

---

**Artykuły i rozprawy**

**Articles and Dissertations**

**Beiträge und Abhandlungen**



**Adrian Sadowski**

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań  
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5238-2504>

# **Poland between the West, Russia and... Turkey. The mythologization of Polish-Turkish relations in Ryszard Berwiński's memoirs and correspondence from the Ottoman Empire\*<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

The nineteenth century is a very special period in the history of Polish-Turkish relations in terms of the formation of national identities, progress of civilization, and geopolitical changes. The Polish émigré community in the Ottoman Empire was particularly active in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the prospect of establishing close ties with Turkey seemed to be a viable solution to Poland's struggle against the three partitioning powers, especially Russia, and its fight for independence.

This article analyzes the views of Polish immigrants in the Ottoman Empire concerning the geopolitical situation of Eastern Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The main emphasis was placed on their interpretation of the East-West dichotomy and its impact on the formation of Polish national identity in the Romantic period. The myths surrounding the history of Polish-Turkish relations can be reconstructed based on an analysis of letters and memoirs that were written during the Crimean War and make a highly valuable contribution to Polish historiosophical research. The recognition that Turkey was not only an invader, but also an ally, is an interesting alternative to the belief, predominant in Polish historiography, that Poland had to choose between the West and Russia.

---

\* Translation services were co-financed by the Ministry of Education and Science pursuant to agreement No. RCN/SP/0245/2021/1 of 1 November 2022; value of the grant awarded as part of the „Development of scientific journals” program – PLN 80 000.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was also published in Polish language version in journal „Ruch Literacki” 2024, no. 3.

This article analyzes literary works, sentiments, opinions, political plans, interpretations, and historical myths. The main emphasis was placed on narratives, both written and imagined. Larry Wolff argued that Eastern Europe is a theoretical construct that was a product of the Enlightenment, but he also noted that highly valuable conclusions can be drawn by analyzing the narratives about countries and regions<sup>1</sup>. From the perspective of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, the narrative concerning Turkey is highly interesting and requires further research. This article focuses on written works describing Polish authors' attitudes towards Turkey and the influence of these opinions on the decisions and political declarations of Poles who fought in the Crimean War of 1853. What arguments were put forward by Michał Czajkowski and Ryszard Berwiński to support the idea of a Polish-Turkish alliance, and why were some of these proposals rejected by insurgents outside the Ottoman Empire? What were the reasons behind the political and religious conversion of Poles who joined the Turkish army? How were Polish immigrants in Turkey perceived by other Poles, and did their decision to fight on the side of the Ottoman Empire influence the Polish sense of national identity? What was the envisioned status of Poland and Turkey on the future map of Europe and why? In this article, attempts were made to answer these questions based on an analysis of the memoirs and letters written by Poles who emigrated to Turkey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their views on the geopolitical situation during the Crimean War were reconstructed and examined to expand our understanding of the East-West civilizational dichotomy and its impact on both the Polish and Turkish sense of national identity.

Commentators and observers of 19<sup>th</sup>-century geopolitical processes never ceased in their efforts to draw or move the borders of states and regions, redefine the political allegiance of territories, or arbitrarily modify the political map of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The partitioning of Turkish territory was a possible scenario already on the brink of the Crimean War of 1853. The risk that the Ottoman Empire, known as the “sick man of Europe”, would share the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth could not be ruled out<sup>2</sup>. In a letter addressed to Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, Władysław Zamoyski cited a French diplomat:

The French reconnaissance officer was convinced that Turkey would fall and asked Alexander Chodźko whether France would be able to acquire new territories. “England would take Egypt; Moscow would get Istanbul, but what about France?” he asked. “France would get nothing”, replied Chodźko. “But why? Can't we get a piece of Asia Minor or Syria?” the minister wondered.

These are the people who rule our world! (...)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Wolff, *Wynalezienie Europy Wschodniej. Mapa cywilizacji w dobie Oświecenia*, Kraków 2020.

<sup>2</sup> K. Wasilewski, *Turecki sen o Europie – tożsamość zachodnia i jej wpływ na politykę zagraniczną Republiki Turcji*, Warsaw 2015, p. 198

<sup>3</sup> *Jeneral Zamoyski*, Vol. VI: 1853–1868, Poznań 1930, p. 3.

What were the geopolitical implications for Poland and Turkey? Above all, both states faced the same threat to national sovereignty – Poland had already been conquered, and Turkey would soon follow in its footsteps. State borders were arbitrarily shifted by global powers who could not reach agreement on how to resolve the most pressing geopolitical issues, including the new borders of Europe, Asia and, possibly, Eastern Europe. At the time, little was known about the political, ethnic and cultural makeup of the region, and Eastern Europe remained *in statu nascendi*, especially since European nationalist sentiments exploded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Poland, this issue was particularly important in the context of anti-Turkish liberation movements in the Balkans. After all, if Turkey were to be considered an ally, the Turkish state had to be upheld, but the loss of European territories on the Balkan Peninsula would compromise Turkey's geopolitical status and, in addition, would strengthen Russia's position in the region. For this reason – as will be discussed later in this article – some Poles did not support the national independence movements of the south Slavs. However, the future of the Balkans remained unknown, which only added to the fact that political movements in this part of Europe were largely incomprehensible to external observers. Similarly to the historical narrative on the collapse of a superpower, this observation also largely applies to both Turkey and Poland. In turn, those who regarded Turkey as a potential ally in the struggle for Poland's independence perceived the political instability in the Balkans as a tremendous opportunity. These people believed that a geopolitical reshuffle could potentially help Poland regain its sovereignty.

