The Creation of New Politics of Memory as a Consequence of a State's Rebirth: A Case Study of Poland in the First Postwar Years

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On 10 November 1918, Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) arrived in Poland from Magdeburg Fortress, where he had been imprisoned in July 1917 after refusing to swear an oath to the German emperor. His arrival is often illustrated with a photograph depicting him surrounded by a crowd. This is, however, inaccurate – only a few people greeted Piłsudski on that autumn morning, and none of them was a photographer. Adam Koc recalled the event as follows: 'On the night of 10 November I received a message that the commandant would arrive at Warsaw at 5 o'clock in the morning. [...] There were few people to welcome him, because the commandant's arrival was unexpected.'[1]

The photograph was taken in December 1916 and was first used in 1926 as part of creating the image of Piłsudski and a founding myth of the Second Polish Republic shortly after the May coup d'état of that year.[2] Although the discourse on the Second Republic of Poland's politics of memory became formalised after 1926, as Mieczysław Biskupski put it,[3] we can

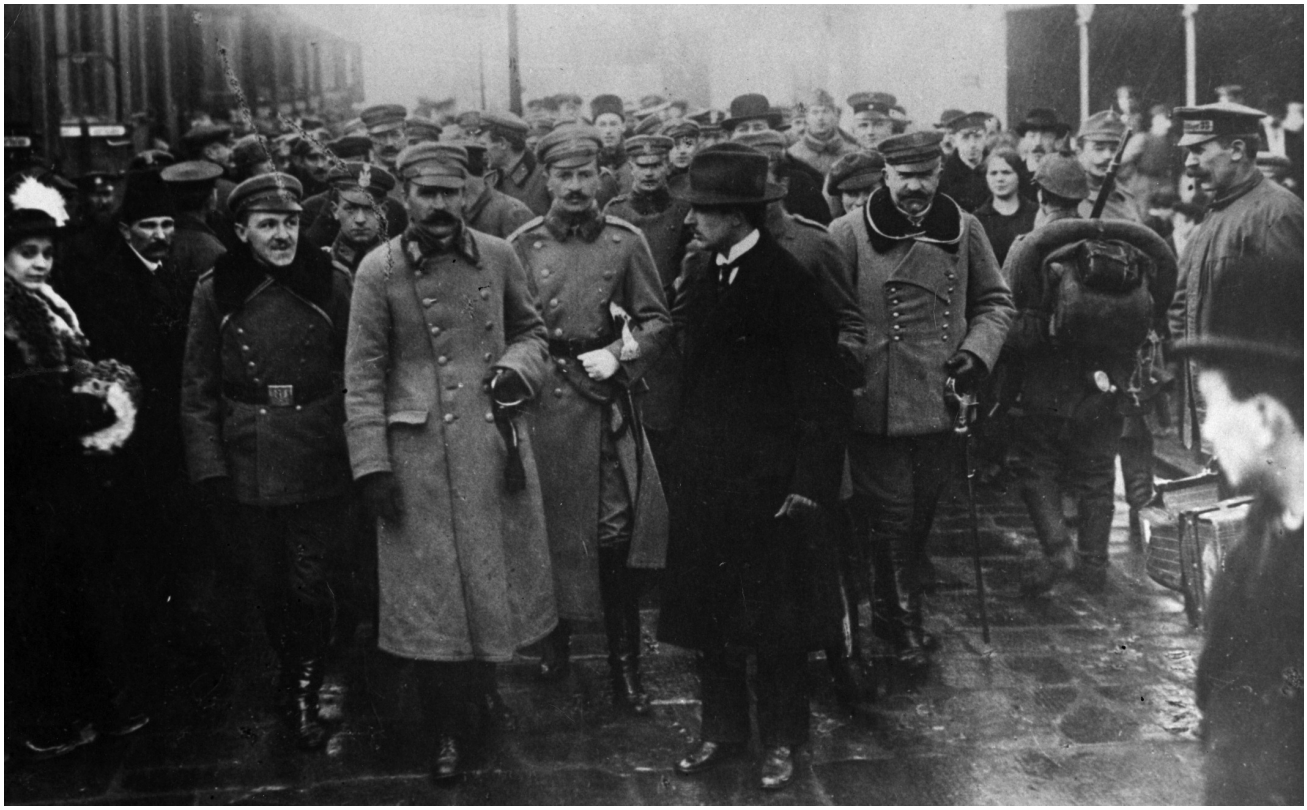

Fig. 1: Józef Piłsudski on Warsaw railway station after his arrival, seemingly on 10th of November 1918 (released from German prison in Magdeburg), however the photo was shot two years earlier.

trace the beginnings of these politics conducted by institutions of the emerging state back to the period of the war itself.

In 1919, Polish historians were still intensely involved in the Paris Peace Conference, yet it seemed that their future role would not be as vital for the existence of the nation as it was during the partitions. The distinguished historian of early modernity Władysław Smoleński (1851-1926) therefore stated the following during his inaugural lecture at the University of Warsaw that year:

> [T]he conditions of independent existence destroy the main reason why history was considered one of the means of rescue [...] future scholars of the Polish past, free from the temptation to provide the nation with rescue instructions, will be protected from one of the most important difficulties hindering our predecessors in finding the truth. Their search will be aided by the best skills guide, one alien to those of the past – selflessness.[4]

I believe, however, that although the role of history has changed since the 19th century, it was still important for politics in 1919.

The examples of official politics of memory, i.e. those conducted by the state, chosen for this paper will be based on Edgar Wolfrum's classical understanding of the politics of memory:

> The politics of memory is a field of action and politics in which different actors load their specific interests onto history and attempt to put it to political use. It is targeted at the public and seeks to create legitimising, mobilising, politicising, scandalising, defaming and other effects within the political struggle.[5]

