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# Polish Chicago and the Struggle for a Free and Independent Poland

Several questions troubled Polish society in the second half of the 19th century. The Polish Question haunted Europe, but it posed a particularly vexing problem for those who continued to consider themselves Polish after the upheavals that ended with the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The French Revolution had unleashed changes across the continent. The ideas of citizenship and national identity transformed European society. The continued spread of capitalism and industrialization altered the economic landscape. Poland, dismembered and under foreign occupation, did not at first fully participate in these developments. In the nineteenth century, the nation struggled to regain its independence from the three partitioning powers – Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary – that occupied Poland. While the three empires might have been competing with each other, they all agreed that a Polish state should not reemerge on the map of Europe.

Major uprisings, led largely by Poland's upper classes, broke out in all three partitions throughout the nineteenth century, and each ended in disastrous defeat. Peasants, for the most part, either ignored or opposed these rebellions, often seeing the occupying empires as their protectors or benefactors against the Polish nobility. Polish aristocrats and the lower gentry, looked down on the peasantry, whom they exploited and often did not consider to be true Poles. After the tragic defeat of the 1863 insurrection against the Czarist Empire, however, both Polish noblemen and intellectuals looked to the 'folk' to help bring about the resurrection of the Polish state. The identification of the peasantry as the soul of the nation soon emerged [Kieniewicz; Keely Stauter-Halsted; *The Lands*].

This recognition occurred just as the huge economic flight from the Polish lands began in earnest. This peasant migration, or *Za Chlebem*, occurred after the emancipation of the peasantry from serfdom took place, first in German occupied Poland and later in both the Austrian and Russian Partitions. The mass of peasants heading for German and Dutch ports, and thence sailing for the New World perplexed the Polish gentry and intelligentsia, as the concept of nationalism transformed Europe. The emigration and the rise of nationalism presented the question of just who was a Pole?

Throughout most of Polish history, the peasantry was seen as alien, whether they were Polish speaking or spoke one of the other tongues of the Commonwealth such as Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ruthenian, Czech, or German. Jews, of course, made up the ultimate outsiders in Poland, as they did throughout Europe at the time. Before the nineteenth century rise of European nationalism this meant little to Polish unity. Afterwards, who was considered a Pole and who was not would mean a great deal. By the end of the nineteenth century these neighbors emerged as the 'other'. What this meant for the future resurrection of Poland posed a problem to Polish elites. The development of national feeling among peasants proved to be a crucial factor in the rebirth of the Polish state. Polish speaking peasants developed feelings of loyalty to the idea of Poland whereas previously they had simply been subjects of the Polish Commonwealth [Kopczyński and Tygielski].

In the mid-nineteenth century Austro-Hungarian Galicia grew to be a hotbed of Polish nationalism. Lwów, with its lively cultural and political life as the provincial capital, provided a conduit for the revival of the Polish state. From 1867, Poles had largely controlled this outer province of the Hapsburg state. Led by the nobility and a growing intellectual elite based both in Kraków and Lwów, the province essentially developed on its own. Lwów played a very important role in the independence movement and as a link to the diaspora.

Meanwhile Chicago, the largest Polish settlement overseas, emerged as the capital of the diaspora. The city became the home of the most important fraternal groups in the United States and Polish Chicagoans developed a strong sense of Polish identity and Polish

patriotism. The Polish communities in Lwów and Chicago made an important connection before 1900. Intellectuals and politicians in Lwów emphasized the fact that emigrants were not lost to the Polish cause [Pacyga Chapter 1; Dabrowski Chapter 4].

This relationship proved crucial once World War One broke out in 1914. At first the Chicago Polonia found itself in a difficult position. Divided politically between those who supported either Józef Piłsudski or Roman Dmowski. In addition, Polish Chicago, like the entire American Polonia, was also divided over the idea of Polishness. Who was a Pole? Could a Jew be a Pole? A secularist? An atheist? A Protestant? What about someone of Lithuanian, Belarusian, or Ukrainian descent? Most Poles felt that a resurrected Poland would contain all the lands and the ethnic groups lost during the partitions [The United States 59; Pacyga Chapter 2].

