

*Marek A. Cichocki*

## Poland – Between Germany and Russia

Director Andrzej Wajda's moving film *Katyni* (2007) begins with a scene in which a crowd of civilians fleeing the approaching Wehrmacht collides on a bridge with a stream of terrified civilians fleeing in the opposite direction from the Red Army. Panic and turmoil erupts on the bridge—the Poles escaping to the other side in September 1939 realize the hopelessness of their position. They have fallen into the fatal trap their countrymen have been trying to avoid for 200 years. Squeezed between totalitarian Germany and totalitarian Russia, they have no chance of escape. The scene that shows Poles fleeing the mortal threat from the west meeting the Poles fleeing in the opposite direction, from the mortal threat from the east, symbolizes Poland's desperate geopolitical situation, from which there is no escape and that, in the years of the Second World War, confronted Poland with the prospect of annihilation. The interwar-era Second Republic's attempt to balance between west and east, between Germany and Soviet Russia, to build its own independent position—either by military means or by the path of diplomacy—these policies had failed and now nothing could protect Poles from complete catastrophe.

The image of the Polish nation caught between those two powers, Germany and Russia, is so strongly imprinted in our collective consciousness that it fundamentally determines our view of ourselves, our place in Europe and possible scenarios of the future. There is a fair dose of fatalism in it, as well as the desire to liberate ourselves. From this perspective, the 20th century presents itself exactly as Andrzej Wajda showed it in his film: as a trap with no escape. Poles became the victims of two totalitarianisms. But is such a view of Poland's destiny and history, through the lens of two enemy powers and geopolitical fatalism, entirely correct? Is that all there is to the "Polish question"?

## The Reversal of European Vectors

Placement between Russia and Germany has constituted the basic experience for Poles of the past two centuries, but in no way suffices in understanding the phenomenon of Polishness. While modern Polish nationalism was formed in the 19th century in obvious opposition to both enemy powers (in abnormal conditions of occupation by those powers, it must be emphasized, without the prospect of self-actualization within its own national legal-governmental framework), Polishness as a culture and as a political community had emerged from an entirely different source. Polishness as a prior phenomenon was not born of the fatalism of geopolitical location between Russia and Germany. It is free of that. Polishness originated in the meeting of barbarian Poles with the Latinized, Christian South of Europe, thus with events that constitute the foundations for the entirety of Western European culture. Thanks to this, Polishness was the effect of a general pan-European phenomenon, not of some specific regional, geopolitical situation that arose as the result of the expansion of two hostile powers.

The 18th century was a key period for the emergence of a new political constellation in Europe, in which the Poles found themselves between Germans and Russians and, later, had the sense of fatalism of that location ground into them. Despite attempts at revitalization, this period saw the final downfall of the political and cultural idea of the First Republic (the era of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). At the level of international politics, the end played out in the north, in the Baltic Sea basin. The so-called Great Northern War ensured the survival of a disadvantageous arrangement for Poland between the most important actors in that part of Europe. The return of Augustus the Strong to the Polish throne in 1709 was possible due to the conclusion of the Treaty of Thorn with Peter I, which made Russia *de facto* the protector of the Republic's internal order.<sup>1</sup> These events coincided with the emancipation of Prussia. Frederick William, the Great Elector, rendered homage to Władysław IV Vasa at the Royal Castle in Warsaw in 1641, but it was the last time he did so. The Prussian leader set about building a consistently separate, modern statehood. His successor, Frederick I, who reportedly spoke fluent Polish, was crowned in 1701 in Królewiec as “King of the Prussias,” culminating the birthing process of founding a new, independent Prussian power. Poland did not emerge unscathed from this situation. Not only was its decline painful, involving the loss of statehood, but this was also shameful and even outright dishonorable, as “the Saxon period” saw a deep spiritual crisis of Polishness. The crisis was so deep that the writer Witold Gombrowicz would later call it the “Polish hell.” In Gombrowicz's opinion, the mold of Polishness was broken then (and never fully resurrected, we might add): “This is the source of our incredible, adventurous 18th century, the almost brilliant crisis of Polish beauty, which put us face-to-face with our Ugliness, our Profligacy... a century of sclerotic, senile old stiffening and at the

same time, a dull unruliness, when the armistice between form and instinct had created a chasm... probably the deepest which has ever shown itself to our idyllic spirit. Never before or since have we been closer to rubbing up against hell and any thought about Poland and the Poles is not worth much if it bypasses the period of Saxon scurrility,"<sup>2</sup> writes Gombrowicz in the first volume of his diaries.