In a letter to Ludwika Śniadecka, Czajkowski wrote: “We are living in strange and confusing times – friends and foes, allies and enemies have to fight on the same side. But this is how the world works...”<sup>4</sup>. Czajkowski, who by that time had pleaded allegiance to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, had a rare insight into the intricate web of political connections between countries, religious and ethnic groups in Eastern Europe and Asia Minor. Czajkowski's decision to convert to Islam and pledge allegiance to Abdulmecid could be regarded as an act of political pragmatism. His decision attracted severe criticism, in particular from Hotel Lambert, a political faction of conservative Polish exiles associated with Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski. Czajkowski's political affiliation is among of the most interesting examples of borderline or even palimpsest-like identity in Polish history. Numerous letters and papers written by Czajkowski in Turkey have survived to this day, and a separate article will be dedicated to this prominent figure in the future. In the present article, Czajkowski will be mentioned only briefly to highlight his importance for the discussed topic. This article focuses on the views of Ryszard Berwiński, a poet from Wielkopolska region and a close associate of Sadik Pasha, concerning historical and contemporary Polish-Turkeys relations and their impact on the political situation in Poland.

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Czapska, *Ludwika Śniadecka*, Warsaw 1958, p. 333.

## Ryszard Berwiński's views on the history of Polish-Turkish relations

Ryszard Berwiński is a fascinating figure in the context of the history of Polish-Turkish relations. He is the author of a fairly coherent mythology of Polish-Turkish relations, and his written works are the main topic of this article. Berwiński provided ideological support for Czajkowski's diplomatic efforts. His task was to resolve or at least mitigate the conflict between Czajkowski and General Zamoyski. Czajkowski lobbied for alternative solutions to Poland's struggle for independence, and Berwiński quickly sided with his point of view. Tymon Terlecki, one of the greatest experts on Ryszard Berwiński's biography and work, argued that the poet and social activist had a tendency to "take his ideas to the extreme"<sup>5</sup>. In turn, Jerzy Fiećko aptly noted that both the life and personality of the author of *Don Juan Poznański* were clearly permeated with non-Wielkopolska sentiments. Berwiński did not attempt to find balance or back his views with rational arguments, instead he "chose the fate of a mad man, to use Mickiewicz's terminology"<sup>6</sup>. He joined the Sultan's Cossacks Division and, despite mounting disagreements, remained faithful to Sadik Pasha until the very end.

However, there was a consistent narrative, if not a method, in Berwiński's madness, namely his decision to travel to Turkey. His considerable poetic fame had long faded by the time he departed for Turkey. Berwiński had been a highly celebrated literary figure, and he is still considered one of Wielkopolska's greatest writers of the Romantic period. The poet's "Turkish episode", which lasted nearly twenty-five years, has not attracted considerable research interest. Indeed, Berwiński did not write much in Turkey and dedicated his life to a military career. Jerzy Fiećko deftly observed that:

Berwiński hoped that his decision to remain in Turkey would be regarded as an element of a long-term, premeditated strategy serving Polish national interests, rather than an eccentric whim<sup>7</sup>.

This is a valid observation because Berwiński's writings do not provide any evidence that he regarded Turkey as an exotic or foreign location. On the contrary, his works expound, even in an exaggerated manner, the many similarities between Poland and the Ottoman Empire. However, as a native of Wielkopolska region, Berwiński had much less in common with Eastern values and cultures than Czajkowski who was born in the Ukrainian territories of the First Polish Republic. There is no evidence to suggest that his

<sup>5</sup> T. Terlecki, *Rodowód poetycki Ryszarda Berwińskiego*, Poznań 1937, p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> J. Fiećko, *Ryszard Berwiński: poezja i polityka. Szkic biograficzny*, [in:] idem, *Romantycy i polityka. Szkice historyczno-literackie*, Poznań 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

works were influenced by Oriental esthetics. The only exception was the phrase “under the influence of the Eastern sun”<sup>8</sup>, which was used by the poet only once to imply that one could gain a more extensive and coherent glimpse of reality simply by living in the East. This article analyzes Berwiński’s views on Turkey and Poland, as well as the prevailing historiosophical trends at a time when the author of *Bogunka na Gople* abandoned his literary career and decided to become a soldier and a diplomat<sup>9</sup>.

A detailed analysis of Berwiński’s biography, sources of inspiration, and ideological sympathies could explain some of the opinions formulated by the poet in the letters written from Istanbul. Berwiński’s letters, collected and published by Tymon Terlecki in the 1930s, are the main focus of this article. These letters are not numerous, but they are sufficiently informative to reconstruct, at least in part, the poet’s views on the Eastern question with the use of genetic criticism tools. Berwiński’s direct writing style and clarity of thought significantly facilitate the analysis.

