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**BETWEEN IMPERIAL TEMPTATION  
AND ANTI-IMPERIAL FUNCTION IN EASTERN  
EUROPEAN POLITICS: POLAND FROM  
THE EIGHTEENTH TO TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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**WAS THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN  
COMMONWEALTH AN EMPIRE?**

There are two questions: how to analyse effectively the political structure and function of a vast Eastern European realm named through centuries the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and what it should properly be called? “Imperiological” studies, rapidly growing in the past two decades, form an original context in which a new answer to this perennial historical question seems possible: the Commonwealth was an empire. In fact, this name has already been given to the Polish-Lithuanian state, rather intuitively however, and in a not very convincing manner, in a few recent studies. “It is not customary to speak of a Polish empire, [...] but I do not see why the Swedes, with a Grand Duchy of Finland and other possessions in northern Germany, had an empire while the Poles did not” – based solely on this statement, a Harvard historian of Eastern European geopolitics, John P. LeDonne, posits a Polish empire on a par not only with the seventeenth century Swedish state, but with the Russian Empire of Peter the Great and his successors as well. Another American scholar, a political scientist, Ilya Prizel, stresses similarities between the Russian and Polish empires – as he calls them – due to their multinational structure and their supra-national elites.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World 1700-1917. The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York, Oxford, 1997), p. 371; Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy. Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 3.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had several of the characteristics of an empire, such as territorial greatness or at least extension beyond ethnic borders, multinationality, and formation of a supra-national elite. These features fit the reality of the state that evolved from the so-called Polish Crown lands between the late fourteenth century and 1569 (the year of the Lublin Union with Lithuania) and lasted till the partitions at the end of the eighteenth century. One might quote just the very beginning of the Polish king's list of titles from the year of the Lublin union: "King of Poland, Grand Duke of Lithuania, Lord and Heir of Ruthenia, Prussia, Mazovia, Samogitia, etc." (Król Polski, Wielki Książę Litewski, Ruski, Pruski, Mazowiecki, Żmudzki, itd., Pan i Dziedzic). It is worth remembering too that the territory of this state was close to one million square kilometers at that time. But are these characteristics enough to confirm that this state was an empire?

There was of course no single Polish emperor. "The Commonwealth was Europe's largest early modern realm, governed by early modern Europe's largest citizenry, the noble nation," as its historian from Yale University, Timothy Snyder, aptly observes.<sup>2</sup> In the political structure of this specific republic as created after the Lublin union and the end of the Jagiellonian dynasty, the nobility could be portrayed as a candidate for a collective emperor. Despite this ruling, the multiethnic elite had no geographical center. It would be very difficult to confirm any systematic form of centralizing policy or of unequal economic exchange between some imagined Polish political center (be it Warsaw or Cracow), and non-Polish peripheries. The power and wealth of a Ruthenian magnate (like Wiśniowiecki) or a Lithuanian one (like Radziwiłł), sitting in their manors beyond the Dnieper or Dvina, were in many cases greater than anything the elected king in his palace in Warsaw had at his disposal. Political domination of a center over peripheries, centralizing practices of the former, and a systematic unequal flow of goods between center and peripheries – is any empire possible without these characteristics? Most modern definitions would disagree.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven, London, 2003), p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> To find the most elaborated definitions see, for example, Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, 1986); Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York, 2001).

There was, however, another factor in the Commonwealth's cultural and political fabric that could be – and is – employed as a key argument in the debate over its imperial character. It was the bloodless triumph of the Polish vernacular in the late sixteen century over its potential rivals, such as Latin, old Church Slavonic (and vernacular Ruthenian), as the language of politics, law, and culture. Polish became thus a common high language of multiethnic elites. "Though I myself was born Lithuanian and a Lithuanian I shall die, in our country (that is as citizens of the Commonwealth – A.N.) we have to use the Polish language," wrote the richest Lithuanian magnate, Prince Janusz Radziwiłł, to his brother Krzysztof at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In the middle of that century even the Cossack elites that led the uprising against the Polish gentry used Polish as their language of command and of negotiations with the Commonwealth. They did not understand – it is worth stressing – the Muscovite dialect at that time, so that Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi had letters in this dialect translated into Latin, just to be able to read them.<sup>4</sup>

So if every empire is about power and conquest, this cultural "conquest" could most definitely be mentioned in the Commonwealth's case. However, it was not a forced one, but the result of a more spontaneous, natural attraction to the best means of communication with the broader, European culture.<sup>5</sup> Polish was the language to assimilate the surrounding population not only to the great innovations and small pleasures of Western European post-Renaissance thought, but also to a specific republican culture of the Polish gentry liberties, their extensive constitutional protection against arbitrary actions of the king. It became the language to assimilate the surrounding population to the specific laws, customs and institutions. If, as in many definitions, a general form of ideology or a shared

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<sup>4</sup> See: Stanisław Kot, "Świadomość narodowa w Polsce w XV-XVII w.," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 52 (1938), pp. 15-33; O. Pritsak, J. Reshetar, "Ukraine and the Dialectics of Nation-Building," *Slavic Review* 22:2 (1963), pp. 224-255.

<sup>5</sup> It is, again, worth remembering that in the seventeenth century only seven books of purely secular content were printed in the Russian state, as contrasted with thousands of books and brochures on secular subjects circulating in that century in the Polish Commonwealth – printed in Polish of course. See S.P. Luppov, *Kniga v Rossii v XVII veke* (Leningrad, 1970), p. 29.

political belief – with at least potentially universal appeal<sup>6</sup> – is another necessary precondition for the foundation of any empire, then the Commonwealth acquired one. Through its constant battle against the incursions of the Ottoman empire into Europe, the Commonwealth gained its identity as a defender of Christianity. Through the success of assimilation of the most of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania elites to its republican culture in its Polish language package, the Commonwealth acquired its identity as a distinct civilization of free citizens – opposed to and contrasted mostly with the Muscovite or the Ottoman despotism.

The “Sarmatian” myth of the common descent of all the Commonwealth’s gentry formed a popular basis for the very original ideology of this unique state. It was founded on the belief that this was the promised land of a free people -- the brave and independent “Sarmatians.” One of the most original and prolific political writers of the sixteenth century, Stanisław Orzechowski, who coined the phrase “*gente Ruthenus, natione Polonus*” (ethnically Ruthenian and politically Polish) as the two-layered definition of his identity, expressed that belief in the following, rhetorical question: “Could Poland have conquered the ancient and more numerous peoples, such as the Rus’, otherwise than by these liberties?”<sup>7</sup> One and a half centuries later, another ideologue of the “Sarmatians” perfect civilization, a Jesuit, Walenty Pęski, wrote even more forcefully: “In freedom lies Poland’s strength. [...] We do not live in a foreign way, nor as Frenchmen, nor as Germans do, but in our own native Polish way. What is more, it is rather not a human but a heavenly way of life. The words *Polus* (heaven in Latin – A.N.) and *Polonus* are very close [...] and this results in forms of existence. [...] We do not blame foreign ways of life, they are good for foreigners but not for Poles, because they would harm our freedom, which is the most precious and pleasant thing for us.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the especially revealing discussion of these aspects of “imperial definitions” in Sviatoslav Kaspe, *Imperia i modernizatsiia. Obshehaia model’ i rossiiskaia spetsifika* (Moscow, 2001), pp. 19-84.

<sup>7</sup> Stanisław Orzechowski, *Wybór pism*, oprac. J. Starnawski (Wrocław, 1972), pp. 99-114.

<sup>8</sup> Cited after: Jerzy Michalski, “Sarmatyzm a europeizacja Polski w XVIII wieku,” Zofia Stefanowska, ed., *Swojskość i cudzoziemszczyzna w dziejach kultury polskiej* (Warsaw, 1973), p. 115.

The rudiments of the identity shared by the Commonwealth's rulers (nobility), quoted above, show two different aspects of its influence on future generations of Polish elites looking for their – and their country's – identity after the collapse of the state. A remembrance of the relative success of the Polish language as the means of communication of the Western (or rather Southern) European culture to the eastern/northern part of the continent in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century would inspire the belief that Poland could be again the gateway for European influences among Eastern Slavs, their elder sister in civilizational development. In this case Poland would be a very active part of the periphery of a Western European center. In another variant, relating to a perceived function of the Commonwealth as the bulwark of Christian Europe against Islam or the "schismatics," a reborn "Polish empire" could play a passive role on the European periphery: that of the wall against the barbarians.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, however, there was a firm belief that the Commonwealth had constituted the best political order in the world, giving more freedom and rights to its citizens not only than the eastern despotisms of Muscovy or the Ottoman Empire, but also more than the absolute monarchies of Western Europe. The idealized model of the lost world of "Sarmatians" could thus become an inspiration to a vision of Poland as not a periphery of anything but as an independent center in its own right: a unique civilization of republican liberty and self-government. Its natural realm was coextensive with the Commonwealth's borders. This was a specific meso-arean perception of the Polish place in the center, or rather in between two or more alien civilizations: Moscow's despotism, Turkish Islam and Western European bureaucratic absolutisms.

As we may observe, not only in the opinion of an eighteenth century Jesuit, quoted above, but also in hundreds of other documents of the "Sarmatian" thought, the self-perception of this specific civilization was concentrated on its own perfection rather than on any idea of expansion. This was a kind of Utopia realized, as most of its citizens believed. In order to make any Utopia stable, it is advisable however to keep it on an island. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth was not an island. It was placed in the middle of a geopolitical

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<sup>9</sup> Janusz Tazbir, "Przedmurze jako miejsce Polski w Europie," J. Tazbir, *Rzeczpospolita i świat* (Wrocław, 1971), pp. 63-78.

whirlwind, among real empires. So it has been rather difficult to stay passive and self-satisfied in this place of the continent. The temptation to influence, to actively change the surrounding societies and states was quite evident in this case. The question was in what direction, and by what means? Occupying the borderlands between the Latin West and the Greek East, most of the Commonwealth's citizens recognized the roots of their political identity in the former – either in a Roman-Catholic or in an ancient Roman-republican version. So the further transfer of the values connected to this identity could lead only to the North/East – as had already been the case with the assimilation of Lithuania to the Polish nobility's political culture.

