

Russia was the most important among the partitioning powers. It was that state that seized the largest part of the old Polish Commonwealth. In this arrangement, which lasted for 100 years after being confirmed in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna, Russia occupied 82 percent of pre-partition Commonwealth territory (Austria took 11 percent, Prussia 7 percent), which included the capital, Warsaw. The struggle for Polish independence seemed to push Poles into taking armed action against Russia. It was Russia, then, that became enemy number one during this struggle. Two great uprisings broke out against Russia, and were suppressed with much loss of blood: the November (1830-1831) and January (1863-1864) uprisings. These followed earlier uprisings that broke out against Russia while the Commonwealth still existed (The Bar Confederation of 1768-1772; and Kościuszko's Insurrection of 1794).

There were nine wars, in which Poland was victorious in two, and Russia in seven; and four uprisings – all unsuccessful for Poland. Russia rose against Polish-Lithuanian domination in Muscovy when for two years (1610-1612) Poles occupied the Kremlin. The Russian uprising was successful. This was the total time that the Commonwealth was dominant over Russia – two years. Russia ruled Polish lands for over 200 years. Indirectly at first during the Reign of Peter I, that is, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the final partition; and then directly – until the disaster of World War I.

During those 200 years, hundreds of thousands of people passed through Russian prisons, incarcerated for their participation in the fight for the rights “of the unreasonable Polish nation”. No less than one hundred thousand people were sent to Siberia or to other distant outposts of the Russian Empire. No less than one hundred thousand persons fell in the uprisings against Russia, or were executed by the Russian authorities. Hundreds of thousands were deprived of their land and property. No less than a quarter million were forcibly inducted into the Russian army after 1832 (of which about 150 thousand died in the Tsar’s service). This was the most measurable summation of the political relations between Poland and Russia, at the moment when Poland recovered its independence.

Was the war of 1919-1920 the tenth war in this cycle? One more Polish-Russian war? Before we answer this question, it seems worthwhile to recall this history, even in an abbreviated version, regardless of what that answer may be. After all, it had an enormous impact on the political imagination of those of the generation which defended Warsaw in 1920 as well as among those who tried to capture it. Józef Piłsudski, the first head of the reconstituted Polish nation state, was raised by his mother in the spirit of the insurrectionist tradition, under the influence of the legend of the January Uprising. To him, Tsarist Russia was the arch-enemy. He was not the only one to think this. Most Poles at that time remembered the subjugation of the nine-

teenth century through family experiences. Moreover, the great literary works – chiefly by the Polish romantic authors Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński – recorded a vision of the Polish-Russian conflict on a spiritual plane. This still was still able to inspire active resonance in thought and emotions.

Excerpt translated by Peter Obst



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Selected books

Dzieje Polski, t. 1-4, 2014-2019

O historii nie dla idiotów. Rozmowy i przypadki, 2019

Niepodległa! 1864-1924. Jak Polacy odzyskali Ojczyznę, 2018

Metamorfozy Imperium Rosyjskiego 1721-1921. Geopolityka, ody i narody, 2018

Putin. Źródła imperialnej agresji, 2014

Intelektualna historia III RP. Rozmowy z lat 1991-2012, 2013

Strachy i Lachy. Przemiany polskiej pamięci (1982-2012), 2012

Imperialogical Studies. A Polish Perspective, 2011

Nowak a historian, university professor, publicist and the author of 20 books and almost 200 papers published in joint publications and journals.

Foreign language translations

Nowak's texts have been published in Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and USA.

Selected awards

Catholic Publishers' Association FENIKS (2018)

Kazimierz Moczarski History Award (2016)

KLIO Award for the best history book of the year (2015, 2016)

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2015)