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University in Toruń**Kant about Poles, Poles about Kant.  
The hidden reception of German  
philosophy in Poland  
in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The paper aims to present the specifics of the first reception of Kant's philosophy in Poland. Unfortunately, it is mainly an account of obstacles and failures. The paper presents the most important episodes of this history and formulates hypotheses concerning their causes: starting by presenting Kant's ambivalent attitude towards Poles, explaining the 'Polish motif' in Kant's essay *Toward perpetual peace* (*Zum ewigen Frieden*) and the achievements of the first Polish supporters of Kant's philosophy, and eventually, presenting the Polish opponents of Kant's philosophy and explaining the reasons for their criticism of transcendental philosophy. The paper intends to characterize a hitherto insufficiently researched part of the history of Polish philosophy, the period of the late Enlightenment, in which Poles attempted to develop science despite lacking their own nation state. The struggle to preserve national sovereignty was reduced to a concern to preserve the identity of their own culture. Between the modern scholasticism of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the romanticism and messianism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there lies a still little-known part of the cultural and educational history of the area which today is occupied by countries such as Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Russia. The Polish Enlightenment (1740 – 1822) took place in special political and cultural circumstances and was mainly the work of the clergy and Francophiles. One of the greatest achievements of this period was the education reform carried out by the National Education Commission (1773 – 1794), and one of the most important assumptions of the reform was the dissemination of natural sciences, for which the philosophical justification was given by sensualism and empiricism. The success of what was understood in Poland by "Enlightenment" was to be achieved thanks to a careful selection of philosophical inspira-

<sup>1</sup> The present publication is the result of research financed by the National Science Center, Poland as part of the research project No. 2017/27/B/HS1/00330, entitled "Johann Heinrich Abicht's philosophy and his scientific and didactic activity at the Imperial University of Vilnius (1804-1816)".

tions. Speculative philosophy, especially German, was treated as an obstacle not only to the success of the education reforms, but also as a threat to the cultural identity of the Polish nation. That is why the reception of German philosophy at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was unofficial and even underground.

**Key words:** Education. Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant. Johann Heinrich Abicht. Józef Władysław Bychowiec. Politics. *Toward perpetual peace*.

### **Kant o Poliakoch, Poliaci o Kantovi. Skrytá recepcia nemeckej filozofie v Poľsku na začiatku 19. storočia**

**Abstrakt:** Cieľom príspevku je predstaviť špecifiká prvej recepcie Kantovej filozofie v Poľsku. Nanešťastie ide najmä o opis prekážok a neúspechov. Príspevok predstavuje najdôležitejšie epizódy tejto histórie a formuluje hypotézy o ich príčinách: počnúc predstavením Kantovho ambivalentného postoja k Poliakom, vysvetlením „poľského motívu“ v Kantovej eseji *K večnému mieru* (*Zum ewigen Frieden*) a úspechov prvých poľských stúpencov Kantovej filozofie. Príspevok končí predstavením poľských odporcov Kantovej filozofie a vysvetlením príčin ich kritiky transcendentálnej filozofie. Jeho cieľom je charakterizovať doteraz nedostatočne preskúmanú časť dejín poľskej filozofie, obdobie neskorého osvietenstva, v ktorom sa Poliaci pokúšali rozvíjať vedu napriek tomu, že nemali vlastný národný štát. Boj o zachovanie národnej suverenity sa redukoval na záujem o zachovanie identity vlastnej kultúry. Medzi modernou scholastikou konca 18. storočia a romantizmom a mesianizmom 19. storočia sa nachádza stále málo známa časť kultúrnych a vzdelávacích dejín oblasti, ktorú dnes zaberajú krajiny ako Poľsko, Bielorusko, Ukrajina, Litva a Rusko. Poľské osvietenstvo (1740 – 1822) prebiehalo za zvláštnych politických a kultúrnych okolností a bolo predovšetkým dielom duchovenstva a frankofilov. Jedným z najväčších úspechov tohto obdobia bola reforma školstva, ktorú uskutočnila Národná vzdelávacia komisia (1773 – 1794), a jedným z najdôležitejších predpokladov reformy bolo šírenie prírodných vied, ktorých filozofické zdôvodnenie poskytoval senzualizmus a empirizmus. Úspech toho, čo sa v Poľsku chápalo ako „osvietenstvo“, sa mal dosiahnuť vďaka starostlivému výberu filozofických inšpirácií. Špekulatívna filozofia, najmä nemecká, sa považovala nielen za prekážku úspechu reforiem školstva, ale aj za hrozbu pre kultúrnu identitu poľského národa. Preto bola prvotná recepcia nemeckej filozofie na začiatku 19. storočia neoficiálna až undergroundová.

**Kľúčové slová:** Immanuel Kant, Johann Heinrich Abicht, Józef Władysław Bychowiec, *K večnému mieru*, osvietenstvo, politika, vzdelávanie

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

To us today, Kant's philosophy seems an integral part of the heritage of the Enlightenment. In the past, however, it was not always perceived in this way. Although it is difficult to imagine it nowadays, Kant's contribution to what we consider the culture of the Enlightenment was also questioned. I would like to focus on a certain episode in the history of the European Enlightenment, and at the same time an important chapter in the history of Polish philosophy.

"There was no Poland on the map between 1795 and 1918"<sup>3</sup> Perhaps for the historian this fact does not stand out against the background of similar historical disasters. States have constantly interfered in the fate of other states. Time and again in history great empires have disappeared and nations have lost their sovereignty and political autonomy. From the perspective of Poles, however, this event has retained fundamental significance for the sense of national identity to this day. Perhaps this is because the identity of contemporary Poles was formed mainly in the process of a prolonged struggle to regain political independence throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the creation of an independent Polish state as late as 1918.

