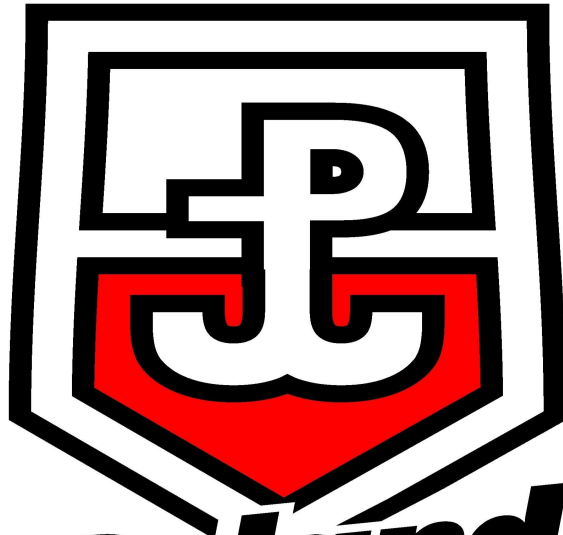


“The Polish Struggle for Unity and Independence: The 19th Century Rehearsals”

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Poland emerged from historically obscure origins as a sovereign nation state in the latter half of the 10th century. Under the leadership of Mieszko I a number of fiercely independent groups of Slavic peoples were fused by conquest and diplomacy into one polity. Through the maintenance of a strong army, dynamic leadership and strategic marriages, Poland was able to expand territorially and maintain itself for centuries as one of the preeminent powers of Europe. The nation's might was wielded effectively whenever foreign powers threatened the country's sovereignty, such as in the 11th and early 15th centuries, when the Teutonic Order sent armies of knights on missions of conquest. In 1648 Christian Europe as a whole was saved from possible oblivion when Polish “winged hussars” under King Jan Sobieski defeated the sultan's army outside of the gates of Vienna. Yet, by the middle of the 18th century, the country became diminished through internal political discord, economic deterioration and the meddling of powerful neighbors. This interference escalated into territorial annexations by Russia, Prussia and Austria through a series of partitions. These culminated on the 26th of January 1797, with the complete dismemberment of the Polish state. Yet the nationalistic passions of the people survived these dark days. In the century that followed, under valiant leaders, new generations of Poles rose up to challenge the foreign domination. These efforts ultimately failed because of the fragmented efforts of the revolutionaries, the weakness of their armed forces, poor timing, and the concerted and overwhelming reaction by the occupying powers. As important as were these considerations was the fact that Poland lacked champions in the form of powerful allies that could counterbalance the collective might of the conquering triumvirate and adopt Polish independence as a vital component of its national interests. Such congruence of factors would arise and independence achieved only after the coming of the First World War.¹

In the early 19th century Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France represented a forceful champion of Polish nationalism. In 1807, following a series of decisive military victories against Prussia, he became the inspiration behind the creation of the Duchy of Warsaw out of lands that this German state had acquired under the recent partitions. Although it encompassed only a fraction of the land mass of historic Poland, the Duchy represented in sovereign territory the political aspirations of the Polish people. A constitution was adopted, serfdom abolished, and civic and political rights were expanded. The Emperor's motives for this action included the assurance of continued incorporation of Polish military units under Prince Joseph Poniatowski within the French army. Additionally, being a "son of the French Revolution," Napoleon favored the liberation of this ethnic minority from the autocratic rule of the Prussian king and nobility. Noteworthy was the fact that in the interest of maintaining the (then) harmonious relationship with both Russia and Austria, the French leader excluded from the Duchy's boundaries those territories that had been incorporated into these two empires. But Polish independence would not survive the final defeat of the Emperor's armies.²

