

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 179

### “1919 – Poland I”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1797, two years after the nation of Poland was partitioned among Prussia, Austria, and Russia and had disappeared from the map, the Polish Legions in Napoleon’s army began singing a patriotic song, “Poland Is Not Yet Lost.”

For a century, the very singing of this song was a prosecutable offense in most of the lands that had been Poland and occasionally it became a revolutionary anthem during the numerous revolts. Finally, in 1918, prophecy became reality, when Poland was reborn.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 179. 1919 – Poland, part one.

This is the fourth episode in our 1919 World Tour, and today we’re looking at the rebirth of Poland. One of the most dramatic changes wrought by the Great War was the reemergence of the nation of Poland, 124 years after that same nation had been erased from the map of Europe.

Poland, or more precisely, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was at one time the largest nation in Eastern Europe, admired for its prosperity and learning. But the Commonwealth went into a long decline in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, caused by a series of debilitating wars and the collapse of its unique political system, under which the king was elected by the nobility. In the final decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland was partitioned by its neighbors, Prussia, Austria, and Russia, in three stages, until after the final partition in 1795, no Polish state remained.

In 1807, Napoleon recreated a Polish state, the Duchy of Warsaw, which encouraged many Poles to fight with Napoleon’s armies, but following Napoleon’s retreat from Russia, the Duchy of Warsaw was occupied by the Russians in 1813, and the Congress of Vienna essentially reaffirmed the earlier partitions. Despite this, the reappearance of a Polish state twelve years after

it was declared dead made an impression on the Polish people, who kept alive the dream of a free and independent Poland despite the century of oppression that followed.

Most ethnic Poles found themselves living in the Russian Empire following the partitions. Technically, the Congress of Vienna had created Russian Poland as the “Kingdom of Poland,” in personal union with the Russian Empire; that is, the Russian Emperor was also the titular King of Poland, which retained its own autonomous government with a constitution and a separate military. But over the century that followed, a combination of increasingly heavy-handed rule from St. Petersburg and a cycle of rebellion and repression in Poland led to the abolition of Polish autonomy. The Polish language and Catholic religion were suppressed in favor of Russian and Russian Orthodoxy.

Wedge as they were between Lutheran Prussia and Orthodox Russia, the Poles clung to their Catholicism with ferocity. It became an important part of the Polish ethnic identity.

Most non-Poles believed that Poland was gone forever. The governments of Germany and Russia certainly hoped so, and did their best to erase the Polish identity. But the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the century of romantic nationalism. Restless ethnic groups from the Irish to the Bulgarians were straining at their imperial bonds. The Polish were no exception, and there were a lot of them. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were more than thirty million ethnic Poles in Eastern Europe. Compare that to the five million Czechs in Austria, or the four million Irish in the United Kingdom or the one million Serbs and Bulgarians in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire and you realize the question becomes when, not if, an independent Poland will reappear.

For most of the Great War, the Eastern Front cut a swath from the Baltic to Romania that ran right through the lands that had once been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and were inhabited by Poles. What the years of fighting in these lands did not destroy, the huge and undersupplied armies operating in them confiscated, leaving behind poverty and devastation.

During the war, both Germany and Russia had pledged to create a new Polish state after the fighting was over. This was partly because both nations saw the wisdom of creating a buffer state between them, and, it must be said, both nations envisioned a buffer state that while nominally independent would be a puppet of its imperial patron.

But the particular circumstances under which the war ended allowed for the creation of a Poland that would be fully independent from either of its neighbors. The October Revolution led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which left Germany and Austria in control of Polish lands and free to create a Polish state in whatever form they chose. But then the Western Allies defeated Germany and Austria, which meant they inherited the Polish question. Since Russia had reneged on its pledge not to sign a separate peace with the Central Powers, the Western Allies considered themselves released from any obligation to restore Russia’s pre-war territories, which in any case

would be inconsistent with the principle of self-determination that was the lodestar of the peace conference.