Today's Poland is nothing like the Polish state of 300 or even 200 years ago. First of all, it was not Poland, but the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a multinational country with a multilingual and multireligious population, which came into being in 1569 as a result of the union of the Polish Kingdom (the so-called Crown) and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This country was a real European power with an area of one million square kilometres exceeding the combined area of present-day France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. This state existed until 1795, when it disappeared from the map of Europe as a result of partitions by Russia, Austria, and Prussia.

Regrettably, our modern terminology is not suitable for discussing events that took place over 200 years ago. Today we think of Europe as a community of nation states whose borders have remained relatively unchanged since the Second World War. What I am about to describe took place in completely different circumstances. I am referring to events that not only took place a long time ago, but also outside the geographical borders of what we now call Poland, in a country that in no way resembles contemporary Poland. It was not with-

<sup>2</sup> The article was presented on April 21, 2022, as a part of Lecture Series entitled "Philosophical Sources of European Identity" (University of Antwerp / YUFE).

<sup>3</sup> Porter-Szűcs, B.: *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*. West Sussex: Wiley, 2014, p. 6.

out reason that the French historian Pierre Chaunu wrote: “Beyond the Oder, in the lands of Poland and Russia, begins an archaic world of nebulous states, simple federations of great domains with nine-tenths of the population beyond the reach of the great currents of trade”.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to imagine today how much further these “nebulous states” must have remained outside the mainstream exchange of ideas.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the Enlightenment, like every other epoch in the history of European culture, was not homogeneous. The ideas of the Enlightenment did not progress everywhere at the same pace and did not have the same effects, with the result that the boundaries of what we call the Enlightenment are blurred. Although, we can speak of the Enlightenment as a certain epoch only if we define its certain borders, different in France, different in Scotland, in Germany, and so on. In the case of the Polish Enlightenment, these boundaries are defined by two dates: 1740 and 1822. In 1740, the Collegium Nobilium was founded in Warsaw. It was the first Polish secular school educating young noblemen. It was founded by Stanisław Konarski (1700–1773), a priest, member of the Piarist order and one of the reformers of Polish education. This, then, is one of the most important features of the Polish Enlightenment. The Polish Enlightenment was primarily the work of Catholic clergy, who did not hesitate to introduce educational reforms in the spirit of the secular state. The founding of the Collegium Nobilium and later the Knights’ School (1765) and the Commission of National Education (1773), the first centralised educational authority in Europe, were among the many events that determined the character of the Polish Enlightenment. If I were to reduce the specific character of the Polish Enlightenment to a single idea, I would say that the Enlightenment in Poland was a comprehensive project of educational reform. The Enlightenment in Poland began late, but it also ended late, in 1822. Also, this date is symbolic. In 1822, in Vilnius, Adam Mickiewicz published a volume of poetry entitled *Ballads and Romances*. For every Pole, the poems written by this former student of Vilnius University are a symbol of a new era: Romanticism. In the words of the poems, every Polish reader will recognise an allusion to the Vilnius professor of mathematics and astronomy, Jan Śniadecki, a great supporter of Scottish empiricism and a critic of Kant’s philosophy. It is this last episode that I want to refer to in this paper. It takes place at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when the Polish Enlightenment was coming to an end; on the frontiers of Europe, in Vilnius,

<sup>4</sup> Chaunu, P.: *Cywilizacja wieku Oświecenia*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989, p. 134. Own translation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kupś, Tomasz, Dalius Viliunas and Joanna Usakiewicz, eds., 2017. *Konkurs na katedrę filozofii w Uniwersytecie Wileńskim w roku 1820*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2017, p. 119.

in a city which at that time was within the borders of the Russian Empire, but which nevertheless remained the true capital of Polish culture and science.

The question arises: what determined the identity of the state whose existence ended in 1795? In the first place, of course, the political system with the king as head of state, as well as the legal system and culture. To a lesser extent religion, language, or ethnicity. Unfortunately, much of what formed the cultural identity of this complex state organism at that time was the cause of its downfall. In any case, contemporary historians' assessments are consistent on this matter. Much has been written about the defects of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Many of these defects survived even after the collapse of that state. Immanuel Kant also wrote about them.

### Kant on the Poles<sup>6</sup>

What did Kant write about the Poles? In a nutshell: the truth. Up until the third partition in 1795, the borders of the Republic of Poland ran in the vicinity of Königsberg. Poles were the closest foreigners for Kant, with whom he could also come into contact outside the university. It is usually said that Kant never left Königsberg. This, however, is not true. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the only country to which Kant travelled abroad.<sup>7</sup> Of course, later on, during his work at the university and in his private life, Kant repeatedly came into contact with many foreigners, including Poles and the Polish Mazurians living in East Prussia. For example, in a treatise from 1764 entitled *Versuch über die Krankheiten des Kopfes* (*Essay on the Maladies of the Head*), Kant mentions a certain Jan Pawłowicz Komarnicki, who lived in the area of Königsberg. Komarnicki, called by the people "the goat prophet", was a shepherd living in symbiosis with nature. Kant describes Komarnicki as an example of a man living according to the principles described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the University of Königsberg was the closest university to the inhabitants of Pomerania and Prussia. At the time when there was, as yet, no university in Warsaw,<sup>8</sup> many inhabitants of the northern areas of the former Republic of Poland chose to study in Königs-

<sup>6</sup> This part refers to the findings of historians of Polish philosophy presented in a number of works in Polish and German. Above all, I draw on the publications of Mirosław Żelazny as well as on my own published works (cf. bibliography).

