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Polonia and the Struggle
for Polish Independence*

edited by Tomasz Pudłocki
and Andrew Kier Wise

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on day of their arrival at their home in Warsaw. Courtesy of Library of Congress

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III. BOOK REVIEWS

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ROBIN LAUERMANN (Grantham, PA)

REVIEW: M.B.B. BISKUPSKI, *THE UNITED STATES
AND THE REBIRTH OF POLAND, 1914-1918*
DORDRECHT: THE NETHERLANDS, 2012

By the turn of the 20th century, a significant wave of immigrants from Poland had fled their homeland as it marked over one hundred years under partition rule by the Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires. As they resettled in diaspora, including a significant number in the United States, they formed a significant base of political activity to influence other nations' foreign policies. In this scrupulously detailed work, M.B.B. Biskupski characterizes the activities by various civic associations of Polonia and their leaders to raise American consciousness, first for relief and military support of the war-ravaged lands of Poland and then for its return to independence. Two key lessons emerge: despite fragmented agendas and rivalries, Polonia achieved its common goal of Polish independence in part due to intentional leadership from the Polish community; despite the impact of the United States' foreign policy contributions to this outcome, its lack of strong and consistent commitment to the cause meant that it was not quite the strong ally as some had perceived it, often frustrating the accomplishment of Polish goals.

Built on extensive source documents in Polish and English, Biskupski presents a painstakingly detailed narrative that affirms the complexity of historical developments. Although not fully ordered either by chronology or topic, the author provides a compelling wealth of evidence. Cautioning against deterministic explanations for the outcome of Polish independence, he nevertheless reveals some influential factors. American Poles demonstrated similar sub-divisions as their international counterparts, though at times they could set those differences aside for the common good of a rebirthed Polish nation-state. Polish leaders helped to generate attention within Polonia and connections with the American government to promote their goals – for an army, for relief and for independence.

America responded, but sometimes with more rhetoric and symbolism than effective policy decisions and commitments. As a result of this scholarship, we have a much more detailed picture of the events that influenced the rebirth of the Polish nation-state – before, during and after the war.

Biskupski's account of the diverse perspectives within American Polonia, initially sketched in the first chapter, presents a complex picture. Contrary to some summary images of immigrant groups, Poles were far from a monolith of perspective and experience. Sometimes seen as a "Fourth Partition," this population was no less divided than those in the land from whence they arrived.¹ Individuals settling in the Midwest, around the Great Lakes, tended to come from the German portion of partitioned lands; they tended towards more clerical and economic traditionalism with a pro-Russia stance. Those settling along the Atlantic came from eastern lands; they tended towards more socialist and pro-German stances. In all, each of these broad groupings were very much framed by the culture and experiences of their emigration locations. Moreover, these multiple cleavages tended to be reinforcing rather than cross-cutting, save for the overarching interest in some sort of independent Poland, so there was less common ground on which to build collaboration.

These differences were reflected in the organizations that developed within Polonia producing, in turn, complications to efforts to support the Polish Question; that is, the return of Polish independence. Since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, observers in America have seen civic associations as a mainstay of generating support for political activity within the general public.² These groups bring together like-minded individuals, pooling efforts collectively, magnifying their influence over what an average individual might accomplish. Within Polonia, Biskupski catalogs the varied associations that represented interests from clerical (Polish Roman Catholic Union, ZPRK), to nationalist (Polish National Alliance, ZNP), to martial (Polish Falcons Alliance of America, ZSP) and many other groups.³ Throughout the text, he frames the events of the war and its resolution in an independent Polish state through the vantage point of these numerous and sometimes competing groups, indicating the important role of grassroots participation in these efforts.

The plethora of organizations resulted in divergent perspectives on the ends of a rebirthed Poland, reflecting more common ideological differences, resulting in an inability to tolerate the success of competing groups. These divisions were perpetuated by those of parallel émigré camps in Europe, particularly those spearheaded by Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski.⁴ Other leaders, such as

¹ M.B.B. Biskupski, *The United States and the Rebirth of Poland, 1914-18*. (Dordrecht: Republic of Letters, 2012), 6-11.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, transl. Henry Reeve (Project Gutenberg, 2006), Volume I, Book I, Chapter XII, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/815> (accessed: 1 July 2019).

³ Biskupski, 10-16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-21.