An independent Poland was not a high priority for David Lloyd George or the British government. The British viewed Poland as likely to become more of a burden than an asset, a state reliant on British support, but difficult for Britain to defend. But the American attitude was quite different. The United States was home to millions of ethnic Polish émigrés and their children, most of whom were working class, lived in the cities of the Northeast and Midwest and voted Democratic. The sunset of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had also been the dawn of the United States, and two senior Polish military figures of the time, Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski, saw in the American Revolution a reflection of Poland's own struggle against its imperial neighbors and came to North America to fight for the infant Republic. Now was America's opportunity to repay the debt. The thirteenth of Wilson's Fourteen Points called for an independent Polish state with free and secure access to the sea.

Since the days of the French Revolution and the Duchy of Warsaw there has also been an affinity between the Poles and the French. French conservatives admired the Poles for their Catholic devotion; French liberals sympathized with Polish nationalism and anti-imperialism. In the period when there was no Polish state, Paris became a haven for talented Poles whose ambitions were frustrated in the Russian Empire. I speak of people such as the composer Frédéric Chopin, the scientist Marie Curie, and the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, the latter two of whom you should be well acquainted with, if you've been following along since the beginning of the podcast.

Georges Clemenceau and his government also supported the rebirth of Poland for geopolitical reasons. The old Franco-Russian Alliance had helped keep German ambitions in check for a generation. Now, in 1919, Russia was an enigma. Who knew when or whether she would rejoin the community of nations? But an independent Poland, allied with France and part of a network of Eastern European allies, especially Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, could be just as valuable, both as a counterweight to Germany and as a barrier against the westward spread of Bolshevism.

Poland, like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, created itself. All the way back in episode 124, I told you about the Polish Legions, an ethnic Polish fighting force originally created within the Austrian Army by the Polish socialist Józef Piłsudski. They fought on the Eastern Front, and the high point of their history came at the Battle of Kostiuchnówka on July 4, 1916, when they fought tenaciously and helped to blunt the Russian Brusilov Offensive. In November of 1916, the German and Austrian Kaisers jointly decreed the creation of the Kingdom of Poland, in response to the Polish Legion's aid and to the demands of its leader, Józef Piłsudski. This was one of the last acts of the old Austrian Emperor, Franz Josef, before his death. The Polish Legion would become the army of the new kingdom, and the Germans created a Regency Council that would nominally rule until after the war when a suitable monarch would be chosen. And when I say *suitable*, I mean *German*.

Well, most of Europe's monarchs were Germans. Still, the German and Austrian idea of Poland was that it would consist only of Russian Poland and would be a German or Austrian puppet state. This became clear at once when the Germans insisted that the soldiers of the Polish Legion swear an oath of allegiance to Kaiser Wilhelm personally. Piłsudski told them not to, and most of the Polish soldiers followed his lead and refused. Those who refused and were Austrian subjects were drafted into the regular Austrian Army, while those who were from occupied Russian Poland were interned as prisoners of war, including Piłsudski himself, who had been born in what is today Lithuania.

As you know, in October 1918, the Regency Council actually declared Polish independence, after the German government agreed to the Fourteen Points, one of which was Polish independence. On November 8, three days before the Armistice, German military authorities released the now-50-year-old Piłsudski and sent him to Warsaw. Apparently the thinking among the Germans was that a Pole who had once fought for the Central Powers would be a friendlier Polish leader than any Pole who had spent the war in Paris, or worse, was sent from Bolshevik Russia. Upon his arrival in Warsaw, on the day of the Armistice, the Regency Council named Piłsudski commander in chief of the Polish armed forces, and Piłsudski declared, you know, real independence. There had been a couple of regional authorities in Poland who had already made their own separate declarations, but such was Piłsudski's reputation in Poland that they were all willing to accept him as their national leader. In our time, Poland celebrates the date of Piłsudski's declaration, November 11, as its independence day.