The Poles' political and spiritual catastrophe coincided with a fundamental reversal in European trends up to that period. While the previous dominant division of Christian Europe was into the north—where Poland had been situated for centuries—and the south, now, as a consequence of the Enlightenment, Western Europe was being redefined and consolidated. This new west of European civilization was consolidated around Enlightenment values, yet at the same time the east was being rediscovered, thanks in part to a fascination with Orientalism. The geopolitical change that occurred in the 18th century as a result of the appearance on one side of a strong, centralized Prussian state and of a new, modern Russia on the other, and as the result of the political-spiritual decline of the First Republic, had its deeper, pan-European context in the reversal of earlier cultural-civilizational vectors in European development. In this sense, Voltaire was right in claiming that the Enlightenment would found a new Europe, on new bases, which would become a real challenge for Poles, in both the political-spiritual and real geopolitical sense. In the new division of east and west, Poland had no place. The importance of this change was perfectly understood and reflected on by the Polish Enlightenment thinker Stanisław Staszic in his *Warnings for Poland* and by the Romantic-era poet Adam Mickiewicz in his *Paris Lectures*.

Through the entire 19th century, Poles attempted to find their place in this new division of Europe, so disadvantageous for them. At the beginning, it seemed that a sensible response was perhaps to enroll Poland, to the extent that was possible, as a dependent yet autonomous political entity in the imperial politics of either neighboring power, Prussia or Russia.

What was needed was to overcome the negative consequences of those powers' partition policies by proving that an autonomous Poland could be an essential component of regional balance, in terms of the new Continental powers' policies regarding each other.

### The Concept of Barriers and Foregrounds

In this political constellation, the tragic end of which was the partitioning of the First Republic, a new approach was formed to Poland and Central Europe as an object in a game between large, absolute powers. This entire area of Europe (orphaned after the demise of the First Republic) became at times a buffer zone and at times a frontline. The concept of Poland as a buffer

appeared in the 1780s in Prussia's policies toward Russia. This could be considered the new Prussian eastern policy. Given Russia's entanglement in war with the Ottoman state and the support it was receiving from Vienna, the idea emerged in Berlin of an alliance with Poland to serve as a counterweight to growing imperial ambitions of Russia, further strengthened by the support of Austria. Ewald Friedrich von Hertzberg, then Prussian minister of foreign affairs, was a great proponent of such a rapprochement with Warsaw and the reform camp in the Sejm, the Polish parliament.<sup>3</sup> Hertzberg tried unsuccessfully to persuade Frederick William II to accept his idea that excessive weakening of Poland, not to mention its partitioning, was not in Prussia's interests. Such developments would mean, after all, the disappearance of the natural buffer dividing Prussia from Russia. In the resulting consequence of such events, an overgrown Russia, directly bordering Prussia in Central Europe, could rein in Berlin's imperial policy in Europe (as in fact would happen a quarter of a century later, as a result of the Napoleonic wars, the policies of Alexander I toward Prussia and the new post-Vienna order on the Continent). Thus Hertzberg considered that Prussia, in an alliance with France and the reform party in Poland, should strive to maintain the First Republic. The second and third partitions of Poland eliminated the possibility of realizing such a policy. However, this first, unsuccessful attempt to draw Warsaw and Berlin together in a new constellation of forces in Europe opened the question, which would periodically recur in the Polish political debate, as to the degree to which it might be possible for Poland to break down the fatal nature of its location between east and west by allying itself with one of its two neighbors—Prussia or Russia. The choice, preferred by the reform camp and especially by Ignacy Potocki, of drawing closer to Prussia against Russia, led to an alliance in 1790 but was burdened by the concessions of Toruń and Gdańsk to Berlin. Later it was judged, by Father Walerian Kalinka among others, to have been a mistake.<sup>4</sup> Berlin did not intend to realize an alliance with Poland—aside from the possible advance of the Prussian army through territories of the Republic—and the activism in the Sejm in this period only increased the distrust of Catherine II, hastening Poland's downfall. It would also seem that, after the events of 1789, the reform movement in Poland was perceived in Berlin primarily through the prism of the revolutionary threat undermining the legalistic order of European monarchies. The idea of supporting Warsaw against Russia, then, could not enjoy much popularity at the court of Frederick William II, where the spread of dangerous revolutionary ideas was feared. As the writer Joachim Christoph Friedrich Schulz later observed, in his appraisal of Polish hopes for closer ties with Prussia, "the leaders of the Polish revolution, in accordance with their national character, demonstrated rather their fervent imaginations than sober deliberations [...] They did not take into account that Prussia had only momentarily extended its hand to Poland because it needed it. [...] In their inconceivable blindness, they forgot the political truth: that a weaker

