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One Hundred Years of Polish Comic Books. A Review of Ewa Stańczyk's Comics and Nation: Power, Pop Culture, and Political Change in Poland

Ewa Stańczyk, *Comics and Nation: Power, Pop Culture, and Political Transformation in Poland*. Ohio State University Press, 2022, xii + 211 pp., US\$34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8142-5838-5

Sebastian Jakub Konefał, Department of Film and Media, University of Gdansk, Poland, sebastian.konefal@ug.edu.pl

This article is a review of Ewa Stańczyk's monograph entitled *Comics and Nation: Power, Pop Culture, and Political Change in Poland*. The book is a comprehensive and well-documented analysis of the complicated relationship between political power and citizens' pursuit of freedom of thought and entertainment during Poland's over one hundred years of comics history. The research spans the interwar period (1919–1939), communist-era Poland, and the thirty-plus years of democracy. *Comics and Nation* provides an invaluable perspective on the history of Polish comics, seamlessly linking ideology, politics, economics and pop culture's pleasures. Stańczyk's meticulous examination of the subject serves as an indispensable reference for foreign scholars, while some of its gaps provide opportunities for future research to expand and enrich the study of Polish comics in the changing landscape of global culture and society.



Ewa Stańczyk's monograph *Comics and Nation: Power, Pop Culture, and Political Transformation in Poland* (published in English by Ohio State University Press in 2022; **Figure 1**) is a well-thought-out and richly documented analysis of the relationship between the political power of the communist authorities and Eastern Europe citizens' dreams of freedom and access to Western entertainment, which were attracted by the transnational currents of soft power, in this case, especially comics. Stańczyk is a great ambassador of Polish culture and an experienced researcher with impressive knowledge of history, cultural theory and the comics market. Living and working outside her home country (at the University of Amsterdam), she also could look at the field under study from a different, unique angle.

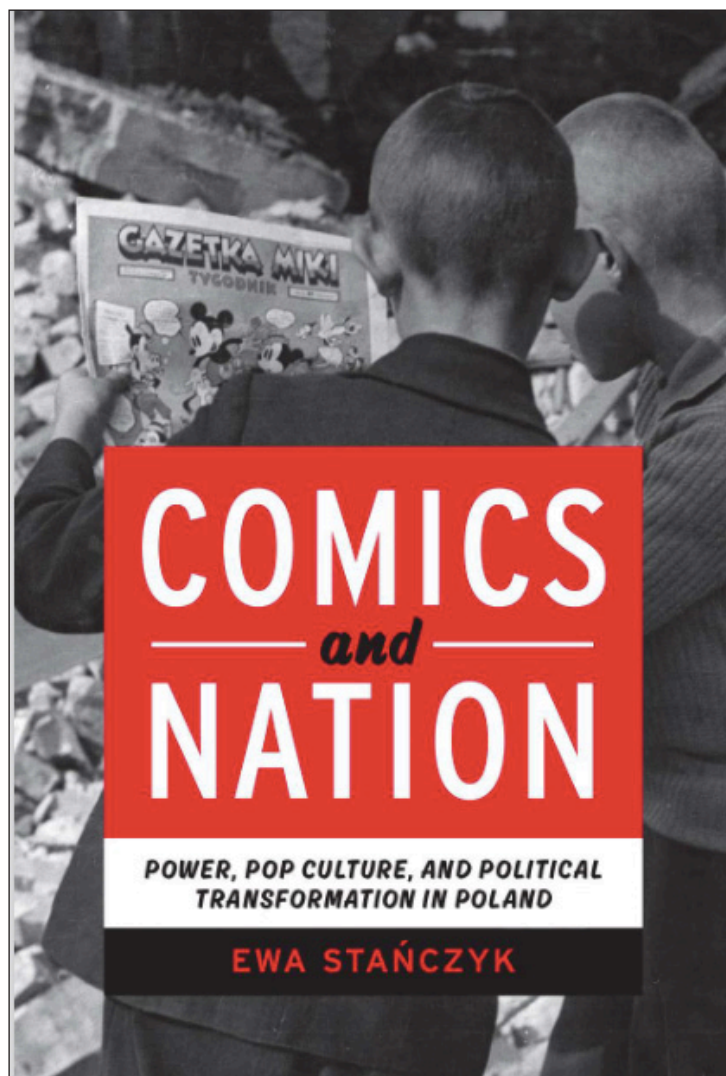


Figure 1: Cover artwork for Ewa Stańczyk's monograph *Comics and Nation: Power, Pop Culture, and Political Transformation in Poland*. © Ohio State University Press, 2022.

