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THE BULWARK MYTH

The term “bulwark” is one of the notions which have played an important part in the development of Polish historical consciousness. In the 16th and 17th centuries it suited the concrete reality connected with the geopolitical situation of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Although in the subsequent centuries it was relegated to the category of myths, it did not lose its significance. On the contrary, the term “bulwark” made a dazzling career in the period when the state once given this nickname, for many years (1795–1918) disappeared from the political map of Europe.

It would take many pages merely to enumerate the titles of Polish and foreign works that from the 15th century onwards have described Poland as a wall, fence, bulwark, shield or fortress of Christianity. However, for a long time the main term that was used was the Latin one, and the first attempts to polonize it were made relatively late. This also goes for the appearance of the word *antemurale* in the Polish version, *przedmurze*. Not until the translation of *The Old Testament* made by Jakub Wujek (1599), did the term appear, e.g.: “a wall and a bulwark (*przedmurze*) will be erected there” (Isaiah), “and the bulwark (*przedmurze*) and wall were ruined together” (*Threnodies*).

All the data convince us that Poland started to be described as a bulwark in the middle of the 15th century. This was already after the death in 1444 of Ladislaus III, later called Ladislaus of Varna, at the moment when the Ottoman power disturbed the whole of Europe by advancing far into the Balkan Peninsula. It seems more interesting to look for an answer to the question who first gave Poland that name. Most historians have so far upheld the view that the name was given by the papal diplomacy, intent on involving Poland in a successive coalition mounted against the Sublime Porte. Hieronymus Lando, a papal legate, was said to

encourage the king in 1462 to conclude as soon as possible a peace treaty with the Teutonic Knights. This would allow Casimir Jagiellon to start a campaign against the Turks; this war, precisely, was to be waged by a country that was a shield, wall, and bulwark (*scutum, murus, antemurale*) of the whole of Christendom, shielding it effectively against the Tartars. Underlying all this was probably counsel, connected with a reproach: it would be better to start a crusade, conducted under the auspices of the Pope, than to be at war with a Christian order. Lando's words, however, drew a blank; Casimir Jagiellon was displeased with the legate's clear support for the Teutonic Knights in their dispute with Poland. And he was not at all eager to start a campaign against the Turks; the recent defeat at Varna (1444) was still fresh in everybody's mind.

The circumstances of the probable origin of the notion "bulwark" seem to be really exciting. In fact, due to the *Chronicle of Poland* written by Jan Długosz, we have got a precise date, which is something completely unusual in the history of terminology. Poland was called a wall and a shield by a papal diplomat who in this way wanted to involve her in his politics. This was accompanied by a sharp conflict between Cracow and Rome. However, everything seems to indicate that Polish diplomacy anticipated the papal initiative. At least since the end of the 14th century it attempted to inculcate on the Roman court the conviction that it was precisely loyal Poland, connected by a dynastic union with recently christened Lithuania, that had long fulfilled the role of the shield or the bulwark of the whole of Western Christendom. This contention was meant to neutralize the endeavours of Teutonic diplomacy which maintained that in the East of Europe it had to deal with a state that was in alliance with the pagans against the most loyal servants of the Church. Probably this is the reason why Jan Długosz in his *Chronicle* had reduced to 300 the number of the Tartars who took part in the Battle of Tannenberg on the Polish-Lithuanian side. The Teutonic sources, on the other hand, spoke of several tens of thousand Tartars. When after 1411 Ladislaus Jagiello and Witowt, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, established diplomatic contacts with the Sultan, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order (Heinrich von Plauen) accused both rulers of intending to stand up to the whole of Christendom in collusion with "the enemies of Christ's Cross".

Henceforward, almost until the Battle of Varna, charges were made that Poland co-operated with the Turks to the detriment of the Christian world; she was said to consent to the Ottoman invasion in Hungary in 1415. Polish diplomacy replied almost day by day with "pungent, telling formulations (in one of them the Teutonic monks were called the sons of the Devil)"¹.

The missionary deeds of Ladislaus Jagiello, the heroic death of his son at Varna, the warfare conducted by Casimir Jagiellon against the Tartars, all this allowed the Polish legate Tomasz Strzemiński to recall in Rome in 1450 the services of his sovereign who established a fortified wall "against the infidels" on the borders of his state. Four years later Pope Nicholas V heard the same thing from another Polish legate, Jan Lutek.

In this way the Poles tried to kill two birds with one stone, since the neutralization of the Teutonic propaganda went hand in hand with recalling the role played by Poland in the defence of Christianity (especially in the fight against the Tartars). The Polish diplomats thought that their argument would naturally incline the papacy to support Casimir Jagiellon in his dispute with the Teutonic Knights, as well as to subsidize Poland in her fight against the Tartars. Neither of these hopes came true. What is, however, most important for the subject of our discussion is the fact that it was precisely due to Polish and no other diplomacy "that the opinion of the role of loyal Poland as a bulwark or shield of Western Christendom was consolidated in the Roman curia and in Western Europe". This action of the Polish diplomacy "was dictated by the definite political needs of Jagiellonian Poland"².

Some scholars think that Długosz made Archbishop Lando repeat his own opinions. Many fragments of his *Chronicle* show that he regarded Poland as the bulwark of Christianity, a country always faithful to Rome, a stronghold of faith continually besieged by the pagans, one that was continually in such a critical situation that it was forced to be in alliance with pagan Lithuania against the Teutonic Knights and with the Tartars against the Turks. Even if Lando really pronounced the words attributed to him, they would be an echo of the opinions the Polish diplomats

¹ E. Potkowski, *Książka rękopiśmienna w kulturze Polski średniowiecznej (Manuscript Book in the Culture of Medieval Poland)*, Warszawa 1984, p. 60.