entity that participates in a quarrel between powers will be trod underfoot when they take the first friendly step toward each other.”<sup>5</sup>

Prince Adam Czartoryski’s policy from 1803 to 1805 could be considered a countering attempt at resolving Poland’s geopolitical dilemma, trapped between Prussia and Russia.<sup>6</sup> Czartoryski presented Alexander I with his plan to create a great federation of Slavic nations under the czar’s leadership, wherein Poland was to be reborn as a kingdom attached to Russia. Based on the Enlightenment idea of a multinational federation, the plan was not, however, an attempt to embody Kant’s idealistic premises of eternal peace, as it is sometimes presented. It was the expression of a rational political calculation, as Czartoryski assumed the inevitability of Russia’s conflict with Prussia, as opposing powers. Later, naturally, he also had to justify the inevitability of Russia’s conflict with new French expansionism under Napoleon. In both cases, the role of the Russian front fell to Poland. Thus Poland’s autonomous rebirth would mean repairing political errors of Catherine II’s imperialism, and the permanent union of Polish and Russian interests within the framework of a new European order. A Polish kingdom based on a new, liberal constitution was becoming St. Petersburg’s main weapon in conducting a new European policy. For this purpose, it was necessary above all, however, to overcome Prussia’s expansionism.

For Czartoryski and other Polish thinkers of the Enlightenment, including Staszic (*Thoughts on the Political Equilibrium of Europe*), Prussia appeared to be the most threatening European predator, particularly if earlier experiences were recalled. In the first part of the 18th century, Prussia had partitioned Silesia. Later, it occupied Pomerania, and did not keep its covenant of 1790 with Poland. Finally, it took Warsaw. Now, at the price of disloyalty toward Russia, the Hohenzollerns were ready to ally themselves even with Napoleon, in order to occupy territories of German principalities, step by step. In Czartoryski’s view, the Prussians thus constituted the greatest danger to European order and must be neutralized by any means. To that end, it would be necessary for Russia to abandon its earlier defensive policy for the sake of a more active European policy. Given Prussia’s disloyalty, and the change in France as a result of the Revolution, there remained only two real powers that could, in Czartoryski’s opinion, restore Europe’s lost equilibrium: an actively European Russia and liberal England. Both powers should unite on behalf of a new policy, the aim of which would be the establishment of a lasting political architecture for the Continent and the elaboration of new, liberal, progressive principles for its functioning. Prussia should also be kept in check by a reborn Poland on one side, loyal to Russia, and on the other by reborn German states functioning as one political union.

Czartoryski’s plan (explained in his memorandum of 1803, “On the Political System Russia Should Employ,” among other places) was great and farsighted; it also assumed the possibility of a fundamental improvement in Europe’s internal relations, which had undergone visible deterioration as a result

of the political turmoil of the 18th century. Therefore these ideas are compared, not infrequently, to Kant's conception of eternal peace and to the Abbé de St. Pierre's plans for a united Europe. In addition, due to Czartoryski's influence on Russian policy and on the czar personally, they had the charm of real and achievable plans. Unfortunately, Czartoryski's close association with Alexander I, who was favorably disposed to the idea of placing Russian policy on a new track, was supposed to be the source of hope for the realization of his far-reaching plans; instead, it became the source of their defeat. Alexander I did not intend to restrain Prussia, and his attitude to Frederick William III and the Hohenzollerns was characterized by deep ambiguity. As a result, Czartoryski's plan came to nothing. It wasn't possible to rebuild an independent Poland as an autonomous actor within the new international order.

