

Desertions of Poles from the Tsarist Army and the Attitude of the Independent Caucasian Peoples towards Runaways

The Polish subject literature, to substantiate the assertion that Poles served against their will in the tsarist army and that they were used to conquer the Caucasus despite their moral convictions, references the Poles' supposed mass desertions (Chodubski 1984: 4; Chodubski 1994: 61; Chodubski 2003d: 91; Chodubski 2005a: 22; Chodubski 2005b: 178; Miłoszowie 1979: 72; Zwierz 1996: 136). No source documents are usually cited to support this position, nor are calculations presented to demonstrate that desertions by Poles were somehow particularly more frequent than those by, for example, Russians, as well as being politically motivated.

Occasionally, as evidence of the mass desertion of those conscripted into the tsarist army after the November Uprising, certain information is cited regarding 500 Poles who were said to have fled tsarist units and joined the Persian army in the 1830s (Chodubski 2003d: 92; Darski; Piwnicki 2001: 48). However, it is worth verifying the source of this information. It first appeared in the second volume of the work by Polish missionary Manswet Aulich, *Dziennik dwunastyletniej misji apostołskiej na Wschodzie* (Diary of a Twelve-Year Apostolic Mission in the East), published in Kraków in 1850. The author, referring to the year 1837, wrote that a certain inhabitant of Lviv had come to him and asked him to go to Persia on a mission to perform spiritual service among Poles of whom, he claimed, as many as 500 were said to be enlisted in the army of the Persian Shah. He also claimed that these Poles had been without a priest for eight years already. Aulich then described his arrival in Persia in 1838, at which time the missionary reached the town of Khoy in north-western Iran. He found that there were up to 80 Poles and Russians in the area, serving in the army of the town's *basha* (i.e. administrator). However, during the missionary's stay, an order arrived from the state authorities to transfer all Poles and Russians to Tebriz, and this was carried out. The Polish priest then set out to visit a Chaldean bishop who lived in the city of Salmas and had about 500 Catholics in his parish. There he was informed that his efforts had been in vain, for the Shah of Persia had signed a treaty with the Tsar stipulating that Poles and Russians who had fled the Russian army and were living in Persia would be expelled to Russia. Wanting to confirm this for himself, Aulich travelled

to Tebriz. In that city, the Russian consul confirmed the information that he had previously received. The missionary also received news from Tehran that Persian forces had attacked the 500 Poles residing in the city. Some of them were said to have perished, some to have fled to India and Arabia, and others to have been handed over to Russia. Aulich returned thus to Istanbul, finding no reason why he should remain in Persia (Aulich 1850: 28–29). From the missionary's memoirs, therefore, it is not possible to deduce either the scale of Poles' desertions from the tsarist army or their numbers in the Persian army, as information on the number of Poles is limited to only two locations: the area around the city of Khoy and Tehran. Moreover, the missionary did not mention anything about the Poles residing in Tehran being soldiers. This could have been the case, but it is not inferable from the source text. For our consideration, the relevant information within the memoirs is that by 1837 eight years had passed with the Poles residing in Persia without a priest. As such, they could not have been November insurrectionists from 1830–1831. They had to have been in Persia by 1829 and cannot be considered 1830s deserters. Most likely, they had been prisoners and deserters from the Russo-Persian War of 1826–1828.

It should be noted that there are also identified cases of Poles living in Western Europe voluntarily joining the service of the Persian Shah. However, we have no documents proving this constituted a large group. Rather, these should be regarded as single cases. One such person, for example, was described by Wojciech Sulewski. The said individual went by Izydor Borowski, a legionnaire of the Polish Legions in Italy, who later took part in the French operation against Santo Domingo. The Pole settled there and joined the locals, cooperating with Simón Bolívar, among others. After a few years, however, he returned to Europe. In France, he learned that in Persia they were looking for experienced officers. He and his colleagues thus set off for that country, where Borowski went about forming infantry units. He also took part in a punitive expedition against the Arabs and in operations against the Afghans in 1826 (Sulewski 1973: 40–41).