The above-mentioned state institutions are the actors of these politics and use the politics of memory to achieve different political goals. According to Lech Nijakowski, therefore, '[t]he politics of remembrance consists of all of the intentional actions of politicians and officials with formal legitimacy aimed at the consolidation, removal, or redefinition of specific contents of social memory'.[6] As Peter Steinbach has put it, the politics of memory are not so much about the past as they are about power over the public's mentality and influencing the future.[7] This paper's aim is thus to present how history served, or was used by, the emerging state and its politics during the Great War and in the first years of the Second Republic of Poland. It will investigate the old and new realms of memory that were celebrated then, how the new official memory influenced the public sphere and how the new state presented its image abroad.

History and Diplomacy During the Great War

The most important goal of the emerging state's politics of memory was to secure Poland's border lines and legitimise its rights – not so much to new areas as, above all, to its status as an independent state. Historians working for various organisations, including some abroad, were therefore to prove that Poland should gain independence and that it was strictly connected with Western Europe. The first works in this field began within the Supreme National Committee, established on 16 August 1914 in Cracow. More than 30 historians cooperated with the Committee, which published over 25 books and many articles, including ones published in foreign journals. Their aim was to create a national consciousness in society and convince foreign opinion not only that Poles were able to create an independent state, but that this was in Europe's own interest.

One of the most important Polish scholars who published abroad and directed his texts in support of Polish independence mainly to the West European elites was Szymon Askenazy (1866-1935). He initially blamed England and France for the partitions, but in 1917, when the international situation changed and Poland began to seek good relations with the Entente states, Askenazy emphasised the strong ties between Poland and the United Kingdom. In London, August Zaleski (1883-1972), sent there by Józef Piłsudski, issued among other texts his brochure *Landmarks of Polish History*. He compared the Polish political system to the English one and argued that these were the only two European countries to have created democratic institutions in the early modern period, and that the reconstruction of Poland was an indispensable element of peace on the continent. Wilhelm Feldman (1868-1919), living in Berlin, wrote in support of the reconstruction of the Polish state. And the