Yet on the other hand, Czartoryski's steps helped pave the way for two ideas that were essential in terms of 19th-century politics. The concept of linking a sovereign Poland with the interests of Russia's European policy originally had at its base geopolitical significance and the balance of power, but with time was transformed into the pro-Russian idea of a Slavic brotherhood of nations, in which Poland appeared in the role of older but weaker brother at the side of the Russian power. Second, Czartoryski's idea of managing German states in the center of Europe so they would not fall prey to Prussia or France established the basis for a new German nationalism, which with time determined the realization of the idea of a newly united German state in the center of Europe.

### Opposing Ideas

The Napoleonic wars in Europe were an important caesura in the evolution of the east-west order, which, beginning in the 18th century, determined the fates of Central European states and nations. Napoleon's imperial policy aimed at a new consolidation of the west, as a civilizational project for Europe under conditions dictated by traditions of the French Enlightenment. European nations, concentrated around the civilizational principles of the west embodied in Enlightenment ideals, would become one European family, a common continent, where "every traveler would feel at home everywhere." From this perspective, the east became the opposing, crooked reflection of the west. "There are only two nations in the world. The one lives in the Orient," claimed Napoleon, "the other occupies the Occident. The English, French, Germans, Italians and so on, are governed by the same civil law, the same mores, the same habits and almost the same religion. They are all members of one family; and the men who want to start war among them, want a civil war."<sup>7</sup> The conflict of two Continental powers, defined with such radical differences, had more far-reaching consequences than ordinary geopolitical effects—it led to ideological and civilizational decisions. On the geopolitical plane, it led to the disappearance of

Central Europe as an independent region, and it was now being transformed, rather, into a field of battle. Political calculations in regard to the role the area might possibly play as a barrier or strategic foreground thus lost their *raison d'être*. It might even have seemed, for a time, that the new type of power in Central Europe, such as Prussia had become in the early 18th century, had lost its *raison d'être* as well.

The Napoleonic wars brought conflict between the east and west primarily on the ideological plane, as they entailed a civilizational choice between western (French) Enlightenment—symbolized by the Napoleonic Code—and Russia, which thanks to policies of Alexander I and the alliance with Great Britain, briefly appeared as a reasonable liberal alternative, in the spirit of providing nations constitutions under the protection of the czar. The transformation of Russia occurred in another direction, however and the suppression of the Decembrist Revolt opened the door wide for the creation of modern Russian despotism under the rule of Nicholas I. This was the moment at which Sergey Uvarov formulated his main principles, the three pillars on which the state doctrine of czarist despotism would be based: Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality.

Thus the division of east and west ceased to be exclusively a game of power politics conducted by absolute rulers in a modern style. From the Polish perspective, it was no longer a choice between one of two possible geopolitical strategies or a dispute over which would be better. It was a question of civilization. In addition, after Napoleon, the policy of European states became increasingly an expression of growing national aspirations. This changed Poles' previous perspective on their situation. Up to that time, policies toward Poland, and the partitions themselves, could be perceived as the result of machinations by absolutist courts of neighboring monarchies. Toward the end of the first half of the 19th century, it was no longer possible to avoid seeing that Poland's situation was the result of the politics of neighboring nations rather than a plot by absolutist leaders. The Romantic-era concept of messianic Poland as the Christ of nations and Polish writer and politician Joachim Lelewel's historical ideas are essentially examples of many attempts to provide an answer to the new international situation, which had emerged in Europe as a result of the awakening idea of democratic nationalisms.

How dramatically the new democratic-national ideas in Europe changed the situation in Poland can be seen in the example of the German approach to the question of Poland in the 1830s and 1840s. German liberalism, which developed in the German states after 1815—to a large degree, under the impression of French changes (the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the shock produced by Napoleonic imperialism)—saw in the question of Poland a key point in the fight with the absolutist order of continental Europe. In the wake of the November Uprising of 1830, Poland became the very symbol of the fight for liberty, in which the idea of national independence coincided with the universal values of international brotherhood and democratic liberties. The famous *Polen-*

*lieder* of Franz Grillparzer, Ludwig Uhland and Gottfried Keller, to mention only the best known, were among the expressions of this sort of *Polenrausch*, as some called the sudden German interest in Poland.

