

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The shaping and activities of the Polish state authorities during the Greater Poland Uprising

Andrzej Gulczyński

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Regained independence was the result of years of

Polish endeavours, advantages taken of favourable circumstances and the organisation of appropriate measures. All these factors were considered when creating the concept of the Partition Sejm of Poznań and the system of people's councils. The ending war, the different revolutionary strands, the experience of the possibility of effective cooperation and the conviction of the necessity to make use of those opportunities created by the legal system led to the decision on the disclosure of secret inter-party agreements, their transformation into overtly operating councils and the convening of parliament.

The architect of the concept of the structure of the Polish representation ready to take over power was Priest Stanisław Adamski, the patron of the Union of Earning Associations from the year 1911, previously a close collaborator of Priest Piotr Wawrzyniak, and also, later on, in free Poland, an honorary professor of the law department of Poznań University, a member of parliament and a senator, and also the Bishop of Katowice. His idea originated, above all, from the concept of cooperatives and the Catholic social doctrine and referred to a successfully applied form of expression within Polish society: educational and economic regional assemblies – a model accepted by Poles and allowed by the occupier.

The structure proposed by Adamski resembled that of an association: all Poles living in the territory of the German Reich were its members, the Partition Sejm of Poznań was an assembly of delegates, the Supreme People's Council

functioned as the supervisory council, and the Commissariat was the board of the association. The poviats, municipal and communal people's councils were also a part of this structure.

When the revolution developed in Germany, Poles effectively became part of the system of worker and soldier councils. Polish authorities were established in Polish centres such as Warsaw, Lviv, Cracow or Cieszyn and the decision was taken in Poznań on 12 November 1918 to disclose the Central Citizens' Committee. Members of the Reich parliament and the Prussian parliament (sejm) as well as representatives of Polish political and social organisations were all a part of it. This institution was considered the representative of the Polish population in the Prussian partition - it secretly maintained contacts with the Polish National Committee in Paris and later also the Regency Council. On the initiative of the Executive Division of the Central Citizens' Committee, local citizens' committees were also established.

Immediately after the disclosure of the Central Citizens' Committee (CCC), a team which consisted of 3 people was appointed: Priest Stanisław Adamski, member of parliament Wojciech Korfanty and editor Adam Poszwiński. It was called the Temporary Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. Its most important task was to represent the matters of all Poles who lived within the territories of the German state and to bring about the establishment of the Supreme People's Council.

On 14 November 1918, the decision was taken to

convene the parliament (sejm). In an appeal made on that day, the Temporary Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council announced the necessity to wait with confidence for the decision of the peace congress and remember the right of Poles to determine their own future.

Furthermore, it stated the fact that everyone who was 20 years old or more was entitled to vote in elections. It must be particularly emphasised that this was the first time in the history of Poland that women gained passive and active electoral rights. Decrees of the Polish authorities in Warsaw, which acknowledged the equality of electoral rights, were issued as late as on 28 November, and the elections to the Legislative Parliament (Sejm) were held on 26 January.

By order of the Temporary Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, the local citizens' committees started to be more open about their activities and organise electoral rallies. The details were determined by the Provincial Electoral Committee for the Grand Duchy of Poznań, which sent a short instruction to the presidents of poviats electoral committees, ordering the organisation of electoral rallies at which members of people's councils and delegates for the Partition Sejm of Poznań were to be elected.

During those electoral rallies, about 1400 delegates were elected, including those from Greater Poland - 526, Royal Prussia (Eastern Pomerania) 262, Ducal Prussia (Masuria and Warmia) 47, Silesia about 430 and Polonia centres - 133. Among the delegates, there were also members of the Reich's parliament and the

Prussian parliament; some of them were subjected to elections in their existing electoral districts. A few of these parliament members included: Stanisław Łaszewski from Grudziądz, Priest Józef Kłos from Szamotuły and Wojciech Sosiński from Siemianowice. Among the delegates, there were at least 140 women and 90 priests.

The smooth course of the meetings was ensured by earlier preparations and arrangements. If we also take into account the intention of the uniform demonstration of the Poles, they were simply necessary. Before commencement of the sessions, some unofficial talks were held. They resulted, among other things, from the necessity to explain such issues as the number of assigned mandates, and reservations as to the method of conducting elections, and also the distribution of seats in the sejm's authorities. The female delegates who arrived in Poznań met in the day-care centre of the Female Landowner Society in the Bazar Hotel on the eve of the sessions. Intense debates probably also took place in Zielona Kawiarnia on Wrocławska Street, where delegates from Westphalia and Rhineland as well as representatives of the organisers of the Sejm gathered. Here, the accusation of electing too many delegates in certain districts was considered too. However, it was agreed that the number intended for the exiles was not globally exceeded. As a result of a compromise there was an arrangement that member of parliament Stanisław Nowicki, an activist of the National Workers Party would become the marshal, while a delegate from Westphalia would be the vice-

