

Interpretations of Revolution in Partitioned Poland

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The nineteenth century was a time of great turmoil in Europe. With a fervor of nationalism sweeping the continent, some countries found their way to dominance, leaving others in their wake as they rose – Poland was one of the casualties in this struggle, falling prey to the aspirations of the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian Empires first through the Partitions in 1772–95, and then through the Congress of Vienna in 1815. These meetings of the European powers saw Poland wiped from the map, not through warfare, but through diplomacy. Surely such a slight would encourage aggression in the Polish population, and the fact that the next few decades of the nineteenth century would be embroiled in revolution, particularly in the area around Poland, is no coincidence. Though the connection between the political divisions of Poland and the revolutions it experienced seems clear, it has been dealt with in varying methods throughout the following periods in the study of Polish history. To come up with a clear picture of nineteenth-century Poland and its revolutions, this essay will examine the World War II-era *The Cambridge History of Poland* (1941), the Soviet-era *God's Playground* by Norman Davies (1979), and the more modern *A Concise History of Poland*, written by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki (2001).

The earliest of these three works, *The Cambridge History of Poland* (1941), was published during a time in Europe when Poland was a major point of discussion amongst heads of state and civilians alike, having fallen to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939. The work is primarily edited by four individuals, W. F. Reddaway, J. H. Penson, O. Halecki, and R. Dyboski, and is composed of many essays by a variety of academics, many of who are writing from places in Poland like Kraków and Warsaw. The entire work bears a feeling of sympathy

towards the Poles (a sympathy some later writers, such as Adam Zamoyski,¹ say somewhat bitterly was and still is common in Europe). The preface to the work notes that “all literary communication with Poland has ceased,” and adds, “We know that all our Polish contributors have undergone great suffering.”² Seeing Poland suffer the subjection of the Third Reich in 1939 very likely affected the way the authors in *The Cambridge History of Poland* viewed the subjection of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria – but instead of one subjected state, there were three.³ It’s also worth noting that the exiled Polish government had begun residing in London after the fall of France to Nazi Germany in 1940 – a combination of long-lasting European sympathy towards the Poles and the immediate influence presented by the presence of the Polish government-in-exile could have inspired the British authors of the *Cambridge History* to promote ideas of Polish nationalism, independence, and strength in face of trials.

One of the primary chapters on post-Partitions Poland was written by J. Feldman (or Józef Sokołowski, his real name), who was born in Przemyśl in 1899 and taught in the Jagiellonian University. Sokołowski was a wanted man during World War II, having criticized the German treatment of Poland in the past in his academic works. This element of his academic career carries into his chapter in the *Cambridge History*, which discusses the treatment of Galicia and Poznań by Austria and Prussia in the nineteenth century. Sokołowski discusses how Austria and Prussia, to maintain their new Polish territories, “were compelled, the first in a slight, the

¹ Adam Zamoyski, *The Polish Way: A Thousand-Year History of the Poles and Their Culture* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1988), 4. Zamoyski reflects that, “In her moment of crisis, Poland could count on the sympathy of every state in Europe, and on the support of none.”

² W. F. Reddaway, ed., J. H. Penson, ed., O. Halecki, ed., and R. Dyboski, ed., *The Cambridge History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), vii.

³ These three political bodies created by the Partitions are referred to variously, but, in this essay, they will be referred to as the Congress Kingdom (Russia’s Polish province), Galicia (Austria’s Polish province), and Poznań (Prussia’s Polish province). These names are used in the work in one of the chapters of focus, Chapter XV. J. Feldman, “Chapter XV: The Polish Provinces of Austria and Prussia After 1815: The ‘Springtime of Nations.’” In *The Cambridge History of Poland*, ed. W. F. Reddaway, J. H. Penson, O. Halecki, and R. Dyboski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 336–364.

second in a larger degree, to satisfy the national aspirations of their Polish subjects.”⁴ However, he notes that the demise of the Congress Kingdom’s national significance after the November insurrection (1830–1) allowed Austria and Prussia to further enforce their own institutions.⁵ Sokołowski seems to imply here that Austria and Prussia’ balance between authority and lenience in Galicia and Poznań helped pacify those regions, while the semi-autonomy of the Congress Kingdom allowed it to breed the nationalist sentiments that sparked the November insurrection. However, the crackdown on Galicia and Poznań that occurred after the insurrection also led to new nationalist revolutions around 1848–9 – it seems inevitable that the Poles would rebel. Sokołowski also speaks of “the national consciousness which the Poles kept in spite of bondage,”⁶ a sentiment which, when applied to Poland’s status in World War II, would imply that the sense of Polish nationalism expanded as a result of Nazi occupation, and that Poland will rebel again like they did in the November insurrection and in 1848–9.