However, a dozen or more years later, the attitude to Poland had changed diametrically in the German states. The liberal idea was being increasingly connected with an aggressive nationalist concept, as expressed by the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848, particularly in its July debate devoted to the question of Poland.<sup>8</sup> In this debate, all the old and new partition arguments were given voice. The leftists defended the position—which had developed especially strongly after the Congress of Vienna—of Poland occupying a key position in the program of combating the “reactionary” order in Europe. The Frankfurt national assembly thus represented not only the particular interests of Germany, but also pan-European goals. These, above all, were the establishment of an order free from the despotism of monarchs, based on the restored rights of nations, with consideration for the necessary liberation of the Slavic nations. Here the question of Poland became the key issue. The problem was not solely ideological, though. On the side of the liberal left, the old geopolitical argument of the 1780s had returned, as well. The partition and post-partition policy of Prussia regarding the question of Poland would lead, in consequence, to the harnessing of Berlin and Vienna to the chariot of Russian imperialism in Europe.

Rightists in the Frankfurt assembly did not differ much from leftists in their fear of the increasing might of Czarist Russia. They perceived it as an existential threat to the growing unity of Germany. The right’s conclusions, however, were entirely contrary on the question of Poland. In a decisive moment for that question, during the July debate of the assembly, Wilhelm Jordan, a writer and translator of works of Lelewel, among others, explained the entire problem of the autonomy of the Grand Duchy of Posen. In Jordan’s opinion, with an autonomous, reborn Poland the new Germany would not acquire an effective barrier against the threat of Russia. Politically, Poles were aligned with Slavic nations, with Russia above all, and this was strengthened by Poles’ distaste for Germans, of which there was a long tradition, back to the times of Poles’ struggles with the Teutonic Order. Autonomy for Poland would thus be a geopolitical gift to the Russian czar, which he would eagerly use to increase his advantage over Germans. Poland’s territory should therefore remain attached to the Reich as a province and should constitute the natural German staging ground to the east.

For many, the events of 1848 were a confirmation of the sense that in the new civilizational-cultural struggle in Europe, Poles could not count on understanding and support from the side of the liberal west, and particularly not from emerging modern German nationalism. In their policies toward Russia, free, democratic nations did not need to be less calculating in any way than their despotic previous rulers had been. The events of 1848, like the massacre earlier in Galicia in 1846, and the Congress of Paris and the treaty of 1855–1856 regulating, in the aftermath of the Crimean War, the so-called Eastern question,



strengthened all these arguments in which Russia was seen as the only sensible option in Polish lands for obtaining a guarantee of security. Such arguments could be constructed traditionally, legalistically, as was done by Aleksander Wielopolski in his *Letter of a Polish Nobleman to Prince Metternich*. Nevertheless, in regard to the ideological changes occurring in western, post-Napoleonic Europe, and strengthened national-democratic aspirations, the choice of Russia acquired another deeper significance: above all, the idea of a great Slavic state with its capital in St. Petersburg.

As an ideological-civilizational idea and as the inexorable effect of the historical process in this part of Europe, such a state, on whose behalf Poles were supposed to work with Russians, constituted an answer to the decline of western civilization, which had been inevitable from the time of the French Revolution, and to increasingly hostile modern nationalism. As is shown by the example of Henryk Rzewuski's writings and those of his followers, particularly Adam Gurowski, in the concept of a great Slavic community under Russia's leadership to which Poles should now submit themselves. Polish traditionalism and disillusionment and distaste for the west would seek, hand in hand, a positive response in Nicholas I's despotic system of government and its supporting ideology of Russian imperialism, propagated in ideas of people such as Nikolay Karamzin and Sergey Uvarov.<sup>9</sup>

Henryk Rzewuski rejected the contemporary west, as it had been shaped by Anglo-Saxon capitalism, the French Revolution, Napoleon and the new nationalisms. He saw the demise of the former world of the First Republic, which he idealized so masterfully in *The Memoirs of Soplica*, to a lesser degree through the political or geopolitical prism of the partitions. He was interested in the pre-context of the crisis of European civilization, which he viewed through the texts and ideas of Joseph de Maistre. From this perspective, every positive program to transform republican Poles into a modern nation had to seem like a criminal departure from their one true tradition. The only desirable form for the existence of Poles ended, according to Rzewuski, with the First Republic. Poles as a nation had entirely ceased to exist. All attempts to resurrect them in a lesser form meant lesser or greater concessions on behalf of civilizational changes in Europe, which were in fact a decomposition. In this manner, "depraved conservatism, in Polish conditions, would transform itself into national nihilism, in the apotheosis of a foreign power."<sup>10</sup>

