

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The idea of Independence in the Poznań Region

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THE IDEA OF INDEPENDENCE IN THE POZNAŃ REGION had been evident since the fall of the Republic of Poland. The term “independenta”, which meant striving for sovereignty, was used. It should be emphasised that 19th-century representatives of the patriotic elite equated the term “national being” with complete independence. They claimed that the fight to retain 'national being' also covered the fight for independence. It was observed back in 1841 by the Upper President of the Duchy of Poznań Adolf von Arnim-Boitzenburg, who concluded in his programme memorandum that Poles considered their nationality as “a connection between all the remnants of the former Polish state which would make it possible to break away from Prussia and unite those remnants into a Polish State on the first favourable

occasion.” The idea of independence, understood as the concept of regaining freedom, operated in the Poznań region in two different periods.

In the first period, which lasted until the mid-19th century, concepts of independence were developed in the spirit of Enlightenment, and then from the 1830s, in the spirit of Romanticism. At that time, three concepts of pro-independence thought were present in Greater Poland: one calling for an insurrection, one referring to limited sovereignty and one favouring revolution. The insurrectionist concept, initiated by the Bar Confederates, thrived during the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794 and the Prussian Partition period until 1806. In the period of the Duchy of Warsaw, insurrectionist slogans were replaced by a doctrine of limited sovereignty as part of a larger political structure going beyond the state. This model, treated by the Poznań elite as a transitional one, became fundamental in the Grand Duchy of Poznań after the Vienna Congress. When the November Uprising broke out, insurrectionist thought returned and prevailed in the 1830s and 1840s, in close connection with the Great Emigration. In the 1840s, it was the Poznań region that became the main centre of the three-partition uprising. After the failure of the Revolutions of 1848 and of the Poznań Uprising in 1848, the leaders of the Polish national movement returned to the concept of limited freedom as part of the Prussian state. Advocates of the concept, both ultramontanists and liberals, tried to implement it legally in German representative bodies, relying on the

terms adopted in Vienna.

In the second period, which lasted until the end of the Great War, the idea of independence moved into the background, representing merely a strategic objective. In terms of national action actually undertaken, pro-independence thought was barely visible. An analysis of various assumptions of pro-independence thought in the Poznań region during the Prussian Partition era allows for the distinguishing of several common features. Individual concepts were developed with the entire Polish nation, in all three partitions, in mind. In practice, the 1940s were the only time when the fight against the three occupiers was assumed, and Poznań was supposed to be the centre of actions. The maximum objective was to achieve sovereignty as in the pre-partition period, whereas the minimum objective was the independence of the Poznań region as part of the Prussian state. There were two opponents provided for in the plans: Prussia and Russia. The enemy, however was not the German or the Russian nation, but rather the legal and administrative structures of these powerful states.

According to the political thought of conservatives rooted in Poznań, Russia remained the main opponent until the end of the partition era. Pro-independence concepts were accompanied by a striving to find an external ally in the fights that were to come. In the vision of a future Europe, Poland was seen as this ally's sidekick. This feature was also evident in all of the emigration programmes developed by the Lambert Hotel faction, the democratic movement,

the revolutionary left and the Polish National Committee in Paris. Starting from the 1930s, pro-independence thought in the Poznań region was associated with the Slavophilic idea. Free Slavdom was an essential element of the vision of a free Poland.

Pro-independence thought in the Poznań region was initially shaped by rich land-owners and the nobility. From the 1940s, however, the role of the intelligentsia, the lower clergy and the common people slowly started to grow. The idea of freedom was becoming real as Polish society evolved from Enlightenment and Romanticism (which was most influential) to Organicism. The foundation of independence-related concepts lay in the conviction that the pursuit of freedom had to be combined with the modernisation of Polish society in the Prussian Partition. From the beginning of the partition era, Polish community leaders from the Poznań region consciously agreed that they did not want to be the object of Prussian reign, but rather the subject of their own fates. They were active in numerous areas that referred to matters such as insurrection, politics, social affairs, the economy, culture and education.

