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**Dominik Szczęsny-Kostanecki**  
*Ph.D. student (History),  
 University of Warsaw*

## **NAPOLEON’S SPANISH WAR (1808-1813) UNDER THE EYES OF POLISH MEMOIRISTS**

*This article discusses how Napoleon’s Spanish War (1808-1813) was perceived by those of Polish soldiers fighting as allies of the Emperor who left memoirs and to what extent the general picture that emerges from these works differs from the average perception of the war in British, Spanish and French memoirs.*

**Keywords:** *Spanish war (1808-1813), Spain, reception/perception, Polish memoirists, Polish memoirs, Napoleon.*

Napoleon’s Spanish war – also known as the ‘Peninsular War’ in the Anglo-Saxon historiography and by the name of ‘Guerra de la Independencia’ in Spain was the longest and most untypical of all Napoleonic campaigns, where “everything was small, fragmented and chopped” [11, p. VI]. Often dated from the popular rising in Madrid in May 1808 till the battle of Vitoria (June 21, 1813), which altogether makes over five years of conflict – it was immortalised by eye-witnesses in numerous memoirs, journals and letters. Their authors varied in terms of social rank – we are in possession of correspondence between the Emperor and his brother Joseph, king of Spain, as well as of works composed by soldiers, e.g. Nicolas Marcel who for some time had been merely a non-commissioned officer [17, p. 214] – but also in terms of nationality. In that period among Spaniards, Frenchmen and Britons, who mobilised the largest forces in the war, and thus – had potentially – the greatest number of memoirists, we shall find also representatives of other nations, including Poles fighting alongside Napoleon and whose presence behind the Pyrenees is estimated at 24,000 men [6, p. 193]. Those of them who at some point of their live (usually after a few decades) decided to commit their Spanish impressions to paper – despite all differences – constitute,

even if it was only for the language, a separate group, which – language taken away – is marked by significant traits to be signalled in conclusion. Earlier on we shall discuss key elements of that narration: military life accounts, cultural remarks and political discourse. We would also like to stress that for the purpose of this paper letters and journals should be considered as memoirs too. In view of the length of the passage devoted to the Spanish War as well as the range of issues brought up across the text we should note five names in the first place: Henry Brandt (1789-1868), officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reg. of the Vistula Legion [12, p. 395]; Joseph Załuski (1787-1866), officer in the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Light Cavalry Reg. of the Imperial Guard – *chevau-légers* [2, p. 383], Stanislaw Broekere (1789-1860) doing service in the 9<sup>th</sup> Reg. of the so-called ‘Polish Division’ [13, p. 100], Cajetan Woyciechowski (1786-1848) officer in the Vistula Light Cavalry Reg. [12, p. 491] and, last but not least, Vincent Płaczkowski (1772-1855) from the *chevau-légers* unit [2, p. 110]. All these works have been published – the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of Płaczkowski’s memoirs in Zhitomir! – and are easily accessible. Worth mentioning are also letters from Spain written by the colonel Vincent Krasieńki (1782-1858), commander of the *chevau-légers* [1, p. 331] and those by prince Paul Anthony Sułkowski (1785-1836), commanding the 9<sup>th</sup> Reg. of the Polish Division [1, p. 533]. The remaining memoirs are minor in scale and often refer to one episode (e.g. those by Joseph Mroziński depicting only the siege of Saragossa).

### **Military life**

Hence the Spanish war was nothing short of an armed conflict and hence every each of the Polish memoirists, as we have argued, went to the Iberian Peninsula as a professional serviceman, the average conceptualisation of this conflict should be embarked on commencing with accounts on military life.

Let us begin with general remarks. On the whole Polish memoirists at the time of described events were low-rank officers (second-lieutenants lieutenants, captains), which resulted in their limited capability to take in the whole perspective of a major battle not to mention of a campaign. Out of the two superior officers (Krasieńki, Sułkowski), the first in his letters focuses almost exclusively on

Spanish culture, except the account of the Somosierra charge. The other, writing at the age of 23 to 25 to his newly married wife may dazzle contemporary reader's eyes with self-love and pride. This is briefly for the epistemological risk accompanying this set in the military aspect. What are the advantages then? Are there any?

