

Caught in the Middle: Reportages on War-Torn Poland

Poland 1945: War and Peace

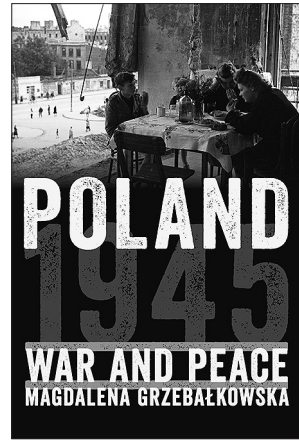
by Magdalena Grzebałkowska. Translated by John Markoff and Małgorzata Markoff. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 336 pp. USD\$35.

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Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) remains the most famous Polish writer of reportage (*reportaż*) for non-Polish specialists, but since the 1990s in Poland, the genre has attracted many talented authors, a great many more interested readers, and dedicated series publication by various presses. Consumers of reportage enjoy its potent blend of historical contextualization and literary stylization, and particularly value the genre's focus on individual human experience and testimony as expressed in interviews, correspondence, and memoirs. Given the genre's popularity, it seems a matter of course that a first institute of reportage (*Institut Reportażu*), established in Warsaw in 2010, now offers a certificate to those who complete a year-long program of ten intensive workshops in which well-published mentors train them in research, writing, and editing techniques.

Magdalena Grzebałkowska [Gzhe-bow-kov-ska] (b. 1972), roughly two generations younger than Kapuściński, became a *reporterka* the old-fashioned way, training on the job as a journalist for Warsaw's *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the Polish equivalent of the *New York Times*) and writing pieces for the paper's reportage section under the whip hand of her experienced, exacting editor, Małgorzata Szejnert. Grzebałkowska's third stand-alone book, *Poland 1945: War and Peace*, published in Poland in 2015, represents her most ambitious project to date and first book of new reportage—or, rather, eleven distinct reportages presented as chapters. *Poland 1945* won the 2016 Teresa Torańska *Newsweek* Award, *Gazeta Wyborcza's* Readers' Award, and the Tadeusz Mazowiecki Polish-German Journalism Award. It was also listed as a finalist for the prestigious Nike Literary Award in the same year. [See: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/1945._Wojna_i_pok%C3%B3j]. Its English-language version, carefully, if at times too literally, translated by John and Małgorzata Markoff, appeared in August 2020.

Grzebałkowska credits her grandmother, to whom this book is dedicated, with determining her research-intensive, human-story approach in *Poland 1945*. The old-



er woman disabused her granddaughter of any sentimental notions about the war's neat, happy end— notions suggested by such popular images as Alfred Eisenstaedt's photograph of a U.S. sailor passionately kissing a female stranger on V-J Day in New York City's Times Square. Grzebałkowska's grandmother remembers only a meager celebration of the war's end in a displaced persons camp when she was seventeen, followed by her subsequent repatriation, along with her equally young husband, to be with her parents, who had just been forcibly relocated from their ancestral home in southeast Poland to the heavily bombed-out city of Gdańsk on the Baltic Sea. Grzebałkowska's great-grandmother wept as she greeted her daughter on the doorstep: "Why did you come back here, my child? It is horrible in this Poland" (7).

The pattern of Grzebałkowska's book entails displacing anodyne clichés and propaganda with the complicated testimonies of not-so-ordinary ordinary people. Following her grandmother's advice to do her homework, Grzebałkowska familiarized herself with several major academic histories about the war's immediate aftermath in Poland; interviewed roughly 200 people, almost all of whom were young eyewitnesses of the war's end; and pored over scores of published and unpublished memoirs (323). She gathered entries from the personal ads and public service announcements that appeared in assorted Polish newspapers printed in 1945, shaping these quotes into verbal and visual gates at the start of each chapter, alerting readers to the immediate historical context as they enter the reportage itself. Grzebałkowska also collected or gained permission to reprint the many photographs that fill this book. A large percentage of them come from personal archives, matching as much as possible individuals' meandering stories with their candid visuals.