<sup>7</sup> The first time was during his stay in Braniewo. The second time, when travelling through Warmia to the estate of Bernard Friedrich von Hülser in Jarnołtów (Arnsdorf) near Morąg, where after 1750 he worked for a time as tutor.

<sup>8</sup> The University of Warsaw was not founded until 1816.

berg.<sup>9</sup> Polish names are preserved in documents, although not all of them belonged to Poles. For instance, Kant's biographers, Wasiański or Borowski, had typically Polish surnames, but were not Polish. On the other hand, many students may have been Polish, although they did not bear Polish surnames. Many of them were subjects of the Prussian king, inhabitants of East Prussia, speaking Polish and considering themselves Poles. The most famous among them was Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz (1764–1855). Everyone researching Kant's philosophy knows this name, as Mrongowiusz is the author of one of the finest collections of notes from Kant's lectures. Mrongowiusz published an original selection of these notes in Polish translation in 1854.<sup>10</sup> It was also the first edition of Kant's lectures on morality. It was published not in German, but in Polish.

Thus, it should not come as a surprise to us that in Kant's lectures on *Anthropology* we also find characterizations of the national qualities of Poles. The content of these notes is almost invariably critical and largely in line with analogous criticisms formulated by Polish authors of the time. In one of the notes we read, amongst other things:

Not so long ago, the principle of barbaric freedom prevailed in Poland, until it became a mere slogan, because no laws were enforced, and the one who was stronger had supreme power. A nation that has fallen into barbaric freedom will not find its way out of it on its own. It is so sweet to it that it would rather succumb to other circumstances than be deprived of uninterrupted freedom. Such a nation must be taught by force. Free nations are boastful and lazy in their freedom, and this laziness makes them more boastful. They have no desire to work because nothing compels them, and they regard as slaves those who work.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This was still the case at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. Święcicki, J.: *Listy z Królewca*, ed. T. Kupś. Toruń Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, I.: *Rozprawa filozoficzna o religii i moralności miana przez Immanuela Kanta a na język polski przełożona przez Mrongowiusza, kaznodzieję przy kościele św. Anny i kawalera Orderu Orla czerwonego IV klasy*. Gdańsk/Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 1854/2006.

<sup>11</sup> *Die Anthropologie nach denen Vorlesungen des Herrn Professor Kant gelesen nach Baumgartens empirischer Psychologie zu Königsberg in Preußen*. The National Library of Russia, Saint-Petersburg, sign. Q. III No. 168, p. 271. Own translation. I am quoting from Żelazny, M.: Kant und die 'polnische Frage'. In: L. Kais, ed.: *Das Daedalus-Prinzip. Ein Diskurs zur Montage und Demontage von Ideologien*. Steffen Dietzsch zum 65. Geburtstag. Berlin: Parerga, 2009, p. 177. Of course, Kant's lectures contain many more references to Poles. I only give some examples here.

Kant writes here that in Poland the principle of barbaric freedom prevailed until quite recently.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Kant sees that for a while something has been happening in Poland that offers some hope for change. In all likelihood, Kant is referring to the political changes introduced by the reformers gathered around the Polish king.

Unfortunately, Kant is sceptical about the chances for success of the reforms of the Polish state. He believes that there is no independent social group among Poles that would be capable of effecting positive reforms. We find the most on this subject in a fragment of a lecture on anthropology given by Kant on 3 March 1792:

[Poland] is a peculiar country. In a way, it has only one real state, namely the nobility. They alone constitute the state. Of course, there are also free craftsmen. But they have never attained the rank of citizens of the state. They demand freedom, power, but not power over themselves. They want a state of nature and freedom, namely that everyone can kill another with **impunity**, and yet they demand the law. Poles are described as reckless, unstable people, incapable of firm decisions. They incur debts without thinking about payment. However, this does not happen out of principle, but because they are bad stewards. They are disorderly and have great wealth, but many debts. They are rich, but they lack almost everything – shoes, glasses, etc. They cry out for freedom, but seek it for themselves and not for the state. Since there is no middle class, they have little culture either in the arts or in the sciences. For culture usually originates from the middle class. It is not easy to find among Poles someone who would be particularly meritorious in some science. It is true that some are regarded as such, but wrongly. They completely lack the heart for community benefit that the English have (public spirit). For everyone considers himself to be some kind of sovereign. From what is **now** taking place among the Poles, nothing can be concluded with certainty for the future.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth used the name *respublica*, the very same name that Kant considered the best form of political system (cf. *Toward perpetual peace*). However, it was a *respublica* in which nothing was *publicum*. In fact, there was no community of free citizens in the Polish Republic at that time. “The serfs were subjects of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, while the nobles were citizens. Revealingly, as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Polish word *obywatel* could be translated as both ‘citizen’ and ‘noble landowner.’” (Porter-Szűcs, B.: *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, *ibid.*, p. 33). The culmination of the position the nobility gained in the Republic was the ‘golden liberty’, protecting the nobility’s interests against changes that would not receive universal consent: *nihil novi nihil comune consensu* (nothing new without universal consent). This destructive power of a single dissenting vote (*liberum veto*) is what Kant arguably calls ‘barbaric liberty’. It was this barbaric freedom that was one of the causes for the downfall of this state.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, I.: *Die philosophischen Hauptvorlesungen Immanuel Kant*, hrsg. von Arnold Kowalewski. München und Leipzig: Rösl & Cie., 1924, pp. 357–358. Own translation.

