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THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND THE POLISH QUESTIONS IN 1831

The discussion of the attitude of Great Britain towards the November Uprising falls into two parts: the attitude of the British government and the attitude of the British people and the Parliament. This paper attempts to present a small fraction of the Parliamentary discussions devoted to the Polish question in 1831. The debates of this year constituted the general pattern followed by the House of Commons during the discussions of the Polish question in 1832, 1833 and 1834. Generally speaking, the pattern was the following; at the start the Member of Parliament for a given borough moved a motion concerning the Polish issue or presented a petition in behalf of his constituency or any specific social organisation. Then, the discussion took place during which there were presented two opposite points of view: one for and one against the motion or petition. Finally, the representative of the government took the floor and presented the rational explanation of the governmental stance in the matter under consideration. Usually, the representative of the government entreated that the motion be withdrawn which in most cases was agreed upon. The withdrawal of the motion completed the discussion.

The problem of the November uprising appeared in the House of Commons for the first time in August 1831, that is, nine months after the outbreak of the insurrection. It was connected with the attitude of the British society towards the Poles and the Polish issue. The pro-Polish feelings of the British were manifested not till the first Polish emigrés arrived to Great Britain. There is no unanimity as far as the number of the Polish exiles is concerned but the prevailing opinion is that their number never exceeded 10 000<sup>1</sup> of whom 3000 reached Great

Britain<sup>2</sup>. The presence of the Polish exiles in Great Britain intensified the pro-Polish feelings there. The Poles gained the sympathy of the West since they were treated as the leaders of the war against the oppression of the Russian Empire and as the heroes defending the Western civilisation against the Eastern barbarians<sup>3</sup>. There was yet another aspect of the attitude of the British people towards the Polish emigrés; there was a Romantic era and the Polish exiles from the country suppressed by the barbarian Russia brought with them an air of exoticism. The British treated them as the Romantic heroes struggling against the Eastern despot, like the heroes steadfast in their fight for the cause of liberty and civilisation until they were conquered by the superior power of the enemy. The Polish cause, according to Henry G. Weisser, "provided the opportunities for indulgence in the sentimental, melodramatic and sensational feelings. This would seem to be one of the main reasons why the cause of Poland was such a popular topic in workers newspapers and on their meetings"<sup>4</sup>.

Particularly, the sensational aspect is worth emphasizing, and the evidence to prove this statement can be easily found in the meetings devoted to the Polish question during which the participants were told the stories depicting the Russian cruelties committed in Poland. For example, Northern Star, on June 15/1844, published the report on the workers' meeting during which William Lovett depicted the lot of Polish women: "six hundred of the Polish females were hurried to the camp of Woznesiński and handed over to the Russian soldiers who gratified their brutal passions on these innocent, virtuous and helpless creatures". The journalist emphasized that Lovett's words "Had an electric effect upon the audience who were roused to the highest pitch of frenzy by it"<sup>5</sup>. The stories of this kind referred to the events in Galicia in 1846 and the speakers especially George Julian Harney loved describing the horrible details and, as H.G. Weisser notes, the suspicion arises that the audience relished them as well<sup>6</sup>.

These sensational and bloody stories might have served the same functions as the detective and criminal stories do today,

that is, their main function might have been to entertain the society, and not to increase the sympathy towards the Polish problem. One can even risk a statement that the only element of these stories that really did matter was their sensational and bloody aspect, and that the public did not pay much attention to the tragic heroes **themselves**. If there had been mentioned the heroes of any other nationality it would probably have made no difference to the audience.

The above mentioned remarks ought to be taken into account while considering the stance of the British Parliament to the Polish question. The Polish debates of the House of Commons might be viewed upon as a reflection of the sympathies towards Poland shared by the British society; however, they had their own character different from that of the workers meetings in favour of Poland. It was due first of all to the fact that the British Parliament played an important role not only in the British society but its opinion and debates were carefully followed by the British government and the whole democratic Europe. Another factor which influenced the Parliamentary debates and their outcome was that the Members of Parliament were not prompted by the occasional feelings of sympathy but they guarded first of all the interests of the British Empire. It should have been obvious to anyone trying to obtain at least a promise of the British help.