Activists were often advocates of both, insurrectionist and organicist, movements. They considered them both as paths leading to independence. It should be noted that the Poznań region did not witness a positivist breakthrough like the one in Warsaw. The Revolutions of 1848 and the Kulturkampf era (1871-1878), after which active national awareness became a common trait of the inhabitants of Greater Poland, were

important turning points. In the first half of the 19th century, Poznań-rooted advocates of irredentism believed that the territories of the Prussian Partition would regain freedom as a result of an armed uprising. An organised uprising that would rely on the nation's own strength, not necessarily providing for favourable circumstances or help from outside. Prussia's war against Russia was considered a favourable circumstance. From the 1880s, active liberals and democrats, later on members of the National League, national democrats and pioneers of the peasant movement even considered the possibility of Greater Poland citizens fighting the Germans upon the involvement of Germany in a war against Russia or any other superpower. Only due to Germany's weakness did they start to consider the outbreak of an uprising in the territory of the Prussian Partition as well-founded.

At the end of the 19th century, a new generation of Poles who did not know the bitter taste of defeat was raised in the Poznań region. People brought up in this era of positivism looked for new perspectives for the nation. It favoured the formation of new movements, organisations and modern political parties. Some organisations functioned legally, adapting themselves to applicable law (e.g. the Polish Gymnastic Society "Sokół", scouting in Greater Poland), others worked in conspiracy (Tomasz Zan Society, Association of the Polish Youth "Zet", Eleusis, PDS, Polish League and National League).

The country witnessed the growth of a new generation of positivists characterised by the Romantic spirit. The Congress of Grunwald held

in 1910 in Cracow was an important opportunity to undertake practical military action. As a result of agitation initiated by national democrats from Poznań, contrary to the ban imposed by the Prussian administrative authorities and despite strong objections from conservatives, approximately 500 people from the Poznań region, led by M. Seyda, left for Krakow. B. Chrzanowski, K. Rzepecki, C. Rydlewski, Z. Sokolnicka, A. Trepínski and K. Zakrzewski, who held patronage over the illegal youth movement, swiftly slowed down its radicalism. As a political party, (Polish Democratic Society since 1901) National Democracy officially avoided slogans referring to independence. The views of the national democrats from the Poznań region on the matter of Poland and its perspectives reflected the tendencies and goals of the National League. National democrats from Greater Poland underwent the same evolution as national democrats in other partitioned territories, considering Germans their greatest enemy. ND activists from the Prussian Partition, led by M. Seyda, W. Korfanty and B. Chrzanowski, approved the solution of the Polish matter suggested by Roman Dmowski. The prospect of uniting Polish lands and granting autonomous rights as part of Russia seemed encouraging. It gave hope for the fuller satisfaction of national ambitions and greater development of social and economic initiatives than under Prussian domination. It also meant that the Prussian acts on expropriation and associations (both of 1908) would not apply. Besides, the consequences of the Tzar's reign were barely visible in the Poznań region. Since 1903, this opinion was also shared by

representatives of the bourgeoisie, namely the peasant party's members which gathered around Roman Szymański and the "Orędownik" magazine.

In discussions among conservatives from the Prussian Partition, the matter of independence was barely raised. The issue was not part of their leading ideals, nor did it go beyond the limits of moderation they held so dear. Until the 1860s, conservatives were under pressure from the public who favoured the patriotic and Romantic approaches, and feared an outbreak of "national madness", namely revolution. Approval of Catholic universal values was expressed through the criticism and rejection of new, radical projects concerning the organisation of social life. The Poznań-based conservatives of the second half of the 19th century rejected a programme focused on fighting for independence, not because they did not want Poland to be free - at least there is evidence for that - but because they did not see the possibility of success in the foreseeable future. They considered themselves the protectors of national tradition.

Acknowledging the power of Germany and its attractiveness in terms of culture, they failed to notice the political changes in Europe or the appearance of strong anti-German tendencies that might affect the matter of Poland.

Conservatives in the Poznań region had little to offer in terms of independence. They called German authorities to abide by the laws concerning Poles, and requested the autonomy of the Poznań region. After 1912, conservatives and national democrats were partly brought together.

Facing the threat caused by the adoption of the appropriation act, the National Council (1913), led by Ludwik Mycielski, was formed. The main tasks of the Council included the education of the youth in a patriotic spirit and educational work in the borderlands of the Poznań region and among economic migrants.

The Polish Socialist Party of the Prussian Partition had to face particularly harsh conditions. Until 1910, in cooperation with the German Social Democratic Party, it advocated a programme of autonomy for the territories of the Prussian Partition. The growing reluctance of the SDP towards the PSP resulted from the fact that the pro-independence claims of the latter were becoming more and more radical, until they fully evolved into demands for full independence. The Polish socialist movement among ex-patriots in Germany and in the territory of the partition did not win broader support and was barely noticeable in cities such as Gniezno or Poznań.