Unfortunately, the assessment of the political situation in Poland at the end of the eighteenth century presented here is accurate. This is hardly surprising, as Kant is commenting on current events that were taking place in a neighbouring country. What are these events? First of all, the Constitution of May 3 1791, enacted in Warsaw. It was the first constitution in Europe and the second in the world (after the Constitution of the United States of America). Unfortunately, the adoption of the Constitution did not mean an immediate change in the political system of the country. Reforms of the state proceeded with the greatest difficulty. The ambitious plans of a small intellectual elite met with resistance from the conservative part of society.

Kant realised how difficult it was to create new foundations for a political system. That is the reason he remained sceptical when assessing events in the Republic. Unfortunately, Kant's scepticism proved to be well-founded. Just a few weeks after Kant's lecture, the work of the reformers was destroyed by foreign military intervention, as a result of the activities of a group of opponents of reform, who are now called traitors to their homeland in Polish school textbooks. Two years later, the Polish state ceased to exist.

### **Polish motif in *Toward perpetual peace***

In the last years of his work, Kant published several treatises on the philosophy of politics, history, and law. This does not mean that Kant speaks directly about current political events in his writings. As a loyal subject of the King of Prussia, Kant had to exercise caution. Not surprisingly, nowhere does Kant explicitly write about the French Revolution, although today we rightly believe that some of his treatises are commentaries on this event.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we may also assume that Kant indirectly commented on events that took place in the closest vicinity of Königsberg; in the Republic of Poland. Such suppositions were already formulated in Kant's time.

In 1794 (i.e., between the second and third partition of Poland) a German treatise was published anonymously in Warsaw, entitled *Untersuchung über die Rechtmäßigkeit der Theilung Polens* (*Reflections on the legitimacy of the partitions of Poland*). In the treatise, the author criticizes the official propaganda of Prussia on the partition of Poland, referring to arguments from the field of law, religion, and morality. The whole text is written in

<sup>14</sup> I am referring primarily to *Zum ewigen Frieden* (*Toward perpetual peace*) and *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (*The Contest of Faculties*).



excellent German and shows a very good knowledge of Kant's philosophy. The anonymous author disagrees with the view that by introducing a system of liberty and equality, the security and prosperity of Europe will be threatened. In support of his arguments, he also quotes Kant's *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* (1793). The author cites Kant as a defender of civil liberty:

I admit that I am not comfortable with this way of speaking, which even clever men are wont to use: "A certain people (intent on establishing civil freedom) is not ripe for freedom"; "The bondmen of a landed proprietor are not yet ripe for freedom"; and so too, "People are in general not yet ripe for freedom of belief." For on this assumption freedom will never come, since we cannot *ripen* to it if we are not already established in it (we must be free in order to be able to make use of our powers purposively in freedom). To be sure, the first attempts will be crude, and in general also bound to greater hardships and dangers than when still under the command, but also the care, of others; yet we do not ripen to freedom otherwise than through our *own* attempts (and we must be free to be allowed to make them). I raise no objections if those in power, being constrained by the circumstances of the time, put off relinquishing these three bonds far, very far, into the future. But to make it a principle that those who are once subjected to them are essentially not suited to freedom, and that one is justified in keeping them from it for all time, this is an intrusion into the prerogatives of Divinity itself, which created human beings for freedom. It certainly is more convenient to rule in state, household, and church, if one succeeds in imposing such a principle. But is it also more just?<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, Kant's position on the partition of Poland must have been similar to the position of a considerable number of Germans living in Poland and Prussia at that time. As neighbours or fellow-citizens of the Republic, they knew better than anyone else the defects of the Republic's system. It is therefore not surprising that they were sceptical about the final results of the Polish Revolution. Of course, as Kant believed, the future course of history cannot be predicted. However, the feudal system in Poland, like that in France before it, had to be changed, even if that entailed the risk of temporary anarchy, and even if the effects of that change initially seemed doubtful.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, I.: *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* (AA 6:188). In: Kant, I.: *Religion and Rational Theology*, A. W. Wood, G. Di Giovanni, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 204–205.

On October 1, 1794 (that is in the year of the publication of *Untersuchung über die Rechtmäßigkeit der Theilung Polens* in Poland), the Prussian Minister for Education and Culture, Johann Friedrich Wöllner, sent an official letter to Kant on behalf of the King.<sup>16</sup> Wöllner draws Kant's attention to the impropriety of the statements contained in *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*. It seems, however, that the religious issues are only a pretext for censorship on more serious grounds. Most likely the political context is at issue. Perhaps the above-mentioned dissertation, published in Warsaw, also had some influence on the decision of the Prussian authorities?<sup>17</sup>

It is understandable that Kant could not ignore the key political and social events that were taking place at that time. It is not without reason that the treatise *Toward perpetual peace* from 1795 is commonly assumed to have been written as a commentary to the peace of Basel concluded the same year between Prussia and France. The fact that already in 1796 a translation of this treatise into French was published in Königsberg (and this was extended with new passages written by Kant, which were not published in German until the following year, in the second edition of this essay), shows that the matter of the French Revolution was of great interest to Kant and that he wished his voice in this matter to be heard in France.

