

The Dusk of Prometheanism (1935–1940)

Wojciech Łysek

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9180-5546

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to highlight the importance of the Polish Promethean campaign in the late period of the Second Polish Republic. From the historiographic point of view, the issue of when exactly Polish Prometheanism came to an end remains a subject of debate. The proposed periodization focuses on 1932 – the year that Poland and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression treaty; or 1935 – the death of Józef Piłsudski. And yet the most obvious date that sounded the knell of Prometheanism seems to be September 1939 – the German attack on Poland. After the Soviet attack of 17 September 1939, the Polish government had to flee the country. Conditions for promoting the Promethean idea visibly improved in 1939–1940, and that is precisely what makes Polish government policy towards the Soviet Union during the period from 1935 to 1940 so interesting.

The beginnings of Prometheanism, a political and intellectual movement against Soviet policy which developed in Europe in 1921–1931, date back to the reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725) and are strictly bound up with imperial tendencies in Russian politics. One of the first people to realize the danger lurking in the East was the émigré hetman Filip Orlik. He made attempts to create an alliance of anti-Russian forces from Sweden to Turkey (Charaszkiewicz, 1955, p. 126). Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski's *Essai sur la diplomatie* [Essay on Diplomacy] published in 1823 is considered the first manifesto discussing the idea of Prometheanism. It defends the principle of the nation, considered the foundation of the right to independence. Czartoryski contrasted independence with empire (Nowak, 2012, p. 18).

Meanwhile, if we consider the situation from the Russian perspective, we need to remember that the first person to attempt harnessing the ethnic diversity of the Russian Empire to break the latter apart was British foreign minister Henry Temple Palmerston during the Crimean War (1853–1856). Palmerston proposed to strip Russia of Finland, the Baltics (i.e., Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), Poland along with Belarus and Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia, and the North Caucasus (*Prometèj...*, 2007).

In the literature, Prometheanism is defined as a political concept dating back to the 18th century and attaining its full development in the 20th century, whose aim was to bolster the independence efforts of the non-Russian nations inhabiting Russia and later the Soviet Union (Kwiecień & Mazur, 2002, p. 157). Its target audience, spurred on by émigré hubs, consisted largely of Ukrainians and the peoples of the Caucasus. It should also be pointed out that Prometheanism was part of the political program of those who supported Józef Piłsudski.

Already towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the future Chief of State saw the nations inhabiting Russia and ruled by the tsar as “a force that will shatter his power” (Piłsudski, 1937a, p. 90). In a letter to Leon Wasilewski, Piłsudski noted: “it is incumbent on the Poles to initiate an ‘awakening’ of the nations inhabiting tsarist Russia and to spearhead the resistance against it” (*List Józefa Piłsudskiego...*, 1899).

The first Polish Promethean activities on the international arena made themselves known in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, when Piłsudski arrived in Japan proposing the intelligence services of the Polish Socialist Party. It was during that visit, on 13 July 1904, that he presented himself at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo and submitted a memorandum in which he expressed the belief that:

Russia only appears to be a uniform state [...], the greater part of the county has been joined to the empire by force of conquest and the violent annexation of countries and nations that lived a different life before [...]. This lack of uniformity is

the country's principal weakness – its Achilles' heel (Piłsudski, 1904, pp. 249–258).

The origins of the term “Prometheanism” remain contentious. According to some scholars, the term emerged in 1913, when Piłsudski received the sculpture *Prometheus shattering his chains* from *katorga* prisoners near Irkutsk. This is how the Greek titan became the symbol of the titanic labor undertaken for the sake of liberating Poland and other nations suffering under the Russian yoke. Professor Marek Kornat believes that the notion was introduced into political discourse by Col. Tadeusz Schaetzel (Kornat, 2004, p. 358).

The Promethean movement developing in interwar Poland was a continuation of Piłsudski's political thought from before 1914 and the period of struggle for Poland's borders (1918–1921). According to Ireneusz P. Maj during this time Prometheanism was an extension of Piłsudski's federalist plans to rally the nations of the region to Poland's side. This was supposed to counter the non-conclusive Polish-Soviet War of 1920–1921 and the still very real threat of an invasion from the East (Maj, 2011, pp. 73, 75). Generally, it was an attempt to counterbalance Poland's unfavorable balance of power, placed as it was between Germany and the Soviet Union.

The shift from the idea of a federation to Prometheanism can be seen in a secret instruction issued on 19 October 1920 by Poland's foreign minister Eustachy Sapieha to Polish diplomatic missions. It included the following directions:

It is therefore necessary to continue to support elements hostile to the Soviet Union, whether Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian or Caucasian. [...] Our interests in the east do not end at our border [...]. Nor are we indifferent to the fate of the historic lands of the Commonwealth, separated from us by the future Treaty of Riga. We will be supporting Ukrainian and Belarussian self-determination in these territories (*Instrukcja Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych...*, 1920).