Berwiński’s philosophical and literary orientation was largely consistent with the views expressed by Zygmunt Krasieński. According to both writers, thoughts and ideas occupy a central place in literature and are largely responsible for the value of literary works. These expressive, radical, and uncompromising writers stood on the opposing sides of the ideological and historiosophical barricade, and they became the ideological supporters of the two main activists of the Polish émigré community in Turkey, with Krasieński supporting Zamoyski, and Berwiński siding with Czajkowski. In many of his letters, Krasieński attempted to influence Zamoyski’s political philosophy and reassert his conservative views. In turn, Berwiński – as a recipient of Czajkowski’s doctrine, significantly reshaped his ideas and transformed them into a more radical form. However, he readily criticized Czajkowski’s philosophy whenever it did not coincide with his views. For example, Berwiński was deeply disappointed by Sadik’s refusal to participate in the January Uprising, and when the latter asked for Berwiński’s help (after leaving Turkey) in publishing his letters, Berwiński wrote:

I agreed to assist in publishing two of his letters... However, since I strongly disagree with many of his ideas, I had to compose an introductory note in order not to be identified with Czajkowski<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> T. Terlecki, *Listy tureckie Ryszarda Berwińskiego do Władysława Bentkowskiego i Karola Libelta*, „Kroniki Miasta Poznania” 1932–1933, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Fiećko noted that other Romantic writers also abandoned literature in favor of politics: „In the late phase of the Romantic period, both first- and second-generation writers were personally involved in political events, especially during the Springtime of Nations and the Crimean War. [...] Romantic writers turned to politics *en masse*, and many of them abandoned their literary careers” – J. Fiećko, *Romantycy i polityka w fazie zmięczenia epoki. Uwagi wstępne*, [in:] idem, *Romantycy i polityka...* This movement could be compared to the demise of Polish poetry during the reign of Stanisław August Poniatowski after the last Partition of Poland.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, pp. 10–11.

Until the outbreak of the January Uprising, Berwiński had argued that Sadik's military unit should be stationed in Turkey. If need be, the regiment could be moved to Poland to support the insurgent army. However, the poet was aware that the regiment's formal status was unclear for external observers. Berwiński realized that not all members of the resistance movement in Poland or Paris were convinced that this regiment served Polish interests.

You write about the unclear status of our regiment. However, I will argue that its status is not unclear, but complicated. For the Turkish authorities, our regiment is a purely Christian formation; for the Christian community governed by the Ottoman Porte, it is a Slavic and Christian formation, yet it is regarded as a Slavic and Polish formation in terms of its political agenda<sup>11</sup>.

Berwiński argued that for the Turks, the regiment was first and foremost a Christian formation, whereas its dedication to the Polish cause was only a secondary consideration. However, he was not highly consistent in his views, and in another letter, he wrote:

National interests should prompt our regiment to act in the name of Poland, but regardless of whether our regiment is regarded as a formal representative of Polish interests in Turkey, foreign – or at least Turkish – authorities believe that its main purpose is to serve the Polish cause<sup>12</sup>.

Subsequent events demonstrated that the Polish cause had little influence on the Empire's political agenda, which suggests that the regiment was regarded as a Christian formation. Similarly to Czajkowski, Berwiński set out to create a mythologized narrative about the Cossack regiment. It was his hope that the regiment's "Polishness" would be recognized by both social activists in Wielkopolska and Polish émigré communities in the West, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Therefore, the passages expounding the nearly exclusively Polish character of Sadik's formation were exaggerated to create the right impression. Jerzy Fiećko aptly noted that "Berwiński undoubtedly overestimated the significance of the Polish cause for the political agenda of the Turkish empire"<sup>13</sup>. However, he resorted to this exaggerated rhetoric for practical reasons to create a coherent autobiography and a mythologized narrative on the history of Polish-Turkish relations.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> J. Fiećko, *Ryszard Berwiński...*



A similar interpretation of Berwiński's work and biography was presented by Jarosław Maciejewski in a chapter dedicated to the author of *Don Juan Poznański*<sup>14</sup>. "Similarly to Czajkowski, Berwiński idealized the Cossack regiments' status among the Turkish and Slavic nations living in the Balkans"<sup>15</sup>. According to Maciejewski, Berwiński's biography should be examined in the context of personal failure. From this perspective, the poet's views on current politics and history – which were formulated far more directly than his opinions on Sadik – were an attempt to convince his addressees, or perhaps even himself, that his decision to travel to the Ottoman Empire had been justified, even if unproductive.

Berwiński hoped that Turkey would become Poland's greatest ally in its struggle for independence, and he regarded the East as a place where Poland's fate would be decided. In one of his letters, Berwiński reported on "a certain party's efforts to deprive Sadik's regiment of its Polish character". According to Terlecki, the poet was referring to Polish émigrés who "opposed the Polish army's presence in Turkey in fear that it would be forced to participate in dishonorable acts of oppression". There was some speculation that Sadik's regiment could be used to suppress the national independence movements of the south Slavs. Berwiński's views on Slavs living in the Ottoman Empire deserve closer attention in this context:

I do not need to tell you about the unforeseeable consequences of the regiment's Polish spirit and the *unquestionable supremacy of the Polish nation* [emphasis added] on the strong, hearty, congenial, and kindred tribes of Turkish Slavs<sup>16</sup>.

