

MAREK M. DZIEKAN
(University of Lodz, Poland)
ORCID: 0000-0003-0291-2997 

70 Years of the Committee of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Abstract

The article is devoted to the establishment, development and activity of the Committee of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, which has been operating under various names since 1952 and celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. The Committee is the most important institution of Oriental studies in Poland, coordinating and monitoring the development of various fields of this area of science. It also conducts organizational activities (conferences, symposia, conventions) and publishing – among others it is the publisher of the oldest Polish scientific journal in this field, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* / *Yearbook of Oriental Studies* and various publishing series.

Keywords: Committee of Oriental Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* / *Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, Oriental studies in Poland, history of science in Poland

In 2022, the most important Oriental studies institution in Poland – the Committee of Oriental Sciences (Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych / KNO) of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Polska Akademia Nauk / PAN), celebrates its 70th anniversary. The Committee was established following the guidelines formulated as a result from the discussions on the shape of Polish science that took place at the 1st Congress of Polish Science in 1951 and the application of the research planning principle to science. During the same Congress,



the Polish Academy of Sciences was established, with scientific committees becoming an inseparable part of it, apart from institutes and departments. The tasks and functions of the committees are described in the following words in the information materials of the Polish Academy of Sciences: "The scientific committees of the Polish Academy of Sciences are a self-governing, nationwide representation of individual scientific disciplines or groups [...] which are working with departments [...] to integrate scientists from the entire country. The scientific committees are composed of national members of the Polish Academy of Sciences of relevant specialties, distinguished academics representing universities, institutions of the Polish Academy of Sciences and institutes of scientific and research facilities of ministries, as well as representatives of economic and social institutions and organizations. Due to their composition, gathering eminent representatives of the entire scientific community, the scientific committees of the Polish Academy of Sciences are the most representative group of specialists in a given scientific discipline."¹

At the very beginning of its activity, the Committee set several research goals, thus pointing to the directions it would promote and support as a central institution:

"1. The historical and cultural ties between Poland and the East: a) preparation of handwritten and other Oriental sources for the history of Poland and neighbouring countries, b) history of Polish Oriental studies, with particular emphasis on the contribution of Polish travellers in the East, c) the influence of Oriental languages on Polish.

2. Contemporary history of Eastern countries with particular emphasis on national liberation movements.

3. History of social formations in the East.

4. The emergence and development of national languages in the East. The role of literary languages.

5. Contribution of the culture of Oriental nations to the treasury of human culture."²

The aforementioned Congress of Polish Science is often, and not without reason, viewed in a negative light as an application of the centralized Soviet system of science management to the Polish reality. Considering, however, that it was as a result of these changes that the Committee of Oriental Studies was established, and therefore the authorities noticed the importance of Oriental studies in the context of the entirety of science, it should be concluded that these activities had more than just a negative impact.

The organizational history of the Committee is quite turbulent and reflects, on the one hand, changes in the structure of Polish science, and, on the other hand, the personal

¹ 'Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych, Polska Akademia Nauk', Viewed 29 June 2022,; <https://kno.pan.pl/index.php/pl-pl/>; Marek M. Dziekan, 'Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk i jego działalność naukowa oraz organizacyjna', in Tadeusz Majda (ed.), *Szkice z dziejów polskiej orientalistyki*, Warszawa 2010, p. 9; see also: Marek Mejor (ed.), with assist. of Filip Majkowski (from materials prep. by Maria Kozłowska), *The Committee of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences 1952–2007 / Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk 1952–2007*, Warszawa 2008.

² Jan Reychnman, 'Orientalistyka polska w okresie 10-lecia Polski Ludowej', *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 2 (1954), p. 78; Dziekan, 'Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk i jego działalność naukowa oraz organizacyjna'.

animosities among its members – natural in all environments. It is particularly difficult to talk about the latter, because in the available official materials one can only find allusions to those matters that will remain only in the memory of the scientists who witnessed and participated in these events.

The Committee of Oriental Studies was established by a decision of the Praesidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences on 25th May 1952 under the name of the Oriental Committee. Its chairman was prof. Ananiasz Zajączkowski (University of Warsaw). The Committee was composed of: professors Janusz Chmielewski, Witold Jabłoński, Marian Lewicki, Kazimierz Michałowski, Rudolf Ránoszek, and Stefan Strelcyn from the University of Warsaw and Tadeusz Lewicki from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Thus, the following specializations were originally represented in the Committee: Sinology, Altaic studies, Arabic studies, Egyptology, Ancient East Philology and Semitic studies. In 1955, after the death of prof. Marian Lewicki, the Committee welcomed two new members – a linguist, prof. Jerzy Kuryłowicz (Jagiellonian University) and the Indologist prof. Eugeniusz Śluszkiewicz (University of Warsaw). Composed of the above members, the Committee survived until 1960. As is evident from this composition of the Committee, it represented the two strongest Orientalist centres in Poland – Warsaw and Kraków. The statutory and basic form of the Committee's activities include regular meetings that cover the scientific segment, where papers on various fields of Oriental studies are presented and discussed,³ and the organizational segment, where current issues related to the functioning of science are discussed.