Diaries are an important source for researching Poles' attitudes towards desertion. It would be expected that first and foremost those sent to exile for patriotic activities would have a positive attitude towards escape, yet it is difficult to distinguish such a position in their works. One opinion regarding escapes can be found, for example, in writings by Stanisław Pilat,¹ who, for his participation in the November Uprising, was punitively conscripted into the Russian army in the Caucasus and served there until 1835. He provided the story

1 It should be noted that Stanisław Pilat's memoirs were published in Lviv, so the author was not restricted by Russian censorship.

of a comrade-in-arms planning an escape to the Circassians. From the way this case was presented, it is clear that it represented a unique and rare phenomenon. The author, in an attempt to justify the intentions of the desertion-set man, wrote that he was not an ethnic Pole, but a polonised, Muslim Tatar. Stanisław Pilat advised his acquaintance against going over to the side of the Circassians and believed that it would be better for him to remain in the ranks of the Russian army. He argued that the Circassians were a “barbarous people even in their own cause” (Pilat 1862: 130). The memoir author stated that among the Poles serving alongside him in his unit, plans to go over to the side of the independent mountaineers initially did appear among soldiers, but these were quickly abandoned. The reason for this was that the independent mountaineers had surrendered two deserters in exchange for their own comrades in Russian captivity (Pilat 1862: 134). Pilat’s diary is characteristic in that he describes Russia and the tsar negatively, while manifesting a lack of sympathy for the peoples living in the Caucasus in parallel.

There were of course some Poles who sympathised with the independent mountaineers and expressed this in their memoirs. The most prominent examples are Wincenty Gedeon Giedroyć and Mateusz Gralewski. However, even they did not decide to join Shamil’s forces and instead served in the tsarist army well enough to be promoted to the rank of officer. Relating a clash between the Russian army and forces of the independent mountaineers at Chokh aul in 1849, Gralewski wrote that 200 soldiers fled at the time,² among whom Poles and Ukrainians were the most numerous (Gralewski 2015: 315), although without specifying whether they deserted over to Shamil. But even this author wrote at the end of his memoirs with undisguised regret that Poles did not flee to the independent mountaineers:

Before 1830 the Poles, having rarely come into contact with the Caucasians could explain themselves in that the mountaineers’ battles, resembling border skirmishes, did not yet define the people’s potential. However, after 1830, especially during the period of Shamil’s imamate, not uniting with them, while remaining in the invader’s ranks, albeit without the intent of killing the freedom-seeking peoples, was more than a mistake; it was an outward contradiction of the ideal they represented. There were no doubt personalities to whom inspiration indicated the correct path, nonetheless, unsupported by the whole, they squandered this sonorous manifestation of God’s voice. (Gralewski 2015: 579)

² This number of 200 soldiers who were to desert at Chokh aul seems inflated in the light of Wiesław Caban’s calculations, which will be discussed later in the publication.

Residing among the independent Circassians Teofil Łapiński, on the other hand, did describe in his memoirs a case of desertion from the tsarist army that took place in 1857. At the time, 166 privates were said to have escaped from a Russian camp (such a large number given by Łapiński is questionable, but it is not pertinent here). The author stated additionally that there were very few Poles and Ruthenians among them, only eight, while the vast majority were Russians and Tartars (Lapinskij 1995: 345). It should be borne in mind, of course, that this is one individual account and concerns the western part of the North Caucasus. However, it illustrates an important point – even the arrival of a Polish detachment, whose commander was cooperating with representatives of the Polish national camp centred around Prince Adam Czartoryski, did not spur Poles' desertions from the tsarist army. It is also difficult to argue that the increase in escapes was influenced by the appearance in the Caucasus of Czartoryski's envoys, whose task was, among other things, to goad Poles into fleeing to the independent mountaineers. The Princes Czartoryski Library has preserved the *Odezwa do Polaków* (Pronouncement to the Poles) that Ludwik Zwierkowski took to the Caucasus in 1844. It read:

Providing good will our duty is simple. Abandon the enemy ranks and the Moskals themselves, persuade others to flee. Destroy warehouses, war supplies. Sparl gunpowder, kill military horses. Exterminate the enemy. Sabotage roads, bridges, and army buildings. Run hither to the mountains with weapons and cartridges. Every such deed will be glory for a Pole, and after such a deed, every individual will be able to tell themselves, I serve my homeland rightly, I fulfil my duty. (Czajkowski 1844a)