The first institutional Promethean body in Poland was the Union for the Rapprochement of Reborn Nations [Związek Zbliżenia Narodów Odrodzonych] founded on 10 January 1921. The first periodical devoted to the subject was the weekly *Przymierze* [Covenant] published since mid-August 1920. One of its contributors, Tadeusz Hołowko, formulated a view that could be considered the credo of the emergent movement:

An independent Poland is not conceivable without an independent Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Ukraine, and Belarus. [...] If Poland becomes isolated, if the other states

established on the rubble of Russia do not manage to survive – a sad future awaits it. Squeezed in between powerful Germany and a rebuilt Great Russia it will either lose its independence again or become [...] a vassal to one of these countries (Hołowko, 1920, p. 4).

Both initiatives ultimately failed. The final issue of *Przymierze* came out in November 1921, while the Union for the Rapprochement of Reborn Nations terminated its activities in 1923. These closures weren't due only to lack of funding. The main reason, as it turned out, was the Treaty of Riga concluded on 18 March 1921, dealing a death blow to the idea of a federation. Piłduski's gradual retirement from politics was also a significant factor.

Although pushed to the political sidelines, Prometheanism still showed some vitality. At the beginning of 1925, Stanisław Siedlecki founded the Eastern Institute [Instytut Wschodni] in Warsaw, financed by the Polish Army General Staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was a Sovietology think-tank publishing numerous periodicals (Maj, 2007, p. 66). The best known of these was *Wschód-Orient* (1930–1939) and *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* (1932–1938). The former was the organ of the Youth Oriental Circle [Orientalne Koło Młodych] which operated as part of the Eastern Institute. Its aim was stated in its subtitle: "the organ of Polish youth devoted to friendly rapprochement and closer acquaintance with the nations of the Near and Far East." Officially, the periodical was devoted to Sovietology, but the editors were much more concerned about issues relevant to the USSR's non-Russian minorities and their political aspirations (Schaetzel, 1972, p. 248). *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* meanwhile rose to a special position. Its founding and activities were supported by the Second Department of the Polish General Staff, the Nationalities Department of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Eastern Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, it would be an oversimplification to say that the *Biuletyn* was an official journal. It was more of a platform for the ruling camp, Piłsudski's followers, and those responsible for Promethean thinking with regard to Ukraine. The *Biuletyn* initially came out as a monthly, and then as a weekly from June 1933 until 1938 (Chojnowski, 1979, p. 193; Kornat, 2004, pp. 374–375).

The *Biuletyn* phenomenon was heavily influenced by the activity of its likely originators – Włodzimierz Bączkowski (editor-in-chief), Paweł Dunin-Borkowski, and the head of the Office No. 2 [Ekspozytura nr 2], Cpt. Edmund Charaszkiewicz (Libera, 2011, p. 34). Aside from these figures, the magazine brought together many prominent personalities, including Marcelli Handelsman, Józef Łobodowski, and Leon Wasilewski. Regular Ukrainian contributors included Ivan Kedryn-Rudnitsky and Roman Smal-Stotsky. In terms of its editorial line, the *Biuletyn* took the middle road between the assimilation of Ukrainians and the reconstruction

of the Polish state on principles of autonomy (Chojnowski, 1979, p. 192, footnote 118; Kornat, 2004, p. 375; Maj, 2007, pp. 71–72).

Outside of Poland Col. Schaetzel was involved in the Promethean milieu. From December 1924 on, he served as military attaché in Ankara, establishing prolific contacts among émigrés from the Caucasus. He was assisted by the head of the Polish diplomatic mission, Roman Knoll. Poland's engagement in this region was not accidental. The mission staff sought support from Turkey and wanted to work together with migrants from the Caucasus. This approach was due to the ethnic composition of the said region. And yet the reluctant foreign policy of the Turkish elites ultimately spelled the failure of the Polish mission, even though contacts with military officers from Georgia had been established. After many difficulties these Georgians settled in Poland and served as contract officers in the Polish Army (Kolbaia, 2008; Kolbaia, 2015; Kowalski, 2001; Krotofil, 1999; *Pismo gen. Władysława Sikorskiego...*, 1922; *Raport attaché wojskowego...*, 1922).

Paris became an important hub for émigrés from the former Russian Empire. In 1925, one of Piłsudski's associates, Hołówko, traveled there several times. The purpose of his visits was to forge relationships and broker agreements between members of different émigré communities, and to get them to cooperate with one another. In January 1926 these efforts came to fruition in the founding of *Le Prométhée*,¹ a communication and cooperation platform for Ukrainians (Symon Petlura's milieu), Georgians, Karelians, Crimean and Kazan Tatars, Turkic peoples from Azerbaijan, Turkmen, and North Caucasian highlanders. Of nationalities inhabiting the USSR only the Armenians and Belarusians were missing from this body (Bączkowski, 1984).

The climate for Promethean ideas improved after the May Coup. Schaetzel, who had been serving as attaché in Ankara, became the head of the Second Department of the General Staff. In the summer, Hołówko visited Paris again, and 15 July 1926 saw the founding of the Committee for the Independence of the Caucasus. In November, the first issue of the French-language monthly *Prométhée* appeared.