marshal and the delegate from Berlin - the secretary (no names were mentioned). And this is in fact what happened, Nowicki became the marshal, Stanisław Piecha from Westphalia was the vice-marshal and Feliks Kosztuski from Berlin was proposed as the secretary. Furthermore, other vice-marshals were as follows: Józef Rymer from Silesia, Stefan Łaszewski, a member of parliament from Grudziądz, and parish priest Walenty Barczewski from Royal Prussia. The secretaries were as follows: Antoni Wierusz Ph.D. from Dolsk, Countess Maria Potocka from Piątkowo, Szczepan Gracz from Lębork, Franciszek Kurpierz from Opole and Dobrogost Lossow from Grabonog.

For the time of the Sejm's sessions, Poznań was decorated with national symbols. The streets through which the march of the delegates passed were decorated with particular splendour. Busts of national heroes were placed in windows, simply "the city was flooded with red and white banners as well as standards with a white eagle against a red background". Near St. Martin's Church, a garland with the image of a White Eagle with wings rising to fly was hung over the street, then slightly further away, over Piekary Street, just at the entrance to the session room, a garland with the inscription "Welcome" was also hung. As Bohdan Hulewicz mentioned after some years, Helmut von Gerlach, a state under-secretary in the Prussian Ministry of Interior Affairs, who observed the proceedings of the Sejm, said: "There is no point in fooling ourselves. The Poznań region is completely lost to us".

Before the beginning of the sessions, the

delegates got together in the parish church, where Primate Edmund Dolbor celebrated a holy mass, and a solemn sermon was delivered by Priest Antoni Stychel, also a parliament member. The great march through the city, which was in the form of a demonstration, brought the delegates to the Apollo room. There, three plenary sessions of the parliament were held, one on each day.

The room space was divided into two sections. The podium, which we know from illustrations, was occupied by the praesidium of the parliament, and the delegates and guests were seated in the auditorium. Behind the praesidium's table, there was a decoration, on top of which an eagle with wings spread rising to fly was located. Underneath, on four pilasters, there were eagles which symbolised the four districts that took part in the parliamentary sessions: Poznań, Pomerania, Silesia and Warmia and Masuria. On the ramp of the stage, four shields with eagles were placed, and in between them, there was an emblem which was the symbol of emigration - swallows in a nest.

Suitable prints containing drafts of legal acts which were to be adopted by the parliament were prepared for the delegates. They were compiled in the form of a booklet: "Presentations for the Partition Sejm of Poznań in the year 1918", and in the form of a large sheet: "Resolutions to be sent to coalition states handed over to the Polish National Committee in Paris" (the print which bore this title also included "General Resolutions"). The course of the sessions was covered in a bulletin entitled "Parliamentary

journal summary of the course of the sessions of the Partition Sejm of Poznań". Four issues of this bulletin were published and when the sessions came to an end, their descriptions, including long quotations from the respective speeches, were published in the form of a brochure. All this proved that the Partition Sejm of Poznań was prepared with particular care, whereby the intention was to give it a parliamentary dimension.

The foundation for all deliberations and postulates during the Sejm's meetings, was the assumption that the peace congress would determine the future of the Polish state and the territories of the Prussian partition. National solidarity and the introduction of changes by way of evolution were the two important cornerstones of the arrangements. Not everyone agreed to this, therefore, some protests were expressed also after the sessions had come to an end.

There were statements during discussions, which generally pointed to the concept of the political system of the reborn Polish state. The equality of all people before the law, care for citizens and protection from destitution and poverty were all emphasised. The details of the political system of the entire state were not, however, the subject of the debate. The "Law on the political organisation of Poles living within the existing borders of the German Reich" which was adopted by the Parliament, was, as it were, of a constitutional nature. By implementing the provisions of this legal act, the Sejm elected the Supreme People's Council by acclamation, whereby, half of it was supposed to consist of workers, carpenters and

peasants. In terms of the regional composition 27 members represented the Poznań region, 13 members came from Royal (West) Prussia and 28 members were from Silesia. Furthermore, two deputies were, in each case, elected from each of these districts. Other districts did not have deputies, but just members: Warmia – 2, Prussian Masovia – 3 (Warmia and Prussian Masovia were also called East Prussia), exiles on the left side of the Elbe River – 4, exiles on the right side of the Elbe River – 3.

