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The Duchy of Warsaw, 1807-1815

A Napoleonic Outpost
in Central Europe

Jaroslav Czuby

Translated by Ursula Phillips



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The Duchy of Warsaw, 1807–1815

Bloomsbury Studies in Central and East European History

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Jarosław Czubaty

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**NARODOWY PROGRAM
ROZWOJU HUMANISTYKI**

Introduction

The Napoleonic era was a crucial period in Poland's history. The pace and drama of events unfolding in contemporary European politics, the glittering campaigns and desperate battles in which Polish soldiers participated, the hopes associated with them for the restoration of a Polish state, the scale of the transformations initiated in various areas of life, not least the influence of Napoleon Bonaparte himself – to some observers a radiant light of genius, to others a grim shadow of despotism cast over Europe – all meant that the events of 1807–15 became an essential part of Polish historical and national consciousness. They have also attracted the attention of Polish historians stretching back many years. The first work to provide an overview of events as well as an assessment of processes taking place in politics, the constitutional and legal system, economics and social life, and which took into account also the personal perspective of the author, was published in 1860. This was *History of the Duchy of Warsaw* [*Dzieje Księstwa Warszawskiego*] by Fryderyk Skarbek, an economics professor and participant in the events described. Skarbek's work was to remain the chief compendium of knowledge on the period for years to come. Despite Poles' continuing interest in the history of the Duchy of Warsaw during the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, Skarbek had few continuators. Works published in subsequent years in one or other of the three partitioning powers (Russia, Austria or Germany) tended to be popular works containing a minimal canon of knowledge and emphasizing those strands in the Duchy's history that Poles considered especially important for sustaining a patriotic spirit and national cohesion.

The reticence of scholars to attempt a general history of the Duchy of Warsaw may spring from their awareness that many aspects of its history had never been properly researched. Scholarly research on the Napoleonic era in Poland deepened only during the first half of the twentieth century. Monographs and articles appeared devoted mainly to the Polish question in great power politics or the progress of individual campaigns and wars. Biographical studies of the most important politicians and military men, installed by posterity in the pantheon of national heroes, made up a significant popular trend. Detailed aspects of the political history of the Duchy, its wars and diplomacy, continued to attract the interest of historians even in the 1950s and 1960s. However, issues of political and social transformation, or transformation to a new national consciousness, previously outside the main concerns of historians, began to gain in importance. Despite the growing number of publications devoted to the history of the Duchy, the only work to seriously reconnect with the tradition

established by Fryderyk Skarbek was Barbara Grochulska's book *The Duchy of Warsaw* [*Księstwo Warszawskie*, 1966]. This was the first modern overview of the Napoleonic protectorate in the Polish lands. Grochulska presents a panorama of the politics of the era, the structural and institutional framework of the state, as well as the transformations taking place in society, mentality and culture. On the basis of her own research, she also undertook an equally significant re-evaluation of the economic situation in the Duchy.

Without doubt, the so-called Polish question became a crucial factor in political rivalries between the great powers at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Polish historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to concentrate, however, on the internal problems of the Polish independence movement. Meanwhile, their successors, who found themselves after 1945 on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, had very little opportunity to participate in subsequent international scholarly debates. For these reasons, very little of the history of the Duchy of Warsaw and its role in European political history has entered the canonical knowledge of the Napoleonic era. The most detailed information published to date may still be found in the articles by John Holland Rose, Marian Kukiel and Marcelli Handelsman included in volume two of *The Cambridge History of Poland* (1941). More recently, Alexander Grab devoted a short chapter to the Duchy of Warsaw in his book *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (2003) in the Palgrave Macmillan series *European History in Perspective*. This state of affairs induced me to attempt to supplement existing knowledge about the French protectorate on the Vistula by taking into account both the European context in which it functioned and recent research by Polish historians. I refer to the most important research in my footnotes. Readers wishing to broaden their knowledge further will find a full list of references in the Polish edition of my book, which is considerably longer than the English version.

I have endeavoured to ensure that this book should not be a chronicle of political and military events. I am not interested simply in war and political intrigue. My intention has been to convey essential knowledge of the social processes underway at the time and also, as far as my modest competence permits, of economic transformations and changes to culture and mentality. In discussing all these aspects, I have tried not to lose sight of the individual human beings who were caught up in the events of the time.