Poland saw her youth fighting on both sides of the struggle. Józef Piłsudski supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire against Russia, while those who sided with Roman Dmowski condemned Germany and hoped for the victory of the Entente Cordiale composed of France, Great Britain, and Russia. Polish Chicagoans had a mixed reaction; while all hoped that the end of the war would result in a free and independent Poland, most feared that the country would be devastated by the fighting and that none of the warring empires had Poland's interests in mind.

Chicago's *Dziennik Związkowy* lamented this lack of unity in both Polonia and Poland and complained that this curse hung over both the nation and the diaspora. While wishing for a Russian and Slavic victory, the *Dziennik Związkowy* also hoped that the war would weaken Russia and so that Poland could rise and also settle her score with the Czarist Empire. Furthermore, the *Dziennik Związkowy* proclaimed, "... we see in the defeat of Germany the defeat of our everlasting oppressors, the defeat of monarchism and, by the same token, the defeat of Russian czarism, which, although it will emerge victorious from the war with the Germans, will be weakened and will pave the way toward revolution!" The newspaper thus predicted the destruction of all three empires, something that could only be considered a Polish fantasy in 1914 [*Dziennik Związkowy* 1 Aug. 1914; 14 Aug. 1914].

Polish Day, Sunday January 24, 1915, provided one of the first displays of organized reaction to the fighting. Planned under the auspices of a new group that had come into being in Chicago the previous October, *Polski Centralny Komitet Ratunkowy* (PCKR or Polish Central Relief Committee), it received support from all of the major Polish American organizations. Earlier on January 20, Mayor Carter Harrison, Jr. of Chicago issued a proclamation encouraging all the people of Chicago to take part in tag days to raise money for Polish Relief on January 23 and 24. He established a Polish Day committee that included a wide cross section of Chicago's Polish clergy, aldermen, and leaders, as well as prominent non-Poles such as Julius Rosenwald and Charles M. Dawes. The Polish Day raised \$250,000 (\$6,119,650 in today's money) for humanitarian aid to the devastated Polish lands [*Dziennik Związkowy* 12 Jan. 1915, 21 Jan. 1915; Pienkos 107-108].

Much of the leadership of Chicago's major Polish institutions had lived in the German partition and held a hatred for Berlin and what they saw as its anti-Polish policies. As a result, it was natural for these leaders to support Dmowski and his anti-German attitude. The alliance of Ignacy Jan Paderewski with Dmowski further strengthened this tendency. Paderewski was perhaps the best known musician of his time and was extremely popular in Chicago among Poles and non-Poles alike. Known as both an exceptional artist and a Polish patriot, he paid numerous visits during the war to Chicago to rally Polish Chicagoans to the Polish cause and to raise money both for Polish Relief Aid and for the Polish Army organized in the diaspora.

Indeed, some hoped to establish a Polish Army in the United States, but it proved futile to attempt to do so while the country remained neutral. Nevertheless, relief aid could be raised, and this would bring the Polish Question to the forefront of American public opinion. As the war continued, it became more and more evident that physical destruction and famine had devastated the Polish lands. The Nobel Prize winning author, Henryk Sienkiewicz, made a personal appeal to the United States to send aid to the stricken country. He represented a group organized in Vevey, Switzerland, allied with Dmowski, and served as president of the General Relief Committee for the victims of War in Poland. Paderewski acted as vice-president

of the group. The committee appealed for American aid, pointing out that Poland was the eastern equivalent of Belgium, which had also been ravaged by the fighting. Paderewski arrived in Chicago in 1915 and addressed some 50,000 Polish Chicagoans in Humboldt Park marking the annual celebration of the anniversary of the Polish constitution adopted in the eighteenth century [*Dziennik Związkowy*, 15 March 1915; *Naród Polski* 19 May 1915; Pienkos 108].

