

Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska. 2018. *Reko-rekonesans: praktyka autentyczności. Antropologiczne studium odtwórstwa historycznego drugiej wojny światowej w Polsce* [Reenactment reconnaissance: the practice of authenticity. An anthropological study of World War II historical reenactment in Poland]. Kęty: Marek Derewiecki Publ., 391 pages.

Dominika Czarnecka

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska's book on historical reenactment analyses the practice of authenticity, understood as the means of "presenting and experiencing History in historical reenactment used by reenactors themselves" (p. 9). The content indicates that the author, having accumulated a vast knowledge, gathered a broad research material, and conducted thorough field research on the phenomenon of reenactment, has consciously and deliberately constructed her project and the resulting publication to revolve around the titular issue of the practice of authenticity. This choice leads to certain consequences, three of which appear to have the most significance: (1) the author presents and analyses reenactors' own attitudes towards reconstructing and experiencing the past in historical reenactment, which is one of the many perspectives that may be adopted to study and describe the cultural phenomenon in question. From the point of view of the audience, the conclusions may have been different; (2) the issue of authenticity is essential for understanding the phenomenon, as it is in its very core; (3) last but not least, such a research angle grants the author the opportunity to analyse the phenomenon on the peripheries of historical research, paving the way for and validating the anthropological approach towards it.

The author grounds her study on experiencing history through historical reenactment in the anthropology of experience, but makes frequent references to the concept of performance. Such a framework proves fitting, as it allows her to present the complexity and ambiguity of the reenactors' attitude towards the past. Although at least several important academic works on historical reenactment have been published in the West, as far as Polish academia is concerned, Baraniecka-Olszewska's anthropological research is pioneering in nature. This is not to mean that Polish scholars take no interest in the phenomenon of historical reenactment, but rather that they rarely see it as valuable, treating the studied issues in a selective and fragmentary manner,

or make no attempts to “investigate the attitudes the reenactors themselves harbour towards their actions, or to show how they utilise the possibility to get closer to the past, provided by historical reenactment” (p. 9). The aim set and consistently pursued by Baraniecka-Olszewska was therefore not only to present the phenomenon in a particular manner (‘from within’, or, as the author put it, shifting the focus towards the emic nature of the phenomenon), but also to select and use theoretical frameworks and methodological tools which would enable her to show this cultural phenomenon from a new perspective, after a thorough analysis which opens the way to further questions. Consequently, the centre of attention moves away from the opinions of the reenactors (who frequently present a rather hagiographical vision of themselves and their actions) towards the author’s efforts to understand and conceptualise what the reenactors are saying.

Baraniecka-Olszewska demonstrates that the actions and experiences of reenactors are more than the light entertainment with no deeper involvement they may seem to be on the surface. She emphasises that she only focuses on the public aspect of reenactment, i.e. “coming in contact with the past during activities conducted in the public sphere” (p. 13) within the framework of contemporary Polish culture, consciously disregarding the private side of reenactment (the so-called social aspect). The author stresses that, in practice, her research was conducted on various groups reenacting events from different time periods, from the 10th century to the Second World War. Ultimately she made the choice to limit her analysis to the reenactment of the history of Poland and the Second World War, stating that it is this period that arouses the strongest emotions, implicating reenactment in historical and social conflicts. Although the topic of reenactment being entangled in historical policies, debates on collective memory and the nature of public spaces is not the main focus of Baraniecka-Olszewska’s research, she is fully aware that in the case of the cultural phenomenon under analysis some additional aspects, such as the political involvement of reenactment, cannot be fully disregarded (p. 24). Not to question the author’s right to narrow the analysis down to the groups reenacting the Second World War, one is nevertheless tempted to ask whether a study conducted among reenactors of other historical periods would yield similar results, for instance in the context of the questions posed in the penultimate part of the book and revolving around the issues of the impossibility to portray the past or the problems of impersonating enemy troops.

