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Polish Struggle for Independence in the Eyes of American Press of 1914-1918

Polish matters had never been an important source of interest for American society. At the time of the partitions in Poland (1772, 1793, 1795), the citizens of North America were first struggling to organize themselves into a harmonious society. Following this, in the years 1775-1783, they were first fighting for independence from the British in the American Revolutionary War, and subsequently were preoccupied with setting the grounds for the first fully independent national government, the first American Congress, which met in 1789 and lasted till 1791, and the first presidential elections, held in 1789, which were won by George Washington.

The American press mentioned Poland on rare occasions after the Kościuszko Uprising of 1794, for instance publishing Kościuszko Proclamation: *Dear Fellow-Citizens, Having been often called to assault in the salvation of our common country, behold I obey the call – but I cannot be useful to you, or break the chains of slavery, if you do not give me speedy succour!*¹; however, the topic was soon abandoned, becoming further marginalized from the following year, when the third partition of Poland took place and the state (or rather what was left of it) was torn between Prussia, the Austrian Empire and the Russian Empire.

The American press were nevertheless reminded of the Polish matter by the torment in Europe at the beginning of 1914. In an elaborate article, the author claims: *Two centuries ago Poland was an independent nation and one of the most popular in Europe. She was far ahead of neighbouring States in government. She had a constitutional monarchy before constitutions were dreamed of by the surrounding empires. The soldiers were the bravest of the earth. Led by John Sobieski, the valorous Poles had stemmed the tide of Moslem invasion*

¹ *Proclamation of Thaddee Kosciusko, Commander in Chief of the Armies of the Nation, to the Citizens of Poland*, "Gazette of the United States and Daily Evening Advertiser", Philadelphia (Pa.), 2 July 1794, s.3.

*and saved Europe from being overrun by the Turk. Yet today there is no Poland except in name.*² The author praises the Polish spirit and pities the society that has to live divided under three foreign governments. When WWI broke out on June 28th, 1914, after the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated in Sarajevo, Europe sank into torment: Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28th, the Russian Empire declared war on Austria-Hungary on July 30th, and the German Empire declared war with the Russian Empire (August 1st), France (August 3rd) and Great Britain (August 4th).

Alarming titles appeared in American press immediately after the outbreak of war. On July 29th, 1914, The Valdez Daily Prospector shouted *All of Europe is in Turmoil*³ in a large font across the front page. Even a brief summary could hint at the complicated situation in 1914 Europe: *Austrian bombard Servian positions. Russia continues mobilization of troops in spite of threat of Kaiser that to do so meant war with Germany. Germany is actively preparing for conflict. French army suddenly appears at Luxembourg.*⁴As could be expected, this was the perfect occasion for Polish citizens to mobilise their forces in support of their cause.

On August, 1st, the Daily East Oregonian published an article entitled *Polish Cities Are Fighting for Rights*, which reported: *With the defeat in the Russian Imperial Council of the bill to introduce municipal autonomy in the kingdom of Poland, this country continues to be the only one in Europe whose cities and towns are non-self governing*⁵. The author continues, claiming that the basic needs of the citizens of the Polish towns are not met: *In the whole of the towns of Russian Poland there are only eighty-eight hospitals with a total of 4.832 beds – the lowest figure in all civilized Europe*⁶. However interesting, the article did not propagate any military action and, needless to say, was relegated to the third page of the newspaper.

There were even some cases of non-support, or even denial, of the right of Poles to fight for an independent state. In The Granada Sentinel, there appeared an article in which the author claimed: *Possibly Russia governs Poland better than the Poles could have governed it themselves. It is conceivable that in the substitution of the Russian*

² *Vengeance for Wrongs Two Centuries Old*, "The Ogden Standard", Ogden City (Utah), 17 January 1914, s.18.

