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Tadeusz Kościuszko, Poland-Lithuania and the Age of Atlantic Revolutions

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Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski, a leading expert on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and ScienceCampus visiting fellow in July 2022, explores how attempts to sustain an economic, cultural, intellectual and ultimately political revival of this state was linked to the central ideas of the age of Atlantic revolutions and Enlightenment. He focuses on the figure of Tadeusz Kościuszko, a military engineer and colonel who contributed to the US-American victory, before leading an insurrection in Poland that was eventually put down before the state finally partitioned. The text explores the intersections of Kościuszko's anti-slavery efforts with efforts to end serfdom in Central and Eastern Europe. Just as his efforts to restore Poland were thwarted, Kościuszko's will to support slave emancipation was posthumously denied by his supporters in Europe and America. Still, his legacy as a symbol of the fight for liberty lives on in Belarus, where he was born.

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Karl G Schweikart – Portrait of Tadeusz Kościuszko. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Historians such as Robert Roswell Palmer and Jacques Godechot conceptualized the Atlantic Revolutions in the mid-twentieth century, connecting revolutionary movements in Europe and the Americas between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They emphasized shared ideas of liberty and democracy, as well as ocean-goers such as Franklin and Lafayette. Besides the starring American and French Revolutions, there were supporting acts in Corsica, Sweden, the Dutch Republic, Poland-Lithuania, Belgium, and across Central and South America. Subsequently differences between revolutions were underlined.

The twenty-first-century revival of the concept has foregrounded contests for Atlantic trade –

particularly in slaves and commodities dependent on slaves – in the struggles between the maritime powers. Probably because of this shift, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which had no colonial empire, has become less prominent in the recent historiography of Atlantic Revolutions. Polish contemporaries, however, had a clear sense that they lived in an age of revolutionary upheaval. In 1789 one periodical announced it would cover ‘great events and revolutions of nations, which change their state, government, laws and their relations with other nations’.[i]

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Agrippa Hull, African American who fought with Tadeusz Kościuszko; Copyright: WHA UnitedArchives015838

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The history of the last decades of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is full of such 'great events and revolutions'. Rather than the 'decline and fall' of the anarchic 'republic of nobles' so often imagined as a result of the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795, the Commonwealth experienced an economic, cultural, intellectual and ultimately a political revival. Throwing off the Russian hegemony which had crushed its sovereignty for decades, the Four Years' *Sejm* (Parliament) of 1788-1792 reformed the country's constitutional and social order. The Constitution of 3 May 1791 proclaimed an inclusive idea of the nation, taking peasants – its most numerous and useful part – under the protection of law and government, as well as expanding the civil and political rights of townspeople. The underlying potential of the Commonwealth's republican values blended fruitfully with Enlightenment ideas, and the British and American examples. The Polish Revolution – as it was called in five languages – opened the path to a brighter nineteenth century, closed by the Russian invasion in 1792. The historical trajectory of central and eastern Europe changed, much for the worse.

The most obvious figure to reconnect Poland-Lithuania with the mainstream of Atlantic Revolutions is Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746-1817). Born in what is now western Belarus into a modest noble family of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Kościuszko showed such promise in the royal Cadet Corps, that the king sent him on a scholarship to Paris. There he learned the art of military engineering. Too poor either to purchase an officer's commission in the Polish-Lithuanian army, or to marry his beloved Ludwika Sosnowska, he sailed for America. Having volunteered for an examination, on Franklin's recommendation he joined the Continental Army with the rank of colonel. He contributed to the American victory through his fortifications at Saratoga and West Point, and at the end of the war was decorated, rewarded and promoted. Perhaps under the influence of his orderly, the free African-American Agrippa Hull, the erstwhile soldier of fortune became an idealist, opposed to slavery and serfdom.

