

# Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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## Organic work as a path to the 1918-1919 Greater Poland Uprising and to the independence of Poland

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Researchers of the 19th century have for a long time been arguing about the historical

significance of the organic work in Poland. Was it one of the paths leading to the independence of Poland, or merely to the survival of the Polish spirit during the occupation? In *The History of Poland*, Michał Bobrzyński wrote in 1929: "The Polish nation pursued its independence in two ways: by armed uprisings and by organic work.". This belief was consistently rejected by Witold Jakóbczyk, the most distinguished researcher of organic work. In the first volume of *Studies on the History of Greater Poland in the 19th Century*, published in 1951, he concluded that the organic work policy was "[...] a rather defensive programme and did not lead to independence [...]. It merely made it easier to retain nationality and to transform the Polish feudal society into a capitalist one [...]". In his last works (published in the 1980s) he also emphasised that the organic work in Greater Poland largely contributed to the survival of Polish identity. He claimed not to be exaggerating its historical significance. Stefan Kieniewicz, who, in his publications from the 1950s and 1960s shared this opinion, later changed his standpoint. In an article entitled *The Loss of Statehood and the Way To Regain It* he wrote that in the 19th century, different paths supposedly leading to independence were taken into account. In his further considerations, he distinguished eight of the most typical concepts and ways of action, including organic work.

A definitive settlement of the said dispute with reference to the entire period of national imprisonment seems unnecessary and unfounded. It should be emphasised, however, that some of the Organicists were driven by far-fetched goals.

When they decided to take the various initiatives, they assumed that they would modernise and gradually prepare Polish society for its fight for independence when the time came. Evidence of this is a confidential letter written in 1851 by Gustaw Potworowski, a leading representative of the Organicist movement in the region of Poznań, to landowner Wojciech Lipski, which says:

“Whatever events occur and whatever reasons for our actions arise, it is essential to make sure that the anticipated moment finds us prepared, and not surprised or materially or morally numb. I shall repeat it once again, when our moment of liberation comes [...], everyone, regardless of their past sympathies, will go where the banner of our liberation will be waving, with their eyes kept on Poland, with their hearts beating for Poland and with their weapons fighting for Poland.”

The term “organic work” was used for the first time by Jan Koźmian in 1848. In an article published in “Przegląd Poznański”, concerning the Revolutions of 1848 in the Poznań region, he wrote: “[...] it is up to the Poles if their Homeland will be reborn sooner or later; the path of all virtues, the love for everything that is Polish, the path of fair methods, commonality, sacrifice and organic work [underlined by - W.M.] activity and perseverance leads to Poland”. Slightly later, Marcelli Motty in his memoir of Karol Marcinkowski wrote that the doctor from Poznań “[...] showed us the need to unite individual, weak forces into one mighty force, and to carry out continuous organic work [underlined by - W.M.] to carry the weight of our nationality, the need to find a common measure to unite the dispersed

fragments of national life.”. Thus, it may be said that the term “organic work” was widely used in publications released in Poznań in the era of the Revolutions of 1848. However, it was soon forgotten. It appeared again in the Poznań press after the failure of the January Uprising, in propaganda materials encouraging people to promote different forms of national self-assistance, expand networks of industrial associations, savings & loan associations, peasants’ agricultural circles, parish libraries, singing societies, etc. An anonymous correspondent wrote in 1868 in “Dziennik Poznański” daily: “Today, when the existence of our element is threatened, when we are at risk of losing the people representing our nation, we are in need of an institution, in need of organic work, and of a broad moral and national infrastructure that would, provided its permanent nature, replace the missing people, and whose triple task [is – added by W.M.] to extract elements that are scarce in the higher classes of the nation from the lower classes, to promote national education [...] and to multiply national welfare.” In magazines published in Poznań in the next two decades, the term “organic work” was in common use not only in editorials or articles devoted to specific problems, but also in letters and other correspondence sent in by the readers.