Prior to this monograph, she published several journal articles and book chapters on Polish history and comics, focusing in particular on and the Holocaust (Stańczyk 2019), personal and collective memory (Stańczyk 2018), and women (Stańczyk, Nappi 2015, Stańczyk 2020). Some of them are included in the structure of *Comics and Nation*. History, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism are such important topics that they even appear in the introduction to this study, where she begins with an anecdote about the cultural and political affair sparked by the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in Poland in 2001 (Stańczyk 2022, 2–3).

The book is divided into an introduction, five chapters and conclusions. It begins with a very useful general overview of the position and role of comics in the transnational exchange of ideas. It also indicates connections of pop culture to social and political structures, drawing on a wide range of important scholarly sources. The first chapter focuses on the period between Poland's independence (1919) and the beginning of World War II (1939). Stańczyk here points to the transnational circulation of styles, characters, and comic strips in Polish press of the interwar period (borrowed from Denmark, Belgium, France and the United States) as a significant novelty in her research (Stańczyk 2023: 8), but it should be noted that such factors are known in Poland, for example, from the books of Adam Rusek (who, nota bene, is mentioned several times in *Comics and Nation*). The second chapter deals with the state anti-comic campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s, which were fuelled and controlled by the local authorities under the supervision of the Soviet Union. Stańczyk rightly notes that, paradoxically, the arguments against the capitalist, imperial threat from America that promotes low culture and illiberalism often resembles those used in the United States during the period of popularity of Fredric Wertham's theses from the book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Stańczyk 2022: 55–56, Wertham 1954). The third part of the study is devoted to “the golden age of Polish comics” (from the 1960s to the end of the 1970s). During this period, the country “opened up” to Western pop culture (see for example: Prażmowska 2010: 196–199), especially under the leadership of the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers Party, Edward Gierek, a Francophile whose political decisions were partly responsible for the fascination of local artists with the *bande dessinée*. Many iconic Polish comic characters and popular series, printed in hundreds of thousands of copies, date from this period (Konefał, Szyłak 2022: 59–62). In the fourth chapter, the Stańczyk traces the cultural and economic changes after 1989 (when Poland regained its political freedom), focusing mainly on the introduction of manga and American superhero stories in Poland and Europe. The final chapter aims to capture some key characteristics of the new Polish comics, revolving around the themes of individual and collective memory and identity, and covering such themes as nostalgia, trauma and feminism. Stańczyk has a sheer gift for linking the major world historical processes with the situation in Eastern Europe bloc and her ex-homeland.

Another important aspect of her approach is the fact that she does not fall into the trap of comparing the most popular Polish comic heroes, such as Kapitan Żbik (handsome, intelligent and highly effective “detective” officer of communist militia) or Kapitan Kloss (an undercover Polish spy acting as Nazi SS officer) to American superheroes, which is quite popular among younger generations of Polish academics but seems to be a very controversial analogy and an oversimplification.

The book also offers a very detailed outlook on public and academic debates about the meaning of foreign influences on Polish culture and an excellent insight into the mechanisms, role and work of publishing industry in different periods of Polish history.

Next great achievement is the very accurate juxtaposition of Polish narrative conventions with well-known European and American examples (Marjane Satrapi, Justin Green, Alison Bechdel), providing readers from outside Poland with a clear background to little-known and sometimes difficult-to-access texts of culture.

Finally, as another reviewer rightly points out, one of the greatest achievements of the research presented in this book is a solid description and recognition of various cultural, political, and economic changes and a unified view of the field of discourses in the history of Polish comics spanning over a century (Eedy 2023: 58).

Unfortunately, the outsider’s position of researching Polish archives rather than collaborating with local researchers during academic work (or during the final process of book edition) also leads to some blind spots that should be pointed out. First, in some chapters one can find many studies on many different comics (especially chapter 3 is full of important and interesting case studies that might fascinate some foreign readers), whereas others focus only on a few texts of culture (chapter 5). Moreover, there are also some parts of the book almost avoid the strict analyses and interpretations, dealing rather exclusively with the study of discourse or the interactions between market, laws and work of publishers and editors.

In my opinion, not enough attention is paid to the connections of Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom with comics culture and the important role of underground and independent zines (noticed only on some pages). The formative role of the magazine “Fantastyka” and “Świat Młodych” (a youth newspaper known for illegal publication of some fragments of Western European comics like *Valerian*) is not mentioned too. It is significant that Stańczyk claims that she did not find any evidence of such unlawful practices in “Świat Młodych”, but they are quite easy to detect, for example, in Leszek Kaczanowski’s research presented in the monograph “Komiks w Świecie Młodych” (Kaczanowski 2010: 69).

