Lecture 5

Russian Poland 1815-1831

1. Introduction

Russia in 1815 incorporated by far the largest area of Poland. For the next 100 years, the Polish question was primarily the question of the relation of Poles to the Russian Empire. It was in Russian Poland that the main issues of Polish history were decided.

2. Constitution of Congress Kingdom

This intended not only to satisfy Polish aspirations, but also to serve as an experiment which might provide lessons for later application in Russia. The constitution was prepared by Czartoryski – modeled largely on that of Duchy of Warsaw. It was not particularly liberal; its aim not to conciliate all classes of the population, but rather to bind propertied classes (described in the constitution as ‘rich, well-born and able’) to the new system. Some dispute about the way it should be assessed. Compare the treatment in Frank Thackeray, *The Antecedents of Revolution: Alexander I and The Polish Kingdom* (Boulder, 1980) and R. F. Leslie, *Polish Politics and the Revolution of November 1830* (London: The Athlone Press, 1956).

Parliament was composed of two houses: the Senate, made up of nominees of crown which in practice represented great magnates and bishops and the Sejm. In theory, this to represent the whole of szlachta and also bourgeoisie. ‘In practice, property
qualifications and the division of the country into territorial consistencies effectively reduced the influence of all except the most important szlachta.’

Leslie calculates that the number of landlords capable of wielding political influence by virtue of their social standing was about 5,500 (out of a total population of 4.1 million) Thus practical working of constitution in constituencies elected by szlachta ensures return of substantial nobles.

Non-noble constituencies (51 of these). Franchise here very narrow: it was restricted to men of property who paid land tax or who had a capital of 10,000 zl., and to people distinguished by intellectual attainments or social functions, e.g., men of letters, priests, school teachers, etc. In general, these constituencies elected landowners of noble status.

Sejm to meet every two years for a session of one month. Important legislation was to be referred to it, but Tsar could legislate by decree, as could also his deputy, the viceroy. One third of Sejm’s membership to seek re-election every 2 years.

All power thus lies in the administration. This taken over from French. At its head stood the Viceroy – General Józef Zajączek. Had been a Jacobin in 1794, but now a convinced believer in Russian connection. Under him sat an Administrative Council, which was formed by heads of the five main ministries – Finance, Education and Religion, Justice, Internal affairs and War.

Other prominent persons nominated by Viceroy to serve on the Council, among them Czartoryski. Council to approve drafts of bills to be submitted to Sejm.

In addition, a key role in political life was played by the Tsar’s Personal Commissioner in the Kingdom of Poland, Nikolai Novisiltsov. He exercised a general
supervisory position.

This was not the constitution of a state with responsible government – ‘It was a constitution under which all effective power was in the hands of ministers appointed by the crown, but which permitted periodic consultations with the substantial gentry’.

(Leslie)

An important element in the political structure of the state was played by the army. This separate from Russian army. Comprised 35-40,000 men under Grand Duke Constantine, Alexander’s brother.

Alexander determined to make this constitution work. Even vaguely hinted that area of Congress Kingdom might be extended eastwards. Thus, the Grand Duke Constantine commanded not only the Polish army, but also a separate Lithuanian corps.

In addition, in March 1818, at the first session of Sejm, Alexander remarked, ‘The results of your labours in this first assembly will teach me what the country can expect in the future from your devotion to it, as from your goodwill to me, and whether faithful to my resolution, I can extend what I have done for you’.

Yet he hopes invested in the 1815 settlement were rather naive. There was considerable opposition in Russia to idea of extending Polish control eastwards. Moreover, though Poles responded to Alexander, the new constitution was fraught with difficulties. The Poles had not renounce their hopes for national independence. In Leslie’s words:

The Polish szlachta nation had been a byword in Europe for its particularism and its instability, but by 1815 new elements had been introduced into the national mystique. The state and army had become objects of renovation, no longer things to be feared. Liberty had become synonymous with national independence not with individual privilege. In one way, the Polish szlachta had acquired a new sense of unity and purpose, but there was a fissure within the noble order,
between the propertied element, agrarian and conservative in outlook, ready to cooperate with the partitioning powers in quiet years, and the non-propertied section, professional and radical which found it difficult to accept indefinite dismemberment.

These differences were not always pushed to extremes, but successive crises were to reveal this cleavage and were clearly evident in the period of constitutional rule between 1815-30.