Could it lead further – to Muscovy? In the beginning of the seventeenth century a part of the Commonwealth's elites tried to answer this question in the affirmative – with the only clear example of imperial expansion of this state: the so-called Polish intervention during the Russian Times of Troubles.<sup>10</sup> Some of the Jesuit thinkers who so strongly influenced the Commonwealth's Counter-reformation movement spurred the expansionist spirit of the Polish nobility: "We do not need the East and West Indies. Lithuania and the North (that is the eastern orthodox Muscovy – A.N.) are a true India," father Piotr Skarga wrote in that time. Another ideologue of the Polish intervention in "the North" – Paweł Palczowski – used this comparison again to describe truly colonial perspectives for the Commonwealth's expansion: Muscovy was to Poland-Lithuania as the West Indies were to Spain and Portugal, as the object of a Christian and civilizing mission as well as a land of huge resources.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For the best and the most balanced account of this problem (and the place of the Polish intervention in it) see Chester S. L. Dunning, *Russia's First Civil War. The Time of Troubles and the Founding of the Romanov Dynasty* (University Park: Penn, 2001). See also Wojciech Polak, *O Kreml i Smoleńszczyznę. Polityka Rzeczypospolitej wobec Moskwy w latach 1607-1612* (Toruń, 1995), as well as the older study of Jarema Maciszewski, *Polska a Moskwa 1603-1618. Opinie i stanowiska szlachty polskiej* (Warsaw, 1968), which shows the relative unpopularity of the interventionist policy among the majority of the Commonwealth's nobles.

<sup>11</sup> Ks. Piotr Skarga, *Listy*, ed. by J. Sygański (Kraków, 1912), p. 55; Paweł Palczowski, *Kołęda moskiewska to jest wojny Moskiewskiej przyczyny słuszne* (Kraków, 1609); both quotations are discussed interestingly by David A. Frick, "Lazar Baranovych, 1680: The Union of Lech and Rus," Andreas Kappeler, Zenon Kohut, Frank E. Sysyn, Mark von Hagen, eds., *Culture, Nation, and Identity. The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter (1600-1945)* (Edmonton, Toronto, 2003), pp. 34-36.

The Polish occupation of the Moscow's Kremlin as a consequence of this "mission," however fateful for future Polish-Russian relations, was an isolated episode in the attitude of the Commonwealth's elites' attitude towards the means of influencing its eastern Slavic neighbor. The idea of extending the peaceful experiment of co-opting the Lithuanian Grand Duchy boyars to the Polish gentry's privileges and freedom and of repeating this process with all of Russian tsardom's elites was an older and more popular tradition in this respect. This idea had been launched seriously for the first time when the Polish throne fell vacant after the death of the last Jagiellon in 1572. Ivan the Terrible was presented then as a serious candidate – on condition that the whole fabric of the structures and mores of his own state would be opened to the Commonwealth's political culture. In 1600, the great ambassadorial mission of the Lithuanian chancellor Lev Sapieha to Moscow presented to Boris Godunov an elaborated idea of a union between the Polish-Lithuanian and the Muscovite states. The subjects of both rulers were to be free to serve the other ruler, travel to his country, contract marriages with the other ruler's subjects, own land and go to study in the other ruler's country.<sup>12</sup>

I do not intend to go into details of this seemingly extravagant idea, repeated several times in different versions during the seventeenth century. It is enough here to stress its exponents' belief in the attractive power of the Commonwealth's political model at least for the whole Eastern Slavic world: "*ut in perpetuum respublica Polona cum Domino Moschorum sit una respublica in aevum.*"<sup>13</sup> To transform the Russian tsardom into a republic modeled on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – such were the most ambitious prospects (and the limits) of the "Sarmatian" ideological "imperialism" in the East.

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<sup>12</sup> See: Wiktor Weintraub, "Ivan the Terrible as the Gentry's Candidate for the Polish Throne: A Study in Political Mentality," *Cross Currents*, Vol. 1 (1982), pp. 45-54; Boris Floria, *Russko-pol'skie otnoshenia i politicheskoe razvitie Vostochnoi Evropy vo vtoroi polovine XVI – nachale XVII v.* (Moscow, 1978); Alexander Yanov, *The Origins of Autocracy: Ivan the Terrible in Russian History* (Berkeley, 1981); Andrzej Nowak, "Russo-Polish Historical Confrontation," *The Sarmatian Review* 28:1 (January 1997), pp. 432-442.

<sup>13</sup> Quotation from a letter by a Polish negotiator of the truce with Russia in Niemiza, dated 25 September 1656 – after: Hans-Joachim Torke, "Moscow and Its West: on the "Ruthenization" of Russian Culture in the Seventeenth Century," Kappeler et al., eds., *Culture, Nation, and Identity*, p. 107.

**THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: A MENTAL TRANSFER  
OF THE COMMONWEALTH TO A EUROPEAN PERIPHERY**

By the middle of the seventeenth century the Polish-Lithuanian state had stumbled on the Ukrainian (Cossack) problem and lost its strategic contest with the Russian tsardom. At the beginning of the next century, Russia under the leadership of Peter the Great became not only a great European power, but it was officially declared an empire, while the massive intervention of the Russians and the constant presence of their troops in the Commonwealth's territory during the great war between Peter I and Charles XII of Sweden transformed the Polish-Lithuanian state into a Russian protectorate. From a geo-political perspective the Commonwealth, instead of being a core power, at least on a regional level, became just a "limitrophe," that could be used either as a means of introducing Russian influences to the heart of Europe, or – in the opposite direction – as a Western European power leverage against the rising ambitions of Russia. This state of affairs began to influence the self-perception of at least some of the Commonwealth's elites. The reality of political dependence brought into being the idea of independence as an aim to be pursued. How to attain this new aim? The eighteenth century Enlightenment prompted the idea of modernization, which was necessary to compete more effectively with the surrounding, modernizing empires: not only the Russian one, but the Habsburg, and the Prussian too. The old "Sarmatian" ideal could be seen in this new perspective not as the essence of the Polish originality, but as an obstacle to success in the fight for the state's independence. It was not by chance that the harbinger of the Enlightenment reforms, Father Stanisław Konarski, was the first person to use "Sarmatian" pejoratively and introduced the word "independence" into Polish political literature.<sup>14</sup> "Emphasizing the 'infinite difference' separating Poland from the progressive countries of Western Europe, such as England, Switzerland, or Holland, [...] he scored the myth of Polish distinctiveness 'a peculiar and unheard of pretense of superiority over

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<sup>14</sup> Michalski, "Sarmatyzm a europeizacja," pp. 137-138; Władysław Konopczyński, "Narodziny nowoczesnej idei niepodległości w Polsce – 1733-1755," *Pamiętnik V Zjazdu Historyków Polskich w Warszawie* (Lwów, 1930), part I.

mankind,' as well as the Sarmatian claim of Poland's special Divine protection."<sup>15</sup>

The eighteenth century, especially in its Enlightened version, can be described as the age of crisis for the idea of Poland as a separate civilization, a distinct cultural-political center, with its separate mission and ideological sphere of influence. Father Konarski's followers, authors of most of the political reforms and cultural innovations introduced so rapidly during the reign of the Commonwealth's last king Stanisław August Poniatowski, accepted the place of their state on the periphery of the one and only civilization: the Enlightenment, with its center somewhere around Paris/London. This was the time when the semi-orientalizing concept of Eastern Europe, so clearly evident in the writings of intellectuals like Voltaire or Diderot,<sup>16</sup> was invented. However, due to the concentric structure of this imagined community of the enlightened, the late Commonwealth's elites could aspire to be at least closer to the center than some other Eastern European societies. They could aspire to be less "barbarian" than, for example, Russians, doomed by their more eastward geographical position. Deprived of their "Sarmatian" originality, modernizing Polish elites could look for consolation by imagining a place for their nation on the "better" side of Europe. A reinvigorated and reformed Commonwealth could perceive itself to be an "Eastern March" of the Enlightenment and Europeaness. The question was, whether it should serve as a bridge or rather as a bulwark again?

With the onset of the revolutionary era, the tenet of liberty, so deeply ingrained in the Commonwealth's political culture, regained its privileged place in the imagined structure of modernity, lessening the sense of backwardness among Poles – which the Enlightenment's pre-revolutionary civilizational categories had made so evident. The American experiment was observed with considerable interest by Polish

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<sup>15</sup> Konstantin Symmons-Symonolewicz, *National Consciousness in Poland: Origin and Evolution* (Meadville: Pa., 1983), p. 36

<sup>16</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994); Larry Wolff, "Voltaire's Public and the Idea of Eastern Europe: Toward a Literary Sociology of Continental Division," *Slavic Review* 54:4 (1995), pp. 932-942; Robin Okey, "Central Europe/Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions," *Past and Present* 137 (1992), pp. 102-133.

republican ideologues, who saw in Washington and Jefferson followers of the same ideal that formed the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of noble citizens. The first echoes of the French version of the new political order, launched under the banner of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* were received with enthusiasm in some other circles in Warsaw and Vilnius as a formula quite familiar to the traditional political culture of the nobiliary republic.