Following Bonaparte's abdication after the Battle of Waterloo the victorious powers at the Congress of Vienna decided to maintain the fiction of a Polish nation by the creation of the Kingdom of Poland under the Russian Czar. The people were granted limited autonomy, with an elected assembly ("Sejm"). But the Duchy's military forces were disbanded and Polish soldiers were incorporated into the Russian army. In the Austrian province of Galicia, which had been formed from lands acquired during the partitions, Polish political aspirations were generally stifled under the authoritarian regime imposed by the Habsburg's. As described by historian Adam Zamoyski, a noteworthy exception was the City of Krakow, the ancient capital of Poland, which saw limited autonomy for a brief period of time following the Napoleonic wars. Similarly,

Prussia's incorporation of Polish lands featured both political dominance by the reactionary King Frederick William III and attempts to homogenize the indigenous peoples with the larger German population. The latter was pursued through restrictions on education, the use of the Polish language, and the outward manifestation of popular culture. But despite superficial signs of calm in all three lands, Polish revolutionary stirrings were underway.³

With the death of Czar Alexander I, the Russian Empire was placed in the hands of the more conservative Nicholas I. In the Kingdom of Poland, the limited political freedoms that were originally permitted were gradually eroded under the more reactionary regime. The Sejm became increasingly ineffective and the people, finding no outlet for their grievances, channeled their energies to a series of secret societies. One such group was the Patriotic Society among Poles in the Russian Army. The Poles looked encouragingly to the revolutionary events in France and drew the conclusion that a popular revolt could succeed. What was needed was an incitement. The Czar provided it in the form of a general mobilization to confront the perceived military threat from France. Reacting to this coercion, the Sejm deposed the Czar and declared a national uprising in January of 1831. Unfortunately, the Polish leaders failed to realize the weaknesses of their position.⁴

While they had a cadre of trained soldiers, the nascent Polish army was greatly outnumbered by Russian forces. Critical industries that were necessary for the successful prosecution of the war were outside of the insurrectionists' control. Additionally, the revolution in France acted as a catalyst to mobilize the forces of the conservative monarchies in Austria and Prussia. Both countries reinforced the garrisons in their Polish territories, imposed harsher controls over their populations, and pledged military intervention to assist the Czar if needed. Unlike the previous era, when the French army under Napoleon was used as a forceful instrument to achieve Polish

sovereignty in the Duchy of Warsaw, no effective assistance was offered to the revolutionaries of 1831 by the other major European powers. Consequently, after a brief period of success, epitomized by the Polish victory over the Russians at the Battle of Racławice, the “January Uprising” as these events were called, was suppressed. Norman Davies, in his comprehensive two-volume history of Poland, relates that the direct consequence of this failed revolt was that authority within the Kingdom of Poland was placed more firmly in the hands of the czar, with an expanded Russian bureaucracy and a larger occupying garrison of foreign troops. Control of the population in general was exercised through the reliance upon heavy-handed police tactics. In the Polish lands that were taken by Prussia and Austria, additional security measures were imposed that were intended to forestall future revolutionary movements, such as controls on assembly and a more aggressive police presence. Yet, despite these restrictions on political activities, Polish nationalism continued to be stoked through the fires of a cultural reawakening.⁵

Increasing dramatically in the early 1800s and continuing through the period encompassed by this study, Polish artists, poets and authors applied their talents toward the glorification of the past as a way of offering hope for future liberty. One of the most accomplished painters of this era was Jan Matejko, whose stirring works, epitomized by his “Battle of Grunwald,” were able to morally reinvigorate the Polish people by reminding them of their previous victories against the seemingly overwhelming strength of foreign foes. Adam Mickiewicz, who would be acknowledged as Poland’s greatest poet, weaved his willful words in a manner that inspired both nobleman and commoner. His fame was renowned throughout Europe. He, along with his cultural compatriots, instilled in many a sense that Polish culture was uniquely distinct from those of the country’s occupiers. Henryk Sienkiewicz, made famous for his masterwork “Quo Vadis,” authored a series of historically romantic novels that were set in the 15th and 16th centuries, when Poland was

militarily challenged by the Tatars, Cossacks and Swedes. His characters included peasant heroes, among others, who were often portrayed as using their crude weapons to overcome more powerful opponents. Together, these cultural combatants were instrumental in keeping the quest for Polish independence alive in the minds of contemporary and future generations.⁶

