

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 18, No 1 (2021)

Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVIII (2021)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

The National and Universal Significance of the 1821 Greek Revolution: The Perspective of Polish Romantic Philhellenes

Maria Kalinowska

Copyright © 2022



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Kalinowska, M. (2022). The National and Universal Significance of the 1821 Greek Revolution: The Perspective of Polish Romantic Philhellenes. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 18(1), 157–164. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/31371>

THE NATIONAL AND UNIVERSAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 1821 GREEK REVOLUTION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH ROMANTIC PHILHELLENES

Maria Kalinowska

Abstract: From the perspective of Polish Romantic poets such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Cyprian Norwid, the 1821 Greek Revolution was not merely a war for Greek freedom, but also had a more universal significance for other nations across Europe. In Polish poetic philhellenism, the uprising was seen as a great transnational war of common European values, a battle both for the freedom of individual nations as well for respect for every human being and the continuity of European culture.

It was not only Shelley who wrote that “We are all Greeks” (“Hellas”, 1821). This famous assertion obviously has a universal dimension, as it points to what Europe owes to ancient Greece: things Greek are the source of things European – in the sense of the best features of Europeanness (democracy and the achievements of Greek arts, philosophy and theatre).

However, this statement also has a particular, national meaning: it opens the way for individual modern European nations to trace themselves back to the history and culture of Greece. Thus, Greece has provided nations with a language to express their own particular histories. Of course, this oft-repeated assertion consequently also implies a philhellenic identification with the independence drive of the modern Greeks.

The parallel between Greece and its history and the modern European nations was referenced many times and in different ways in nineteenth-century European culture. The parallels between the history of Greece and the history of Poland were also a recurring theme of Polish Romantic literature.¹ For the Polish Romantics, the direct impulse for the production of this historiosophical parallel most certainly came from the 1821 Greek Uprising, although we also need to remember the permanent and strong presence of the ancient cultural code in Polish national identity.

* This article was completed within the framework of a research project financed by the Polish National Science Centre (reg. no. 2014/15/B/HS2/01360).

¹ See Maria Kalinowska, “Waning Worlds and Budding Hopes: Anti-idyllic Visions on Antiquity in Polish Romanticism,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 5, no. 3 (2013): 320–35.

The Greece–Poland parallel assumed various forms in Polish Romanticism: for example, it was drawn between Poland and ancient Sparta (Juliusz Słowacki’s drama *Agesilaus*) or ancient Athens (Cyprian Norwid’s *Tyrtaeus*, in which a small state stands up to the violence of a bigger aggressor). The Romantics almost always found a direct impulse for this universal reflection on the flourishing and waning of states, and also entire cultural formations, in the uprising. The participants of the 1821 Greek Revolution, together with figures from ancient Greece and its myths, formed a “chain of freedom heroes” who fascinated Polish and European Romantics.

A special form of the Greek–Polish Romantic parallel emerged from the juxtaposition of the Greek Uprising with the Polish uprisings. It might be more appropriate to use the plural for both – the Greek and Polish *uprisings* – because Słowacki, for example, drew on the events of the Greek rebellion of 1770, although it was actually the 1821 Uprising that inspired him, and in fact his poem “Lambro” is about the situation of his nineteenth-century contemporaries.

For the Poles, the nineteenth century was an age of national uprisings – failed ones unfortunately, though full of victorious battles and heroic figures. These rebellions are part of a sequence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Polish national insurrections, one of the most tragic being the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, which ended in the complete destruction of Warsaw by Nazi Germany. As an aside, the nineteenth century in Polish culture was also the time when the most brilliant literature was produced.

The juxtaposition of the Greek and Polish national liberation movements may well have been the Greek–Polish Romantic parallel that caused the Poles most pain. It was painful for two reasons: for the contrast between victory and defeat, and for the reflection on the experience of bondage.

The 1821 Revolution gave the Poles hope – hope that Poland would regain its independence, not in a short-term political way but in the sphere of moral ideas and in terms of the ethicisation of international relations. It is important to emphasise this aspect of ethicisation, of establishing political relations on clearly ethical foundations. As he travelled across the newly liberated Greece (1836), Słowacki, one of the two most important Polish poets, recalled the depictions of Greek heroes from his readings as a youth, such as Botsaris, Kanaris and Miaoulis.² He described them as his existential models, as examples of heroism and the chivalric ethos. Thus, here is another aspect of the Polish Romantics’ thinking about the Greek insurgents: as models of action in history, but also simply as role models.

² For Słowacki’s travels, see slowacki.al.uw.edu.pl.