² M. Biskup, in: *Historia dyplomacji polskiej (A History of Polish Diplomacy)*, vol. I: *The middle of the 10th century — 1572*, ed. i d e m, Warszawa 1980, pp. 474–475.

used to express in Rome for several years. Seeing the speedy approach of the Turkish threat to the borders of their country, they voiced the opinion that this threat was also dangerous to the whole of Europe.

Claude Backvis was right in his observation that for Poles "their state was not [...] like that of many others", but a "Commonwealth", something great, "owned in common, something one should care for and feel responsible for"³. Hence it seems quite logical that "bulwark" was the term identified in Poland not only with the king or the said Commonwealth, but also her natural defenders and rulers, that is the gentry. Since the will of this estate determined the direction of Polish policy at the Sejm, and the breasts of the gentlemen replaced Polish fortresses, it was obvious that the gentry considered themselves to be the live bulwark of Christian Europe.

The idea of the bulwark of Christianity was mentioned as a rule, but it never occurred to any old-Polish writers to call their homeland the bulwark of Europe. In their statements the sense of the community of faith gained the upper hand of the European awareness. This, of course, does not mean that such authors as Stanisław Łubieński or Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro did not stress that the Poles shielded Europe with their own breasts from the barbarians.

The pressure of opinion was so strong that any person who did not consider himself as an inhabitant of the *antemurale*, placed himself as if outside the denominational (Christianity), or ethnic (the Polish nation in its gentry version) community. No wonder that the term "bulwark" was treated almost as a dogma by all Christians: both Catholics and Protestants. With the only significant difference that for the followers of Rome *antemurale* signified the defensive rampart of Catholicism and the struggle for this rampart was proof of loyalty and obedience to the Pope. On the other hand the heretics perceived in it almost exclusively a war waged in defence of the territory of the state imperilled by Islam representing a non-Christian power. However, despite those divergencies, the statements on the subject of *antemurale* do not always allow us to distinguish the denomination of the writer, or a painter, since in Rembrandt's "Portrait of a Polish

³ C. Backvis, *Szkice o kulturze staropolskiej (Essays on Old-Polish Culture)*, Warszawa 1975, p. 475.

Horseman” some historians of art perceive a profound allegory. This horseman, presented with the full realism of detail (arms, dress and even the horse’s harness and equipment, characteristic of Polish cavalrymen), was to be a symbol of a knight keeping watch for the whole of the Christian community of which Rembrandt — a Protestant — also felt to be a member.

The “bulwark” period, when Poland “was keeping watch for the West”, in fact removed her considerably from it. Trips to France, Italy or Germany became even less frequent than in the first half of the 17th century. Because of a shortage of money, caused by the general economic crisis, as well as engagement in continual warfare, the gentry had neither enough cash nor time to visit in great numbers western European universities. They gained their education in the battlefield, where they clashed with the Turks, Tartars and Muscovites. It was from there, and not Paris, Rome or London, that they brought home the models of their clothing and military equipment, a fact that in the eyes of Europe earned Poland the opinion of an extremely exotic (or even barbaric) country, the inhabitants of which relished in Eastern luxuries.

The Polish national costume (that is gentry dress, imitated also by the burghers) was made up of so many oriental (or orientalized) elements that according to a rumour Sobieski in Vienna made his soldiers tie straw strings round their arms, so that they would not be taken for the Turks. When in 1710 Rafał Leszczyński arrived “with his illustrious legation” to Istanbul, his hosts maliciously asked whether his retinue wore the costumes captured in 1683. Years later this masquerade produced comic effects, for when there were no Turkish captives, the local peasants were disguised as such.

Thus the “bulwark” period brought the gentry Commonwealth closer to the Orient, against which it was to defend Germany and France, Italy and England. As a consequence the most permanent trace that the *antemurale* left in our culture were eastern influences, for long reflected in the Polish national costume and the language. When in the era of Enlightenment a rapid and feverish attempt was made to keep Poland’s pace with the march of Western-European states, the oriental material culture, in Poland, too, started to be treated as something exotic. The 18th century would gladly shut it up in a curiosity shop; a similar fate

was destined for the conception of “bulwark”. It was to be relegated to the junk heap of history, and remain there side by side with other, out-dated or completely compromised myths.

In Western Europe nobody was any longer likely to believe that Poland was a shield defending it from Moscow, the more so, because the latter ever more strongly subordinated the Polish state to itself. In previous centuries the policy of Moscow was enclosed only within one part of the Continent, and its conflicts with Sweden, the Khanate of Crimea, the Sublime Porte or Poland did not influence the fate of Germany, France or England. By becoming one of European Powers in the 18th century, Russia started to co-determine the fate of Europe. Since the Eastern border of Europe moved thousands of miles eastward, the Polish bulwark changed into a useless fiction. If by *antemurale* we also understand an element of the isolation of “proper Europe” from what changes into Asia, it also ceased to exist. In the 18th century, due to Peter the Great’s reforms, the cultural isolation of Russia from the rest of Europe came to an end.

The weak and only partly independent Commonwealth could no longer play the role of a rampart, bulwark or wall, the functions that involved a necessity to represent an adequate military power. All that remained of the fortress-state once so much needed by Europe, was a complex of unforbidding fortifications. At the beginning of the 18th century Kamieniec Podolski, this “*antemurale christianitatis*, without being attacked by bombs, was falling into pieces of itself” — wrote Polish historian, Władysław Konopczyński⁴.