As the 19th century approached its midpoint, Europe was perched on the edge of a political precipice. A new generation of young nationalists and romantics, joining forces with the elder generation who remembered an earlier revolutionary period, awaited the opportunity to unleash new struggles for social liberalization and national unification. Beginning in Sicily in January of 1848 and spreading throughout most of Western Europe, reactionary rulers were deposed or forced to make political concessions to new liberal governments. And yet, the Poles were largely quiescent. There were liberals and nationalists of Polish decent, such as Ludwik Mieroslawski, who joined the revolutionaries in Prussia and Austria and spoke forcefully for independence. (Polish sovereignty in Pozen was acknowledged briefly by the Prussian provisional government in March of 1848.) But in reviewing the events of 1848, there appears limited evidence of a concerted, forceful “Polish Revolution” per se. Polish soldiers in Polish uniforms under Polish flags did not take to the field as they had in 1807 and 1831. A consolidated Polish Sejm did not assemble in Krakow, Warsaw or Poznan. In short, there was no unified Polish reaction to the political opportunities which presented themselves in this crucial period. To make sense of this inaction in the face of Polish history, political aspirations and the events of the time, one has to focus on the political, geographic and demographic fragmentation of the Polish people.⁷

In the period of time following the partitions, interrupted only briefly during the era of the Duchy of Warsaw, Polish political organization to a considerable degree evolved independently within the three occupying powers. Individual leaders, autonomous social and political institutions,

and divergent agendas evolved. Charles Morley, in his assessment of Prince Adam Czartoryski, concludes that this was due to the degree that the Polish nobility and bourgeoisie looked to Russia, Austria and Prussia as a source of their own aggrandizement. In other words, the degree to which influential members of Polish society were likely to adopt revolutionary rhetoric and actions was inversely proportional to the extent that they prospered under the occupation. Additionally, the liberal and nationalistic political parties that existed during this era possessed divergent agendas that reflected their own sense of importance as well as their unique perspective on an idealized future Polish nation-state. For example, political parties such as the Polish Democratic Society, which were organized within the Kingdom of Poland in Russia, viewed themselves as the heirs of past political power. They concluded that their best hope for the future lie within a unified Polish state that was linked closely with the Czar. (Some influential politicians felt that, considering the inherent vulnerability of Poland within its historic indefensible boundaries, a “condominium” with Russia was the only viable solution.) Consequently, they were not inclined to work in harmony with the political organizations in Austrian Galicia and Prussian that viewed themselves and the future with a divergent perspective. Events in Posen in 1846 and elsewhere can also aid in the understanding of Polish quiescence two years later.⁸

Under the leadership of Mieroslawski, Polish nationalists, who had seen their efforts to peacefully achieve political rights increasingly suppressed under the reactionary Frederick William of Prussia, conspired to use violence to attain their ends. As described by Robert Gildea in his survey of European history at this time, their plot was discovered, over two hundred of the revolutionaries arrested, and their most prominent leaders were condemned to death. When one considers these events in relation to similar repressive actions taken by the Russian government following the January Uprising, one realizes that in two of the three partition areas, the potential

leadership of a Polish national uprising in 1848 was either in jail or was under intense police scrutiny and harassment. Just as there was a dearth of effective internal leadership, the international situation in 1848 was also inimical to the creation of an independent Poland.⁹

Of the major powers that had traditionally championed Polish sovereignty, one was itself in the throes of revolution and the other was both unable and unwilling to take unilateral action. Beginning in February 1848, opposition to the government of Louis-Philippe in France reached a crescendo, culminating in violence in the streets of Paris and elsewhere and his subsequent abdication. What followed was a period of political, economic and social instability which prevented France from taking any effective action on the international scene. This period ended with the rise of Louis Bonaparte, who was himself pro-Polish. But, by the time he consolidated his power, the revolutionary events in Prussia and Austria had already been reversed and the opportunity to achieve Polish independence had passed.¹⁰

