Executive Summary

This paper examines the contribution of Poland's nineteenth and twentieth century uprisings and social upheavals to the formation of a modern political culture. It takes issue with several of the premises by which the insurrectionary tradition has been defined in the past. First, Poland's insurrections do not fall into the category of "strategies," since they were--more often than not--poorly planned and disorganized outbreaks, the result of accident rather than intention. Secondly, their goal (if they had one at all) was not so much "national survival," for the survival of the nation was never really at stake, but the reestablishment of an independent Polish state. Indeed, vis a vis the nation as an historical, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic entity, the insurrections had in their universal failure an opposite effect, provoking various reprisals aimed at reducing the Poles' national identity. Nor did they serve well the purpose of state-building, creating weak and temporary structures that were easily eliminated by the powers that had partitioned Poland. Finally, the insurrections were the work of circulating elites--that is, of small minorities--which despite their democratic rhetoric, did not and could not by their very nature promote the democratization of Polish political culture.

The contribution of the insurrections to the formation of a modern political culture, therefore, must be found elsewhere--namely, in the construction of a sustaining national mythology. Virtues associated with the insurrectionary tradition such as honor, sacrifice, courage, and martyrdom are believed to be the principal component parts of the national character. The simple moral dichotomies of the good, Catholic Pole versus the evil, non-Catholic alien (whether external or internal), of "us" versus "them", of "hero" versus "traitor", were sharpened by the insurrections, thereby promoting a national identity that tended toward exclusion. Finally, the democratic rhetoric of the insurrections—if not their actual results—has imbued the tradition with progressive, civilizing, indeed messianic (embodied in the slogan "For Your Freedom and Ours") qualities which remain part of the popular system of beliefs by which Poles define themselves. In this way, the insurrections have had a moral and psychological significance quite out of proportion to their importance as historical events and their concrete result as "failures." Indeed, without the insurrections, the Polish national myth would not exist as we know it.
In this paper I take issue with several of the premises by which the insurrectionary tradition has been defined in the past. Generally speaking, Poland’s insurrections do not fall into the category of "strategies," since they were--more often than not--poorly planned and disorganized outbreaks, the result more of accident than intention. Indeed, the critical voices which made themselves heard after the event--especially in the case of the January Insurrection and the Warsaw Uprising, the two main defining moments in the insurrectionary tradition--focused precisely on the neglect of strategy, on inconsistent and divided leadership, on inadequate planning, on the lack of diplomatic preparations, charges which even those more favorably disposed to the insurrectionary "spirit" could not ignore.¹

Secondly, the goal of the insurrections, especially those of the nineteenth century, was not so much "national survival," for the survival of the nation was never really at stake, but the reestablishment of an independent Polish state. Indeed, vis à vis the nation as an historical, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic entity, the insurrections had in their universal failure the opposite effect in their provocation of various reprisals aimed at chipping away at the Poles’ national identity. Germanization and russification may not have succeeded in the end, but their failure cannot be attributed to the insurrections, but to modern social, economic and demographic processes, and to the strategies and institutions of "organic work" which accommodated modernization.

Nor did the insurrections serve well the purpose of modern state-building, creating weak and temporary structures that were easily eliminated by the powers that had partitioned Poland and suppressed the insurrections. Józef Piłsudski may have seen in the secret National Government of the January Insurrection a model for organizing armed struggle fifty years later,² but neither it, nor the organizations created by Piłsudski during the First World War, could serve as a basis for reconstructing the Polish state. The underground state of the Second World War may have been an exception in this regard, but we will never know, as its fate was determined by the outcome of the Warsaw Uprising.³


²These models for Piłsudski’s conspiratorial and military activities in Galicia on the eve of the Great War were also well known to the Russian Okhrana; see, for example, Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (AGAD), Pomocnik General-Gubernatora Warszawskiego (PomGGW), 413, Compilation of Agents’ Reports for June, 1913.

³As described by Stefan Korboński, The Polish Underground State: A Guide to the Underground, 1939-1945 (New York, 1978), these governing structures may have been more firmly rooted than those established in London.
More importantly, the insurrectionary tradition contradicts the evolution of a modern Polish political culture, a process lasting over a century and culminating in the triumph of democratic pluralism in 1989. The insurrections were the work of circulating elites drawn from the szlachta, and eventually the intelligentsia—that is, of small minorities. Their own inheritance was based on the premodern *liberum conspiro*, a constitutional principal which abetted the activities of self-serving elites far more than it opposed "tyranny." Despite their employment of democratic rhetoric, despite the inspiration of democratic ideals, the requirements of conspiracy and the dependence on conspiratorial methods and organization would lead the insurrections in an opposite direction—to dictatorship. It is no accident that insurrectionary leaders, from Kosciuszko to Traugutt, held the "title" of dictator. Nor is it any accident that Józef Piłsudski, the eternal conspirator who constructed his political identity according to the insurrectionary tradition, established a dictatorship in peacetime.