The following year Paderewski returned to Chicago to plead for his war-stricken country. Bryan and Lynde Lathrop, who played an important part in raising war relief funds for the population of Europe, organized a Polish Benefit Concert at the Chicago Auditorium. Paderewski was to be the star attraction as some 4,000 Chicagoans gathered in the beautiful theater to hear the maestro play and to make his plea for aid to the Polish populace on February 6, 1916.

A stream of men and women made their way in automobiles, streetcars, and on foot to the concert. In the automobiles were wealthy society leaders who sat in the most expensive box seats for the concert. Hundreds of others purchased seats on the floor of the Auditorium. Polish immigrants sat in the topmost galleries to get a glimpse of Paderewski and to show their support for Poland. Inside the lobby, Polish boys and girls in traditional costumes sold programs, pictures of Paderewski, and dolls created by Polish artists and distributed by Helena Paderewska to raise funds for Polish Relief. They sold sixty dolls and brought in a contribution of \$664.50 for Polish War Relief (over \$15,000 in today's money). Programs sold for only 25 cents – but one Polish girl, Florence Dalkowska, sold \$147 worth and collected other funds as well. The program began at 3:30 p.m. with the singing of the Polish National Anthem and the hymn "America." After the choir left the stage, Paderewski appeared, standing before a huge Polish flag.

Paderewski asked the audience to pardon his English, and made a fervent appeal for Polish Relief Aid. His voice shook with emotion as he raised his arms above his head as if appealing to the hundreds of his country people sitting high above in the galleries to aid him in making the prosperous Americans sitting in the more expensive seats to understand the needs of Poland. Paderewski told the audience of Poland's glorious history and of the terrible crime

committed by the three empires that had partitioned her. He proclaimed that Poland had fallen because it had exhausted itself defending Europe. The pianist said the nation had disappeared from the map of Europe, because it had stood for “chivalry, humanity, and Christianity.”

Paderewski explained Poland’s condition during the Great War. Poland lay devastated as the Eastern Front was largely fought across the ancient Republic’s territory. Poles fought on both sides of the conflict as they had been conscripted into the German, Austrian, and Russian armies. Paderewski claimed that some 2,500,000 Poles had fought on the Eastern Front and that three quarters had been killed or wounded – and this in defense of their national oppressors. The country was devastated – cattle, crops, supplies of all kinds had been destroyed. Women and children starved and villages ruined by the warring armies. He asked the audience to remember Pulaski and Kosciuszko’s contribution to American independence. With those words the maestro rallied Chicago’s support for Polish War Relief. Paderewski then played a brief Chopin program, finishing with a rousing “Polonaise” and thrilled the audience with several encores. Chicago’s Polonia was firmly rooted in the industrial working class. Most Polish Chicagoans had little money, but they offered what they could. A typical ten-dollar contribution came from Martin Domikowski, who worked in the steel mills of East Chicago, Indiana. This was actually quite a large donation given the pay of an unskilled industrial worker. The event raised a total of \$40,000 (more than \$9,000,000 in today’s money) [*Chicago Tribune* 7 Feb. 1916, 8 Feb. 1916, 9 Feb. 1916; Paderewski].

Paderewski and his wife Madam Helena Paderewska became the most prominent leaders of the attempt to raise funds to help the Polish population during World War One. Poland’s suffering helped mobilize American support for the country’s resurrection. While the international effort to send relief to Poland proved complicated and eventually, by the end of 1916, ended in defeat, it gained massive public sympathy for Poland. The failure to aid the starving Polish population promoted the idea of the rebirth of the Polish state in the American public’s eye [Biskupski Chapter 5].

President Wilson proclaimed January 1, 1916 Polish Relief Day. Chicago’s Polonia leaders sent a telegram of thanks to the White House. *Dziennik Związkowy*

addressed the question in February with an editorial calling for American aid to the Polish people. In March, Archbishop George W. Mundelein proclaimed Sunday April 2 as Polish Day in the Chicago Archdiocese, and all parishes, regardless of ethnic identification, made collections for Polish Relief. Mundelein also made a personal contribution to the cause.