The Council got together for the first time right after the end of the Parliamentary sessions. The meeting was attended by 62 members. At that time, the praesidium was elected in the following composition: president – Bolesław Krysiwicz Ph.D. (Poznań region), deputy presidents – Priest Paweł Pośpiech (Silesia) and Priest Władysław Wolszlegier Ph.D. (Pomerania), secretaries – Czesław Meissner Ph.D. and Karol Rzepecki (Poznań region). Also, an executive body was established – the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council. It was composed of representatives of different territories of the then German Reich: Priest Stanisław Adamski (Poznań region), Wojciech Korfanty (Upper Silesia), Stefan Łaszewski Ph.D. (Pomerania), editor Adam Poszwiński (Kuyavia), Józef Rymer (Upper Silesia) and attorney Władysław Seyda (Poznań region).

The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council was authorised to act both inside the association (i.e. in relation to all Poles) and to represent it outside. All local (i.e. rural and municipal) and powiat people's councils were subordinated to it; it was also authorised to

commission all kinds of issues to them and to settle disputes between them. It also had the right to convene a meeting of the Supreme People's council and sejm. It struggled for the peaceful incorporation of the Polish territories into the re-established Polish state, however, it did not rule out military action. Right after the outbreak of the Uprising, the commissariat entrusted temporary command to Stanisław Taczak and started talks with the Temporary Chief of State, Józef Piłsudski, regarding the sending of qualified officers to Poznań. Among them, there was Julian Stachiewicz, who at the end of December and the beginning of January took the post of head of staff of the insurgent armies. The Chief of State proposed two generals for the post of commander of the insurgent armies: Eugeniusz Michaelis and Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki. The Commissariat chose the latter one.

Together with this appointment, building of the Greater Poland Army was initiated. On 17 January, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council ordered the conscription of three age groups (1897-1899), on 4 March, more, different age groups (1895-1900), and on 24 April, further five age groups (1891-1901). The People's Guard was significantly expanded, and then transformed into the National Defence. On 25 May 1919, command of the Greater Poland Army (in the meaning of the tactical not organisational subordination) was passed on to Józef Piłsudski. The integration of the Greater Poland Army and the Polish Army took place in August 1919.

Before that, however, the Supreme People's

Council announced a seizure of power, which was a political declaration and authorisation for the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council to take action. Based on this authorisation, it announced the seizure of power on 8 January 1919 and proceeded with changes in the administration in those areas controlled by the insurgents. This entirely changed its nature - from a representative of the dominant national group to an authority. It immediately appointed Poles to the posts of chief president of the province and at the same time, president of the administrative district (attorney Bernard Chrzanowski) and also to the post of president of the police (Karol Rzepecki). Attorney Zygmunt Rychłowski and Kazimierz Bajoński Ph.D. were appointed members of the Settlement Commission. In the meantime, the local people's councils also took over power in the field and accepted inspectors who had been appointed by the worker and soldier councils or appointed new ones. On 11 February, the Commissariat issued a regulation on the dissolution of previous municipal councils and the holding of elections, and on 15 February - an electoral code. The elections took place on 23 March; as well as the party competition it was possible to observe the creation of cross-party, national lists: Polish, German and Jewish, which would reflect the national nature of the people's councils. The new municipal councils were dominated by Poles.

The commissariat, taking over the leadership of the Polish affairs in the entire territory of the Reich, established two sub-commissariats: in Bytom (for Silesia) and in Gdańsk (for

Pomerania). In May 1919, the Prussian authorities prohibited all further activities of both representations. The sub-commissariat in Gdańsk, which was the coordinator of the Polish efforts to regain Pomerania, was transferred to Poznań where it resumed its official activity in August 1919. The sub-commissariat for Silesia was headed by Józef Rymer (with the assistance of attorneys Kazimierz Czapla and Konstanty Wolny), while the head of the sub-commissariat for Pomerania was Stefan Łaszewski Ph.D. An important step towards covering the entire Prussian partition was the establishment of the sub-commissariat of the Supreme People's Council for the Netze District with its headquarters in Bydgoszcz at the end of July (attorney Melchior Wierzbicki was in charge). In July 1919, deputies of the Commissariat's members were appointed: Leon Pluciński, Cyryl Ratajski and Stefan Piechocki Ph.D. who were to act as substitutes of the commissars in their absence.

All activities had to be undertaken by the Commissariat within the framework of the still existing German state, though the area of the liberated territories was gradually enlarged. Despite the continued fighting and the fact that the decisions of the peace conference were still being awaited, power was taken over in all spheres. The commissariat took over the competences of the Prussian government as the supreme representative of the local administration and also the local government administration. It also initiated the action of repolonisation. A regulation was issued to remove

German names at railway stations, on public buildings and streets, also, the celebration of the 3rd of May as a public holiday was ordered. The commissariat issued regulations on 15 May, to publish all announcements in the "Official Weekly" in Polish; it introduced the requirement of the command of the Polish language for all officials. Polish was becoming the official language, German could only be used alternatively, based on express consent. Also official changes in the names of towns was initiated.