“A wise government — that is your best bulwark”, a French political writer, Gabriel Bonnet de Mably, reminded the Poles in the era of Enlightenment. The awareness of all these changes took long to reach the gentry society, which considered Poland, as of old, to be a bulwark, and associated with this idea their faith in Providence that keeps constant watch for their country. Political writers and historians, late-baroque preachers and *literati*, continued talking of the Christian Commonwealth, a *respublica christiana*, for which the Polish bulwark was to be at the same time a sword and a shield. Meanwhile, after the defeat of Turkey in Vienna (and in Párkány), and after halting its further

⁴ W. Konopczyński, *Polska a Turcja, 1683–1792 (Poland and Turkey, 1683–1792)*, Warszawa 1936, p. 84.

expansion, the notion of a Christian Commonwealth (even limited to the closest neighbours of the Sublime Porte) made no longer any sense. This notion, even in Central–Eastern Europe, used to be replaced by the term “a commonwealth of scholars” (*respublica litteraria*), understood as a community of intellectuals who did not acknowledge denominational divisions or political borders. The antithesis: Catholic (that is defender of the bulwark) — pagan (Turk or Tartar), changed into the opposition: civilized man (European) — barbarian (inhabitant of other continents).

However, in the Poland of the Saxon era, her place on the map of Europe was defined as before by the term: the bulwark of Christianity. It was considered to be to the greatest credit of the grand hetmans, Jan Karol Chodkiewicz and Jan Zamoyski, that they “supported the *antemurale christianitatis* with their own shoulders”. The question about the sense of the existence of the gentry state in the perspective of the philosophy of history was answered by writing that Poland defended Europe on the south from the pagans, and on the east from schismatists. This answer had two dimensions: temporal — we defended the interests of Europe on its south–eastern border, and metaphysical. If Poland was surrounded by the enemies of faith, this was due to the Supreme Will of the Divine Strategist, who designated for her such a place on the map of the world. The argument that Poland was called “*murus et antemurale* of the Holy Church” was used in the fight against the heretics (used e.g. by Rev. J. Pokorski in 1721).

The well-known and many times repeated thesis that the gentry defends the Commonwealth, the priest prays for it, and the peasant nourishes both these estates, found its counterpart in the ideas embracing the territory of all Europe. Some nations defended her, others — as for example Italians — took care above all of the ecclesiastical affairs, and others engaged in commerce and crafts. The latter were in Poland treated most slightly, just as her own merchants, who were treated with sheer contempt. In modern terminology, the notion of the role of a bulwark added to the sense of the gentry defenders’ own value. Their self-importance was great; since this estate considered themselves to be the best in the Commonwealth and the gentry nation was regarded as towering above others, while Europe, where they lived, outdistanced other continents, was it not obvious to many that the

Sarmatians were at the very top of the then world? They contributed to it the most valuable sacrifice of life, blood and property. Within their country this gave the gentry a moral right of dominating the peasants and burghers who shielded by the knights' swords could engage in commerce or the cultivation of the soil.

In contrast, it occurred to no Polish writer of the 16th–18th centuries to boast of our contribution to the development of general human culture, the influence of old–Polish culture on our neighbours, or our role as the intermediary between West and East. This seems, however, quite understandable: military successes or export of grain were more striking achievements than those of culture, which can be sized up only from the prespective of later centuries. It is true that as early as the 16th century barbaric Asia was set against civilized Europe, yet despite this the motif of the defence of its culture almost does not appear in anti–Turkish literary works. This state of affairs changed in the era of Enlightenment, but then, too, Polish publicists kept writing as before about the credit to be taken by their ancestors in the field of the defence of faith; the definition of the Polish bulwark as a rampart of West–European civilization was to come only in the 19th century.

The bulwark myth backed up the risky trust in the help that other countries would offer Poland in a conflict with her closest neighbours. While frequently and willingly talking of the indispensability of the Polish state to Europe, which would never let it be abolished, the gentry publicists would never consider whether and to what extent the Commonwealth needed contacts with other countries of this continent. The lack, up till the reign of Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski, of permanent Polish diplomatic representations abroad was characteristic of such an attitude. The Polish state was believed to be self–sufficient and politically superior to other systems.

Only at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century did the attitude to the *antemurale* traditions undergo a radical change. This was a consequence of two basic factors: the political situation of the Commonwealth, and the influence of the ideology of Enlightenment, which entailed a profound secularization of many ideas, including the opinion on the role of the bulwark in our history. It was then that the Polish politicians,

diplomats and writers, for the first time in the long history of the *antemurale*, asked about the price the Poles had paid for performing this role. This would have never occurred to the representatives of Saxon times, since they neither knew the idea of progress nor believed in the possibility of a downfall of their state due to its economic, systemic or military backwardness.

The Polish gentry of the era of counter-reformation accepted without any objections their place on the Continent, proud of the fact that it was them who were called upon by Providence to defend it. Despite continual warfare against their neighbours and the fact that Poland was compared to a besieged fortress or island, it never occurred to anybody to complain about her unfortunate geographical situation. It was only Stanisław Staszic who cried out with despair: "There is no other country in Europe as badly situated as Poland", thus expressing the current opinion of the politicians from his milieu⁵. Previously, the simple reflection that in case of attack of a fortress the place at the foot of its walls — that is the renowned "bulwark" — was the worst, would never enter anybody's head.

The myth of the great services of Poland as a shield of Europe was set against the indifference of the great European capitals to the three partitions (1772, 1793 and 1795) carried out by Poland's neighbours. The praise of the granary of the Continent was opposed to the bitter reality of a country which, although endowed with fertile land, was one of the poorest in this part of the world. "We have always been thought to be the feeder and the granary of Europe" — wrote Józef Wybicki, arguing that the erroneous policy of orientating the Polish economy exclusively towards agriculture ruined Polish crafts and commerce; the export of grain entailed the famine in the Polish countryside⁶. The place chosen — as it was believed in the 17th century — by God, turned out to be at the end of the nations' procession towards progress.

The questioning of the bulwark myth went hand in hand with a revision of the attitude to the Polish-Turkish wars, waged in the past. A question arose about the rationality of directing Polish military efforts precisely to the fight against the Sublime Porte.