The 1821 Revolution thus appears in Polish Romanticism in at least three dimensions:³ first, a broad philhellenic and Byronian perspective; Byron was one of the most important figures for Polish Romanticism, deeply assimilated by Polish culture; second, a universal dimension – through a connection with ancient models; third, as a mask for Polish independence aspirations and as a context for reflecting on the Polish uprisings.

In Polish circumstances, the theme of the 1821 Revolution is a painful summons to reflect on the failures of the nineteenth-century Polish uprisings, inspiring a bitter settling of accounts with the defeat of successive national rebellions.

The Poles showed no lack of dedication and heroism towards their national cause; in fact, they showed more than enough. In this sense, Botsaris, Kanaris and Miaoulis always had their Polish equivalents, both in Polish literature and in Polish reality, but the final outcome of the Greek Revolution – regained independence – turned out to be a desired but unattainable goal for the Poles in the nineteenth century. The Greeks' victory continued to contrast with the Poles' defeat.

Polish Romantic poetry shows us different versions of such mutually reflected images of Greek and Polish rebellions and, more broadly, Polish and Greek independence aspirations (including covertly speaking about contemporary Polish and Greek circumstances through the mask of Greek history from the early centuries of the Common Era, when Greece was subordinated to Roman imperial rule). Let us look at just a few examples from Słowacki's oeuvre. His poem "Lambro" refers to the Greek events of 1770, and his hero is loosely based on Lambros Katsonis. However, as already mentioned, this work was directly inspired by the events of the 1821 Greek Revolution and the 1830 Polish November Uprising. This Byronic poem is about the experience of defeat – that of the Greeks in 1770 and of the Poles in 1831 – but it goes beyond the national specifics, containing questions about ethics in politics and about the experience of bondage. First and foremost, however, it is also an image of the European nineteenth century, marked by doubt, weariness and "powerless efforts".

As has already been mentioned, Słowacki's poem "Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu" (The journey to the Holy Land from Naples), written mainly in Greece, on Syros during his journey to Greece, Egypt and the Holy Land (1836–1837),

³ On Polish philhellenism, see Małgorzata Borowska, Maria Kalinowska, Jarosław Ławski and Katarzyna Tomaszuk, eds., *Filhellenizm w Polsce: Rekonesans* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2007); Małgorzata Borowska, Maria Kalinowska and Katarzyna Tomaszuk, eds., *Filhellenizm w Polsce: Wybrane tematy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012).

conveys important images of the Greek Revolution. In one excerpt, the traveller-narrator, having visited Kanaris (a fact), recalls how he read about the heroes of the Greek Uprising in his youth and dreamed of similar deeds, treating the biographies of Tzavelas, Botsaris and Miaoulis as his role models. The poem is full of references to Greek insurrectionary battles and contains what is probably a complete repertoire of philhellenic themes, which are conveyed with great respect and admiration: from the Ypsilantis brothers, through numerous allusions to the 1821 Revolution's legendary fighters, to places described with great respect and tenderness, like Messolonghi, which in the poetic logic is close to Lepanto. One of the hills protecting Messolonghi is likened to a pyramid: "Before the country gained renown, / The great God predicted it and raised a monument."⁴

In Słowacki's description, the shared cause of enslaved European nations' independence acquires a sacred aspect, a kind of absolute value, an idea bringing together nations that have experienced bondage. Such is the case, for example, in this excerpt from the description of the meeting with Kanaris:

Looking at the eyes filled with lightning,
At the bronze forehead of the king of flames,
I asked him about the secret he knew,
For he had pushed away the tombstones himself
From the tomb of the deeply sleeping homeland:
He must know the remedies – for he knows all the scars.⁵

Słowacki's travel writing about Greece is simultaneously marked by an elusive and puzzling melancholy, created by the internal state of the pilgrim – the Polish political émigré who knows he will never return to his homeland – and by his thoughts, difficult to put into words, on the situation of not just his own enslaved native country, but also other countries that have long been in bondage.