On May 28, 1916 Chicago’s Poles celebrated two holidays; the 125th anniversary of the May 3rd Constitution and a tribute to Thaddeus Kosciuszko. A parade of roughly 30,000 people made its way through the Northwest Side of the city, that ended at the Kosciuszko monument in Humboldt Park. The rally put forward a resolution demanding Polish independence. That evening, Polonia celebrated with a banquet in the Auditorium Hotel on Michigan Avenue. [*Dziennik Związkowy* 26 Feb. 1916; *Naród Polski* 22 March 1918, 7 June 1916; Biskupski 139; Pienkos 108]

Later that year, as international diplomatic efforts at coordinating relief for the beleaguered nation faltered, the major Polish organizations, nearly all headquartered in Chicago, again sent a message asking for President Wilson’s assistance. As 1916 came to an end, the Polish Central Relief Committee in Chicago called for participation in a great fair to raise more funds on January 10, 1917 at the Chicago Coliseum on South Wabash Avenue. The Committee requested that representatives of all Polish societies attend an organizational meeting at the Polish Women’s Alliance Building. The appeal pointed to similar festivals held in Detroit and New York City [*Naród Polski* 5 Jan. 1916, 19 July 1916; *Dziennik Związkowy* 4 Dec. 1916, 9 Dec. 1916].

As a result of Poland’s partition among Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, the Polish political response to the war remained fragmented in both Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, the position of Chicago’s Polonia was increasingly to favor the Entente, and therefore Poland’s Dmowski faction. Meanwhile Paderewski emerged as the voice not only of Polish relief, but also of Polish independence in the United States. In addition, Chicago’s John F. Smulski, the inheritor of his father’s publishing empire, as well as a successful businessman and politician in his own right, joined as a powerful ally of Paderewski [Biskupski Chapter 6].

On April 6, 1917, the United States Congress declared war on Germany and the Central Powers. Chicago's Polonia quickly answered the call to arms. On April 7, the National Department of the Central Polish Relief Committee, with its Chicago-dominated Executive Committee, telegraphed President Wilson offering their loyalty and their willingness to place at his disposal all the strength and resources at their command. Polonia obviously wanted to insure Wilson of its loyalty to the American and Allied cause, especially now that Polish independence, with access to the sea had become a goal of the Allies. The announcement had many ramifications for the diaspora on the local, national, and international level. The end of American neutrality freed the Polish community to raise a Polish Army in North America to fight on the Western Front. With the declaration of President Wilson's Thirteen Points, an independent Poland with access to the sea became an allied goal. The Bolshevik Revolution took Russia out of the war later that year and the Central Powers now occupied all of historic Poland, which enabled the Allies to promote the objective of Polish nationhood. [*Dziennik Związkowy* 7 Apr. 1917]

Polish men volunteered in large numbers for the American Armed Forces. One estimate claimed Poles, both foreign and American-born, made up 42,000 of the first 100,000 men to volunteer. Eventually, as many as 300,000 Polish Americans served in uniform [Pienkos 111]. On Sunday June 3, 1917, the Chicago Polonia showed its organizational strength and patriotism with a huge parade and demonstration to mark the annual Kosciuszko and Polish Constitution Day celebrations. Marchers assembled at the PNA Headquarters on Division and Noble Streets at 1:00 p.m.. Polish Chicanos gathered at the building decorated in Polish and American national colors. Thousands filled the streets, boulevards, and Humboldt Park at the site of the Kosciuszko monument, where a platform stood filled with dignitaries. American and Polish flags decorated the parade route.

The PNA Commissioner Adam Majewski rose to open the program at 3:30 p.m.. After a few words of introduction, he called upon the demonstration's chairman, Julius Smietanka, to address the crowd. Applause broke out during his speech, in which he called for the full support of Polonia for the American

war effort and for an independent Poland. He summoned the youth to enlist in the United States Army as volunteers and urged the purchase of Liberty Bonds. The orchestra followed with a rendering of "America" and the hymn, *Patrz, Kosciuszko, na nas z nieba* ("Watch Us from Heaven, Kosciuszko"). The activist and Polish patriot cleric, Rev. Władysław Zapała, reminded the immense throng that Kosciuszko had donned the peasant cloak and fought for their liberty as well as Poland's. The gathering adopted a resolution in the name of the estimated crowd of 40,000 Polish Americans in attendance and vowed to sacrifice everything for the freedom of both countries. The assembly ended with the singing of *Boże, coś Polskę* [*God Save Poland*] [*Dziennik Związkowy* 4 Jun. 1917].