Some concepts or notions used in the text require explanation. I use the term 'nation' [Polish: *naród*] in the way it was used by my protagonists, although, as I stress in the book, in the period under discussion, a modern national consciousness was only just taking shape. I use the term 'aristocracy' even though in the Polish lands, according to some historians, it became an entirely separate entity only in subsequent decades of the nineteenth century. I am concerned, however, to differentiate between the elite according to birth and possessions that functioned in the changed social and political conditions following Partition – which were very different from those prevalent in the eighteenth century – and former magnates [*magnateria*], who were not only an official part of the noble estate [*szlachta*] of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, but also occupied a specific political position because of their landed possessions and their political influence.

The Duchy of Warsaw, like the Napoleonic period as a whole in the history of Poland and the Poles, has been controversial. Were those few years of its existence anything more than a dramatic, colourful yet isolated episode in Polish history, devoid of lasting significance? We will return to this question. It remains for me to express the hope that my work will enable readers to make up their own minds.

Prologue: The Horses of Minister von Hoym

Throughout the day of 6 July 1796, crowds of Warsaw's inhabitants watched the celebrations that accompanied the swearing of an act of allegiance to Frederick William II by representatives of the territories incorporated into the Kingdom of Prussia as a result of the Third Partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The king's representative, Minister for South Prussia (Südpreussen) Karl Georg von Hoym, addressed the Polish clergy and nobility gathered in the Royal Castle. He described the misfortunes which, according to the propaganda of the partitioning powers, the political anarchy inherent in the former Commonwealth's system of 'noble democracy' had brought upon the Polish nation. He presented a prospect of 'happiness and prosperity' under the new regime. In the castle courtyard, following the ceremony's conclusion, Minister von Hoym swore in representatives of the townsmen and peasants. The celebrations were crowned by a religious service, the firing of a hundred-gun salute and banquets organized at the government's expense. A few days later, the wedding of twenty-four young women whose dowries were provided by the Prussian authorities took place. A different view of the promised 'prosperity' under Prussian rule was held no doubt by one particular townsman, whose watch 'was pulled from his pocket in the crush during the act of homage [*homagium*] at the Castle', according to a police report.¹

The *homagium*, which was preceded by similar ceremonies in the Russian and Austrian partitions, formally concluded the reign of Stanisław August Poniatowski. His rule had coincided with years of crisis in noble parliamentarianism as well as Russian domination in the Commonwealth. In 1772 the colossal but weak state had fallen victim to its powerful neighbours and lost a significant portion of its territory to Russia, Prussia and Austria. Attempts at reform culminating in the Third of May Constitution (1791), and intended to strengthen the state, came too late. The closing years of the king's reign – of a man who some regarded as a patient and skilled politician, others as a mere connoisseur of the arts – were marked by the Second Partition of the Commonwealth (1793) and the rising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko in defence of its territorial integrity and political independence. After Kościuszko's defeat, on the strength of treaties concluded between Austria, Russia and Prussia in 1795, the Commonwealth ceased to exist. As a consequence of the three partitions, Russia gained about 463,000 square kilometres of territory and a population of more than 5.5 million. Austria acquired approximately 129,000 square kilometres and 4.2 million people living in the territory known as Galicia, and Prussia 141,400 square kilometres

and about 2.6 million people.² The acquisitions of the house of Hohenzollern included territory which was well cultivated and economically developed, densely populated, and united East Prussia with the rest of the monarchy.³

For the inhabitants of the former Commonwealth, being brought under the control of three partitioning powers meant having to adapt to a new political situation. The consequences could be felt even by strata of society that took no direct interest in political life and accepted the transfer of state allegiance with indifference. Commercial, professional and even family contacts were hampered or simply terminated once the new borders had been demarcated. Transition to government under a new authority brought with it a number of drawbacks, humiliations and threats. Within the system of absolute monarchy pertaining in Austria, Prussia and Russia, the Polish *szlachta* or nobility, having lost their status as citizens, became subjects – albeit privileged ones – but deprived now of influence in political and public affairs. Having to bear increased burdens for the sake of the state was a new experience. This included military service, from which only the *szlachta* were exempt. The centralized monarchies of Enlightened Despotism also needed money to maintain their armies and bureaucracy. For their Polish subjects, this meant a significant rise in taxes in comparison to levels they had paid under the Commonwealth. Adapting to the realities of life under foreign domination also required overcoming difficulties in everyday communication with the new authorities, and conducting one's affairs in unfamiliar judicial and administrative institutions that employed new procedures and official languages usually unknown to the petitioner.