⁵ S. Staszic, *Przestrogi dla Polski (Warnings to Poland)*, Kraków 1923, ed. S. Czarnowski, p. 8.

⁶ J. Wybicki, *Listy patriotyczne (Patriotic Letters)*, comp. K. Opałek, Wrocław 1955, p. 199.

The citizens of the state that became the victim of history reflected with bitterness upon the fact that a hundred years earlier their homeland was a bulwark shielding the whole of Europe. Although Vienna was thought to be a battle fought precisely in defence of this *antemurale*, the term itself was cited very rarely. Much more willingly the issue was raised of a debt of gratitude to Poland incurred by Western Europe. To repay it, the Western countries were expected to offer moral, military and political assistance to the recovery of Poland's independence lost at the end of the 18th century. This hope and claim were corroborated by poetry which was friendly to Poland and which frequently presented her as the homeland of the victor from Vienna, while Poles were described as sons or grandsons of John Sobieski. Up till the times of Tadeusz Kościuszko, Sobieski was the most popular representative of the Polish nation in other countries. The Poles themselves, throughout the 19th century, tried to convince Europe that they were the defenders and the bulwark of Western civilization.

According to Martyna Deszczyńska, the Christian dimension of the *antemurale* was effaced even before the final loss of the Polish state, while "there developed its geopolitical dimension, and emphasis was placed on its civilizing aspect"⁷. Henceforward Poles became not only the defenders of faith but — and above all — of a definite system of values that used to be linked with European civilization as well as the political interests of the West, as opposed to Asia, which mainly designated Russia. The process of seizing successive provinces of the Commonwealth by Russia, which began with Grzymułtowski's Treaty (1686), shortened the distance of Moscow from the West, with which this Eastern Empire was sooner or later bound to enter into a military conflict.

The third and last partition of the Commonwealth brought this dangerous neighbour even closer to the West of Europe. It seemed that in these conditions the only rescue could be sought in the reconstruction of the Polish *antemurale*. If not for the loss of the Polish state for the long period of captivity, the *antemurale*

⁷ M. Deszczyńska, *Wyobrażenie przedmurza w piśmiennictwie schyłku polskiego Oświecenia (The Conception of Bulwark in Polish Enlightenment Writings)*, "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. XCII, 2001, fasc. 3, p. 289. Cf. also A. Wierzbicki, *Wschód-Zachód w koncepcjach dziejów Polski (East-West in the Conceptions of the History of Poland)*, Warszawa 1984, *passim*.

would have been only discussed by specialists in the history of Polish-Turkish wars.

The listing alone of 19th century statements on the subject of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity would fill a whole book. There are many reasons for this, and some of them deserve special attention. One should not forget the special role played by the 19th century in shaping Polish historical consciousness. It was then that a new picture of Poland's national past arose and became popular, to this day being accepted by the majority of Poles, not excluding "professional" historians. Similar processes also took place in other countries: indeed, almost everywhere the rise of modern culture entailed a revision of the old views on the national history. Poland, however, differed from them because of the circumstances under which this revision took place: in captivity, under the vigilant eye of the historiography developed by the invaders who were glad to diminish Poland's achievements in the past, or outright slandered Polish history. It might be added that other countries of Europe which like Poland lost their states (from Bohemia to Ireland) were in a similar situation. However, they generally lost it long ago, while in Poland, at the beginning of her captivity, the historical consciousness was shaped also by the generations who well remembered the times of freedom. Moreover, in the 16th century, and even up till the middle of the next century, the Commonwealth of the gentry was one of the major European powers, which can by no means be said about Bohemia, Croatia or Ireland. Thus the myth of the bulwark of Christianity served to evoke a relatively recent past.

We have written about a myth, since the picture of the history of the bulwark fostered by Polish minds in the 19th century had little in common with the historical reality. One of the ideas that were then current was the conviction that Poland performed the role of the *antemurale christianitatis* throughout three centuries (15th — 17th) without any break. It was not remembered, or was willingly forgotten that Poland since the beginning of the 17th century continually and consistently refrained from joining the anti-Turkish league, and then — involved in war against the Sublime Porte — did not hesitate to resort to Tartar assistance when a war with other, Christian enemies came into play. John Sobieski, the victor of Chocim, Podhajce, and above all Vienna battles, had overshadowed the politician who in some periods

contemplated a reversal of alliances and a conclusion of peace with Turkey. This was connected with a conviction that Poland throughout her history had never invaded other countries. In fact it would be hard to associate the myth of a strictly defensive bulwark with the expeditions of Jan Zamoyski to Moldavia, the intervention in Moscow in the reign of Sigismund III Vasa, and the designs of John III Sobieski to secure a sovereign duchy in Moldavia for his offspring, etc.

The conviction that the role of Poland as the bulwark was exceptional was an essential part of its myth. Clerically-minded historians maintained that this was the will of God who interfered in Polish history again and again. More rationalistic researchers attributed Poland's role as the *antemurale* to the geopolitical situation of the Commonwealth. Both the former and the latter entertained no doubt that only Poland was a rampart of Catholicism, or in another version — Western civilization — reaching the farthest to the East. It was rarely mentioned that this role, at least in their own opinion, was also played by such countries as Spain, Hungary, Venetia or Austria.

