

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

<https://pw.ipn.gov.pl/pwe/history/behind-the-scenes-of-th/3240,The-Independence-Organisations-in-the-Poznan-Region-at-the-end-of-the-19th-and-b.html>
24.09.2026, 17:53

The Independence Organisations in the Poznań Region at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Janusz Karwat

Select Pages

[Before World War I \(...\)](#)

[From 1912 \(...\)](#)

[In 1912 \(...\)](#)

[Tones of independence \(...\)](#)

[In April 1917 \(...\)](#)

Before World War I, they were established,

above all in German gymnasiums and universities, where larger groups of studying Poles were concentrated. Until the year 1885, associations of Polish students operated legally. Then, the Prussian authorities prohibited the establishment of any associations by Poles, including participation in the work of organisations outside universities. On 12 July 1896, a superior secret organisation was set up: the Union of Polish Youth Societies in Germany. One of the statutory objectives of the Union was national and educational activity among Polish exiles in Germany. In 1897, the Union consisted of 250 members belonging to 11 societies. The discovery of the activity of Union of Societies by the police led to the trial of Polish academics before the Tribunal of the Reich in Leipzig on 25-27 June 1900. 16 students received penalties ranging from one week to 3 months in prison. After this event, most of the Polish associations from German universities became part of the Union of Polish Youth Societies Abroad with its headquarters in Geneva (including Polish organisations from Aachen, Berlin, Chemnitz, Dresden, Fryburg, Greifswald, Halle, Heidelberg, Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Munich, Würtzburg and Wrocław).

The Association of Polish Youth, i.e. "Zet" was the most influential among the Polish students. Its range covered all partitions and foreign university centres where Poles studied. Set up on 14 January 1887 in Cracow, on the initiative of Colonel Zygmunt Miłkowski, it called for independence and democratism. The organisation had a three-level structure, i.e. 3

levels of initiation of the members (colleagues, comrades and brothers). "Zet" was a type of patriotic order and its aim was to combine organic work with irredentism – as its activist Stanisław Szwedowski wrote. The highest authority in the association was the "Centralizacja" ["Central Board"], elected at annual congresses. District Committees, whose members were delegates from several academic centres, were subordinated to it. The circles (10) from the German Reich were concentrated in the Poznań district. Academic circles, the National Group, the theological group "Swoi" [Locals], gymnasium commissars (from Pomerania, Silesia and Poznań), the "Brzask" monthly magazine and from 1912, the civil defence commissar were all subordinated to the district board. National Groups were a temporary stage between secret gymnasium circles and "Zet". In 1908, the Gymnasium Council was established. Its consecutive leaders till 1919 were as follows: Antoni Wierusz, Tomasz Graczykowski, Witold Jeszke, Wincenty Kruska, Priest Czesław Piotrowski and Zygmunt Zaleski. The commissars to whom the gymnasiums from the Poznań region were subordinated included: Czesław Chmielewski, Władysław Hedinger, Witold Jeszke, Władysław Likowski, Leon Strehl, Jan Plackowski and Maksymilian Wilimowski. The "Zet's" Poznań district was different from other districts in terms of internal stability. The "Zet" of the Prussian partition did not have any competition as was the case with the Russian partition. Under its direction, a new generation of Polish intelligentsia of the Prussian partition was

shaped in the last twenty years before the outbreak of the war. It contributed significantly to the establishment of Polish carpenter and worker organisations in Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, Wrocław and Westphalia-Rhineland.

Initially the members of "Zet" (brothers) also belonged to the National League. After the year 1899, two directions crystallised: socialist (press organ: "Promień") and national (press organ: "Tekka") whose influence covered Galicia and the Prussian partition. The pushing aside of the idea of independence by the National League led to the termination of cooperation between them and "Zet". After the year 1910, the Centralizacja [Central Board] was located in Leipzig and Munich, and was composed of Greater Poland inhabitants: Aleksander Dubiski, Ignacy Nowak, Brunon Nowakowski, Stefan Rosiński and Leon Suchowiak. Before World War I, the organisation set its course on independence and took a both anti-Russian and anti-German stance. It accused the Commission of Confederated Independence Parties and Józef Piłsudski of bias in its military preparations and of turning a blind eye to matters related to the Prussian partition.