On June 4 1917, the French government permitted the creation of an independent Polish Army on its territory. The United States War Department agreed that the recruitment for the Polish Army could take place within the United States and its territories the following October. On October 25, the annual meeting of the PCKR opened at the Polish Women's Alliance Hall on Ashland Avenue. Delegates from major Polonia centers attended. In addition to collecting funds to help those suffering in Poland, funds were also allocated to aid German-held Polish prisoners. The relief committee further passed a resolution to create a Polish Army to fight side by side with the Allies. The motion also requested Polish American priests to issue the call to arms from every pulpit and further expressed thanks to Allied Powers and especially to the United States and France for allowing the creation of the Polish Army.

On Sunday September 9, 1917 thousands marched to the Kosciuszko monument in Humboldt Park to receive the visiting Franco-Polish military mission and to honor yet again Kosciuszko as the Polish hero of the American Revolution. American, French, and Polish colors decorated neighborhood homes. At nine o'clock in the morning, Polish organizations gathered on Division Street to conduct the visitors from France to St. Stanislaus Kostka Church. After Mass, organizers took the visitors to the Washington Monument in Washington Park on the South Side. When they returned that afternoon, a parade took place to the Kosciuszko monument. Despite the rain, about 10,000 spectators followed the procession. The French representative,

Henri Franklin Bouillon and Lt. Waclaw Gąsiorowski of the Polish Army in France, placed wreaths on the Kosciuszko monument. A telegram pledging the support of 400,000 Chicago Poles was sent to the French President Raymond Poincaré. The importance of this cannot be underestimated, it bound the American Polonia in general, and the Chicago Polonia in particular, to the Polish war effort. Those men who would volunteer and be sent to France and later to Poland served as Polish soldiers, under Polish command, and fought for an undeniably Polish cause [*Dziennik Związkowy*, 10 Sep. 1917; *Chicago Tribune* 10 Sep. 1917; *Hapak* 38-60].

The organization of a Polish Army in the United States instantly became a cause célèbre in the Polish community. While only a small minority of Polish Americans volunteered for what became known as the Blue Army or Haller's Army, it provided a potent symbol for Polonia to prove its allegiance to the cause of Polish independence. Eventually over 30,000 Poles in the diaspora joined the Polish Army. The American government, however, stipulated that only the foreign born Poles who had not yet taken out citizenship papers, were not heads of families, not born in the United States, not in the process of volunteering for the American Armed Forces, or were not within the age range of the draft, that is twenty-one to thirty years of age, could join the Polish Army. By November, eighteen Polish recruiting centers had opened across the United States and Canada. Training facilities operated at Fort Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario and St. John, Canada. In December a second training camp opened at Fort Niagara, New York. The first contingent shipped out to France in February 1918 [*Dziennik Związkowy* 10 Oct. 1917, 16 Oct. 1917; Pienkos 112-113; Valasek 156].

On October 14, 1917, between 25,000 to 40,000 Poles and their supporters gathered at the Dexter Park Pavilion to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Kosciuszko and to present the first battle flags to the Polish Army. At 1:00 p.m. crowds began to fill the streets around St. Joseph's Parish as marchers arrived at Słowacki Hall (Columbia Hall) on 48th Street, designated as the starting point for the parade to the pavilion at 43rd and Halsted Street. Recent volunteers for the Polish Army and members of various Polish societies took part in the spectacle. At 3:30 p.m.

the parade set out for the Dexter Park Pavilion. The Dexter Park stage held the representatives of allied governments and the armies of the United States, France, England, and Poland. Paderewski addressed the crowd for over an hour and presented the flags to the troops. When the ceremony concluded after 9:00 p.m., the assembly collected \$13,560 (\$259,129 in today's money) to support the Blue Army [Valasek 37; *Dziennik Związkowy* 15 Oct. 1917; *Naród Polski* 24 Oct. 1917; *Chicago Tribune* 15 Oct. 1917].