Using abundant research material and a thorough analysis of the concepts and theories known from relevant literature, the author introduces some complexity to the simplified narration on experiencing and living the past in historical reenactment. This social movement, distinctly present in contemporary culture, has often come under (not always unjust) criticism in the media and the academia. In keeping with her initial Baraniecka-Olszewska does not discuss all the charges laid against reenactors and reenactment, focusing solely on “analysing arguments pointing to the lack of

authenticity, both as a factor eliciting specific experiences, and as a form of presenting the past (...)” (p. 308). The author is very thorough in her analysis of the narratives present in the public sphere and subsequently undermines the allegations of kitsch, infantilisation, falsifying history or commercialisation (p. 310) made against reenactors as well as against reenactment as a phenomenon. Thus, she emphasises that even an imperfect form of representing the past (this imperfection, naturally, has its limits) may elicit a deep emotional response in reenactors. Although the author uses many convincing arguments to disprove the critics’ allegations, it seems that presenting a thorough image of the phenomenon would require more research on the reactions and experiences of the audience. The reenactors’ activities take place in the public sphere, and therefore their experience remains, at least to a certain degree, connected to the reactions and experiences of the audience. Thus, their experience is relational in nature, even though this relationality is of a different kind than the one mentioned by the author (p. 92). An analysis of this interrelation between the reenactors (the addressants of the message) and the audience (its recipients) would certainly enrich, complement and perhaps even change the image presented in the publication.

The book is composed of twelve parts divided into sub-sections, each of which focuses on a specific issue. The analysed topics include experiencing the past, the legitimization of authenticity, the time-space of the reenactors, the image and presence of women in historical reenactment. Instead of providing only a general overview, this task-focused approach offers a deeper insight into each of the issues connected with the practice of authenticity in the reenactment milieu. All parts of the book reveal Baraniecka-Olszewska’s qualities as a scholar, such as astute analytical skills, the ability to conduct the narrative from general statements to their material exemplification, and stylistic clarity. This does not mean, however, that the book is uniform in all its parts.

The author’s considerations on the subject of experience in historical reenactment, the experience of the past, as well as the issue of truth and authenticity are presented masterfully indeed. What is more, Baraniecka-Olszewska offers a thorough analysis of the titular notion of reenactment, stating that it could mean three things: “a general cultural phenomenon, a method of work used by historians, or a single historical presentation” (p. 27). Baraniecka-Olszewska is in favour of a broad understanding of historical reenactment, beyond the actual moments of recreating past events and including “other activities related to the process of reconstructing the past necessary for enacting it, such as the search for and the study of source material, the preparation of equipment and experimenting with it, training, drills, meetings, discussion, making plans for the so-called reenactment season, and the organization of events. It also encompasses seeking information on the daily life of soldiers (...)” (pp. 29–30). Ultimately, all these elements influence the experience of the past and the methods of its reenactment, even though, as the author emphasises, the complexity of the cultural phenomenon comes not only from itself, but also from the context in which

it functions (p. 31). This being said, Baraniecka-Olszewska does not accentuate that significant aspects of the contemporary context include a kind of commercialisation of experience, which is promoted and 'consumed' similarly to products or services available on the market. Although this subject is not tackled in the book, viewing the reenactors' experiences of the past in this context does not seem groundless.

Portraying historical reenactment as a modern rendition of the past (p. 55) and a resultant of the change in attitude towards history observable in our culture (p. 53), Baraniecka-Olszewska develops her own notion of 'reenactment history', a form "dependent on history and created in close connection with the past, yet inextricably related to the present (...)" (p. 61). This notion allows the author to present history as a construct and to situate historical reenactment within historical culture, providing more validation to anthropological studies of the phenomenon. She also emphasises the unique nature of this form of recalling the past, indicating that significant properties of reenactment history include "an individualised, or even intimate contact with a specific vision of the past" (p. 67).

The part relating the manner in which reenactors experience the past is truly informative. Baraniecka-Olszewska offers a detailed analysis of her vast research material and demonstrates that the reenactors' experience of the past is multi-sensual and embodied (p. 113). This sensual aspect of reenactment is sometimes criticised by scholars, yet the author argues that it is these embodied experiences that make reenactors feel a special connection with the past. Such experiences prove to be a unique manner of acquiring knowledge about history. A communal experience of the same vision of history or the same representation thereof, so crucial for reenactors, does not mean, however, that each of them experiences it in the same way (p. 88). The author shows that experiencing the past within the framework of historical reenactment means not only collective experience, but also experiencing things in relation to someone or something, i.e. relational experience (p. 92). Baraniecka-Olszewska makes that conclusion on the basis of intensive communication with reenactors, which included numerous discussions and prolonged contact. However, since no in-depth study of the experiences and reactions of the audience has been attempted, it would be difficult to assess whether the fact that the reenactors come in such contact with the past is in any way noticed and perceived by outside observers and whether it has any convincing external manifestations.