The Committee, as a coordinating body, took over the patronage of the first organization of Polish Orientalists, the Polish Society for Oriental Studies (Polskie Towarzystwo Orientalistyczne / PTO), established in 1922 in Lviv (today in Ukraine). It was also connected with changes in the publishing policy. Starting from the fifth issue (1953), the Polish Society for Oriental Studies received the *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* ("Review of Oriental Studies") as its official publication, and in the same year, from the 19th volume onwards, the Committee of Orientalist Studies became the publisher of *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* / *Yearbook of Oriental Studies* (RO) which has existed since 1914 and was published at that time by Polish Society of Oriental Studies). There were no changes in the editorial committee of the RO. Formally, the publisher was the Department of Oriental Studies (Zakład Orientalistyki) of the Polish Academy of Sciences, established at the request of the Committee on 7th November 1953, headed by the chairman of the Committee and the head of RO in one, prof. Ananiasz Zajączkowski.⁴ It is worth adding that A. Zajączkowski was also a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In 1954, the Committee, together with the Department of Oriental Studies, initiated the

³ Maria Kozłowska (ed.), *Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk. Spis referatów wygłoszonych na posiedzeniach naukowych 1952–2012*, Warszawa 2012.

⁴ Comp. on this periodical: Marek M. Dziekan, '„Rocznik Orientalistyczny” („Yearbook of Oriental Studies”) 1914–2014. A Short Outline', *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 67/2 (2014), pp. 5–16; Marek M. Dziekan and Marek Mejor (ed.), *Czasopisma orientalistyczne w Polsce. Studia i materiały dla uczczenia stulecia „Rocznika Orientalistycznego” 1914–2014*, Warszawa 2014.

‘Oriental Studies’ (‘Prace Orientalistyczne’) publishing series – the first book in this series was A. Zajączkowski’s *Arabic-Kipchak Dictionary from the Mamluk State period. Part II. Verba*. In 1958, initiated by the Committee, the Orientalist Commission (Komisja Orientalistyczna) was established at the Kraków Branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The findings of the 1st Congress of Polish Science, mentioned in the introduction, concerned the transformation in Polish science in the context of the post-war social and political system in Poland. This concerned, among others, the use of Marxism-Leninism as the basic ideological orientation in science – as is already known today, this methodology in the field of Oriental studies did not take root despite various attempts to introduce it by some Polish researchers.

In May 1960, the Committee was transformed into the Orientalist Section (Sekcja Orientalistyczna) of the Committee of Philological Sciences (Komitet Nauk Filologicznych) of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This occurred during the reorganization of science and higher education in Poland (a new law on higher education was adopted in 1960, and in 1961 – a new law on the Polish Academy of Sciences). It seems that such an organizational change should be considered a kind of degradation of Oriental studies, not to mention the narrowing of its understanding as a strictly philological science, which it never really was. The then-current chairman of the Committee became the chairman of the Section. At that time, the Section was also expanded to twelve people. Yet in this form the institution did not survive long. As early as January 1962, the Praesidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences established the Committee of Oriental Studies. As Witold Tyloch wrote that “giving the Committee this name was not just a pure formality, but a reflection of the situation that had arisen in Oriental studies in the face of new political conditions on the African continent, where the existing colonies gained independence. Disciplines were spontaneously emerging as part of Oriental studies, and their subjects were languages and literature as well as other manifestations of social life in African countries. By introducing the term *Oriental studies* they wanted to emphasize that their interest is not only in Asia and North Africa, as in traditional Oriental studies, but also the entire African continent south of the Sahara.”⁵ One of the manifestations of such interest could be the appointment of an African studies specialist, prof. Roman Stopa (Jagiellonian University in Kraków). The Committee retained this shape until the end of 1965, when the activities of the Committee were suspended for five years, as W. Tyloch writes, “due to internal disruptions.”⁶ Meanwhile, on 31st March 1969, the Department of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences was dissolved, and its employees moved to the Institute of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw or other units of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

On 6th April 1970, in Rome, prof. Zajączkowski passed away; the last chairman of the Committee before the suspension of his activity. Soon after, on 24th August of that

⁵ Witold Tyloch, ‘Komitet Nauk Orientalistycznych PAN i orientalistyka polska w czterdziestoleciu PRL’, *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1–2 (1986).

⁶ Ibidem, p. 20.

year, the Committee of Oriental Sciences was reactivated under the chairmanship of prof. Tadeusz Lewicki (Jagiellonian University; correspondent member of the Polish Academy of Sciences since 1983), and significantly enlarged to include 20 scientists. Professor Lewicki held the position of the Committee's chairman till 1983 (and until his death in 1992 he was the honorary chairman of the Committee). In the same year, the Hebrewist prof. Witold Tyloch (University of Warsaw) became the chairman. In 1975, the Committee already included 31 researchers representing nineteen disciplines related to the study of the East, currently (term 2019–2022) the Committee has 34 members (the number varied during different terms). Despite these problems, the publishing activity of the Committee continued and in the 1970s the series titled "Historical and Sociological Monographs of African Countries" ("Historyczno-Socjologiczne Minografie Krajów Afryki") was created.

