



05.11.1916

Act of 5 November 1916

After 123 years of partitions, in international politics the Polish cause was mostly treated as an internal business of the partitioning states, which had obviously no interest in reviving Polish sovereignty in any form. If they decided to make some promises, or offer the Poles some hope for an independent state, they did so for such ad hoc benefits as army drafts or favourable attitude of the population to the passing troops. The Poles treated such promises with scepticism as they know the attitude of the partitioning states towards the establishment of free Poland. That is why the partitioning powers (particularly the Russians) did not hesitate to draft Poles in their armies by force. The Poles found themselves in dramatic circumstances when Polish soldiers were forced to fight against their compatriots in foreign interest. At the same time, the fight between the partitioning states was highly beneficial in political terms. Given those circumstances as well as the fact that the war opened up a new negotiating chapter, Polish diplomats began intense lobbying for an independent Polish state amongst western leaders. The Far Left aside, all political groupings agreed that some form of statehood should be fought for.



In the first years of the war, the Central Powers supported the creation of Polish paramilitary units to be able to use them on their side. As the dominant approach of the Triple Entente was that the decision about the Polish cause would be taken by the Russians, the French hampered the creation of a Polish army in France. It was only after the 1917 February Revolution and the tsar's abdication that it was allowed, thanks to the active diplomacy on the part of politicians from the Polish National Committee in Paris.



The situation of the Poles began to change in the successive years of the war. The Central Powers needed more and more support of Polish soldiers. Consequently, the emperors of Germany and Austria-Hungary proclaimed an act known as the Act of 5 November 1916, where they promised an independent Polish state in return for military support. Soon afterwards, also Tsar Nicholas II started to talk of the need to grant the Poles their own state. In other countries of the Triple Entente, too, the view was expressed that after the war a free Polish state should emerge, the Italians saying that out loud as first. Ignacy Paderewski's activity in the US bore fruit in the form of a message from President Woodrow Wilson of January 1917 that a sovereign independent Polish state should be established in the future. After the February events in Russia and the US joining the war, the hope harboured by the Poles became realistic for the first time in

decades.

The Poles were not waiting passively for things to come. Seeing that the promises made by the emperors were just an illusion, Polish military units under the command of the Central Powers rebelled and refused to do as told (the Oath Crisis). The merger of Józef Haller's Polish Auxiliary Corps serving on the Austrian side with the Second Polish Corps set up by the Russians and their common fight against the Germans at Kaniów was symbolic for the Polish reunification. Given the revolutionary chaos embracing Russia, the Russian promises were equally false.

In January 1918, US president firmly repeated that an independent Polish state with sea access should be established, as that was in the interest of Western Europe. Another condition favourable to the Poles was the revolutionary movement embracing Western Europe. Although it was also present on Polish territories, the Polish Left (with the exception of the SDKPiL, Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania) visibly stressed its patriotism and the need for statehood. Given strikes and riots in Germany and Austria-Hungary as well as the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, control of Polish territory was taken over and local power centres were organised spontaneously.

In January 1919, Ignacy Jan Paderewski became the prime minister of the incipient Polish state, which guaranteed support of Polish diplomats active in the West thanks to whom Paderewski's government and the Polish state were recognised by the countries of the Triple Entente. The Polish delegation for the Versailles Peace Conference included Ignacy Paderewski and Roman Dmowski. After long debates, western leaders, who given their contradictory interests tried to play the Polish case off against each other, delineated the Polish-German border making provisions for some areas to be determined by means of plebiscites and proclaiming Gdańsk a free city. The Polish-Russian border was to follow the Curzon Line (named after the surname of the British Foreign Secretary) from Grodno, to Brest, then along the Bug River and southwards to the town of Przemyśl.



Anna Buchner



References:

Translated by Mikołaj Sekrecki,
Proofread by Dr. Ian Copestake