REVIEWS


Teofil Lachowicz’s indispensable, albeit hermetic almanac of the Polish ex-combatant experience in the United States is divided into two chronological parts: first, the period between the War of Independence and the First World War and secondly, the interwar years up to 1939.

The first part of the book is based almost exclusively on secondary sources, some of them hard to find. The second draws on a wealth of primary sources chiefly from a single, exhaustive collection — that of the Polish Army Veterans’ Association of America (PAVA) held in New York City and Orchard Lake, Michigan — but also material from the Pilsudski Institute in New York, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Archive of New Acts in Warsaw. The monograph sadly fails to include any English-language primary sources and hardly any non-Polish secondary ones. Its first part concerns veteran personalities; the second describes various veteran organizations, most particularly PAVA.

To set up the story, the author briefly recounts the exploits of personalities such as Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Pułaski during the War of Independence. Many others, often obscure and forgotten, surface in the author’s chronological list of personalities. Most get an honorary mention; a few merit a mini-biography.

Although Lachowicz’s statistics are, regrettably, scattered and inconclusive, a few thousand Polish veterans had settled in the USA by the 1880s. Most of them came voluntarily, but several hundred had been forcibly deported by the
Habsburg authorities during the mid-nineteenth century. Only a few returned to the Old Country or, at least, to Europe, to fight again or retire at home. Many stayed behind to sample fully the American experience.

Amongst those who stayed, some were lucky and did well for themselves, but most ex-soldiers had a tough time. They generally experienced indifference from federal and state authorities who often limited themselves merely to declarations of sympathy. On exceptional occasions they were backed by political resolutions which were, in theory, aimed at relieving the hardships of the Polish veterans but which in practice failed to deliver, such as the unrealistic congressional Ohio land grant project of 1834.

The Poles’ encounters with the denizens of the United States usually reflected the latter’s utter ignorance of Poland and its plight. On the other hand, the former military men, many of whom were noblemen, were largely ill-equipped to take advantage of America’s individualistic freedom. They also found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. Some complained that the blacks enjoyed a status superior to them because of their lack of command of the English language: ‘We are worse than the Negroes, under whom we work in domestic service situations. We are placed under their supervision because they know the native language’ (p. 15).

After a while, the veterans set up a number of organizations, most of them ephemeral, like the Polish Committee in New York. Some veterans were also active in establishing major fraternities, including the Polish National Alliance (PNA) and the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America (PRCUA), which eventually provided the framework for PAVA. Most ex-military Poles remained unorganized, however. Some assimilated quickly; others simply wandered the continent.

The fate of the wanderers was chequered. Some experienced kindness from native Americans in Ohio in 1834; others died at their hands, like the band of Polish ex-military brothers who left Louisiana for Texas in 1835. Others fought them in the ranks of the American army, for example during the Seminole wars between 1834 and 1842. Overall, however, only a few Poles joined the US military during the nineteenth century with the exception of the Civil War, when numbers of Polish volunteers markedly increased. Poles fought in every American conflict but often paid the highest price. The Petruszewicz brothers were killed by Mexicans at Fort Goliad in 1836, for example, while Gustaw Szulc was hanged by the British following his participation in the ill-fated American military incursion into Canada in 1838.

Statistically, after 1863, Polish veterans were not representative of the American Polonia. After the 1870s, arrivals from Poland were dominated by economic migrants, mostly peasants. Military and political figures were exceptional. However, those peasants and their offspring (and here the author unfortunately fails to include any references to Thaddeus and John
Radziłowski’s work on Polish-American consciousness) became American Poles. During the First World War about 20,000, spurred by patriotism, fought for Poland, and subsequently in the ‘Blue Army’ under General Józef Haller, while nearly 40,000 American Poles joined the US armed forces.