³ *All of Europe is in Turmoil*, "The Valdez Daily", Valdez, Alaska, 29 July 1914, s.1.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Polish Cities are Fighting for Rights*, "Daily East Oregonian", Pendleton, Oregon, 1 August 1914, s.3.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

*for the Polish language (and the two are closely allied) the Poles would have little, if anything, to lose. It is within the bounds of imagination to believe that Poland as a part of Russia could participate in a much larger world than could have been possible to her had she remained Poland.*⁷ Such outrageous words were spoken and printed by an American citizen, whose nation had struggled to shrug off any formal attachment with Great Britain during the war of independence. Such an offensive claim would undoubtedly have shocked a Polish audience. What is even more surprising is the fact that it was not the sole voice.

Military action was being discussed in strong words. The author of an article that appeared in "The Washington Herald" on August 11th, 1914, labels the Austrian army as *invaders*, who had *occupied the towns of Andrejew, in Russian Poland, and Volhynia*⁸. Needless to say, Poland was treated by the author as one of the numerous provinces of the Russian Empire, and not as an independent state that needs to be treated as such.

As early as in 1914, attempts were made to predict the results of the war, which was expected not to last long. Some predicted that: *If the triple Entente wins, the annexation of German and Austria Poland and Galicia, to the Carpathian Mountains, to the Russian Empire, thereby restoring to Russia in its entirety the old Polish Kingdom. If the triple Alliance wins, the surrender of the Finland provinces and Russian Poland to Germany.*⁹ Not even the slightest crumb of hope was offered that Poland would regain independence due to the military conflict.

No trace of the first maneuvers of the Polish troops (First Cadre Company under Józef Piłsudski) in August 1914 can be found in American press of the period. While this Polish unit was not particularly large, numbering not more than 160 people, there must have been some public interest in the situation of Poland among US citizens: sources claim that *between two and three million Poles lived in America by 1914.*¹⁰ It is hardly believable that the descendants and relatives of the Poles did not wish to have recent news on the issue,

⁷ *Traces War to a Clash of Tongues*, "The Granada Sentinel", Granada, Miss., 7 August 1914, s. 7.

⁸ *Austrian Invaders Take Towns in Russian Poland*, "The Washington Herald", Washington, D.C., 11 August 1914, s. 5.

⁹ *How Europe's Map May be Changed*, "Harrisburgh Telegraph", Harrisburg, Pa., 12 August 1914, s. 5.

¹⁰ N. Siekierski, *American Relief and Poland's Independence*, "The Warsaw Institute Review", 12 March 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/american-relief-polands-independence> (dostęp 10 lipca 2018r.).

and some organizations were formed that united those preoccupied with the matter of Polish independence. As early as in 1913, the Committee of National Defense (Komitet Obrony Narodowy- KON) was established in Pittsburgh, but soon disagreements on the means of achieving Polish independence, such as whether such a goal would be better achieved the help of the Russians or the Austrians, led to its dissolution.¹¹ A significant influence on the popularization of the cause was exerted by The Central Relief Committee, an organization that was formed in 1914 on the grounds of the Committee of National Defense. The Central Relief Committee, together with the National Department, established in 1916 *the Relief's political Arm*¹², as sources call it; both parties favored the National Democratic Party in Poland.¹³

In January 1915 the Central Relief Committee started gathering funds for The Polish Relief, established in Lausanne, Switzerland, by Ignacy Paderewski: *January 24, 1915, was proclaimed Polish Relief Day across the united States; and Chicago's Mayor Harrison, prodded by Polish aldermen, passed a proclamation permitting Polish-Americans to sell tags on the twenty-third and twenty-fourth. These Chicago tag days netted about twenty-five thousand dollars. Almost a quarter of a million dollars were collected nationwide on Relief Day.*¹⁴ Money was raised to support the Polish cause, but one of the outcomes was also a rise in the awareness of both the Great War and the struggle of dependent nations.

One person who often visited the USA, popularizing the ideas of Polish independence, was a famous pianist, Ignacy Jan Paderewski. His figure was described dramatically in numerous Polish-speaking American magazines, like "Dziennik Chicagoski", which devoted an entire page to the story of Paderewski coming to America, with the title *Paderewski o Polsce* [*Paderewski on Poland*].¹⁵ On May 30th, 1915, an assembly was gathered to listen to Paderewski speak about the matter. Despite the fact that Paderewski was a prominent figure and the meeting gathered over one thousand spectators, it was ill-described in the press, the story being only reported in Polish-language magazines as "Wiarus" or "Głos Polek".