3. Economic Developments 1815 - 1830

1. Agriculture

Latter period of Napoleonic rule had led to widespread depopulation and indebtedness. In addition, tension resulted from demands of peasants that labour dues be converted into rents. In 1814 a ‘Reform Committee’ was established under Czartoryski. This issued a questionnaire to local officials and judges as well as prominent landowners asking what reforms were required. Most favour retention of labour dues – thus decree of December 1807 maintained.

Some restriction of peasant’s freedom of movement in this period. In 1818 a royal decree entrusted landowners with duties of village mayor, thus giving them administrative power over population of their estates, while in 1821 a decree made it difficult for an agricultural worker to leave his employment.

The general economic situation did not favour development of agriculture. Grain prices fell, partly as a result of the Congress Kingdom being cut off from Danzig and partly because of the high duties imposed by the Corn Laws in the United Kingdom. In addition, many estates heavily burdened with debt. Could only carry on because of moratorium. Some switch however from grain to potatoes (for distilling) and wool,
particularly in western part of Congress Kingdom

From the mid-1820’s, the agricultural situation began to improve. In 1825, the state established a Land Credit Society. There was also some attempt on government estates to more over to rents. But these abandoned after protests by landowners.

2. Industry

There were some important developments here. An important role was played by Ksawery Drucki-Lubecki – Minister of Finance from 1821 to 1830. When he came to power, treasury in desperate state as a result of excessive military expenditure and speculation from corrupt officials. Wins confidence of local bankers and obtains necessary credits. Ruthlessly collects all tax arrears and thus able to balance budget. Exploits state monopolies of sale of salt and tobacco – with money obtained helps landowners with repay their debts and launch policy of large scale investment. Able to obtain favorable Russian tariff for Polish goods. In 1828 founds Bank Polski

Significant economic development in this period. Textiles around Łódź. Woolen cloth at first important, followed by cotton. Private capital encouraged here. There was also some growth of heavy industry. State plays large role here. Iron production most important.

Some development of coal mining.

But these developments, like Lubecki’s policies as a whole, did not benefit mass of population and were also unpopular with landowners. Lubecki’s autocratic ways also make him unpopular. Economic development cannot overcome political problems.
4. Politics 1815-30

System not a very stable one – different views have prevailed on its working. Polish emigrés after 1830 have stressed way in which constitution was disregarded by Alexander. This was not the prevailed new at the time. Different views expounded in Leslie and Thackeray. Alexander was not a constitutionalist – the budget was never submitted to Sejm and Sejm not called every two years. But he did try to win over the substantial szlachta, who were for the most part content in these years.

But an important underswell of grievance. Poles hoped for an extension of Congress Kingdom. Still not reconciled to loss of independence. Moreover, though administration hoped to conciliate wealthy classes, it was hostile to spread of liberal ideas. In 1819, the government imposes censorship, first of periodical literature, than of all printed matter.

Government also tries to win over church. Tries to transfer to church complete control over marriage laws. This resisted by Sejm which had as its special province the revision of civil code. In 1821 Voltairean Stanislaw Kostka Potocki dismissed from his post as Minister of Religion and Education. Replaced by obscurantist Stanislaw Grabowski. By royal decree, ministry reorganized and direction of ecclesiastical affair and education brought more and more under control of bishops and clericals. Unpopularity of Grabowski and his assistant Jan Kalasanty Szaniawski in Congress Kingdom.

Opposition to the Government began to grow and this takes two forms,
constitutional and conspiratorial. Let us first look at the constitutional opposition. This came first from Kalisz province and was led by two brothers Wincenty and Bonawentura Niemojowski. They had received their education in Germany where they had come under the influence of French ideas. Programme closely modeled on that of French liberal Benjamin Constant. Advocated strict observance of 1815 constitution.

Their position was that in terms of the constitution, deputies were entitled to voice their opposition and should do so regardless of the issue. In 1818 Wincenty objects to a fairly innocuous bill on settlement of boundary disputes. In 1820, his followers oppose the establishment of a land credit society.

Way they played to gallery. Attempt of Wincenty to defend Radowksi; a landowner who had taken part in Naples rising brings his downfall. Both brothers excluded from Sejm. Moreover, in order to prevent sterile debates, Alexander in February 1825 issues an Additional Article to constitution when states that only first and last sittings of Diet to be public. This issued without knowledge of Viceroy or ministries. Increases fear of radicals that Alexander would act against constitution.

The conspirational opposition was of two types, student and military. A major feature of the student conspiracies was Napoleon worship. Younger generation in Poland had come to manhood after great struggles of past. Felt itself limited by narrow confines of Congress Kingdom. Looked back to Republic with regret; idealized attempt of Napoleon to recreate it.