The elites of the Commonwealth, or rather that part of them that prepared the first European constitution of May 3, 1791, and then led the last fight to defend the constitution, independence, and remnants of the state against the final Russian intervention, found a new identity for the spirit of the dying Commonwealth. This new identity combined a few elements of the old "Sarmatian" myth of Polish freedom as something unique, at least in Eastern Europe, with a new ideology of a revolutionary, post-Enlightenment Europe. The latter extolled not so much the difference between the "perfumed" ones and the "unwashed," but rather the fight for freedom against tyrannies and different forms of oppression – and who could feel more keenly all political injustice, and who understood better the necessity of freedom than a revolutionized Polish noble, fighting against armies of three empires that had decided to eliminate the Commonwealth and its political nation from the map of Europe? The Commonwealth, just starting a painful process of modernization of the spirit of the nation during the last years of its existence and first decades after its final dismemberment, was perceived by its most active political elites more and more as a champion of freedom – opposed more and more to Russia, seen as a champion of tyranny again. One can call this model of the deceased Commonwealth, as it evolved on the verge of the nineteenth century, as a regional power of freedom, responsible for its preservation or its further transmission eastward.

After the final dismemberment, the political hopes of the leaders of the last battles for the Commonwealth's independence led them to look to revolutionary, and then Napoleonic, France as the anti-status quo superpower. Their strategic program was formulated comprehensively in an anonymous political brochure, published in 1800, *Czy Polacy wybić się mogą na niepodległość?* [Can the Poles win back their independence?], ascribed to Tadeusz Kosciuszko's secretary, Józef

Pawlikowski. This was a vision of Poland, operating not only within the former Commonwealth's borders, but inciting revolutions in all three empires, those of the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, and the Romanovs, that partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian state. The author urged Polish political elites to launch a war of opinion against the tsardom within the Russian nation, as well as to incite non-Russian nations, Ukrainians in the first place, to rise against the empire that was portrayed as the prison of nations. Seven years later, the same author prepared a plan for the dismemberment of the Russian state along its ethnic borders.<sup>17</sup> New Polish patriotism began to identify its role as a leader of nation-awakening movements in Eastern Europe. The final aim of this role would be to crush all of the three empires dominating the region (Russia, Austria, and Prussia), which had been the participants in the partitions of the Commonwealth, and to make room for new actors in political arena, that is, nations instead of dynastic states and bureaucratic empires.

Had the Polish "ideal" become essentially anti-imperial by then? No. There were just "evil" empires and "good" ones in this pattern. The addressee of Pawlikowski's project of destroying the Russian empire was the leader of another one: the French emperor, Napoleon. Children of the Enlightenment could not imagine a totally independent role for an Eastern European political-cultural entity. They were not able to conceive of a regenerated Commonwealth and its mission in the region without practical support from a Western strategic patron. Nothing better confirms these limits to the political imagination of the first generation of the Commonwealth's orphans than the works of such eminent thinkers as Stanisław Staszic and Hugo Kołłątaj. I mean here their works published during the short-lived existence of the Duchy of Warsaw, which was an embryo of the Polish state as the Western power's "Eastern March" and also the French military outpost on the Russian border. Both philosophers envisaged Europe as a federation of nations under the leadership of France. This was to be a community of civilization and enlightened order, and the chaos beyond would be kept at bay. The principal meaning of the Duchy of Warsaw, enlarged to the

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<sup>17</sup> [Józef Pawlikowski], *Czy Polacy wybić się mogą na niepodległość* (Warsaw, 1967) (introduction by E. Halicz). See also Andrzej Nowak, *Jak rozbić rosyjskie imperium? Idee polskiej polityki wschodniej (1733-1921)*, 2nd ed., (Kraków, 1999), pp. 50-52.

borders of the pre-partition Commonwealth would consist in being the easternmost flank of this community, once again a wall defending Europe against potential dangers stemming from Asia. In order to strengthen this “eastern march” of Napoleonic Europe, Poland should become the kernel of a Slavic federation, a regional representative, so to speak, of the Enlightenment and civic liberties. Russia, on the other hand, was to be excluded from this union and relegated to Asia, to chaos, to the status of barbarians beyond the wall – at least as long as it continued to be another Empire, the “evil” one.<sup>18</sup> It was not a concept of a meso-area, but of a distinct differentiation between two worlds, with Poland on the right or “good” side as the door-keeper, important as long as there was a strategic tension between her western patron-power and the eastern enemy power just over the border.

This concept was destroyed together with Napoleon’s Grand Army and the Duchy of Warsaw. For the next hundred years there would be no Western power interested in posting Poland as its plenipotentiary in the east of the continent, or in recreating the Commonwealth in any form. A new territorial order established in Vienna in 1815 on the post-Commonwealth realm opened up the possibility of Poland (now given the rump form of the Congress Kingdom) being made the vanguard of the Eastern Empire aiming at the center of the continent. Tsar Alexander I took most of the former Duchy of Warsaw territories under his rule, radically changing the proportions of the three partitioning empires’ shares in the Commonwealth’s heritage. Now, the Russian tsars had 82 percent of the Commonwealth’s lands, the Austrians – 11 percent, and the Prussians – 8 percent. Together with the largest share of territory, the ethnic Polish center included, the Russian state “absorbed more nobles of Polish culture than there were nobles of Russian culture in the entire Russian empire. In the early nineteenth century,” as Timothy Snyder reminds us, “far more subjects of the tsar could read Polish than Russian.”<sup>19</sup> This change had enormous consequences.

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<sup>18</sup> Stanisław Staszic, “O statystyce Polski,” S. Staszic, *Pisma filozoficzne i społeczne*, Vol. 2 (Warsaw, 1954), pp. 298-300; Hugo Kołłątaj, *Uwagi nad teraźniejszym położeniem tej części ziemi polskiej, którą od pokoju tylżyckiego zaczęto zwać Księstwem Warszawskim* (Lipsk, 1808). See also Andrzej Nowak, *Między carem a rewolucją. Studium politycznej wyobraźni i postaw Wielkiej Emigracji wobec Rosji* (Warsaw, 1994), pp. 13-15.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, pp. 25-26.

The eastern, former Lithuanian provinces of the Commonwealth were again under the same scepter as the Polish cultural-ethnic core. This very fact made any attempt to absorb the Lithuanian-Ruthenian part of the Russian state's acquisitions much more difficult. The Russian Empire's elites had to either agree to a kind of cultural condominium over these territories, or engage in a deadly struggle with the Polish element. Fifteen years after the Kingdom of Poland was attached to the Russian Empire it was already clear which direction had been taken: the November uprising of 1830 constituted an official declaration of war between Poland and Russia over the Lithuanian-Ruthenian borderlands. Can this fateful conflict, that overshadowed the whole history of nations in this region of Europe for the next hundred years or more, be called a clash of two imperialisms? This question is by no means easy to answer.

### NATIONALISM, MESSIANISM AND DECONSTRUCTION OF EMPIRES

First, we should take into consideration the role that "the Polish question" objectively played in destroying the Russian Empire. Tsar Alexander I tried to keep the Congress Kingdom of Poland not only as a valuable strategic outpost of Russia's influence in central Europe, but as a kind of testing ground, where he tried out new ideas for reforming his state in order to bring it closer to western standards. The fact that he gave Poland a liberal constitution, while Russia still had no constitution of any kind (and indeed would have to wait nearly 180 years for her own liberal constitution) symbolized this situation. The Russian westernized elite, however, took it an insult, an affront to the victorious generation of 1812 war heroes, later to become the Decembrists. It was during the reign of the same Alexander I that the Russian-language elite expressed its outrage at the prospect of being once again invaded – this time internally, so to speak – by the late Commonwealth's elites, with their political ambitions and traditions so alien to the Russians. It was against such figures as Prince Adam Czartoryski, Tsar Alexander's friend and the Empire's foreign minister for a few years (1804-06) that a

new Russian national – exclusive – consciousness began to form. “The father of Russian historiography,” Nikolai Karamzin best voiced this new, national idea, generated in opposition to Poland. He addressed his warning directly to the Emperor in 1819: “No, Sire, the Poles will never be our true brothers nor our faithful allies. Now they are weak and defenseless. [...] When you strengthen them they will wish to be independent and their first step will be to separate from Russia.” Karamzin was the first to express so sharply a vision of the deadly struggle between two cultural-political cores, Russian and Polish, over the lands of the former Kievan Rus’ and for domination of the whole of Eastern Europe. His verdict on the geopolitical realities was tough. There was a simple choice – Either, or. There was no room for two ruling elites. Either the Russians would dominate, or the Poles, so it was the obvious duty of a Russian citizen to extirpate all Polish influence from the Lithuanian-Ruthenian lands, and to eliminate a Polish statehood in any form whatsoever.<sup>20</sup>

This logic made Karamzin’s warnings a self-fulfilling prophecy. An important part of the former Commonwealth’s elites had not been satisfied with the separation of the Kingdom of Poland from the so-called western gubernii, that is the eastern half of the Commonwealth. They were already on the path that led – through modernization – to a new, national re-construction of their identity, with the idea of state independence as a natural consequence and guarantor of it. Another and still quite substantial part of the former Commonwealth gentry (ethnic Poles included) saw nothing bad or compromising in serving the Empire and promoting their personal careers in the tsarist administration and army, but were trapped between the independence-minded Polish group and the Russian national reaction. This spiral of recriminations and aggression on both sides of the conflict confounded

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<sup>20</sup> See: Andrei Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla... Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologija v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII–pervoj treti XIX veka* (Moscow, 2001); Andrzej Nowak, “‘Oświecony’ rosyjski imperializm i Polska. Od Piotra I i Katarzyny II do Karamzina i Puszkina,” *Jak rozbić rosyjskie imperium*, pp. 12-38; idem, “Imperializm, nacjonalizm i historia: refleksje nad politycznym i ideowym kontekstem polsko-rosyjskiej współpracy naukowej w pierwszej ćwierci XIX wieku,” Roman Jurkowski, Norbert Kasperek, eds., *Dawna a nowa Rosja (z doświadczeń transformacji ustrojowej). Studia ofiarowane profesorowi Janowi Sobczakowi...* (Warsaw, 2002), pp. 299-314.

the imperial logic of the tsarist state. Poles (equated in the traditional, still officially pre-national system, with Catholics) began to be excluded from the Empire's elite just because they were Poles.<sup>21</sup> This meant the beginning of the "nationalization" of the Empire that finally led to its destruction. Two Polish uprisings of 1830-31 and 1863-64 and the waves of Russian national reaction to them were milestones in this process. As different scholars agree now, unable either to throw off Russian domination or submit meekly to it, Poland became a permanent festering sore on the Russian body politic. "It demonstrated vividly the problem of an Asiatic empire trying to dominate an European nation" – writes Geoffrey Hosking, very much in the tradition of Edmund Burke and Lord Acton. The Polish nobility were, as Andreas Kappeler reminds us, pioneers of modern nation-building in the Empire, challenging not only the tsarist administration but Russian elites, as well as Ukrainians, Lithuanians and other nations of the region to follow.<sup>22</sup>

How did the Polish elites of the former Commonwealth transform themselves into pioneers of modern nation-building, and how were they able to challenge the Empire and "awake" the nations of Eastern Europe? It is necessary to stress here the importance of a specific ideology coined during the Romantic era, following the first great uprising of 1830. Actually it was not a modern ethnic nation-state ideology, but – on the contrary – a new faith in the Commonwealth's binding capacities. Beaten in the field, the old Republic should have its spiritual revenge on the Russian and all other despotisms. This new idea was presented in the post-insurrection emigration by the most talented Polish poets, such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and their teacher, the historian from Wilno University, Joachim Lelewel. All of them represented the traditions of the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania, their native land.