Polish inhabitants of the Prussian Partition encountered all these problems. The territory was divided into departments, in which the civil administration was entrusted to the War and Domains Chambers [*Kriegs- und Domänenkammer*]. At the district [*Kreis* or *powiat*] level, the administration was controlled by a *Landrat*, who was subordinate to the Chambers.⁴ Catholicism lost its status as the official ruling confession. Ownership of Church property passed to the Royal Treasury in exchange for endowments paid to the clergy. Lands previously belonging to the Polish kings were treated in a similar way. The Prussian authorities removed the former lessees, which often meant loss of a major source of income for the latter. The state likewise confiscated landed properties from the most active participants in Kościuszko's rising now resident in the Prussian Partition. Within the space of a few years, more than 240 such properties ended up in the hands of Prussian generals and dignitaries.⁵

In contrast to the system introduced by the Third of May Constitution, which diluted divisions between the estates, the Prussian legal system strengthened the barriers dividing them. The special social position of the *szlachta* was guaranteed by their recognized privilege of owning landed property as well as their right to serve in officer ranks of the army and occupy higher posts in the civil service. *Szlachta* who owned land also had administrative and judicial control over the peasantry, though this was subject to the supervision of Prussian officials. The changes that came about with Prussian rule were felt especially acutely by the lower echelons of the noble estate, who owned small scraps of land or nothing at all. During the Commonwealth, most representatives of this group had earned their living through military service, employment in courts of law or administrative offices, or by administering royal

or church lands. They now had to seek other means of upkeep. Their position was exacerbated by the Prussian ban on nobles' following a craft or trade under threat of forfeiting their noble status. The situation of minor *szlachta* was also made worse by the collapse of the existing clientele or patronage system. This had been an important element in the system of noble democracy. Powerful magnates had built their political positions on support from local *szlachta*. Scrambling for the support of these lesser nobles, they had lavished protection upon them, assisting them financially and employing them in their households or private military formations. After 1795, under absolute monarchy, political followings constructed in this way had become redundant, and were even eyed with suspicion by the new authorities. The courts of wealthy patrons, which until recently had welcomed *szlachta* clients, now offered protection and support less and less frequently.

Townspeople likewise found many causes for dissatisfaction. The new government admittedly safeguarded the inhabitants of private towns from increases in liabilities imposed by their owners. The status of inhabitants of royal towns decidedly diminished, however, compared with the status gained as a result of the reforms of the Four Years Sejm of 1788–92. The new prohibition on acquiring landed property as well as restrictions on career opportunities in the army and civil service provoked discontent among representatives of the burgher elite – wealthy merchants or better educated individuals who treated education and state service as a means of social advancement. All townspeople were affected by a steep rise in taxes. Their mood was not helped by the worsening economic situation of towns and cities in general. The drainage of inhabitants, seeking other sources of livelihood in the new circumstances, could be observed in the majority of towns, sometimes on a dramatic scale. Warsaw, a city of more than 100,000 inhabitants at the time of the Four Years Sejm, had only 61,000 in 1796. In the emptying towns, the demand for services diminished, turnover in trade decreased and manufacturing fell, cut off from its traditional market outlets. Only the early years of the nineteenth century brought improvement in the economic outlook.⁶

The situation of the peasants in the Prussian Partition remained much as it had always been. On the one hand, the new order brought an increase in financial obligations – such as higher taxes, compulsory services to the army or regular conscription. On the other hand, the introduction of a ban preventing peasants from being expelled from the land, or the possibility of official intervention in cases where estate owners were clearly abusing their seigniorial power, may indicate an improvement in the peasantry's position in certain circumstances.

The partitions of Poland altered the position of the Jewish population. Distinguished from other subjects by their religion, language, customs and dress, and enjoying their own self-government, Jews were perceived by the Prussian authorities as too different and too independent of state control. Hence, decisions were taken to prepare their integration and assimilation as quickly as possible. On the strength of the *General-Juden Reglement* (1797), Jews were deemed to be a separate estate deprived of full municipal and national rights. Jewish self-governance was abolished and jurisdiction over Jews transferred to magistrates' courts, leaving only the management of religious affairs to the old organs of local Jewish community government. It was the intention of the Prussian authorities to subject Jews to tight control and 'socialize' them by,

among other things, the compulsory learning of German and the requirement to adopt a German surname. In exchange for exemption from military service, they were burdened with a special tax. However, the ban on acceptance of Jews into town guilds as well as on their right to settle in towns, until then prohibited by former burgher privileges, was lifted. This led to a sharp rise in the percentage of Jews living in cities and towns.⁷