The Greek journey also inspired Słowacki to write the poem "Agamemnon's Tomb", which has shaped the imagination of several generations of Poles. Here, we see yet another version of thinking that merged the Polish uprising with the Greek independence struggle. The failure of the November Uprising of 1830–1831 is compared to Chaeronea. The traveller-narrator does not have the

⁴ Juliusz Słowacki, "Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu," in Maria Kalinowska, *Juliusza Słowackiego "Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu": Glosy* (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011), 215, canto 4, 149–50. Original quote: "Nim się ten kraj wślawił, / Bóg wielki przeczul i pomnik postawił."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 224, canto 5, 13–18. Original quote: "Patrząc na oczy pełne błyskawicy, / Na czoło króla płomieni – brązowe, / Pytałem znanej mu już tajemnicy, / Bo sam odwał kamienie grobowe / Z grobu uśpionej głęboko ojczyzny; / Musi znać leki – bo zna wszystkie blizny."

courage to stop at the Pass of Thermopylae: “I will not stand there before the spirit of Greece – / No, I would die first rather than go there in chains.”⁶ The failure of the November Uprising is juxtaposed with the heroism of Leonidas and the Spartans, but there is also a clear undercurrent to the recent victorious Greek Revolution. Thus, Słowacki speaks of the “spirit of Greece”, which in this case means identifying the Greek idea with freedom, or aspirations for freedom.

These works by Słowacki appeared at the peak of the development of Polish Romanticism. But Polish writers and thinkers would long continue to refer to the Greek Revolution in their work. The work of Cyprian Norwid is particularly important in this respect, in particular a lecture he delivered in 1875, after the end of the Polish Romantic period. It concerns a talk delivered to Polish political émigrés in Paris on the 12th anniversary of the outbreak of the 1863 uprising.⁷ It is important to point out that nineteenth-century Polish culture is punctuated by the dates of uprisings against the partitioning powers, especially Russia; the 1863 insurrection, known as the January Uprising, which was the most Romantic and the most tragic and traumatic, brought a final end to the Romantic period in Polish literature.

Whereas the 1830 Uprising involved fighting by regular Polish troops who rebelled against the Russian authorities, the one in 1863 (when both the Polish army and the Polish state had definitively ceased to exist, and the martial law that the Russians had imposed in Warsaw had been in force for over a quarter of a century) was a rebellion of young people who were inadequately armed and conducted guerrilla warfare in the forests. It ended in hangings, Siberian exile, ruthless and brutal Russian repression, turning into a national trauma felt by several successive generations.

For greater clarity, it is worth discussing the work of Norwid (1821–1883) in a little more detail. A poet, painter and thinker; a Romantic, but one who went beyond Romanticism, a precursor of modern poetry, he lived and worked in Paris. To this day, he has a separate and extremely important place in Polish culture. A great patriot, yet an opponent of premature national uprisings and revolutionary actions; in this he differed from most Polish Romantics, although he was also an admirer of Byron (like all the Polish Romantics). We should also

⁶ Juliusz Słowacki, “Agamemnon’s Tomb” (Grób Agamemnona) (1839), trans. Catherine O’Neil, in *Poland’s Angry Romantic: Two Poems and a Play by Juliusz Słowacki*, ed. Peter Cochran, Bill Johnston, Mirosława Modrzewska and Catherine O’Neil (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 161.

⁷ Cyprian Norwid, “W rocznicę Powstania Styczniowego” [Mowa wygłoszona 22 stycznia 1875 r. w Czytelni Polskiej w Paryżu], in Juliusz W. Gomulicki, ed., *Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 7/2, *Proza* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973), 95–102.

add that Norwid was a philhellene, a great enthusiast of Greece, both ancient and modern. In his most wonderful expressions referring to Hellas, he called Greek culture “the talisman of nations”,⁸ and also a mystical bread that is shared, like communion, by nations.

Considered a fascinating but difficult, poet and philosopher of history, at the 1875 Paris commemoration of the anniversary of the January Uprising Norwid devoted as much attention to that uprising as he did to the 1821 Greek Revolution, which had occurred five decades earlier. His lecture has a very elaborate, complicated structure as well as a parabolic aspect, combining a commentary on current political facts with an attempt to identify more general historical laws and regularities.

Once again, we have here the Romantic Polish–Greek parallel, and once again it is applied to the matter of the uprisings. The parallel between the fates of the Greek and Polish nations is defined by a similar rhythm of heroic deeds and destruction stemming from bondage, including the spiritual kind that causes a nation’s “historical nonexistence”, an interruption in its history.

It should be stressed that this is a very bitter lesson, a very harsh and painful diagnosis of the situation of subdued nations that have experienced bondage and are trying to regain their freedom. But it is also a bitter vision of the condition of Europe, showing it to be capable of great enthusiasm for the cause of enslaved nations but incapable of moving beyond a superficial rapture, often guided by appearances and commercial benefits.

The issue of national uprisings is also Europe’s business, according to Norwid. Even if Europe is politically incapable of resolving them, national uprisings always pose new questions about European values.