This Polonocentric and supremacist point of view cannot be ignored in the context of postcolonial or post-independence criticism. However, the main aim of this article was to reconstruct Berwiński's historical awareness. To achieve this goal, the poet's early life and views on Slavophilia should be examined in greater detail. This issue was analyzed in the introductory chapter to *Księga życia i śmierci*, an anthology of Berwiński's poems compiled by Maria Janion. According to the researcher, the Slavophile ideology consisted of distinct right-wing and left-wing factions:

The Pan-Slavic movement developed by right-wing Slavophiles promoted the unification of all Slavic people under the ruthless leadership of the Russian tsar, supported social exploitation, opposed any nationalistic or independence movements, championed the return of a feudal society, and fostered hatred towards capitalist progress [...]. In turn,

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Maciejewski, *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński 1819–1879*, [in:] *Wielkopolskie XIX wieku*, Vol. 2, ed. W. Jakubczyk, Poznań 1969, pp. 197–234.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> T. Terlecki, *Listy tureckie...*, p. 25.

the left-leaning proponents of Slavophilia openly promoted independence movements, supported Slavic people's struggle for national sovereignty, and opposed any attempts at exploiting the working classes [...]. In some cases, the progressive and regressive factions of Slavophilia coincided because both ideologies had emerged to negate and eliminate capitalism - the essential step on the road to social development<sup>17</sup>.

Berwiński's political and social views had evolved long before his journey to Turkey. The hostile attitude towards capitalism, a common feature of all Pan-Slavic factions, inevitably prompted the writer to travel to the East, and in this respect, his views never changed. However, by rejecting Slavophilia as an ideology that was tainted by a vision of a utopian past, Berwiński became a proponent of democratic, leftist, and revolutionary movements. This change was one of the key events on the writer's intellectual journey. Henceforth, his postulates consisted of unusual combinations of ideas – Berwiński was clearly an anti-European democrat, but he did not support the communalist ideas of left-wing Pan-Slavists. His uncompromising attitude towards Germany was less problematic than Krasiński's uncompromising attitude towards Russia, mainly because Berwiński rejected Western capitalism as the only scenario of human development. Berwiński's democratic (non-communist) views prevented him from sympathizing with Russia or Polish nobility. According to Janion, "Berwiński is undoubtedly one of the leading Polish writers whose poetry expressed blazing hatred for the old world"<sup>18</sup>. Janion also observed that "Berwiński [...] openly criticized the nobility for their selfishness, meanness, servility, shameless passivity, and wickedness"<sup>19</sup>. Berwiński argued that by entering into anti-revolutionary and reactionary agreements with the neighboring powers, the nobility were directly responsible for the Partitions of Poland. The writer rejected both pro-Western and Pan-Slavic sentiments, and he found a third option in Turkey. He was mistrustful of the degenerate and dishonorable nobility, and he had no faith in diplomatic endeavors or "bargaining with the West"<sup>20</sup>. In one of the letters written from Istanbul, Berwiński asserted that "at least I have no reason to doubt Turkey's sincere intentions"<sup>21</sup>. In his opinion,

<sup>17</sup> M. Janion, *Wstęp*, [in:] R. Berwiński, *Księga życia i śmierci (wybór pism)*, ed. M. Janion, Warsaw 1953, pp. 18–19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> In turn, Jedlicki used the term "mercantile West" to describe the prevailing narrative in Polish literary works criticizing Western diplomacy. He argued that this trend was exacerbated after the November of Uprising. According to Jedlicki, the West's indifference to Poland's struggle against the Russian Empire provided Poles with "yet another, but this time distinctively Polish reason to dislike the West". This event catalyzed works of literature that differed from papers on modernity, democracy, and industrialization which were published in most countries, including in Western Europe. The November Uprising was associated with the experiences of a historically conscious society, and it became an important component of the narrative on the self-serving and treacherous West. Cf. J. Jedlicki, *Świat zwyrodniały. Lęki i wyroki krytyków nowoczesności*, Warsaw 2000, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> T. Terlecki, *Listy tureckie...*, p. 22.

the Ottoman Empire was a source of hope for Poland, or at least the intentions of Turkish diplomats were easy to interpret. Turkey did not have a capitalist economy or a feudal political system. According to Berwiński, Poland and Turkey were a part of a single, albeit non-identical, geopolitical paradigm:

[...] There has never been any ingrained historical hatred between Poland and Turkey, the kind of hatred that divides Germanic and Slavic tribes. Poland and Turkey had waged many memorable and bloody battles and wars. In one of these conflicts, Poland's role was elevated to the status of a historical or even a divine mission. The Polish people were told that their army served a similar purpose to Achilles' seven-skinned shield – its role was to protect the West against Eastern savagery, *scilicet* to ensure that the Germans would not be disrupted in the process of drinking beer while wearing comfortable slippers in their security of their homes.