During the Crimean War, an ostensibly convenient occasion for desertion, agents financed by Adam Czartoryski's camp informed their superiors about the small number of Polish runaways within the Caucasus. One such report was referred to by Andrzej Furier: "Overall, the hundred or so deserters who have turned up to date have long since been sent back to the minister of war. [...] Generally Moskals, Tartars, but very few Poles" (Furier 2009: 194). Polish historians have counted only a few cases of desertion over to the Turkish side during the Crimean War (Caban 2001a: 742). Similar conclusions are found in the diaries of tsarist generals. In such diaries, for example, the chief of staff of the Caucasus Army and later minister of war Dmitry Milyutin recorded that "the Poles were calm throughout the Crimean War" (Milyutin 1999: 47).

Polish desertions were so few that some members of the Hôtel Lambert began to realize that Poles could not constitute an independent force in the

region against the Russians. One such individual was Ludwik Bystrzonowski, who believed that an operation in the Caucasus could be successful if Muslims, Russians, and Poles acted together. Here he did not have in mind deserter Poles from the tsarist army, but rather Poles transported to the Caucasus from Western Europe (Caban 2001: 170). Reality thus verified Czartoryski's assumptions, who in the 1830s was still convinced of the possibility of instigating mass desertions among Polish soldiers.

The fact that escapes by Poles were not numerous (or at least not more frequent than among other nationalities) is also evidenced by reports of Russian commanders. In the 1840s, General Pavel Grabbe reported to his superiors that, although there were instances of Poles siding with the independent mountaineers, the majority of soldiers sent from Poland were distinguished by their exemplary behaviour (Klyčnikov/Lazaryan 2019: 6).

It is significant that researchers maintaining that desertions of soldiers of Polish origin from the tsarist army in the Caucasus were numerous do not provide data and rely on generalizing references like "frequent escapes". In contrast, reliable calculations, to the extent of available sources, were presented by Wiesław Caban, who pointed out that the number of Polish fugitives under Shamil had been hitherto exaggerated in publications (Caban 2005: 55). He cited data from the Caucasus Corps that shows, for example, that in 1833 (when representatives of the Hôtel Lambert planned to create an 18,000-strong Polish army in the Caucasus consisting of deserters from the tsarist army) 123 people, that is approximately 1.2% of the Poles serving in the unit, attempted to escape (Caban 2001: 169). Therefore, in the year in which Poles with particularly independence-minded views – participants of the November Uprising – served in the region, the rate of escapes was only slightly higher than the average rate for the tsar's army, regardless of a deserter's nationality. Indeed, between 1825 and 1850, it amounted to 0.7% of the army's total forces, meaning on average 6,235 people fled from garrisons across Russia each year (Caban 2001a: 740). As for the frequency of escapes by soldiers of Polish origin, according to the historian, these became increasingly rare from 1833 onwards (Caban 2001: 169). They did not, therefore, differ significantly from the average for the Russian army as a whole.

Based on Caban's research, it is possible to advance the thesis that desertions were a marginal phenomenon. A certain mindset likely prevailed among Polish soldiers, which was often expressed in diaries. It was connected with the dream of returning to the fatherland. The only way to realise this, however, was to serve a prescribed period in the army. If life among the independent mountaineers became the case, a return to Poland proved unrealistic. For this

reason, only a few decided to take such a desperate step as to escape. The relevant observation here is that this was conditioned primarily by arduous service and not by sympathy towards the peoples fighting against the Russians. Nikolai Pokrovsky, a researcher into the history of Shamil's state, found that, based on reports from the tsarist general staff, deserters most often fled after the commencement of summer processions, when drilling became particularly burdensome. They stayed in the forests for as long as it was possible to feed on the fruits there. Once foraging became no longer possible, many deserters returned to their regiments, albeit some did go over to Shamil (Pokrovskij N.I. 2000: 380). In the opinion of historian Oleg Matveyev, too, an analysis of archival material allows one to conclude that the majority of desertions from the tsarist army were in no way related to the ideals behind the slogan 'For Our Freedom and Yours', but rather to matters of livelihood: crimes committed in the line of duty and the desire to avoid punishment, negligence, or dissatisfaction with harsh living conditions (Matveev 2008: 113).

