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"The Great Work of Inventory". The activity of the Central Office for the Inventory of Art Monuments in the Second Polish Republic and its significance for the research and protection of monuments

Summary

The relatively short period of activity of the Central Office for the Inventory of Art Monuments („COI"), closing in the years 1929-1939, may give the misleading impression that the inventory work carried out under its auspices was of a uniform nature throughout the decade. The aim of this study is to trace the process of the establishment of the institution, as well as the crystallisation or transformation of the programme for the inventory of art monuments in Poland, which with great difficulty but effectively tried to adapt to the unexpectedly changing economic situation of the country. Although the establishment of a central office within the structures of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment was a great success, it was at the same time a significant reduction in relation to the original - let us add - more ambitious plans. This peculiar compromise at the origins of COI was even a characteristic feature of the institution, which had to make constant choices between the grand ambitions of a West European state and the real possibilities of a country that was still recovering from the post-partition collapse.

This study aims to present COI in a broader international context, allowing a comparison of its activities with similar ventures in selected European countries. Until now, such a perspective has basically been completely ignored, although it seems to be important, all the more so because, according to the assumptions of the time, the Polish inventory of art monuments was to be based on the best 'foreign models'. In addition to meeting the scientific standards at the European level, the inventory should additionally - as it was emphasised - be adapted to "our needs and conditions". Here, of course, further questions arise, this time about the specificity of the Polish activities in this area carried out in the Second Polish Republic. What was the nature of these specific needs and conditions, was it related to organisational and financial constraints or was it a result of the historical background, or was it perhaps determined by the distinctiveness of Poland's cultural heritage?

The subject of this paper is the activity of the Central Office for the Inventory of Art Monuments in the Ministry of the W.R. and O.P. and its significance for the research and protection of monuments. The territorial scope of the work covers the area of the Second Republic of Poland within the borders formed in principle until 1922, which consisted of the capital city of Warsaw and sixteen provinces. The chronological framework of the work is set by the years 1929-1939, i.e. from the establishment of COI to the outbreak of the Second World War. The year 1929 is generally considered to be a breakthrough date in the history of Polish inventories of historical monuments, which only as a result of the establishment of COI took on the character of a planned and systematic

action. The end date is 1939, which brought the end of the Second Republic of Poland and stopped all efforts of the Polish conservators for several years.

Chapter 1 provides a kind of historical background to the main topic, where selected inventory actions are briefly presented, starting from Kazimierz Stronczyński's pioneering efforts, through the activities of the Western Galicia Conservator Group and the Society for the Care of Monuments of the Past, to the first decade after Poland regained independence. The discussion focuses on those efforts which had a direct or indirect influence on the later inventory programme carried out under COI auspices. More attention is given to the 1929 General National Exhibition in Poznań, which was crucial to the establishment of COI.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the establishment of COI within the structures of the Ministry of Religious Confessions and Public Enlightenment in 1929, with particular attention paid to the process of the gradual formation of the concept of the institution itself and its programme assumptions, which were originally broad, as they concerned monuments of art and culture, including folk works. Slightly more space was devoted to a discussion on the material and chronological scope of the monuments that were the subject of the inventory and the concept of a topographical publication. In addition, the first inventory expedition to Polesie in 1929 was discussed, which inaugurated field activities, but also showed a markedly different character to later actions carried out under COI auspices.

Chapter 3 presents COI activities in the years of full bloom (1930/1931 and 1931/1932), when a substantial ministerial subsidy allowed it to fully spread its wings. It introduced uniform inventory rules throughout the country, while at the same time narrowing its subject to art monuments only. Intensive fieldwork was carried out in almost all conservation districts, producing hundreds or thousands of scientific descriptions, photographs and architectural drawings. Preparations began to establish a cartography of monuments, a central inventory archive, a topographical inventory and the *Protection of Art Monuments* magazine, the first issues of which appeared in print.

Chapter 4 is devoted to activities in the shadow of the Great Depression (1932/1933-1934/1935), which almost completely halted the planned and systematic inventory of monuments. At the same time, it was a time of new ideas and dynamic changes that - even in the extremely difficult economic situation of the country - allowed the "great work of inventory" to continue. Unexpectedly, the Society for the Care of Monuments of the Past entered the arena, which - with the support of the Labour Fund - carried out hundreds of measurements of architectural monuments. On the other hand, the inability to complete a detailed topographical inventory led to a radical change in the concept of the publication itself, which it was decided to replace with a much more modest catalogue of monuments.

The final chapter presents the times of gradually overcoming the effects of the Great Depression and the introduction of a new monument inventory programme, thanks to Jerzy Szablowski, who took over COI leadership. In 1935 a final decision was taken to set up a central

archive, and gradually field inventories were resumed on the basis of subsidies from the Labour Fund, thus drawing on the experience of the Society for the Care of Monuments of the Past. Finally, the first volumes of the topographical publication were published in print, which was a compromise between the Austrian artistic topography and the Dehio-type catalogue of monuments. Further work was unexpectedly interrupted by the outbreak of World War 2.

The present work has made it possible to show COI activities in a broader perspective as an element of the cultural policy of the state or the reconstruction of Polish statehood in general. The reconstruction was intended to make Poland a modern state, which was not only an expression of ambition, but also evidence of the Polish nation's readiness for self-determination. Modernity in the Second Polish Republic, which - at least in the ideological sphere - represented a rebirth of the pre-partition state, was rooted in Polish tradition, of which the monuments of art and architecture were a visible sign. Monuments - let us add - which testified to the centuries-old Polish culture, and at the same time to its belonging to the "great family" of Western Europe.

A strong emphasis on belonging to Western Europe was associated with a huge effort to catch up on more than a century's backlog with the most developed countries of the Old Continent. COI, which was generally modelled on the Vienna Institute of Art History of the State Office for the Protection of Historical Monuments, was to close the gap in terms of the inventory of historical monuments. The aim was not to duplicate the existing solutions, but to develop its own model, adapted to the possibilities of a country ruined by the war and the plundering policies of the partitioners. A closer look at the organisational foundations developed made it possible to fully appreciate COI 's achievements as an institution of almost historic significance for the preservation and study of historical monuments in Poland. A significance - which is worth emphasising - that goes far beyond the inter-war period alone, as demonstrated by the institutions that grew out of the COI idea, that is the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the National Heritage Institute in the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.