Contrary to the expectations of certain right-wing opposition circles, ethnic minorities living in Poland, and the Soviet authorities, Piłsudski and his associates did not make Prometheanism the leading doctrine of Polish foreign policy. Instead, during the period from 1926 to 1932 they strove to normalize relations with Germany and the Soviet Union.

Although the rise to power of Piłsudski's supporters created opportunities for an expansion of Promethean activity, the Polish government

1 Scholars have questioned that there was an actual organization (as reported by many authors). According to these voices, 1924–1925 only saw efforts to enlist various émigré centers to the cause through emissaries. Promethean clubs functioned inter alia in Helsinki, Paris and Warsaw (Bruski, 2010, p. 215; Libera, 2018, pp. 121–136).

nonetheless chose to adhere to the Treaty of Riga, as the pursuit of Promethean initiatives would threaten a conflict whose outcome would be uncertain. Ideas of breaking up the USSR were therefore set aside as unrealistic. Only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Military Affairs drew up plans in the event of the collapse of Poland's eastern neighbor. Still, the 1926–1932 period was “a time of the most decisive organizational and active cooperation with Promethean organizations” (Charaszkiwicz, 12 February 1940, pp. 63–77).

Support was provided to immigrants from the USSR living in Poland, Paris and Istanbul (Maciejewski, 2008, p. 150). Secret military cooperation with the Ukrainian People's Republic was pursued. On 1 February 1927, the UPR Ministry of Military Affairs Staff was established (Krotofil, 1999, p. 30). Within the framework of this cooperation, communication was maintained with various groups in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. These contacts were likely sporadic and not too deep. Sections of the Ukrainian military staff survived into the mid-1930s. Ukrainian contract officers were admitted into the Polish army pursuant to a resolution of the President of the Polish Republic from 26 January 1928, based on the Georgian precedent. From 1928 until 1936, 58 officers and non-commissioned officers from the former UPR armed forces served in the Polish army (Potocki, 1999, p. 260; Torzecki, 1989, p. 163; Szagała & Wiszka, 2010, p. 76).

Meriting a separate discussion are various institutions operating in Poland, such as the Prometheus Club (Kwiecień & Mazur, 2002; Wiszka, 2011), the Eastern Institute (Kornat, 2004; Maj, 2002; Maj, 2007) or the Ukrainian Academic Institute (Kozak, 2008; *Pięć lat istnienia...*, 1935; Potocki, 1998; *Ukraiński Instytut Naukowy...*, 1932–1933) – all of them based in Warsaw – or the Academic and Research Institute for Eastern Europe in Wilno (Kornat, 2000a; Kornat, 2003; Potocki, 2000).

The Promethean campaign also ran into obstacles. The most discouraging ones at the turn of the decade included the murder of important activists. Here, we must mention the assassination of Petlura in May 1926, Volodymyr Oskilko in June 1926 (MP Stanisław Kętrzyński..., 1926, l. 42), Noe Ramishvili in December 1930 (Żeleński, 1989, p. 197) and Tadeusz Hołówko in August 1931 (Motyka, 2011, p. 32; Torzecki, 1972, pp. 57–58, 67; Wszendyrówny, 2010, p. 210). Although no clear link can be established between these killings and the actions of the Soviet secret services, it is beyond doubt that the USSR benefited most from these crimes.

A Turning Point?

The gradual waning of the political influence of Polish Prometheanism could be observed as early as the 1930s. September 1939 seems to be an indisputable end date (the invasion of Poland by the Third Reich and later by the Soviet Union). But we can also often read that Promethanism had

already started to wane in the first half of the 1930s,² and the year 1932 is cited as the point of no return. Indeed, after the signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union the Promethean vision no longer played as important a role as it had in 1926 (Kornat, 2012a, p. 60).

Prometheanism was not at odds with the treaties signed in the first half of the 1930s.³ We should also consider the opinion of Bączkowski, who in 1986 explained that the growing resistance to Promethean ideas came from:

a deep belief that Germany was the biggest threat to Poland. One should therefore seek a *modus vivendi* with Moscow, or at any rate abstain from provoking it with Promethean propaganda and Polish-Ukrainian plans against Moscow (Bączkowski, 1986, p. 128).

Up until 1932 the fact that official Polish state agencies were pursuing a Promethean Eastern policy was not a secret. After that time, official contacts were taken over from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the Polish Army General Staff. The head of the Office No. 2 began to play a special role.⁴ As a result, the representatives of the Promethean nations became convinced that they were treated “not as the spearhead of an ideological revolution in their countries, but as regular diversionary material, paid for in cash” (Siedlecki, 1994, p. 85). Polish state agents tried to convince their partners that “the signing of the pact [with Moscow] was a tactical move, and the agreements concluded with Poland were still in force” (Wszendyrówny, 2010, p. 207).

On top of these processes an economic crisis made it necessary to reduce the subsidies allocated for the Promethean campaign. According

2 Ryszard Torzecki claimed that “from 1933 it was all about maintaining a certain fiction.” In his view, Piłsudski’s followers needed those illusions because the Petlurites, who counted themselves adherents of Prometheanism, had a neutralizing influence on the Ukrainian minority in Poland and supported currents leaning towards a settlement (Torzecki, 1989, p. 163).