Ignacy Jan Paderewski, likely helped to promote sustained American attention to their goals because of celebrity.⁵ However, social capital failed to bond the efforts across American Polonia in significant ways, despite several attempts to create larger umbrella organizations, such as the KON (National Defense Committee – Komitet Obrony Narodowej), as the ideological competition usually tended to rent cooperative efforts.⁶ As a result, the efforts by differing groups were often seen as competition, rather than collaboration, which likely hampered the effectiveness of their work.

One of the several goals towards which Polonia worked involved repeated and faltering attempts, traced by Biskupski over several chapters, to fund and recruit for a Polish national army. Initial efforts began in Poland with the KTSSN (Temporary Coordinating Commission of Confederated Independence Parties) and RN (National Movement), and spread through connections to American Polonia. Dr. Teofil Starzyński initiated efforts by the Falcons to lead the organizational and funding elements. Very quickly, divisions between traditionalists and the left created challenges in cooperating on this goal. A solution offered involved centering efforts for a Polish army in France, encouraged by Waław Gąsiorowski, but faltered to lack of funding and support by the French government.⁷ A second option for conglomerating and training recruits in Canada, promoted by the PCKR (Polish Central Relief Committee), would likewise dissolve after opportunities to fight on Polish and Russian behalf dissolved. Leftist efforts, aligned through the NKN (Supreme National Committee) to support the efforts in Austria also fell through.⁸ Anti-Semitic impulses, evident in Poland during the war and in clashes within America, also hindered collaborative support in this area as it opened the movement to criticism of its character and question of its merit.⁹ The initiative would lose its momentum for a time.

Efforts to create the army were also hampered by imaging of Polish ties to subterfuge. Segments of the foreign press attempted an appeal to discourage America's entry into the war, due to concerns of how it might impact the outcome. In response, the British launched campaigns, not only to discredit particular editors, but also to cast German Poles as agents of the European powers that ruled their homeland.¹⁰ Despite limited evidence of actual collusion, efforts by domestic opponents of the KON, along with Allied powers, gained credibility with the larger public, discouraging support for the recruitment of American Poles to serve in the army.¹¹

⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

⁷ Ibid., 50-54.

⁸ Ibid., 59-63.

⁹ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁰ Ibid., 99-104.

¹¹ Ibid., 105-19.

As with other developments, it took movement by other international actors to spur America to further action. Jan M. Horodyski would serve as mediator on these issues, reporting to Paderewski. After delays in agreement forming "Kościuszko's Corps" within the United States army, or as contingents of noncitizens in Canada, the French government indicated a renewal in its own interest and support.¹² However, it would be the transition in Russian governments in 1917 that would lead to the authorization of the first official unit.¹³ Yet despite the formal recognition of these units, the Polish army languished, as citizens were not eligible to serve outside American forces and those not eligible for draft faced uncertain return under immigration law.

Once the United States entered the war, German and Austrian Poles became enemy aliens as opposed to refugees. Attempts to gain certificates of nationality for potential recruits were slowly addressed by the administration, showing a lack of awareness of the impact from the war that this population faced. Only late in the war was permission granted for recruiting of American Poles, along with concerted training efforts in several locations along the Canadian-American border.¹⁴ As the army's ranks also flourished from the gathering of Poles elsewhere in the world, larger scale developments in the war would determine that this activity was too little too late for the army to make its anticipated impact.¹⁵ However, the persistent attention to this concern would allow for inroads on other affairs of Polonia.

When military recruitment efforts stalled earlier in the war, members of Polonia turned their attention towards relief assistance, albeit, ultimately unsuccessfully. Polish celebrities, such as Paderewski and Henryk Sienkiewicz, made use of their renown to build attention to the suffering in Poland brought on by the war.¹⁶ Their founding of the Vevey Committee, in partnership with several others, dominated the relief efforts. Their pro-Russian/Entente leanings created dissatisfaction among those aligning with Austria/ Germany, especially with its resulting alliance with the PCKR, and for Jews who came to America from Poland who experienced poor treatment there.¹⁷ Moreover, they undercut perceived rival efforts, such as the Kochańska Committee, burning bridges with others who shared a larger concern for the homeland.¹⁸ Ultimately, the efforts raised a meager amount in relation to relief efforts for other nations, at least until major organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation became involved and émigré leaders convinced the American government to support its cause.¹⁹

¹² *Ibid.*, 279-86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 287-90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 341-45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 349-52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65-68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 86-96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124-27.