"Zet" became the main force that managed underground activities in the Prussian partition until the outbreak of World War I. Together with other organisations subordinated to it, it effectively counteracted the Germanisation of the Polish students. It did not have to face such competition here as in other partitions. It consciously struggled to interconnect organic work with those aspirations related to national

liberation. Most of the Greater Poland political, social and economic activists as well as the clergy, during the inter-war period, were members of "Zet". Before the outbreak of war, the influences of Endecja [the National-Democratic Party] and Piłsudski's adherents crossed into this organisation.

From 1912, physical education and civil defence sections were formed. Practical activities were started and its members were encouraged to voluntarily join the German army to hold the posts of military instructors. The first military departments of "Zet" were established in Berlin, Dresden, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Munich and in Italy. Before the outbreak of the war, military training was conducted in 11 German universities and about 130-150 Polish students, i.e. about 22% of the Poles studying in Germany underwent this training. German instructions and handbooks brought from Cracow as well as maps and weapons delivered by the members who had completed the one-year military service were all used for training purposes. The infantry soldier training programme was implemented including elements of platoon tactics. In Munich and Berlin, rifle groups were also joined by Polish workers. The positions of instructors were held by Kazimierz Glabisz, Bohdan Hulewicz, Józef Górski, Stanisław Krzeczyński, Tadeusz Lechnicki and Stanisław Marcinkowski to name a few.

"Zet" also supported the activities of the gymnasium youth. In 1874 in the Grand Duchy of Poznań, there were 19 secondary schools (13 gymnasiums, 2 progymnasiums and 4

Realschule¹). The first secret unions of the Polish gymnasium youth were established in the 1830s including the "Marianie" (Ostrów, Poznań, Trzemeszno, Śrem and Wągrowiec). As patriotic sentiments grew, on 19 February 1861, the National Society was set up and consisted of the following divisions: "Krakus" in Leszno, "Zawisza" in Ostrów, "Kościuszko" in Poznań and "Zan" in Trzemeszno. After the discovery of the existence of the National Society and the ensuing court trial in 1863, the gymnasium youths were sentenced to lenient penalties (up to one month of imprisonment). For participation in the January Uprising in the years 1863/1864, 38 pupils from Poznań and 19 from Trzemeszno were expelled from their schools. Soon the philomath movement reactivated itself in almost all gymnasiums of the province. At the end of the 19th century, philomath circles were formed in Berlin, Hildesheim and Westphalia (Gelsenkirchen, Hamborn, Recklinghausen). Before World War I, girls' circles were established in Gniezno, Inowrocław, Ostrów and Poznań. The network of secret societies also covered Gdańsk Pomerania (14 circles) and Silesia (14 circles) with approximately 15000 Polish students in 1914.

On the initiative of "Zet", a congress of gymnasium delegates from Greater Poland was held in July 1898 in Poznań. During the congress, the "Czerwona Róża" [Red Rose] union was formed. This union took over the leading role in relation to all the philomath circles in Germany. In 1901, an unmasking took place and during trials in Toruń (1902) and

Gniezno (1903), 88 pupils were accused of aspirations to rebuild the Polish state. 53 gymnasium students were sentenced and expelled from schools. After these events, the gymnasium circles submitted themselves to a countrywide organisation called "Przyszłość" [Future], abbreviated to PET. Drawing on the example of the Gniezno circle, all the circles were given a unified name in the year 1903 - the Tomasz Zan Society (TZS). There were 3 levels of initiation in the organisational structure of the Tomasz Zan Society: "Promieniści" [Radiants], "Philaretes" and "Philomaths". The accepted statutes touched upon the issues of functional duties, the principles of conspiracy and the content of the oath. In Germany, 6 Tomasz Zan Society districts led by permanent commissars delegated by the academic "Zet" were designated. The circles also benefited from local patronage and cooperated with Polish physicians, priests, lawyers and land-owners. From the year 1906 during the summer holidays, courses for circle boards were organised in Poznań and Cracow. In 1906, there were 56 active Tomasz Zan Society circles with 537 members (52% among Polish pupils). Over 3900 names of members of philomath circles of the Prussian partition are known from the years 1860-1919. More than 2300 names are associated with the region of Poznań, 1200 - Gdańsk Pomerania, over 300 - Silesia and about 100 names - Westphalia-Rhineland. After the members of the Tomasz Zan Society started their studies, they still continued their illegal activities in "Zet".