The thinking of Julian Klaczko shows an entirely different type of Polish conservatism, which tried to react positively to the civilizational and national dilemma wherein Poles, in the middle of the 19th century, were torn between Eastern and Western Europe. Before the People's Spring in 1848, Klaczko, the son of a wealthy Jewish family from Vilna (Vilnius), who had converted to Polishness and Slavicness, was an ardent advocate of allying with Germany against Russia. He worked with the Poznań National Committee and participated in the Greater Poland Uprising. The anti-Polish nationalism of German liberals in

Frankfurt was a great disappointment to him, as he was associated with Georg Gottfried Gervinus' liberal *Deutsche Zeitung*. He gave expression to these feelings in his famous text *Niemieccy hegemoni. List otwarty do Georga Gervinusa (The German Hegemons: An Open Letter to Georg Gervinus)*,<sup>11</sup> which was something more than just an attempt to defeat the anti-Polish arguments of the July debate in the Frankfurt assembly. The text is also an unusually penetrating analysis of the political culture being born in German territory, and a vision of the trend of Europe's balance of power, which would result twenty years later in the unification of Germany and the policies of Chancellor Bismarck. Klaczko recognized that democratic movements and the shaping of a modern, bourgeois nationalism would lead, in the case of Germany, to an anti-Polish policy, as they were based on one hand on the "aristocracy of race," emphasizing the exceptional nature of German culture, and on the other, corresponded to a "despotic centralism and a state that is an end in itself." Poles, belonging to Slavic culture, represented an entirely different viewpoint on democracy and freedom. They were democrats; they desired "a free federation and a state whose aim is the community: desiring diversity and life." This different understanding of freedom appeared, according to Klaczko, "in the harmonious combination of individual freedom and common duty," although he admitted that Poles had disturbed that harmony in turning individual freedom into anarchy. In turn, however, the Russians, in eliminating individual freedom, had constructed an unprecedented despotism. Klaczko considered that after the events of 1848 there was no longer any room for understanding between Poles and emerging new national Germans. The alternative was rather the Poles' renaissance within the framework of Slavic political culture, although not under the despotic leadership of the czarism.

German and Russian cosmopolitanism were unacceptable for Poles, because their radicalism meant the renouncement of freedom and full unification. "Poland will become, for the Slavs, the geographic and spiritual center between the East and the West," he wrote. In this, Klaczko was close to the thinking of Maurycy Mochnacki, who between the 1820s and 1830s ceased to believe in the possibility of positive change in Czarist Russia, or in the aid of European peoples or governments, considering that Poland could count solely on its own strength. Many of Klaczko's theses of 1849 were also no doubt inspired by the Slavic Congress in Prague, which had taken place the previous year, not without connection to events in Germany and Greater Poland. Nevertheless, his conception deepened with time and aimed in a different direction from that of Russian pan-Slavism, as was notable in his later writings. In Klaczko's eyes, it was above all the positive changes in more varied Habsburg monarchies that constituted a certain definite political opportunity for Poles. But the subjectivity of Poles, particularly in the spiritual sphere, would have to rely, in Klaczko's opinion, primarily on Catholicism and Latinism, thus in both cases on matters toward which German and Russian universalism and centralism was becoming increasingly antagonistic.

## Under the Control of the League of the Three Emperors

In the first period after partitions, the choice between east and west could appear to be the choice of a more clever policy of alliance, which Poles should conclude with Prussian or Russian enlightened absolutism, seeking for itself an advantageous geopolitical balance of power in Central Europe. After Napoleon, the choice presented itself ever more often as a national-ideological decision with far-reaching civilizational consequences. From the Polish viewpoint, a series of disastrous events—the Galician Slaughter of 1846, disillusionment in the German attitude in 1848, and finally the end of the Crimean War in 1855–1856—showed that Poles found themselves in a certain systemic arrangement, within which there was no good choice. From this perspective, Bismarck’s policies and the unification of Prussian centralism with the German national idea meant one of the qualitative changes in Europe that led to “closure”—fatal for Poland—of the continental order. Its culmination was the so-called League of the Three Emperors in the 1870s, which might in fact have made it possible to conclude that Poles, with their strivings for independence, had been utterly immobilized.