To prove the extent of the influence of the political reality in the 19th century on the ideological content of the bulwark myth we may cite that in the pre-partition period it never occurred to anybody to derive any anti-German arguments from the *antemurale*. On the contrary, it was supposed to defend in the first place the German Reich from the invasion of the Turks, Tartars or Moscow. Since the Prussian Homage until the first partition, the western border of the Commonwealth was one of the most peaceful, and if there were any invasions from the North, they were conducted by Sweden. Although in the critical period of the "Deluge" (1655–1660) the Elector of Brandenburg rose up treacherously against the Polish king whose vassal he was, in vain would we seek Ducal Prussia or Brandenburg in the tapeworm-long list of enemies with whom the Polish bulwark of Christianity had to fight fierce battles. It was only due to the processes of germanization, continued in the Prussian, and before it gained an autonomy, also in the Austrian partition, that Poland's fight to oppose the *Drang nach Osten* started to be mentioned. The historical myth of the bulwark collided here with another myth, alive to this day, that is a conviction that there was some consistent German eastward onrush, realized with an iron per-

sistence over the ages. "It has been Poland's mission among the civilized nations", wrote Jędrzej Moraczewski in 1851, "to defend the life of the Slavs against the more enlightened West, and to defend Europe against barbaric Asia..."⁸.

In the day of *Kulturkampf* these issues were raised more frequently and emphatically. Thus Stanisław Smolka, when taking the chair at Cracow University (1883) would recall that "Polish blood was shed for the sake of the good of mankind not only in Legnica, Orsza, Kłuszyn and Vienna. The fight of Boleslaus the Brave against the Germans, and a hundred years later the heroic defence of Głogów, Płowce and Tannenberg — are also to our credit in the historical balance; [...] while battling against the invaders from the West, who aimed their attack against our national existence, what we defended against the brutal assault was God's work, an organ indispensable to the good of mankind, which would not have survived and fulfilled its mission if not for the sacrifice of the blood of the warriors of Boleslaus the Brave, Boleslaus the Wrymouth, Ladislaus the Short and Jagiello". The representatives of the so-called Cracow historical school (19th century), politically linked to the Stańczyk camp (an anti-conspiratorial, anti-radical conservative grouping) thought that the historical mission of Poland consisted of cultivating the most precious values of the Latin-Christian civilization. Therefore, on the one hand Polish culture should not accept the traditions of the East, on the other it must avoid accepting those currents of Western culture which were at variance with our historical mission.

Of course, Smolka in his statement could not help using such expressions as "our struggles with the Crescent and the Muscovite savages", when "defending ourselves we shielded with our breasts the moral output of the whole of the Western world against the assaults of the brutal, devastating power of its enemies"¹⁰. The partitions strengthened even more the long upheld conviction that "the Polish bulwark" shielded Europe also

⁸ J. Moraczewski, *Dzieje Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej od piętnastego wieku ułożone* (*The History of the Polish Commonwealth Compiled from the 15th Century Onwards*), Poznań 1851, p. 239.

⁹ *Historycy o historii. Od Adama Naruszewicza do Stanisława Kętrzyńskiego, 1775–1918* (*Historians on History. From Adam Naruszewicz to Stanisław Kętrzyński, 1775–1918*), comp. M. H. Serejski, Warszawa 1963, pp. 320, 328.

¹⁰ *Historycy o historii*, vol. I, p. 320.

from Orthodox Russia. No effort, of course, was made any longer to explain, as it was done in the 16th or the 17th century, that the inhabitants of Russia were in effect half-heathen, since nobody in Europe bothered about such things any more. Just as it had been done ages before, emphasis was placed on the differences in civilization and the political system, this attitude being coloured with an additional motivation. Just as the inclusion of the Russians in the great community of Christian nations was earlier called into question, so in the 19th century their place among the Slavs was willingly denied.

Poland changed from a bulwark of Christianity into a rampart of Western culture and freedom, opposed to the world of barbarians, despotism, and in the past — also the “schism”.

The role of Poland as the rampart against “Eastern despotism” or “the Asiatic formation” was also acknowledged by the extreme Left. Suffice it to mention that Karl Marx called the Commonwealth “the immortal knight of Europe”, a rampart protecting it from the deluge of Asiatic despotism. Indeed, it was thought to be a “dam between Slav Mongolia and the European Continent”. According to Marx the reconstruction of Poland signified “the destruction of Russia as a candidate to dominating the world”. “Either Asian barbarians led by Moscow will tumble like an avalanche over the head of Europe — or Europe must reconstruct Poland, thus separating herself from Asia with a twenty million strong barrier of heroes, and thus find time for respite indispensable for her social revival”¹¹. Marx’s attitude towards the problem of the *antemurale* is extremely characteristic, since he understood this term not in a religious sense, but one indicating freedom and civilization. Engels expressed similar opinions, and among Polish socialists Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz thought alike.

The opinions cited above show clearly that those who invoked the traditions of the Polish bulwark not only made an appeal for Europe’s assistance to the country which once was her sword — and shield. The *antemurale* also fulfilled the role of a consolatory utopia, a remedy that allowed the Poles to forget their failed

¹¹ K. Marks, *Przyczynki do historii kwestii polskiej. Rękopisy z lat 1863–1864 (Contributions to the History of Polish Question. Manuscripts from 1863–1864)*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 17, 77 and A. Walicki, *Polska, Rosja, marksizm. Studia z dziejów marksizmu i jego recepcji (Poland, Russia, Marxism. Studies in the History of Marxism and its Reception)*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 31, 52, 238–240.

uprisings and the repressions that followed. Just as the historical novel, the *antemurale* also served "to hearten the Polish souls". By enriching the treasury of national myths, it served at the same time the glorification of the gentry in the writings of rightist and Catholic publicists. The apology of the *antemurale* carried a praise of its heroic defenders, knights and hetmans, those gentry troops that stood on guard of the eastern and southern borders of pre-partition Poland. Just like the historical novel, it introduced into the national consciousness an element of irrational trust in the possibility of a revival of the old, powerful Commonwealth, if not within the borders from before 1772, certainly not in the territorial shape of the Duchy of Warsaw or Congress Poland. Hence the critique of the bulwark traditions was not so much aimed against the conception of the *antemurale* itself, as against the gentry and its modern inheritors: that is the landed class.