As in France, so in Poland, Bonapartism had little connection with the rationalism of the eighteenth century. It was rather a nostalgia for the glory of all battles of the past, a sentiment easily acquired by a nobility which felt itself humiliated by the partition of its country and frustrating with the straitened circumstances of defeat. (Leslie)
This hero worship of Napoleon strengthened by new literary forms. Romanticism reaches Poland from Germany. Greatest of Polish romantics was Adam Mickiewicz. Published his first works in 1822-3. Gained widespread popularity in 1825. His appeal to patriotic feeling.

Oda do młodości

Without heart, without spirit;
These are skeletons instead of people
O youth – give me wings to soar above the dead world.
In a heavenly region of illusion
Where enthusiasm creates miracles
Where the new shakes up the old
And clothes golden images in hope.

Ironic that Niemojowskis and the adherents were upholding of classicism, they identified romanticism with reaction – as with Francois-Rene de Chateaubrand. But young won for romanticism – sets before them the ideal of a strong free individual struggling against fate and dying gracefully in hour of defeat. An appeal to action. Encouraged young to look forward to day when they would create a new Poland.


Influence of romantic movement on Polish mind and particularly that of young generation enormous. Radical szlachta has already adopted idea of strong national state - this emphasized by Romanticism with its appeal to past.

Stress on individual – role of knight errant. Reinforced belief that the most noble
occupation man was war and entitled prowess in battle to the exclusion of the more solid qualities of the administration and business man.

This intellectual climate did not encourage among the younger generations’ respect for Lubecki, the aristocrat who thought in terms of industry and trade. Patriotism was measured by professions of devotion to the national cause. Discussion of social and economic realities found little place in the thoughts of the radical youth who laid stress upon the essential polonism to which all should be faithful by which all should be judged. (Leslie)

Importance of Warsaw – centre for young men from all over former Republic.

Constitution of Congress Kingdom did not permit any open political association, which might have absorbed energies of younger generation. Instead they were to seek self-expression in secret societies for which Masonic lodges of eighteenth century Poland to provide model. There was a large number of these societies: the Panta Koina (everything in common) founded 1817, Powszechny Związek (1819), Wolni Lechici (1820) and the Wolni Polacy (1820). This the most important. Maurycey Mochnacki among its members.

Aim of these societies simple. Professed to be animated by desire for freedom, a feeling of patriotism a hatred of deposition. Proclaimed freedom of all nations and their own right to express the spirit of the Polish nation. In native and effectiveness similar to German Burschenschaften.

Government worried by growth of idealism among students. It tried to stop study abroad and November 1821 forbade all secret societies. Most societies rather ephemeral. First real clash with authorities came in May 1823 following student disturbances in Vilna. Here there had been some talk of assassination of Grand Duke Constantine. Arrests made; some students exiled to Russia. Leads to Czartoryski losing his post as curator of Vilna University. Radicals see this as confirmation of abandonment of
liberalism by Alexander. But all these student conspiracies very small beer.

More important were the military conspiracies. Reasons for discontent in army not hard to find. Term of service much desired by younger gentry. But advancement difficult to obtain. Napoleonic veterans clung to commissions and blocked advancement. Constantine also a martinet. Obsessed with parade ground drill. Declined to use Polish army in Russian-Turkish war of 1829 for fear of disrupting its parade ground efficiency. Discipline harsh – one officer so humiliated by Constantine’s insults that he committed suicide. Others resigned including the popular General Józef Chłopicki. In Robert Leslie’s words: ‘Cadets saw no prospect of advancement and seemed condemned by the stultifying military system to a life of endless parades and instruction’.

Main source of discontent among younger elements in army. The frustrating restrictions of military life and the lack of purpose in an army which was kept in existence but was not used. Leslie has put the position well:

‘They wanted glory and distinction very much as the literary men, suffocated by a censorship which applied the texts of the clericals to all writings wanted freedom from intellectual supervision and liberty to achieve success outside the border of conventional literature.’

Cadets and literary men met in cafes and joined forces. In these circumstances, military conspiracies multiplied. In 1819 a Major Walerian Łukasiński founded a Freemason’s Lodge in Polish army. April 1821, a former Polish General, Jan Umiński, now a Prussian subject came from Poznan to Warsaw on behalf of a secret society in Prussian Poland. Met Łukasiński and on 3 May 1821, secret meeting held near Warsaw at which it was decided to establish a Polish Patriotic Society to have branches not only in the kingdom, but also in Volhynia, Kraków, Poznania and L’viv, as well as within army.