3 For Polish diplomats, interference in internal Soviet affairs was only a hypothetical scenario should the USSR be in a state of critical collapse. Poland never planned an armed insurrectionary campaign, whether alone or as part of a coalition. It was assumed that a Polish Promethean operation would only begin once the Soviet system had started disintegrating. No action was to be taken until such a moment came (Józef Beck wobec Moskwy..., 2009, p. 101; Kornat, 2004, p. 367).

4 Important decisions were made by officers of the Second Department, who were superior to the head of the Office No. 2. As a result, there was an impression that Promethean affairs were handled by the “Two” [Office No. 2] (Bączkowski, 1984, pp. 118–119). According to Olgierd Górka, responsible for ethnic affairs within the Polish government-in-exile, the Poles did indeed “make [the Promethean movement] somewhat clandestine” in 1933–1934. Later on, however, it received “quasi-candid support, regardless of protests voiced by the Soviet Embassy” (*Komentarz do pisma P. Pelca...*, 1940, p. 345).

to the available sources, the total budget for Promethean undertakings reached its peak at over 1,200,000 zlotys in 1931–1932. According to other data, it surpassed 1,450,000 zlotys. Afterwards the subvention was reduced – down to as little as 803,000 zlotys in 1937–1938 (Wroński, 1968, p. 287; Charaszkiwicz, 1 December 1939, p. 85).

Personal changes were another problem. A number of well-known Prometheans passed away in the 1930s, including Gen. Julian Stachiewicz (1934), Piłsudski (May 1935), and Wasilewski (1936). At the same time due to a reshuffling in the Sanacja camp Wacław Jędrzejewicz (1935), Aleksander Kawałkowski (1937) and Schaetzl (1938) lost their influential positions (Cisek & Jędrzejewicz, 2008, p. 394; Torzecki, 1995, p. 198).

Military and political circles close to Minister Józef Beck, Gen. Tadeusz Kasprzycki and Bogusław Miedziński were not interested in Prometheanism. As Marshall Edward Rydz-Śmigły rose to prominence (Bączkowski, 1984, p. 118) and the Sanacja camp declined, they were the ones increasingly in control of current affairs. There was also a widening gap (especially in the second half of the 1930s) between Polish internal policy with regard to Poland's Slavic minorities and the tenets of Prometheanism (Kwiecień, 2014, p. 337). There was also a clear correlation between the rise of nationalist tendencies in the government of the Second Republic and the dwindling credibility of Prometheanism.

Promethean Periodicals after 1935

Transformations inside the Promethean movement were reflected in the composition of the editorial boards and profiles of the periodicals devoted to the subject. This was true both of the *Prométhée* (Mamulia, 2010, p. 97) and the periodicals associated with the Eastern Institute.⁵ In 1938, *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* stopped coming out. Its niche was filled by *Problemy Europy Wschodniej* [Problems of Eastern Europe] (*Odpowiedź mjr. Edmunda Charaszkiwicza...*, 1936; Łukasz Dalnicki [Władysław Pelc]..., 1937; *Projekt reorganizacji czasopisma...*, 1938; Kuromiya, Libera, 2009, pp. 125–126).

The fact that government circles increasingly distanced themselves from the principles previously governing Poland's eastern policy undermined the position of the Eastern Institute and the milieu associated with Bączkowski (including the *Biuletyn*). Although the weekly was overseen

5 In an official letter regarding reorganization sent out to diplomatic missions in June 1939, it was announced that the Eastern Institute was now going to turn much of its attention to the Balkans, the Middle East and the Baltics. The document also mentions an interest in the affairs of the Far East and the USSR (*Dary Polaków...*, n.d., l. 5–6).

by the Second Department, not everyone in the management of the “Two” were fond of it.⁶

The situation deteriorated as high-ranking military officers became critical of Henryk Józewski, a well-known Promethean activist who was forced to step down as voivode of Volhynia in 1938 for his anti-Polish policies. Dark clouds gathered over the *Biuletyn* as early as August 1937 (Bączkowski, 1952, p. 68). At that time, in the introduction to a survey concerning Polish-Ukrainian relations Bączkowski wrote that after 1926 national security and foreign policy issues had been the direct and exclusive prerogative of Piłsudski. “Other problems were handed down to mediocre types schooled in the spirit of the partitions, Galician and Muscovite varmints, small-minded people from the Hakata school, detractors of the [Polish] Republic.” Along with the death of Hołówko, who had enjoyed the Marshall’s mandate to deal with ethnic affairs, the wobbly

idea of Polish-Ukrainian rapprochement began to go through a series of seemingly “normalizing” stages, which were effectively periods of driving the disease further inward, terminating in today’s “nationalist-national” palaver that feeds on hatred towards Ukrainians (Bączkowski, 1937a, p. 334).