The ‘freedom fighters’ of 1914–21 were inspired by the Polish veterans of 1830 and 1863, as well as by their patriotic priests. Polish-American troops played a significant role in the conflict in Ukraine and contributed to the victory against the Bolsheviks, even though they were shabbily treated by Józef Piłsudski. This was in response to the Polish-Americans’ solid support for Roman Dmowski and Ignacy Paderewski, which reflected not only their preference for nationalism over socialism but also the logical embrace of the Entente over the Central Powers, which was in congruence with the United States’ war-time policy. Thus, American Poles remained patriots of both the USA and Poland.

Once the conflict in Europe had ended, most of these fighters returned home to America; a few stayed behind or later re-emigrated. Although designated as ‘Americans’ in Poland and evacuated home by the White House in 1921, the soldiers of the ‘Blue Army’ were denied veteran status in the United States and all rights to government assistance that went with it. This was based on the spurious grounds that Poland did not exist as an allied state when the men had volunteered, regardless of the fact that in 1917 they had gone into action in France as allied units, or that the political leadership of the ‘Blue Army’ was uniformly recognized by the leaders of the Entente, including President Woodrow Wilson, as a de facto Polish government. Unlike Belgian veterans resident in the US, Polish ex-combatants had, for example, no access to federal health care. On arriving home the Polish Americans had to rebuild their lives on their own and find a way to re-integrate into a society crippled by post-war recession.

To maintain the spirit of camaraderie from the trenches, the ‘freedom fighters’ founded PAVA. This was a fraternity par excellence. Its main objective was to look after the welfare of its members but it also participated in cultural, educational and political events. These included defending both Poland and America in print and deed, in order ‘to repel anti-U.S. and anti-Poland propaganda’, as reaffirmed in their statutes of 1937.

The main function of PAVA was self-help. Most of its funds, collected from subscriptions and supporters’ contributions, most notably by Ignacy Paderewski and the clergy (‘among the larger donors the names of priests predominated’, p. 193), helped to sustain widows, orphans, war invalids and down-on-their-luck veterans, and Lachowicz’s account of their plight is harrowing. There were several deaths by starvation and suicide among homeless veterans, such as Piotr Malinowski in 1922, and the Great Depression created more victims. ‘About 45 persons’ died in the interwar period, all of them unaffiliated veterans.
During this time, PAVA played an important, albeit ancillary role. It was a relatively small outfit, having by 1939 only about 4,500 members, since most veterans failed to enrol (p. 146). Nevertheless, it took care of its members and often extended free membership to the needy who turned to the ‘freedom fighters’ for help. The PAVA Women’s Auxiliary Corps, for example, under ex-combat nurse Agnieszka Wisła, distinguished itself in this endeavour.

Teofil Lachowicz’s history of the Polish-American ‘freedom fighters’ demonstrates that, inspired by a spirit of nationalism and camaraderie, American Poles not only fought for Poland’s independence but were also able to take care of their own, by their own means, when their victorious troops returned home.

Institute of World Politics
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This informative collection of essays, generated from an international symposium at the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University, explores the history of Russian expansion into the Muslim world. Its main aim is to establish ‘a dialogue between Russian studies and Oriental studies’ in the tradition of Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917 (edited by Daniel Brower and Edward Lazzerini, Bloomington, IN, 1997). The key term, ‘Asiatic Russia (Aziatskaia Rossiia)’ is a direct translation from its vernacular version, which has political implications for this region.

The book is divided into four themes covered in thirteen papers. The first theme is Russian expansion into the East and the Tatars’ role as intermediaries during this mission. Ricarda Vulpius compares Russia’s eighteenth-century civilizing mission with British colonization policies in India. Although there may be some similarities, it proves unproductive to compare these two contexts, and particularly to apply the same concepts (colonization, colonial) to describe these policies. Hamamoto Mami contributes to this theme with historical accounts of Kargala, which was Russia’s trading centre in Central Asia, whilst Gulmira Sultangalieva’s essay describes the Tatars’ intermediary role in relations between the Russian Empire and the Kazakhs.

The book’s second theme is the institutional formation and demography of the conquered regions. Matsuzato Kimitaka details the complexities of the governor-generalship and its relations with the ministries of the empire. Anatolii Remnev describes the agrarian policy of moving Russian peasants