The work of the Tomasz Zan Society circles focused on two areas: education and teaching (self-education). Self-education comprised the learning of Polish, history, the geography of the Polish territories and political-economic issues considered from the perspective of the Polish nation and in the aspect of the regaining of independence. The programme was completed during a 2.5-year period, in four sections, twice a week, in groups consisting of 3-6 people, under the supervision of higher ranking members. The action of the distribution of books from Galicia was managed by Zofia Sokolnicka. The "Filaret" [Philarete] monthly was published (Priest Nikodem Cieszyński). In Ostrów, the members of the Tomasz Zan Society founded a sports club under the name "Venetia". With the help of the "Zet" and the Poznań "Straż", [Guard] four-week trips to Galicia were organised. There, the participants could become familiar with the idea of the scouting movement and issues related to paramilitary training. In the years 1905-1914, 215 pupils from the Poznań region and 162 pupils from Pomerania and Silesia took part in these organised trips.

In 1912, scout groups were formed as part of the Tomasz Zan Society circles. When the leader of the Poznań-based TZS circles - Wiktor Jakubowski - was in Cracow, he conducted talks on 27 July with the command of the Cracow district of Polish Rifle Squads (cadet Michał Żymierski). In September 1912, the Cracow instructors (Karol Popiel, Zygmunt Karwacki and M. Żymierski) conducted a series of instruction meetings in the circles. Soon first

rifle squads were organised in Poznań (S. Dabiński), Wschowa (Bronisław Piniecki), Leszno (Stanisław Jórka), Ostrów (Kazimierz Glabisz), Wągrowiec (Jan Knach), Gniezno and Inowrocław. The military work was supervised by Adam Rose and S. Dabiński. In January 1914, Zygmunt Karwacki concluded a detailed contract with the Tomasz Zan Society on behalf of the Polish Rifle Squads. An inspection of Poznań District VI conducted in June 1914 showed that regular military training was held by 160 members of the Polish Rifle Squads. More than half of them implemented the cadet school programme after completion of the recruit school training. All squads were in possession of weapons and instructions supplied by Lesser Poland. On 15 July 1914, the Poznań-Pomerania company which consisted of 120 people was sent to Cracow for manoeuvres organised by the Polish Rifle Squads. Jerzy Stam was appointed as the commandant of the Polish Rifle Squads (PRS) in the Prussian Partition. After the outbreak of the First World War, the course was interrupted and under the advice of Bernard Chrzanowski, its participants returned to their homes.

In Autumn 1914, the members of the Poznań PRS formed the Secret Independence Organisation with Z. Dalski and Henryk Bukowski as its leaders. It consisted of 70 members. The leading positions were held by: Wiktor Dega, Czesław Ganke, Józef Łakiński, Józef Skrzydlewski, Franciszek Wojtasiak and Janusz Zeyland. The Secret Independence Organisation was characterised by high internal

cohesion and did not maintain any contacts with any political groups. As a result of the conscription of some its members to the army and misunderstandings within the leadership, in spring 1916, it was dissolved.

Organisations of an ethical nature, referred to as “rebirth” organisations were an excellent introduction into independence work. These included the Teetotaller societies; “Wyzwolenie” [Liberation] „Jutrzenka” [Dawn] and “Świt” [Daybreak]. The oldest of these initiatives was “Eleusis” founded in 1902 by Wincenty Lutosławski. This was an all-Polish organisation which brought together students in Galicia, gymnasium pupils in Greater Poland and Pomerania and young workers in Silesia and Westphalia. According to Eleusis, moral rebirth and internal liberation gave a guarantee of the regaining of independence. The national rebirth was supposed to take place by building a strong moral formation able to make sacrifices. The starting point in working on oneself was to practice the quadruple restraint from alcohol, tobacco, debauchery and gambling. The spirituality of Eleusis was based on combining Christian elements with the “national revelation” of Polish Messianism. As a result of systematic practical exercises, the sphere of religious life was strongly linked to patriotic feelings.