Fig. 2: Congress of the Supreme National Committee in Cracow, Collegium Maius, 1916.

cultural historian and Slavist Aleksander Brückner (1856-1939) presented Polish statehood in opposition to the myth of the so-called *'polnische Wirtschaft'* – an alleged organisational and governmental ineptitude. In his writings, he strongly opposed Russia and supported the relationship of the Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian lands with Poland.[8]

In addition, the Polish National Committee in Paris had a large group of historians who wrote texts justifying the Polish demands. One of the crucial issues in the talks with the British prime minister was that of granting Gdańsk to Poland. Władysław Konopczyński (1880-1952) and Wincenty Lutosławski (1863-1954) argued that this city must remain in Poland, using abundant historical arguments.[9] Maps also served as an important tool for Poland's unofficial diplomacy. The most famous was the atlas published in 1916 by the Polish professor of geography Eugeniusz Romer (1871-1954).[10]

Of course, the Polish delegation was not the only one to use historical arguments in order to create new borders. We can only speculate how this kind of diplomacy actually influenced the decisions made during the conference. The arguments for Poles' rights to their own sovereign state were not unreasonable, as the Paris Conference revealed. At that time, the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1863-1945), who held a negative view of Poland, argued against the Polish territorial demands, claiming that the Polish nation 'did not manage to demonstrate the ability to maintain constant independence throughout the whole history'.[11]

Old and New Celebrations

New traditions and myths crucial for the emerging country started to be created at the end of the war. At first, however, the focus lay on celebrating old

anniversaries, such as the Constitution of 3 May 1791 and the November (1831) and January Insurrections (1863). Very early on – in April 1919 – the Polish Sejm decided that the Constitution of 3 May should be celebrated as a national holiday.[12] These celebrations also served current political needs. In 1921, they were supposed to underline the political stability by comparing the 1791 constitution with the one passed on 21 March that year. Moreover, by renaming – on 3 May 1921 – Warsaw's Warecki Square (plac Warecki) to 'Napoleon Square' (plac Napoleona) on the centenary of the French emperor's death, Polish authorities wanted to highlight the Polish-French alliance. It was part of a campaign aimed at strengthening Polish–French relations, which was important due to the Polish struggles to join Silesia to Poland.[13]

At last, historians could also study those topics that had been banned during the partitions. One such issue was the January Uprising.[14] The new legal regulations for the status of veterans confirmed the vital importance of the uprising to the new authorities' politics. As early as January 1919, Józef Piłsudski commanded the January insurgents to join the Polish Army, for financial reasons, and on 2 August 1919, a fixed salary for the November 1831 and January 1863 insurgents was passed. Although almost none of the November insurgents was alive at that point, it was meant to show the continuity of the Polish fights for independence. Military units were often given the names of January insurgents.[15]

It is also worth mentioning that on 1 August 1919, the Parliament restored the highest Polish military distinction, the Virtuti Militari Cross, and the first decoration with a silver cross took place during the anniversary of the January Uprising – on 22 January 1920. The theme of the uprising was so important that it became the canvas for one of the first Polish feature films – *The Year 1863*, directed by Edward Puchalski (1874-1942) in 1922.[16] The key figures in the celebration of the uprising were veterans, the so-called living monuments of heroism.[17] The uprising was also combined with celebrations of other an-

Fig. 3: Napoleon Square in Warsaw, 1920s.

Fig. 4: Marshal Józef Piłsudski rewarding French Marshal Ferdinand Foch with the Virtuti Militari Cross, 1921.

niversaries associated with the army – e.g., the insurgents were often invited to the legion ceremonies.