Faced with this attitude on the part of the magazine’s editor-in-chief, the Ministry of Military Affairs, an important ethnic policy decision-making body, began pondering the idea of closing down the *Biuletyn*. The final decision was made at the end of 1938.⁷

Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński and *Wschód-Orient* (both edited by Bączkowski and his staff) were a platform promoting Promethean thought in Poland. In the late 1930s, these periodicals became pillars of the Young Promethean movement, whose main proponents were the *Wschód* team. In addition to these two, the “press microcorporation” also included *Mysł Polska* [Polish Thought] (Bączkowski, 1986, p. 123; Libera, 2011, p. 33; Maj, 2007, pp. 115–116). These periodicals were subsidized by the Second

6 The first reservations with regard to the periodical’s political line emerged in August 1932. They were submitted by the deputy head of the Second Department, Lt. Col. Józef Englicht. Englicht’s remarks had to do with a series of articles on the Hutsul region published in issues 11 through 13, whose aim had purportedly been to “paralyze the activities of Gen. T. Kasprzycki.” Meanwhile, Gen. Kordian Zamorski accused the periodical’s editorial staff of yielding to Ukrainophilia and creating an image of Ukraine that was at odds with Poland’s national interest (Libera, 2011, p. 36).

7 The direct reason for the termination of *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* was the activation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in connection with events in Carpathian Ruthenia which led to tensions in Polish-Ukrainian relations (Chojnowski, 1979, pp. 232–233).

Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸ Office No. 2 of the Second Department of the General Staff was in charge of coordinating propaganda activities.⁹

The first issue of the biweekly *Mysł Polska* came out on 1 February 1936. The periodical was founded and edited by Feliks Zahora-Ibiański. It was more of a program discussion forum, with news playing a secondary role (Libera, 2010, p. 92). In one article, Bączkowski stated that aside from popularizing Prometheanism, the purpose of the biweekly was “to promote independent opinion of young followers of Piłsudski, expressed in constructive ‘nationalist’ terms” (Bączkowski, 1936a, p. 1; Bączkowski, 1937b, p. 1). The publication devoted quite a lot of room to efforts aimed at combating communism in National-Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy (Bączkowski, 1936b, p. 1).

The chief goal of Prometheanism remained unchanged in the mid-1930s and could be summed up as follows:

resolving the issue of Poland’s security in the east and strengthening [Poland’s] position vis-a-vis the West depends on the decomposition of Russia into its primary constituent elements, i.e., the liberation of the nations subjugated over the centuries by Russia. Pushed back to within its historic borders, Russia would no longer be a really dangerous opponent (Radwański, 1938, pp. 126–128).

After the suspension of *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński*, Bączkowski founded a new Eastern Studies magazine, *Problemy Europy Wschodniej*, whose first issue came out in January 1939. The authors of the program statement published therein noted that “the weakening of Russia and the dynamism of contemporary Germany” defined the main thrust of the changes taking place in the balance of power in Eastern Europe. The main consequence,

8 Aleksander Bocheński criticized this state support (his remark was about the *Biuletyn*) in a letter to Stanisław Łoś from May 1933. Bocheński saw no point to creating periodicals like the *Biuletyn* on purpose. He argued that “they are intended for and available to only a handful of people with a special interest in these matters, who are already familiar with them. [...] generally it makes no sense for the government to finance periodicals if the latter are to be independent in their outlook” (*Aleksander Bocheński do Stanisława Łośia...*, 1933, p. 343).

9 In 1933, the Office No. 2’s monthly subsidy for *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* oscillated between 400 and 910 zł. An undisclosed amount was also transferred by the Eastern Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the Ethnic Minorities Department of the Ministry of Military Affairs paid out a monthly subsidy of 100 to 300 zł. Subscriptions brought in around 180 zł per month, and donors accounted for another 120 zł. Aside from this, the Office No. 2 provided one-off grants, for example 600 zł in March 1935 when the 100th issue appeared (Libera, 2011, p. 35).

however, was the “renewal of the Ukrainian cause over by the Dnieper.” The editors stated that they would focus on analyzing ongoing changes and tentatively “formulate a long-term Eastern and South-Eastern policy for Poland.” The authors of the inaugural article openly stated that they wanted to continue the assumptions of *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński* (*Od wydawnictwa*, 1939, p. 1).

Changes to the content and the political line were clearly noticeable, however. The periodical’s profile was more academic than political. The focus was broadened to include issues relevant to Central and Southern Europe. As a result, only 1–3 articles per issue were devoted to Ukraine, including cultural, historical and literary matters (Libera, 2011, p. 39).

Problemy were supposed to be a platform for analyzing current events and formulating a “long-term Eastern policy” for the Polish state. For this purpose, a column titled *Z terenów zsrś* [From the USSR] was introduced, providing a broad overview of news from the Soviet Union, albeit Sovietology was not a priority focus. Eight issues appeared prior to September 1939. The list of contributors included many authors who had written for *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński*, i.a., Jan Lipowiecki, Stefan Kuryłło (the alias of Józef Łobodowski),¹⁰ Zahora-Ibiański, and above all the magazine’s editor-in-chief Bączkowski (Kornat, 2004, pp. 375–376). The composition of the editorial body looked the same at first glance, but the periodical had lost its extremely valuable Ukrainian contributors. Texts by Kedryn-Rudnytsky, Mykola Trotsky (the alias of Mykola Danko) and Mykhailo Kovalevsky no longer appeared in *Problemy* (Libera, 2011, pp. 39–40).