I never subscribed to this pragmatic view of history, and I never prayed that such an honorable mission would befall Poland<sup>22</sup>.

This excerpt could be interpreted as an affirmation of Eastern identity. Prompted by the need to develop a coherent narrative, Berwiński proposed an interesting historiographical concept. The notion that Poland was the bulwark of Christianity<sup>23</sup> or, if we use the Homeric metaphor – Achilles' seven-skinned shield, had rarely been interpreted as a borrowed or imposed concept. Berwiński rejected Poland's historical mission and special role in defending the Christian civilization. More importantly, he argued that this narrative had been imposed artificially to enable the West to profit from Poland's misfortune and to stir up conflict between Poland and the Eastern world. Poland and Turkey

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> This concept plays a fundamental role in Polish historiography, and it was analyzed by Janusz Tazbir in his book *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna* [Poland as the bulwark of christianity in Europe. Myth and historical reality], Warsaw 1987. This excellent study of ideas addresses Russia's ambiguous attitude towards Poland and Europe (p. 33), but above all, it demonstrates that Polish writers who analyzed the history of Turkey in the centuries before the Partitions of Poland made a significant contribution to historiographical literature. Several arguments presented by Tazbir are worth citing in the context of this article. Most importantly, Tazbir points out that opinions about Turkey were highly diverse in Poland. On the one hand, "Turks were the only Asian nation that most Poles were familiar with, and this part of the world was associated mainly with the Sublime Porte. [...] The country inhabited by the Prophet's followers was considered the epitome of tyranny [...], and Turks were portrayed as a nation of slaves" (p. 47). On the other hand, "Turks garnered far more praise than, for example, Germans" in Polish literature, even in the period of "memorable and bloody battles" (p. 41). According to Tazbir, "the conviction that Poland was a unique country [as the bulwark of Christianity – A.S.] (p. 109) with a divine mission (p. 71) played a significant role in that myth". Therefore, Berwiński's assertion that Poland's mission was not dictated by Providence, but by the morally crippled Western countries deprived this historiographical myth of its force. Tazbir also notes that "the growing conviction that Poland was a bulwark on sides intensified the sense of isolation among state officials and the nobility". Berwiński argued that the fight for national independence was unsuccessful precisely because the Polish elites failed to establish cooperation based on common interests.

may have waged many memorable wars and battles<sup>24</sup>, but these conflicts had never been instigated by hatred or historical animosities. These honorable battles were a natural consequence of historical processes, and they do not prevent Poland or Turkey from entering into an alliance. The derogatory portrayal of Germans living a safe and comfortable life at Poland's expense was meant to represent the moral gap between Poles and Westerners. For a writer who cherished the world of ideas and honorable behavior, the ethical divide was far more problematic than the cultural and social differences between Christianity and Islam.

Berwiński put forth two arguments for increasing the involvement of Western émigrés and domestic activists in the East. Firstly, he focused on pragmatic issues and problems that were directly related to current events. In his opinion, military units capable of fighting for Poland's independence could be most effectively built and trained in Turkey. Berwiński was both a social and a political revolutionary, and he remained a staunch advocate of an armed struggle for independence until the end of his life. He relied on Napoleon's famous statement that all nations have a right to self-determination as an ideological basis for his beliefs<sup>25</sup>. For this reason, Czajkowski's reluctance and refusal to participate in the January Uprising caused a deep rift between the two men. Secondly, Berwiński addressed issues of morality, solidarity, and gratitude to various groups that fought for the Polish cause in different parts of the world:

We are unable to take an active part in your endeavors at home [...], but we are monitoring your efforts with a watchful eye and a compassionate heart – we admire your resilience, sacrifice, courage, and civic spirit. But what do we get in return for our compassion and involvement?<sup>26</sup>

including in Turkey:

Renounced by nearly all Christian States and Powers, we were completely abandoned, forced to wander the earth in an atmosphere of hatred and persecution, without a single European haven where we could lay our weary heads to rest. Turkey not only offered us a sanctuary, but it was willing to accept us regardless of political risks and potentially grave consequences. [...] Turkey has been always faithful to its ideals and our alliance, even at a time when Poland was unable to accept an outstretched hand<sup>27</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> T. Terlecki, *Listy tureckie...*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 23–24.

Berwiński referred to European politics as a “conspiratorial game”<sup>28</sup> which, unlike Turkey’s honorable and noble conduct, lacked transparency and was more focused on vested interests. He also argued that the West should pay greater attention to Eastern affairs because they greatly influenced the entire European continent. The poet prophesized that major geopolitical shifts and the global powers’ struggle for influence would culminate in the East, which is why “Napoleon’s political strategy will be ultimately decided by the so-called Oriental question”<sup>29</sup>.

