

Witkiewicz and the Course of Mid-Eastern History

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In January, 1812 Alexander von Humboldt wrote to his Russian friend, General Rennenkampf in St. Petersburg, about the invitation extended by Czar Alexander I to explore the Ural Mountains and the ranges of Mongolia, to offer advice about mining, and collect scientific data for the Russians.

Humboldt explained that what he now had in mind was a journey of exploration to Russia lasting seven or eight years that would also take him to Bukhara, Kabul, and Tibet. Politics intervened – in the form of the war between France and Russia and its aftermath – and that trip did not take place.

When his long awaited dream did materialize in 1829, Humboldt was sixty years old and the expedition was scaled down to six months travel that took him and his party through the Ural Mountains and Siberia to China and on the return to the Caspian Sea.

During that trip, at Orsk he met a handsome young man forty years his junior who would fulfill his dream by penetrating to Bukhara and Kabul. It was Humboldt who launched the short, extraordinary, and tragic career of that young man, thus becoming indirectly responsible for a major diplomatic confrontation that took place ten years later between Britain and Russia. The young man was Jan Witkiewicz, and my paper tells the story of his meeting with Humboldt and its consequences.

Jan Witkiewicz's Road to Orsk

Born in 1809 in Samogitia, Zmudz, Jan Witkiewicz was a well-to-do young nobleman in Polish Lithuania. The Witkiewicz family of small landowners was a large one; Jan was one of ten children. In 1824 as a student at the Polish gymnasium in Kroze (some 100 miles from Vilnius), he was one of the

founders of a semi-clandestine patriotic student association, the Black Brothers. In the early 1820s, twenty-five years after the final partition of Poland, secret societies started to spring up at Polish educational institutions, especially at Vilnius University.

The Black Brothers were essentially a social group devoted to playful games, discussions, and songs that occasionally took on a patriotic tone alarming to the Russian forces of occupation. One month after the establishment of the group, on the basis of information provided by another student, Jan Witkiewicz – along with five other members – was arrested by the Czarist secret police and accused of anti-Russian political activity.

FIGURE 27-1. Jan Witkiewicz in a Czarist army uniform. A lost portrait attributed to Walenty Wankowicz. Reproduced in Jan Reychman, *Peleryna, ciupaga i znak tajemny*, Cracow, 1976



After a thorough investigation was launched from St. Petersburg, both the students at Vilnius University and those at the secondary school at Kroze were tried by a military court. The university students, including the twenty-four-year-old poet Adam Mickiewicz, received relatively light sentences of banishment to Russia (where Mickiewicz was treated as a celebrity); but, in an attempt to make a frightening example of the high school students, Jan Witkiewicz was condemned to death at the age of fifteen.

Because of his youth Witkiewicz's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He lost all rights to his property and was stripped of his title of nobility. He was to be sent in exile to serve one year at a fortress at the foot of the Ural Mountains and then to remain for life an ordinary conscript in the Russian army without the right to promotion and subject to punishment by flogging.

The young Polish prisoners were sent to Moscow by wagon (and obliged to pay for the trip). Then from Moscow they were transported on foot and in manacles (weighing twenty-pounds), each to a different place of exile along the so called Orenburg line, which consisted of a number of military posts along the eastern border of the Russian empire clustered around the Orenburg fortress. The entire journey of 1500 miles took seven months. Witkiewicz's destination was the Orsk fortress. To the south lay wild, dangerous, and uncharted territory full of Kazakh and Uzbek tribes, where the Russian colonizers dared not penetrate too deeply.

The barracks at Orsk were primitive with long rows of wooden platforms serving as bunks. Military service for an ordinary conscript like Jan Witkiewicz meant endless mind-deadening drill and inhumanly strict discipline, any slight breach of which could result in flogging.

Jan Witkiewicz had good luck in having as the fortress's commander a humane and educated officer, Colonel Isayev, who was highly impressed with the boy's energy and determination in finding time to study the totally unknown languages, history, and ethnography of the peoples of Central Asia. Isayev took Witkiewicz under his wing, made him a tutor to his children, and used him as an interpreter in negotiations with the nomadic Kazakh tribes. Well-educated and highly motivated, the Polish political prisoners had intellectual abilities the Russian colonizers badly needed, and they did not hesitate to make use of them.

After a year at the fortress, Witkiewicz was allowed to live in private quarters outside the barracks. Required to pay for his room and board (which included a servant), he received money from his family for his upkeep. Now relieved of the drudgery of camp life, Witkiewicz diligently pursued his study of the Central Asian languages (including local dialects) as well as Persian, and mastered the geography, customs and manners of the entire area.