Since Poland regained its independence in 1918, researchers have been using the term “organic work” rather freely, not to mention the publicists and politicians who consider themselves authorised to take a stand on it. Stefan Kieniewicz offered quite a broad definition of the term. He

considered it a “convenient and capacious bag”, into which all forms of individual and collective non-political activity, “beneficial to the country in one way or another”, may be thrown. Such forms included “the improvement of agriculture, the establishing of enterprises, banks and joint-stock companies, agricultural circles, co-operatives, amateur choirs, sports clubs, the popularisation of education (legal, half-legal and illegal) and scientific and cultural organisations”. For quite a long time now, most researchers have come to the agreement as to the fact that organic work covers the modernisation of the economy and all forms of promoting education. “Shouldn’t we – as Marek Czapliński aptly states – perceive the so-called organic work as an inseparable part of the activities, which, by the way, have remained largely unchanged in the course of history, aimed at the true Europeanisation (not in the sense of cosmopolitanism and loss of national identity!) and modernisation of Poland?”

The strategy of the Organicists – as aptly concluded by Przemysław Matusik – “did not result from any sophisticated ideologies or social theories. Its rules were drawn up in various places and at various points in the history of post-partition Poland; from Stanisław Staszic and the authors of the Warsaw Society of Friends of Arts and Sciences, to the positivists in the second half of the 19th century.”. In the history of Greater Poland, however, organic work played its greatest role, especially during the Prussian occupation era, when it significantly contributed to developing a separate ethos, so characteristic of the Greater Poland residents. According to

Stanisław Filipowicz, the programme of the Poznań-rooted Organicists was an offensive, not defensive, programme of combat and expansion, founded on its faith in the motivating force of the Polish spirit. With this force, Polish society was supposed to gradually modernise and become a modern society, based on the iron discipline of national goals, able to achieve independence in favourable circumstances. Organicists have frequently been opposed to Romanticists and insurgents. In the historical reality of the Prussian Partition, both attitudes, Romantic-insurrectionist and Organicist, were not contrary to each other and with every change of situation, they occurred simultaneously. Many Organicists in their youth, willing to release their enthusiasm or responding to addresses made by respected leaders, got actively involved in uprisings and underground movements (such as secret organisations of students).

As Tadeusz Łepkowski put it, organic works were “actually local, adapted to specific conditions and possibilities, different in each of the partitions.”. The chronological framework in which they developed was also different. It is not possible to provide exact start and end dates. Stefan Kieniewicz considered the year 1840 as an initial date for all of the Polish lands. Witold Jakóbczyk, however, moved that date to 1828 for Greater Poland, as it was when a group of broad-minded landowners attempted to establish the Society of Friends of Agriculture, Industry and Education. The Prussian authorities did not allow the formation of the Society, but its statute included the first advanced plan of specific activities aimed

at accelerating social and economic transformation and, consequently, strengthening Polish society. Witold Jakóbczyk, Stefan Kieniewicz and other contemporary researchers assumed that the year 1890 marked the end of the “organic work” era. As Stefan Kieniewicz wrote, it was when opportunities for the “landholding classes” to start broad activities based on political parties for the masses emerged. Although the work was not given up on, political parties still remained patrons of economic and educational organisations, which were, however, degraded to “an addition to the central front of political action.”. After 1890, organic work undoubtedly lost its prestige and its status as an independent political programme. The situation looks different from the perspective of the function of organic work in the process of modernising Polish society in the Prussian Partition. The turn of the 19th and 20th century brought about dynamic developments in various organisations established on the Organicists’ initiative in the previous decades (agricultural circles, industrial societies, saving & loan associations etc.), the operations of which considerably contributed to the growth of the economic force and national awareness of the Polish population. This is when the “fruits” of the organic work ripened, and Polish society was finally capable of succeeding in its fight against a much stronger opponent: the Prussian state and a part of the German population also taking part in the fight.

According to Stefan Kieniewicz, a particularly important domain of organic work was “spreading

national awareness among the masses and multiplying the number of patriots.”. The statement fully applies to the Prussian Partition, where activities raising national awareness among petty bourgeoisie, peasants and workers had a considerable share in “organic work”. Authors of the Organicist thought claimed that societies should be the core of patriotic undertakings. They were to be a place of patriotic education. Thus, the organisational structures of the Polish national movement were gradually expanded within the limits of the legal possibilities allowed within the Prussian state. In the region of Poznań, the directions of organic work initiatives were initially set by landowners’ agricultural associations, called “Kasyna” [Casinos] to confuse the Prussian authorities. They did not stand the test of time and turned out to be ephemeral. However, the Gostyń Kasyno, founded in 1835, for the next six years was a home for undertakings organised by the Organicists.