Another significant chapter is Chapter XIII, which is actually two chapters merged. The second one, authored by Br. Pawlowski, centrally focuses on the November insurrection. The chapter is fascinating for its descriptions of military strategy – the table of contents notes that Pawlowski is a colonel, so this makes sense. He describes how the uprising began with the military, who had heard of the uprising in Paris in 1830 and were about to be sent to stop it. Not wanting to do so, they enacted their own plan of revolution in Warsaw.⁷ Pawlowski’s military background causes him to focus on the military’s role in the insurrection, and why, from a military perspective, the insurrection failed. In his description of this latter topic, Pawlowski’s writing begins to sound like a how-to guide for revolution, and he points out issues such as the

⁴ Feldman, 336.

⁵ Feldman, 336.

⁶ Feldman, 337.

⁷ Br. Pawlowski, “Chapter XIII: B. The November Insurrection.” In *The Cambridge History of Poland*, ed. W. F. Reddaway, J. H. Penson, O. Halecki, and R. Dyboski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 295–6.

lack of a central leader⁸ and the failure of the Polish army to have prepared a strategy.⁹ Taken together with Sokołowski's implication of an inevitable revolution in Nazi-controlled Poland, Pawlowski's chapter almost seems like a guide to the Polish on how to succeed. The *Cambridge History* is full of Polish nationalist notions – plans and warnings for the future dressed up as retrospective history.

The next work that will be examined is Norman Davies' *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, published in two volumes in 1979, shortly after the election of Pope John Paul II – the first Polish pope – in 1978, and towards the end of the Polish People's Republic. Davies is a British historian who was born in 1939, and is known for his work on European and Eastern European history. Davies would have been a child during the 1940s, growing up during the postwar rise of the Soviet Union in Europe. He initially attempted to acquire his PhD in the Soviet Union, but, upon being denied a visa, went instead to Kraków, studying at the Jagiellonian University. Here his work began to face some controversy, as his specialty of research, the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–21, was still being denied by the media in Poland and the Soviet Union. Later in his life, Davies faced some criticism for his treatment of the Holocaust in his works, an issue he believes cost him a tenured position at Stanford University;¹⁰ the central issue in his approach was stated to be his emphasis on the sufferings of Poland as a whole rather than simply its Jewish population, which overlooked the suffering of that group – some believed this to be dismissive, and historian Lucy Dawidowicz went so far as to accuse him of “erasing Polish anti-Semitism from the history books he writes.”¹¹ Davies' conflicts in social issues could be ascribed to his being a privileged British man, or to simply being newer ideas that clashed

⁸ Pawlowski, 296.

⁹ Pawlowski, 300.

¹⁰ “Kahn v. Superior Court (Davies) (1987),” Justia, last modified 2016, <http://www.law.justia.com/>.

¹¹ Lucy Dawidowicz, “The Curious Case of Marek Edelman,” *Commentary* 83, no. 3 (1987), 66.

with the existing body of previous academic thought – and, since the end of the Polish People’s Republic, many historians and academics decided to lean towards the latter.

As for *God’s Playground* itself, the second volume is of primary interest in discussing Poland after the Partitions. Davies’ method in writing *God’s Playground* was to focus on a body of thematic essays in addition to narrative chapters; these essays discuss separate contemporary subjects such as the separate Polish partitioned provinces and trends in different social groups. He notes in his preface that Poland is “inseparable from the catastrophes and crises, on which, paradoxically, it thrives,” and that “Poland is permanently on the brink of collapse.”¹² A decade or so later, this school of thought, in which Poland is a nation of tragedy, was dismissed as an exaggeration based on its twentieth-century sufferings;¹³ however, it’s worth noting here that a connection is visible between his emphasis on Poland’s sufferings in the twentieth century and his emphasis on Poland’s sufferings in the nineteenth century. He adds that “Poland has never failed to revive,”¹⁴ a sentiment very much in line with those put forth by authors like Sokołowski and Pawlowski in the *Cambridge History*, although this time likely targeted towards the Soviet Union rather than Nazi Germany.