The Great Powers and Prometheanism

Hołówko’s warning from 1925 materialized at the end of the 1930s. He had raised the alarm: “Ukraine as a distinct 45-million nation is becoming a fact. Meanwhile, we are asleep, although this is happening at our side. As a result the English and the Germans will seize control of this movement, and we will lose Volhynia” (Tymieniecka, 1969, p. 86, footnote 294).

The warning raised by Hołówko, a leading Pilsudskiite, was gradually coming to pass. In the second half of the 1930s Polish Prometheanism was already on the defensive and limited to ensuring Poland’s security.

10 Łobodowski had been forced to take on an alias while working for *Biuletyn Polsko-Ukraiński*. As he himself underlined, neither Bączkowski nor Zahora-Ibiański had done so. Only political articles were signed with an alias (Łobodowski, 1975, p. 152).

The Promethean community was joined by Italy,¹¹ Japan, and the Third Reich.¹²

Initially, an offer of cooperation was extended to the Polish Prometheans, for instance in the form of Polish-Japanese intelligence cooperation. However, Marshall Rydz-Śmigły did not take up Japan's generous offer to engage in joint activities in the Russian Far East in 1937. The reason he gave for declining was that the Second Republic's Prometheanism was not about expanding intelligence and diversionary cooperation in Russia, but only "preserving [Poland's] endangered independence" (Bączkowski, 1984, p. 50; Mikulicz, 1971, p. 267).

The pursuit of Prometheanism by the Third Reich was due to public image considerations. Frequent meetings between German dignitaries and their Polish counterparts led to the proliferation of rumors about a secret alliance of the two countries and their closely linked interests when it came to policy towards the Soviet Union. The German participants of those talks made frequent allusions to the possibility of an anti-Soviet pact. But all of the Reich's efforts in this direction were unequivocally rejected by the Polish authorities. The Poles were well aware that the Germans had ample means to wage a military campaign and could lure the young Prometheans with the vision of an armed operation against Bolshevism, while reaping certain benefits from raising the Ukrainian issue (Kornat, 2012a, pp. 64–65, 70; Kwiecień, 2014, p. 337).

The Polish September Campaign

When the German and Soviet armies attacked Poland in September 1939, the behavior of Polish citizens who were not ethnically Polish raised concern among the ruling camp. The political scions of Józef Piłsudski had failed to harness ethnic minorities to break up the Soviet Union, but feared that they would be used against the Second Polish Republic. Doubts were cast not only by the loyalty of ethnic Germans, but also of Ukrainians on account of their pro-German sympathies (Szwahulak, 1999, pp. 36–61). These concerns were proven right among others by the German secret services attack on the railway station in Tarnów in late August 1939, realized

11 In 1934, Prof. Enrico Insabato (a trusted associate of Benito Mussolini) made a tour of the Promethean milieus across Europe. In conversation with Olgierd Górka, deputy director of the Eastern Institute, he asked about Poland's willingness to solve the Lithuanian and Belarusian issue. He also suggested the possibility of obtaining access to the Black Sea. A firm diplomatic response meant that ultimately he got no reply (*Pismo prof. dr. Olgierda Górki...*, 1934).

12 It is worth mentioning that the German attitude towards Ukrainians came down to the common view that they were political dilettantes, laymen in politics and diplomacy, but still make good agents (Kuromiya & Peplowski, 2009, p. 426).

with Ukrainian help.¹³ The declaration of the Ukrainian National-Democratic Alliance and the Ukrainian Parliamentary Representation in the Sejm and Senate speaking of the Ukrainian people performing their “civic duty of blood and property to the [Polish] state” should be deemed an exception (Motyka, 2011, pp. 41–42).

In hindsight, Prof. Olgierd Górka judged that:

The UNDA proclamation backing Poland issued on 24 August 1939 [...] had a very significant influence on the attitude of the Ukrainian community during the war. I saw it for myself in certain parts of Stanisławów and Tarnopol voivodeships in September 1939, of course things were worse in Lwów [voivodeship] (Uwagi prof. dr. O. Górki..., 1940, l. 17–18).

Meanwhile, historian Mirosław Szumiło believed that the declaration was probably dictated by a fear of preemptive anti-Ukrainian action by Polish services (Szumiło, 2007, pp. 239–240).