¹¹ E. R. Kantowicz, *Polish-American Politics in Chicago 1880-1914*, Chicago, 1975, s. 111.

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ E. R. Kantowicz, *Polish-American Politics in Chicago 1880-1914*, Chicago, 1975, s. 111.

¹⁵ *Paderewski o Polsce*, "Dziennik Chicagoski", Chicago, 1 June 1915, s. 5.

The pianist's wife, also an avid supporter of the issue, thus described the Poland of World War I: *A land of starvation – that's all Poland is now.*¹⁶ She also added: *The land has been the highway for the war ever since it began. A nation is dying there for hunger. That is why my husband is so heartbroken; that is why he and other men like him are devoting all their time and incomes to the raising of a relief fund to help allay the destitution in their native land.*¹⁷ She focused on possible solutions to the problem, which was raising funds for common people that die everyday of hunger. She and her husband never propagated any military solutions, they tried to convince American society, particularly those of Polish descent, to get interested and try to support Polish citizens by providing materials to satisfy their basic needs and difficulties. Madame Paderewski also claimed: *Think of it. They are expecting at a conservative estimate nearly half a million war babies in that country. There is scarcely anything to eat any place, except in a comparatively small area near Warsaw. There is not a cow in Poland; the German Army took all cattle in that first invasion of last August. The people cannot cultivate the ground because they have neither seeds nor implements.*¹⁸ These words may be easily supported with evidence. The Great War touched not only the soldiers participating in military actions, but also ordinary citizens: *The Polish people, too, are ruined. Their fields, drenched with blood, are desolate. Their towns are destroyed, their industries paralyzed, their women and children are starving. But they have promises that give them hope for a rejuvenated, united and autonomous Poland.*¹⁹

One of the key documents that gave hope for raising the issue of Polish independence was the Act of 5th November of 1916: a proclamation of two emperors, Wilhelm II of Germany and Franz Joseph of Austria. The text was not precise in any way and it suggested a lasting connection between the two empires with Poland. It did not satisfy the desire for an existence of an independent state, calling it *sa-modzielne*²⁰ [self-reliant] but not independent.

The American press reacted to the document with numerous articles, claiming: *There was no hope of a restoration of Poland while*

¹⁶ *Poland's Crop War Babies.* "Alexandria Gazette", Alexandria, D.C., 2 June 2015, s. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ *Horrors Worse Than Kishineff Charged Against Russia,* "The Sun", New York, 6 June 1915, s. 1.

²⁰ *Act of 5 November 1916.* [Akt 5 listopada 1916], 5 listopada 1916, [https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Indeks:Akt_5_listopada_\(1916\)#/media/File:Akt_5_listopada.jpeg](https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Indeks:Akt_5_listopada_(1916)#/media/File:Akt_5_listopada.jpeg) (dostęp 30 lipca 2018 r.).

*three great and reactionary empires held fragments of the old Polish state. However much they might differ on Balkan questions there was a common ground between Berlin, Petrograd and Vienna in the matter of Poland.*²¹The ultimate motivation of the emperors, recruiting soldiers that would partake in military actions against Russia, was also clear. For decades, Poland had not been an independent country, being treated either as a problem or as currency in negotiations: *We may conclude, fairly enough, that the proclamation of the new Polish state means that Austria and Germany have abandoned any hope of an easy and immediate victory. They did not annex or liberate Russian Poland until now because it was a basis for bargain. They have not erected the new Polish state now, with a full realization of the peril it brings, until the last chance of speedy victory has been extinguished and the need for recruits at once has pushed aside the more remote dangers.*²²

The topic of Poland returned to the American press in December 1916, when the last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II issued his Special Order of the Day (Приказ Государя Императора Николая II по армии и флоту 12 декабря 1916 года): *Russia's achievement of the tasks created by the war, the possession of Constantinople and the Straits, as well as the creation of a free Poland from all its now disparate regions have not yet been secured*²³[Достижение Россией созданных войной задач, обладание Царьградом и проливами, равно как создание свободной Польши из всех её ныне разрозненных областей ещё не обеспечено].²⁴ However enigmatic, the statement was read as a manifesto supporting the foundation of fully independent Poland, with its own, fully self-reliant government and borders.