The collection of taxes was maintained, but the collected funds were not transferred outside the partition, at the same time, the payment of a national tax (which had been introduced earlier by the temporary Commissariat and approved by the parliament) and donations for the Polish army were encouraged. A ban on the exporting of money and securities outside the borders of the territory covered by the Uprising was introduced. The Central Food Office was established and the exporting of food was banned; in February, the Distribution Office was established to manage the stocks of goods and raw materials, and in March - the Clearing House as the financial control authority. In June, the Prussian Settlement Commission was transformed into the Settlement Office. Changes in the government administration and the judiciary system were linked to the commencement of widespread action related to the import of qualified human resources from other districts. The commissariat also issued a number of acts aimed at ensuring public order as well as those of a social nature, including the

introduction of the 8-hour working day.

The principle of the integrity of all Polish territories (including the preservation of certain differences) and subordination, after the decisions were taken by the peace congress, were the pillars of the Commissariat's policy. Thus, there was a necessity to conduct negotiations with the authorities in Berlin and to maintain contacts with the Polish National Committee which could influence decisions taken in the international arena. This was necessary for the signing of the armistice in Trier between Germany and the coalition states in the middle of February, which delimited the demarcation line and recognised Poles in the Poznań region as a party at war. The armistice was also decisive for the exclusion of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council from matters related to Silesia. In order to implement the provisions of the armistice, the Inter-Allied Mission arrived in Poland to conduct negotiations with the Germans, first in Warsaw and then in Krzyż and Poznań.

At the same time, close contacts were maintained with the Polish government in Warsaw with regards to the inclusion of the representatives of the former Prussian partition in the Legislative Parliament (Sejm). Although, the introduction of a broad representation of the former Prussian partition was advocated, only 16 members of the Reich's parliament were present in the Legislative Parliament without the holding of any elections. However, one of them, Wojciech Trąpczyński, was elected marshal during the first session of the Parliament. However, pursuant to arrangements, complementary elections in the

Poznań region were held on 1 June.

The matter of the affiliation of the Polish territories, both those already liberated by insurgents, and the other territories, was determined in the treaty of Versailles signed on 28 June 1919. Soon the customs border between the Prussian partition and the rest of the country was lifted, the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council did this on 1 July 1919, and the Polish government followed suit as late as 22 July 1919.

The Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council, striving for unification, assumed maintenance of the administrative separation of the partition in view of its different legal system, in which the majority of institutions were better regulated than in systems in place in other partitions. From among various different solutions (the Commissariat suggested, among other things, the establishment of a collective authority, government and the appointment of a general delegate) the office of the Minister of the former Prussian partition was elected - a member of the government with a territorially specified scope of activity.

The last meeting of the Supreme People's Council was held after the adoption of the law of 1 August 1919 by the Legislative Parliament (Sejm) on the temporary organisation of the administration of the former Prussian partition. On 19 August, the Council adopted a resolution on the liquidation of the political organisation of Poles living in the German Reich and its authorities. The liquidation of the Commissariat was entrusted to the Minister

of the former Prussian partition. Władysław Seyda, the commissar of the Supreme People's Council, who the combined two functions for some time, was appointed to this post.

On 6 November, the Commissariat issued a regulation on the liquidation of its own divisions and the delegation of all powers to the Minister. This act crowned the efforts of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council to maintain the existing system and establish such a body, which could manage the administration of the partition in the best possible way and the taking over of the administration on the territories granted to Poland by the treaty of Versailles. The administration departments were transferred in stages and the final liquidation of the office of the Minister took place in the year 1922.

The parallelism of the measures taken was absolutely vital in the process of regaining independence. Regardless of the continued fighting and the fact that decisions being made during the peace conference were still awaited, power was taken over gradually in all spheres. Universal agreement beyond all differences (or at least restraint from the exposure of the particular interests of the respective parties) allowed for the convening of the Partition Sejm of Poznań and the expression of the unity of Poles during its operation. The Sejm created such a framework for the functioning of the Supreme People's Council and the Commissariat elected by it that these bodies could operate within the German state. After the outbreak of the Greater Poland Uprising, not only did the Commissariat ensure effective leadership, but it also took power and

led to the unification of the territories of the Prussian partition with other Polish territories. At that time, the administration and schooling systems were taken over, a university, originally called Piast Wszechnica, was established and elections to municipal councils and the Legislative Parliament (Sejm) were organised. All this took place during the ongoing insurgent battles. And this parallelism of the undertaken activities ensured the regaining of independence and the building of the foundations of Polish statehood on a national level. Because only the laying of bricks together could lead to the rebirth of Poland.

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