Some Ukrainian milieus, with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in the lead, chose to side with Germany. This could be seen in Ukrainians from Lwów voivodeship crossing the green border into Slovakia. In September 1939 they fought side by side with the Wehrmacht in the several-hundred-strong Ukrainian legion commanded by Col. Roman Sushko (Mazur, 2007, p. 424; Motyka, 2011, p. 16).¹⁴

As more news arrived of Polish debacles and the approaching German army, Ukrainians increasingly prepared for a takeover of the local government structures in Eastern Lesser Poland. Armed deserters making their escape frequently formed larger groups (*Relacja kapitana Jana Konopki...*, 1947). Various kinds of diversionary actions and assaults by Ukrainians began. The first large-scale clash occurred during the night from 12 to 13 September in Stryj, where the Polish Army had to confront a group of some 500–700 Ukrainian nationalists. Starting in the second decade of September, armed Ukrainian riots began to erupt in almost every district east of the Bug river (*Relacja Adama Stefana Kotuły...*, 1995). However, they did not have a mass character and were not coordinated. The typical scenario involved an attempt to seize power in the Eastern Borderlands’ towns and cities once the Polish army and police had left the area (Grzelak & Stańczyk, 2005, p. 277).

Although Polish units had little trouble bringing the rioting under control, starting on 15 September at the Romanian Bridgehead (where the Polish defense was to concentrate) instead of organizing defense against

¹³ On contacts between German intelligence and Ukrainian nationalists in Poland see also: Grünberg, Sprengel, 2005, pp. 483–487.

¹⁴ For more on the creation and activity of Sushko’s legion see: Wysocki, 2003, pp. 353–355.

the Wehrmacht the Polish Army increasingly had to focus on suppressing ructions organized by Ukrainian nationalists. Diversions activity intensified after 17 September when the Red Army entered Poland from the East, especially in Volhynia and southern Podolia. Some of these attacks were carried out by the dregs of society looking for an easy way to enrich themselves. The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists activists took part in many operations, and some skirmishes also allegedly involved Petlurites (Motyka, 2006, pp. 70–71). Due to declining morale, desertions from the Polish Army grew in number. These were due largely to the fact that battlegroups or units comprising members of Slavic minorities entered areas inhabited chiefly by those same minorities. The locals not only provided the deserters with food but also sheltered them (Rezmer, 1999, pp. 29–32).

According to a memorandum presented on the night from 16 to 17 September to the Polish Ambassador to the USSR Wacław Grzybowski by the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov:

the Polish state and its Government have effectively ceased to exist. For this reason the treaties concluded between the USSR and Poland have ceased to be binding. [...] The Soviet government cannot remain indifferent to the fact that the kindred peoples of Ukrainian and Belarusian extraction living in the territory of Poland are defenseless and have been left to their own devices. In light of this state of affairs, the Soviet Government has instructed the Red Army High Command to order troops to cross the border and take stewardship of the life and property of the people of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus (*Nota komisarza ludowego...*, 1939).¹⁵

Leaving aside the hypocritical and twisted phrasing of the document, meant to justify the breaking of several international agreements,¹⁶ we should note the instrumental way in which the Slavic minorities have been treated (Grzelak & Stańczyk, 2005, p. 317). The Soviet attack stoked hidden social and political conflicts that had lain dormant for two decades. There were many killers in Poland's Eastern Borderlands in September 1939. Murders were committed by Belarusians, Ukrainians, Red Army soldiers and members of the Soviet security apparatus (Jasiewicz, 1998, p. 182).

¹⁵ For more on Ambassador Grzybowski's subjective feelings in connection with the events of the night from 16 to 17 October, see also: Kornat, 2016, pp. 224–225.

¹⁶ In 1921–1939 the Polish-Soviet border was guaranteed i.a., by the Treaty of Riga from 1921, the Litvinov Protocol of 1929, the non-aggression pact of 1932 (extended in 1934) and the October 1938 Soviet declaration on the legal force of the previous agreements with Poland.

NKVD groups operated in the Polish territories, entering homes with proscription lists consisting mostly of Poles (Bonusiak, 2006, p. 125).

Aside from the collapse of Polish statehood, the war had another, symbolic, consequence for the Promethean movement. The Soviet security organs entering Wilno on 18 September 1939 took hold of the collections of the Eastern European Academic and Research Institute. Even prior to the entry into force of the Soviet-Lithuanian treaty of 10 October which handed the city over to the Lithuanian Republic, the looting of Wilno archives was already underway. As a result, some 14 to 18 train cars full of archival collections from the State Archive, the Wróblewski Library and Stefan Batory University were transported out of the city to the East (Kornat, 2000b, p. 99).

Despite these events, in the autumn of 1939 it still looked like the interruption of university teaching and research was only temporary (Kornat, 2003, pp. 94–95). Thanks to the efforts of rector Stefan Ehrenkretz, Wilno University remained open until the Christmas holidays. The Lithuanian authorities subsequently refused to grant permission to reopen the university (Sukiennicki, 1967, p. 97),¹⁷ which is why 15 December 1939 marks the end of the Wilno-based “Polish school of Sovietology” (Kornat, 2000a, pp. 87–88).