It is possible that Jan Witkiewicz was plotting his escape through the steppes and then to Persia and India, but it is more likely that he was already planning a career with the Russians. For that to be possible, however, he needed to move up the ladder and gain freedom of movement.

In 1828 the general governor of Orenburg supported the request of the Polish exiles from Kroze that, in reward for their good behavior, they be transferred to active service and sent to the Turkish-Balkan front where a war

was raging. Distinction on the field of battle would mean restoration of their titles of nobility and property as well as their receiving the rank and pay of officers. The Russian Minister of Military Affairs had to decide the issue and then the Czar must give his approval. Nothing came of this matter until Humboldt appeared on the scene and intervened. Were it not for his meeting with Humboldt, Witkiewicz might well have spent the rest of his life in Orsk.

Humboldt's Road to Orenburg

Humboldt's long deferred trip to Russia (conceived as early as 1794) finally became a reality in 1829. A member of the Russian Academy of Sciences since 1818, Humboldt held a high opinion of Russian science and maintained contact with a large number of Russian scientists.

When he reached St. Petersburg, he was feted everywhere and dined with the imperial family almost everyday. "Everywhere I go they offer me money like hay and anticipate every wish," he wrote. Humboldt received twenty thousand rubles for the trip; over seven thousand remained unspent, which he requested be used to facilitate the research of two young Russian scholars, Helmersen and Hofman.

Even though the trip had been scaled down from his earlier grandiose dreams, the twenty-five-week journey in 1829 took Humboldt across nearly every part of European Russia.

Because the Russian surveillance of their guest was so thorough, we know that the Humboldt party (starting from Berlin) covered 11,500 miles – 500 miles on rivers with 53 river crossings – and that they stayed at 568 different accommodations and were transported by 12,250 horses.

These Russian documents indicate that the police kept a vigilant eye on Humboldt's every movement. His itinerary was prearranged in every detail, and throughout the entire trip Humboldt and his party were provided with German or French speaking guides and monitors, entertained by pre-chosen local officials, scholars, and mining engineers. Nothing was left to chance.

Secret reports were submitted covering all of Humboldt's activities. I should like to quote from the surveillance letter of the mayor of a small town in Siberia, which reads as though it came from the pen of Gogol.

To the Governor General:

A few days ago a certain German, named Humboldt, arrived here, a slim fellow of unimpressive stature, but since he presented a letter from Your Excellency asking me to be polite to him and extend him all possible assistance...I followed your orders and treated the German accordingly...However, I take the liberty to inform Your Excellency that this man seems to me a highly suspicious and even dangerous type. I disliked him from the start, he's been com-

plaining and turning up his nose at my food that I offered him from the goodness of my heart He wouldn't even touch a delicious cordial of my own concoction...thus treating slightly my person and my hospitality...Moreover, he clearly disdained the most respected citizens and civil servants of our town and allegedly called them idiots. On the other hand, he's always been seen in the company of those political criminals, the Poles, who have been sent to our town for resettlement and placed under my steadfast supervision... I humbly ask Your Excellency's forgiveness for my being so bold...but these relations with the political criminals could not escape my attention, all the more so that in recent days after a long meeting that he held with those Poles, they all went out at night to a nearby mountain and from a case that they were carrying with them took out some implement resembling a long pipe, which to my mind...looked like a large cannon, placed said cannon on a tripod-shaped gun-carriage pointing at our town, and then every person in the company took his turn by coming over to it and taking aim at the town. Seeing a danger to the inhabitants of our town, for whose safety I am responsible and taking into account that all the structures are wooden, I have immediately ordered the internal guard, consisting of six soldiers and one junior officer, to have arms at the ready and keep a constant watch on the activities of this German. If the incendiary plans of this individual should prove a menace to us, we would gladly give our lives for Our Czar and Holy Russia.

FIGURE 27-2. Jan Witkiewicz in an Eastern costume. As Fig. 1



Known throughout the world as an impassioned opponent of slavery, for the trip to Russia Humboldt was required by the Czarist authorities to limit his public comments to scientific matters. After all, serfdom was the law of the land, and political prisoners in manacles were widely visible. Humboldt had been obliged to write to the Russian Minister of Finances, "It will be well understood that we confine ourselves to observations of an inanimate nature, and avoid everything connected with the government or the conditions of the poorer classes." But, as we shall see, Humboldt made efforts to help both Polish exiles and Russian victims of autocracy.