The events of 1792–5 were no doubt regarded with indifference or lack of comprehension by large swathes of the population. It is difficult to describe the reaction of the majority of peasants, townspeople and Jews to the Third Partition. To most circles involved in public life, however, above all the entire *szlachta* and town elites, the Third Partition came as a terrible shock. Some of the most emotional reactions to the Commonwealth's collapse were recorded in the work of contemporary poets, subsequently designated 'the poetry of national despair'. The partitions were portrayed as the triumph of lawlessness over innocence, an act of violence annulling national history, as well as a catastrophe with perhaps irreversible consequences. If – as many political writers maintained in the eighteenth century – a national community required state structures in order to exist, could a nation deprived of its own state actually survive?⁸ This was not merely an expression of a breakdown in the collective mood provoked by the disaster. The imminent demise of the Polish language and Poles' national life was also apparent to outside observers. In 1803 a Prussian dignitary, reaching for examples from ancient history, recognized the denationalization of the Poles as 'a fact to be expected in accordance with the normal course of events'. George Burnett, well disposed towards the Poles yet convinced when visiting Poland in 1805 that Polish would soon become a dead language, came to similar conclusions.⁹

Reeling from the catastrophic effects of the collapse of their state, 'former Poles' were confronted by a dangerous crisis in their communal identity. Seeking answers to the question of what had happened to their community, and who were its current members, only a minority decided to reject their Polish identity (political, that is, certainly not cultural) and consistently opt for another. Many others had to come to terms with their doubts about fundamental issues of collective consciousness: Would a unified community of former Commonwealth citizens survive the partitions? Did loyalty to the Polish nation take precedence over loyalty to the new rulers?

The least susceptible to such dilemmas were steadfast advocates of continuing struggle to regain an independent state. This milieu consisted of political activists and officers from Kościuszko's rising, many of whom, fearing repressions following its defeat, had taken refuge in France. For all its numerous divisions, this group was held together by shared faith in the sense of further struggle, as well as the belief that revolutionary France – recognized as the protector of all nations fighting for freedom – was the natural ally of the Poles. Émigrés in Paris canvassed for diplomatic and military support for a future rising in Poland, which was to be prepared by conspiratorial organizations working inside the country itself. The insurrectionists' struggle was to be supported by Polish armed forces created outside its borders. Great hopes were attached to their establishment, also in propagandistic terms – Polish divisions fighting alongside France were to remind Europe of the constancy of Polish national aspirations. In addition, hopes were aroused by a change in Prussian policy. In 1795

Prussia concluded a peace with France, which appeared to create opportunities for drawing Prussia into some kind of agreement for restoring Poland – even if it meant offering the throne of the recovered state to the Hohenzollerns.

In 1797 émigré activists succeeded in establishing Polish legions to assist the Republic of Lombardy, a political entity created in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's victories on the Apennine Peninsula. Their success was due to the perseverance and skill of former Sejm envoy Józef Wybicki and of General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski, a respected veteran commander of Kościuszko's insurrection, who managed to convince Bonaparte of the idea of creating the Polish units. 'Fellow Poles, hope is rising,' he announced to his countrymen. By the spring of that year, in the ranks of two legions – in which a national uniform, commands issued in Polish and republican principles of egalitarianism were obligatory – there were already 6,000 soldiers recruited from among Polish prisoners of war taken from the Austrian army, as well as volunteer officers newly arrived from within the home country. The number of Polish military formations grew until 1801, when they counted 12,000 men under arms.

In the course of a few years, the legionaries gained experience of armed combat in battles against the Austrians, Russians and armies of Italian states. News of their operations reverberated across their homeland, thus making it easier for émigrés to influence the hearts and minds of their countrymen. Another means of influence were the underground conspiratorial organizations. Apart from distributing pro-independence propaganda, they concentrated on mobilizing networks of contacts in the home country or organizing the departure of volunteer recruits to the legions. After a few years, the partitioning authorities succeeded in destroying the majority of underground organizations. From 1798 their activity was taken over by the Society of Polish Republicans [*Towarzystwo Republikanów Polskich*] created by activists associated at the time of Kościuszko's rising with the so-called Polish Jacobins. They combined demands for the restoration of the state with calls for the social emancipation of peasants and townspeople, the spread of education and improvement in the civilizational level of the country.¹⁰

Hopes associated by supporters of the independence movement with France and with the legions reached their apogee during the campaign of 1800. The peace negotiations, ending with the signing of the Treaty of Lunéville in 1801, brought about a complete reversal in mood. They included no mention of Poland. Worse still, France and Austria officially renounced support for the internal enemies of the other side. For the Poles, this meant a decline in their hopes for French assistance and a threat to the continued existence of the legions. For Bonaparte, the legions had become a troublesome impediment to peaceful relations with Austria. Some Polish units were deployed to Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) to suppress a slave revolt in the then French colony. The rest of the Polish soldiers remained under Dąbrowski's command in the service of the Italian Republic, which did not augur well for furthering the Poles' political cause. These decisions, which in practice liquidated the legions as representatives of the Polish cause, estranged many of the most persistent Polish adherents of France. A wave of resignations, handed in by officers outraged by Bonaparte's behaviour, swept through the ranks. Most emigrants likewise lost faith in the sense of remaining alongside France, and the majority decided to return home to Poland. The belief that after the Peace of Lunéville, the Polish question had finally

disappeared from the European political stage was also shared by conspirators at home. Following the signing of the treaty, the Society of Polish Republicans broke off its work. The political stabilization of the European continent after 1801 seemed to put an end to dreams of Poland's restoration.

