

# The Wartime Roots of Wittgenstein's Logic: Review of Urszula Idziak-Smoczyńska's Book

Urszula Idziak-Smoczyńska, *Wittgenstein in Polish Galicia. The Life and Thought behind the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026, 297 pp.

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Before we begin discussing the form and content of the book *Wittgenstein in Polish Galicia*, two comments should be made regarding its title. Firstly, the author points out that "It is seldom noted that Wittgenstein was in Poland, and this omission is not without reason as Poland was, at that time, partitioned by Russia, Prussia and Austria. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that from August 1914 until the end of 1917 he was stationed . . . on land historically belonging to Poland" (p. 47). There were only brief interruptions to this state of affairs, such as his officer training in Olomouc. It is likely that Wittgenstein knew that the territories where he fought were historically Polish. Even when these regions were under enemy occupation, he was still operating in Poland. He was involved in the defense, capture, and loss of Polish towns such as Sandomierz, Tarnobrzeg, Szczucin, Sokal, Lwów, Kraków and others.

Secondly, the subtitle of the book, *The Life and Thought behind the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, informs us that the author will be referring to the genesis and the content of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, pointing to specific situations from Wittgenstein's wartime stay in Polish Galicia. This can be seen, for example, on page 187, where she suggests that the experiences during, for example, the weeks of the Russian Brusilov Offensive, prompted Wittgenstein to engage in intense self-reflection, lasting from July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1916, to October-November of the same year. *Unencrypted Notebooks* entries from this period partially overlap with *Tractatus* items

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from 6.41, and “their significance is heightened by the fact that they were written at the epicenter of the war experience” (p. 186). The next day (5<sup>th</sup> July, 1916), Wittgenstein wrote down in his *Private Notebooks* an entry that would later be transferred to the *Tractatus* as proposition 6.373: “The world is independent of my will.” Similar transfers of content from the *Notebooks* take place, for example, in *Tractatus* 6.374, 6.43, and 6.431. According to Idziak-Smoczyńska, “These reflections have garnered significant scholarly attention, yet what is often overlooked is the wartime context that served as a crucial catalyst for their emergence. Understanding the setting in which these ideas took shape is essential for their proper interpretation” (p. 188). The author identifies many more such direct references to the *Notebooks* showing up as material transferred to the *Tractatus* (see e.g. pp. 218, 219), and in her Afterword she writes that “the book narrows its focus to a remarkably brief period in Wittgenstein’s life, a fleeting moment when viewed against the expense of a lifetime, corresponding only to a limited number of philosophical issues related to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In consultation with the reviewers and the publisher, the decision was made to refrain from engaging with the complex logical-philosophical debates surrounding the *Tractatus*” (p. 233).

The content of the book *Wittgenstein in Polish Galicia* is skillfully, even intricately, woven around Wittgenstein’s personal notes, mainly from the years 1914–1917. Chapter 1 is entitled “The Movement of Thought. The Parable. The Apostle – Wittgenstein’s Underestimated Idioms,” while Chapter 2 has the title “MS 101: The First War Notebook 9.08.1914 to 30.10.1914.” Chapter 3 deals with “MS 102: The Second War Notebook 30.10.1914 to 22.6.1915,” and Chapter 4 addresses “MS 103: The Third War Notebook 28.3.16 to 10.1.1917.” Finally, there is an Epilogue. Given its subject matter, Idziak-Smoczyńska’s choice of such a structure for her book turns out to be highly appropriate for several reasons.

The diary-like notes from the First World War, covering the years 1914 to 1917, are part of Wittgenstein’s philosophical manuscripts (MS 101, 102 and 103); the diaries from the 1930s, 1930–32 and 1936/37, on the other hand, are a separate manuscript (MS 183), which was found in the 1990s in the estate of his friend Rudolf Koder. What significance did the diaries have for Wittgenstein personally, and for the development of his early philosophy? As the diaries are part of his philosophical manuscripts, they have a special historical value in that they are—at least at first glance—not bound by public opinion. However, Idziak-Smoczyńska is primarily concerned here not with the documentary value of Wittgenstein’s diaries—i.e. the diary as a way of keeping an account of what happened—but rather its

significance as an everyday practice and the result of a specific situation. Seen in this light, Wittgenstein's writing does not always spring from a particular awareness of individuality, but is often evoked by crises and circumstances. Writing down one's view of oneself is also a question of upbringing, an educated middle-class tradition that encourages an internalized form of self-reflection. (See, for example, the diaries of David Hume, Pinsent, Paul Engelmann and Rudolf Koder.)