However, the publication of these documents led to a slight change in the rhetoric of the establishment of Poland. The American press did not call the country self-dependent. An article in “The Ogden Standard” thus describes possible future actions: *Alsace-Lorraine is to be restored to France. The Danish portion of Schleswig-Holstein is to go to Denmark and Posen, Polish Prussia and Austrian Poland are to be added to the new sub-kingdom of Poland which the czar has*

²¹ F. H. Simonds, *The Kaiser Follows Napoleon in Poland*, “New York Tribune”, New York, 19 November 1916, s.8.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Translated by the author.

²⁴ Special Order of the Day of Russian Emperor Nicholas II . [Приказ Государя Императора Николая II по армии и флоту 12 декабря 1916 года], 25 (12) December 1916, <https://dvoynik-nikolay.livejournal.com/28914.html> (dostęp 15 lipca 2018 r.)

pledged to create".²⁵ The formation of such a "sub-kingdom", as the author calls it, does not leave much hope for the Poles. At this time of war, after over a century after the partitions, it appears that a puppet state is the only thing the population can count on.

Some authors treated the subject more lightly: *The ancient kingdom of Poland just now presents the attentive attitude of the mouse that waits to see which way the cat will jump*.²⁶ The author elaborates on the issue, describing Poland's desires: *But Poland's position in present Weltpolitik is that of desperate neutrality. Both Germany and Russia have promised her much. Poland wants to cash one of those promises. Of the two, Russia offers the more – a complete independence. But there is this drawback (...) Russia is promising independence to territory occupied by German troops*.²⁷ This simply means that Poland was offered independence on condition that it would win it on its own. There also appeared some doubt concerning the political system of a future Poland: *Suppose it becomes an independent Poland, will it be a republic or a monarchy?*²⁸

The independence of Poland was twice mentioned in official speeches by Woodrow Wilson. The first was made on January 22, 1917: *I take it for granted, for instance, if I may venture upon a single example, that statesmen everywhere are agreed that there should be a united, independent, and autonomous Poland, and that henceforth inviolable security of life, of worship, and of industrial and social development should be guaranteed to all peoples who have lived hitherto under the power of governments devoted to a faith and purpose hostile to their own*.²⁹ Such a manifesto strengthened the Polish claim and brought international interest in the matter. Nevertheless, there existed various doubts, concerning the details of ending the military conflict, namely the shape of the state that was to be recreated: *If it is the president's thought that Poland is genuinely to be united it is obvious that his preceding statement is not accurate. (...) German states has attached much weight, and whose bare words he seems disposed to accept, seem unanimously opposed to a united Poland. They have made it clear that Galicia and Posen and the Polish parts of west*

²⁵ *Entente to Make Heavy Demands as Price of Peace From Germany*, "The Ogden Standard", Ogden City, Utah, 29 December 1916, s. 1.

²⁶ *Kingdom or Republic? Poland Now Waits to See Which Way Cat Jumps*. "Carson Daily City Appeal", Carson City, Nevada, 19 May 1917, s. 1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ W. Wilson, *Address to the Senate of the United States: "A World League for Peace"*, 22 January 1917 r.,

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65396> (dostęp 10 sierpnia 2018 r.)