Piłsudski had been an ardent socialist in his younger days in the Russian Empire. In 1886, at the age of 18, he had been convicted of taking part in the same plot to assassinate the Emperor Alexander III as had Vladimir Lenin's older brother, Alexander Ulyanov. I told you that story in episode 143. Alexander was executed for his role in the plot; Piłsudski was sentenced to five years' exile in Siberia, which nearly killed him.

There's a famous story that tells how the day after his arrival in Warsaw in 1918, Piłsudski was greeted by some of his friends from his socialist days. When they addressed him as "comrade" and asked him to support socialism in Poland, Piłsudski rebuked them, saying, "We all took a ride on the same red tram, but I got off at the stop marked Independence. You may travel on to the end of the line, but be so kind as to call me 'Mister.'"

Part of the reason for this disavowal of socialism was that as head of state and military chief, Piłsudski felt he needed to be above politics and serve as leader of the entire Polish nation, whatever that may turn out to be. Navigating the shoals of the postwar world to the safe harbor of independence would be quite enough work for one person.

For Piłsudski had an ambitious vision for the new Poland and its role in postwar Europe: nothing less than as a modern analog to the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. I say this guardedly because Piłsudski's vision wasn't exactly to recreate the old commonwealth. That would have

been unrealistic. His view went more like this: new states are forming all along the periphery of what used to be the Russian Empire. Many of these new states represented peoples who had never known independence and self-government before. Poland, by contrast, was an older and more numerous nation with a distinguished history that included ruling over many non-Polish peoples. Poland's role, therefore, should be as a sort of big brother to these new nations. Those who had not fully broken free from Russia would receive Polish aid. Some of the peoples who had might live within Poland as minorities, with autonomy and full legal rights, of course. Others might function better as independent states, as Polish protectorates or maybe as full allies, depending on their circumstances. His goal was an arc of independent states, led by Poland and stretching from Finland to the Black Sea—perhaps even to the Caspian Sea—all working together to defend one another against the threat of Russian revanchism.

I told you it was ambitious.

[music: Paderewski, *Humoresques*]

Long before Piłsudski had any hope of building his new commonwealth his government would need to be recognized by the Western Allies meeting in Paris. Unsurprisingly, they had a problem with a Piłsudski government. In the West, Piłsudski was best known as that guy who had been recruiting Poles to fight for the Central Powers. Yes, he had defied the Kaiser and been imprisoned for it, but then he was also the German government's handpicked choice to become leader of postwar Poland, and that looked suspiciously like the Germans slyly implementing the German puppet state that had been their ambition since the early days of the war.

In Paris, the face of Polish independence belonged to the 54-year old Roman Dmowski. Dmowski, like Piłsudski, had been born in the Russian Empire and was a Polish patriot. Piłsudski had studied medicine and Dmowski had studied biology. But there the similarities ended. Piłsudski had been born into a noble household and knew privilege. Dmowski was born in Warsaw, the son of a construction worker. Dmowski's politics leaned at least as far to the right as Piłsudski's did to the left. He was no romantic, like Piłsudski. He was dispassionate and logical. His background in biology led him to embrace the ideology of Social Darwinism. Life was a struggle. Individuals and nations sink or swim. He had no patience for Piłsudski's commonwealth; he wanted a smaller, homogeneous Poland that was ethnically Polish, religiously Roman Catholic, and if you didn't like it, hey, there's lots of other countries in the world.

Back in the days of the Russo-Japanese War, when the Japanese military attaché, Colonel Akashi Motojiri was handing out Japanese money to political dissidents in the Russian Empire, episode 34, Dmowski was one of his beneficiaries who in turn used the money to urge Polish soldiers in the Far East to defect. Dmowski also advised Akashi not to waste any of his money on that impractical dreamer, Józef Piłsudski.

When the Great War began, Dmowski traveled to Paris to campaign for Polish independence after the war, much in the same manner as had Tomáš Masaryk. Dmowski founded the Polish National Committee which was meant to form the nucleus of a post-war Polish government, and recruited Poles to fight with the French on the Western Front. Despite a century of Russian oppression, Dmowski believed it was the destiny of Poles and Russians as fellow Slavs to work together and considered Germany to be the far greater threat to Polish nationalism. And so he had no use for Piłsudski, the Pole who was fighting for the two Kaisers.