Despite the relative lack of sustained success of the relief effort compared to those for other European nations, such as Belgium, Biskupski asserts that it did stimulate attention to the Polish cause within American society and thereby helped to facilitate movement on the Polish Question, which would not be resolved until the conclusion of the war. The devastation visited on Polish territories both by Russian and German troops produced concern within the American public and government, especially with concerted attention to the issue in the national press. Earlier efforts by Erazm Piltz in establishing the Central Polish Agency (CAP), an international body that solicited funds from American Poles, laid a foundation for action.²⁰ In cooperation with the Polish National Department (WN), collaboration spread across Polonia. That collaboration would be impacted by international developments, as the coordinated PCKR-WN successfully developed internationally while the NKN-KON declined; however, the dissolution of formal competition meant that a more coherent approach to President Wilson could occur.²¹

Paderewski, as the perceived diplomatic leader of the Polish cause, was successful in gaining entrée to President Wilson's advisor Colonel House, on this and other issues, though Biskupski notes that evidence is unclear as to the exact extent of Paderewski's influence on American actions.²² Despite this contact and America's sympathetic rhetorical response, relief efforts would be stalled by the blockade of Germany, which the British initially refused to lift, in whole or part, without some guarantees for protections against German responses.²³ After lengthy diplomatic machinations, American support failed to secure agreements with the British and German governments, as conditions in Poland remained grim, but facilitated some furtherance of Polish national concerns.²⁴ Despite unsuccessful efforts in ending the blockade, the United States' displayed an open interest to intervene on behalf of the Polish cause. These developments would not have been possible without President Wilson's openness as a leader to learn.

In his work, Biskupski also provides a view into the evolving perspective of President Wilson, who went from near ignorance on Poland, Polonia and their cause, to a receptive ally. His prior academic work said little about Poles, and what there was of it was dismissive, as was his view of "hyphenated Americans."²⁵ As such he alienated Polish voters in 1912.²⁶ Held to account for his statements, he managed to overcome his negative reputation among this group. Moreover, his veto of immigration restrictions won favor among Poles for the

²⁰ Ibid., 160-64.

²¹ Ibid., 164-79.

²² Ibid., 131-40.

²³ Ibid., 142-45.

²⁴ Ibid., 145-46.

²⁵ Ibid., 184-87, 194-96.

²⁶ Ibid., 196-98.

1916 election.²⁷ Attentive to this group more closely, he would go on to insert the United States into the international conversation with a push for Polish independence, though not before other foreign powers officially raised the issue.

Early attempts by Austria and Germany to control the evolution of events produced a proclamation of November 5, 1916 establishing an as-yet-to-be determined independent Polish state; this potential outcome did not sit well with Russia, who feared the new state would align with its current enemies.²⁸ However, rather than giving a positive reception to this statement, the WN agitated among American Polonia, claiming that it failed to deliver a true independent Poland. Despite counter-efforts by KON to highlight the proclamation as a positive development, general attitudes tended to be negative.²⁹ Wilson initially critiqued this proclamation to the Senate, finding it self-serving to the actors who issued it.³⁰ He would later include a more specific and formal statement of support of Polish independence as his Thirteenth Point, advocating for its autonomy with sea access, for which America would further push once the Central Powers were cornered.³¹ This assertion marked a consonance with broader administration policy towards facilitating democracy, as well as an alignment with the Allied powers on the question of Polish independence.

Once efforts finally turned to defining the borders of Poland, contestation still abounded as to whether to draw boundaries based on pure geography, history, ethnicity or other criteria. Initial considerations examined population dispersions based on linguistic commonality.³² Continued conversation on the importance of a sea-port through Danzig stretched these original criteria, resulting in five potential combinations of partitioned lands.³³ The conversations were complicated by contested views of data from two different censuses – one conducted by tsarist Russia in 1897 and those by the Germans in 1916.³⁴ Moreover, the experts had to balance the proposed boundaries of Poland with concerns about other ethnic groups; the Baltic states, along with Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus, where members favored restoration of those territories as part of a Russian confederacy.³⁵ But ultimately, Poland would achieve its independence, along with its sea-port, simultaneously with the end of the war on November 11, 1918. Biskupski's research reveals that the path to independence was indeed complex, shaped by Polonian efforts to influence American foreign policy.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 200-12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 220-21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 223-24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 239-40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 328-36.

³² *Ibid.*, 393-96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 398-405.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 407-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 409-12.