Mr Hunt was the first to bring up the Polish issue in Westminster. On August 8/1831 he presented the petition from the Westminster Union in which he and the people of whom he was the representative referred to their memorial to Lord Palmerston and his reaction to it.

The Westminster Union having been convinced that Russia had been waging the unjust war on Poland, sent a memorial to Lord Palmerston requesting the interposition of the government for the protection of that country<sup>7</sup>. The problem was that Palmerston did not reply to it treating the authors of the memorial with contempt. They felt offended and demanded that the House addressed His Majesty to dismiss him.

Considering such a motion one may come to the conclusions concerning the model of the British democracy and the way of functioning of the Parliament and not to the conclusions referring anyhow to Poland. This petition might be considered as the example of the relations between the members of the government and the electorate and not as the contribution to the Polish cause. However, the discussion that followed Hunt's petition was devoted to the Polish issue. The disputants took two opposite points of view; Mr Hume supported Hunt's petition in that he like every individual wanted to know whether the government intended to take any measure in behalf of Poland and whether the Ministers had interfered in any way in behalf of Poles. He also mentioned the constitution guaranteed to Poland and the existing treaties by which Great Britain was bound to act in favour in Poland as well as of Belgium. He concluded his statement saying that the government and the ministers intended to do nothing for the Poles.

Hume's stance was supported by O'Connell who stated that the people of Great Britain were indignant that the government was not able to interpose in behalf of the Poles. Nevertheless, in his speech O'Connell expressed his concern mostly about the security of Britain. He warned the House that if the Polish struggle were unsuccessful Russia would become stronger or France would render herself more powerful by assisting the Poles. The result of the French-Polish cooperation might be the extension of the French boundaries to the natural limits.

The next disputant, colonel Evans, tried to make the discussion more general attempting to elicit from the MPs who were independent on the government declarations which would support the liberal cause throughout Europe<sup>8</sup>.

The support of the Polish issue was too weak to prevent the representatives of the government from carrying their point. First, Lord Palmerston explained that it was not from feeling of disrespect that he had declined to inform the petitioners on the intentions of the government in regard to the war in Poland and that any existing treaty and obligation would receive the attention of the government. Then, Sir Robert Inglis and George Robinson objected to printing the petition; first, because of its



language, second, because it did not convey any information to MPs and its printing would occasion useless expense and it might encourage the presentation of other petitions equally absurd. Lord Althorp backed up the standpoint of G. Robinson by adding that such a petition was perfectly useless and appealed to Mr Hunt to withdraw the motion. Finally, the motion for printing the petition was withdrawn<sup>9</sup>.

Three more debates of the British Parliament in 1831 devoted to the Polish affairs were held on August 16, September 7 and October 13<sup>10</sup>. Every time the motions were moved by Colonel Evans and they fell into the following groups of topics: the neutrality of the bordering states, **especialy** of Prussia; the execution of the Treaty of Vienna 1815 and the role which should be played by Great Britain in fulfilling its resolutions; relationships between Great Britain and Germany and Poland. He also expressed his admiration for the bravery and patriotism of the Poles.

Evans focused on the problem of the neutrality of Prussia in the contest between Poland and Russia and emphasized the importance of its neutrality. He stated that he received information that the Polish right to claim the neutrality from the neighbouring powers was not generally observed. He had been convinced that for the last two months /the debate under consideration took place on August 16/1831/ the resources of the Russian army must have been derived from some neutral power since for some time their communication with Russia had been cut off<sup>11</sup>.

The problem of neutrality was strictly connected with the abidance by the Treaty of Vienna 1815, to which Great Britain was a party. According to that treaty, said Mr Evans, the rights secured to the Poles in 1815, were an element of the balance of power in Europe, the cornerstone of the British foreign policy. Evans quoted the stipulations of the treaty stating that "Poland should be irrevocably bound to Russia by its constitution". He went into details of the treaty proving that the annexation of Poland to Russia did not mean an incorporation. Poland was to have maintained her own national army, taxes were to have been levied by the Polish Diet and the liberty of the press was guaranteed to the Polish people. All those conditions

had been violated by the Russians; there had been no freedom of press, no budget had been submitted to the Diet, and all personal liberties had been violated in Poland. He demonstrated to the House that the Poles had the unalienable rights which demanded the protection of the public law of Europe and the protection of Great Powers. The continuance of the war in Poland was an insult upon all the great potentates who in Vienna guaranteed the national independence of Poland. Evans also pointed to the Russian threat in Europe; if Russia were successful in the struggle Poland would be garrisoned not by the Polish troops but by the Russian army. He also emphasized the fact that Russia exercised the most arbitrary power that had ever threatened other state<sup>12</sup>.