An unknown reality awaited the returning legionaries and émigrés. To many it was a painful disappointment. Life in the lands of the former Commonwealth was already being conducted along unfamiliar lines. Even the most uncompromising opponent of the new order had to work out basic principles of how to live as 'a good Pole' under a foreign power, and then reconcile these with a life strategy that would facilitate a relatively peaceful existence in the new conditions. The extent of such adaptation varied from person to person. For some *szlachta*, their expression of civic virtue was a demonstrative flight into private life and splendid isolation, requiring a refusal to serve the new authorities. Not everyone, however, wished to follow that path. Hence, numerous Poles appeared at the courts of the partitioning monarchs ready to demonstrate their total loyalty, and seeking the support of powerful protectors in furthering their own careers or saving their threatened estates. Boycotting the partitioning state, as postulated by some patriots, was for many a high-minded slogan far removed from the humdrum reality of everyday life.¹¹

Adaptation to post-partition realities may have been assisted by the revised policy of the Prussian authorities towards their Polish subjects. At first, towards the end of Kościuszko's rising and immediately following its defeat, the Prussians introduced measures intended to intimidate Poles. After a time, however, the idea of limiting repression (confiscation of property and punishment by imprisonment) to the most active participants in the independence movement prevailed in Prussian government policy.¹² This more lenient approach, however, did not fundamentally improve its image in the minds of Poles. It was not helped by memory of their lost state and the perfidious policy of Prussia in the years 1788–94, when it was Berlin that first allied itself with the Commonwealth in order to provoke conflict with Russia and a new partition, and then participated in suppressing Kościuszko's rising. Similarly, their having to pay higher taxes than in 'Polish times' hardly inspired enthusiasm. The *szlachta* were put off the new order by their loss of influence over state affairs, and the town elites – by the blocking of mechanisms enabling social advancement. The new system required the appropriated lands to be brought under the control of an expanded bureaucracy run by Germans. To the average inhabitant, this meant communication difficulties with officials who did not understand Polish. Dissatisfaction was also provoked by high stamp duty and other fees demanded in courts and official departments.¹³ Newspapers, books and other printed matter were subject to strict censorship procedures. Most Poles reacted badly to a civil service that overwhelmed them with an avalanche of rules and regulations. Many of these, for instance the curious 'procedure relating to mourning', which described in precise detail obligatory mourning dress and compulsory symbols for individuals belonging to different social classes, created an impression of absurd pettiness – and it was such things that were doubtless most remembered.¹⁴

Many Poles therefore perceived the apparatus of power as a hostile and arrogant institution. However, to portray life in the Prussian Partition solely in terms of national oppression or bureaucratic nightmare would be a simplification. Some of the rulers'

measures gained recognition among those who were able to discern – beneath the avalanche of rules and regulations – attempts to ensure public order, improvements in sanitary conditions and health, and the security of subjects. As one historian, otherwise highly critical of the policies of the partitioning powers, observed years later, the Prussian government had raised taxes, but had not ruthlessly exploited the Polish lands. On the contrary, it had invested considerable sums in regulating the use of rivers, cleaning up towns and improving roads.¹⁵ Despite the restrictive censorship in South Prussia, books were published in the Polish language, including valuable editions of Polish literary classics. Periodicals devoted to literature or science were also able to reach more demanding readers. An institution whose influence transcended the borders of the three partitions was the Society of Friends of Science [*Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk*], founded in Warsaw in 1800, which set itself the goals of defending the Polish language, spreading knowledge of national history, as well as developing education and the economy in the Polish-speaking lands.¹⁶