The fifth chapter on comics in democratic Poland seems to be another good example of some incomprehensible omissions. Three of arguably the most important historical

comics deconstructing and reinterpreting the Polish martyrology and the local view of the Holocaust (*Kaczka i Stan* by Jacek Fraś and *Achtung! Zelig. Druga wojna* by Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Krystian Rosenberg) are missing in the main body of the analysis. The award-winning stories created by Fraś in 2001 and 2006 appear only in a footnote (cf. Stańczyk 2022: 163) and the last, and probably most important one, *Achtung Zelig!* (2004) is not even mentioned.

The reason that may excuse such a gross reduction is the fact that Stańczyk writes about these artworks in her own journal articles (see for example: Stańczyk 2014). However, if the book is to be a complete compendium, these cases should have been included.

Especially considering that other comics such as *Totalnie nie nostalgia: memuar* (created in 2017 by Jacek Fraś and Wanda Hagedorn) not only have already been the subject of Stańczyk's published research (Stańczyk 2020) but are also carefully analysed in her monograph (nota bene with a brilliant interpretation). One might have an impression that the unique style and attitude towards the painful for Poles subject from second world war do not fit into Stańczyk's thesis, which focuses quite often on Polish intolerance and traumas.

Furthermore, it is a pity that the Stańczyk does not mention the highly interesting graphic novels that use the formula of reportage (known from the works of Igor Tiveri or Joe Sacco), such as *Morze po kolana* from 2016 (based on the book by Marcin Kołodziejczak with excellent drawings of Marcin Podolec) which interestingly deals with economic and political changes in Poland after 1989. Also missing here are the artistic branches of Polish comics, such as the surreal *Hydriola* (2005) by Maciej Sieńczyk or the works of Wilhelm Sasnal, one of the best-known artists outside of Poland, whose *Maus*-inspired paintings were an important voice in the domestic affair and were discussed at the beginning of her book.

On top of that, although the Stańczyk declares to change or reject the national perspective unknown in Poland and argues "for a revision of a national paradigm that has guided many of the Polish studies until today" (Stańczyk 2022: 11), she does not embed modern Polish comics in the current of transnational convergence culture (as she did with some studies from the late 1970s and 1980s). Probably, such a decision has been made due to not so touchable (but easy to catch both in the matters of collective and individual identity) political involvement of some of them.

Surprisingly, Stańczyk also overlooked the new wave of Polish science fiction and fantasy comics, which has allowed some artists and writers to achieve transnational distribution with franchises like *The Witcher* and *Cyberpunk 2077* (published by Dark Horse). One does not find here some interesting domestic literary collaborations (the

dystopian *Bardo* series created between 2017 and 2022 by Wojciech Stafaniec and award-winning novelist Daniel Odija) that deal with social, economic and political changes in a gritty futuristic convention

The key of the female perspective also misses some important examples of transnational practices, such as the dilogy *Anastasia* (2017, 2019) by Joanna Karpowicz and Magdalena Lankosz (published in English by the Franco-Belgian publisher Europe Comics), set in the golden age of Hollywood but allegorically referring to modern Poland in some aspects, which was “called one of the best European creations of 2017 by comics critic Paul Gravett” (Europe Comics), or the supernatural comics of Unka Ody (e.g., the *Brom* series, 2019, 2021), which combine Kashubian and Celtic beliefs and local settings in Gdansk with a story about individual and collective teenage identity.

Likewise, the research leaves out film and video game adaptations and foreign carriers of some contemporary Polish comic artists, such as Piotr Kowalski, and glosses over foreign successes of local scriptwriters (e.g., Nebula Award-nominated writer Bartosz Szybor, who collaborates with Dark Horse Comics and Netflix).

Therefore, the parts of the book that focus on contemporary Polish comics can be considered the weakest link of the whole investigation. Especially if we consider the monograph as an attempt to give a comprehensive overview not only of historical, political and economic factors. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that nowadays some Polish scholars try to prove that the last thirty years should be called another golden age of Polish comics due to the diversity of themes, styles and conventions (Stańczyk 2022: 118).

Finally, the research could certainly be enriched by some elements of a qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as personally conducted interviews with comic artists (although Stańczyk cites some published artist statements). I am a bit disappointed too by the limited use of visuals (containing only twelve samples), even though Polish comic artists and publishers are very willing to provide visuals for educational and academic purposes.

All these minor remarks should not overshadow the importance of the knowledge contained in the book and the author’s excellent academic research skills. In summary, the book provides invaluable insight into the history of Polish comics brilliantly catching essential connections between ideology, politics, economics, publishing, and entertainment. Furthermore, the wide range of theories, sources, methods of analysis, and case studies that Stańczyk provides in this monograph is a perfect foundation for subsequent researchers, who are invited to address some omitted areas and continue the task of mapping contemporary Polish comics almost thirty-five years after the political and economic system change in 1989.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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