Prof. Tyloch managed the work of the Committee until 1989. In the years 1990–1992 the chairman of the Committee was Hittitology specialist, prof. Maciej Popko (University of Warsaw), then, in the years 1993–2007, this position was taken over by the sinologist prof. Mieczysław J. Küntler (University of Warsaw), later, in 2007–2018, the indologist prof. Marek Mejor (University of Warsaw). Currently, the chairman of the Committee is the Hittitology specialist prof. Piotr Taracha (University of Warsaw).

The activities of the Committee of Oriental Studies include, on the one hand, the guardianship and control functions over other Orientalist institutions in Poland, and on the other hand, organizational activities in the field of scientific life (conferences, conventions) and publishing. The Committee cooperates with Orientalist institutions at Polish universities as well as with the Polish Society for Oriental Studies. Cooperation with the PTO was limited, first of all, after the reorganization of Polish scientific life, when at the end of the 1980s scientific societies were removed from under direct control and financing by the Polish Academy of Sciences. In the 1960s and 1970s, conferences were organized with the cooperation and participation of foreign Oriental researchers. Later, this activity was stopped, but for several years now international Oriental conferences have been organized again, and they have gained a high reputation in the world. They are often organized in cooperation with the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw and the PTO. An important aspect of the activities in this area are also lectures organized as part of the Committee meetings, held several times a year. It would be difficult to list here all the conferences and scientific sessions organized so far. For the record, one can mention sessions commemorating outstanding representatives of Polish Oriental studies: Marian Lewicki (1956), Władysław Kotwicz (1972), Jan Reychman (1975), Tadeusz Kowalski (1978), Eugeniusz Śluszkiewicz (1982) and Włodzimierz Zajączkowski (1983). Subsequent conferences, the materials of which were often published as special-edition volumes of the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies*, were already thematic in nature.

The publishing activity deserves the most attention. As mentioned above, the *RO* has been published since 1953 under the aegis of the Committee of Oriental Sciences, and from 1954 – the series 'Prace Orientalistyczne'. Since the *RO* was taken over by the Committee (until 1970, the *Yearbook of Oriental Studies* was actually signed by the Department of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, but in fact it is difficult

to separate the function of the Department from the Committee of Oriental Sciences in this respect) 38 volumes of the journal have been published (the latest volume LVI fasc. 2). Starting with volume XXI of 1957, the *Yearbook* appears in two issues a year. Since its inception, over 400 authors have published in the *RO*, about half of whom are scientists from abroad. A summary of the journal's activities for the years 1914–1997 (fifty volumes) can be found in volume LIII fasc. 2, which is the bibliography of the *Yearbook* for this period, compiled by Marek M. Dziekan. Apart from regular issues, there were also thematic volumes dedicated to outstanding Polish Orientalist researchers (e.g. professors Rudolf Ransozek, Józef Bielawski, Wiesław Kotański, Janusz Chmielewski, Edward Tryjarski, Tadeusz Lewicki).

Since the *RO* was taken over by the Committee of Oriental Studies, the post of editor-in-chief was held by: prof. Ananiasz Zajączkowski, prof. Jan Reychman, prof. Stanisław Kałużyński and prof. Edward Tryjarski. In 2004, the position of editor-in-chief was taken over by prof. M. Dziekan (University of Lodz).

The series “Oriental Studies”, as mentioned, has been published since 1954, when the Department of Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences was operating, it was signed by this institution. So far, 44 volumes have been published. The current editor of the series is prof. Alfred F. Majewicz. “Orientalist Studies” cover a wide spectrum of fields represented by Polish Oriental studies, including Turkish Studies, Arabic Studies, Sinology, Indology, Ethiopian Studies, African Studies, Altaic Studies, and Semitics. Among the volumes of “Oriental Studies”, I would particularly like to mention the XIX volume, published in 1983, titled *Oriental Studies in the Sixty Years of Independent Poland*, the fruit of a scientific conference organized by the Committee on Oriental Studies in 1978.

In addition to this series, the Committee (with the Department of Oriental Studies) also published various important books by Polish Orientalists, including the particularly important, multi-volume *Katalog rękopisów orientalnych ze zbiorów polskich (Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts in Polish Collections)*, including Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Armenian and Georgian manuscripts.⁷

Facing seventy years of history, it should be said that the Committee of Oriental Studies performed its role exceptionally well as a coordinator and curator of Polish Oriental studies. During this time, it gained the status of necessary and useful science. Its interdisciplinary character also began to be clearly noticed and, most importantly, appreciated, which nowadays is especially necessary.

⁷ For a detailed bibliography of these publications, see on the Committee on Oriental Studies (KNO) website.

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