In the Prussian partition, Eleusis supported the activities of the National League and was of a clandestine nature. The effect of the activities of the Cracow emissaries (Tadeusz Strumiłło, Jerzy Grodyński and Zygmunt Podgórski) was the

founding of the first Eleusis circles in gymnasiums in Greater Poland (1905). The circle in Gniezno was managed by Józef Kostrzewski (pseudonym: "Wielki Eleutryk"), in Poznań - Bogusław Zielewicz, in Ostrów - Leon Sokołowski and Jan Jachowski, in Śrem - Stanisław Janicki, in Leszno - Bohdan Hulewicz, and in Pleszew - Ludwik Bociański. Eleusis members exerted a strong influence on the development of the Greater Poland scouting movement. In the Poznań Province, in 1914 there were 80-100 members of "Eleusis" including girls. The ideas of the organisation were popularised in such magazines as "Świt" and "Filaret". In those magazines, the members of the Tomasz Zan Society, who imitated the German dormitory societies were stigmatised by their names. This led to the expulsion of the Eleusis members from the Tomasz Zan Society. The discovery led to the expulsion of Eleusis members from a gymnasium in Gniezno (J. Kostrzewski, Kazimierz Łuczewski and Tadeusz Korzeniowski).

The Eleusis movement in the Poznań region, in view of the necessity of secrecy and high ethical requirements, could not be a mass movement as was the case in Galicia, where it was legal. The spiritual formation of young people, who soon became leaders of independence work and the Greater Poland Uprising was built into the ranks of the Eleusis organisation. However, it turned out that independence came earlier than the moral rebirth that the young neo-philomaths had imagined.

Tones of independence also appeared among

young carpenters, merchants and workers. The youth had already experienced the school strikes in the years 1901-1903 and 1906-1907.

Meanwhile, underground, not numerous but disciplined, groups of working youth were being established. The attitude of some of them was very radical, e.g. the military-reconnaissance organisation founded in 1908 by Jan Kąkolewski - "Orzeł Biały" [White Eagle], which brought together the youth from Poznań city centre, the Jeżyce district and Główna Street. Militia groups with code names such as "Wolni Strzelcy" [Free Riflemen], "Czarna Ręka" [Black Hand] and "Sokół" [Falcon] gathered military and police information, getting ready for sabotage operations.

In the face of a ban on the work of the youth falcon circles, the Association of Games and Fun "Zorza" ["The Dawn"], which was managed by Józef Paczkowski, Andrzej Pokrywka and Antoni Wysocki, was set up in 1911. After the scout course organised by "Sokół" [Falcon], the society was transformed in 1913 into a scout troop which bore the same name.

In 1903, the working youth established the Self-Educated Polish Youth Society "Iskra" ["Spark"]. On its initiative, the organisation called "Ogniwo" [Link] was founded in 1910 for young merchants and bankers (Seweryn Krzyżaniak and Stanisław Szulc). In 1912, "Brzask" [Dawn] was set up (Stanisław Maćkowiak). These organisations cooperated with the Polish Gymnastic Society "Sokół" ["Falcon"] and co-formed the first scout groups. On 10 July 1913, a patriotic demonstration was organised in front of the

monument of Adam Mickiewicz. As a consequence of police intervention, riots took place and 38 participants were arrested. After a trial they were all punished with imprisonment. In 1902 the board of the union was arrested and sentenced to fines and short-term imprisonment.

A significant influence on the development of the Greater Poland independence movement before World War I was also exerted by inspiration from the Lesser Poland region. The majority of organisations were ideologically inspired by the National League. Based on source data, it can be concluded that 800-900 people were members of youth conspiracy organisations before the outbreak of the war. About 400 of them took part in preliminary military training. Galicia, and above all Cracow, influenced the Poznań region educationally. The numerous and regular trips of the Poznań school youth to Cracow shaped the sense of the ideological community. Their organisers skilfully combined tradition and religious content with elements of political and paramilitary activities.

An important moment to start practical military activity was the Grunwald Congress organised in the year 1910 in Cracow. Over 400 delegates from the Poznań region took part in it. The appearance of youth independence organisations was strongly criticised at that time by the older generation which was not prepared to accept such activities.

The outbreak of the war, owing to the conscription of many Poles to the army, caused decay in the organisational life in many areas.

The work of "Sokół" practically ceased, the more active, though not always prudent scouts organised the so called "tens", a form of militia. In October 1914, the first military "ten" under the name "Sęp" [Vulture] was organised by Bohdan Szeffer. After three months it was detected by the police. Blame for this was put on a very busy but undisciplined scout - an individualist - Stanisław Nogaj. Other "tens" were organised by Józef Jęczkowiak and Alfons Radomski - carpenters from the Old Town and Józef Nowak (workers from the Wilda district).