First of all, even being low-rank officers, these people didn't commit basic errors referring to their profession. That is to say they are competent while speaking about ranks, commands, uniforms and discipline, which doesn't mean they always take it very seriously, as it is testified by Woyciechowski [24, p. 40-41, 71]. Secondly, some of them, above all Brandt, Załuski & Broekere – clearly more meticulous than others – in our opinion must have prepared diaries in Spain as the dating they present to the reader is almost always correct.

Among numerous battles fought in Spain, two were extremely impressive for Polish authors: Saragossa and Somosierra. Two completely different in character, the first being a prolonged two-part siege in which belligerents – mostly infantry – resorted to the cruelest means of combat and the other being a lightning-paced cavalry charge of the *chevau-léger* regiment, resembling a sport feat more than a battle – which by the way was put forward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century [21]. Of all Polish chroniclers of the war – that we know of – there is no one who wouldn't have mentioned at least one of them! And although Spanish soldiers in the Somosierra passage, trying (in vain) to protect the route to Madrid, were regarded somewhat with disdain – 'The Spanish army was overcome by fear and, having fled, ran into dispersion' [25, p. 139], Saragossa defenders were regarded quite differently: 'they fight in every household and even in every chamber and they surrender only rubble[...] The Saragossa inhabitants' noble character displayed in these sieges is one of the greatest sights that history of nations has shown since the siege of Sagunto and Numantia'[18, p. 190].

The true character of the prolonged conflict was of the sort that for most time, soldiers were engaged in pacifications or had to be extremely careful not to fall into traps set on by Spanish *guerilleros*. If such a trap was revealed and

acknowledged as a non-noble act, the revenge was cruel. The Vistula Light Cavalry Reg., having discovered the massacre of twenty-little comrades in San Ferdinando, burnt the whole village [9, p. 259]. Such people under the eyes of memoirists didn't deserve pity.

As for the pacification process, it resembled the mythical Sisyphean. In 1811, in the province of Navarra in northern Spain, there had been active a certain guerrilla leader – Francisco Espoz y Mina [12, p. 127]. The task to counter his actions was bestowed on the Vistula Legion fighting under the Marshall Suchet's commandment. In Brandt's memoirs the period in question (Feb.-Aug.) appears to the reader as an errant march back and forth, between such villages as: Exea, Sadava, Sos, Un Castillo and others, which bore very little fruit, mostly because 'French leaders lacked bravery, energy and ability' [3, p. 96]. Other memoirists would blame rather the guerrilla warfare itself: 'they [partisans] were everywhere and nowhere at the same time – we would go forward, they were behind, when we moved back, they were aside, etc.' [4, p. 40].

### **Cultural remarks**

Naturally the Peninsular war would give soldiers a moment of rest which was often used to make cultural observations thanks to which we can speak of (re)discovering the Spanish culture in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That would have been impossible if it hadn't been for the Napoleon's engagement behind the Pyrenees. This has to be stressed very strongly. Most probably – although relevant sociological research would be difficult to undertake – what Poles knew about Spain before I WW and the emergence of Polish diplomatic service was taken from those very memoirs.

Very much of that success is due to Vincent Krasiński. For a considerable part of Polish historians this figure remains at least ambiguous, being on the one hand a talented serviceman, whose regiment showed the best of Polish cavalry in the battles of Somosierra, Wagram, or Arcis-sur-Aube, and almost a traitor in his attitude towards Russian authorities after the Vienna Congress on the other. Undoubtedly, he was a very well-educated man and a connoisseur of art [7, p. 88].

Leaving aside Krasiński's letters to his wife, the main corps of epistles referring to the Spanish culture (and history) were meant to be published by their recipients in the Duchy of Warsaw [16, p. 13].

For Krasiński as for many other writers there exists a huge gap between Spain's great past and mediocre present. However, being a fervent conservative, he doesn't seek reasons of that decline in petrification of the regime since the 17<sup>th</sup> century or, in some aspects – Inquisition! – Since the Middle Ages, but in unnatural changes inflicted on the country, including the cassation of the Jesuit Order which 'caused great damage' [16, p. 89].