Dmowski made a favorable impression in Paris and the French government eventually recognized the Polish National Committee as the government of Poland. Dmowski lectured at Cambridge University and impressed the professors there sufficiently that they awarded him an honorary doctorate, but Dmowski did not win over the British or American governments. He could be abrasive and demanding. And although he envisioned a smaller, exclusively Polish ethnic state, his ideas of the appropriate borders for that state were as grandiose as Piłsudski's or anyone else's. Woodrow Wilson joked that Dmowski's proposed map of post-war Poland "claimed a large part of the earth." And, it has to be said, Dmowski was a pretty gross anti-Semite. Most Europeans of the time were anti-Semites—excepting Jewish Europeans, of course—but in elite circles, it was considered uncouth to voice your anti-Semitism too loudly. Dmowski, by contrast, was pretty in-your-face with his anti-Semitic views, enough so that Jewish people and organizations in Britain and the US lobbied against recognizing Dmowski as the rightful leader of post-war Poland, which only moved Dmowski to another round of grumbling about Jewish conspiracies.

This was an awkward moment for Polish national aspirations. The new nation had not one but two provisional governments, neither of which was recognized by the Allied powers meeting in Paris who would remake the map of Europe. The British and American governments sought to resolve this dilemma by encouraging Dmowski and Piłsudski to combine their respective governments. The person nominated to negotiate this delicate but important agreement was one of the most famous Poles in the Western world, the pianist Ignacy Paderewski.

Ignacy Paderewski was born in 1860 in Galicia. He took an interest in music at an early age and was studying piano at the Warsaw Conservatory by the time he was 12. By his mid-20s, he was studying in Vienna and giving public performances to rave reviews. He debuted in London in 1890, when he was still only 29, and the following year, he toured the United States. He became a popular phenomenon, as famous for his piercing eyes and his wild shocks of red hair as for his virtuosity. He composed his own music as well as performing that of others; the piece I played for you a few minutes ago was one of his. By the age of forty, he was the wealthiest and most famous pianist in the world, and no doubt the most famous Pole in the world, too, Vaslav Nijinsky still being just a little boy at the time.

He hobnobbed with the crowned heads of Europe and with American Presidents, including Woodrow Wilson. Paderewski was very fond of the United States. He bought himself a ranch in

California, where he planted a vineyard. His very name became a byword for excellence at the keyboard, so much so that the line, “He’s no Paderewski” was a common put-down of lesser pianists, something you might say about your twelve-year old cousin after you were forced to sit through his recital. “Well, he’s no Paderewski.” A remark akin to “Don’t quit your day job.”

Paderewski was also well known as a philanthropist. After the Great War began, he donated serious money to Polish relief charities and joined Dmowski’s Polish National Committee, lending it his name and his celebrity. Colonel House consulted with him on Polish questions; some credit Paderewski with Polish independence becoming one of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.

So at the age of 59, Paderewski was dispatched to Warsaw to meet with Piłsudski and try to work out some common ground. He returned to Paris soon after as the newly appointed Polish prime minister and foreign minister of an all-party provisional government, Piłsudski being all too happy to slough off the political parts of leading the new Poland onto someone else. Roman Dmowski was appointed the Polish representative at the Paris Peace Conference along with foreign minister Paderewski, who was well suited to the task, due to his fame and his ability to speak seven languages. On June 28, 1919, the same day the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the new League of Nations signed a separate peace treaty with Poland recognizing its independence. This second treaty is sometimes called the “Little Treaty of Versailles.”

The two provisional governments had become one. Paderewski held his two portfolios—prime minister and foreign minister—for ten months in 1919 until a new, elected government could be seated. Those ten months saw the new Poland gain international recognition, hold democratic elections, and ratify the treaty, which is a pretty good record for ten months’ work by someone who had never before held a political office. That’s the good news. The bad news is, well, where do I begin? Why don’t we listen to some more Paderewski while I catch my breath?