In 1841, two pillars of organic work were established in Poznań: The Bazar Hotel and the Scientific Help Society. The Bazar, located in the centre of Poznań, was not only a hotel with Polish shops and craft workshops (on the ground floor) that used their signboards to accentuate their presence in the heart of the city of merchants and craftsmen, but also, above other things, an institution which was home to the Polish national movement (the seat of Polish societies and a venue for the conventions and meetings of its leaders) and a centre of Polish cultural and social life. It may be said that it was a multi-functional



Polish “national house”. Its multi-functionality was a phenomenon, as no other place in Central Europe had so many functions at the same time. The fundamental task of the Scientific Help Society was to collect funds and grant financial support to the youth from poorer social classes. Hundreds of school-going children and students benefitted from its scholarships, one-off grants and loans. After obtaining a professional education, the beneficiaries became part of the intelligentsia and the increasingly powerful petty bourgeoisie. The Scientific Help Society not only supported poor students financially, but was also involved in patriotic and educational activities. The beneficiaries had to prove their progress in education and send papers on different subjects to the Society’s office. Many of them were grateful for the aid they had been granted, and, after achieving professional independence, they tried to pay the debt back to society, frequently by engaging themselves in political and social work, often combining a high professional level with social acumen. These beneficiaries included some of the most active participants of the Polish national movement. The Scientific Help Society was the longest-running society in Poland. Despite crises, which were impossible to avoid in its long period of activity, it survived from the year of its founding in 1841 to the end of the partition era, and served Polish society even in the Second Polish Republic. The longevity of the Scientific Help Society and its resistance to the Prussian attempts at its liquidation was very important for other Polish societies established later. They drew inspirations from its experiences and followed its example.

In the era of the Revolutions of 1848, the Organicists from Poznań were given the opportunity to spread the ideas pursued by their societies. On 25 June 1848, on the initiative of August Cieszkowski, a group of Polish deputies in Berlin set up a society named the Polish League. The League, established in full compliance with the law, was to help lift the Polish nationality up. Its founders wanted to implement a broad programme of civic education addressed to the masses, to counteract the Prussian propaganda praising the alleged benefits offered by the king, and also the emigration-related revolutionary propaganda. Organisers of poviats leagues, which were later to form the lowest links, i.e. parish leagues, were quickly appointed. The organisational work on this new form of Polish activity proceeded fast; at the end of 1848, there were nearly 246 district and local leagues operating in the region of Poznań and in West Prussia. According to a report from 1849, the Polish League had 37271 members (the data was, however, incomplete, because not all of the local leagues sent their reports to the headquarters), so it was one of Europe's first mass organisations. A complete description of its activity would be quite extensive and would certainly go beyond the subject of this article. However, its activities in the arenas of promoting patriotism and education have been presented below. The League did not become as extensive as its leaders, including August Cieszkowski, had expected, because soon many landowners became indifferent to its activities. Some of the district leagues, however, could boast great achievements. Every week, appointed lecturers gathered local people (mostly

on Saturday afternoons or Sundays after the mass) to read newspapers or to discuss current political events and issues related to civic education. During the meetings, they encouraged townspeople and peasants to make sacrifices for the nation. According to the reports published in "Gazeta Polska", the meetings were attended by crowds of people from the neighbourhood. It can be assumed, therefore, that, at least in some of the poviats, the League's activity had a significant impact on raising the national awareness of the Polish masses. Unfortunately, on 11 March 1850, the Prussian Parliament adopted an act prohibiting the existence of political associations with central headquarters and well-developed organisational field structures, which brought the activities of this mass organisation to an end.