From the very beginning, recent history had been celebrated in Poland. In 1919, the country celebrated the march of the First Brigade on 6 August as the Day of the Army. In 1923, however, this holiday was moved to 15 August, to commemorate the 1920 Battle of Warsaw.[18]

The most important discussion, which started on the eve of Poland's re-establishment, was the question of when Polish independence began and who deserved credit as its main architect. New symbols and realms of memory were created and introduced in a process of discussions and internal political fights. Over time, anniversaries related to recent history began to emerge, and we can thus observe a growing discussion between politicians and historians on the starting date of Poland's independence, the main factors leading to it and the persons who played the most important role.[19]

Celebrating Polish Independence

The first national holiday established by law in 1919 commemorated the opening of the Polish Parliament on 10 February. Later that year, much of Poland celebrated 5 November – which was related to the proclamation by Germany and Austria-Hungary of the Kingdom of Poland in 1916. Independence Day was officially celebrated on 9 November 1919. The Right (Narodowa Demokracja) stressed, among other things, the signing of the Versailles Treaty in June 1919, since their leader, Roman Dmowski (1864-1939), was also the leader of the Polish delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. The Right emphasised their role in asserting Polish interests against the Germans in the uprisings in Silesia and in Greater Poland, which Piłsudski could not claim as his successes; later, they tried to diminish Piłsudski's role in defeating the Soviet Army in the Battle of Warsaw in 1920 by creating a legend of the so-called 'Miracle at the Vistula River'.[20]

Moreover, according to Marcin Jarząbek, Dmowski perceived Poland's participation in the war as more

Fig. 5: Insurgents of the January 1863 uprising laying wreath on 3 May 1926 at the newly erected Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw.

of a great tragedy than a heroic fight. This might be the reason for the Polish Right's failure to implement clear politics of memory before the 1926 coup.[21] The Left, on the other hand, associated the symbolic day of Polish independence with the creation of the socialist government, led by Ignacy Daszyński (1866-1936), in Lublin on 7 November 1918. In addition, persons most closely connected with the establishment of Poland's new statehood – Ignacy Paderewski (1860-1941) and Wincenty Witos (1874-1945) – did not acknowledge the importance of the Armistice date, i.e., 11 November 1918.[22]

Although the group created around Józef Piłsudski could not agree on a date of independence, Piłsudski's role was well acknowledged. It should be stressed that the creation of the Piłsudski myth began very early on – during the war itself – and was strictly connected with the Polish legions. A substantial percentage (around 40%) of the legionaries belonged to the intelligentsia, and so they themselves produced songs, poems and other texts, in which they praised Józef Piłsudski – the commander of the first brigade. The brigade's distinctiveness was underlined by his behaviour and looks, aimed at creating the Polish Army. Already in 1915, Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski (1885-1944), a member of the First Brigade, published a book entitled *Piłsudczycy* – Piłsudskites. Polish legions were unique but not united, as there were numerous tensions between their officers regarding the role of the legions role in gaining Polish independence or in creating a trialistic Austro-Hungarian-Polish monarchy. This conflicting memory sparked various tensions in the reborn Polish state.

Despite his critics, by the end of the war the myth of Piłsudski was already established and connected with the legend of the Polish legions. Regardless of their indisputable merits, even more important was what the legions symbolised – a founding myth for