[music: Paderewski, *Humoresques*]

While Paderewski and Dmowski were in Paris, pleading Poland’s case, Piłsudski was moving Polish soldiers east and south. Into Lithuania. Into Belarus and Ukraine. And Galicia. Partly it was a land grab, an attempt to present the Allies in Paris with a *fait accompli* they would then have no choice but to ratify. The Poles weren’t the only ones pulling something like this. You’ll recall from our previous episodes that Hungary, Serbia, and Romania were attempting more or less this same thing at about this same time.

But it was also about filling a vacuum. To the east was the monumental chaos that was Russia, wracked by a civil war and in the hands of a Bolshevik government no one in the West could make sense of. While the Allies deplored the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and forced Germany to renounce it, they had also asked the German military to maintain their military occupation of Ukraine and western Russian territories, which is pretty embarrassing when you think about it.

But with the war lost and revolution breaking out at home, the German Army was in no position to maintain a military occupation and it just melted away.

There was a fear that the Bolsheviks might march westward on their way to Hungary, say, and relieve the pro-Bolshevik government of Béla Kun. Hotheads among the Bolsheviks were talking confidently about marching west and spreading the socialist revolution as far as Berlin, or even Paris. Such a march would pass through Warsaw along the way, trampling the new Polish state. So these Polish military moves were partly motivated by self-defense, although it was also true that the “defensive” positions the Polish forces were taking were in territories with substantial Polish populations, including places that were well to the east of what most people envisioned when they envisioned Poland.

And this is the reason why the new Polish government felt stabbed in the back by Czechoslovakia when Czechoslovak forces moved into the disputed territory in Teschen in early 1919 at a time when most Polish forces were moving east against the Russians. And the Lithuanians. And the Ukrainians. Welcome to the birth of the new Poland.

The question of where the new Poland’s borders should be drawn led to bloodshed in Eastern Europe and to no small amount of gnashing of teeth and rending of garments at the Paris Peace Conference. I already quoted to you Wilson’s quip about the provisional Polish government asking for a large part of the world, and it was a serious problem. The peace conference created a Commission on Polish Affairs, which was one of the largest of the many expert committees created at the conference to work out the technical problems of implementing a peace agreement.

I should note here that back in episode 175, when I talked about the peace conference, I said the Big Four, Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Orlando, did most of the work. Let me clarify that. I meant that they took the big decisions, but I didn’t mean to dismiss these hundreds of experts that were also part of the conference. The Big Four would agree on principles and then charge one of these committees with the task of working out the details. They worked hard, too, and nobody worked harder than the Polish Affairs committee. Their charge was simple enough in principle: draw Polish borders so as to include all majority Polish territories in Germany, Austria, and Russia into one unified Polish state. But that proved to be a lot more complicated than it sounds.

There isn’t enough time left today for me to cover the entire Polish border situation, so let me focus on one piece of it: the formerly Austrian province of Galicia. I gave you a good rundown on Galicia back in episode 90. It was one of the most impoverished regions in Europe, and during the Great War, much of the fighting between Austria and Russia took place here.

The western portion of Galicia was predominantly Polish, and there was a consensus that this part should be included in Poland. In the final days of the war, the Austrian Kaiser Karl had granted the people of this region the right to leave his Empire and become part of a Polish state if they so chose, and the Allies agreed, based on the principle of self-determination. Western



Galicia includes the city of Kraków, which lies on the Vistula River as it flows north from the Carpathian Mountains to the Baltic. Kraków is as Polish as a city can get. It was the capital of Poland from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, before the capital was moved to Warsaw. In our time, Kraków is Poland's second-largest city.

But when you turn your attention to eastern Galicia, the picture becomes less clear. Most of the population here is Ukrainian, though as I explained in episode 90, these are Catholic Ukrainians, unlike their Orthodox cousins to the east. This is because they've been ruled over by Catholics for centuries now, first Poles, then Austrians. There's a substantial Polish minority here as well, which wields outsized power for its numbers because the Poles are the merchants, the landowners, and the professionals in this region, while the Ukrainians are the rural peasant folk. The two largest cities in eastern Galicia were majority Polish: Tarnopol and Lemberg, the provincial capital of Galicia during Austrian rule. The Poles call it Lwów. In our time, it is part of Ukraine and the Ukrainians call it Lviv.