Norwid’s entire lecture is built on the simultaneous comparison of insurrections, Polish and Greek, but in a very new and special way, concentrating not on insurrectionary operations but on bondage, which is equivalent to “historical nonexistence”. There are two elements in this juxtaposition: the consequences of bondage, and treating national insurrections as a European matter. What are the consequences of the “historical nonexistence” of enslaved nations, and how does Europe treat those nations?

Norwid’s discussion focuses on the consequences of long-term national bondage, which plunge nations into “historical nonexistence”. In the Polish situation this means, above all, the loss of state institutions and the destruction

⁸ Cyprian Norwid, List do Wojciecha Grzymały [Paris, 1852] [Letter to Wojciech Grzymała], in Gomulicki, *Pisma wszystkie*, vol. 8, *Listy* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1971), 175.

of the nation's overt social, political and cultural life. Norwid considered the nation's spiritual rebirth through the revival of public life to be the most urgent task of the Polish intelligentsia.

"Historical nonexistence" and the consequences of bondage and, on the other hand, "European friendliness" and raptures built on a fragile foundation of stereotypes and an unrealistic diagnosis of the situation of enslaved nations – these are the real topics of the lecture. A great patriot who deeply respected national tradition, Norwid was also a very harsh critic of Polish society as being branded by bondage. His deep sensitivity to the consequences of Poland's bondage enabled him to see some significant dangers in Greece's situation. And vice versa: the situation of Greece emerging from bondage enabled him to notice the dangers for Poland.

Norwid's lecture represents one of Polish literature's most beautiful praises of philhellenism as selfless enthusiasm for the Greek cause, and also European literature's most beautiful accounts of the Greeks' insurrectionary achievements. According to Norwid, the Greeks responded in full to the image anticipated by European philhellenism, the image

that Europe had intended ... the athletic heroism shown by them and the leaders of this movement equalled or surpassed the ancient gestures. The death of Botsaris, the fall of Messolonghi, the massacre at Chios ... The Greeks ... from the start of their uprising displayed both their old valour, marked by semi-divine rays, and all the things that long historical nonexistence imposes on peoples.

Then Norwid lists the faults of enslaved nations (by the way, he "endowed" Polish society with an even longer list of national faults and inadequacies of social life): "disobedience, mutual disrespect of leaders and their fickleness, were present equally with a pathos very similar to the great Homer's," as he writes about Greece.

In this lecture, philhellenism is thus shown in a tension between the ideal and the complicated reality of the societies of Western Europe, as well as Greece in the process of its liberation. In fact, philhellenism in this text is a great ideal project for both Greece and Europe, originating from the Greek tradition precisely. But it also involves imposing a single tradition, a single image on Greece, instead of *reading* Greece's true and deep identity. "The great ... heroism of the ancient men" is all very well, but you also need "the power of daily and lasting endurance". Europe's philhellenic fascination with 1820s Greece also appears in the writings of Norwid – the great philhellene and admirer of Byron – in two contrasting ways. There is the traditional depiction of philhellenism as bright, noble and selfless, but there is also a darker view of it – as a "philo-clamour" (*filo-wrzask*), a superficial materialistic

movement that treats Greece instrumentally. Yet is it still possible to refer to this second view as philhellenism, one might ask?

Norwid's speech in a Polish reading room for political émigrés in Paris has an unexpected ending. This is yet another instance in Polish Romanticism when the favourite character of philhellenes, Markos Botsaris, appears. He is described as passing on his testament, namely his wish and command (in the original) for his son to receive an education and (in Norwid's version) for his son and his nation to learn to read the historical truth. The knowledge about Botsaris is mediated through a modern Greek song that Norwid translated and exploits like a parable to portray Botsaris both as a hero of battle and as a teacher of the nation who recommends "bold awareness stemming from the complete *reading* of historical truth".⁹ Introducing this theme, Norwid seems to be strongly encouraging heroic nations that suffer the consequences of "historical nonexistence" to search for their own truth about their own fate, their own identity, to go beyond any imposed stereotypes.

Translated by Joanna Dutkiewicz
University of Warsaw

⁹ See Michał Kuziak, "Epimenides – W rocznicę powstania styczniowego: Norwid o pułapkach dyskursu filhelleńskiego," in Borowska et al., *Filhellenizm w Polsce*, 257–68; Zofia Dambek-Giallelis, "'Bystro czytać w dziejach,' czyli o pewnym wystąpieniu Norwida w rocznicę Powstania Styczniowego," *Studia Norwidiana* 33 (2015): 192–216.