The Act contributed to the fall of the Polish League and other Polish organisations. Only a few of them (landowners' agricultural societies of the Scientific Help Society) managed to survive the difficult period of Prime Minister Otto von Manteuffel's rule (1850-1858). At the end of the 1850s, when the Prussian authorities eased the administrative pressure as part of liberalising political life, new organisations emerged and existing ones started to develop in the Grand Duchy of Poznań. Firstly, there was the Central Economic Society, established in 1861, which gathered together landowners' agricultural societies in poviats. The Society focused on those economic affairs related to the interests of landowners. Organisations of townspeople were developing very slowly, especially outside of larger cities. Although the Industrial Society was

founded in 1849 in Poznań, a larger number of such organisations were established only as a result of a wave of national repression in the 1870s. The organisations were mostly composed of merchants, craftsmen and journeymen, but they also included priests, doctors and lawyers, who were often their leaders. Their core activity was “promoting morality, education and welfare” among the petty bourgeoisie by organising specialist courses, lectures, dancing events and excursions, establishing self-assistance loan facilities, etc. At the end of the 19th century, a tendency towards centralisation of the movement appeared among these dispersed associations. In July 1895, delegates, who came to Poznań, agreed to establish the Association of Industrial Societies in the German Reich, which was to support local societies in their activities aimed at “improving the handicraft, industry and profitability”. Initially, the Association grew very slowly, it became more dynamic only in the years preceding the outbreak of World War I. At the beginning of 1914, it included 163 societies, which were jointly composed of nearly 11 thousand members.

An important and also one of the crucial segments of the Poznań organisational system were commercial enterprises. The Savings & Loan Society established in 1850 in Śrem is considered to be the oldest one. The Loan Society for Poznań Industrialists, founded in 1861 on the initiative of Hipolit Cegielski, was better known. As time passed, more and more companies were established in the form of people’s banks and loan&savings associations, composed of merchants, craftsmen, peasants, priests etc. They

accumulated savings and granted cheap loans to its members, mostly for the purchase of raw materials and tools. Priests Augustyn Szamarzewski and Piotr Wawrzyniak, later patrons of the Association of Commercial and Economic Companies for the Grand Duchy of Poznań and West Prussia, had a considerable share in their development. In 1913, there were 221 Polish people's banks, with 140 thousand members, in the Prussian Partition.

Parish agricultural circles were set up for the peasants. The first one was founded in 1862 by Julian Karasiewicz in Piaseczno, West Prussia. It became an example for similar initiatives, also in the region of Poznań. The patrons of the associations were landowners and priests, who, in a period when political parties were taking shape, inhibited in a way, the political maturity of peasants. The rapid increase in the number of circles in the region of Poznań was a result of the activity of their long-term patron (until 1901) Maksymilian Jackowski. Each of the circles held, on average, 6-8 meetings a year, participated in by 50-75% of its members. Topics discussed at the meetings included land cultivation techniques, cattle and pig farming, agricultural accounting, horticulture, apiculture, etc. Other issues that were discussed included the raising of children in a national and Catholic spirit, elections to the Prussian parliament, etc. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a dense network of 395 agricultural circles with, jointly, 14500 members. Participation in the circles' activities taught their members organisational culture and the skill of public activity. It was also

an elementary school of engagement for emancipated peasants.

Pope Leon XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum*, published in 1891, encouraged people to establish Catholic worker societies. Although the first worker society in the Poznań region was set up only in 1893 (at the "fara" parish in Poznań), in the following years, thanks to the involvement of the clergy, the Catholic social movement started to develop very fast. In 1900, the Union of Catholic Societies of Polish Workers, including 40 societies, was established, whereas the beginning of the 20th century brought their further growth. Before World War I, the Union consisted of 276 societies, which jointly included approximately 31 thousand members. The activity of these Catholic societies (or Christian unions) of workers mostly consisted of combating socialism, promoting a conciliatory attitude towards employers among the proletariat, strengthening their religious beliefs and relations with the Church and pursuing educational activities among workers and their children, in the national and Catholic spirit.

Over time, Gymnastic Societies "Sokół" ("Falcon") also became a mass movement. The first gymnastic circle (nest) of "Sokół" was founded in 1884 in Inowrocław. More nests were soon set up in other towns in the Poznań region and in West Prussia, although they had great difficulties with finding proper premises and exercise equipment. They mostly included young craftsmen, petty merchants, private officials and workers. In 1893, the nests were associated into the Association of Greater Poland "Sokół" Nests, which two years

later transformed into the Union of Polish Falcons in the German state. The central role in it was played by the Main Division, which was patiently and vigorously building field structures and subjugated individual nests. The development of the association gained momentum after 1904, which was manifested by a fast increase in the number of nests (from 90 to 291, with nearly 12 thousand members in 1913).