According to the method adopted by Idziak-Smoczyńska, Wittgenstein's diaries, as part of his manuscripts, can be regarded as biographically motivated reflections on philosophy, but they are also characterized by self-analysis and thoughts on God and faith, sin and meaning (see, e.g., p. 189). For Wittgenstein, writing a diary was a way of understanding himself and coming to terms with himself. The author emphasizes the importance of Wittgenstein's experiences during World War I, which are reflected in the content and form of his diaries. As was mentioned above, she draws parallels between Wittgenstein's wartime posting, his diary entries from the First World War, and statements in the *Tractatus*, which was largely written during the war. Reading Wittgenstein's notes, we see that he conceals, trivializes, romanticizes or in other ways rephrases his actual war experiences and military achievements—a kind of 'inner censorship' that is characteristic of letters sent back from wartime postings and that tends to promote, in its own way, the erasure of the memory of war. "Wittgenstein," so Idziak-Smoczyńska writes, "followed the path of Alyosha [see Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, J.B.]. Such figures, even in war, never seek military achievements; they seek only to approach death. They keep observing because the simplest barrack's stove can be seen as the whole world, like Kartashov's smile for Alyosha" (p. 232).

In contrast to his external perception as a brave soldier, testified to by several medals and his emphatically casual remarks about the war, Wittgenstein's existential crises are only revealed in his secret diaries: expressions filled with a dark longing for death and fear of death, lamentations about religious and moral inadequacy, invocations of God—all of which emerge while serving as an artillery observer at the front. There is silence about his direct experiences of war (see, e.g., p. 36). It is precisely this psychosocial condition that is omnipresent in his diaries, as well as an inner image of the enemy: the immoral, the unbelieving and the vicious—that "other self," or the thought that "I am living in sin" (p. 190; see also p. 212).

There is one more thing worth noting in connection with the structure of the book in question, and thus also in regard to Wittgenstein's *Private Notebooks*. They were first edited in full by Wilhelm Baum and published

in 1991 as *Geheime Tagebücher* (*Secret Diaries*). Baum considered this source significant in two respects: firstly, as with Idziak-Smoczyńska, for learning more about the genesis of the *Tractatus*, and secondly, as helping to clarify the speculation about Wittgenstein's sexuality initiated by William Bartley's 1973 biography of the philosopher.

On the one hand, thanks to the complete edition of the *Geheime Tagebücher* it was indeed possible to question the canonized interpretation of the *Tractatus* as a key work of logical positivism, in the sense of being connected to the philosophy of the Vienna Circle and also as the work of an anti-metaphysician. (Idziak-Smoczyńska mentions this subject briefly on page 203.) For the secret writings show Wittgenstein to be a religious thinker inclined towards moral rigor, influenced by Sören Kierkegaard, Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Emerson, whose influence Idziak-Smoczyńska comments on extensively. On the other hand, whereas the *Tractatus* contains nothing like a "redeeming word," the latter does emerge in the *Private Notebooks* (20<sup>th</sup> January, 1915; 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1915). Baum thus claims—as he himself writes—to have co-initiated a paradigm shift in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's thought. It should be added that Wittgenstein had just finished his technical studies when he volunteered for the army. If his philosophy at that time conveys elements of the kind of thinking more at home in the world of engineering and machines—featuring rules of connection, cognitive precision, commitment to linguistic material—it is, nevertheless, when viewed in its entirety, now found to amount to the purest negative theology: keeping silent about that which is most important, which cannot be said.

Meanwhile, the secret writings, according to Baum, also contribute significantly to understanding Wittgenstein as a religious thinker and to clarifying the controversial issue of his homosexuality. Baum is less concerned with the fact of homosexuality itself than with the significance of this circumstance for Wittgenstein himself. The relevant question is not whether he was homosexual or not, but what significance this possible fact may have had for him. For Baum, it is only in connection with Wittgenstein's desire for "purity" and "decency"—as being necessary to shed light on his sexuality—in that here, homosexuality may explain his outbursts of self-contempt and his suicidal thoughts. This is because Wittgenstein—like Weininger, whom he admired—was radically oriented towards moral greatness and a misguided ethical ideal (see Baum, Nachwort, in: *Geheime Tagebücher*, 1991, pp. 155-72, 164).