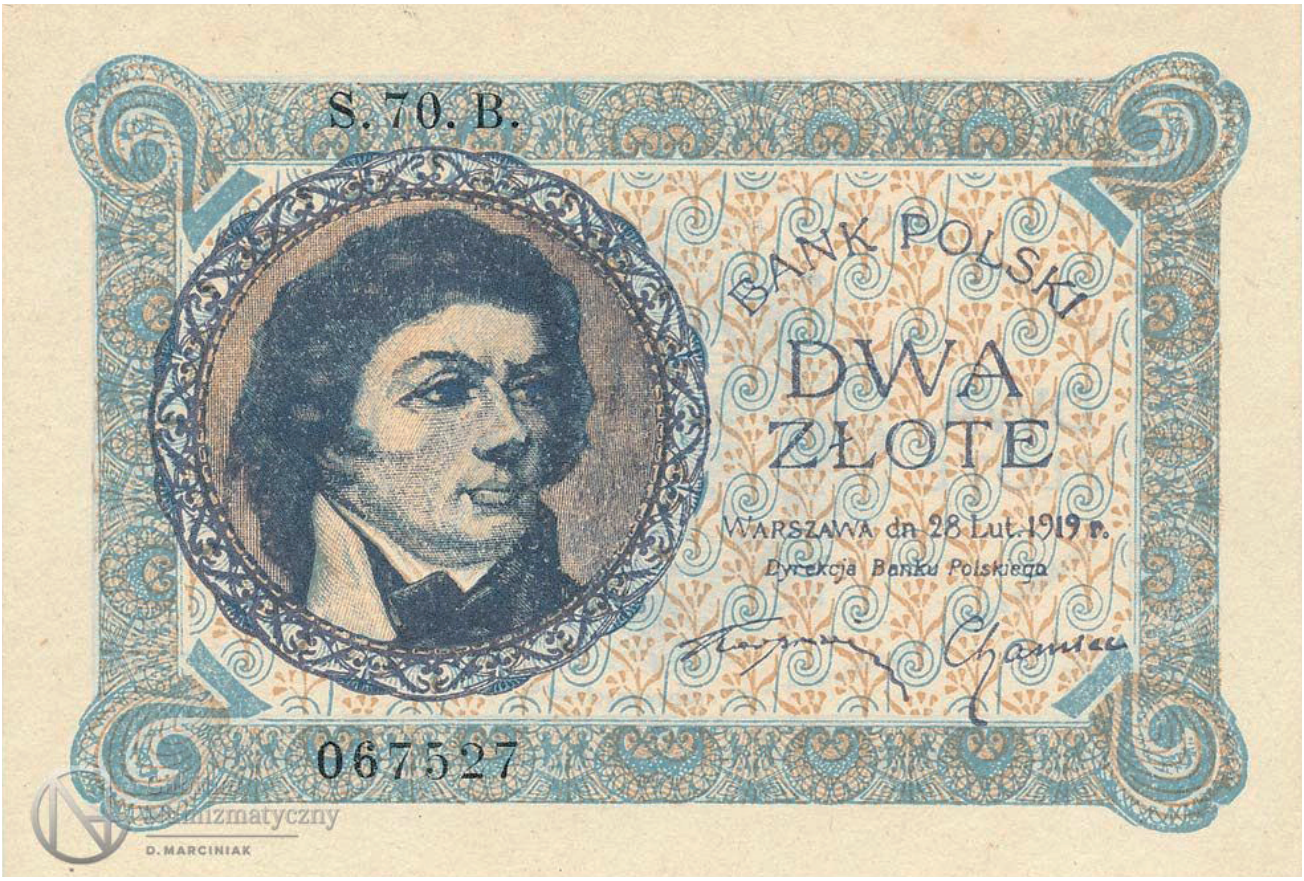

Fig. 6: Polish 2 Złoty banknote from 1919 with the image of Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746-1817).

Fig. 7: Józef Piłsudski during a parade celebrating the independence day in front of the Tomb of Unknown Soldier in Warsaw, 11 November 1926.

the young state. The legendary status of both the legions and Piłsudski were also linked with the memory of the Kościuszko and the January 1863 uprisings. It is worth underlining that Piłsudski himself also influenced the memory of the legions and thus also his own legend by his writings on recent history.[23] This was, however, a selective memory, as the official memory included mainly Poland's struggle for independence and not its alliance with the Central Powers.[24]

One of the moments when the official date celebrating independence could be recognised was the year 1920. On 22 October, the Bureau of Internal Propaganda of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers in Warsaw selected 11 November as a temporary date for celebrating Poland's emancipation or rebirth.[25] However, the main festivities were organised for 14 November (on a Sunday) and were connected with awarding Józef Piłsudski the rank of Marshal of Poland.[26]