Polish settlements across the city held rallies. On March 25, 1918 Madam Helena Paderewska spoke to Polish women from across the city at Pulaski Hall. She spoke to the crowd on behalf of the children of war-torn Poland and asked for contributions to the Polish Army. Madam Paderewska, like her illustrious husband, had worked fervently for the Polish cause. She sold dolls, made by Polish artists in France, to raise money for relief for her war-ravaged homeland and organized the "Circle of Girls for Girls" a group of young Polish women who sold Polish and American flags at various events to raise funds. The International Red Cross had refused to organize a Polish Red Cross unit. As a result, Polonia, with the urging of Helena Paderewska, organized a group called the Polish White Cross to support the Blue Army [*Dziennik Związkowy* 11 March 1918, 13 March 1918, 15 March 1918, 16 March 1918, 18 March 1918, 28 March 1918; *Chicago Tribune*, 5 Apr. 1918; Grassman and Niklinska].

Not only did Polish Americans join the armed forces, but they also participated in Liberty Loan Drives and those involved in the various drives played an important role in the war effort. Jan Smulski reported that during the war, American Polonia purchased \$150,000,000 (\$2,431,649,007 in today's money) worth of bonds. The PNA alone procured \$500,000 (\$8,105,497) of the bonds. *Dziennik Związkowy* pointed out that every dollar used to purchase Liberty Bonds contributed to the struggle to defeat Germany and thus spared the blood of those fighting. By April 1918, the Polish Liberty Bond office on Division Street alone had sold over \$10,000 worth of bonds. The Polish press used patriotic language to rally the community to buy the bonds and stamps, proclaiming that those who could afford the bonds but did not buy to be cowards with no place in Polonia [Pienkos 111-112; *Dziennik Związkowy* 14 June 1917,

11 Apr. 1918, 16 Apr. 1918, 27 Sep. 1918; *Polonia* 3 Jan. 1918, 31 Jan. 1918].

The long struggle for Polish independence finally ended on November 11, 1918. Polish Chicago in particular, and Polish Americans in general, played an important role in raising funds for both relief and for the organization of the Polish Army in France. They also fought alongside the Allies as members of the American Armed Forces. The connection between the diaspora and the homeland would continue throughout the tumultuous twentieth century. When Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union attacked the Second Republic in 1939 and Poland again found itself partitioned, the diaspora raised funds for relief for the Polish populace. Later, during the long Cold War, Polish Chicago led the diaspora in its opposition to the Communist regime imposed on the fatherland by the Soviet Army, and in the 1980s *Polonia* again came to the aid of the Polish populations during the long struggle led by *Solidarność*. Over the years Chicago's Polish community has constantly been watchful of events in Poland and Polish American institutions have often rallied to the Polish cause, proving that the fear that the diaspora was lost to the nation was simply not true [Pacyga Chapters 6, 7, 8].

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#### ABSTRACT

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**Polish Chicago and the Struggle for a Free and Independent Poland**

Poland disappeared from the political map of Europe in the eighteenth century, and after 123 years of foreign domination, the country regained its independence in 1918. This article will look at the migrations from all three partitions and their impact on the United States with an emphasis on the city of Chicago. Chicago quickly emerged as the capital of the diaspora and played a crucial part in the struggle to regain independence in the 20th century. In 1939, the Polish Republic was once again under attack and the Chicago *Polonia* led the response of the diaspora to yet another partition, as Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R. divided the Second Republic. Finally, during the long Cold War, Poland fell under Soviet domination and again Chicago's *Polonia* reacted and played a role in the nation's continuing struggle for freedom. The article outlines Chicago's response to these events and discuss the role of peasant emancipation and immigration in the long struggle for a free and independent Polish Republic.

Keywords: *Polonia*, Independence, Paderewski, Blue Army, Chicago