Reception towards *God’s Playground* has been and continues to be quite positive. One review, written by Benjamin Schwarz in *The Atlantic* in 2002, begins with the not-so-unassuming question, “What makes this two-volume history of Poland, first published in 1979,

¹² Norman Davies, *1795 to the Present*, vol. 2 of *God’s Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), vi.

¹³ Zamoycki, 4–5. “There is loss sorrow and suffering in [Polish] history than in that of many nations – they were not traumatised by the Black Death; they did not, like the Germans, see over half of their population slaughtered by religious wars; they have experienced no horrors akin to those of the Russian Revolution or the Spanish Civil War. When disaster did strike, however, it coincided with the birth of the Romantic Movement, which exalted the tragedy into something monumental. Again, in 1945, a martyred nation was abandoned and condemned to moral and physical misery, the spectre of which haunts the world’s view of Poland’s past.”

¹⁴ Davies, vi.

such a great book?”¹⁵ Schwarz continues to praise Davies’ intellect and writing style, but notes that “Davies is opinionated and biased,” and “could be characterized as a Polophile” – however, this does not stop Schwarz from commending the work even in the places where he disagrees with Davies’ conclusions, which he claims is “an impressive mark of Davies’ scholarly honesty and comprehensiveness.”¹⁶ Another review by Piotr Wandycz comments that *God’s Playground* is a “remarkable book,” and Wandycz praises Davies for taking on the very complex task of creating a comprehensive history of Poland. Wandycz also notes Davies’ historical influences, stating that, at the Jagiellonian University, he “was exposed to deterministic and ‘causalistic’ Polish historiography heavily tinged by ‘Marxism,’” and concludes by claiming that, though many sections are too brief or broadly generalized, the work is “imaginative, thought-provoking and extremely well-written.”¹⁷ Common themes in both reviews are Davies’ strong, bold conclusions, which many may disagree with – the very factor that caused his controversy with Stanford University. However, the reviewers don’t believe that this is necessarily a bad thing, and commend his approach and effort.

The final book that will be examined, the modern *A Concise History of Poland*, written in 2001 by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, comes at a time during which an independent Poland exists, a claim that could not be made by the editors of the *Cambridge History* or by Norman Davies. The two authors have divided the work in the book, and Zawadzki ends up being the one to discuss Poland in the nineteenth century. Little information exists on Zawadzki, but it can be assumed that, like Lukowski, he is a Polish-British historian, due to his work with the Cambridge University Press (which published *A Concise History of Poland*) and his Polish

¹⁵ Benjamin Schwarz, review of *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, by Norman Davies, *The Atlantic*, December 2002, 127.

¹⁶ Schwarz, 127.

¹⁷ Piotr S. Wandycz, review of *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, by Norman Davies, *The American Historical Review*, April 1983, 436–437.

name. The *Concise History* is interesting because it contradicts some of the big themes of the *Cambridge History* and *God's Playground*, mainly in the area of nationalism – Zawadzki contends that Poland's rebellious streak in the nineteenth century was not due to some sort of inevitable trajectory or indestructible nationalist spirit, but rather influences from the West, focusing particularly on exiled Polish patriots in France¹⁸ and Napoleon's role in creating the Congress Kingdom from the partitioned Polish territories.¹⁹ The latter, Zawadzki notes, was especially important in the introduction of "modern elements" to Polish culture, including a revolutionary spirit and liberal intellectual ideas.²⁰ Zawadzki claims that Alexander I played a major role in preserving Poland in some form, and it's no accident that the November insurrection took place in his Congress Kingdom, which retained the Napoleonic institutions that been brought to it between the Partitions and the Congress of Vienna.²¹ In the 1820s, Zawadzki speaks of "an intellectual ferment generated by the influence of western Romanticism and of German idealistic philosophy," and, in an important connection, states that the November conspirators were "fired by Romantic dreams of Polish independence and inspired by the political upheavals of that year in western Europe."²² Overall, the interpretation of Polish revolution that Zawadzki presents dismisses the thematic inevitability of Polish nationalism presented by former authors, instead linking the events to the rest of Europe. Not only does this create a clearer image of Poland's place in Europe, but it seems to be a much more realistic interpretation of events than the idealistic rhetoric of Davies and the authors within the *Cambridge History*.