The Winter War

After the reassembly of the Polish government in France, Promethean ideas were revived in the émigré milieu. But no consensus on the issue was reached in government circles. The Committee for Homeland Affairs passed a resolution on 28 November 1939 which made room for coordinated action with the Ukrainian independence movement with a view to creating a common front against the occupiers and setting up an independent Ukrainian state. It stated that every proposal concerning Ukraine’s eastern border would be accommodated, although some reservations would be made in the case of its Western border with Poland. The delineation of the latter was to be conditional on the degree of federation between the two countries, but the Polish prime minister Władysław Sikorski was quite skeptical about returning to a federation policy. Sikorski also expressed doubts whether the Allies would concede to a Promethean policy. Similar opinions were expressed by officers from the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, socialists and peasant party activists.¹⁸ Only the Pilsudskiites,

17 For more on Lithuanian policy with regard to Stefan Batory University in Wilno in the autumn of 1939, see: Łossowski, 1985, pp. 219–227.

18 The report *Prometeizm i intermarium*, drafted in 1947 in the Polish Ministry of Public Security, emphasized the role of the Ministry of the Interior in Promethean affairs

who were predominantly Promethean, postulated a return to federalism and the creation of a Ukrainian state (Torzecki, 1992, pp. 360–361).

Conducive to these discussions was the fact that towards the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940 a short-lived political shift created an opening for Prometheanism. It came as a direct consequence of the Soviet attack on Finland on 30 November 1939 (Rosen-Zawadzki, 1969, pp. 159–163). The League of Nations reacted by expelling the USSR, and the idea of taking action against Moscow was put on the table in Paris and London (Kowalski & Skrzypek, 1980, p. 193).

The Promethean philosophy was briefly revitalized among Polish politicians, who expected that the Polish Army (the fleet and the air force) would likely be involved in a joint operation.¹⁹ The government-in-exile saw the circumstance as an opportunity to internationalize the issue of Transnistrian Ukraine. An attempt was made to set up Ukrainian units alongside the Polish Army in France (Potocki, 1999, pp. 310–311). Plans and visions were also spun of sparking an uprising in Western Ukraine using special Polish-Ukrainian guerrilla units transported in from Romania.

These ideas were completely unrealistic (*Opracowanie Jerzego Klimkowskiego*, n.d., l. 11–22), especially since Finland ultimately signed a peace treaty with Moscow on 12 March 1940, thus putting an end to any plans of an armed intervention involving Poles.²⁰ The conflict ended on 13 March, dissolving any British and French plans to intervene along with Polish troops (*Telegram szyfrowy ambasadora...*, 1939; *Oświadczenie podsekretarza stanu...*, 1939; *Odpowiedź attaché wojskowego...*, 1939).

Conclusion

Although Poland's interwar elites hoped for the collapse of the USSR, this scenario did not occur. The USSR outlived the Second Polish Republic. In the 1930s Poland was ruled by a party that brought together supporters of Prometheanism, but efforts to actually put the Promethean design into practice waned over time. There were many factors at play.

Certainly, the Soviet Union could only be dismantled through military action. The weakness of independent Poland, whose very existence

(from October 1940 to September 1941). The latter at the time had been overseen by the peasant party politician Stanisław Kot. We should however keep in mind that when preparing this document the communists were hoping to compromise the serving ambassador of the People's Republic of Poland in Rome (Łukasiewicz, 2012, p. 313).

¹⁹ The coalition planned to use the air force to bomb the oil-rich fields of the Caucasus. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was considering cooperation with the Caucasian Confederation (Kwiecień, 2014, p. 339; Hułas, 2010, pp. 286–290).

²⁰ For more on Polish activity during the Winter War, see: Suchcitz, 2018, pp. 145–152.

would be put to a serious test if such a scenario materialized, made this solution impracticable. Poland's engagement in Promethean politics continued until the Second World War. The situation was further complicated by the economic crisis, the low credibility of the internal actions Poland took with respect to its Slavic minorities after the death of Piłsudski, as well as generational changes. The waxing influence of politicians hostile to Prometheanism was another issue.

No less important was the aggressive foreign policy of the Third Reich. By this we should understand not only Germany's danger to the integrity of the Polish Republic, but also its competitive edge among the financial supporters of the Promethean cause. The superior potential of Germany or Japan left Polish endeavors far behind. At the same time, for Poland to join these countries on account of a shared interest would seriously tarnish its reputation. Both Berlin and Tokyo rallied for the revision of the international order, while the Second Republic was a supporter of the Versailles system.

But the Polish political class was not clueless about reality. Ethnic issues had an enormous potential to transform the international arena. This was evident not only in the Third Reich's policy towards Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, but also in the instrumentalization of minorities by the aggressors of September 1939. Poland went from being a subject in the international arena trying to turn this ethnic diversity to its advantage, to being an object of others' policies. This was illustrated especially by the actions of the USSR which justified its aggression on Poland by citing the protection of minorities and handed the Wilno region over to Lithuania. The same, to a lesser extent, was also true of Nazi Germany which collaborated with Ukrainian nationalists.

Paradoxically, an opportunity to implement Prometheanism appeared briefly when the Second Polish Republic had already been divided by the Third Reich and the USSR. At the turn of 1939–1940, the Polish government could only join in the actions of more powerful allies, putting its soldiers and intelligence data at their disposal. The Promethean idea was therefore not synchronized with the political situation in Europe. It was more of a vision of a future, since its implementation would have required the attainment of Utopian circumstances.

(transl. by Dominika Gajewska)

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