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Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Belarusians do not bow their heads

2023 marks the 160th anniversary of the January Uprising. Despite the passage of years, the echoes of this uprising are still present in public debate. An important, albeit challenging, question ‘to fight (for one’s country’s freedom) or not to fight?’ is still being asked in Central Europe.

To understand the meaning and significance of the January Uprising, we need to know the historical context of the entire Central European region – today’s territory of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus.

Looking back at over three hundred years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, inhabited and co-created by some ten generations of citizens, what comes to the fore is the tradition of freedom and citizenship shaped by over two hundred national parliament sessions and thousands of regional ones. The deep roots of this tradition meant that people drawing from the spiritual heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian state, growing up with the stories of their ancestors, could not agree to live with their heads bowed.

In the past, the peoples of today’s Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus elected their own rulers and had personal and property liberties granting protection from state violence. The political life of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was founded on the *nihil novi sine communi consensu* rule, meaning ‘nothing new without common consent’. That principle underpins the spirit of liberty that refuses to accept the external imposition of an unwanted lifestyle. It kindles the desire for independence and the readiness to fight for the most worthwhile cause – dignity and freedom.

Parallel to the memory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth exists the legacy of the tradition of uprisings against the 18th-century oppressors. Its origins can be found in the Dzików Confederation (1733), the first uprising against enslavement, against the powers that had taken away Poland’s independence. The deed became clear in 1733 when the Russian army entered the Commonwealth to install a ruler favoured by the Russian tzarina and the Austrian Emperor rather than the one chosen by the Polish citizens. The nation responded with an uprising. Another armed revolt against an externally imposed authority was led by the Bar Confederation (1768-1772), formed in reaction to the humiliation inflicted on the Republic’s senators by the Russian ambassador, who kidnapped them from the centre of Warsaw and sent them deep into Russia. This was followed by the Kosciuszko Insurrection (1794), and later the Greater Poland Uprising (1806) that brought about the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw in 1807, and finally, the most famous of all, the November Uprising of 1830/1831. Less recognisable insurrections followed still: the Cracow Uprising (1846) and a number of uprisings in the Spring of Nations (1848).

We can name between five and ten uprisings in the period of 130 years (from 1733 to 1863), depending on which events we want to consider. This means that in a great many families of noble origin, in quite a few bourgeois families, and even in peasant families, the memory was stored that one must fight for their dignity, even if the fight is seemingly impossible to win; that constant bowing and never-ending humble stance distort human nature, and that we should make every effort to stand upright.

The start of the insurrection in January 1863 was both a response to forced conscription into the Russian army (pl. *branka*) and a result of the continuous development of the underground movement, which grew to count some 20,000 sworn young members. Between the November January Uprisings, in 1832-55, the Russian authorities conscripted 200,000 recruits from the Kingdom of Poland – a tiny entity with a population of 4-5 million – 175,000 of whom were forever lost to the Russian Empire. The small Vistula land lost 175,000 people because they were forced to fight for tsarist Russia. The reaction of insurgents expressed opposition to local youths dying on the Caucasus Line or in Kazakhstan for the glory of the Russian emperor. That is why the rebellion was planned for January 1863.

The outbreak of the January Uprising led to a diplomatic crisis on the European political scene. The rapprochement of Prussia and Russia, in response to the initiation of the uprising, instigated a reaction of France, Britain and Austria. In May 1863, a war between Russia and the Western powers was a possible scenario. We forget about it when we think of January Uprising as doomed from the start. In fact, no uprising had ever come so close to causing a European war in which the Polish side had a chance of obtaining external help from the Western countries.

Not many people know that Russia has lost Alaska due to the January Uprising. The threat of war with Britain and France multiplied the costs of servicing the Russian debt, which, combined with the high price of pacifying the January Uprising, led to a de facto bankruptcy of the Russian Treasury. The Minister of Finance begged the Tsar to sell Alaska in order to obtain funds – which in the end amounted to a measly \$7 million – to stave off the threat of bankruptcy. That indirect consequence of the January Uprising is worth recalling.

Another noteworthy issue is the supranational nature of the January Uprising. The symbol of this insurrection – the last joint uprising of the peoples of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – was the triple coat of arms, incorporating not only the Eagle but also the Vytis and Archangel Michael – the latter being the symbol of Kyiv, Ukraine, where the uprising has also made its mark, even if somewhat less prominent. The Lithuanian irredentism of 1863 was powerful and involved almost exclusively peasants who rebelled against the same invader that the Polish nobility was fighting against – Russia. The tsarist empire took away not only their political freedom but also their religious liberty. Earlier, including in the Kościuszko or November Uprisings, the nobility of Lithuanian origin, often speaking Polish, went shoulder to shoulder with the ‘Crowners’ (pl. *koroniarze*), that is, ethnic Poles, fighting for freedom against a common enemy. This confirms that until 1863, the Commonwealth had been unity. In 2023, we can say it still is, in the spiritual sense, as witnessed to by Ukraine.

Given the psychological factor – the spiritual legacy of the Commonwealth and the tradition of fighting for freedom that lived in the consciousness of the January insurgents – as well as the political climate accompanying the decision to launch the insurrection, the popular claim that the Polish romantic spirit was the antithesis of reason must fail. That belief has its roots

in Enlightenment propaganda directed against the Commonwealth. It intensified when the Polish-Lithuanian state began to recover from its decline after the legislation of the Great Sejm was prepared and the Constitution of 3 May 1791 was finally passed.

From the moment Stanisław August Poniatowski announced his programme of reforms in 1764, propaganda intensified, financed by the Russian Tsarina Catherine II on the one hand and Frederick II on the other, as they jointly hired the greatest minds and pens of the French and German Enlightenment, with Voltaire in the lead. The avalanche of texts slandering Poland, created by these enlightened hosts, perpetuated harmful stereotypes. One of them was the belief that Poles were rainbow-chasing madmen and romantics. In addition to all of that, we must consider the Prussian propaganda against the Kościuszko Uprising, which presented the rebellion as a romantic gesture ending in tragedy for the Commonwealth. These days, the image of a collapsing Kościuszko allegedly uttering the words *Finis Poloniae!* – ‘the end of Poland!’ – was popularised.

We should not, however, forget that uprisings are not only a Polish thing. They are an essential part of the Irish tradition and the identity of Italy, Germany, Spain, Hungary and, indeed, Russia, whose history can show both victorious and lost revolts. What determines that distinctive Polish quality – while also fuelling suspicions of romanticism – is the fact that the Polish insurgents had to face not one opponent, as was the case in Ireland or Hungary, but three at once.

The three continental powers – Russia, Prussia and Austria – carved up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795. The significance of the Polish issue lies in the fact that it affected these three major powers simultaneously, which made it a matter of great importance and made our struggle for independence particularly difficult. Because of that, the resumption of the struggle seems madness, even though its goal was nothing but rational. The victory was hard to win because of the strength of the opponents striving to ensure that Poland would not win. But we live in a free country now – and that is the best proof the uprisings were not lost.

Without the persistent reminder that Poland was still there, alive and opposing the verdict of the superpowers, we would not have regained our independence in 1918. Constantly claiming freedom is part of our identity. Naturally, the geopolitical map changed after the First World War. Poland did not rise alone in 1918, but along with many other smaller and weaker countries, which in the face of the empires’ interests had seemed doomed to fade away. The existence of Ukraine, Lithuania, Slovakia, and even the Czech Republic is, to some extent, a result of the Poles’ insistence on their right to independence. That is our nation’s precious heritage. And those who worship empires and believe they alone should run the world as the guarantors of order have the right to condemn the Polish uprisings. That is why we recall them.

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