The rightist governments tried to diminish Piłsudski's role,[27] so support among the veterans helped provide the strong political base he needed. The first celebrations of the First Cadre Company's 1914 march from Cracow were organised for 5 August 1922 in the form of the Congress of Legionaries combined with a historical reenactment of their march.[28] This Congress was one of the first occasions institutionalising a cult around Piłsudski.[29] The Right gained more votes in the November elections and Piłsudski soon afterwards withdrew from active political engagement. From that point, the importance of the independence day celebrations dwindled. Still, the date of Independence Day was not yet settled. In a 1924 lecture, Piłsudski himself stated that the most important dates were either the 22 November (when he was appointed Provisional Chief of State) or 28 November 1918 (when he announced the date of the parliamentary elections).[30] Even though he had with-

drawn from politics in 1923, his legend was further cultivated in order to integrate his proponents. This was one of the aims of Piłsudski's book devoted to the Battle of Warsaw, in which he not only presented himself as a successful leader, but also criticised his opponents, who at that time were ruling Poland.[31] His legend was strengthened through the works of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary National History in Poland (Instytut Badań Najnowszej Historii Polski), established in 1923 and renamed the Piłsudski Institute (Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego Poświęcony Badaniu Najnowszej Historii Polski) in the late 1930s.[32] Piłsudski's cult flourished after the 1926 coup and served as means of legitimising the new regime, emphasising the links between the people and the new Piłsudski government, even though it was criticised by the opposition. The Piłsudski cult served especially as an important means of integrating Silesia with Poland, as the memory of the Silesian uprisings was neatly mixed with the memory of Piłsudski.[33]

In 1926, i.e. after the May coup, Prime Minister Józef Piłsudski issued a circular in which he stated that 11 November should be celebrated as Independence Day. Although this circular dealt only with the year 1926, it in effect introduced this day as the official date of celebrations. From that point on, more vivid discussions between different political options concerning this date and the role of particular politicians in achieving independence thus began to politicise the memory. Irrespective of the official celebrations, left- and right-wing parties conducted their own celebrations during the 10th anniversary of independence in 1928, underlining the different visions of the recent Polish past.[34] Eventually, however, a single official memory emerged from this polyphony of narratives, and it was Piłsudski's version that prevailed, with 11 November crowned as Independence Day.[35]

Memory Politics and the State

In the first years after 1918, the issue of the nation dominated the school programmes. Moreover, in the first decade of Polish independence, the history textbooks presented a number of personalities whose actions enabled Poland to gain independence. Later, however, the role of Piłsudski was highlighted and after 1926, there is clearly a discourse of integrating the society and country around statehood.[36] Due to the inherited differences of the Polish lands after the partitions, the idea of the state was the most general common denominator.

The Ministry of Art and Culture was speaking of the key importance of culture for state cohesion and security as early as January 1920:

> The Polish state has grown, it must merge the Poles, it took the Belarusian, Ruthenian provinces, it is about to take Masuria, Silesia, and Spisz. Keeping these provinces with bayonets and butts is impossible in the 20th century. Our country cannot be united by force: we must seek a different path, and this is our culture. [...]. A state institution of propaganda for Polish culture should therefore be created.[37]

The symbolic sphere was directly related to the politics of memory. It was previously one of the important fields of conflict over identity between the Polish population and the partitioning authorities. Therefore, the issues of caring for monuments, statues, (re)naming streets etc. were of crucial importance. Probably for this reason, one of the first actions of the new Polish authorities – even before the end of the war – was to pass a resolution on art conservation and restoration care, issued by the Regency Council in October 1918.[38] The Ministry of Culture and Art emphasised:

> In creating this statehood, we must care for its autonomous independence, political, military, economic, as well as its autonomy and cultural separateness. [...] Without chauvinism, but with a proper understanding that it is the only weapon against Germanisation or Russification, one should strive with all the consciousness [...], to have [among others] our architecture, separate art.[39]