The tensions between the insurrectionary tradition and the evolution of modern mass political culture have been expressed in several paradoxical situations since 1863. During the 1905 revolution, tangible and truly national gains won in areas of local administration and education, not to mention fundamental political rights of association and assembly, were endangered as much by on-going "insurrectionary" activity as by Russian reaction. Small wonder that popular support in the Kingdom for Piłsudski’s armed insurrectionary plans on the eve of the Great War was practically non-existent. Insurrectionism in Poland would have receded further into the background were it not for the unprecedented historical cataclysms of two world wars. Even so, the Warsaw Uprising represented the last, desperate gasp of the insurrectionary tradition, ill-fitting the larger trends of modern Polish history since 1863. In a cruel irony, the main Polish achievement of World War II—the creation of a truly pluralistic, if underground, state—was destroyed in the process.

However, despite their concrete results as failures, despite their opposition to and, at times, interruption of the evolution of a modern democratic and pluralist political culture in Poland, the insurrections have enjoyed a moral and psychological significance quite out of proportion to their importance as historical events. During the 50th anniversary celebrations and observances of the Warsaw Uprising in the summer of 1994, President Lech Wałęsa, speaking to surviving combatants, proclaimed their victory, albeit "a victory of the spirit." Wałęsa's remarks are representative of a culminating shift in postwar Polish public opinion toward the Uprising. In the immediate postwar years, public opinion was dominated by a critical reaction to the romantic, insurrectionary tradition generally, and the Warsaw Uprising in particular, as reflected in Jerzy Andrzejewski’s famous novel, *Ashes and Diamonds*.

*Duraczyński, pp. 71-72.*
Reasonably accurate surveys from the mid-1960s reveal that opinion remained critical, if somewhat less hostile. By the late 70s, with the appearance of a new generation which was not tied to painful memories of the Uprising, a clear reorientation in public opinion had occurred. Within a few years the Uprising would become a primary symbol for many in that generation of its own struggle for national independence. With that independence achieved, by the time of the 1994 celebrations in Warsaw, opinion about the Uprising and its significance had again shifted, this time in the direction of ambivalence.

The victory proclaimed by Wałęsa for "God and the Fatherland", and for "honor", was not the first time Polish politicians, joined by publicists and historians and removed from the actual events by a generation or two, had transformed a horrible catastrophe into a moral triumph. The January Insurrection, regarded in its immediate aftermath as a national disaster, within a couple of decades was deemed by many a necessary and heroic stage in the struggle for independence. For Piłsudski, as mentioned, it became a symbol of Poland’s greatness. However, for Roman Dmowski--another member of the post-January generation--the insurrection represented an impermissible risk of both the Fatherland and the nation. On the eve of the Great War, the debate over the January Insurrection had lost much of its punch for a generation confronted by a new set of issues and for a society that had been much transformed over the previous fifty years.

In social consciousness, as Barbara Szacka reminds us, images of the past serve legitimizing functions and are a formative element in the establishment of group identities. Disputes about the content of those images, therefore, are not about the past, but about the present and the future. Thus, the discourse about the January Insurrection, joined by the Kraków and Warsaw schools, conservatives and liberals, and eventually nationalists and socialists, employed varying images of the

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3Barbara Szacka, "Powstanie Warszawskie w pamięci społecznej okresu PRL," in Marian M. Drozdowski, et al., Powstanie Warszawskie z perspektywy późniejsza: Studia i materiały z sesji naukowej na Zamku Królewskim w Warszawie, 14-15 czerwca 1994 (Warsaw, 1995), pp. 423-430. According to Jan Nowak, however, insurrectionary symbols did not become models for political behavior; instead the Warsaw Uprising acted as a sobriety check, not only during the crucial days of October, 1956, but again in 1970 and 1980-81. However, one could also agree with Eugeniusz Duraczyński that the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia had a far more immediate influence on postwar Polish behavior in crisis situations than the "mythological" role of memory of the Warsaw Uprising. See Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, "Powstanie Warszawskie-próba syntezy," in the above-cited Powstanie Warszawskie, p. 496, and Duraczyński, pp. 87-88.


5Wandycz, p. 73.

6Although observances of the January Insurrection became a mass phenomenon in Galicja at the beginning of the twentieth century, local populations interpreted its images in their own way, transforming what was meant to be a national celebration into a celebration of community. Moreover, the attempt to introduce these observances to the Kingdom of Poland following the Russian evacuation met with limited success in the absence of a tradition of local community participation. See Jan Molenda, "Wpływ obchodów rocznicy powstania styczniowego na kształtowanie się świadomości narodowej chłopów od lat dziewiętnastoleczych XIX w. do 1918r.," in Powstanie styczniowe, pp. 78-107.

