

# Public Opinion on the 1863 Polish Uprising in Russia

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The Polish Uprising of 1863 took many in Russia by surprise, sharply dividing the literate public. Two prominent nationalist writers, Ivan Aksakov and Mikhail Katkov, used their newspapers and journals to advance a highly nationalistic reading of the events that influenced the opinions of not only the Russian populace but also the Tsarist officials. Their polemics show the broader trend of public opinion playing an increasingly important role in European external political affairs in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The rise of nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe transformed the international political arena; for the first time in history, mass participation in foreign policy issues became a reality. Hitherto, diplomacy was practiced solely by the rulers and the elites of the European states. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the rise of print journalism and literacy enabled the citizens or subjects of their respective states to have a suddenly relevant voice on foreign affairs. This article examines how two prominent Russian publicists, Ivan Aksakov and Mikhail Katkov, portrayed the Polish uprising of 1863 in their publications and influenced the rise of Pan-Slavist ideology among their readers.

The rise of Polish nationalism writ large and the January uprising of 1863 writ small were the main catalysts for the evolution of early Slavophilism with its rather ambivalent attitudes towards non ‘Great Russians’ into expansionary Pan-Slavism. This trend is evident in the transformations of Ivan Aksakov’s thinking in the wake of the 1863 Polish uprising.<sup>1</sup> Before the revolt, the younger Aksakov saw Pan-Slavism as an unrealistic project due to religious differences between the Catholic Poland and Bohemia, and the remaining Orthodox Slavs. Going beyond religious schisms, Aksakov doubted whether the Slavic peoples living under Austro-Hungarian rule were capable of or even desired self-determination.<sup>2</sup> Regarding his views on Poland, Aksakov showed signs of early sympathy for the protestors and was even initially supportive of Alexander Herzen’s editorials in *Bell*, which had come out staunchly in favor of granting Poland greater autonomy. All of this changed over the span of the sixteen-month revolt. Aksakov and other leading conservative nationalists began to view the Poles as “the renegades of Slavdom” who had formed an unholy alliance with Russian revolutionary nihilists and foreign powers to weaken and cripple Russia<sup>3</sup>

The Russian revolutionaries did indeed overwhelmingly support the Polish uprising, which furthered the wedge between the Pan-Slavists and their Westernizer counterparts. In the previous decades, the Slavophiles had maintained close and often friendly relationships with the more numerous liberal intelligentsia; their championing for a communal *obschina* endeared them to considerable praise from Alexander Herzen and Nikolay Chernyshevsky.<sup>4</sup>

Once the Polish revolt broke out, the newspaper editor Mikhail Katkov and others came to believe that the Poles were using the nihilists and socialist radicals for their separatist goals.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Katkov and Aksakov, it caused both to break definitively with Herzen’s *Bell* due to its publication of “Vivat Polonia!”<sup>6</sup> The links between the nihilists and the Poles would become a point of obsession for Katkov, who was convinced that the Russian revolutionary movement was nothing more than a clever Jesuit ruse to weaken Russia sufficiently for Poland to be able to secede.<sup>7</sup> The involvement of Polish revolutionaries in *The Peoples’ Will* only reinforced these views. Without a shred of physical evidence, Katkov believed that the bomb used in 1881 to kill Tsar Alexander II was designed by a Pole; the fact that one of the assassins, Ignacy Hryniewiecki, was Polish was enough for Katkov.<sup>8</sup>

It is outside the scope of this work to cover in detail the contributions of Nikolai Danilevsky and his opus, *Russia and Europe*, to the broader Russian nationalist thinking. Regarding the Polish question Danilevsky was adamant: Poland is a tarantula that is attempting to devour its Eastern neighbor all the while it is being eaten by its Western neighbors.<sup>9</sup> While Danilevsky was one of the chief architects of the philosophical shift in Russian nationalism from the largely benevolent Slavophile discourse to Pan-Slavist apologetics for territorial aggrandizement,<sup>10</sup> it should be noted that his theories surrounding historical-cultural types were not initially popular. First published in 1869 in the journal *Zarya, Russia and Europe* failed to sell copies and would not become widely known until a posthumous reissue of the work.<sup>11</sup>

Mikhail Katkov’s views regarding Poland underwent an evolution that mirrored the transformation of Ivan Aksakov’s thinking on the matter. In his initial article on the revolt, simply dubbed “The Polish Question,” Aksakov took up a defensive tone. He chastised the Poles for labeling the Russians in Poland as barbarians, “They want to make us into something which we are not!” and countered that while the “level of enlightenment is generally higher among the Poles than the Russians” this did not mean that “Russia is the Kirghiz Steppe.”<sup>12</sup> Katkov was furious that the Poles were so ungrateful to the people that shielded them (and Europe) from the Mongol yoke and

the wrath of Tamerlane.<sup>13</sup> Historical slights aside, Katkov believed that the key to ending the rebellion quickly was to rally the Polish peasants to the Russian cause. The plan was not wholly without merit, since pitched tensions did exist among the rebels between the “White” Polish gentry faction and the “Red” militant populists who supported land redistribution. In reality, Polish people of all classes had come to resent the heavy handed policies of the Russian government, and animosity towards Russia served as one of the few points of agreement among the insurrectionists.