Henryk Wereszycki describes the disadvantageous situation as follows.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning, the united Reich was still dominated by dynastic-Junker interests, represented in German politics by Bismarck and still influential with the first emperor. The primacy of Prussian interests in German politics ruled out any plans for making Poland autonomous within the framework of the federation, and meant that strengthening relations with Russia was a necessity for Berlin in order to stabilize the situation in central Europe. The stabilized Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy of the Habsburgs was also not interested in strengthening Poland’s role as a pan-Slavic element. In turn, the domestic, post-Sebastopol reforms conducted by Alexander II, the elimination of serfdom and entry on the path of capitalist development, above all, made the question of Poland even more dangerous from the viewpoint of the ruler’s interests, as it had the continual potential to destabilize the empire, which was passing through a difficult and dangerous process of transformation. Thus internal changes that occurred in the second half of the 19th century within the compass of the three partitioning powers pushed them toward each other and toward a renewal of the former Holy Alliance, which led to a definitive demise of hopes for a positive policy toward Poland from any of the sides. The additional weakening or actual elimination of France’s position as a power on the Continent as a result of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, and the isolation of Great Britain, meant that decisions of the three emperors regarding the question of Poland gained the stature of irrevocable sanction.

From the Polish perspective, the process of creating a new order in Europe, beginning with the Crimean War of 1853–1855, must have seemed depressing after the establishment of the League of the Three Emperors. Practically all the

most important liberal postulates of the People's Spring had been fulfilled by this period: Italy had united, Germany had united and there had even been a liberalization of domestic social relations in Czarist Russia. In this context, the lack of a positive resolution of the Polish question, the shaping of a new balance of power and dependencies between the partitioning powers must have been painful and should have led to deepening resignation. But this was also the period that saw, in 1863, the last great national uprising of the Poles. Nevertheless, rather than bring a resolution, it only strengthened mutual dependence among the partitioning powers, particularly between St. Petersburg and Berlin. Bismarck understood that changes inside Russia that Alexander II had set in motion with his reform process would be important for international politics. Losing control over the Russian peasantry, the aristocracy expected extensive political rights from the czar along the pattern of those in the Kingdom of Poland. Thus between liberalization, the reforms undertaken by Alexander II and the situation in the lands of the former Poland, there existed a functional relationship—as expressed, among other things, in the reform policies of Aleksander Wielopolski and Aleksander Gorczakow—that was essential for international order.

Bismarck considered that a negative closure of the Polish question, after all, constituted one of the basic guarantees of order in Central Europe and of the prospect of unifying Germany. “The time for reorganization in the Polish spirit has passed and after the development that has occurred here, on the former Polish territories, and given the uniform political conditions of the Polish state, it can never return,” Bismarck claimed in 1863. “Prussia must forever remain the natural opponent of an autonomous and national development of the Kingdom of Poland.”<sup>13</sup> He needed to strengthen the alliance with Russia, preferably with a Russia that would remain incapable—based on internal, conservative forces—of deeper systemic change, as in the nature of things this would lead to destabilization and a revision of the order in the center of Europe. Bismarck simply feared the international consequences of what he called “the great Russian muddle,” and thereby led a German European policy that has remained characterized, till today, by a conservative attitude to every leader in Russia.

Thus, in the beginning, Alexander II's reforms were a challenge for Bismarck. From this perspective, he could make use of the January Uprising to strengthen the alliance with Russia and break apart reform circles concentrated around the czar, then further on, to bind Russia more strongly to his policy of unifying Germany. In the context of the January Uprising, the secret Prussian-Russian Alvensleben Convention, in which both states bound themselves to mutual aid in pacifying the uprising, could be considered the practical fruit of these politics. Its aims were, however, significantly broader, as Bismarck later summarized the matter, because it was a question of “winning a victory in the cabinet of the Russian czar for Prussian policy over Polish, which was represented by Gorczakow, Archduke Constantine, Wielopolski, and many influential

persons. The agreement, of a political-military nature, which Russia concluded with the German enemy of pan-Slavism against the Polish brother tribe, was a decisive blow to the hopes of the Polonophile parties of the Russian court.”<sup>14</sup>