7Szacka, p. 423.
Insurrection to justify contemporary political positions and strategies. During the last decade of the PRL, the legacy of the Warsaw Uprising, including its signs and symbols, were appropriated by the opposition to the communist regime, precisely as a demonstration of that opposition.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, a May 1994 survey conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research revealed that opinion over a number of issues associated with the Warsaw Uprising divided along a political fault line defined by contemporary Poland's "Lewica-Prawica" (Left vs. Right) debates and power struggles.\textsuperscript{11}

Meanwhile, the measurable decline in the general public's factual knowledge of Poland's insurrections, including the Warsaw Uprising, has effectively confined the contribution of the insurrectionary tradition in the formation of a modern political culture to the construction of a sustainable national mythology.

The film industry, for example, has today become the most popular source of knowledge about the Warsaw Uprising.\textsuperscript{12} According to Barbara Szacka, the growing lack of knowledge about the actual personages and events of the Warsaw Uprising precisely coincided with the appropriation of its images by the opposition in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the interwar Polish state's organized cult of the January Insurrection, important parts of which were continued into the postwar period, and despite the on-going primacy of place of the January Insurrection in Polish historiography on the partitions era, it is fading ever faster into the shadows of popular consciousness.\textsuperscript{14}

What then is left are the street names and the monuments, and the association of the insurrectionary tradition with virtues of honor, sacrifice, loyalty, courage and martyrdom. Moreover, the democratic rhetoric of the insurrections, if not their actual results, has imbibed the tradition with progressive, civilizing, indeed messianic qualities (embodied in the slogan "For Your Freedom and Ours"), which remain part of the popular system of beliefs by which Poles define themselves. Such virtues are certainly more appealing as component parts in the construction of a national identity than the grit and grind of organic work, regardless of that tradition's much more tangible contribution—in my opinion—to the evolution of a modern mass political culture. After all, how many monuments in Poland are devoted to the tradition of organic work, how many organic workers are enshrined in the pantheon of patriotic saints? Meanwhile, the negative and chauvinistic legacies of the insurrectionary tradition—particularly its sharpening of simple moral dichotomies of the good, Catholic Pole versus the evil, non-Catholic alien (whether external or internal), of "us" versus "them", of "heroes" versus

\textsuperscript{10}Of course, the struggle over national symbols in the 1980s involved much more than those connected to the Warsaw Uprising; See Jan Kubik, The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland (University Park, PA: The Penn State University Press, 1994) for a larger discussion of these competing claims on the past.

\textsuperscript{11}Kolarska-Bobińska and Głowiński, p. 451 and passim.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid, p. 450.

\textsuperscript{13}Szacka, p. 429.

\textsuperscript{14}See Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, "Tradycje powstania styczniowego w społeczeństwie polskim doby popowstaniowej," in Powstanie styczniowe, pp. 108-119.
"traitors", in a word, its promotion of a national identity that tends toward exclusion—are conveniently forgotten.

Does this mean, however, that a modern political culture which identifies itself in these terms is also a culture that models its behavior according to an insurgent mentality? Here I would beg to differ with Professor Wandycz's belief that the "combatant" attitudes expressed in contemporary Polish political discourse are evidence of a deeply rooted insurrectionary legacy.\(^\text{15}\) There are a sufficient number of divisive and polarizing contemporary issues, and a more immediate and "usable" past, to shape and sharpen the language of present-day politicians and publicists. Nor can I see in the insurrectionary tradition, as Professor Wandycz does, a patriotic antidote for the erosion of the "ethos of citizenship" by the forces of modern materialism.\(^\text{16}\)

Rather, as in all things Polish, we have a paradox. Namely, there is a public opinion, as measured in May 1994, that wants to believe that the death and devastation suffered during the uprisings were for a good cause—be it defense of the fatherland, national liberation, or "national survival"—but which also believes that patriotism today is better expressed in terms of organic work, in consistent work for the improvement of the country.\(^\text{17}\) To a modern political culture, democratic and pluralist, the positivist rather than the insurrectionary model has come to define the "ethos of citizenship." For unlike the closed historical chapter of the insurrections, the chapter on the construction of a pluralist political system based on a modern civil society is open-ended and on-going, a process of constant adaptation, renewal and change.

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\(^\text{15}\)Wandycz, pp. 84-85.
\(^\text{16}\)Ibid., p. 86.
\(^\text{17}\)Kolarska-Bobińska and Głowacki, p. 463.