In the aftermath of the Great War, the Russian Revolution, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the Armistice, the fledgling Polish government in Warsaw and the fledgling Ukrainian government in Kiev both claimed eastern Galicia for historical and demographic reasons. The Ukrainians in eastern Galicia declared a West Ukrainian republic in early November 1918, before the Armistice was signed. The Polish majority in Lemberg rose up in a counter-revolt and seized control of that city. The Ukrainians fought back, putting the city to siege. The Ukrainian government in Kiev supported the Ukrainians in Galicia; the Polish government in Warsaw supported the rebels in, I guess I'm going to go ahead and start calling it Lwów.

The Allies forced a brief ceasefire in February, but it didn't hold. The Paris Peace Conference wanted to apply the principle of self-determination, but it was hard to figure. Ukrainian Galicia was too small to become an independent state. Would Catholic Ukrainians be better off ruled by Orthodox Ukrainians, or by Catholic Poles? And there were the Jewish residents of eastern Galicia, about 15% of the population. Which would they prefer? It was widely believed that Jewish Galicians identified as Polish, but it isn't as if anyone went out and took a survey. Also, a lot of people doubted whether Ukraine could maintain its own independence, since both the Reds and the Whites currently fighting the Russian Civil War agreed that Ukraine should remain part of Russia. It seemed that no matter who won the civil war, Ukraine would lose. So there's that to consider, too.

A Galician Ukrainian delegation actually turned up in Paris to meet with the peace conference, but even they weren't sure what to ask for.

The siege of Lwów was finally broken in May. Polish troops that Dmowski had recruited to fight on the Western Front arrived in Poland and were quickly deployed to eastern Galicia. Ukraine was by this time also dealing with a Red Army offensive from Russia and was in no position to fight a two-front war. In 1920, Poland and Ukraine cut a deal under which Ukraine would

abandon its claim to Galicia in exchange for Polish support in dealing with the Red Army. But we'll save that story for next time.

In the meantime, though, this leaves Poland in full control of Galicia, whatever the rest of the world might think. The Allies didn't approve and the League of Nations didn't approve until 1923, after the fighting in Eastern Europe was finally over. By then, with Poland still in control of Galicia and no prospect of that changing anytime soon, the League of Nations relented and recognized Polish control over Galicia in exchange for Polish promises of autonomy for the Ukrainian portion of the province. This promise was swiftly broken, and Polish control of this region remained a point of contention with the Ukrainians for many years to come, though it must be said that at least the Ukrainians of eastern Galicia were spared the famines that killed millions of their cousins to the east during the 1930s.

We'll continue the story of Poland in the next episode, but we'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening. This is a special Christmas bonus episode I'm releasing on Christmas Day, as a small token of my gratitude to all of you for being listeners. Without you, there'd be no point in my doing all this. I'm also celebrating the fact that I am finally caught up in my research and writing of episodes. That's always a reason to celebrate.

Greetings to our donors and patrons as well, and I'd especially like to greet new patron Mason Meinhold. Merry Christmas, Mason, from me and from your Mom, who is so happy to feed your passion.

I'd like to wish all of you a Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year and/or whatever greeting is appropriate to you and your faith and culture. That's what's great about this time of year. There's a holiday in there somewhere for everyone.

And I hope you'll join me next time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we complete the story of Polish independence with an uprising in Germany and a war against Russia. That's next time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned that the quip "He's no Paderewski" was a common put-down of lesser pianists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the phrase became such a cliché that another Polish pianist, Moriz Rosenthal, was able to make a famous joke out of it when asked his assessment of the great man's performance in London: "He plays well enough, I suppose," Rosenthal said, "but he's no Paderewski."

[music: Closing Theme]