 84). The divisions that the author suggests – in the eyes of his opponents – is simplistic, impractical and, above all, anachronistic (Stanley 80). In this light,they treat Granatstein as a sort of a scholastic 'dinosaur' that cannot or does not want to cope with the changes that today brings (Stanley 88, 98).

Ad personam as the above counter-arguments may be, the other one has much more solid grounding. The critics of *Who Killed Canadian History?* voice concern that the Anglophone scholars and political decision makers – if allowed – would simply produce an exclusively Anglophone version of history of Canada and, maybe, the world (Stanley 87). The point seems justified; it is enough to look through the interpretations of the history of the US Indians by the American researchers. Many of them lack the basic decency in the sense of methodological approach, interpretation of facts; some are simply bits of propaganda. Canada – the adversaries of the author claim – cannot afford such a liberty.

Also, it seems quite challenging, if at all possible, to somehow prove the practicality of history. The main difficulty is that the students cannot be offered an *immediate* use of the historical knowledge that they acquire, contrary to a number of other subjects. That may be yet another reason for the crisis of history as a subject in Canada rather than – as Granatstein puts it – consent for the abuse of history as an element of indoctrination (Granatstein 133; Stanley 86). Furthermore, some scholars – in response to Granatstein – openly claim that they premeditatedly 'kill' Canadian history if that means diversifying its sources, providing other, new interpretations (Stanley 102).

Additionally, even those, among the book's critics, who admit that the crisis of history is a fact indeed, they postulate that it is not any new phenomenon (Strong-Boag 283), which—by the way—Granatstein is fully aware of (44). Much before the 1980s when – according to Granatstein – the collapse peaked, John Dewey's ideas of the child-centred approach to education had become hugely abused (Glassford 21). The idea of 'attitude over knowledge' spread worldwide (Granatstein 47), and Canada just acquired it in a compact way –

encompassing educational processes as a whole; thus, that had little to do with history teaching as such (Strong-Boag 284).

Who killed Canadian History? did its job. It sparked controversies, outraged numerous decision makers, shook the educational establishment (Strong-Boag 286-287), provoked debates and attracted attention to the problem. Since 1998, i.e. for the last fifteen years, quite a lot has changed in the respect of teaching history at Canadian schools and universities. The subject has attracted some generous sponsors who have started historical foundations and scholarship schemes for talented students willing to pursue their development in the field (Conrad et al. 25-29). The provincial educational boards have since then thoroughly revised their school curricula. The Canadian War Museum has earned excellent reputation as a historical institution and is very popular with tourists, students and researchers, and Canadians have started being more involved in history-oriented activities (Conrad at al. 28-29). Additionally, the book initiated – or developed – the debate on how important in a multi-ethnic and multinational society (which Canada clearly is) is the need for different pasts (Conrad et al. 29-31).

In the above sense, there comes the question how close or abstract the whole situation is if compared with Poland? What – if any relevance – does J. L. Granatstein's book bear for the Polish realities? Can the realities of both the countries be compared at all? Why bother to analyse a fifteen-year-old book that was written at the other end of the world, in a specific moment and referred to a specific situation at a specific period?

Paradoxically, bearing in mind all the differences between Poland and Canada, the crux of the matter seems quite similar (identical?). Education in Polandis in deep value crisis and the educational decision makers – as their Canadian counterparts fifteen years ago – seem clueless. On all levels, history seems to be an unwanted issue. The 2013 reforms in Polish education aiming – in secondary schools – at reducing the number of history lessons as such and replacing them with modules of mysterious content (which has not actually been decided upon yet) may undermine the foundations. The teachers, parents and students are highly confused and demotivated with the state of affairs. The Polish experience borrows richly from the western tradition of multiculturalism; unfortunately in both aspects – positive and negative. And that means political over-correctness, mumbling and blurred vision of what the subject should be taught like.

In this respect, the outcome may be as serious as in Canada. The lack of historical roots, ignorance of the past and the lack of interpreting own experiences will result in deeper complexes of the Polish youth. All too many of them do not feel proud of being Polish, which stems directly from the fact they do not have authorities and positive examples to identify with. And it is not because there are no such examples; the young simply do not know they exist.

Also – similarly to Granatstein's worries about the loss or watering down of the Canadian identity – Poland is now facing the strong and intensive exposure to the European Union and the values of the structure (again in a positive and negative sense). The over-emphasis on the European community, its matters, interests and priorities at the expense of the national identity can bring irreparable damage to the society.

However, luckily enough, it may not be too late for a change. However, the Canadian experience proves that the steps need to be taken immediately; debates and conclusions do not happen overnight and neither do changes, especially for the better. Thus, it might be the precedent of *Who Killed Canadian History?* as such rather than its content that Polish education in a broad sense and history as a subject in particular can benefit from. The book seems a must for everybody who believes something should be done to improve the situation of studying and researching history in Poland.

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