Kościuszko, having finally been given a command in the Polish army in 1789, led the rearguard with distinction in the war against Russia in 1792. Alongside George Washington and sixteen others, 'who, through their writings and through their courage, have served the cause of liberty and prepared the emancipation of peoples,' he became an honorary citizen of France on 26 August 1792.[ii] Yet the French Republic denied aid to the Insurrection Kościuszko led in 1794 against renewed Russian domination of the truncated Commonwealth. The general famously donned peasant-soldiers' garb to honour their role in the victory at Racławice in April 1794 – the gesture would become iconic in the decades and centuries that followed. He found it difficult, however, to square his need for peasant recruits and desire to emancipate the serfs with most nobles' reluctance to relinquish peasant labour – resulting in half-measures. Kościuszko's valorous reputation impressed Tsar Paul I who released him from captivity. The wounded hero's voyage back to America via Sweden and England was a triumph:

after his arrival Thomas Jefferson hailed his friend as ‘as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known, and of that liberty which is to go to all, and not to the few or the rich alone.’[iii]

> [Kościuszko] left his accumulated American fortune for the manumission and education of slaves. It is all the sadder that Kościuszko’s statue in Washington was ignorantly vandalized during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, but its copy in Warsaw regularly gathers members of the Belarusian opposition in exile.

Returning in 1798 to France, Kościuszko sought the Directory’s support for the restoration of Poland, but he set his bar too high for successive French regimes. He was disgusted when Napoleon Bonaparte sent the Polish Legionaries across the Atlantic to suppress the slave revolt on San Domingo, where most died of tropical diseases, but some changed sides and fought for the Haitian cause. Nor would Kościuszko trust Tsar Alexander I, who welcomed him to the Congress of Vienna in 1815. After the septuagenarian general died in Solothurn in Switzerland, Alexander denied the implementation of Kościuszko’s last will, freeing the villagers on his family estate at Siechnowicze (now Siachnovichi, Belarus) from serfdom. The tsar did however permit a magnificent funeral and burial in Kraków’s Wawel Cathedral, the necropolis of Polish kings. Within a few years, a great mound had risen in Kościuszko’s honour on a ridge outside the city – the first of hundreds of places of memory across the world connected to him.



June 28, 2020, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S: Belarusians living in the United States gather at the statue of Belarusian national hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko as they rally in solidarity with their countrymen at home for fair transparent elections and against political repressions in their home country in Boston, Massachusetts. Copyright: xAlenaxKuzubx; Photo credit: IMAGO / ZUMA Wire

On the other side of the Atlantic, despite Kościuszko's last plea, Thomas Jefferson refused to execute his friend's earlier testament, which left his accumulated American fortune for the manumission and education of slaves. It is all the sadder that Kościuszko's statue in Washington was ignorantly vandalized during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, but its copy in Warsaw regularly gathers members of the Belarusian opposition in exile. Belarusians, too, are claiming this hero as their own. Sometimes criticized for inflexibility as a strategist and statesman, Kościuszko was above all a man of principle.

Notes

[i] Piotr Świtkowski, *Pamiętnik Historyczno-Polityczno-Ekonomiczne*, quoted after Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, 'Konstytucja 3 Maja. Rewolucja – prawo – dokument', in *Konstytucja 3 Maja 1791 na podstawie tekstu Ustawy Rządowej z Archiwum Sejmu Czteroletniego*, ed. Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Warsaw, 2018, pp. 5–52 (at p. 5).

[ii] Quoted after Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 159.

[iii] Thomas Jefferson to Horatio Gates, 21 February 1798, quoted after James S. Pula, 'The American Will of Thaddeus Kosciuszko', *Polish-American Studies*, 34, 1977, 1, pp. 16–25 (at p. 18).

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Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski is Professor of Polish-Lithuanian History and Head of Research at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at University College London (UCL). He will be a visiting fellow at the ScienceCampus, based at IOS, throughout July 2022. He received his BA and MA from Cambridge, before gaining a PhD at Oxford and a habilitation degree from the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). He moved to UCL-SSEES from Belfast in 2005 and was made professor in 2013. He is a specialist in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, with his most recent book The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1733–1795: Light and Flame, published by Yale University Press in 2020. He has also published the monograph monograph The Polish Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1788-92: A Political History, published by Oxford University Press in 2012. Its principal aim was to establish why certain decisions were made by a parliamentary assembly in a republican political culture, while others, which at the time seemed equally plausible, were not. It explains how the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth went to the verge of schism with the Holy Apostolic See, before the negotiation of a face-saving compromise. His broader research interests take in the Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment in broader contexts as well.

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