This notion was also shared by those artists who, like Władysław Skoczylas (1883-1934), promoted a so-called 'Polish national style' in arts.[40] Therefore, efforts were made to re-Polonise space. In December 1920, the Ministry of the former Prussian District issued a ban on building in Dutch, Swiss, or Prussian styles. Newly built villas were to take inspiration from the Polish court style or the Kashubian style.[41]

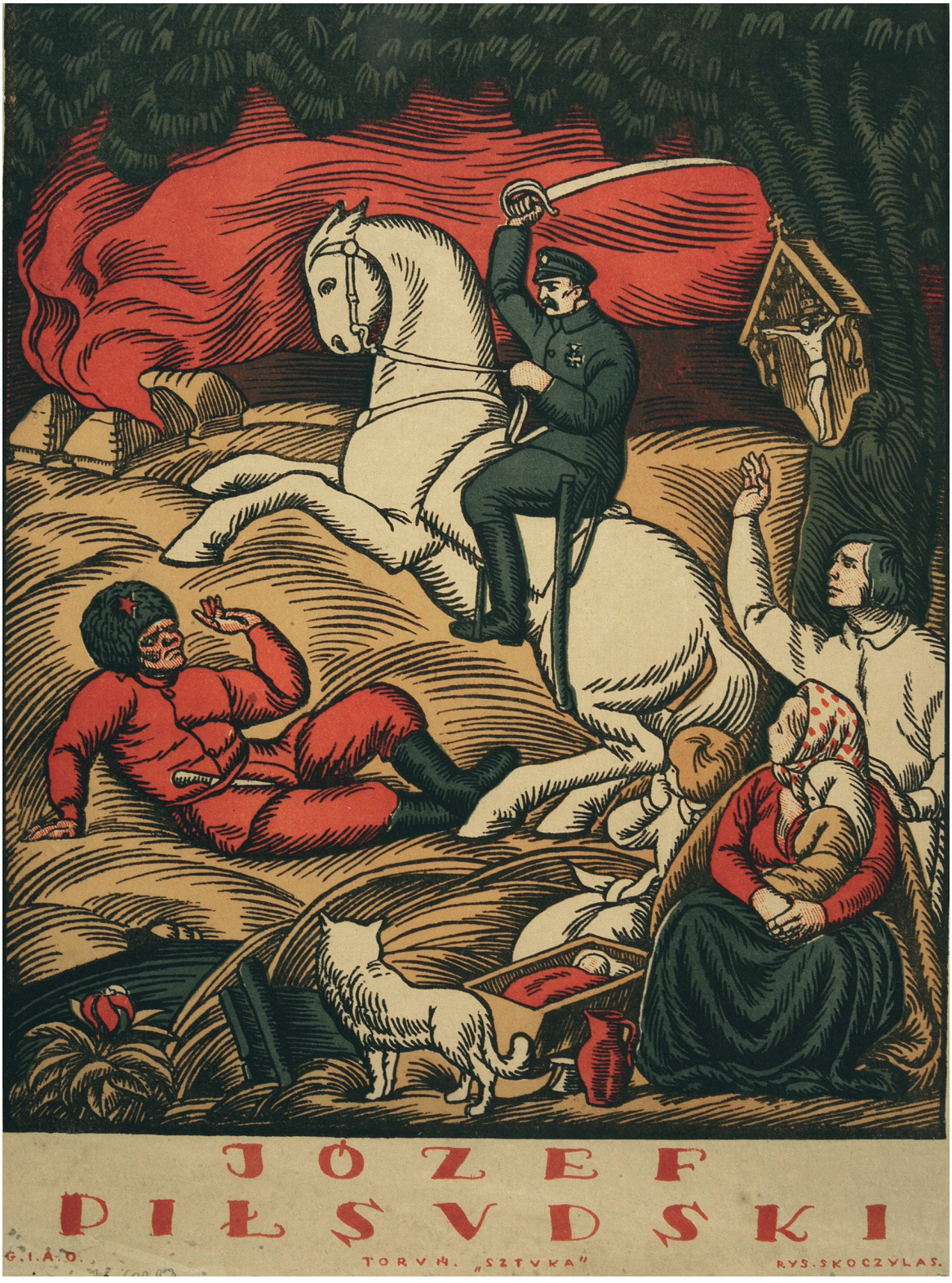

Fig. 8: Józef Piłsudski protects the Poles from the 'red danger' in the graphic by Władysław Skoczylas, around 1920.