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<sup>21</sup> See: L.I. Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki: Poliaki v Rossii, Russkie v Pol'she* (Moscow, 1999); M. Dolbilov, "Kul'turnaia idioma vozrozhdenia Rossii kak faktor imperskoi politiki v Severo-Zapadnom krae v 1863-1865 gg.," *Ab Imperio*, No. 1-2 (2001), pp. 227-268; Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Provinces of the Empire (1863-1905)* (Lublin, 1998); Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1914* (DeKalb, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> See: Andreas Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* (München, 1992); Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire. 1552-1917* (London, 1997), p. 30 (quotation); Kaspe, *Impieria i modernizatsiia*, pp. 124-126.

All of them stressed the importance of voluntary union as a principle of the Commonwealth's political system. All of them extolled the unique character of the republican virtues of the Commonwealth's citizens and their liberties, as opposed not only to the Russian or the Ottoman political traditions, but to Western European bureaucratic formalism, and state absolutism in different guises. They re-interpreted the "Sarmatian" idea in a more democratic form, that should open up citizenship of a regenerated Polish republic to all its inhabitants. At the same time, they identified the post-partition political body of Poland as a symbol of all oppression. In Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's messianic-religious interpretation, Poland became the nation-martyr, even the Christ of nations. Every struggle for Polish independence, every subsequent insurrection – from the Bar confederation, through the Kosciuszko uprising, up to the latest (1830-31) war with Russia – was interpreted as a model of a brave consistency in striving for freedom's sake. Lelewel was the originator of the battle-cry of the uprising of 1830-31, "For your freedom and ours," which was then repeated in the emigration as the new motto of the Polish mission. And indeed, Polish emigrants were active and very much visible in every possible political turmoil in Europe between 1831 and 1863. The revolutions of the so-called Spring of Nations in 1848-49 formed the peak of this revolutionary Polish activity.

The paradoxical nature of the ideology that led the Polish emigrants to this hectic activity could be described most concisely as an international nationalism, a call to solidarity of nations in their fight against the solidarity of despotic monarchs as represented by the Sacred Alliance, initiated by Tsar Alexander I, Francis I – Austrian emperor, and Frederick William IV – king of Prussia. Polish Commonwealth regenerators would be natural leaders in this specific nationalist international. The ultimate consequences of their plans are vividly described by Mickiewicz in his futuristic vision of the year 1899 (written in 1832), when he expected a hetman (that is, military leader) of the Commonwealth to come back from the Urals after defeating the last remnants of the forces of tsarist despotism, thus enabling a Free Republic of Siberia to be firmly established. All nations were to be liberated – Siberia included – and the center of their liberation was to be in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, regenerated

and united anew with Poland.<sup>23</sup> The whole Eastern and Central European post-tsarist realm was to be transformed into a set of democratic, nation-based republics, modeled on and liberated with the help of the reestablished Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. And so the latter was to be a kind of anti-imperial empire. In reality this vision inspired revolution-oriented national movements in many parts of Europe, and future Zionist leaders as well.<sup>24</sup>

For Lelewel and Mickiewicz any geopolitical considerations were rather alien. They sternly believed in the attractive force of an ethical appeal connected to the example of the Polish fight against the tsarist imperial arch-enemy – and extended this belief even to the Russian nation, which they saw as one of the victims rather than as the most important of their enemies. In other version of the Polish emigrants' political thought, however, the Polish "liberation doctrine" took a more geopolitically oriented shape, distinctly opposing Poland and Russia as the two contradictory poles of political attraction in Eastern Europe, and in Slavdom in general, not only in terms of some idealistic principle but in the harsh reality of state interests. Poland, reconstituted in its old, pre-partition borders, would form then a kind of anti-Russian strategic magnet. In order to make the future place of Poland secure its aim would be not so much to create a Polish Empire, as to disperse the existing Russian Empire, diversifying its geopolitical territory into as many elements/states as possible. This idea was quite close to the one implemented two centuries earlier by Cardinal de Richelieu against the German states in order to make France's strategic position in the east unbeatable.

As an example of this mode of Polish political thought one can mention General Ludwik Mierosławski's geopolitical treatise, published in 1857. He explained the necessity of balancing the much too powerful

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<sup>23</sup> Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziela*, vol. VI: *Pisma prozą*, part II (*Księgi Narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego, Pisma polityczne z lat 1832-1835*) (Warsaw, 1955), pp. 159-161. For general interpretations of Polish romantic "international nationalism" see: Andrzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland* (Notre Dame, 1983); Andrzej Nowak, *Między carem a rewolucją. Studium politycznej wyobraźni i postaw Wielkiej Emigracji wobec Rosji 1831-1849* (Warsaw, 1994), pp. 94-116, 172-203, 286-356.

<sup>24</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland. The Formative Years* (New Haven, London, 1981), pp. 344-345.

and dangerous Russian political realm with a strong Poland and her influence in all Slavdom (Russia excluded). Poles (together with Ruthenians) should play a central role in the liberation of the Slavonic race from despotisms ruling in Eastern Europe, and connect the world of the Slavs to western civilization.<sup>25</sup> Even more illustrative in this respect may be the last stage of Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski's political career and thought. In 1831 the former foreign minister of the Russian Empire became the prime minister of the Polish insurgents' government, and ended as the head of the most implacable enemy of the Russian Empire's territorial integrity, for thirty years leading his propaganda and diplomatic fight against the tsarist state from his émigré base in Paris. Disappointed in the idea of a just empire, which he had cherished during his service in the court of Alexander I, he developed a highly original concept of nations and the priority of their right to independence over imperial states in organizing a new political order in Europe. He expressed this new idea first in his extensive *Essay on Diplomacy* (written in 1823 and printed in 1830), and then tried to realize it against the Russian Empire. Leading the post-insurrection diplomacy and propaganda of the Polish emigration for thirty years, prince Czartoryski became the main patron of using all ethnically non-Russian elements of the Empire in order to tear it apart. His battle against the Tsar Nicholas I's state was independence for Don Cossacks, Tatars, Circassians (Chechens), Finns, Estonians and other ethnic or religious minorities he portrayed as victims of the Russian Empire's oppression. Inspired by the prince's agents, and backed by Western European powers, especially by the British, these new nations were to form an important element of Czartoryski's plan for the Russian Empire's destruction and formation of a new political order in all of Eastern Europe. It is worth stressing that Czartoryski was consistent in extending his principles and efforts to lands of the Ottoman and – to a lesser extent – Habsburg empires, backing national movements of the Rumanians, Serbs, Croatians, Hungarians, and Bulgarians.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ludwik Mieroslawski, *De la nationalité polonaise dans l'équilibre européen* (Paris, 1857).

<sup>26</sup> Andrzej Nowak, "Europa narodów: wizja księcia Adama Jerzego Czartoryskiego," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 1:3 (2001), pp. 179-206 (in Russian, "Evropa narodov: vzgljad kniazia Adama E. Czartoriskogo," *Jewropa: Żurnal Polskiego Instytutu Międzynarodowych Diel* 1:1 (2001), pp. 35-64; idem, *Jak rozbić rosyjskie imperium*, pp. 81-162..

Was he, however, consistent enough to apply his idea of the right of nations within the realm of the former Commonwealth? This key question may be broadened out and applied to other political thinkers as we search for the true meaning of Polish imperialism in the nineteenth century. Czartoryski himself was the main financial and political patron of this group within the emigration which tried to defend the old unity of the Commonwealth – as a multiethnic, multireligious, and even multilingual entity founded on common republican virtues and on a belief in the revival of the old Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian power within its pre-partition frontiers.<sup>27</sup> They even organized themselves as the Society of the Lithuanian and Ruthenian Territories, established in Paris at the end of 1831. It had a member of Czartoryski's circle as its president, Mickiewicz as vice-president, Słowacki as treasurer, and Lelewel as the head of its historical section. The Society's aim was to promote unity of Lithuanian and Ruthenian lands with Poland, and their specific historical character and the political traditions that differentiated them from Russia proper (called quite frequently *Muscovy*).