Grzebałkowska's separate chapter-reportages cover an enormous swath of geographic territory, primarily because her country's borders were abruptly moved west under the terms of the Allies' peace treaty, even though Poland had fought alongside the Allies in the war. Stalin demanded that large sections of eastern Poland be formally integrated into the USSR as a future military buffer. The defeated Germans, in turn, were forced to cede their eastern territory to Poland in recompense. This meant that almost all of Poland was on the move as soon as peace was declared in May 1945. As millions of Polish citizens were repatriating from their places of slave labor in the former Reich, millions whose families had lived in eastern Poland for generations had to relocate to an unknown "Wild West" (79), slyly renamed "Recovered Territories" (30, 78) by the new communist government to convince uprooted evacuees that they were somehow coming home to what had once been Polish territory, albeit several centuries earlier.

Poland 1945 opens in the Recovered Territories with a reportage on the widespread looting of German property by Polish civilians, rogue bands of Soviet soldiers, the Red Army, and the new Polish government (11–30). The book closes with the twisted true-life story of a Polish woman reclassified as *Reichsdeutsch* during the war and finally reinstated as a Pole who had survived the January 1945 sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a giant German passenger ship loaded with some 8,000 to 9,000 refugees (312) and torpedoed by a Soviet submarine (307–22). The chapters in between include a fragmented history of the residents and caregivers in the postwar

Jewish children's home in Otwock (163–97); frank accounts of the restoration of Warsaw from its grim postwar state as rubble-strewn cemetery into a bustling, city-wide, semi-legal marketplace (127–59); and horrifying, contradictory testimonies of villagers in eastern Poland who bore witness to the devastating hostilities that erupted from 1945 to 1947 between Ukrainian partisans, Polish units under the Red Army's command, and factions of the Polish Home Army (the underground resistance that pledged loyalty to the London Polish government-in-exile) (285–302).

In every chapter, Grzebałkowska's reportage pivots against expected outcomes and judgments. In some cases, this pattern plays out in her choice of subjects. Several reportages feature German protagonists, but Grzebałkowska's interviews led her to those who were beleaguered adolescent refugees rather than hardened Nazis. These young people's tormentors tend to be a faceless Red Army attacking all German targets, Russian soldiers who steal from them, Polish employers who exploit them, and Polish peers who humiliate them. In other instances, Grzebałkowska's pivot involves shifts in approach and tone. Her reportage on looting eschews condemnation of both petty and powerful thieves, instead taking its cue from her first interviewee, a polite, old Polish lady who remembers the seductive rush of casing out abandoned German homes when she was a reckless teenager in 1945 (18). Even as Grzebałkowska tracks the crazily mounting scale of the looting—from household furnishings carted away by Polish civilians to entire factories packed up and shipped east by the Red Army—her tone remains astounded (and sometimes bemused) rather than outraged.

Grzebałkowska's first-person narrator periodically admits her limitations vis-à-vis the unimaginable sufferings of her subjects, be they Jewish orphans who will never recover from their terrible childhood spent hiding from the Germans, or German civilians fleeing the Red Army across an iced-over inlet as Soviet planes bomb their path. As narrator, Grzebałkowska vents her anger mainly against chroniclers who have preceded her and deliberately falsified their reports. Such sinners include the Polish communist journalist who visited the "Recovered Territories" in 1945, exaggerating their available bounty and lying about the ease of relocating (71–73, 76–78), and the caretaker and chronicler of the Jewish orphans, who fabricated some of their stories while censoring such unseemly facts as the children's rape by their rescuers (175).

Of paramount importance to Grzebałkowska, the dedicated *reporterka*, is that the collector of individual testimonies relay them as accurately as possible, valuing them as both document and story. This she does, with concise eloquence, in every reportage of *Poland 1945*. As Grzebałkowska admits in the acknowledgements (amplified in the English translation), she most regrets not being able to feature all those whom she interviewed: "The stories of some I talked to have remained in my archives. I hope they don't resent me and that in the stories of others they will find their own. Maybe the purpose of my work was to remind us what our grandfathers and our grandmothers were not able to tell us? Or that we were not able to listen to them to the very end?" (324). Readers of *Poland 1945: War and Peace* will be gratified that Grzebałkowska at least relied on her grandmother as her primary consultant.