The Pan-Slavists took great pains to compare the situation in Poland in 1863–64 to that of Ireland, India, and Algeria within the British and French empires respectively.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, they wished to dissuade foreign interference on the behalf of the Poles, but by their actions they trampled on sacrosanct Slavophile principals. The analogy to Western colonial powers openly implied that Russia was keeping Poland within its borders by force. This contravened the entire premise of brotherly ties between Slavic peoples and a commitment to non-violence on internal affairs.

As the revolt intensified, Mikhail Katkov appears to have realized that his earlier belief that the Polish peasantry was a natural ally for Russia in its fight against the rebellious Polish aristocracy amounted to little more than wishful thinking. This explains Katkov’s change of stance in his March 1863 article, “What are We to do About Poland?”<sup>15</sup> No longer spending time deploring the loss of life in an internecine conflict and drawing distinctions between the Polish peasants and the ungrateful and perfidious *szlachta*, Katkov dismisses the idea of universal suffrage as a Napoleonic concept and stresses that an independent Poland is diplomatically impossible and against Russia’s interests. Most importantly for the purposes of this work, Katkov appeals to the Russian romantic sense of *volksgeist*, but stresses in the same vein that the *narod* and the Russian state are indistinguishable. The Russian state would be crippled if Poland broke away, and he ends the article by declaring that, “The question between Russia and Poland is a state question: whether or not a Polish or a Russian state is to exist... The struggle is not one between two tribes for their language, customs, and faith; the struggle has its own subject the very existence of the Russian state.”<sup>16</sup> This was a significant departure from early Slavophile beliefs; the Slavophiles were never comfortable with the pervasive nature of the Russian state and firmly believed that the Russian *volksgeist* stemmed from the *obschina* and from the Orthodox faith, not from the governmental edifice that was prone to abuse.<sup>17</sup> According to Katkov and the Pan-Slavists on the other

hand, true nationalism meant defending the interests of the state; borrowing from Slavophile terminology, there was an organic union between state and society.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of the Polish uprising the original utopian idea promulgated by the Slavophiles, that the *obschina* and the *narod* formed an organic bond that was the bedrock of the Russian way of life was coopted into a Pan-Slav rallying cry that was used to brutally crush the Polish rebellion.

Not all Pan-Slavists and neo-Slavophiles perceived Poland as the “Judas”<sup>19</sup> of the Slavic people. Alexander Kireev prevaricated on the matter; he supported the notion of Polish self-determination independent of Russia as long as it followed “Slavophile principles,”<sup>20</sup> and yet in the very same paragraph he assails Poland for her alleged unyielding desire to rule over non-Poles. Kireev compares Poles to “loyal subjects” in other countries such as the Protestant French and the Catholic Germans, and implores them to have a “sense of duty” to the motherland.<sup>21</sup> Perplexingly, while Kireev blames foreigners for creating a row between brotherly peoples, he also accuses the West of trying to encircle Russia with a “web of Polands.”<sup>22</sup> Kireev’s writings on Poland suggest that he vacillated on the issue and that, while confident that Poland would inevitably be an independent member of a Slavic federation, he was unsure whether suppression or liberation was the best course of action in the short term.

The Polish revolt involved another Slavic nationality whose intellectuals split on the merits of Pan-Slavism, the Ukrainians. The Ukrainophile movement was in its infancy during the 1863 revolt, and it would not be until the Ems Ukaz (1876) that resentment at Russian rule would register in any significant numbers.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Katkov was greatly suspicious of the Ukrainophile movement and viewed it as another “Polish intrigue” against Russian autocracy.<sup>24</sup>

The Polish uprising ultimately failed to temper the rhetoric or the enthusiasm among the Pan-Slavs for the need of Slavic unity under Russian guidance. The support given to the Russian troops late in the insurrection by Ukrainian and Belorussian peasants due to their fears of the Polish *pans* comforted many Pan-Slavs by reinforcing their now deeply held prejudice that the tergiversations of Poland were an accident of history or the work of Germany and was not indicative of the remaining “Slavic brothers.” Their views of minority subjects had changed irrevocably: a deeply held suspicion of plots and conspiracies would now define Pan-Slav perceptions of non-Russians living within the Empire. For a group that espoused unity of all of the Slavs in a single state, the Pan-Slavs emerged from the Polish Uprising with a startling degree of xenophobia.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 495.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Even Plekhanov offered some guarded praise to the Panslavs for their overriding faith in the obschina.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Katz, *Mikhail N. Katkov: A Political Biography, 1818–1887* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Katz, *Katkov: A Political Biography*, 118.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolay Danilevsky, *Rossiya i Evropa* (St. Petersburg: 1889), 31–33.

<sup>10</sup> Danilevsky was an ardent supporter of Russian territorial expansionism.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Katkov, "Pol'skii vopros," *Russkiy Vestnik*, no.1 (1863): 26.

<sup>13</sup> Katz, *Katkov: A Political Biography*, 120.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Katkov, "Chto Nam Delat s Polshei?" *Russkiy Vestnik*, no. 3 (1863): 469.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 471–76.

<sup>17</sup> The Slavophile writers unequivocally condemned Biron and Arakcheev.

<sup>18</sup> Katz, *Katkov: A Political Biography*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> A famous remark by the Russian poet Feodor Tiutchev.

<sup>20</sup> Kireev, *Kratkoe izlozhenie Slavianofil'skago Ucheniia*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 78–79.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>23</sup> The Ems Ukaz banned the publication of any new manuscript in the Ukrainian language.

<sup>24</sup> Katz, *Katkov: A Political Biography*, 119.