At the same time, however, the Society had to defend its principles against a new enemy, internal this time. The defeat of the insurrection led to heated debates among the emigrants: why did we lose? The most radical section of their opinion went along with the logic of democratization and modernization: the main reason for the defeat was the fact that the uprising failed to mobilize all strata of society, especially the peasantry. In order to arouse them it is necessary to address them in their own, vernacular language. What language should it be: Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Belarusian? For the leaders of the largest democratic party in the emigration – the Polish Democratic Society – it was obvious that it should be Polish and that centralization was a necessary step to success, first in the next uprising and then in organizing the new state. The early modern conception of a republican nation began to be replaced by the modern concept of nation as the sum of vernacular speakers, a necessary precondition for modern democracy, as it seemed. So they (Tadeusz Krępowiecki and Adam Gurowski especially harshly) criticized the old Commonwealth supra-ethnic conception as a

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<sup>27</sup> Wiktor Weintraub, "National Consciousness in Polish Romantic Literature," *Cross Currents*, No. 6 (1987).

destructive and anarchic one. Any “regionalism,” such as cultivating a separate Ruthenian (Ukrainian) or Lithuanian culture and language, should be strictly forbidden. The eastern half of the former Commonwealth should just be a part of Poland similar to any other part.<sup>28</sup>

Another attack came from a political thinker, Maurycy Mochnacki, who criticized the “international” character of the obligations adopted by Mickiewicz or Lelewel in their concept of Romantic nationalism. Poles should shed their blood for the Polish cause only. Any solidarity of nations was just a dangerous chimera. Mochnacki and Krępowiecki in their concurrent critique of Romantic missionism foreshadowed a crisis of the concept of the Commonwealth’s regeneration and of its “liberation mission” in Eastern and Central Europe. Intellectually, they paved the way for modern nationalists, not only in Poland, but in Lithuania and Ukraine as well. “Modern politics after 1863 meant shrugging off the Commonwealth as a burden and embracing the peasant and his language as the nation.”<sup>29</sup> For Poles it meant an attempt to treat the whole post-Commonwealth realm as a future Polish “empire.” For the first time ethnic Poles began to think about Kiev or Smolensk as properly Polish. Their modern nationalism became a model for Lithuanians and Ukrainians with this new Poland as the main rival.

So the very fundamentals of a specific Romantic-republican ideology of the future Polish state as the cultural and political center for a major part of Eastern and Central Europe were undermined. This crisis was exacerbated by the tragic defeat of the next great uprising – in 1863. It provoked another wave of criticism of the Romantic idea of Poland, this time formulated by the right wing of Polish intellectual life

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<sup>28</sup> Tadeusz Łepkowski, “Pogląd na jedno- i wieloetniczność narodu polskiego w pierwszej połowie XIX w.,” Zofia Stefanowska, ed., *Swojskość i cudzoziemszczyzna w dziejach kultury polskiej* (Warsaw, 1973), pp. 232-245; Alina Barszczewska-Krupa, “Rola Towarzystwa Litewskiego i Ziem Ruskich w popularyzacji wiedzy o Litwie i Białorusi na emigracji (1832-1836),” *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego. Nauki Humanistyczno-Społeczne*, seria I, 53 (Łódź, 1967), pp. 45-69; idem, “Société Lithuanienne et des Territoires Biélorusses et Ruthènes à Paris 1831-1836,” *Acta Baltico-Slavica* 6 (1969), pp. 75-102; Andrzej Nowak, “Emigracyjne Towarzystwo Litewskie i Ziem Ruskich (1831-1833): w labororium rozpadu ‘przednowoczesnego’ narodu Rzeczypospolitej,” in A. Nowak, *Od imperium do imperium. Spojrzenia na historię Europy Wschodniej* (Kraków, 2004), pp. 196-223.

<sup>29</sup> Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 31.

by conservative historians in Kraków (Józef Szujski and Michał Bobrzyński). They were closer rather to Mickiewicz than to modern nationalists in their concept of a tolerant, multiethnic polity. But they were radically vehement in their assault on the Romantic-“Sarmatian” belief in any specific virtues of the old Polish (Commonwealth) political culture and civilization. Just like the Enlightenment philosophers a century before, Kraków’s historical school renewed a perception of Poland as a retrograde country that should be civilized based on Western European standards and should change radically its political “anarchic” tradition in line with those represented by states with strong central power, such as Prussia or France. They actually deplored the consequences of the union with Lithuania as plunging Poland in the mud of eastern politics and mores; they preferred a smaller Poland, but strictly attached to the West as the only source of civilizational and political patterns. Along with modern nationalists they dealt another blow to the “imperial” belief of the old “Sarmatians” and the nineteenth century “Romantics” that Poland could be an independent political leader for the whole of Eastern Europe, that in this strategically vital region, it could be a leader independent both from Russia and united Germany.

### **THE SECOND REPUBLIC – AN EMPIRE THAT FAILED?**

The last practical effort to revive Mickiewicz’s and Czartoryski’s dreams came in the person of Józef Piłsudski and the idea of socialist federalism ascribed to him by his followers. During his period as the leader of the independence-oriented Polish Socialist Party, he recreated the program of restoring the old Polish-Lithuanian union, adding a third element, even more important than the Lithuanian one – namely the Ukrainian. He defended the old concept of early modern nation not as a linguistic, but a status group, sharing the republican idea of Polish citizenship. He defended this concept against his internal rivals – modern nationalists, led by Roman Dmowski, and against modern Lithuanian and Ukrainian nationalists as well. He was determined to defend his beloved idea of a restored unity of a multiethnic republican

power in the old Commonwealth realm against the traditional, Russian-imperial enemy. Piłsudski grabbed the opportunity when all three partitioning empires crumbled during World War I, and the Polish state emerged. The general aim of his policy as Polish Head of State during the war with Bolshevik Russia was to redress the strategic balance in the region. He planned to achieve this aim by forming a Polish-led coalition of lesser nations in Eastern Europe that would be a counterweight to any Russian state. There is no better exemplar of his political intentions than his manifesto published on the occasion of the taking of Wilno from the Bolsheviks in April 1919. It was addressed to the inhabitants of the Old Grand Duchy of Lithuania and was printed in four languages: Polish, Lithuanian, Yiddish, and Belarusian. He appealed to this multilingual audience to share his vision to become citizens of the new republic that would unite Wilno and Warsaw again. During the campaigns of 1920 Piłsudski revealed the extremely ambitious range of his plans. Strictly in the long tradition dating back to the times of the "Sarmatian liberation doctrine" aimed at Moscow, as well as in a continuation of Mickiewicz's Romantic vision, the first Polish Head of State intended to form a kind of pro-Polish party among Russians, and to help them to win power in the Kremlin – in order to change the political system there to a more liberal and democratic one. The central premise of his strategy to influence the nature of any future Russian state was to cut it off from any possibility of regaining its imperial dimension – by cutting off Moscow from Kiev and other strategic borderlands from the Caucasus up to the Baltic republics.

It was not only Russians who rejected Piłsudski's projects. They were rejected as an especially dangerous imperialism by the majority of new national elites of his intended partners from the former Commonwealth, that is, Lithuanians and Ukrainians. They were rejected also by the Western powers, which did not believe (to say the least) in any Polish potential to form the centre of a stable political order in East-Central Europe. While France was ready to see in a reconstituted Poland a valuable and even relatively strong satellite, just to counter the defeated Germany from the east, for both Anglo-Saxon powers Poland could be nothing more than a small buffer state between the only traditional powers in the eastern half of the continent, Russia and Germany.

Piłsudski was determined to break this perception of Poland as a necessarily dependent and weak state, but failed.<sup>30</sup>

His operational success against the invading Red Army in August and September 1920 spared most of the newly created east and central European states the fate of the Soviet republics – for the next 20 years at least. But his political defeat was obvious: Poland did not form any counterweight, either to Russian or to German power. Instead of a federation or at least a close alliance with the nations of the old Commonwealth, Poland was forced to make a new agreement with Russia – Bolshevik this time – to partition Ukraine and the old Duchy of Lithuania territories. This failure was the effect of the lack of really popular partners for Piłsudski's policy in Ukraine and Lithuania, and of the Poland's military and economic weakness relative to the great task of constructing and supporting a new independent power between Germany and Russia. Thus modern nationalism triumphed, and in Poland also. The truncated territory of the old Commonwealth – transformed into the Second Polish Republic – was to be treated for most of its existence as an ethnic Polish state in the making. It was treated, at the same time, by its Piłsudskiyte elites at least, as a mini-empire, a regional power, struggling against its two powerful neighbours and their revisionist ambitions. If one were looking for an emperor in the modern history of the Polish state, Piłsudski could come the closest: both in personality, his power (after the coup in 1926), and in his ideology: statist and supra-national rather than narrowly nationalistic.

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<sup>30</sup> For an extended elaboration of my views on the subject, see: Andrzej Nowak, *Polska i "trzy" Rosje. Studium polityki wschodniej Józefa Piłsudskiego (do kwietnia 1920 roku)*, (Kraków, 2001); idem, "Wobec Rosji. U źródeł polityki wschodniej Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej," A. Koryn, ed., *Międzymorze – Polska i kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej XIX i XX w. Studia ofiarowane Piotrowi Lossowskiemu w 70 rocznicę urodzin* (Warsaw, 1995), pp. 77-90; idem, "Czy Józef Piłsudski był federalistą," Wiesław Balcerak, ed., *Polska – Bułgaria w Europie Środkowej i Południowo-Wschodniej w wiekach XVII-XX. Podobieństwa, różnice, uwarunkowania* (Warsaw, Łowicz, 2003), pp. 156-177; idem, "Spory o politykę wschodnią Piłsudskiego: bohater, zdrajca, czy kozioł ofiarny," *Prace Komisji Środkoeuropejskiej PAU* 11 (2003), pp. 59-76. For a new, revealing interpretation of Piłsudski's "socialist federalism" see: Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, pp. 57-65. To compare the latest analysis of Roman Dmowski's concept, see: U. Schrade, *Międzywojenna polska myśl narodowa. Od patriotyzmu do globalizmu* (Kraków, 2004), pp. 72-120.

