Conrad and communist censorship: the story of the 28th volume of the Polish edition of Conrad's collected works

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Summary/Abstract: Under the Stalinist regime which was foisted on Poland after the Second World War the printing of Conrad's works was not allowed, partly because his books had been popular with members of the wartime Polish Resistance and partly because of their cultural impact. Communist officials condemned Conrad on both aesthetic and ideological grounds: Conrad's individualistic ethic was incompatible with the collectivist tenets of communism, while the innovative nature of his prose exceeded the narrow framework of 'socialist realism'. Things improved after the political "thaw" of 1956, which saw the publication of Lord Jim. After the next "thaw" of 1970
The chances for the publication of a Polish edition of Conrad’s collected works were greatly enhanced by the coming fiftieth anniversary of the author’s death. The initiator and editor of this new Polish edition of Conrad’s works – comprising 27 volumes – was Zdzisław Najder. Although the whole collection was published by the PIW publishing house between 1972 and 1974, some of Conrad’s political essays and other texts were removed by government censors because of their anti-Russian and anti-despotism import. However, Najder eventually found a way to publish them. In the autumn of 1974 he went to the United States to give a series of lectures on Conrad and asked Wit Tarnawski – a Polish émigré living in Britain – to help him. Before returning to Poland, Najder collected the letters which he and Tarnawski had sent to each other. This correspondence is now kept at the Jagiellonian University Joseph Conrad Research Centre. Tarnawski enrolled the support of Andrzej Spyłukowski, who was the director of the London-based Polonia Book Fund. Together with Andrzej Pomian, Tarnawski acted as an intermediary between the publishers and Najder in order to safeguard the latter’s anonymity. Spyłukowski had the idea of copying the graphic layout and artwork of the censored edition that had been published in Poland. The anonymous additional ‘counterfeit’ volume – entitled Political Essays – came out in the middle of 1975 and evoked a nervous response from the Polish secret police, who were unable to find any evidence to connect Najder with it. Copies of the ‘missing’ volume soon found their way to readers in Poland. It was only in 1996 that this 28th volume of Conrad’s collected works was published in Poland – by the very same PIW publishers – and this time with Zdzisław Najder as the editor.