Beginning with the times of Enlightenment the bulwark gradually lost its strictly religious character, while its politico-ideological message was voiced with an increasing emphasis. What became fixed in the historical consciousness of Poles was a picture of their homeland as the vanguard of Latin culture, a rampart of freedom, which for some time victoriously repulsed Asiatic despotism in its Turkish-Tartar version, so as to finally succumb to the Muscovite prevalence, which, to the misfortune of Europe, was a successive stage of the eastern despotism.

When, years later, we look over the passionate discussions of the bulwark, we find to our surprise that both sides in the dispute accepted, in fact, the old, traditional version of the *antemurale*. For some it was proof of the grace of Providence, which designated to the Poles precisely such a place on the map of Europe and the mission bound up with it. This mission, it was maintained, continued, although in changed conditions and a different direction (Poland as a rampart of Slavdom against the *Drang nach Osten*). For others the bulwark was a trap, tragic in its consequences, set by the Papacy for Poland. Tragic, for it drained Polish blood, weakened the state, strengthened its later partitioners, and allowed them to efface the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the political map of Europe. While differing so diametrically in their assessments, both sides were unanimous in the view that Poland, indeed — and extremely long —

played the role of a bulwark. The Right tried to forget the Tartar assistance and the extremely long period during which our kings refrained from taking part in the anti-Turkish league. The Left, on its part, treating the *antemurale* as an ideological import, did not even take into consideration the fact that this term might have been coined in Poland and had long been in accord with the Polish *raison d'état*.

After the October Revolution (1917) the literary work that became extremely topical was Zygmunt Krasiński's *Nieboska komedia (Non-divine Comedy)*. This masterpiece started to be regarded as a prophecy of the clash between the people of the West and those of the East; the Trenches of the Holy Trinity, where a handful of aristocrats defend themselves against the forces of the revolution "were inscribed in the myth of Poland — the bulwark of the West and Christianity"¹². These Trenches came to be identified with the whole of Poland. The same view of the matters was also taken on the other side of the barricade, although they were described by a different terminology and evaluated in a diametrically different way. The 1920 war left a permanent imprint on the relations between Poland and Soviet Russia where the opinion was held that the victorious march of communism across Europe smashed precisely against the counter-revolutionary "Trenches of the Holy Trinity", this farthest eastern outpost of the Christian world. In this way the chances for the victory of social revolution all over the Continent were delayed.

In sum, this war strengthened the faith in the historical mission of the Polish bulwark. "What Europe needs is a live wall, a free Commonwealth that would defend her from the East. This is the *raison d'être* of Poland — her mission" — wrote Wincenty Lutosławski in 1922. It was in her lands, due to their borderline situation, that a synthesis of both civilizations — western and eastern — was to take place. By invoking the idea of bulwark we could show the historical rights of the Polish state to the lands it once owned in the East, both those accorded to Poland by the Treaty of Riga (1921) and those that remained beyond the border.

¹² E. Kuźma, *Mit Orientu i literatury Zachodu w literaturze XIX, XX wieku (The Myth of the Orient and of Western Literature in the Literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries)*, Szczecin 1980, p. 176.

¹³ T. Burek, *Proza (Prose)*, in: *Literatura polska, 1918–1932*, Warszawa 1975, p. 487.

The magic of the slogan: "Poland as the bulwark of Christianity", faded with the political stabilization of the Polish state and the consolidation of its sovereignty.

In the 1930s Olgierd Górka, a historian closely linked to the government camp (in 1927–1930 Górka was editor-in-chief of "Dziennik Ludowy", a daily supporting Piłsudski's line), declared against this favourite (so he maintained) subject of school essays: Poland as the bulwark of Christianity. In his extensive study *Dziejowa rzeczywistość a racja stanu Polski na południowym Wschodzie (The Historical Reality and the Raison d'Etat of Poland in Southern-East)* published in 1933, Górka maintained that Turkey never stood a chance of conquering the Commonwealth of the gentry, and the Polish-Lithuanian state could never threaten the interests of the Sublime Porte. Instead of waging wars against it Poland should have rather concluded a politico-military alliance. As far as the Crimea Tartars are concerned, Poland was not "the bulwark of Christianity" for them, but a territory of almost free exploitation "the dimensions of which surpassed everything that is written about it".

Górka accused the Polish kings that in the 16th and 17th centuries they did not try to create between the Commonwealth and Turkey a system of "buffer states", that is Poland's own bulwarks that could also defend her from Muscovy. These rulers did not appreciate the benefits which could be gained from a strong Transylvania, Moldavia and Cossack Ukraine. Instead of attacking Ducal Prussia in alliance with the Sublime Porte, John III Sobieski preferred to come to the rescue of Vienna, thus lending assistance to the future invader of Poland. The dispute about the purposefulness of this expedition is important for our deliberations, since the Vienna battle, the 250th anniversary of which had recently been celebrated, was one of the main arguments used in support of the thesis about the role of Poland as the *antemurale*. In Górka's opinion the ruling class in Poland soon adopted a quietist attitude that was pernicious to the later fortunes of the Commonwealth, which could only be saved due to a strong army and equally strong royal power.

One cannot overlook the clearly time-serving attitude that underlay these expositions. The reader to whom the historian presented such theses in the year 1933, could easily guess that Poland governed by Piłsudski was trying to avoid all these mis-

takes. Indeed, Piłsudski's post-1926 regime placed emphasis on a strong army, and it tried to shield the 2nd Republic of Poland from the East with a chain of "buffer states", those bulwarks of the 20th century. Let us recall that what gained popularity in Piłsudski's camp was the so-called "Prometheism", a term derived from the mythical hero, once chained to the rocks of Georgia. The latter was one of those Caucasian countries that Poles wanted to tear away from Poland's Eastern neighbour.