In the fifth preliminary article of *Toward perpetual peace*, Kant states unequivocally that the annexation of sovereign states and interference by force with the reforms carried out in these states is contrary to the elementary principles of international law. The following is the most important passage:

'No state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state.' For what can justify it in doing so? Perhaps the scandal that one state gives to the subjects of another state? It can much rather serve as a warning to them, by the example of the great troubles a people has brought upon itself by its lawlessness; and, in general, the bad example that one free person gives another (as *scandalum acceptum*) is no wrong to it. But it would be a different matter if a state, through internal discord, should split into two parts, each putting itself forward as a separate state and laying claim to the whole; in that case a foreign state could not be charged with interfering in the constitution of another state if it gave assistance to one of them (for this is anarchy). But as long

<sup>16</sup> Kant, I.: *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. M. J. Gregor, R. Anchor. In: Kant, I.: *Religion and Rational Theology*, A. W. Wood, G. Di Giovanni, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Presumably, the treatise was written in the circle of Polish and German Jacobins. Hypotheses on the authorship of this work are presented by Mirosław Żelazny in: Żelazny, M.: *Kant i rozbiory Polski. Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria*, 2004, 52(4).

as this internal conflict is not yet critical, such interference of foreign powers would be a violation of the right of a people dependent upon no other and only struggling with its internal illness; thus it would itself be a scandal given and would make the autonomy of all states insecure.<sup>18</sup>

On what basis can we assume that the above passage refers to the partitions of Poland?

According to Kant's comments quoted above, the Republic could indeed be a country whose system provided a bad example to the subjects of neighbouring states. Kant, however, emphasizes that such "bad example" and its bad effects can at most serve as a warning, and thus they can perform a positive educational role. Therefore, no armed intervention in the internal affairs of another state can be interpreted as a defence against the spreading political "illness".

Russian and Prussian propaganda denied that military intervention against the Republic was an interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. This intervention was presented as assistance to one of the centres of power. It was argued that the purpose of this assistance was solely to defend the state against anarchy.

The fragment of *Toward perpetual peace* quoted above was probably written by Kant before the third partition of Poland (1795), as a commentary to the events taking place in the Republic. It is true, says Kant, that when a system of government in a country breaks down, a neighbouring country, preventing the spread of anarchy, may support one of the warring factions. However, in the last years of the Republic's existence, there can be no talk of such ultimate anarchy. On the contrary, we are dealing here rather with what Kant called a "not yet critical"<sup>19</sup> dispute. The Polish state is struggling with its "internal illness" and the resulting consequences, about which "nothing can be concluded with certainty for the future."<sup>20</sup> In this situation Kant writes "such interference of foreign powers would be a violation of the right of a people dependent upon no other and struggling only with its internal illness; thus, it would itself be a scandal given

<sup>18</sup> Kant, I.: *Toward perpetual peace* (AA 8:346). In: M. J. Gregor, ed. *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975/2012, pp. 319–320. Klemme, H. F. ("Wstęp". In: I. Kant. *O porządku: To może być słuszne w teorii...*, transl. Mirosław Żelazny. Toruń: Comer, 1995, p. 105) annotates this passage with the following comment: "It is about Poland. First and foremost, the first and second partitions of Poland (1772, 1793) are regarded here as the great evil which, according to Kant, Poland brought upon itself through a state of lawlessness. The interventionist policy of the three partitioning powers (Prussia, Austria, and Russia) reached its climax in 1795 and led to the third (and total) partition of the country. The fifth preliminary article judges these practices, and thus takes a position on a highly topical issue".

<sup>19</sup> Kant, I.: *Toward perpetual peace* (AA 8:346), *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> Kant, I.: *Die philosophischen Hauptvorlesungen Immanuel Kant*, *ibid.*, p. 358.

and would make the autonomy of all states insecure”<sup>21</sup>

Kant's various statements about Poles, as well as the facts indicated above, confirm that the treatise *Toward perpetual peace*, not only presents Kant's position on the partition of Poland, but also gives a quite precise answer to the question as to what Kant thought about the fate of the Polish nation.

### **The beginnings of the reception of Kant's philosophy in Poland (Józef Władysław Bychowiec and Johann Heinrich Abicht)**

The beginnings of the Polish reception of Kant's philosophy remain in close relation to what has been said thus far. Kant's political writings could be seen as a voice in defence of the interests of the Poles and the sovereignty of their state. Kant's philosophy thus gained the potential to inspire the interest of Poles. Why was this potential not realised? The answers are many. I will present only two examples of people who, at an early stage of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sought in various ways to implement the programme of transfer of German philosophy, including Kant's philosophy, into Polish science and culture. The first is Józef Władysław Bychowiec (1778–1845), philosopher, translator, and soldier. The second was Johann Heinrich Abicht (1762–1816), a German professor of philosophy, employed at the Imperial University of Vilnius in 1804. Each of them pursued the programme of popularising German philosophy among Poles in a different manner. Each of them, in his own way, tried to overcome institutional, mental, political, or linguistic obstacles that hindered this task. I would like to highlight some of these obstacles.