Great Britain on the other hand, while it was a formidable power on the world scene, usually intervened on the mainland of Europe in concert with a continental ally, such as Prussia. Thus, while the liberal government of Lord John Russell was philosophically in favor of Polish political rights, it had no means militarily to achieve these ends. Additionally, being in the midst of a great economic expansion that was associated with the burgeoning industrial revolution and its concomitant proliferation of international trade, England was averse to undertaking any adventure that might adversely affect its prosperity.¹¹

The counterrevolutions in Europe had a devastating effect on Polish nationalism. What had been seen by many as the penultimate opportunity to reverse historic inequities in western society had been quashed by the armies of resurgent reactionary regimes. If liberalization and national unification could not occur after such an auspicious start in 1848, how were the Poles to achieve

their unity and independence in the face of the overwhelming force that was wielded by the three occupying powers? Despite this perception and the inherent weaknesses of their position, the indomitable Poles produced a new generation of revolutionaries that again rose up to fight for liberty in the early 1860s.¹²

The era of the Crimean War and the years that followed appeared to nationalists in the Kingdom of Poland and in other lands within the multi-ethnic Russian Empire to be ideal for a renewed struggle to achieve their rights. Czar Nicholas' armies had been bested by a multinational coalition that included both England and France, traditional advocates of Polish sovereignty. (British Prime Minister Palmerston issued a memorandum at this time in which he proffered the dismemberment of Russia and the creation of a restored Poland.) At least superficially, the British Empire appeared to be unwilling or unable to undertake any adventure that might be challenged both diplomatically and militarily and that would subject the Czarist government to further humiliation. Additionally, a new Russian ruler, Czar Alexander II, appeared on the scene after the death of his father, who promised more liberal policies. (His decision to release the former revolutionaries of 1831 was seen as evidence of a more enlightened regime.) The irony for both Alexander and Polish nationalists was that as conditions within the Kingdom improved, the call for revolution and independence grew more strident.¹³

Although the Czar had not acquiesced in the restoration of the Sejm, he did allow the creation of an "Agricultural Society," with wide geographic representation, that was empowered to discuss land reform. It was during a planned meeting of the Society that a demonstration was organized by students and other radicals, with the intention of using that issue as a springboard for actions of a wider political nature. The plot was discovered and the ringleaders apprehended. What followed was the imposition of yet another repressive regime that attempted by force to control the

nationalistic inclinations of the Poles that had not been soothed through more tolerant means. Predictably, the people rebelled when confronted by these conditions. Organized by the Central National Committee, a group of respected individuals that represented a broad spectrum of political views, thousands of Polish patriots took up arms in January of 1863 to confront the Russian occupying army. But, just as had occurred in 1831, the conservative monarchies of Prussia and Austria joined forces with the Czar in suppressing this new outbreak. Within weeks, the ragtag Polish armed forces crumbled under the weight of a massive military counter reaction. (While the Poles had no difficulty acquiring small arms for their soldiers, they could not match the devastating weight of Russian artillery, massed cavalry, and superior logistics capabilities.) England and France, while expressing lukewarm moral support for Polish rights, were powerless to bring forth any effective diplomatic solution and could not aid the insurgents militarily without risking a wider conflict. Yet again, the Polish struggle for an independent national identity had been hindered by military weakness vis-à-vis their opponents and an unfavorable international climate.¹⁴

The remaining years of the 19th century were peaceful from the standpoint of an armed Polish independence movement. As described by R. F. Leslie in his history of Poland since the January Uprising, the new German Reich under Bismarck and his successors imposed characteristically harsh internal conditions upon their Polish lands. Poles were given token political representation in the Reichstag, while broader political and cultural rights were curtailed. A degree of political and social expression was permitted to the Poles of Austrian Galicia. One notable example is the proliferation of hunting and shooting clubs within which young Polish men learned the arts of warfare. (Poland's future leader, Josef Pilsudski, led such a club and organized it with others into eventual military "legions" that fought during the First World War.) In Russia, the state of Polish