As Wojciech Karpiński observes, the period after the January Uprising was characterized by the increasing scepticism of Poles as to the actual possibility of acquiring political independence.<sup>15</sup> The scale of the post-uprising repressions was only one aspect of this negative change. Equally important were the consequences of the change in the European international order, in which there was no place for an autonomous Poland. The fall of Napoleon III meant the long-term elimination of France as an element favorable to Poland in European politics. After the defeat at Sadowa, the Habsburg monarchy was also an increasingly marginalized actor in the European order. In practice, what remained was united Germany and Czarist Russia. In fact, for two decades Bismarck’s policies excluded any prospect of an understanding between Poles and Berlin. Thus attention was concentrated primarily on Russia, which toward the end of the 1850s, as we have noted, was undergoing tempestuous changes. And although the policy of repression and sharpened Russification did not leave much room for maneuver, the attitude to Russia’s policies became the key question of Polish political thinking of this period—beginning with Zygmunt Krasiński’s well-known polemic with Henryk Kamiński’s ideas, contained in his *Russia and Europe, Poland: An Introduction to Studies on Russia and the Muscovites* (1857).<sup>16</sup>

The attitude to Russia oscillated during this entire time between conciliatory and radical. However, in Polish society, realist, positivist convictions were decidedly prevalent. Only Bismarck’s departure and the internal economic, social and, finally, political changes that took place in Germany and Russia as the new century began, then led to the outbreak of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, opened the way to Poles’ acquiring independence. Intervention by the U.S. in the question of the European order was not without significance, above all the premises of liberal, Wilsonian idealism in international relations, which helped undermine the entire logic—crystallized in 1815—of a European balance between Continental powers, and allowed for the reconstruction of Central Europe. Only briefly, however. Processes set in motion in the second half of the 19th century in both Germany and Russia brought inevitable results in the form of two anti-Western ideologies, Nazism and communism, which ineluctably led Poles to the hopeless situation depicted by Andrzej Wajda in his opening scene on the bridge in the film *Katyń*.

Poland between the east and west, between Russia and Germany—this situation describes Poland’s fate in the last two centuries. Till today, it defines how Poles locate themselves in Europe, how they look at themselves, how they define their situation and their possibilities. It has also determined the nature of the two basic Polish political traditions, two differing types of political behavior—the tradition of insurrection and the conciliatory, realist tradition. It should, however, be under consideration, if changes that have occurred in Po-

land's situation and in the order of Europe toward the end of the 20th century haven't also meant a change in those conditions of the last two centuries, influencing the previous significance of the east-west division. Location between Germany and Russia no longer has the same fatal, catastrophic implications for Poland, although the evolution of Russia could expose Poles to serious dangers in the future. Poland's situation has today become more complex and multi-lateral, requiring numerous experiences of various kinds, farther and nearer, among which the choice between Russia and Germany is only one of many.

(transl. Michelle Granas)

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dariusz Gawin, "Przekleństwo 1709 roku", *Teologia Polityczna* 5 (2009–2010).
- <sup>2</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, transl. by Lillian Vallee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 276.
- <sup>3</sup> Klaus Zernack, *Polska i Rosja* (Warszawa: Niemiecki Instytut Historyczny, 2000), 353 et seq.
- <sup>4</sup> Walerian Kalinka, *Sejm czteroletni*, (Lwów: Księgarnia Seyfartha i Czajkowskiego, 1884), vol. 2, book 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Klaus Zernack, *Polska i Rosja*, op. cit., 353.
- <sup>6</sup> Marian Kukiel, *Czartoryski and European Unity 1770–1861* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 24–40.
- <sup>7</sup> After: Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. by John H. Hallowell (Durnham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), 168.
- <sup>8</sup> Jan Kucharzewski, *Sprawa polska w parlamencie Frankfurckim 1848 roku* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, [1919]), 44–47.
- <sup>9</sup> Wojciech Karpiński, *Polska a Rosja. Z dziejów słowiańskiego sporu* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1999), 30 et seq.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27
- <sup>11</sup> J[ulian] K[laczko], "Niemiecy hegemoni. List otwarty do Georga Gervinusa", transl. by Zbigniew Baran, *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 32 (1987), 327–331.
- <sup>12</sup> Henryk Wereszycki, *Walka o pokój europejski, 1872–1878* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 18–28.
- <sup>13</sup> Excerpt of Bismarck's instructions to the consul general in Warsaw, Klaus Zernack, *Polska i Rosja*, op. cit., 417.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Wojciech Karpiński, *Polska a Rosja*, op.cit., 105.
- <sup>16</sup> Zygmunt Krasiński, "Uwagi nad dziełem o Rosji, Europie i Polsce" In Zygmunt Krasiński, *Pisma*, vols. 9 (Kraków-Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1912), vol. 7.