The language of instruction for traditional Polish education prior to the reform of the Commission of National Education was Latin. However, the elite always followed the taste of their ruler and his court.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, French dominated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, not only as the main means of communication, but also as a source of philosophical knowledge. The German language was known to only a few scholars. I mention this because the first reception of Kant's philosophy in Poland falls on a period when Latin begins to be treated as a synonym of scholastic metaphysics, while French as a synonym of the culture of the Enlightenment.<sup>23</sup>

An interesting confirmation of the connection between the widely used Lat-

<sup>21</sup> Kant, I.: *Toward perpetual peace* (AA 8:346), *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>22</sup> Tazbir, J.: *W pogoni za Europą*. Warszawa: Sic!, 1998, p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> Latin, which had hitherto not only distinguished the intellectual elites of Polish society, but also brought unity to the multinational state across ethnic and religious divides, began to be seen in time as an obstacle to the implementation of further stages of the Enlightenment.

in language in Polish science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the reception of Kant's philosophy is the episode described by the Lithuanian historian of philosophy Dalius Viliunas. Viliunas discovered the first mention of Kant in the writings of a Polish author. This mention dates back to 1764 and can be found in Kazimierz Narbutt's Latin lectures on metaphysics.<sup>24</sup> What is important in this case is the date and the fact that Narbutt refers to Kant's Latin pre-critical treatise. Viliunas poses an important question and offers an excellent answer:

Why did Lithuanian and Polish thinkers first forget about Kant and then rediscover him at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? The answer to this question may be surprisingly simple: because Kant had ceased to write in Latin. This is because Polish-Lithuanian philosophy was initially practised mainly in Latin and then in French. On the other hand, the knowledge of German was poor, and most philosophers did not use German originals at all, which is confirmed by the later famous criticism of Kant by Jan Śniadecki, Rector of the University of Vilnius.

I think that this view explains much of the complexities of the reception of Kant's philosophy, especially among Francophile Poles. In this situation, I consider translations into Polish to be crucial to the success of the process of reception of works of German philosophy. The interest of Poles in Kant's philosophy emerged when it became clear that Kant was also interested in the fate of the Poles.

Kant's treatise *Toward perpetual peace* was the first work to be translated into Polish. As early as in 1797, a Polish translation of this treatise appeared in Warsaw, based on the French version published in 1796 in Königsberg.<sup>25</sup> The Polish translation is not strictly accurate, but it certainly served an important purpose in popularising the work. Historical sources tell us that even before 1802, the same treatise by Kant was translated from German into Polish and published in Königsberg by Józef Władysław Bychowiec. Who was Bychowiec?

<sup>24</sup> *Institutiones Philosophiae ecklecticae [...] a patrae Casimiro Narbuti. Dombrovicae, anno 1764 in 1765.* Cf. Viliunas, D.: *Od kiedy krytykujemy Kanta? Wersja litewska*, ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Projekt wiecznego pokoju. Rozwaga filozoficzna przez Emanuela Kanta. Z języka Francuskiego przełożona z nowemi Autora dodatkami. Drukowana w Królewcu R. 1796. Za pozwoleniem Zwierzchności w Warszawie 1797.* [*The project for perpetual peace. A philosophical reflection by Emanuel Kant. Translated from French with new additions by the Author. Printed in Königsberg in the year 1796 with the permission of the Authorities in Warsaw 1797*]. The fact that already in 1796 a translation of this treatise into French was published in Königsberg (extended with new passages written by Kant, which were published in German only a year later, in the second edition) shows that Kant was very interested in the French Revolution and that he wanted his voice in this matter to be heard in France.

Józef Władysław Bychowiec first studied at the University of Vilnius, then at the University of Frankfurt on the Oder, and finally, in 1799, began his studies in Königsberg.<sup>26</sup> Bychowiec was one of the few Poles who knew Kant personally.<sup>27</sup>

In Königsberg, Bychowiec published the Polish translation of Kant's essay *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (*Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*) and translated two other works by Kant touching on the philosophy of politics: *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (*The contest of faculties*) and the already mentioned essay *Zum ewigen Frieden* (*Toward perpetual peace*).<sup>28</sup> One may wonder whether the selection of treatises earmarked for translation did not have an immediately political purpose and was not consulted with or inspired by Kant himself.<sup>29</sup> We know that both before and afterwards Bychowiec was involved in politics. He took part in the Kościuszko Uprising, joined the Napoleonic expedition to Moscow, translated a lot into Polish and published his own works. When the University of Warsaw was founded in 1816, he applied for a professorship of philosophy, and was the most respectable candidate. He did not receive the post only because he was considered a Kantian who promoted German philosophy too much.

Unfortunately, a number of Bychowiec's translations were lost. No copy of his translation *Toward perpetual peace*, which Bychowiec still had in his

<sup>26</sup> "Bychowice Joh. nobil. Polonus Francofurta ad Viadrum adventa matricula instructus".

<sup>27</sup> "HE. Graf von Byctowitz aus Warschau will mich mor gen nach 12 Uhr besuchen und ist willens künftig sich beim diplomatischen Corpus in Berlin ansetzen zu lassen" ("Count Bychowiec from Warsaw wishes to visit me tomorrow after 12 and would like to be assigned to the diplomatic corps in Berlin in the future". Zentrales Archiv der Akademie der Wissenschaft der DDR, Nachlaß Erich Adickes U 5/11 [= Loses Blatt 18 der Berliner Staatsbibliothek]. This refers to the extract that Adickes prepared for the final, never published, part of "Handschriftlicher Nachlaß. Akademie Ausgabe". This information is given by Mirosław Żelazny after Werner Stark (cf. Żelazny, M.: Kant i rozbiory Polski, *ibid.*). Obviously, Bychowiec did not listen to Kant's lectures, because in 1799 Kant no longer delivered them. On the other hand, he most probably frequented Kant's home. For decades it was claimed that another important populariser of German philosophy among the Poles, Józef Kalasanty Szaniawski, was a student of Kant. This hypothesis has never been confirmed. Szaniawski was also credited with the authorship of the afore-mentioned German treatise (*Rechtmassigung...*). This hypothesis, too, has never been confirmed.