A very different attitude to the question is presented by memoirists raised – sparing with words – in the culture of the Enlightenment: Broekere and Brandt, the latter recalling his participation in Immanuel Kant's funeral as one of the most remembered facts from the youth. Broekere takes pleasure in enumerating the victims of the Inquisition: 'between 1700-1808 the ruthless Inquisition caused death of 1578 people, 788 others, without sentence, took flight [...] 11.997 were put in chains...' [4, p. 38-39]. In presenting the Spanish 'backwardness' he is supported by his fellow Prussian by origin – Brandt: 'in that époque [...] the people believed that heretics and Jews were half-devils endowed with a tail and horns' [3, p. 104].

Speaking of religion, the fact that Poles and Spaniards shared their confession was many a time salutary for both sides. The first would spare catholic temples and rather not participate in sacrilege. Anyway, such actions were dazzling Polish memoirists: in churches of Calatayud drunken French soldiers 'dressed in liturgical vestments, mocking the rite of their own faith [...] were singing dirty songs' [24, p. 39]. But catholic Poles did also benefit from this thread of understanding, contradicting as it were the political division. Żaluski evokes an account of his colleague Mikułowski who was in Madrid during the popular rising on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1808. This Mikułowski was saved from a massacre executed on foreign soldiers only because somebody in the crowd cried: 'Deja los que son Polacos!' [25, p. 154].

When talking about Spanish culture in Polish memoirs, we have to ponder over the so-called national character and everyday life – and why they seemed strange to comers from upon the Vistula. As for the first: Spaniards are cruel and vindictive – regardless of the reasons and how justified they may seem. Every male inhabitant of that country ‘carries a big knife on their belt’ [4, p. 168], understood: ready to use. As for the everyday life, what strikes the authors perhaps most is that Spaniards drink very little wine, although they have it in abundance so the majority of it is used in an unusual way – for example to wash horses! [24, p. 49 sq]. Secondly, that even wealthy Spaniards don’t drink tea or coffee at all, instead of which they take pleasure in sipping hot chocolate while the poorer have to settle for garlic soup [19, p. 40-41].

### **Political discourse**

If ‘war is merely the continuation of policy by other means’ as Clausewitz put it, no wonder that Polish memoirists in Spain in order to comprehend the true reasons and mechanisms of the war into which they had been plunged would eventually examine European politics in early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the two main actors – before 1812 – were France and England. In addition to which – although miles away from home – they didn’t lose sight of their own motherland. What questions did they ask themselves? What conclusions did they come to?

The fact that Polish soldiers fought for Napoleon beyond the Pyrenees didn’t automatically mean that they support him politically – or better to say – that their political support was unconditional. Of course, it was widely believed that the Franco-Polish alliance was advantageous even if it was only for the creation of the Duchy of Warsaw. On the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the first Polish constitution – at an occasional banquet – the colonel Sułkowski proposed a toast to ‘the immortal souvenir of the Constitution of May 3 and to the health of our honourable Liberator, the Great Napoleon’. Which was followed by a triple cry ‘long live Napoleon’ [20, p. 157]. Załuski, for his part, wrote – yet before going to Spain – an anagram: ‘Napoleo Magnus imperator et rex – / Exsurgente Polono,

imperat arma' [25, p. 59]. But at the same soldiers would complain openly, commenting little caporal's decision to split Polish troops in the Peninsula: 'Napoleon [...] wants to expose the disintegration of the ancient Polish Republic, tearing into pieces the Polish army and sharing it between the French' [3, p. 152]. Anyway, opinions on Napoleon were subject to alteration, which – all alone – bears signs of the variability of European politics. The same Zaluski who had written Latin poems will add later on that the whole peninsular adventure was a mistake as the Emperor 'believed the Spanish nation to be effeminate' [25, p. 110].

These political remarks aren't very sophisticated of course, but we have to bear in mind that these people were professional soldiers in the first place, not political analytics. Krasiński and Sułkowski, sadly, were writing letters remembering very well about the French censorship and, therefore, avoiding any 'unorthodox' statements. What emerges however from these memoirs is an interesting idea of conditional – the adjective is usually forgotten – alliance with Napoleon resulting from a conviction that there was perhaps no better opportunity for Poland at that time.

The ambiguity in relation to Napoleon is also perceptible in the Polish reception of Spanish politics. Although 'there was no torment or torture that Spaniards wouldn't have committed against French prisoners' [24, p. 34], the same author speaks with respect – as it were – about the Central Junta's effectiveness: 'after the battle of Ocaña (Nov. 19, 1809) the Spanish national government, having understood that Spanish cannot oppose us in the open space[...] switched from regular war to guerrilla[...]; the Spanish nation may be conquered but it cannot be pacified [24, p. 59].