It was on September 19, 1829 on the return loop of his trek through the Urals and Siberia that the Humboldt expedition reached Orsk. Humboldt proceeded the same day to Orenburg, but his companions, the geologist Rose and the botanist Ehrenberg, remained at Orsk to collect samples and data, and Witkiewicz accompanied them. Members of the group rejoined Humboldt at Orenburg where they stayed six days from September 20 to 26 before leaving for the Caspian Sea.

Humboldt was deeply impressed with the handsome young Pole's knowledge of the geography, ethnography, and languages of the area, and he pitied Witkiewicz's fate. He was also astounded by the fact that Witkiewicz – an exile in a distant outpost – had in his possession one of his works: volume three of "Essai politique sur la Nouvelle Espagne."

Back in St. Petersburg on November 13, Humboldt intervened with the Czar on behalf of Witkiewicz and the other Poles. It is possible that Humboldt met with the Czar and spoke directly to him on this matter; it is certain that he wrote to the Czar twice to help Witkiewicz. Humboldt's letters to Nicholas I – one dated November 26, 1829, one undated – were responsible for getting the Polish conscripts promoted to the rank of junior officers.

Now as a second lieutenant, Witkiewicz was granted the all-essential freedom of movement previously denied him, as well as immediate opportunities for advancement.

Highly ambitious and a personal friend of the Czar's, Major General Vasilii Perovsky, the new Governor General of the province of Orenburg, had his own program for expanding Russian influence in Central Asia. In need of a clever secret agent, Perovsky appointed Lieutenant Witkiewicz to his personal staff as adjutant, claiming that the young Pole knew more about the region than any other officer past or present and that his negotiating skills were indispensable.

Lt. Witkiewicz was now widely used for gathering intelligence among the Muslim tribes along the frontier between Russia and Kazakhstan. He traveled freely throughout the entire region, often wearing native garb, sometimes in disguise. In 1835 he penetrated by unknown routes as far as the emirate of

Bukhara – an unheard of exploit – sounding out the emir’s possible support for Russia and preparing extensive maps for future use.

Interested in the regional independence movements, at home among the local tribes, and accepted by their leaders, Witkiewicz was sometimes suspected of being a double agent; for this was a time of romantic Byronic attachments to the political causes and struggles for independence of captive nations and people. Here is an eyewitness account:

With clean-shaven head, dressed in Tartar clothing, he used to mount a camel and penetrate the steppes in the company of Bashkirian caravans... During his reconnaissance trips in the steppes he would appear in various Asiatic costumes, and in keeping with Koran would join in prayers many times a day, saying them in the language of the region he happened to be in so faultlessly that he was considered as one of them.

If Witkiewicz had wished to flee, he obviously could have done so. In fact, he was even granted a leave to visit his family in Lithuania at Christmas in 1835; he went in December with his Kirghiz servant and in January returned to his post in Orenburg, realizing his career lay with Russia.

Jan Witkiewicz becomes a Player in the Great Game as the Result of Meeting Humboldt

At the time of Humboldt’s trip, Russia was in the process of becoming an expansive empire and the dominant power in Central Asia. Russia’s rise to great power status alarmed Great Britain, concerned for its own commercial supremacy in the region and for the security of its Indian colonies, and caused intense rivalry in Anglo-Russian relations. From its base in India Britain sought to extend its control into Afghanistan and to oppose the intrusion of Russian influence there. This imperial struggle, involving conspiratorial moves in a shadowy battle of wits, was called by the British “The Great Game,” and it would eventually lead to one of the worst catastrophes ever to befall a British army. For a brief but crucial period the obscure Polish political prisoner Jan Witkiewicz became a major Russian player in “The Great Game.”

At this time Afghanistan was divided into different feudal centers – Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, and Peshavar – each ruled over by a different leader. Dost Muhammad, the Emir of Kabul – an intelligent and farsighted statesman – began the struggle for the reunification of the Afghan territories, a move encouraged by the Russians and opposed by the British as a threat to their Indian frontiers.

Acting on the basis of Witkiewicz’s observations and advice, Perovsky decided to counter the British actively. The unification of Afghanistan and its

alliance with Persia now became the main object of Russia's diplomacy in Central Asia. When the Persians laid siege to Herat, the Russians supported them. Because of his enormous skill as a linguist and diplomat, Witkiewicz at the age of twenty-seven was made head of the Russian mission to Kabul. He first went to Teheran to confer with Count Simonich, the Russian Minister to Persia.