Fig. 9: Staszic Palace in Warsaw in the Byzantine style.

From 1924, a major reconstruction of the Staszic palace in Warsaw began, which the Russian authorities had rebuilt in the Byzantine style in the late 19th century.[42] At the same time, the Orthodox Church of Saint Alexander Nevsky in Warsaw's Saxonian Square (plac Saski) was pulled down.

Poland's new culture of memory was also created in the public sphere by referring to the Great War, subsequent conflicts, and the nation's newly won independence. Łódź's New Market Square (Nowy Rynek) was renamed 'Freedom Square' (Plac Wolności) early as 1919.[43] The symbolic sphere was changed by the establishment of war cemeteries and the identification of all the separate graves of those killed during the war. A little later, the authorities began commemorating the memory of the so-called Lwów Eagles, the young defenders of Lwów in the fights against the West-Ukrainian People's Republic. As a symbol of the new memory politics, they also awarded the city the Virtuti Militari Cross.[44] Lwów is moreover connected with the Warsaw Tomb of the Unknown Soldier built in 1925, in which the remains of one of the defenders of Lwów were buried.[45] This tomb is an example of transferring foreign means of commemoration to Poland. At the same time, however, it was nationalised by referring to names of battles fought in the 'local' border conflicts.[46] It later became one of the most important places where Poland celebrated gaining her independence.

Foreign Memory Politics

Polish historians' activities during the Paris Peace Conference were supported by exhibitions. From January to March 1919, an exhibition was organised in Paris devoted to the Polish-French relationship, pointing to its centuries-long history.[47] The use of history also supported Polish diplomacy after the

Fig. 10: Staszic Palace after the restauration in 1924.

Peace Conference. The exhibition organised by the Office of Foreign Propaganda of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers in Paris from April to June 1921 was strictly connected with Polish foreign policy. It opened shortly after the February conclusion of the political and military agreement between Poland and France and after Poland and Russia signed the Riga Peace treaty in March 1921, but before the Allied Powers' final decision on the affiliation of Silesia. The exhibition showed, among other things, Jan Matejko's (1838-1893) work *Batory at Pskov*, significant in the context of defeating Soviet Russia, as well as a bust of Józef Piłsudski. The exhibition was praised in Paris, for example by this newspaper journalist who had recognised the true meaning of the project: '[A]n exhibition of Polish artists currently open in Paris would have no reason if it were not a better presentation of our past and current allies, our Polish allies [...]. The exhibition seems to be a very successful diplomatic event.'[48]

Reborn Poland was able to present its image to the world during the World's Fair in Paris in 1925 – the first such exhibition after the war. In order to show its strength, its centuries-old traditions, and its affiliation with Western European culture, and in an attempt to acquire France as an ally, Poland exhibited its folklore and Western classical art. However, the exhibition did not specifically refer to the traditions of the country's nobility, as Western Europe often perceived this as one of the reasons for Poland's downfall and identified it with bad organisation.[49]

Summary

The beginnings of the Second Republic of Poland's politics of memory date back to the actions undertaken by various institutions striving for Polish sovereignty during the First World War. Poland was forced to prove its right to independence both during the war and after 1918, often using historical argu-

mentation. Shortly after gaining independence, discussions on its beginnings began. Thus history not only united the nation, but also divided the different political groups who were supposed to legitimise it. The topics neglected so far – such as the cult of the January insurgents – were also incorporated in the new politics of memory. It seems that although historians did not have to provide the means of rescue, contrary to the above-quoted professor Władysław Smoleński, history after 1918 was still involved in Polish politics.

Endnotes

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