In October 1821 Łukasiński was denounced to the authorities. At first no action
taken, but when matter came to notice of Novosiltsov, he investigated it thoroughly. In May 1822 Łukasiński and seven others arrested. Condemned to prison by a military tribunal in June 1824. Patriotic society remains in existence. Led by Seweryn Krzyżanowski who conducted negotiations between the society and the Russian Decembrists in 1823 and 1824

Tension within Congress Kingdom increases when Nicholas I comes to power. Nicholas disliked the constitutional system established in Poland, but was prepared to work within it. Poles soon place a heavy strain on his good will by their treatment of compatriots who had been involved in Decembrist conspiracy. Indeed, this probably constituted a major turning point in Polish-Russian relations.

Contact between Decembrists and Polish Patriotic Society revealed by a Polish renegade. Krzyżanowski arrested. Polish leaders argued that he could not be accused of treason because Poland was a separate state and his offense had been committed in Russia. They secured the transfer of his trial to a special court of the Diet which convicted him only of the much less serious offense of conspiracy.

In spite of the rebuff, Nicholas fulfills his obligations towards the Poles. Favorably impressed by policies of Drucki-Lubecki. Constantine spoke well of Polish army.

1829 comes to Warsaw for his coronation. May-June 1830 present at Diet.

5. Revolution of 1830

This had its origin in a new conspiratorial group had been organized in army. In
December 1828 junior officer named Piotr Wysocki forms society among cadets of Officers Training School in Warsaw. In contact with radical literary groups, but had virtually no support in Sejm with civil government machinery.

Wysocki and his friends begin to talk about conspiracy in 1829 and first months of 1830, but talk still far from being translated into action Wysocki moreover, very unclear a lot of his objectives. Claimed that his group wanted only to uphold constitution. Seems no reason to doubt his claims that he had no intention of launching an attack upon Russian Empire to win back lost provinces in east; still further from his thoughts were ideas of social emancipation with the regeneration of Poland by reform.

Mood of people in Warsaw changed radically by revolutions in France and Belgium

‘With Europe once more in flux, Polish romantic imaginations were soon at work.’ (Leslie) In Autumn 1830 following denunciations to the police, Czartoryski began a slow investigation which was bound ultimately to expose Wysocki’s conspiracy. At the same time, the Tsar was mobilizing part of his army in Russia in case he should feel the need for military intervention in western Europe and number of Russian troops in the Congress Kingdom, which formed a large part of the empire’s Western border clearly bound to increase. Seemed that now was time to act before conspirators were arrested and before Warsaw was overflowing with Russian soldiers.

On 29 November when public buildings in Warsaw being guarded by Fourth Infantry Regiment in which a large number of conspirators were serving, they seized Belweder palace. Unable to enlist any support from senior officers. In the confusion, some workmen broke into the arsenal and began to distribute rifles to civilians. Sight of

No revolutionary leadership emerges. Czartoryski and Drucki-Lubecki call a special meeting of the Administrative Council – decide to coopt some persons popular to crowd, including General Józef Chłopicki. Council then issues proclamation calling on Poles not to fight each other and appointing Chłopicki Commander-in-Chief.

Polish troops outside the city receive contradictory orders from Constantine and from Council. On 1 December addressed by group of revolutionaries from Warsaw. Decide to join revolution. This decision accepted by their commander General Jan Szembek

Council now yields to pressure from group of members of Sejm that Drucki-Lubecki should resign and that three radicals, including historian Lelewel should be coopted. Radicals set themselves up under old name of Patriotic Society. Call for war against Russia and for an appeal to the Poles of Lithuania to rebel.

On 3 December Council dissolves itself. Reconstituted as Provisional Government of Kingdom of Poland. Attempt made to overthrow this by Patriotic Society fails. Chłopicki establishes himself dictator.

On 7 December Nicholas receives news of revolution. Constantine appeals to him to show moderation. Tsar sends instructions to Warsaw that all civil authorities to obey Constantine, to whom extraordinary powers had been given. Also orders General Rosen, commanding the Lithuanian Corps of Russian Army to enter Congress Kingdom and accept submission of Polish army. This troop movement averted by Chłopicki who
wrote to Rosen, who responded by referring matter back Congress to St. Petersburg.

On 10 December Chłopicki sends Drucki-Lubecki and Count Jan Jezierski to St. Petersburg to report to Nicholas. But Nicholas not in a conciliatory mood. On 17 December issues a manifesto in which he condemns revolution and orders all Polish corps commanders to concentrate their forces at Plock. Pardon promised to those who would submit.