In the east of the continent this new state had no strategic partners, but a powerful enemy, the Soviet Russia, and some smaller enemies, with Lithuania at the top of the list. Two concepts, evolved during the period, tried to address the problem of this geopolitically critical position through a revival of the old Commonwealth's realm and Romantic ideas of a Polish mission in the East. One of them was rather theoretical, developed in historical circles, mostly by professor Oskar Halecki, an eminent historian of the Jagiellons' state and Polish-Lithuanian unions. He presented his theory of civilizational differences between Western and Eastern parts of Eastern Europe, using for the first time in two historical congresses (in Brussels in 1923 and in Oslo in 1928), the term "East-Central Europe," where the key position was to be occupied naturally by Poland. The rest, the Eastern Europe proper, was to be cut off as a separate civilization, non-European in its religious roots and cultural-political traditions. The border between East-Central and Eastern Europe coincided more or less with the eastern border of the Second Polish Republic and that of other countries saved in 1920, such as Latvia, Estonia, and Rumania. It is interesting to note that this is exactly the border that was repeated seventy years later in Samuel Huntington's famous first article and then in his book *The Clash of Civilizations...* And this was actually the most popular perception among Poles of their country's place in post-World War I Europe: it was on the verge of the fault-line, ready to play once again the role of an "antemurale," bulwark, or "cordon-sanitaire" as it was called at that time. But - we should repeat this - the Western powers and most of their public opinion were not interested in this play for a long time.<sup>31</sup>

While Halecki's ideas defended conceptually a privileged Polish position in the region, Piłsudski's intelligence service worked hard in practice to keep alive the traditions of the Polish anti-imperial mission beyond the old Commonwealth's borders. The term "Prometheism" is usually used in relation to the history of these clandestine efforts. This reminds us both of the idea of liberation and the location of his torment, the Caucasus. Piłsudski's closest collaborators established a set of contacts with anti-Soviet organizations from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Volga

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<sup>31</sup> Oscar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History* (New York, London, 1950), pp. 105-139.

and Crimean Tatars, Kuban and Don Cossacks, Ukrainians from Bukovyna, up to Karelians in the North. They gathered them under the banner of the Promethean League of the Oppressed Peoples, operating from Warsaw, Paris, Istanbul, Teheran, and Helsingfors. The aim of this activity was exactly the same as a century earlier Prince Czartoryski's programme a century earlier: to prepare the elites of non-Russian nations of the Empire to rise in a concerted fight for freedom when the moment would come – on a signal given from Poland.<sup>32</sup>

The moment would not come, at least not during the existence of the Second Polish Republic. A completely different scenario was realized when two neighbouring powers, neither of which Poland was ready to recognize as its superior, decided to collaborate in a concerted action to annihilate the Polish state. Germany and Russia, now operating as the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, partitioned the power in between, which was too strong (or just believed itself too strong) to voluntarily accept one of them as its patron, and too weak to defend itself effectively. East-Central Europe was carved up along the lines dictated in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The "Promethean" program was left behind as a totally exotic and anachronistic idea – or as a message from the late Second Republic political elites to some future generation.

### FROM CATASTROPHE TO REVIVAL

These elites were virtually exterminated during World War II, by Hitler and Stalin's combined efforts. The latter introduced a new geopolitical position for Poland and new political elites ready to accept this change. The essence of the post-war Soviet-imperial vision of the reduced Poland was expressed most concisely by Maxim Litvinov, Deputy Foreign Minister, already in 1943. During the conference of

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<sup>32</sup> On "Prometheism" see: Włodzimierz Bączkowski, *O wschodnich problemach Polski. Wybór pism*, ed. Jacek Kłoczowski, Paweł Kowal (Kraków, 2000); Sergiusz Mikulicz, *Prometeizm w polityce II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1971); Marek Kornat, *Polska szkoła sowietologiczna. 1930-1939* (Kraków, 2003). For the Soviet point of view see: L. Sotskov, *Neizvestnyi separatizm. Na sluzhbe SD i Abvera. Iz sekretnykh dossier razvedki* (Moscow, 2003), pp. 54-90.

foreign ministers of the Allies in Washington, he just stated bluntly that "Poles will have to learn to live in their ethnic borders as a small nation. They will have to forget their thought that they had been a great power once. They were a haughty nation with neither skills nor power to realize their excessive nationalism."<sup>33</sup> As a result, Poland was cut off finally from the rest of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania heritage. The bloody cleansing of Poles from what became eventually a western part of the Soviet Ukraine, then the forced "evacuation" of national minorities, Polish from the new Soviet side, and Ukrainian from the diminished Polish realm – all this underlined the tragic end of the "civilising mission in the east, an idea as essential to Polish national identity as the frontier was to the American, or the empire was to the British."<sup>34</sup>

The new, Communist elites tried to imbue the decapitated Polish society with a new identity. The People's Republic of Poland was to play the role of the Soviet-Russian Empire's western outpost (just as in the time of Tsar Alexander I) with absolutely no independence in international affairs. Poland was moved as far westward as possible, to place her in permanent opposition to Germany (and the West which stood behind the Germans), as well as to make her virtually a hostage of the Russian/Soviet geopolitical patronage. All previous traditions of the Commonwealth, such as its parliamentary institutions, its republican supra-ethnic political ideal, and especially its heritage of a union between the Poles and the nations of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – all these were condemned as elements of a shameful and anarchic past. Another public enemy in the Communist educational and propaganda system was the Romantic tradition of Polish anti-imperial insurrections and conspiracies, as well as the spirit of political-cultural Polish missionism oriented to the East of Europe.<sup>35</sup>

Communists could use different allies and different points of ideological reference in their task of changing the historical Polish identity. One, most frequently recalled in this context, was made up of

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<sup>33</sup> Maxim Litvinov, *Notes for a Journal* (New York, 1955): Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943-1948* (Warsaw, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, p. 204.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

selected elements of Roman Dmowski's ideology. It was his vision of Poland resembling the medieval, Piast state, ethnically united and strategically oriented against Germany, his geopolitical stress on the necessity of choosing Russia against Germany as the most vital support for the Polish state's existence, and his stress on realism in politics expressed in his trenchant critique of the romantic fantasies and missionisms that led Poland to unwise and counterproductive insurrections against Russia. This reasoning was developed further in the Communist period by some politically active Catholics, who were tolerated by the state. Some of them, grouped in the PAX organization, developed nationalistic and antisemitic elements of Dmowski's vision. Another group of Catholic intelligentsia, centered around one weekly magazine, "Tygodnik Powszechny," and two monthlies, "Znak" and "Więź," and led politically by Stanisław Stomma and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, attached their programme to the tenets of political realism or neo-positivism, as they called it. It was first expressed in a pamphlet by Aleksander Bochenski (he was personally connected to the PAX organization), *The History of Foolishness in Poland*. His vitriolic attack against all Polish dreams of independent existence as a kind of "third force" between Russia and Germany, against all delusions of Polish grandeur, all messianism, all Romantic traits in Polish political thought, all "heroic" ambitions to influence the world or at least Eastern European history, was followed in many political statements of Stomma, Mazowiecki, and Andrzej Micewski. They declared the necessity of teaching Poles to live within their ethnic boundaries, as a small nation, with no particular ambitions, neither imperial, nor anti-imperial, but living quietly under the shield of their powerful protector. They were not so geopolitically pro-Russian as Dmowski or the PAX group, but they were determined to imbue the Polish public with a conviction that Poland was too weak to live without external patronage. It was difficult however to persuade most of the Polish public that the Soviet state could be an appropriate patron for a Catholic nation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Pritzel, *National Identity*, pp. 79-91, Adam Bromke, *Poland's Politics: Idealism vs. Realism* (Cambridge: MA, 1967), ch. 12; Stanisław Murzański, *Wśród łopotu sztandarów rewolucji. Rzecz o katolewicy 1945-1989* (Kraków, 1998).

Indeed, it was the Catholic identity of the Polish masses and the use of it by the Church Polish hierarchy that helped Poles to regain the spirit of independence and that of a mission ascribed to Poland. It is worth remembering here, that after the partitions Catholicism was treated both in Bismarck's and Russian officials' policies as the essence of the Polish identity, the essence of the Polish intransigence in fighting against domination by the Russian or the German empire. After World War II, when Poland was cut off from her former eastern *Kresy*, with their predominantly Eastern Orthodox, Uniate, and Jewish populations, the link between the Polish nation and Catholicism was even strengthened. Despite the efforts of some groups of Catholic intellectuals, ready to collaborate with the Communist regime, the Catholic Church became the most powerful stronghold of all the traditions of "Sarmatian"-Romantic culture and past "grandeur" that the new system intended to extirpate. The old traditions of Poland as *antemurale Christianitatis* – the bulwark of Christianity (against the Turks and "Schismatics"/Russians) – were easily translated into the new situation where Polish Catholics formed the largest and best organized Church community within the Soviet system. First, the Church became the bulwark of the Polish traditional identity against the new, Communist power and against its educational system. Then the old dreams of a Polish mission to open the European East to Catholic influences could be revived. Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who led his Church in this fight for survival, and then – after 1956 – for victory, ended his 33 years rule over Polish Catholics with these symbolic words, uttered in his last will and testament, and presented to Polish bishops a few days before his death in May 1981: "The East is opened to the Polish Church, it is to be conquered, all."<sup>37</sup> "The East" meant the old Commonwealth realm, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, and beyond it, Russia, as well as other states of the Soviet bloc in East-

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<sup>37</sup> Stefan Wyszyński, *Nauczanie społeczne 1946-1981* (Warsaw, 1990), p. 1047. For the best account in English of the role of the Church in opposition against the Soviet system see George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford, 1991). For a detailed analysis of Cardinal Wyszyński's concept of the Polish nation and its role see Andrzej Nowak, "Czy teologia narodu prymasa Stefana Wyszyńskiego jest nadal aktualna," Krzysztof Dybczak, ed., *Prymas Wyszyński a kultura katolicka* (Warsaw, 2002), pp. 47-64.

Central Europe, especially those with a distinct Catholic tradition, such as Czechoslovakia or Hungary. "The conquest" meant the break up of the communist system with the force of a spiritual revolution, led or at least inspired by the Polish example.