On his way to Kabul on November 1, 1837 he was spotted in eastern Persia by Major Henry Rawlinson, who became suspicious of his activities and rushed back to Teheran some 700 miles away to inform the British legation about meeting an enigmatic Russian who was en route to Kabul. Since September the British already had their secret agent at the court of Dost Mohammed in Kabul in the person of Captain Alexander Burnes, (who had come up from India posing as head of the British trading mission.

As Witkiewicz rode into Kabul on December 19, 1837, he was the first ever Russian representative in Afghanistan. In the high style of "the Great Game," Lt. Witkiewicz was invited by his rival, Captain Burnes, to Christmas dinner, where the Pole made a most favorable impression both because of his fluency in Turkish, Persian, and French as well as in many Central Asian languages and also because of his diplomatic skills and gentlemanly behavior.

In Kabul Witkiewicz succeeded in winning over Dost Mohammad and in advancing the Persian-Kandahar alliance that would unite Afghanistan and Persia in an anti-British coalition and check British expansion in Central Asia. But finally, as war seemed close to breaking out between the two great powers, the British Prime Minister Palmerston insisted that Simonich and Witkiewicz be withdrawn and that the Russians declare that they did not have the authority to negotiate the Persian-Kandahar pact in the Czar's name.

Unwilling to risk a war with Britain, the Russians backed off. Witkiewicz – a pawn in the game – was recalled to St. Petersburg, where he was promoted to rank of captain, warmly received in military and diplomatic circles, and declared in line for the award of an order and transfer to the guards.

But a week after his return, on May 8, 1839 Captain Witkiewicz was found dead in his hotel room. The official account was that he shot himself after having destroyed all his Afghanistan notes.

His suicide could have been motivated by his feeling that he had been repudiated by the Russian Foreign Minister Nesselrode as "an adventurer" and his brilliant strategy for an anti-British coalition scuttled at the last minute.

Or Witkiewicz might have been driven to suicide by shame and guilt because a fellow Polish exile called him a traitor for serving the Russian empire while Poland remained captive. On the other hand, he could equally

well have been attempting to foment trouble between Russia and Britain so that Poland would have the opportunity – in the resulting chaos – to regain its independence.

Other theories hold that Witkiewicz was recalled to St. Petersburg to be murdered on the orders of the Russian government as a player who knew too much or because of his alleged double-dealing with the British.

FIGURE 27-3. Jan Witkiewicz. Pencil sketch in the Tatras Museum, Zakopane. Photograph by K. Goradowska.



The mystery of Witkiewicz's death remains unsolved. Was he a hero or a traitor, a devious agent or a disillusioned one? Was he a suicide or the victim of a political murder? Why and in what circumstances did all the documents relating to his life and activities disappear without a trace?

Jan Witkiewicz was a product of the age of Romanticism, a hero in quest of great adventure as well as the victim of diplomatic intrigues. In this he resembled his British counterpart, Burnes, who was the also a master of languages and disguises. For his services to Britain, Burnes was knighted, but along with his brother, Sir Alexander was murdered in Kabul by the insurgent

crowd in November 1841 at the start of a disastrous war in which the British lost some 20,000 troops.

Because of his views on Russian autocracy, hatred of all forms of oppression, and compassion for its victims, Humboldt had identified strongly with the fate of the young Polish exiles deprived of liberty to move about or to express themselves freely. The Witkiewicz episode was one he did not want to talk about later on. "The Russian journey," Humboldt wrote, "has changed my outlook on life more than any of my explorations. It made me more serious and conscious of my age." Humboldt's responses to his Russian journey were varied. The scientific accomplishments of the trip were immensely gratifying: all across Russia observation stations on earth magnetism were established. Extensive studies on Russia's geology resulted; diamonds were discovered in the Urals; and thousands of mineral and rock specimens were collected.

We know, however, that he followed the subsequent destiny of Jan Witkiewicz. He was regularly informed by various people he had met in Russia about the young Pole's exploits. Witkiewicz's enterprise, valor, brains, and charisma were human qualities that Humboldt prized highly. In the Preface to the first volume of the three that constitute his great work on Central Asia published in 1843, Humboldt recalls Witkiewicz, mentions how talented he was, and laments his tragic fate.

Always generous to others, and yet a skillful courtier, Humboldt maintained his good relations with the Russian authorities and at the same time succeeded in helping not only Witkiewicz and his fellow Poles, but others as well, including many Russians. But that is another story.