<sup>28</sup> In Teofil Glücksberg's *Universal Encyclopaedia* published in 1838 in Vilnius under the entry "Bychowiec" (vol. 3, p. 739). To date, only extensive fragments of the translation of *The contest of faculties* have been found (Kaśkiewicz, K. and T. Kupś: The first Polish translation of Kant's *The contest of faculties* in the collections of Vilnius University Library. *Problemos* (94), 2018, pp. 134–143).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. M. Żelazny's hypotheses, Żelazny, M.: Kant i Polska. *Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo*, (13), 2007, p. 42.

possession in 1843, has survived. He wrote about it in a letter sent to Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. The following is one of the most interesting extracts from that letter:

You will find there [Bychowiec writes to Kraszewski] at the very beginning three writings by Kant translated into Polish. In the first years of my youth, I did this while studying at the University of Königsberg. I wanted to see if Kant's philosophy could be planted in Poland. I had only 300 copies of the book printed in Königsberg; they circulated, but did not make a strong impression on people's minds. This enterprise was heavily opposed by Jan Śniadecki, an otherwise excellent intellectual.<sup>30</sup>

Here Bychowiec mentions, among other things, the reason for the failure of his own attempts to popularise Kant's philosophy. In this context, he mentions only one name: Jan Śniadecki. Before I answer the question of who Jan Śniadecki was and what role he played in the Polish reception of Kant's philosophy, I will briefly present the situation of Polish academia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vilnius University was not only the most important university providing instruction in Polish, but also the largest scientific institution in the Russian Empire.<sup>31</sup> The high position of Vilnius University was the result of reforms of the Commission of National Education and favourable political circumstances. Of course, after the partitions of Poland, the entire Polish administration, including the governance of education and science passed into the hands of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. The University of Lviv was completely Germanised by the Austrians. The University of Krakow was on the decline, and there was still no university in Warsaw at all. Of course, the educational reforms initiated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Commission of National Education were halted, but Russia needed an efficient and loyal administration in the new territories. Hence, in 1803, Emperor Alexander I of Russia approved the legal framework of the new university in Vilnius and gave permission to commence academic work and teaching.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the search for professors

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Bychowiec to Józef I. Kraszewski dated 21 March 1843, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków, Ref. no. 6456 IV, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Beauvois, D.: *Wilno – polska stolica kulturalna zaboru rosyjskiego 1803–1832*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2012, p. 270 et seq.

<sup>32</sup> *Ustawy, czyli ogólne postanowienia Imperatorskiego Wileńskiego Uniwersytetu* [Statutes, or general provisions of the Imperial Vilnius University].

willing to work at the new university began.

The plan to create a truly cosmopolitan centre of modern academia in Vilnius was implemented by the rector Hieronim Strojnowski, a Catholic bishop who represented the old Polish elites of the Enlightenment era. Administrative supervision over the University of Vilnius and the entire academic district was exercised by Prince Adam Czartoryski, a diplomat, supporter of foreign scholars, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia (1802–1806), and educational officer of the Vilnius school district (1804–1824). From the very beginning, the search was on for people who truly represented Europe. Thus, it was obvious that, in the first place, representatives of Western culture were being sought after. Not surprisingly, when choosing a professor of philosophy, letters were sent to Western universities (Göttingen, Berlin, Leipzig, Stuttgart, Jena, Halle, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Erlangen, etc.), but the nearest university in Königsberg was omitted. Kant did not seem European enough, certainly not Western enough.<sup>33</sup> In the end, it was decided to hire a German, Johann Heinrich Abicht, a follower of Kant's philosophy, as a professor of philosophy, working at the University of Erlangen at the time. This choice was determined both by Abicht's great output (he was the author of more than 30 works at the time) and by recommendations (Abicht was personally supported by Nicolaus Fuss, an influential member of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg).

Abicht initially taught logic and metaphysics drawing on authors he knew (Kant, Reinhold, and others)<sup>34</sup> and used his own textbooks. However, Abicht did not know the Polish language and never obtained permission to teach in German, which he repeatedly sought. He delivered all his lectures in Latin on the basis of notes which have been preserved in their entirety (several thousand pages) in the National Library of Ukraine in Kyiv.<sup>35</sup> The extremely complicated lectures were a torture for students who had little knowledge of Latin. Meticulous divisions and incomprehensible terminology caused Abicht to be called the "Heraclitus" of Vilnius, and his philosophy "Abichtology". As a result, Abicht, who had published more than 30 voluminous books prior to his arrival in Vilnius, published only one Latin booklet in Vilnius, summarising a fragment of

<sup>33</sup> "Kant is the most eastern of all. And Königsberg is on that border." Chaunu, P.: *Cywilizacja wieku Oświecenia*, ibid., p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Bieliński, J.: *Uniwersytet Wileński (1579–1831)*. Kraków: W. L. Anczyc, 1899–1900, (2), p. 398.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Kupś, T.: Uwagi do działalności naukowej Johanna Heinricha Abichta w Wilnie w świetle nowych źródeł. *Ruch Filozoficzny*, 73(4), 2017.



his extensive lectures.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it was just an unfortunate coincidence that for 12 years a talented, but Latin-speaking, and therefore little understood, German taught philosophy in Vilnius.

Abicht found few students interested in German philosophy in Vilnius, and he also failed to win the support of the university authorities. It was not without reason that Jan Śniadecki's aversion to foreigners intensified at that time, especially Germans employed in Vilnius on the initiative of Prince Czartoryski and Rector Strojnowski.<sup>37</sup> The escalating conflict can probably be seen as a collision between two visions of science and the university. Śniadecki represented a pragmatic approach to science. He believed that the university should educate people capable of developing the country economically. Prince Adam Czartoryski was a typical cosmopolitan who saw the need to develop culture beyond the limitations of national divisions and narrow practical skills.