Following the tragic September of 1939 and the subsequent Fourth Partition of Poland, the bulwark slogan started to be invoked by a large part of the underground press (naturally, with the exception of the Leftist organs). This was done with special zeal by the authors connected to the National Party. Wacław Górnicki (*Polska po wojnie — Poland After the War*, 1941, under the pseudonym L. Neumann) wrote that Poland would never renounce "its mission, it will become again the bulwark of Christianity both in the East and the West". The bi-weekly "Chrobry szlak" ("Boleslaus the Brave's Route"), published in Kielce in 1944, demanded the creation of Great Poland from the Dnieper to the Oder River and from the Baltic to the Black Sea. This was to be an effective barrier of Europe against "the communist plague". The "Naród" ("Nation") journal, supporting Piłsudski's line, recalled in 1943 that it was still the historical mission of Poland to disseminate Christian civilization in Europe, especially in the East of the Continent. Also the publications of Polish communities in exile mentioned Poland's role as the bulwark. Even Olgierd Górka, who was so sceptical about the *antemurale* in the times of the 2nd Republic, radically changed his views on the matter. In his *Concise Outline of the History of Poland* (first ed. 1942), Olgierd Górka maintained that as early as the battle of Legnica (1241) Poland started to play the role of the defender of the whole of Christian Europe.

According to Górka, Poland's merits, apart from repulsing first the attacks of Mongolia and then Russia (from the 16th century onwards), were mainly its wars against ... the Sublime Porte. While recalling that the Turkish sources described the Poles as especially dangerous enemies, he wrote with much appreciation of the battle of Vienna. Due to this heroic strife the whole of Christianity as well as the western culture which is based on it, were saved — wrote Olgierd Górka¹⁴. It is hard to

estimate the sincerity of his statement, considering both the views he voiced before the Second World War, and the fact that his praise of the *antemurale* was published in English in a propaganda brochure inspired by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in exile. It was to prove Poland's rights to her return to the political map of Europe. The assistance in the recovery of her independence was to repay, to a certain extent, the debts that Europe incurred in Legnica, Chocim or Vienna. We find similar statements in other popular outlines or text-books about the history of Poland, issued abroad. The renaissance of the idea of the bulwark was almost inseparably linked with attributing to Poland a special historical mission that after the defeat of Germany she was to fulfil in this part of Europe. This entailed a postulate of a considerable enlargement of the territory of the future Commonwealth, on the one hand by the annexation of the lands lost in the Treaty of Riga, on the other due to the territorial acquisitions in the West. The maximum programme assumed the creation of a confederacy of states embracing the area between the Baltic and the Black Sea, or even reaching to the Adriatic, with the leading role, of course, assigned to Poland.

The protests against such a vision of an imperial bulwark were weak and voiced mainly in exile. In 1941 Antoni Słonimski, who was then in England, wrote: "We want to live in a normal country. Not on the earthworks, on a rampart, barbican or bulwark, but in a normal country. We want neither a historic mission, nor leadership; we do not want to have the status of a power or any imperialism"¹⁵.

Following 1945 the dispute over the bulwark was at the centre of the great struggle for the rule of minds conducted by the communist state against the Church and Catholicism, which for the first time in the history of Poland was no longer the ruling denomination. At the same time the rule of the country, due to foreign interference, was taken over by the people who demanded a radical revision of the views on the national past of Poland. Since she was to become an integral part of a bloc based on an ideological monolith, she could not be an enclave hostile to it,

¹⁴ O. Górk a, *Outline of Polish History. Past and Present, by...*, London 1945, pp. 13, 37-38.

¹⁵ S. Lewandowska, *Prasa polskiej emigracji wojennej, 1939-1945 (The Press of the Polish Emigrant Community During the War, 1939-1945)*, Warszawa 1993, p. 324.

coded as the *antemurale christianitatis*. Even the smallest mention of the *antemurale* went beyond the issue of purely "denominational" differences, earlier between Catholicism and the Orthodox Church, now between a religion with a long history and the doctrine contained in the writings of the classics of Marxism. What mattered was also the placing of emphasis on the differences in culture and customs, above all the whole system of values based on the culture with Western, Latin and Christian roots.

According to the official propaganda the historical connections of Poland with Rome had always been the source of national calamities; by fulfilling, under the influence of the "Vatican" (this term was even used in the discussions of the Late Middle Ages), the role of a bulwark, Poland forfeited her *raison d'état*. The Church came up with a polemic reply, using the pulpits as the sole places where traditional views on the past of Poland could be voiced (the situation of Catholic publications was worse, for the censorship tried to reduce their circulation, and to castrate the texts). To escape the boredom of school and university curricula, which in the Stalinist period mainly discussed productive forces and the role of anonymous masses, people read the historical novels of Kraszewski or Sienkiewicz, which were reissued in umpteen thousands of copies. This was the odd paradox of the cultural policy in People's Poland.

Knowledge of the battles of the Polish bulwark and its heroic defenders was derived, as before, mainly from Henryk Sienkiewicz's famous *Trilogy*. This work spoke of the battles fought against the enemies not only of the state, but also the Church, since throughout the 17th century Poles had never crossed swords with Catholic troops. In such conditions the dispute over the bulwark became a conflict between two opposed visions of our national past, with the Church claiming to be its only legitimate inheritor. The communist propaganda tried to bring out the antifeudal movements, so insignificant in Poland's history, and such heroes as Mucha, Aleksander Kostka-Napierski or Jakub Szela, who with time had to be removed from the national pantheon, since they turned out to have been traitors. The Marxist historiography maintained that the key to the history of Poland should be sought in the regularities of the historical process, which was to be crowned by the construction of a system of social equality, under the direction of the Soviet Union, which

in the official propaganda was described as "the rampart and bulwark" of world socialism.