The author's thoughts on the relations between experiencing the past in reenactment and the concept of non-linear time (p. 107) are equally valuable, especially to non-anthropologists. The different perception of time is where one of the many performative aspects of reenactment is realised, thereby granting it the potential to touch the past. Leaving material and immaterial traces in the present, the past transforms the bodies of the reenactors into specific archives which constitute the principal instrument of experiencing, presenting and processing the remnants of the past in the present (p. 110).

Despite the theoretical and methodological value of the work, in this respect the author's claims do not seem fully convincing and would, in my estimation, require further research on historical reenactment, conducted also in the context of its reception.

The author's considerations on truth and authenticity are truly impressive in terms of analytical insight. Both these categories form the theoretical framework for the entire analysis. Drawing on cognitivist tradition, Baraniecka-Olszewska skilfully reconciles the two notions, going beyond their literal and common-sense understanding. She explains that the immanent tensions imprinted in historical reenactment are best represented with an emic understanding of the constructivist take on authenticity (p. 132). Such oscillation between two extremes – one being the need to touch history and the reenactors' belief that it is sometimes possible to get close to it, the other being the conviction that an absolute knowledge of history is beyond our reach and one may only try to reenact it – is dubbed by the author as the titular 'practice of authenticity': "It is a grassroots method of coping with situations in which the original may only be accessed in the realm of almost mystical experience, and Truth is replaced with this emically constructed authenticity, based on various sources, including those performed by the archive of the body" (p. 133).

The chapter entitled *Czy wszystko można rekonstruować?* [Can everything be reenacted?] discusses intriguing and extremely difficult issues of the meaning and possibility of reenacting certain past events. The essential questions revolve around the tactics and ethics of representing the past, and therefore around the boundaries of reenactability and of appropriate representation. The author demonstrates that discussions on this topic hold much significance both for reenactors themselves and the wide circles of their audience. This is one of the contexts which highlight the involvement of reenactment in controversial debates on collective memory, the nature of public space, and finally on historical policies. Baraniecka-Olszewska takes efforts to understand the standpoint of reenactors, who aim to construct specific messages, and presents the complex network of relations between the reenactors' idea to represent the past as it truly was, the process of selecting motives to portray, the availability of means of expression, and the reenactors' intent to tackle controversial topics in order to change the audiences' attitude towards their activities and elevate reenactment to the status of an institution propagating knowledge of history. This is another case where presenting a full picture would require a more thorough study of the audience. Baraniecka-Olszewska is compelling in her analysis of irrepresentability, which, as far as reenactment is concerned, appears to be a relational and situational category (p. 287). She successfully proves that irrepresentability is rarely an immanent feature of the subject of representation, but a project of a kind, a specific strategy of action (p. 268). The author also offers a detailed presentation of the complex relations between the authenticity of items and existential authenticity in the context of the irrepresentable in historical reenactment. This part of the book may, however, leave the reader wanting more. This is on the

one hand due to the analytical skill and in-depth investigations the author presents in other chapters of the publication; on the other, the issues discussed, for instance in the context of impersonating enemy units, are so fascinating and complex that it would certainly be difficult to answer all the related questions without disturbing the proportions of the publication. The author touches on many topics, and therefore not all of them are given the same attention. Parts which might benefit from a more detailed analysis include the presentation of the conflict between the authenticity of items and existential authenticity among the reenactors, their ethical standpoints, the problem of identifying with the impersonated troops and the limits of responsibility.

The issue of women in historical reenactment is also treated in less detail than many others. Ultimately, however, the author does provide the reader with a sizable amount of data regarding the position of women, or rather the dynamic attempts at seeking it in the reenactors' milieu.

To recapitulate, *Reko-rekonesans: praktyka autentyczności* [Reenactment reconnaissance: the practice of authenticity] offers a meaningful and original voice in the context of the debate on experiencing and presenting the past in the public sphere in contemporary Polish culture. The author tackles an interesting, if difficult, topic of reenacted reality, focusing on the emic nature of the phenomenon. Given the incessant discussions on the types of engaging in history or getting involved with the past, Baraniecka-Olszewska's book with its high academic, methodological and cognitive quality, constitutes an important source for anthropologists and other humanists alike. It shall certainly inspire scholars to further research and discussions on the changes in the attitude towards history observable in our culture, as well as on the culture-shaping role of reenactment practices.

Translated by Julita Mastalercz

Author's address:

Dominika Czarnecka Ph.D.
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology
Polish Academy of Sciences
Al. Solidarności 105
00-140 Warszawa, POLAND
e-mail: d.czarnecka@hotmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6841-9567>.