In his mythologized narrative on Turkey’s role in the reinstatement of Polish statehood and the reconstruction of Eastern Europe, Berwiński made a reference not only to current events, but also to important cultural and historical factors, in particular the prophecy of Wernyhora. However, the poet never directly addressed the Ukrainian seer’s prophecy. Berwiński’s conviction that the Eastern question deserved greater attention could also be influenced by this cultural phenomenon, which was also important for Czajkowski – the author of the novel *Wernyhora*, a literary version of this prophecy<sup>30</sup>. In Berwiński’s opinion, the Polish-Turkish alliance, advocated by Turkey “at a time when Poland was unable to accept an outstretched hand”, could have exerted an even greater influence on the argumentative power of his letters. Between 1788 and 1793, Poland and Turkey negotiated a treaty of alliance which was never signed, but could have potentially influenced the Partitions of Poland. Franciszek Piotr Potocki’s several-year diplomatic mission to Istanbul was analyzed in detail by Hacer Topaktaş<sup>31</sup>. It was during Potocki’s stay in Turkey that the parties agreed on the final version of the treaty. At the beginning of the negotiations, the allies were keen on launching joint operations to engage the enemy. Over time, the scope of the treaty was narrowed down to defensive operations, and it was ultimately reduced to a trade agreement, described by Berwiński. The Turkish historian described the planned scope of military operations that were to be undertaken in joint effort by the Polish Crown and the Ottoman Porte:

The confidential part of the treaty consisted of three chapters on security, defense, and cooperation between the Ottoman Empire and the First Polish Republic. The Ottoman

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> According to Marek Kwapiszewski, “the fact that Wernyhora’s prophesy focused on France, Zaporozhian Cossacks, Crimean Tatars, and Turkey sets the tone for the novel’s political narrative (Czajkowski previously promoted the concept of a Polish-Cossack-Tatar-Turkish alliance in two chapters (*Mogila* and *Wyprawa na Carogród*) of *Powieści kozackie* [Cossack tales]. The choice of allies is thus validated by the prophecy as a reliable source of information about countries that would be willing to assist Poland, including in its future struggle against Russia”. Therefore, in the geopolitical context, Wernyhora’s prophecy was consistent with the policies promoted by Czajkowski and Berwiński. Cf. M. Kwapiszewski, *Powieść historyczna z tezą. O „Wernyhore” Michała Czajkowskiego*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1997, No. 88(2), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> H. Topaktaş, *Osmańsko-polskie stosunki dyplomatyczne. Poselstwo Franciszka Piotra Potockiego do Stambułu (1788–1793)*, Kraków 2017.

Empire would allocate all of its resources to the war with Russia. Prussia would participate in the military effort, and the Polish Republic would unite its forces with the Prussian and Ottoman army to launch a full strike against Russia<sup>32</sup>.

Due to protracted negotiations, an unfavorable diplomatic outlook in Europe, and, above all, skeptical and conservative attitudes of the Polish elites, the treaty was not concluded in any of the versions proposed by Istanbul. Topaktaş notes that “Stanisław August had opposed the treaty from the beginning. In turn, Marshal Małachowski, the most ardent supporter of the Polish-Turkish agreement, withdrew his support in early 1791”<sup>33</sup>. This event is not deeply entrenched in Polish historical awareness, and it was used by Berwiński to build his Polish-Turkish mythology.

Paradoxically, the geopolitical instability of Eastern Europe before the demise of Polish independence only reinforced this argument because the hypothesis that the treaty could have prevented or delayed the last Partition of Poland cannot be fully refuted. This alternative version of history is non-falsifiable, which is why it offers excellent material for building a myth. In fact, Berwiński noted that the treaty was not the only alliance that had been proposed by Turkey and rejected by Poland. A fragment of the poet’s letter cited by Antoni Bądzkiewicz in an article entitled *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński: Rys biograficzno-krytyczny* [Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński: a Critical Biography], published in *Ateneum* in 1887<sup>34</sup>, is relevant in the context of mythologization of Polish-Turkish relations. This fragment was also cited by Terlecki who argued that it was the only surviving chapter of *Rzym i Konstantynopol* [Rome and Constantinople], a historical treatise that was composed by Berwiński during his stay in Turkey and which burned down during a fire at his Istanbul home. The poet wrote:

[...] Engrossed in the mission to protect Christianity, a mission that was proselytized mainly by Austria, he even failed to take advantage of Turkey’s assistance in recovering confiscated property<sup>35</sup>. Such an opportunity arose in 1676 during the Battle of Żurawno, where Seytan Ibrahim Pasha commanding an army of 200,000 confronted only 15,000 Polish soldiers and offered to sign a peace treaty on condition that Poland would assist the Ottoman Empire in fighting Russia<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> A. Bądzkiewicz, *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński. Rys biograficzno-krytyczny*, „Ateneum” 1887, Vol. 3(47), No. 8, pp. 226–261.

<sup>35</sup> Berwiński is referring to property that was confiscated under the Truce of Andrusovo (1667) and was never recovered by Sobieski.

<sup>36</sup> A. Bądzkiewicz, op. cit., pp. 257–258.

This passage makes a reference to yet another missed opportunity for Polish-Turkey military collaboration in the fight against Russia. As in the previously cited excerpts, the poet argued that Poland missed this opportunity mainly due to the desire to protect Christianity, thus reasserting the concept that Poland was a bulwark of Christendom, a notion that had been imposed by the West, in particular by the Catholic Habsburg monarchy. In Berwiński's opinion, the anti-Turkish narrative was not only a mistake in Poland's policy towards Turkey, but it became a propaganda tool that was repeatedly used by the partitioning powers to undermine Poland's foreign policy.