It should also be borne in mind that a portion of the deserters who went over to the mountaineers did return to the tsar's ranks after some time. This was mentioned, for example, by Karol Kalinowski, in his description of a group of deserters engaged in ferrying former soldiers back to Russian forts (Kalinowski 2017: 299–309). Returns of Polish deserters were recorded by, among others, French traveller Edouard Taitbout de Marigny. This individual recorded that he had seen several Poles who had come to Gelendzhik, claiming that their misfortune with the Russians was better than what had befallen them under the Circassians who treated them like slaves (de Marin'i 2002: 96). Other fugitives in turn were handed over by the local population to the Russians for money (there is no material based on which it would be possible to establish even an estimate of this practice's scale). In this way, for some mountaineers, this procedure turned into a profitable activity. It was not uncommon for them to also receive salt or food in exchange for deserters (Arsanukajewa 2012: 123). Even long-term residence among the Circassians did not guarantee fugitives their acceptance. In 1854, Vice Admiral Lazar Serebryakov informed the Caucasus Corps command that mountaineers had handed over a fugitive Pole and participant of the November Uprising, Franciszek Dłuski, who had lived with them for 15 years. In exchange, the Circassians received 10 roubles (Matveev 2008: 114). Starting a family and having children also did not shield deserters from being handed over to the Russians. A known case is that of one Łapicki, who lived among the Circassians for 9 years, married a local woman and had children, yet was still handed over by the independent Circassians at Novorossiysk (Matveev 2008: 114–115).

The mother of Roman Sanguszko,³ who was himself exiled to the Caucasus for taking part in the November Uprising, passed on in her memoirs the information she had received from her son regarding the above practice. By her account, the Circassians were a savage people. Several Poles decided to join them in the early 1830s. As Klementyna Sanguszkowa recounted, the most prominent of these was Major Bronowski (she did not mention his name, but probably Stanisław is implied), a participant in several battles on the side of the Circassians, whom he advised. He was later to arrange with them his transport to Turkey. In the end, however, the Circassians betrayed the Pole and sold him to the Russians for 300 roubles (Sanguszkowa 1927: 92). The practice of the Adyghe treating fugitives and prisoners from the Russian army as slaves (irrespective of their ethnic origin) was so well-established that Teofil Łapiński, who in the late 1850s resided in the part of the Western Caucasus not yet occupied by the Russians, estimated their number at around 2,400–2,500 (Łątka 1988: 223) (a similar calculation was made by Ludwik Widerszal (Widerszal 2011: 80)). Describing their situation, he stated that a defector was considered by the Circassians as the property of whoever came across him first. If the deserter possessed a horse, weapons, and money, he was stripped of everything. Even the clothing on his body was rarely left to him. The Polish commander reported that a Circassian would lead such a person home, shave his head, give him a tattered outfit, and keep him on the farmstead as a slave until deciding to sell him. A deserter was usually kept if he was a good craftsman, a blacksmith or saddler for example. In such cases, the householder would buy him the necessary tools, set up a workshop, and profit from his work. Those lacking a trade were instead used for work in the fields, tending cattle, and performing all manner of farm chores (Lapinskij 1995: 144).

Accounts of deserters being treated as slaves by the Caucasian peoples are also found in documents of the Russian command. One example is an 1838 report by General Nikolai Raevsky⁴ prepared for General Yevgeny Golovin.⁵ He reported therein that in most cases, deserters were turned into slaves who were then sold at markets in the Ottoman Empire, though some did participate in battles against Russians. According to Raevsky, the export of Poles from the

3 Roman Stanisław Sanguszko (1800–1881) – prince, Polish social activist. He was exiled to Siberia for his participation in the November Uprising, but thanks to his family's efforts was transferred to the Caucasus. He was promoted to officer for his distinction in fighting against the local population.

4 Nikolai Raevsky (1801–1843) commanded the Black Sea Shore Line from 1839 to 1841.

5 Yevgeny Golovin (1782–1858) was commander of the Caucasus Independent Corps from 1837 to 1842.

Caucasus to the Middle East decreased significantly when in the second half of the 1830s the Russians strengthened the blockade of Circassia and increased the number of coastal forts. Because of this, the price for slaves began falling (Matveev 2008: 115). General Marcellin Olshevsky, on the other hand, wrote in a report to his superiors that during the 1834 expedition beyond the Kuban an unusually large number of Poles fled, but that escapes decreased when the Poles discovered that the Shapsugs mistreat them and assign them to the heaviest farm labour (Arsanukajewa 2012: 124).