The development of singing societies was just as dynamic. The societies originated from church choirs, home choirs, singing sections of industrial societies and other organisations. The first independent singing societies were founded in the late 1860s ("Cecylia" in 1867 in Toruń and "Harmonia" in 1869 in Poznań). In the 1880s, many new singing societies were established. In 1892, during a convention in Poznań, leading activists created the Union of Polish Singing Circles in the Grand Duchy of Poznań, which comprised 13 choirs. In 1913, Poznań was home to 123 choirs, which frequently undertook other forms of cultural and educational actions. Their members usually came from petty bourgeoisie families, and, to a lesser extent, from the intelligentsia and peasant families.

The educational impact of the unions and associations was complemented by the so-called "people's libraries", established, with great financial and organisational effort, all around the Prussian Partition. The first libraries were set up in Poznań as early as the 1840s, but it was only the People's Education Society, founded in 1872 in Poznań, that contributed to the larger expansion of their network. Owing to the

dedicated work of a small group of activists, within several years the Society achieved considerable success, distributed a few thousand books and founded over 100 new parish libraries. In 1878, the Society was dissolved by the Prussian authorities. There were, however, other libraries and experienced activists, who two years later (on 4 October 1880), at a meeting in the Bazar, founded a new organisation called the People's Libraries Society. Its activity was extensive, covering the establishment of dozens of new libraries, providing them with numerous books and involving craftsmen, peasants and workers as librarians. At the end of 1906, there were 693 active libraries in the Poznań region. The books they offered were mostly publications concerning religious and moralistic issues, popular stories, songbooks etc.

Over time, women were becoming more and more involved in Polish national life in the territories of the Prussian Partition, although the first modern Polish women's associations were established only at the end of the 19th century. In late May 1894, nearly 50 women representing intelligentsia and bourgeoisie founded an association "Warta", which, while committed to ensuring that the Polish spirit was maintained among children and adolescents, were mostly preoccupied with organising private tuition. From 1900, a rapid increase in the number of women's associations in the Poznań region was observed. The organisational movement among the women of Greater Poland ran in two directions. The first one included associations that performed educational and cultural functions ("Warta",



Libraries for Women, the Association of Female Landowners), while the second one covered self-help organisations, the main purpose of which was to handle professional and economic affairs in compliance with the current social order. Patrons of these organisations were priests, and their members were mostly female workers, peasants, shopkeepers etc. In 1906, the Association of Polish Societies of Working Women, with its seat in Poznań, was established. It expanded fast and in 1913 it was composed of 29 women's societies.

When the number of Polish women's societies operating in the territories of the Prussian Partition had increased considerably, the idea appeared to bring them together in a federation, similar to that of the unions of men's societies. Having overcome a number of obstacles, the female delegates of Greater Polish, Pomeranian and Silesian societies founded the Union of Polish Women's Educational Societies in the German Reich on 7 February 1909 in Poznań. It was initially composed of merely 7 societies, but more of them joined over time. In 1913, it comprised 30 women's organisations (including, in total, 3092 members) active in the Poznań region, West Prussia and among exiles in Germany. At the founding convention, the issues which the greatest attention was paid to were the immediate goals and aspirations of the delegates of associations from Greater Poland representing the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia.

As the years passed, the network of economic, educational and vocational organisations was becoming more dense, more extensive and multi-

layered (representing many classes). It covered all of the classes of the Polish population: landowners and intelligentsia, petty bourgeoisie, peasants, agricultural holders and the urban proletariat. In many cities and villages, several or even a dozen Polish associations were operating at the same time. Most of the residents of these cities or towns were members of a few associations simultaneously and participated in their meetings, lectures, skill improvement courses, celebrations of national anniversaries, etc. The impact of these organisations was systematically expanding, and at the beginning of the 20th century, the Polish movement became a mass movement, one of the largest ones among national minorities in Europe at that time. It is, however, difficult to provide an exact number of the people taking part in national life, because currently the available data on the number of members of individual organisations do not concern one year, but various different years, frequently distant from each other. Marian Seyda – editor of the popular “Kurier Poznański” – estimated the number of people involved in the movement defending Polish nationality before World War I at approximately 140000.