On 18 December Sejm meets in Warsaw. Revolutionary rhetoric flows freely. Cries of ‘Long live a free and independent Poland’. The Speaker, Count Władysław Ostrowski proclaimed, ‘May the composition of this Chamber be augmented by our brother representatives from those Polish provinces which remain under foreign tyranny’. These attitudes bound to lead to war. Chłopicki aware that this would be disastrous, resigns his office. Only takes it up again when assured that he would be given complete power. But this not realized.

Government now renamed Supreme National Council. Members include Czartoryski and Ostrowski. End of December Tsar receives Drucki-Lubecki and Jezierski, as well as another emissary from Chopicki. Unbending, but shows willingness to treat Poles fairly once they had returned to the allegiance. In his words, ‘Show me the means of settling the affair which would be worthy of a King of Poland who is at the same time Emperor of Russia!’

But mood in Warsaw makes settlement of this type important. On 3 January Manifesto which Sejm had asked Lelewel to draft published. It demanded the reunion of eastern lands with Poland and claimed Poles defending the liberties of all Europe. The Supreme National Council now heard a report of messengers from Petersburg. Chłopicki
saw that war would be disastrous. But none of his colleagues, including Czartoryski was willing to incur the odium of saying so. One consequence was the resignation on 17 January of General Chłopicki.

Radicals now re-establish Patriotic Society. Influence on public opinion increases. Competition in revolutionary invective. Sejm deposes Nicholas. On 30 January, new national government elected. Its President was Adam Czartoryski and it was made up of four other members including Lelewel. Poland was in effect at war with Russia. Leslie has summed up the situation well:

This had come about by drift rather than planning, of any clear political leadership and indeed against the wishes of most of those who went through the motions of leadership. The original conspirators had been neither more numerous, nor more efficient than the conspirators at St. Petersburg on 14 December 1825. They had found themselves in a vacuum of power because a crowd of workers had seized some rights and because some soldiers had followed the example. This had been enough to set a light the smoldering embers of Polish national discontent and none of the older statesmen had then dared or known how, to put out the fire.

Result of Polish-Russian war could never be in doubt. Deep divisions over tactics between revolutionaries and moderates – military and political commands change several times. Major question was how far revolutionaries would attempt to win support of peasantry. Revolutionary leaders in Warsaw understood that the support of peasantry was essential, but landowners, who provided most of Polish political elite slow to take any action about land reform.

In January 1831 Supreme National Council rejects a plea from Minister of Interior for a promise to ‘consider means of assuring gradually at least, property to its peasants’. After inconclusive battle of Grochów – 23-25 February matter seen as more urgent. Ministry of Finance prepares a bill applicable to crown properties, i.e., 15 percent of landed estates in Congress Kingdom. End of March – this agreed by small quorum of
Sejm. Would have permitted peasants to acquire freeholds within 28 years by yearly payments of 6.25 percent of total value of holding. But planning meeting at Sejm at end of April lets matter lapse.

By 6 September, General Ivan Pashkievich reaches Warsaw. 8 September city surrenders.

Polish rebellion had aroused sympathy in Europe, most vocal in Britain and France. But never any question of armed assistance to the Poles from any European power. Has been argued that the rebellion helped France and Belgium. Nicholas unable to attack them while his armies were engaged in Poland. But it is doubtful if he would have tried in any case to intervene in West

After 1831 a Polish political emigration - numbers between 5,000 and 7,000 (See Balzac, Cousin Bette). Czartoryski maintained a sort of exiled court at the Hotel Lambert and sought in this way to maintain a basic political unity among the exiles and continuing to hope that the powers would one day act on Poland’s behalf. Radicals create in 1832 a Polish Democratic Society. 1834 Lelewel founds a Young Poland movement modeled on Mazzini’s Young Italy.

Repression severe in Eastern provinces of Poland. Persons who had taken part in the rebellion have held to be guilty of treason. Campaign against Polish influences in education and cultural life. Many Polish families deported to other parts of empire.

In Congress Kingdom, policies milder. On 26 February 1832, Tsar signs Organic Statute. This bears some resemblance to constitution of 1815. Council of State remains with Administration Council subordinate to it. This has three Commissions in place of five as previously, Finance, Justice, Interior. Statute provided for elected assemblies of
nobility at district and provincial levels, but these were never created. Sejm however abolished.

Middle and lower ranks of civil service staffed by Poles. Senior posts held by Russians. Polish army ceases to exist. Pashkievich becomes viceroy. His rule strict, but in some ways benevolent. Close friendship with Emperor helped Poles.