Although rhetorically sound and based on historical facts, Berwiński's narrative failed to bring the desired effect. The poet was unable to solicit support for his ideas. His political concept, although seemingly attractive, was anachronistic in many respects.

## Conclusions

The letters and articles penned by Zamoyski, Czartoryski, and other important politicians and independence activists do not make any references to the myth of a righteous Turkey. This historiosophical concept was largely disregarded by Polish diplomats who emigrated to the West, although various measures were undertaken to further Poland's collaboration with the Ottoman Empire. However, these measures were limited in scope, which prevented Polish émigrés in Turkey from exerting a significant influence on Poland's policy and its subsequent fate. Berwiński's and Czajkowski's efforts to promote collaboration between Polish elites and Istanbul fell on deaf ears. Their appeals did not attract considerable attention and failed to occupy an important place in historiography.

The reception of Berwiński's letters written in Turkey at that time deserves attention for one more reason. His appeals for financial or ideological support could have been ignored due to conflict of interest or because Berwiński's militant disposition was misunderstood by the proponents of the organic work movement in Wielkopolska. The tone of voice used by Bączkiewicz in his criticism of Berwiński's account of Polish-Turkish relations is equally, if not more important. The critic used phrases such as "perversion of intellect"<sup>37</sup>, "sophistry aiming to deceive self, if not the entire world"<sup>38</sup>, and "intellectual vacuum"<sup>39</sup>, which were unfair, to say the least, given Berwiński's status in the intellectual and artistic milieu of the Romantic era before he fell into oblivion. This searing critique could have stemmed from the fact that Berwiński's ideas struck a sensitive note.

Bączkiewicz used ad hominem arguments to counter Berwiński's logical arguments concerning Poland's role as the bulwark of Christendom, which confirms that the domi-

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 258.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

nant narrative had been deeply established in Polish historical awareness. Indeed, if the *antemurale christianitatis* myth was an undisputable doctrine of Polish national identity in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was yet another reason why Berwiński's and Czajkowski's efforts were unlikely to bring the desired outcome.

Jan Kieniewicz recognized the mythologizing potential of Berwiński's writings in Polish historiography of the Romantic era, thus validating the observation that the poet's efforts had a negligible impact on political events. According to this Warsaw-based researcher:

Romantic Orientalism also had a political component in Poland. Poland turned its back of Asia after it had suffered defeat in the Eastern expansion campaign and had been conquered by Russia. [...] The Partitions gave rise to the myth of the loyal Ottoman Porte, and this myth was reinforced by the achievements of Polish émigrés in Istanbul. Although their efforts are worthy of further study and dissemination, they had a marginal impact on our culture<sup>40</sup>.

These issues deserve further consideration, especially in light of Poland's subsequent, including contemporary, diplomatic relations with Western countries. An analysis of historical differences in the diplomatic protocols of Europe and Asia may produce valuable results, mainly in view of the geopolitical status of contemporary Poland and Turkey. According to Berwiński, current and future political alliances could not be reliably assessed without becoming aware of the extent to which Polish diplomacy had been influenced by Western narratives. An analysis of the history of Polish-Turkish relations can deepen mutual understanding between the two countries which, both in the past and present, have far more in common than we realize.

## References

- Bądzkiewicz A., *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński. Rys biograficzno-krytyczny*, „Ateneum” 1887, Vol. 3(47), No. 8.
- Czapska M., *Ludwika Śniadecka*, Warsaw 1958.
- Fiećko J., *Ryszard Berwiński: poezja i polityka. Szkic biograficzny*, [in:] idem, *Romantycy i polityka. Szkice historyczno-literackie*, Poznań 2016.
- Janion M., *Wstęp*, [in:] R. Berwiński, *Księga życia i śmierci (wybór pism)*, ed. M. Janion, Warsaw 1953.

<sup>40</sup> J. Kieniewicz, *Orientalność polska*, [in:] *Sąsiedzi i inni*, ed. A. Garlicki, Warsaw 1978, p. 85.



- Jedlicki J., *Świat zwyrodniały. Lęki i wyroki krytyków nowoczesności*, Warsaw 2000.
- Generał Zamoyski*, Vol. VI: 1853–1868, Poznań 1930.
- Kieniewicz J., *Orientalność polska*, [in:] *Sąsiedzi i inni*, ed. A. Garlicki, Warszawa 1978.
- Kwapiszewski M., *Powieść historyczna z tezą. O „Wernyhorze” Michała Czajkowskiego*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1997 No. 88(2).
- Maciejewski J., *Ryszard Wincenty Berwiński 1819–1879*, [in:] *Wielkopole XIX wieku*, Vol. 2, ed. W. Jakubczyk, Poznań 1969.
- Tazbir J., *Polskie przedmurze chrześcijańskiej Europy. Mity a rzeczywistość historyczna*, Warsaw 1987.
- Terlecki T., *Listy tureckie Ryszarda Berwińskiego do Władysława Bentkowskiego i Karola Libelta*, „Kroniki Miasta Poznania” 1932–1933.
- Terlecki T., *Rodowód poetycki Ryszarda Berwińskiego*, Poznań 1937.
- Topaktaş H., *Osmahańsko-polskie stosunki dyplomatyczne. Poselstwo Franciszka Piotra Potockiego do Stambułu (1788–1793)*, Kraków 2017.
- Wasilewski K., *Turecki sen o Europie – tożsamość zachodnia i jej wpływ na politykę zagraniczną Republiki Turcji*, Warsaw 2015.
- Wolff L., *Wynalezienie Europy Wschodniej. Mapa cywilizacji w dobie Oświecenia*, Kraków 2020.