The majority of Polish organisations had – as the above considerations prove – a specific social profile. However, their central goal was broadly understood - national education. In other words, they mostly handled; education, organisation of social life, teaching Polish, spreading knowledge on the history and culture of Poland, and, to a lesser extent, economic or vocational activities. Industrial associations combined vocational

training with a general education on national history, culture and duties. They also promoted the exemplary model of a Polish merchant and a small entrepreneur, proficient in his profession, fair to his customers and competitors, who raises his children and subordinates in the national spirit, reading Polish newspapers, active in associations and supporting Polish national and cultural needs. Peasants' circles promoted agricultural progress in rural areas, but also performed educational and national tasks. Lectures and discussions held at their meetings tackled problems related to raising children, cultivating folk songs and customs, good cooperation with neighbours, etc. They taught that a good housemaster should raise his children in the national spirit, be religious and decent, nurture Polish folk customs, subscribe to Polish newspapers, read popular books on the history and geography of Poland, take part in fund-raising events for national purposes and vote for Polish candidates to the Prussian and German parliament.

The Catholic workers' associations also considerably contributed to the dissemination of Polish national awareness. They were not typical trade unions, but rather organisations aimed at educating their members in the Catholic and national spirit. In magazines and during meetings, the workers were constantly reminded that the family home is the only school for Polish children, and that they should therefore teach their children to read and write in Polish.

The activities of the workers' associations were anxiously observed by the Prussian authorities.

One police report (from 10 January 1906) expressed the following opinion on the Union of Catholic Societies of Workers and its branches: "[...] their common goal is to maintain the Polish national awareness of its members. They want to do it by cultivating Polish speech, Polish songs and customs, by teaching the history of Poland and by respecting national traditions. If their statutes include a provision on lectures, they mean education through reading Polish books and listening to Polish lectures. Social issues are of lesser importance to them. They were just used as propaganda to attract new members."

The nests of "Sokół" were also targeted at shaping a "true civic, national spirit, capable of sacrifice at any time" in their members.

According to Witold Jakóbczyk, the share of cultural activity was higher than the share of gymnastic exercise. The nests organised evening meetings where songs were sung and patriotic poems were recited, as well as celebrations of national anniversaries. As part of the so-called higher courses, adolescents from merchant, handicraft and worker families were educated in Polish literature, history and geography. Singing societies did not only organise concerts, amateur performances or public events, they also disseminated Polish culture, taught the Polish language and organised lectures on subjects concerning Polish history, literature and music; they also participated in celebrations of historical anniversaries organised in cities and towns by other associations. Conventions of singing circles from the entire Prussian Partition, disseminating national awareness among the masses, were a

form of patriotic manifestations. The last one before the World War I, organised in Poznań (28-29 June 1914), gathered nearly 4000 participants. Its central event was a concert of patriotic songs performed by a mixed choir composed of almost 3100 singers.

In conclusion, it has to be stated that the strongly developed system of Polish organisations before the outbreak of the First World War, was the crowning success of the idea of the associations promoted by the Organicists since the 1840s. Associations educated the middle classes, peasants and workers. An important role was also played by newspapers and magazines and celebrations of historical anniversaries and rallies, which cannot be described in detail, as this would exceed the framework of this particular article. The function of the associations was, however, crucial. They organised meetings, events, etc., the participants of which were encouraged to read Polish newspapers, to be ready to make sacrifices for the nation and to take part in elections and rallies. Thus, it may be stated that organic work played a fundamental role in fostering active national awareness among the population. In the years preceding World War I, the majority of the Polish population in the region of Poznań were characterised by a high national awareness. Without it, the Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919, which was not only victorious, but also the most popular and democratic of all of the Polish national uprisings, would not have been so strongly supported by Polish society, including the petty bourgeoisie, peasants and workers

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