In her extensive analyses of the years 1914–1917, as seen from Wittgenstein's perspective, Idziak-Smoczyńska often refers to his epistolary correspondence: for example, with Hermine Wittgenstein (pp. 79–80), Ludwig

von Ficker (pp. 129–39) and Bertrand Russell (pp. 166–67). The contents of his letters plays a central role in researching his thought, because they make a concrete contribution to understanding his work on philosophy and his person: they help to elucidate the genesis of the *Tractatus* and comprehend his writing technique, thereby indirectly improving our understanding of his philosophy. Due to their explicitly explanatory nature, they are an exemplary representation of his way of thinking and writing in a kind of dialogical art—and despite great disharmony, they show his strong involvement in family life and close contacts with friends.

A significant degree of additional value, where Idziak-Smoczyńska's publication is concerned—especially in the context of Polish history—lies in her descriptions of some of the military operations involving the Goplana warship with Ludwig Wittgenstein aboard. In describing the battle at the mouth of the Dunajec River as it passes into the Vistula, she combines these with descriptions of war operations in which Poles were engaged at the same time in the same area: the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Polish Legions, under the command of Józef Piłsudski, later Marshal of an independent Poland, as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Army (pp. 63–72): “The narrative of Piłsudski's and Wittgenstein's simultaneous presence along the same stretch of the Vistula River underscores its crucial role as the primary transportation artery of the Eastern Front” (pp. 65–66). Idziak-Smoczyńska also devotes considerable space to the meeting in Krakow between Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Polish logician and translator Michał Dziewicki. This came about thanks to the mediation of Bertrand Russell. She describes not only the engagement of Michał Dziewicki, but also the social activities of his wife, Adela Dziewicka, thus showing the broader context of life in Galicia and Krakow at that time.

The book reviewed here offers a compelling, richly documented account of Ludwig Wittgenstein's wartime experiences and their decisive impact on the crystallization of the *Tractatus*. Drawing on the philosopher's recently published private war diaries from 1914–1917, Idziak-Smoczyńska reveals previously unknown details from one of the most pivotal moments in twentieth-century philosophy. As an author, she guides the reader through a dramatic period in which Ludwig Wittgenstein—coming from a wealthy Viennese family, a freshly trained engineer, volunteer soldier, and thinker—completed his first important work and underwent a profound spiritual transformation that would permanently shape his intellectual path. Tracing inspirations drawn from the Bible, from the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Fiodor Dostoyevsky, St. Augustine, Ralph Emerson, and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Wittgenstein's relationships with leading figures of Austrian

modernism such as Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ludwig von Ficker and Adolf Loos, the book paints a powerful portrait of a thinker poised at the threshold of logic, ethics and extreme human experience.

Fighting on the Eastern Front—beginning with participation in the Austro-Hungarian Viktor Dankl Offensive, through the brutal battles of the Russian Brusilov Offensive, and to the next Russian Kerensky Offensive—Wittgenstein experienced war in its most immediate and violent form. In this extreme proximity to the battlefield, an intense dialogue emerged between his lived experience and the texts of the writers mentioned above. As he wrote in the *Private Notebooks*, he had great difficulty communicating with other, often primitive, vulgar soldiers. This compelling analysis of his formative years is essential reading for anyone interested in the sources of his philosophy. Idziak-Smoczyńska's book situates Wittgenstein within a broader, fascinating context—as one of the outstanding intellectuals and artists of the First World War, whose frontline experiences profoundly shaped the postwar landscape of scientific thought and European culture.

The high quality of the book, in academic or scholarly terms, is evidenced by its huge bibliography and forty pages of extensive footnotes (pp. 235–75). Taken in its entirety, Idziak-Smoczyńska's work is, in a sense, a confirmation of Wittgenstein's own words when he wrote that "meine Arbeit hat sich ausgedehnt von den Grundlagen der Logik zum Wesen der Welt" (*Geheime Tagebücher*, 2.08.1916): it expands from Wittgenstein's personal life and philosophical work on the front line to a broad and multidimensional set of social, political, military and national horizons pertaining to Galicia at the time of the First World War.