Some Poles living in the Prussian Partition might have felt a degree of satisfaction for quite prosaic reasons. Prussia's policy of maintaining peace after 1795 meant that landowners could take advantage of the demand for grain in Western Europe. The easy sale of large quantities of grain at high prices caused an increase in the value of landed estates. Thanks to this, owners acquired the possibility of raising easy credit in the form of mortgages offered by Prussian banks. Some of these credits were used to improve agricultural standards. The most visible result of the favourable economic situation, however, was the *szlachta's* increased expenditure on consumer goods. The credit offered to landowners was attractive because of the low rate of interest; the interests of creditors, however, were secured by strict enforcement notices. Around 1805 the debtors' situation began to deteriorate due to reductions in the export of grain. The shrinking income from sales made it difficult for landowners to pay off the enormous debts they had incurred in more favourable economic times. By the autumn of 1806, many indebted landed estates already found themselves in Prussian hands.¹⁷

The lack of political freedom undoubtedly caused many Poles to feel antagonistic towards Prussian rule. However, it was no accident that many émigrés and former officers of the legions decided after 1801 to adapt to life under the government of Frederick William III. This choice was determined by the positive economic outlook as well as by the relatively mild policy of the authorities towards Poles. The hopes of some were briefly raised by the plan of Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, friend of Tsar Alexander I, who fulfilled at that time the function of Russian foreign minister. His aim in 1805 was to force still neutral Prussia to join the coalition with Russia and Austria against France. In case of Prussia's refusal, Russian troops would cross the border into the Prussian Partition. Czartoryski reckoned that this action could eventually lead to Alexander I declaring himself King of Poland. The reluctance of Alexander and his generals to confront the Prussian army, which had the reputation of one of the strongest in Europe, caused the 'Puławy plan' to end in fiasco.¹⁸ News of the defeat of the Russians and Austrians at Austerlitz later in 1805 was greeted with satisfaction by many Poles, but did not reignite national enthusiasm or lead to a reactivation of underground conspiracy. The lack of visible success in any policy of resistance to the partitioning powers, as well as the prospect of continued stabilization of the existing

balance of power in Europe, inclined most Polish subjects to reconcile themselves – not always comfortably – to the reality of the partitions.

The mood in the country, however, was far removed from the pessimism that had characterized the early years following the Third Partition. Catastrophic prognoses about the swift denationalization of the Poles no longer seemed so close to fulfilment. Symptomatic of the recovery in mood were the words of scholar Stanisław Staszic, slipped into an innocent lecture on mineralogy in 1805: ‘Even a great nation can fall, but only a dishonourable one will perish.’ Actual moods depended, however, on the immediate situations of individuals and groups. A wealthy nobleman assessed the Prussian government differently from a former lessee of royal lands who had been expelled from his property. In 1806, however, the court in Berlin could rest assured that it was totally in control of the situation in the annexed territories. The conspiracy movement had withered, while the numerous manifestations of discontent with the new order could usually be reduced to complaints against the omnipotence and extortions of the bureaucracy. Ten years after the *homagium* festivities, only the witness endowed with exceptional intuition might have recalled – as a good omen for Poles – that the horses pulling the carriage of Prussian minister von Hoym on his way to the ceremony had ‘become entangled and tumbled over’.¹⁹

‘Deliverer’ or ‘Conqueror’: Napoleon and the Poles during the ‘First Polish War’, 1806–1807

‘A mile from the town we noticed whole fields covered in individual soldiers wearing overcoats of different colours. They carried rifles with the butt-end pointing upwards and were seeking a dry passage across the fields, since the mud on the road was up to their knees.’ The sight of the French infantry invading the Prussian Partition in the autumn of 1806 surprised not only the eighteen-year-old nobleman Dezydery Chłapowski but also many other inhabitants.¹ No doubt they had every right to feel surprised, not only by the sight of an army whose appearance and behaviour was far removed from the tightly uniformed and exemplarily drilled Prussians, but also because until very recently, few people had expected to see Napoleon’s soldiers in the Polish lands.

They had been brought – following Napoleon’s recently concluded war with the Third Coalition – by the next dramatic about-turn in European politics. This time a new situation had arisen because of the intervention of Prussia, which had kept aloof from the conflicts shaking Europe for the past ten years. Prussia’s comfortable position as arbitrator, for whose support the remaining powers scrambled, could not be sustained for much longer. In July 1806 the German rulers allied with Napoleon created the Confederation of the Rhine under his protection. The French emperor’s domination of Germany was of great concern to the court in Berlin. The political earthquake came, however, with news of the peace negotiations between France and England, into which the Court of St James’s had been lured by Napoleon’s offer to return Hanover, previously promised to Prussia. Under pressure from the pro-war party, Frederick William III sent an ultimatum to Napoleon demanding the withdrawal of French troops from the German states and his consent to the creation of a confederation of north German states under the aegis of Prussia. No one in Europe was surprised by this demonstration of the Hohenzollern monarchy’s great-power aspirations, which could not be said, however, of its consequences. Notions of the Prussian army’s invincibility, dating back to the reign of Frederick the Great, lay in ruins following its double defeat at the battles of Jena and Auerstädt on 14 October 1806. The demoralized Prussians, retreating towards the northern, southern and eastern fringes of the monarchy, opened up Napoleon’s road to Berlin and the territories further east – to lands absorbed by Prussia during successive partitions of the former Polish–Lithuanian state. The pursuit led by corps of the Grande Armée brought successive victories and tens of thousands

of prisoners of war. These defeats paralysed the Prussians' will to fight to a degree rarely encountered in the history of warfare.