These hopes did not seem so extravagant at the moment when the dying Cardinal uttered them. There was already a Pole at the universal Church's helm. And there had been the great, 10-million-strong "Solidarity" movement in Poland, that seemed to embody both the "Sarmatian," republican dream, and the Romantic, insurrectionist-missionist ideals. Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II – is justly considered to be a strong proponent of the latter, Romantic vision, where being Polish means to have a mission. The essence of this mission, as ascribed to Poland by the new Pope, was revealed fully during his first visit to his native country in 1979. In Gniezno, the cradle of Polish statehood and Christianity in Poland, he presented a program of spiritual liberation of all Slavic nations, and of turning all of them again to Christianity. The Pope believed that the peaceful insurrection he inspired with his words presented to millions of Poles would lead finally to the fall of the evil Empire.

Poland was presented in those days as a spiritual super-power that could influence most of the Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe and counter effectively more than three decades of the communist ideology in the minds of millions. This impression was even strengthened by the "Solidarity" movement, which led to the gravest crisis in the whole Communist system in Eastern Europe since its formation. The missionary zeal, so evident in those hectic days of 1980-1981, was best documented in the Appeal of the First Congress of "Solidarity," addressed to "workers in Eastern Europe" (*Posłanie do ludzi pracy w Europie Wschodniej*). This appeal to follow the Polish free trade unions' example in fighting for human and civic rights was an open declaration of war not only on the communist rulers of Poland, but on the Soviet system as a whole, on the Soviet Empire's ideological domination over its nations. The Soviet authorities treated the Polish example as a mortal threat and serious rival, based on Polish historical traditions in Eastern Europe and on its Catholic, religious identity. They were still able to crush this rival, as the martial law imposed in December 1981 would prove. However, the seeds of unrest had been sown, the

“Polish core” had played its anti-imperial role for the whole region once again. Or, at least, some Poles believe this is so.<sup>38</sup>

### AN EPILOGUE OR JUST A NEXT CHAPTER?

Ten years after martial law was introduced in Poland, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. The Empire seemed to lie in ruins. The combination of the temporary power vacuum with the serious illness of the Big Brother allowed a renaissance of other historical imperialisms. From Hungarian efforts to extend their political community to all Hungarians living in neighbouring states, former parts of Saint Stephen’s Crown lands,<sup>39</sup> through “Russian bombast on behalf of Russian-speakers in the ‘near-abroad’ frightened neighbours,” Russia’s quarrels with Ukraine over Crimea and her armed occupation of Transnistria, to the bloody struggle to keep control over Chechnia, along with the equally bloody struggle to build a Serbian mini-empire on the ruins of the former Yugoslavia – all these events have shown that history is able to take her revenge.

But where was the Polish imperialism in this “favourable” time? Fears of its very real revival throughout the post-Commonwealth, and now post-Soviet, Eastern European realm ran high – especially in the Lithuanian capital, Wilno/Vilnius, in Lwów/L’viv in Western Ukraine, and in Belarusian Minsk. In the middle of the 1990s these fears were shown to be almost totally groundless. Already in 1994 Poland had treaties with all her eastern neighbours and had renounced all claims

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<sup>38</sup> Drogowskazy dla Polaków Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II, Vol. 1, *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny 1979, 1983, 1987* (Kraków, 1999), pp. 31-37. See also an interesting series of articles consecrated to the Polish Church and “Solidarity” influences in the western (“post-Commonwealth”) part of the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, as well as to the Soviet authorities’ reaction to it in Józef Darski, Roman Solchanyk, Ivan Hvat’, “Suchanist,” *Zeszyt w języku polskim*, No. 1-2 (Summer 1985) (München, 1985). For a broader perspective see Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> See Zoltan Kantor et al., eds., *The Hungarian Status Law: Nation Building and/or Minority Protection* (Sapporo, 2004) ([http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no4\\_ses/contents.html](http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no4_ses/contents.html)).

regarding the special status of Poles (which was an especially sensitive matter in Lithuania) and all possible territorial demands. "At the end of the twentieth century, the Polish political mainstream has finally broken with both Józef Piłsudski's Jagiellonian view of Poland as a great power and a multinational Commonwealth engaged in a struggle between Germany and Russia – and Roman Dmowski's notion that the frontiers of Poland were a reflection of its military prowess. Poland has finally resigned itself to the status of a medium-sized country that wants to expand its ties to Western Europe for cultural and economic reasons while accepting the fact that these ties must be conditioned by Warsaw's relations with Moscow."<sup>40</sup>

This transformation of the Polish elites' attitudes was quite unexpected for many commentators critical of the Polish "imperial" traditions as represented allegedly both by Piłsudski and Dmowski. It was ascribed to the triumph of a wise political programme which had been formulated in exile by Jerzy Giedroyc (born in Minsk) and Juliusz Mieroszewski (born in Krakow), his closest political collaborator in "Kultura" monthly (published in Paris for more than fifty years). That programme is usually interpreted as supporting the independence of Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian nation-states, with no territorial claims against them, and with no reference to their historical ties to Poland, as well as with no hostile intentions towards the Russian nation. The only enemy in this programme was to be a kind of "nationalist imperialism," whether Russian or Polish, that could start a quarrel over Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian territories.

It is possible, however, to connect the lasting influence of "Kultura's" programme to more general reasons. In the new world ushered in by "the End of History" – as it seemed then at the start of the 1990s – old territorial quarrels and claims were supposed to lose their previous meaning. Political focus on territory is considered anachronistic and is largely replaced by a tendency to move close to centres of information, finance, and prosperity, driven by economic considerations. As Ola Tunander observes, there is a trend observable in many other cases in Central and Eastern Europe – a trend toward greater centrality

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<sup>40</sup> Pritzl, *National Identity*, p. 104. See also Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations*, pp. 232-276.

and actual amputation of ties with more backward peripheries.<sup>41</sup> He enumerates in this context the examples of Czechs' "velvet divorce" with Slovakia, Germans' willingness to acknowledge their loss of Silesia, Pomerania and East Prussia, as well as Russians' consent to dissolution of the Soviet Union – just in order to get rid of their Asiatic peripheries. Though he does not mention Poland, her relatively easy farewell to the former Commonwealth seems to fit the pattern, too. Like almost every other country under the spell of "End of History" vision, Poland, or rather her inhabitants, preferred to be closer to the Western centre of the only civilization (just as during the Enlightenment) – that is to join the European Union as quickly as possible – than to keep their own, particular nostalgic dreams of historical grandeur.

It was not Giedroyc-Mieroszewski's ideas, but rather a revival of arguments used by the old Krakow school of historians, and Catholic "neopositivistic realists," both fighting with the same enemy of the Polish Romantic tradition for a new, spiritually and materially smaller Poland, that proved to be useful in sustaining that attitude in Polish political opinion during the 1990s. They repeated the old wisdom of the Enlightenment reformers that it might be necessary to amputate not only eastern peripheries from the imagined dimension of a "Polish civilization," but also to amputate some essential traits from the Polish self-perception. They insisted that only after this was done would Poland be able to apply for a modest place on the outskirts of the Western European "city on the hill."

But there was no "End of History." Or at least not everyone was persuaded to believe in it. In the mid-nineties there came another phase. Like the previous one, it could be named after a famous essay turned into a book: it was "the Clash of Civilization" phase. After the war in the Balkans had escalated with the NATO bombardments of Serbian positions in Bosnia, and after Russia had dropped her pro-Western course to show her older faces – those of Vladimir Zhirinovskii and Evgenii Primakov – it seemed again that Poland was somewhere

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<sup>41</sup> Ola Tunander, "Post-Cold War Europe: A Synthesis of a Bipolar Friend-Foe Structure and a Hierarchic Cosmos-Chaos Structure?," Ola Tunander, Pavel Baev, Victoria Ingrid Einagel, eds., *Geopolitics in Post-Wall Europe. Security, Territory and Identity* (London, New Delhi, 1997), pp. 17-45.

on the civilizational "fault-line." Therefore, with Polish efforts to join NATO and with Russia's persistent, sometimes hysterical opposition to this step, Russian fears returned. They feared a Polish-led Commonwealth revival, allegedly planned by Zbigniew Brzeziński and John Paul II in a combined conspiracy, in which the new Polish president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski was included. These fears spread even to the so-called serious press (for instance, "Kommersant," March 1997, "Delovye Liudi," April 1997),<sup>42</sup> not to speak of the more vulgar Russian media. Though there were no intentions of this kind on the Polish side, the change in the political and, so to speak, ideological context encouraged a renaissance of some "imperial," sometimes more "missionist" ambitions. "I would like Poland to be a regional power (*mocarstwo*), which doesn't mean any megalomania. It is just a confirmation of the real position of Poland now. Even our foreign guests speak about Poland as a regional power" – stated Polish foreign minister, Bronisław Geremek in February 1999. This "regional power" was to show many initiatives to influence the situation in the countries of the post-Commonwealth realm, especially in Ukraine – in order to help them to establish more ties with western political-economic structures and standards (or to help the opposition forces, in the case of Lukashenka's Belarus), and to prevent their re-integration within the Russian sphere of domination, and it was in Poland that the Chechen anti-imperial rebellion found the strongest support. Poland as a constructor of an anti-imperial (read "anti-Russian imperial") "democratic cordon," Poland as an "advocate" of the post-Soviet, Eastern European states in Western structures – these two metaphors were discussed very vigorously in the late 1990s in Polish media and political circles.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See: Ola Tunander, Pavel Baev, Victoria Ingrid Einagel, "Rosja w upadku – rozmowa z Andrzejem Walickim," *Arcana*, No. 26 (1999), pp. 33-51.