The war in Poland directly harmed the British interests in that part of Europe. Evans presented the petition from the inhabitants of Westminster complaining of the injury the trade of Great Britain had sustained in its commerce with Germany in consequence of the war carried on by Russia against the Poles. He received information that the merchandise sent out from Britain had been stopped by Prussia in transitu<sup>13</sup> and that the passports granted in Great Britain to proceed to Poland had not been treated by Prussia with the respect they ought to command. Unfortunately, Evans did not supported his statement with any evidence.

The inhabitants of Westminster complained in their petition presented by Col. Evans that there was no resident from the British government in Warsaw to protect the interests of the British subjects<sup>14</sup>.

As we can see Evans devoted his motion mostly to the British interests and to the preservation of the British international position among the European powers. Nevertheless, it must be stated clearly, he presented the tragic situation of the Poles to the House by describing the dreadful effects of the war in consequence of the disease brought in by the invading Russian army. Evans appealed to the Commons for help to rescue the Poles from the evils pressed upon them in consequence of the war. He said that it was time when the interference of Great Britain was

called for to stop the progress of that war<sup>15</sup>.

From among the Members of Parliament O'Connell, Sir Francis Burdett and Dominick Browne and Hume seconded Evans' motion. Sir Burdett expressed his opinion that Great Britain in concert with France should interfere to preserve the integrity of Poland. It was high time, according to Burdett, that something be done to help Poland and he pointed to the peaceful interference like a remonstrance in favour of Poland. He acknowledged that it might be incompatible with the British interests to take an active part to reinstate the Polish rights and to re-establish the independence of Poland. However, this cause called forth the sympathy of the nations and the remonstrance of France and Great Britain against the aggression of Russia and against the violation of the Treaty of 1815<sup>16</sup>.

Similar point view was expressed by Mr Hume, who stressed like Sir Burdett, that Great Britain on the ground of the Vienna Settlement ought to show that they had at least disposition to consider the Polish claims. He also discussed other aspects of the British international commitments. The British ministers had taken a strong interest in the affairs of Holland and Belgium, said Mr Hume, and they ought to take care that the liberty of the Poles was equally secured. He protested against such a partiality as the British government seemed disposed to show in protecting Belgium and resigning Poland to its fate and thought that Great Britain ought to interfere for the Poles as well as for the Belgians<sup>17</sup>.

The House did not share the sympathy of Burdett, Evans and Hume in favour of the Poles. The Members of Parliament listened to the speakers with apathy and in fact did not support the pro-Polish motions. This unfavourable attitude was expressed by Lord Palmerston who vaguely stated that the British government had not forgotten any obligations imposed upon it by the treaties and it was prepared to fulfill those treaties. He entreated that the motion should be negated without requiring him to enter at all into the question<sup>18</sup>.

The next speaker, Lord Althorp, took a hostile attitude towards Evan's motion which demanded on October 13/1831 that the

copies of the extracts of such information as might have been conveyed to the British government by the Russian cabinet and by the agents of the late de facto government of Poland concerning the war waged in Poland, be submitted to the House. He felt it impossible to accede to this motion since it would affect the state of the negotiations between Russia and all other countries of Europe. The production of these papers, Lord Althorp said, would put an end to all the present diplomatic arrangements<sup>19</sup>.

Every motion by colonel Evens was turned down by the House.

The opponents put forward the arguments that this was not the precise moment when a question of such a kind could be properly introduced, as it was remarked by O'Connell on August 16/1831<sup>20</sup>.