Despite the near annihilation of the Prussian army, the outcome of the war was by no means settled. When on 4 November the clatter of hooves of the advance-guard of Marshal Davout's corps resounded on the streets of Poznań, several hundred kilometres further east a Russian army of more than 60,000 was advancing from the Niemen River to confront the Grande Armée. Several days later it had already occupied areas around Warsaw and Pułtusk. Hot on its heels came another of the tsar's armies estimated at a further 50,000 men. Their marching orders had been preceded by a letter from Alexander I to the Prussian king containing assurances of friendship and loyalty as an ally. Behind them lay Alexander's political pragmatism – he was taking action to restore the balance of power in Europe and consolidate Russia's role in maintaining it.

The Russian invasion of the Prussian Partition seriously complicated Napoleon's position and removed any prospect of a swift end to the war. The so far lightning campaign would turn into protracted, destructive operations during autumn and winter in an impoverished country a long way away from the Grande Armée's operational base. Napoleon realized this time that the efficient supply of food, a well-organized logistical infrastructure as well as the possibility of replenishing losses in the ranks with thousands of new soldiers could have a much greater influence than usual on the progress of the war. In this situation, the attitude of the Poles to the invading units of the Grande Armée acquired special significance. Their support might enable the French emperor to carry out further military operations and ensure an advantageous position at eventual peace negotiations.

The benefits of winning Polish hearts and minds did not interest only the Emperor of the French. Even before the start of the war, it had been regarded as essential in the entourage of Frederick William III to investigate the attitude of his Polish subjects towards Prussia, as well as the possibility of creating a Polish volunteer corps. When interrogated on the matter, Prince Antoni Radziwiłł, who was related to the royal family by marriage and an advocate of the restoration of Poland with a Hohenzollern on the throne, claimed that Polish volunteers would definitely join the ranks of the Prussian army if this military initiative was part of a political offer: Frederick William III was to declare himself King of Poland. A similar opinion was expressed by Count Feliks Łubieński, who was valued at the Prussian court as a loyal subject and was also consulted about Radziwiłł's proposals. Following the battles of Jena and Auerstädt, however, Frederick William III thought more about saving his own crown than aspiring to another.² The initiative in forwarding the Polish cause passed to the French emperor.

Napoleon had considered the possibility of playing the Polish card earlier. Before the commencement of military operations, he had ordered a reconnaissance of lands that might become the theatre of war, including gathering important information about their history, geography and economic condition. Thanks to this, he had at his disposal a rudimentary, though superficial knowledge of Polish affairs.³ He undoubtedly valued Polish soldiers whom he had got to know during the campaigns in Italy and Germany in 1797–1801. Despite his flattering idea of Polish soldiers, Napoleon, on entering the Prussian Partition, was accompanied nevertheless by an image – formed on the

basis of his reading – of a country inhabited by illiterate peasants, an anarchic nobility attached to its freedoms and an all-powerful aristocracy.

Napoleon's preparations for possible engagement in Polish affairs were not confined to reading. Even before the battle of Jena, General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski, who at that time was commanding remnants of the former Polish legions in the service of Joseph Bonaparte, King of Naples, received an order to leave immediately for Napoleon's headquarters. On arrival in Berlin, Dąbrowski had several brief interviews with Napoleon, during which the emperor mentioned how an invasion of the Prussian Partition by the Grande Armée might benefit the Poles. Napoleon was in no hurry to make any long-term declarations with regard to the Polish question. As yet he had no precise political plan of campaign; he was considering, however, various possible ways in which the situation might develop. In one of their conversations, Dąbrowski, when questioned directly by Napoleon about his gaining Polish support against the Prussians, told the emperor that it might be forthcoming, if the Poles were assured that such support would lead to the restoration of a Polish state. In addition, he suggested issuing an appeal that would prepare the Poles for the invasion of the Grande Armée. Dąbrowski also proposed that his émigré friend Józef Wybicki be brought to the emperor's headquarters as someone well versed in economic and political matters.