*Prussia are to be retained by their present possessors. Their programme for Poland applies only to Russian Poland.*³⁰ With the Kaiser's declaration, the order of the Russian Tsar and manifesto of the American President, the Polish issue gained international acclaim. From now on it seemed obvious that post-war Europe would be changed. In June 1917, the French president decided on the establishment of the Polish army: *A brilliant manifestation in honor of Poland organized by the committee, "The Effort of France and Her Allies", was held July 5 at the Sorbonne, under the presidency of M. Stephen Pichon and Gen. Archinard, who is charged with the organization in France of the Polish army.*³¹ In the abovementioned article, the author states also that *Allies want Poland Unified*³², which was both a strong claim and positive news for Poland. Contrary to previous proposals, the idea of a Polish sea port emerged.

The second instance when the American President took a side in the conflict, openly propagating the existence of independent Poland, was his speech to the Congress made on January 8, 1918. One of the fourteen points, the thirteenth to be precise, touched on the issue: *XIII. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.*³³ Thus Wilson expressed his full support for the demands of Poland, concerning an independent and self-governed state, with access to the Baltic Sea and the lands inhabited by the Poles within the newly-established borders.

However, the situation in the Polish lands seemed appalling: *The systematic exploitation of human misery by the German authorities in Poland followed the general plan laid down by the Kaiser's order.(...)Poland - Russian Poland - is perishing. And the German high command, imbued with the Prussian system, is coolly reckoning on the necessities of a starving people to promote its imperial ends.*³⁴ The wartime period had shattered the economic situation in Europe, Pol-

³⁰ A "United" Poland, "The Barre Daily Times", Barre, Vt., 27 January 1917 r., s. 4.

³¹ *Allies Aim to Give Seaport to Poland*, "The Evening Star", Washington, D.C., 2 August 1917 r., s. 7.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ W. Wilson, *President Wilson's Fourteen Points*, 8 January 1918r., http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/aftermath/p_wilson.htm (dostęp 23 sierpnia 2018 r.)

³⁴ *Aimed to Make Poland Desert*, "The Elk Mountain Pilot", Irwin, Ruby Camp, Gunnison County, Colorado, 17 January 1918 r., s. 7.

and included. The earlier the military conflict finished, the faster the reconstruction would be implemented.

On March 3, 1918, the treaty at Brest-Litovsk was signed³⁵, according to which all Polish lands were granted to Germany. Thus, the Russian state, who was in the midst of revolution, resigned from any further participation in the conflict. The continuing military actions between the Entente and Germany ensured the Poles that freedom was approaching, which finally happened in November 1918, after 123 years of partitions and generations anxiously waiting to live in an independent state.

Streszczenie

Polskie dążenia niepodległościowe w oczach prasy amerykańskiej w latach 1914-1918

Artykuł bada obraz Polski oraz zainteresowanie sprawą odzyskania przez nią niepodległości w wybranych pozycjach prasy amerykańskiej epoki. Choć kwestia ta nie była wiodąca z powodu skomplikowanej sytuacji wewnętrznej w Ameryce, wojny o niepodległość czy pierwszych wyborów prezydenckich, sprawa polska była opisywana już po powstaniu kościuszkowskim.

Wybuch pierwszej wojny światowej zainicjował debatę nad kwestią niepodległego państwa polskiego, która trwała przez kolejne lata i choć często była opisywana jako niemożliwa do spełnienia, została przez amerykańskie społeczeństwo powitana z ogromnym entuzjazmem.

Abstract

Polish Struggle for Independence in the Eyes of American Press of 1914-1918

The article explores the image of Poland and interest in the matter of regaining independence in selected positions of the American press of the era. Although this was not a leading issue due to the complicated internal situation in America (like the war of independence or the first presidential election), the Polish issue was often written about after the Kościuszko Uprising.

³⁵Y. Felshtinsky, *Lenin and His Comrades: The Bolsheviks Take Over Russia 1917-1924*. New York, 2010, s.70.

The outbreak of World War I initiated a continuous debate on the issue of an independent Polish state that lasted for years and although it was often described as impossible to fulfill, it was welcomed by American society with great enthusiasm.

Keywords: history of Poland, American press, WWI, independence

Słowa kluczowe: historia Polski, prasa amerykańska, I wojna światowa, niepodległość

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