When Polish-English plans (drawn up mainly by Hôtel Lambert partisans) to exploit the Circassians against the Russians were drawn up, David Urquhart and James Bell began lobbying the latter to treat better the Poles residing among them, as they were to be used to fight tsarist troops. The British were said to have been informed by Poles serving in the Russian ranks that if they were provided with a good reception among the mountaineers, the number of desertions would inevitably increase. This was of no interest to the locals, however, as they valued slaves too highly to give them up, even in the name of fighting a common enemy. At most, they agreed to resell Polish slaves to the British for the equivalent of 4 pounds sterling and saw no possibility of releasing them without financial compensation to the owners (Widerszal 2011: 81). In contrast, John Longworth, another associate of David Urquhart who had spent several months among the Circassians, observed that they made no distinction between Poles and Russians and sought to sell anyone to the Ottoman Empire (Longworth 1840: 195).

Polish slaves found their way to the Ottoman Empire not only as a commodity supplied by the Circassians. Their arrival was also a consequence of the Russo-Turkish wars, especially those of 1828–1829 and 1853–1856, and the turning of prisoners of war into slaves. The scale of this phenomenon must have been considerable, for even one Polish émigré newspaper mentioned it: “A not inconsiderable number of Poles finds itself in Turkey, prisoners of war from the Russian campaign against the Turks, who have been sold as slaves in various places” (*Wiadomości* 1842: 322). Polish pro-independence circles recognised this problem and began buying them up. In the early 1840s, on the initiative of Adam Czartoryski, land was acquired near Istanbul and a village – Adampol – was built on it,⁶ where Poles bought out of slavery, some of whom were deserters from the Russian army stationed in the Caucasus, began settling (Widerszal 2011: 91).

6 Modern-day Polonezköy.

Occasionally, in descriptions of the phenomenon of the trade in Polish slaves, one can discern their authors' efforts to specifically exalt Poles and demonstrate their uniqueness. For example, in the opinion of Andrzej Chodubski, Poles were sold at above-average prices because they were considered exceptionally valuable. The researcher argued that they were sold for as much as £4 (most probably the £4 Chodubski writes of relates to the price offered by the Circassians to David Urquhart for buying up Poles, though the author did not specify this), while slaves from Asia or Africa were supposed to cost no more than half a pound (Chodubski 1984: 4; idem 1988: 36; idem 2000: 413; idem 2003d: 92; idem 2005a: 22; idem 2005b: 178). The same information was repeated by Grzegorz Piwnicki (Piwnicki 2001: 48). However, one should object to the reasoning that a slave was sold at a high price just for being Polish. What was most important was his skills and state of health, which influenced the future capacity of using him in farm work. This is evidenced by the case of Karol Kalinowski, who recorded in his memoirs that he was bought by his owner for one ram due to being in poor health (Kalinowski 2017: 52). Moreover, Baron Fyodor Tornau, a Russian officer who resided with the mountaineers as an intelligence gatherer in the 1830s, noted (regarding 1838) that the Ubykhs did not value Polish slaves over a single horse, and sometimes even paid for one with two Poles (Tornau 1999: 479).

There is a strong conviction among Polish authors writing about the Caucasus that Poles were not partitioners and aggressors against the locals of their own volition, but were forced out of necessity, which concurrently exacerbated the tragedy of Polish soldiers serving in the tsarist ranks. I discern in this a clear manifestation of the influence of the Polish ethno-political myth. It determines the view that Poles could not have cooperated with the 'historical enemy' in conquering other peoples, including possible contemporary allies in the fight against him (i.e. the Promethean assumptions already mentioned). At the same time, an image of the widespread "suffering" and "anguish" of Polish servicemen who fought for Russia in the Caucasus is created, although there is no methodological basis for it. In this context, I believe that Oleg Matveyev's thesis that Poles serving in tsarist ranks in the Caucasus tried to maintain their identity not in opposition to the tsar and through solidarity with the mountaineers, but above all by preserving their Catholic faith, should be considered correct (Matveyev 2008: 119).