On 3 November, Dąbrowski together with Wybicki, who by then had arrived in Berlin, published an appeal to their countrymen, calling on them to grant Napoleon unconditional support: 'I will see (he told us), I will see whether the Poles are worthy of being a nation. ... Poles! To exist and have a fatherland depends on you: your avenger, your creator has appeared.' The appeal was a call to action without any political guarantees from the French emperor. The only concrete thing it contained was an announcement that any Polish units would be armed by Napoleon. The support given to him was to be full and unconditional.⁴ Drafted in such a way, the appeal met Napoleon's expectations perfectly. It was able to inspire the enthusiasm of the Poles without provoking at the same time conflict with neutral Austria, and left the emperor totally free to act as he pleased. He was ready to strike the strings of national aspiration, but with caution. In the December issue of the Bulletin of the Grande Armée, the emperor expressed himself sympathetically on the future of the Polish question, but in enigmatic terms: 'Will the throne of the Kingdom of Poland be restored and will this great nation regain its existence and independence? ... God alone, who holds the whole entanglement of events in his hand, can solve this great political problem.'⁵

The cautiousness of these formulations comes as no surprise, since we know that in the early months of 1807, Napoleon was already considering various options for solving the Polish question. French diplomacy at that time was sounding out the preparedness of Vienna to restore Galicia in exchange for Prussian Silesia, which could have made possible the reunion within one political state of the Prussian and Austrian partitions. Less advantageous to the Poles were the peace talks undertaken simultaneously with Frederick William III, during which the possibility of restoring the Polish lands to him was suggested in exchange for his abandoning Alexander I and concluding a separate peace treaty. The paradox of the situation lay in the fact that despite Napoleon's crushing victories over the Prussian army, the intervention of Russia meant that the war had to be begun all over again in conditions that were much more difficult than

a few weeks earlier. Without going into the detail of the disputes between Napoleon's critics and apologists, it is worth noting that while he took advantage of the trump card offered him by Polish support, he did not overstep the boundary between political pragmatism and total cynicism. He categorically advised Polish patriots in the Austrian Partition not to provoke an uprising in Galicia. He also did not exploit a proposal put forward by former Polish republicans for armed action in the rear of the Russian army.⁶ While skilfully fanning their hopes, Napoleon in fact promised the Poles nothing – apart from an opportunity which they could try to turn to their advantage. The rest depended on themselves and the still uncertain outcome of the war. In summoning their compatriots to intervene against Prussia without knowing Napoleon's plans for the Prussian Partition, Dąbrowski and Wybicki took an enormous risk. They knew, however, that the course of the war had created an opportunity, of which supporters of Polish independence had been dreaming for years.

A different approach was adopted by Tadeusz Kościuszko, then residing in France. His name continued to have a magical effect on his countrymen and might have given impetus to the campaign begun by Dąbrowski and Wybicki. Well aware of this, Napoleon ordered his ministers to have him brought to Poland. The former leader of the 1794 insurrection, however, declared his readiness to head the pro-Napoleonic party only if the emperor issued a proclamation announcing that the aim of the struggle about to commence was the restoration of Poland and the granting of liberty to Polish peasants. Napoleon's refusal to agree to such a clear definition of the political aims of the war, not hard to foresee, meant that Kościuszko, who was sceptical of the emperor's real intentions with regard to the Polish question, remained on the sidelines.⁷

Dąbrowski and Wybicki realized time was pressing and the success of their campaign required immediate action. Thus, they prepared letters to be sent to their most trustworthy and influential compatriots in the Prussian Partition – former members of the Sejm, generals and former officers of the legions. They urged them to declare themselves on Napoleon's side for the sake of a chance to restore Poland, and to immediately form a provisional civil authority and army. They also emphasized the need to maintain order and especially to secure magazines and public revenues, as well as to give Napoleon's invading troops a good reception: 'Let us spare no expense in satisfying their needs.'⁸

The general and his friend had no idea what results their appeal distributed by dispatch riders would bring. A cool reaction, especially from significant individuals, would wreck their plans. Any fears as to the reaction of their countrymen were dispelled on 6 November in Poznań. As Wybicki recorded: 'Many worthy citizens, having unharnessed the horses, dragged our carriage as far as the door of the house where we were to stay.'⁹ Consultations between the new arrivals and representatives of the local elite present in the town resulted in the appointment of a provisional administration and Poles' taking control of the judiciary. The Polish administration, the creation of which Wybicki took upon himself, had to immediately attend to the collection of taxes, efficient functioning of the postal service, amassing of food supplies and animal fodder, as well as provision of billets and field hospitals for the approaching corps of the Grande Armée and the Polish units formed by Dąbrowski.