All the speakers emphasized their belief that the justice would be done to the oppressed Poles and expressed their sympathy to the gallant nation and hoped that the sentiment in favour of the suffering Polish people was warm and general. However, the debates in the British Parliament devoted to the Polish affairs allow for the conclusions that the Parliament limited its sympathy to the verbal expressions of sentiment towards the oppressed Poles. The British *raison d'état* did not call for any intervention against Russia or Prussia in that very moment. Poland did not belong to the sphere of the British interests and influence. Therefore, the hopes connected with the stance of the British Parliament towards the Polish cause could not be fulfilled. In 1831 the House of Commons paid more attention to any aspect of the British interests involved in the war in Poland than to the war itself. The mere expression of the verbal sympathy towards the Poles and their cause could not improve the lot of the oppressed. It was obvious for many members of the Polish Literary Association who stated in the Address to the people of Great Britain issued in 1832 that "they are compelled to remind the people for the practical results that their sympathy with the Poles has hitherto been of no earthly use to them; and that supposing their sympathy had changed sides and gone over from the Poles to Russia, the fate of unhappy Poland could not be worse than it now is"<sup>21</sup>.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 R.F. Leslie, *Polish Politics and the Revolution of November 1830*. London 1956, p.260
- 2 H.G. Weisser, *Polonophilism and the British Working Class. 1830-1845*. in: *The Polish Review*. vol.XII, no 2, Spring 1967, p.81, footnote 11
- 3 *Ibidem*, p.80
- 4 *Ibidem*, p.89-90
- 5 *Ibidem*, p.90
- 6 *Ibidem*, p.90
- 7 Hansard, vol.V, p.930,  
*St. Koźmian, Anglia i Polska. Poznań 1862, vol.I, p.63*
- 8 Hansard, vol.V, p.931-932
- 9 *Ibidem*, p.931-932
- 10 Hansard, vol. VI, p.101  
*Ibidem*, vol.VI, p.1216  
*Ibidem*, vol.VIII, p.696
- 11 *Ibidem*, vol.VI, p.107
- 12 *Ibidem*, p.108  
*St.Koźmian, op.cit., p.63*
- 13 Hansard, vol.VI, p.101
- 14 *Ibidem*, p.1216
- 15 *Ibidem*, p.1217
- 16 *Ibidem*
- 17 *Ibidem*, p.108
- 18 *Ibidem*, p.107, 108
- 19 *Ibidem*, vol.VIII, p.696-697
- 20 *Ibidem*, vol.VI. p.110
- 21 *An Address of the Literary Polish Association to the People of Great Britain*. London 1832. p.12

## IZBA GMIN A SPRAWA POLSKA W 1831 ROKU

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie debat Izby Gmin mających miejsce w 1831 roku, a poświęconych sprawie powstania listopadowego.

Artykuł zwraca uwagę, że dyskusja o sprawach polskich w tym roku stanowiła model w zasadzie wiernie powtarzany przez Izbę w latach 1832-1834. Był on następujący: najpierw przedstawiono mocję poselską lub petycję mieszkańców jednego z okręgów wyborczych skierowaną do Izby. Następnie, w dyskusji ujawniały się przeciwstawne stanowiska wobec omawianego problemu. Wreszcie, po zajęciu stanowiska przez przedstawiciela rządu, posłowie przychylali się do rządowego wniosku o wycofanie mocji lub petycji, co kończyło debatę.

Cechą charakterystyczną tych dyskusji było to, że koncentrowały się one na omówieniu interesów i bezpieczeństwa Wielkiej Brytanii wynikających z sytuacji wytworzonej przez polskie powstanie. Wszyscy dyskutanci, nawet ci przeciwni sprawie polskiej wyrażali nadzieję na poprawę losu Polaków i swoją sympatię względem "dzielnego narodu", jednakże wszelkie przejawy owej sympatii ograniczały się do kurtuazyjnych zwrotów. Przyczyną takiego stanowiska Izby był fakt, że posłowie nie kierowali się sympatiami i uczuciami, ale mieli na uwadze przede wszystkim interesy imperium, te zaś nie pozwalały na jakąkolwiek zdecydowaną interwencję na rzecz sprawy polskiej.

Podstawą źródłową artykułu są mało dotąd wykorzystane raporty Hansarda.