### **Conclusion: The first criticism of Kant's philosophy in Poland**

I have mentioned Jan Śniadecki's name on several occasions and in different contexts. As an excellent astronomer, mathematician, geographer, and teacher, Śniadecki was one of the founders of educational reform in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He put into practice his programme for the modernisation of Polish education, first at the University of Krakow and later at the Imperial University of Vilnius. Śniadecki's merits are unquestionable, both as a scholar, as a populariser of the Polish language and, above all, as an administrator of Polish education.

Śniadecki remained faithful to those ideas of the Enlightenment which could be reconciled with the development of natural and exact sciences. This is why Śniadecki was a follower of empiricism, especially of Scottish philosophy; he represented the philosophical minimalism and eclecticism typical of Polish philosophy of that period. Śniadecki's prag-

<sup>36</sup> Kupś, T., Viliunas, D. and J. Usakiewicz, eds.: *Konkurs na katedrę filozofii w Uniwersytecie Wileńskim w roku 1820*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2017, pp. 139–140.

<sup>37</sup> In the correspondence of Prince Adam Czartoryski we find a description of the Śniadecki brothers, who are "contemptuous of everything that is not connected with the sciences" and obsessively oppose the employment of foreigners at the university: "Apart from the struggle between the sciences and literature, we see here also contempt for foreigners and the conviction of their uselessness, which, combined with the self-important conviction that in our country we have many people excelling in every field of science, is harmful". Letter from Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski to Adam Jerzy Czartoryski from Sieniawa, dated 5 September 1807. B. Cz. Ew. 1046, p. 425. Cited after Beauvois, D.: *Wilno – polska stolica kulturalna zaboru rosyjskiego 1803–1832*, *ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

matic approach to science and university education lent his activities an almost positivist character. However, Śniadecki went down in the history of Polish philosophy above all as an opponent of metaphysics, as he claimed that “it is most dangerous for a country that is beginning to learn properly”<sup>38</sup>. Śniadecki’s aversion to metaphysics and speculative philosophy was combined with an obsessive hostility towards German philosophy, in particular towards Kant’s philosophy and the whole post-Kantian idealistic philosophy. Of course, Śniadecki’s anti-Kantianism was directly provoked by “Polish Kantianism”, which, however, was not Kantianism in the strict sense. It was indeed a philosophizing maintained in the spirit of the controversy between empiricism and rationalism of the age of the Enlightenment. In this sense it was indeed philosophizing in the old metaphysical paradigm. Certainly no one understood Kant “adequately” at that time until the rise of neo-Kantianism, not even authors such as Reinhold or Abicht.

Jan Śniadecki wrote several treatises refuting metaphysics, German philosophy, and Kant’s philosophy. The first of these treatises was published during Abicht’s lifetime, in 1814. These were not original writings. They were not even based on the reading of German texts. In fact, they contained a repetition of arguments that Śniadecki found in the popular French textbook *Degerando*. However, the purpose of Śniadecki’s polemics was not strictly philosophical. They were rather manifestos of a concerned teacher and academic who defended Enlightenment empiricism, the achievements of science, and the Polish language. Śniadecki’s activity partially brought the intended effect. Śniadecki successfully limited the official influence of German philosophy and sparked a discussion about the tenure policy of the Imperial University of Vilnius. However, Śniadecki could not stop the unofficial interest in German philosophy that was already taking place on a larger scale in Galicia (in Lviv and Krakow). Many authors responded to Śniadecki’s criticism. Anonymous polemics were published in Polish, Russian, and German.<sup>39</sup> In fact, these

<sup>38</sup> Kupś, T., ed., 2014. *Recepcja filozofii Immanuela Kanta w filozofii polskiej w początkach XIX wieku*. Cz. 1: “Józef Władysław Bychowiec, Anna z Zamoyskich Sapieżyna, Jan Śniadecki, Franciszek Wigura”. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, p. 151. Own translation.

<sup>39</sup> Krouglov, A., Kupś, T., Specht R. and A. Kondrat, eds. *Recepcja filozofii Immanuela Kanta w filozofii polskiej w początkach XIX wieku*. Część 3: *Polemiki z Janem Śniadeckim*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2016.

are the only Polish works on Kant's philosophy from that time.<sup>40</sup> This is why one might even talk about the "Śniadecki paradox". If it were not for Śniadecki's critique of German philosophy, many Polish treatises on Kant's philosophy might not have been written at all. These anonymous polemics reveal the actual – albeit "unofficial" – popularity of Kant's philosophy among Poles.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Heone-Wroński's publications on Kant's philosophy already existed at that time. Given the fact that Heone-Wroński wrote only in French, his works do not really belong to the history of Polish philosophy.

<sup>41</sup> Research into what I call here the 'unofficial' reception of Kant's philosophy in Poland is ongoing. Many explorations have not yet been completed. When almost five years after Abicht's death, in 1820, the application process for the post of professor of philosophy at the Imperial University of Vilnius was re-announced, all the dissertations submitted were 'Kantian' in character. The decision to choose the winning dissertation was difficult. The submitted manuscripts were "unofficially" reviewed by Jan Śniadecki, who was not the rector at that time, but still had great authority. The complete documentation of the application process was published in: Kupś, T., Viliunas, D and J. Usakiewicz, eds.: *Konkurs na katedrę filozofii w Uniwersytecie Wileńskim w roku 1820*, *ibid*.

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