Similar militia groups were organised among the members of the Self-Educated Polish Youth Society which had operated in Poznań since 1903. The society brought together the youth which represented the circles of carpenters and workers. At that time, it was managed by Zenon Kosidowski. It was getting ready for sabotage-intelligence operations at the rear of the German army, if the Russian armies were to arrive in Poznań. The militia groups, altogether, consisted of no more than 50-60 members.

The militia conspirators "Sęp" [Vulture] led by Stanisław Nogaj set up the Sports Club - "Unia" [Union] (8 May 1915), bringing together 36 scouts from the "Piast" troop. Soon the club submitted to Z. Kosidowski. In March 1916, 200 members worked in 16 circles of the "Union". A similar system was started by the clubs established by the team of the "Dawn" troop. The Stefan Czarnecki and Leszek Czarny group members formed the Sport Club "Czarni" on 27 June 1915, under the supervision of Henryk Linke, while the scouts from the Leszek Biały

group formed the Vistula club (Andrzej Pokrywka and A. Wysocki).

In April 1917, the members of the "Union", led by Stanisław Nogaj, conducted a propaganda activity, placing the proclamation of Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich "To the Polish nation" on the most important buildings. On 15 October 1917, members of the independence militia organised a patriotic demonstration in Poznań attended by several thousand people on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of death of Tadeusz Kościuszko. After the holy mass, scouts were able to encourage the crowd to participate in street demonstrations.

In 1915, in the Auguste Victoria Royal Gymnasium, Franciszek Wojaś founded the Union of Polish Youth - "Kościuszko". Initially, only self-education activities were organised among young carpenters and merchants. After a year, the "Kościuszko" Union consisted of 62 members and at the beginning of 1918 it brought together 152 pupils of the older classes from four Poznań gymnasiums. The union was involved in work in three independent areas: public schools, scouting and the "falcon" movement and gymnasiums. It published an underground magazine called "Sami sobie".

At the end of 1917, military exercises were introduced: drills, elements of platoon tactics and exercises with weapons. Field exercises were organised in the Dębin and Gołęcin forests in the vicinity of Głuszyna. They were supervised by Andrzej Linke, Tadeusz Suwalski and Marian Trzeciakowski. Repressions against the scouts led

to the dissolution of this organisation and caused the necessity to operate underground. At the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, the Polish Military Organisation of the Prussian Partition, whose members were mainly scouts and deserters, was established.

LITERATURE

1. Celichowski Zygmunt, *Tajne związki młodzieży gimnazjalnej*, Poznań 1920.
2. Gomolec Ludwik, *Organizacje młodzieżowe w okresie przygotowań do powstania wielkopolskiego 1918/1919 roku*, Poznań 1970.
3. Jabczyński Mieczysław, *Dziesięć lat szkoły polskiej*, Poznań 1929.
4. Karwat Janusz, *Od idei do czynu. Myśl i organizacje niepodległościowe w Poznańskim w latach 1887 - 1919*, Poznań 2002.
5. Kosmowska Irena, *Związki młodzieży polskiej od 1818 roku do naszych czasów*, W. 1929.
6. Kostrzewski Józef, *Z mego życia - pamiętnik*, Wrocław 1970.

7. Markwicz Aleksander, *Filomaci*
(1816-1926), cz. I: *Wilno-Wielkopolska*
Grudziądz 1931.

8. Paluszkiewicz Marian, Szews Jerzy,
Słownik biograficzny członków tajnych
towarzystw gimnazjalnych w Wielkim
Księstwie Pozn. 1850-1918, P. 2000.

[1](#) Translator's footnote: Gymnasium in the Prussian education system, was the most advanced of the three types of German secondary schools, the others being Progymnasium and Realschule. A student attended Gymnasium for nine years and after the final year, they took the final exam called Abitur and obtained the right to go to the university. This type of education was also the most costly.

Progymnasium in Prussia lasted 6 years and then a student acquired the right to one-year service in the Prussian army. The possibility of joining the army entailed certain privileges in the militarist Prussia, therefore, it enjoyed some popularity among the youth.

Realschule is another type of secondary school education which lasted 6 years. As opposed to

Gymnasium which put more emphasis on traditional classical education, the Realschule was focused on practical education and prepared young people for careers in business and manufacturing.

Select Pages

1

2

3

4

5