### **Poland between the West, Russia and... Turkey. The mythologization of Polish-Turkish relations in Ryszard Berwiński's memoirs and correspondence from the Ottoman Empire**

**Summary:** The study analyzes Ryszard Berwiński's memoirs, letters, and articles written in the 1850s after the poet had emigrated to the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War. The article focuses primarily on the literary legacy of Berwiński who actively promoted cooperation with Turkey during the fight for Poland's independence. The main emphasis was placed on the mythologization of Polish-Turkish relations, Berwiński's views on the East-West dichotomy, and his commentaries on the political systems and history of Poland and Turkey. The myth of a "righteous Turkey" and the deconstruction of the concept of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity in Europe seem particularly interesting in this context. The analysis of Berwiński's historical self-awareness aims was undertaken to expand the existing research on the political thought during the Partitions of Poland. Poland's relations with Turkey, the only neighbor of the first Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that did not participate in any of the three Partitions, constitute an interesting chapter in Polish history, but remain insufficiently investigated.

**Keywords:** history of Polish-Turkish relations, nineteenth century, intellectual history, orientalism, mythologization of history, Michał Czajkowski, Ryszard Berwiński

---

**Polen zwischen dem Westen, Russland und... der Türkei. Mythologisierung der polnisch-türkischen Geschichte in den Schriften von Ryszard Berwiński aus seiner Emigrationszeit im Osmanischen Reich**

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel ist eine Untersuchung der Ideen, die in den Memoiren, Briefen und Schriften von Ryszard Berwiński aus seiner Emigrationszeit im Osmanischen Reich während des Krimkrieges, d.h. in den 1850er Jahren, enthalten sind. Gegenstand der Untersuchung ist in erster Linie Berwińskis schriftstellerisches Vermächtnis als ein Autor, der sich im Kampf um die polnische Unabhängigkeit aktiv für eine Zusammenarbeit mit der Türkei einsetzte. Im Mittelpunkt der Betrachtung stehen die Mythologisierung der polnisch-türkischen Geschichte, Berwińskis Ansichten über das zivilisatorische Dilemma „Ost-West“ sowie seine Kommentare zu den Systemen und der Geschichte Polens und der Türkei. Besonders interessant erscheinen in diesem Zusammenhang der Mythos einer „gerechten Türkei“ und die Dekonstruktion des Konzepts von Polen als Bollwerk des christlichen Europas. Die Analyse der historischen Selbstwahrnehmung Berwińskis soll den Forschungsstand zum politischen Denken der Teilungszeit ergänzen. Die Beziehungen zur Türkei, die als einziger Nachbar der Ersten Republik an keiner der drei Teilungen beteiligt war, sind noch unzureichend erforscht und stellen ein interessantes Kapitel der polnischen Geschichte dieser Zeit dar.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Geschichte der polnisch-türkischen Beziehungen, neunzehntes Jahrhundert, Ideengeschichte, Orientalismus, Mythologisierung der Geschichte, Czajkowski Michał, Berwiński Ryszard

**Polska między Zachodem, Rosją i... Turcją. Mitologizacja dziejów polsko-tureckich w pismach Ryszarda Berwińskiego z okresu emigracji w Imperium Osmańskim**

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł stanowi studium idei zawartych we wspomnieniach, listach i w pismach Ryszarda Berwińskiego z okresu emigracji w Imperium Osmańskim w czasach wojny krymskiej, a więc w latach 50. XIX w. Przedmiotem badań jest przede wszystkim spuścizna piśmiennicza Berwińskiego jako autora aktywnie agitującego na rzecz współpracy z Turcją w walce o niepodległość Polski. Głównym obszarem rozważań jest mitologizacja historii polsko-tureckiej, poglądy Berwińskiego na cywilizacyjny dylemat Wschód-Zachód, a także komentarze na temat ustrojów i dziejów Polski i Turcji. Szczególnie ciekawy wydaje się w tym kontekście mit Turcji sprawiedliwej oraz dekonstrukcja koncepcji Polski jako przedmurza chrześcijańskiej Europy. Analiza historycznej samoświadomości Berwińskiego ma na celu uzupełnienie stanu badań na temat myśli politycznej okresu rozbiorowego. Relacje z Turcją jako jedynym sąsiadem pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej, który nie brał udziału w żadnym z trzech rozbiorów, nadal pozostają niedostatecznie zbadane, a stanowią interesujący rozdział historii polskiej tego okresu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzieje relacji polsko-tureckich, wiek XIX, historia idei, orientalizm, mitologizacja historii, Michał Czajkowski, Ryszard Berwiński