<sup>43</sup> Minister Geremek's statements cited in Maria Wągrowka, "Polityka na miarę realnej siły Polski," *Rzeczpospolita*, 16 February 1999; see also, for instance: idem, "Polska jako mocarstwo," *Rzeczpospolita*, 8 June 1998; Leopold Unger, "W oczach Zachodu," *Gazet Wyborcza*, 19 September 1997; Zdzisław Najder, "Ukraina, Polska, Europa," *Polska w Europie*, No. 38 (December 2001); Roman Kuźniar, Krzysztof Szczepanik, *Polityka zagraniczna RP 1989-2002* (Warsaw, 2002), pp. 220-221; Joanna Strzelczyk, *Ucieczka ze Wschodu. Rosja w polskiej polityce 1989-1993* (Warsaw, 2002), pp. 461-468.

Not that there was no opposition in Poland to these initiatives. The low-key vision of Poland as a small and humble petitioner or supplicant of the European Union still has many of supporters. Thoughts of a border role for the Polish state in Eastern Europe are still treated as trouble-making and vain bombast. In their political perspective the only feasible Polish foreign policy was to conform to all the EU requirements. Among these the most important in this context is the one, connected to the Schengen accord, which demands that Poland build what is in effect a visas-cum-police wall on the eastern border – with Ukraine, Belarus, and the Russian Kaliningrad oblast. To be on the better, western side of the new wall – this was the only thing that mattered for the opponents of any active Polish policy in Eastern Europe. That would mean one more Polish withdrawal from the East, and one more partition of the post-Commonwealth realm.

This mode of reasoning was criticized in turn by supporters of the idea of keeping the Commonwealth's strategic and cultural legacy alive, which was probably best expressed by Jan Kieniewicz, an eminent historian from Warsaw. According to his interpretation Poland has had a civilizational role as a builder of European structures in the continent's East, between the Baltic and Black Seas. The Commonwealth was for him rather a model of Europe in the East than an ethnic Polish model. But with the strategic defeat of the Commonwealth in its rivalry with Russia, Europe – in the sense of European civilization – began to be eliminated from the region. In geopolitical terms, Russia stole Poland's European clothes and Poland began to be treated as a synonym for the whole of Eastern Europe. Poland, in turn, started to treat the East as something inferior, something to be ashamed of, and decided to identify herself completely with the West and leave all the concept (and with it all the reality) of Eastern Europe to her successful rival – Russia. And now Poland has to answer this fateful question again: do we want – asks professor Kieniewicz – to accept the place and the role of a periphery? To be just a Western European gatekeeper in the East? Or should Poland become a new European integrator in the East – to open Europe once again to the whole realm of the former Commonwealth?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Jan Kieniewicz, "Czy Europa Wschodnia jest możliwa?," *Arcana*, No. 29 (5/1999), pp. 54-67. Arguments for the opposite, "minimalist" position in the discussion over the Polish "Eastern policy" are summarized in: Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, "Pochwała minimalizmu," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 24 December 2000.

Another professor – Zbigniew Brzeziński – gave a different, but more practical, geopolitical dimension to this vision. Both in his many articles published in the late 1990s and even more forcefully in some of his more private statements, Brzeziński paints a picture in which Poland becomes a regional leader of a new Central Europe. The latter should cover the former Jagiellonian empire, comprising both the Visegrad group (an idea launched in the beginning of the 1990s to provide a forum of integration for Poland and her southern neighbours: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) and the former Commonwealth countries: from Ukraine to the Baltic republics. Only Russia would stay relegated to Eastern Europe. In Brzeziński’s concept, Poland would draw the strength for her role as a regional power from her key geographical position, her historical traditions, and especially from her current strong ties to American policy. Poland would be again something akin to the Duchy of Warsaw, as imagined by Staszic and Kollątaj two centuries earlier: an Eastern European outpost of the Western Empire, this time that of the United States.<sup>45</sup>

John Paul II further strengthened the “missionist” mood, providing another active role for Poland in the east of the continent – in a specific, religious perspective. During his sixth visit to Poland in June 1997 he again presided over the great congregation gathered in Gniezno, to commemorate the meeting there between the first Polish king and the German Holy Roman Emperor in 1000 and the entrance of Poland to Europe. The Pope was greeted there by the presidents of seven Central European states: Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Poland. Poles, according to his words, should accept their duty of being at the centre of a new mission – to form a “pivot” of a united Europe comprising all western and all eastern (mostly Slavic) European nations. As he would stress on many further occasions, Poland, with her strong Catholic identity, should influence both the West and the East of Europe. This vision of a specific Polish moral-religious apostolate bore again strong

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<sup>45</sup> Zbigniew Brzeziński, *O Polsce, Europie i świecie* (Warsaw, 2002). Brzeziński’s more private opinions on the role Poland could play are related in a very interesting way in: *Rosja w upadku – rozmowa z Andrzejem Walickim*, pp. 48-49. See also an interesting collection: Marcin Zaborowski, D. H. Dunn, eds., *Poland. A New Power in Transatlantic Security* (London, 2003).

resemblance to the Polish Romantics model of Polish “moral imperialism,” operating against the despotic East and the materialistic West alike. This, so to speak, Gniezno model of Polish all-European engagement is still stressed in the Church’s activity, as it is confirmed in the idea of organising another great political-religious congregation in this city, exactly the day after Poland’s accession to the EU, on May 2, 2004, with all Europe’s Catholic bishops and most of Central Europe’s heads of state present.<sup>46</sup>

The discussions concerning an active role for Poland were given a new heat and a new dimension by a new geopolitical situation. After “the End of History,” and “the Clash of Civilizations” phases, the new one, introduced with the United States’ open declaration of a “unipolar moment,” and the backlash this ambition provoked in Europe, could be named “the Revenge of History.” The position of Poland, with her drive to become an EU member, and at the same time with her pro-American policy began to be reviewed as being on a fault-line again. This time not the one between the “Eastern Orthodox” and the “Western” civilizations, which runs somewhere through the eastern border of the former Commonwealth. The new fault line, though geographically lying somewhere in the Atlantic, between Washington and Paris, was introduced into Eastern and Central Europe too. It was heralded by declarations of both Donald Rumsfeld (on “the Old and New Europe”) and Jacques Chirac (castigating the leaders of “the New Europe” for their pro-American commitment).

Poland now has to answer a new question. If she wants to retain her position, or perception of herself, as a regional power, influencing a large part of Eastern and Central Europe, she might be pushed to make a choice between treating either the US or the EU (with its hard, Franco-German core) as the source of her regional position and mission. The West is divided – so Poland, feeling herself the exponent of Western values, standards and structures in the region, would be tempted to decide for herself: where is “the true” West, the most promising model of development, the most important source of power, a part of which might be delegated to Warsaw?

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<sup>46</sup> *Drogowskazy dla Polaków Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, Vol. II, *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999* (Kraków, 1999), pp. 337-345.

There is no apter illustration of the Polish choice, than the Polish general commanding an occupation zone in Iraq centring on the ancient Babylon. The Polish *veto* on changes to the Nice treaty, that France and Germany intended to introduce together with a constitution for the EU, is perceived by most of Polish public opinion as another chapter in the old history of the Polish anti-imperial stand in international politics. Poland poses as – and is accused of being – a spoiler of the new empire in the making. This time a Franco-German Europe is for many a candidate for “the Evil Empire.” It might be viewed as more burdensome for the countries of the region because it is geographically closer to them than the distant American power. That power is ready to affirm its ambitions as a distant ally and to use them effectively, as President George W. Bush asserted during his visit to Kraków on May 31, 2003. In his remarks addressed to “the People of Poland” from the Wawel Royal Castle, he touched all the points that have been elaborated above in this paper as the most fundamental elements of a specific Polish oscillation between an anti-imperial function and a unique missionist-imperial tradition. “From this castle, Polish kings ruled for centuries in a tradition of tolerance. Below this hill lies the market square, where Kosciuszko swore loyalty to the first democratic constitution of Europe. And at Wawel Cathedral in 1978, a Polish Cardinal began his journey to a conclave in Rome, and entered history as Pope John Paul II – one of the greatest moral leaders of our time.”<sup>47</sup> The first statement reminds us of the traditions of the Commonwealth. The second recalls both the anti-imperial role of Polish insurrections in the eastern part of the continent and also suggests the privileged position Polish political culture could take vis-à-vis Western Europe. The third stresses the moral (religious) dimension of Polish missionist ambitions.

We still like to listen to this melody. It is not so easy to put to rest five centuries of history and the traditions that make Poland so susceptible to Promethean dreams, dreams that are so hard for neighbouring empires to digest, and so prone to be used by more distant ones. Poland is still here, between the two powerful centres of the Russian Third Rome and the European-German Holy Roman Empire.

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<sup>47</sup> George W. Bush, *Remarks by the President to the People of Poland*, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 31 May 2003.

Eternally too weak to make a stable Empire-in-Between, and too strong (too proud or too self-confident) to accept the position of a small, dependent state. Eternally poised between the European East and West, between its own perception of itself as just a “normal” nation only and as the whole (“Sarmatian”-Romantic) civilization, between the role of a historical victim and that of a perpetrator, between the weak and the powerful. We are still here...<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Is Poland totally unique in this respect? Of course not, at least in the oscillation between an anti-imperial function and an imperial temptation. Almost all empires have had this element in their ideological fundamentals. It is enough to mention a few examples in this respect: the Hungarians as lords of the Saint Stephen Crown lands and the leaders of anti-Habsburg national liberation movements; the Serbs as their own little South-Slavic empire creators – and the leaders of anti-Ottoman and anti-Habsburg movements; the Japanese with their anti-“White Men” empire’s programme of Asia for Asiatic peoples – which happened to be the Japan imperialist doctrine; the Russians with a belief in their power’s liberating mission opposed to the “evil empires” of Napoleon or George W. Bush – and with their own empire, known also as “the prison of nations”; Franco-German Europe, believing itself to be the stronghold of an anti-imperial order opposed to Yankee world-domination while being at the same time quite imperial in its relations with “poorer cousins” from “the New Europe.” As a final example we can mention the empire – the United States, whose foreign policy-cum-propaganda is so much influenced by the presumption that Americans have no empire but a universal liberation mission. There is plenty of room for comparisons to be made and lessons to be learnt.