¹⁸ Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 112–113.

¹⁹ Lukowski and Zawadzki, 115–120.

²⁰ Lukowski and Zawadzki, 117.

²¹ Lukowski and Zawadzki, 124.

²² Lukowski and Zawadzki, 130–132.

Other scholars have found similar value in the *Concise History*. In a review by Richard Butterwick, he refers to the authors as “more realistic” than to imagine a “lost ‘Jagiellonian’ idea of a multi-national and consensual Poland,”²³ and claims that Lukowski and Zawadzki “succeeded admirably” in their attempt to provide a political history of Poland.²⁴ Speaking of Zawadzki in particular, Butterwick praises him for his ability to describe the different governments of the partitioned provinces, and acknowledges what he believes to be “a strikingly positive assessment of the opportunities provided by Tsar Alexander I after 1815.”²⁵ On this section on the nineteenth century, Butterwick lastly notes Zawadzki’s success in “emphasizing the disastrous consequences of the 1830–31 and 1863–64 uprisings and appreciating the Romantic patriotism that inspired them.”²⁶ Another review by Brian Porter praises the authors for “offering a compact, well-written, carefully edited, and reliable summary of Polish history,” and refers to them as “admirably moderate in tone,” a stark difference from the reviews for Davies.²⁷ He adds that the primary issue with the work is that, as a political history, it is incredibly difficult for Zawadzki and Lukowski to maintain narrative flow, and he, like Butterwick, acknowledges the discrepancy in density of the two sections of the work; the first, covering pre-Partition Poland, is “crammed into 105 pages,” while “World War II alone encompasses 25 pages: roughly 8 percent of the text is dedicated to about .5 percent of Poland’s millennium.”²⁸ Despite this, he concludes by claiming that “Lukowski and Zawadzki are quite sensitive to the dangers of overgeneralization and national essentialism”²⁹ – the elements that

²³ Richard Butterwick, review of *A Concise History of Poland*, by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, July 2002, 544.

²⁴ Butterwick, 543.

²⁵ Butterwick, 544–545.

²⁶ Butterwick, 545.

²⁷ Brian Porter, review of *A Concise History of Poland*, by Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *Slavic Review*, Spring 2003, 158.

²⁸ Porter, 158.

²⁹ Porter, 158.

were so crucial and significant in the *Cambridge History* and *God's Playground*. Perhaps it could be stated that an actively independent Poland tempers those ideas, while one in distress encourages writers to speak in a more Romantic tone. The examples within these works certainly seems to demonstrate such a correlation, although that may be just as hasty a generalization as those Davies became known for.

Polish history in the twentieth century seems to be defined by two trends: the first, of what Porter would deem “overgeneralization and national essentialism”; the second, of realistic causality and against Poland’s reputation as a nation of historic suffering and trauma. The revolutions of the nineteenth century suffer from a similar historiographical division, between the emphasis on inevitable nationalistic uprisings in the *Cambridge History* and *God's Playground* and the links to Romanticism and Western liberal thought presented in *A Concise History of Poland*. The major difference in the background of these works is the status of Poland concurrently with the writing of said work. *The Cambridge History of Poland* was written while Poland was at the behest of Nazi Germany and *God's Playground* at a time when Poland, if not forcibly a Soviet puppet, was not free from its influences in the slightest. For these authors, Poland’s circumstance in their time meshed inextricably with its circumstance in the nineteenth century, while Lukowski and Zawadzki, writing in the time of an independent Poland, were free to treat Poland without excess sympathy or idealistic notions – and so the cause of revolution moved from being inevitable to sensible.

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