political, economic and social life alternated in general with the changing dynamics of the governments and policies of its overlords. Under Alexander II, Polish serfs were “freed” in conjunction with a general liberalization of Russian farm policies. But, during the same period, Russian nationals increasingly were used to run the bureaucracy in the ten districts that were created out of the old Kingdom. After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, a more repressive political environment was created in the hopes of quelling rising social unrest. During this time, Polish political philosophy became more radicalized, with the expansion of parties that avowed both socialist and anarchist agendas. Despite the organizing, proselytizing and nationalistic agitating that was occurring underground, a revolt never materialized during these years in any of the occupied lands. Nevertheless, Polish artists, poets, professors, clergymen, authors, and other notables continued to stoke the fires of Polish nationalism. As the 20th century dawned, Polish unity and sovereignty awaited another congruence of factors that would facilitate the achievement of this century-long dream. Such factors would arise in 1914 with the coming of the First World War.¹⁵

When one reviews history broadly, momentous events come to the fore. Occurrences such as successful revolutions and the unification of nation states directly result from a facilitating congruence of conditions. Those that affected the French Revolution, for example, include a fiscal crisis, agitation for increased political power by the Third Estate, threats to the established perquisites of the Second Estate by the sale of offices, the convening of the Estates General by the king, and the “turning” of the army. With regard to the history of Poland in the 19th century, no such momentous event can be discerned. Neither was there a successful revolution, nor was Poland reconstituted as a single polity within the national boundaries that had existed before the 18th century partitions. The lack of success on the part of the Poles to achieve unity and independence

is not for want of desire or effort, as the events of 1831, 1846, and 1863 attest. Based on the research conducted, the conclusion is that Polish nationalism did not succeed in the 19th century because of the partitions and the resulting fragmented efforts of the revolutionaries, the weakness of their armed forces, poor timing, and the concerted and overwhelming reaction by the occupying powers. As important as were these considerations was the fact that Poland lacked powerful allies that would intervene in sufficient time and with appropriate force so as to counterbalance the collective might of Prussia, Russia and Austria. Potential champions, most notably France and Great Britain, could not or would not adopt Polish independence as a vital component of their own national interests and act accordingly. Hence, the struggle for unity and sovereignty would have to await another century, when conditions would lead to success. The events of the 19th century can, therefore, be considered as rehearsals for that future momentous event.

Notes

- ¹O. Halecki, *A History of Poland* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976), 8-10.
- ² David G. Chandler, *The Marshals of Napoleon* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 424-427.
- ³Adam Zamoyski. *The Polish Way: A Thousand Year History of the Poles and Their Culture* (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1987), 266.
- ⁴R.Dyboski, O. Halecki, J. Penson, W. Reddaway, W. *The Cambridge History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941) 295-300.
- ⁵Norman Davies. *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 318-325.
- ⁶*Polish Culture Overview* (Database on-line); available from: <http://culture.poland.com/culture-literature.php>, November 17, 2005.
- ⁷Eric Hobsbawn. *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 126.
- ⁸Charles Morley, "Czartoryski as a Polish Statesman" *Slavic Review* 30 (September 1971): 607-611. Journal on-line. Available from the University of Maryland University College, JSTOR.
- ⁹Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 75.
- ¹⁰Mark Almond. *Revolution: 500 Years of Struggle for Change* (London: De Agostini Editions, Ltd., 1996), 98-101.
- ¹¹Sir George Clark. *History of Britain* (New York: British Heritage Press, 1983), 222-224.
- ¹²Adam Zamoyski. *The Polish Way: A Thousand Year History of the Poles and Their Culture* (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1987), 278-284.
- ¹³Oscar J. Hammen. "Free Europe versus Russia, 1830-1854" *American Slavic and East European Review* 11 (February 1952): 33-35. Journal on-line. Available from the University of Maryland University College, JSTOR.
- ¹⁴R.Dyboski, O. Halecki, J. Penson, W. Reddaway, W. *The Cambridge History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941) 370-382.
- ¹⁵ R. F. Leslie, *The History of Poland since 1863* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14-58.

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Cover: Historic symbol of Polish national resistance to foreign occupation.