

# The Dictatorship of the Ignoramuses

## La dictature des ignares

Presented by: Dorota Walczak-Delanois

La dictature des ignares, in English *The Dictatorship of the Ignoramuses*, is one of the last novels by the well-known, prized and prolific author, professor and renowned translator Alain van Crugten born in Brussels in 1936. The novel was published in Brussels in 2023 in M.E.O publishing house and its main plot is set in Poland in 1968. The French young man from Aix-en-Provence, Jean Artigues, is the protagonist and a kind of literary alter ego of van Crugten. In the novel, just as the Belgian author himself, he receives a scholarship and goes to Poland, which is to him a kind of *terra incognita*, to discover the inhabitants and their customs, culture, history, literature, but also cuisine and music, especially jazz.

With his friends, Artigues travels across Poland through Mazurian lake region to Tatra Mountains, but it is in Warsaw, the capital, that most of the events in the novel take place. Jean Artigues becomes a witness to student protests following the premiere of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), directed by Kazimierz Dejmek; and, like the author himself once did, he realizes the significance of social protests in defence of freedom. Thanks to Jean's trajectories, we can see the University of Warsaw on Krakowskie Przedmieście, Staszic Palace, Blikle's confectionery on Nowy Świat and Fukier's wine bar in the Old Town, Mostowski Palace and the National Theatre, the Jewish Theatre and the Palace of Culture. We can walk alongside the Nowotki Street, Mazowiecka Street, Dowcip Street, or view the Vistula River from both its banks and bridges. By following Jean's story, his conversations, reflections, and actions, we can get to know the fates of Polish women and men, but also of foreigners, diplomats, members of Jean's family, and even Swedish tourists. The reader of the *Dictatorship* follows the conversations between lovers, Julien and Hania, Jean and Adela, between students, Julien and Jean, Jean and August, and intergenerational dialogues about the world and its political condition, e.g. Jean and Ruth Kowalski, Jean and Prof. Stanko. Volleyball players, students, ZOMO troops, security service employees and diplomats co-create fictional events and allow us to refer to real history. The story ends in 1968, after Jean Artigues' return to France. Finally, the protagonist becomes as much a Warsaw resident as if he had been born on the Vistula River.

The political dimension of the novel is evident in this specific narrative *theatrum mundi* in the confrontation between different geographical areas, East and West, different economic systems, Communism and Capitalism, different forms of government, democracy and totalitarianism, but also in the individual fates and histories of nations and societies. The author introduces the reader to the dramatic nature of the events in which Jean Artigues and other characters in the novel are involved, such as ZOMO actions, Security Service interrogations and imprisonment, censorship, proposals for espionage, intimidation and anti-Semitism.

Alain van Crugten's engagement to describe the still poorly known area of Europe with its specific

history and culture is reflected not only in description of real events and phenomena of social and political life, e.g. partitions of Poland, deportations to Siberia in 19th century, the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, Hitler and Stalin's aggression against Poland in 1939, Nazi occupation and expulsion of Jews in 1968. The author also describes how Poles cope with political oppression during the communist era. In addition to strikes and demonstrations, he portrays everyday situations of *załatwianie* 'getting things done' and *radzenie sobie* 'coping', as well as jokes and humour present in everyday life. He portrays the underground literary and cultural scene like samizdat publications, as well as specific fashion for *oporniki* 'resistors' pinned to clothes as a form of silent but visible protest.

The reader can understand Poland's place within the Soviet bloc as the author also draws parallels with the culture and political history of the GDR, Hungary and Czechoslovakia but also with Occidental countries.

Worth noting is also his particular attention to the language, with many Polish interjections in the French narrative plot, from many areas of life, also with its political aspects, e.g. *bigos*, *supersam*, *syrenka*, *pałka*, *komuna*, *likwidacja*, and many others. The author has provided explanations concerning Polish cultural, linguistics and political specifics and included a kind of postface glossary of fictional but also historical figures with short biography projected till nineties of 20th century, at the end of the book.

**LANGUAGE:** French / Français

**This title was not censored before publishing**