For Polish memoirists the enemy is England. It is her who stays behind every enemy to Napoleon, be it Austria, Prussia or Neapolitan insurgents. This thesis is nowadays regarded as obvious. J. Tulard, Napoleon's biographer' commented briefly on the question: 'English gold wasn't inactive in the continent' [23, p. 183]. But it wasn't only about the money. The British government was very ingenious when it came to the treatment of prisoners. Some of them – among

which we know of 11 Poles [14, p. 155] – were sent to a most rocky and unpleasant isle in the Balearic Archipelago named Cabrera which actually became a symbol of the Anglo-Spanish cruelty with regard to prisoners. Apparently, there were acts of cannibalism committed on this isle, due to lack of food [4, p. 121]. Other captives were sent to the so-called pontoons, i.e. wrecked ships floating on water at a certain distance from British harbours, e.g. Portsmouth.

### **Conclusion**

The Spanish war cost the life of – depending on sources – from 200,000 to 300,000 French soldiers alone! [8, p. 752; 10, p. 85]. It cost Napoleon's *Grande Armée* the opinion of an undefeated one. Manuel Cavallero, Spanish memoirist, is right saying that events such as the two sieges of Saragossa attracted Europe's opinion [5, p. 15]. And – may we add it – gave her faith that Napoleon's hegemony could be successfully defied. Napoleon himself sighed at Saint Helena that 'the Spanish adventure was the most important reason of all misfortune that happened to France' [15, p. 815].

These are well-known facts. But what 'average' picture of the Spanish war – and Spain as such, these elements being inexorably linked – emerges from Polish memoirs and what makes this picture different from those left by other spectators of the conflict? Undoubtedly we can see a London-stimulated clash which is either lengthy and dull when it comes to the pursuit of insurgents or very bloody and fierce as the Saragossa example shows. This clash is taking place in an exotic country – most exotic for Poles, less for Frenchmen or Britons visiting the Peninsula at least from time to time in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The exoticism is marked by climate, 'national character' of the inhabitants, customs... But at the same time, it is clearly visible that Polish authors sense – even if it's not openly expressed – that there was a striking likeness between Spain and the recently partitioned Polish Commonwealth, both of them having lost their greatness. These similarities are to be sought in the first place in the attachment to the catholic confession and in the political expectation to redeem independence. (Naturally, the French and the British didn't have such problems!)



From a contemporary perspective, there was a moral ambiguity accompanying the Polish military engagement in Spain. It was manifested in the tension between a justified willing to serve Napoleon – as, let us repeat it, nobody would offer more at that time – and, being its consequence, the necessity to quash political aspirations of another nation. This dilemma was perhaps best expressed by a Polish poet of that time, Canterbury Tymowski, who wrote: ‘Why is that blood stains such a beautiful laurel? / We have routed the unhappy, unhappy being ourselves/ ... One day a Spanish farmer shall dig out these remains/ and he shall revile this unpleasant souvenir’ [22, p. 40-41].

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### **ІСПАНСЬКА ВІЙНА НАПОЛЕОНА 1808-1813 РР. ОЧИМА ПОЛЬСЬКИХ МЕМУАРИСТІВ.**

*Стаття присвячена дослідженню проблеми сприйняття воєнної кампанії Наполеона в Іспанії (1808-1813 рр.) польськими солдатами, які воювали в рядах армії Імператора, шляхом вивчення написаних ними спогадів. Було проаналізовано, яким чином такі тексти відрізнялися від пересічного сприйняття цієї війни у мемуарах Великобританії, Іспанії та Франції.*

**Ключові слова:** *Іспанська війна (1808-1813), Іспанія, рецепція/перцепція, польські мемуаристи, польські мемуари, Наполеон.*

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*Статья посвящена исследованию проблемы восприятия войны Наполеона в Испании (1808-1813 гг.) польскими солдатами, воевавшими в рядах армии императора, путем изучения написанных ими воспоминаний. Было проанализировано, каким образом такие тексты отличались от обычного восприятия этой войны в мемуарах Великобритании, Испании и Франции.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Испанская война (1808-1813), Испания, рецепция/перцепция, польские мемуаристы, польские мемуары, Наполеон.*