The Church, on the other hand, upheld the idea that everything was decided by Providence; historical works were to register the successive acts of its interference; the attitude of Providence to Poles depended on how they fulfilled the mission entrusted to the Polish nation in this part of Europe. As early as August 1946, the later Primate, and then Bishop of Lublin, Rev. Stefan Wyszyński, compared the miraculous places in post-war Poland to "a defensive wreath of borderline outposts", with which the Holy Virgin once surrounded this state¹⁶. This sort of parallels must have not only irritated but also deeply annoyed the ruling circles.

The bulwark issue surfaced during the sharp conflict between the state authorities and the Church that took place during the celebrations of the millenium of Poland's baptism, almost completely entrusted to the Church; this anniversary was strictly bound up with the emergence of the written documents of the Polish state. The Church utilized this event for its multi-aspectual and skilfully conducted propaganda of its own achievements. This propaganda was in sharp contrast to the anachronistic anticlericalism of the Communist Party, which referred to the 19th century traditions of the peasant party in the Austrian partition, in which milieu the leader of the PUWP, Gomułka, was educated. On various occasions Primate Stefan Wyszyński, and the whole episcopate subordinated to him, unequivocally gave one to understand that despite the thorough change of the social relations in Poland and her political dependence on Moscow, she did not cease to play the role of a bulwark against communism.

The battle of pens conducted in 1966 in no way advanced the actual knowledge of the issue of the Polish bulwark. Indeed, what both sides of the controversy were after, was not this knowledge. However, the Church propaganda certainly won a victory. It was all the easier, because the rather primitive and monotonous "anti-bulwark" forays placed on the same plane the support given to False Demetrius and the fight against the Swedish invader. It was also hard to believe that the only victory won by Poland up till 1920, that of Vienna, was a calamity caused by the demoniac "Vatican".

¹⁶ *Listy pasterskie prymasa Polski, 1946-1974 (Polish Primate's Pastoral Letters, 1946-1974)*, Paris 1975, p. 25.

In short, the *antemurale* was not a good clue to the riddle of national calamities. Moreover, despite the intentions of the communist propaganda, the bulwark idea produced undesirable consequences, namely a conviction that the Church and Catholicism were omnipresent in the history of Poland. The consolidation of this conviction was persistently sought by the Church circles through their addresses, pastoral letters or vows taken at Jasna Góra. Incidentally, the Polish episcopate was one of the few ecclesiastical milieux in post-war Europe that invoked bulwark traditions. They were not mentioned by the bishops of Hungary, Croatia, Austria or Venice, the countries which had once, just as the gentry Commonwealth, considered themselves to be the ramparts of Christianity.

The term of bulwark, coined in such early times, was especially capacious for filling it with ever new contents. The slogan: Poland — the *antemurale*, combined religion and politics, temporary and eschatological ideas, the relics of the Middle Ages and the modern doctrine of political balance that is so indispensable to our Continent. In this way a type of political thought arose that was in sharp contrast to its development in the West of Europe where the reward (or punishment) in the other world had long before ceased to be inscribed in the balance of expected benefits and losses, and nobody believed any more in the direct interference of Providence in the course of history. The Polish kind of thought was very strongly influenced by the religious ideology and historical tradition reaching from Legnica (1241) to Vienna (1683). While in other countries their geographical situation was one of the arguments for political realism, in Poland, up till the 19th century, it served the thesis of the special mission of Poland and Poles, identified with their being situated by God in such and no other place on the map of Europe.

This corroborates the thesis of Lech Szczycki that the bulwark idea was to a certain extent a kind of consolatory utopia, "when Poland, torn by her defeats, had to find some explanation for her sufferings, weaknesses and — errors". Not accidentally in the period when the Commonwealth was a power, the bulwark slogan was used almost exclusively by diplomacy, anti-Turkish publicism and all kinds of ephemeral political literature. In contrast, it was not invoked by the greatest political writers of the 16th century, such as Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Jakub

Przyłuski or Andrzej Wolań. Only in the 17th century did the *antemurale* appear in poetic works, so as to figure prominently in the outlines of the history of Poland in the next two centuries, not to mention the history of the Church or the collections of homilies.

At the time when the idea of the Christian community was becoming empty and Europe had long before forgotten that it had entrusted to Poles any mission on the outskirts of the Continent, Polish society remained faithful to its old convictions. Hence the great bitterness when in the crucial moment France or England did not come to the rescue of the Polish "bulwark". In fact the West European countries were rather indifferent to the fortunes of Poland, glad that *l'ordre régne à Varsovie*, as the situation after the stifling of the 1831 uprising was described by Horace Sébastiani, the French minister of foreign affairs.

The Polish poet Jan Lechoń, in his extremely interesting diaries written after World War II in exile, said that — after the experience of totalitarian rule — he was afraid of the countries that announce they have to fulfil some mission. In his opinion the basic task of a state is "to give its citizens maximum prosperity and freedom"¹⁷. Only as much — and so much. The *antemurale* was precisely a mission, assigned by Providence to Poles, proud of their situation on the outskirts of Christian Europe. Controversies over the *antemurale* have been inscribed in the dilemmas of Poland's national fate. Indeed, they concern our position in the age-long contacts (or as some would have it — conflicts) between East and West, the causes of the disappearance of the 1st (and then the 2nd) Republic of Poland from the map of Europe, and finally some characteristics and vices allegedly inborn in the Polish national character.

The bulwark myth was inscribed in two parallel sequences of legends: national and universal. Its popularity reached its apogee in the 19th century and is strictly connected with the treatment of the history of Poland as a sequence of permanent sacrifices for the national cause and with the conviction that Poland played an exceptional role in Slavdom, and Slavdom in the world. The myth of the *antemurale* corresponds, however, to a certain extent with the missionary ideologies appearing also in other countries. One could add to the above-mentioned examples of Moscow or Eng-

¹⁷ J. Lechoń, *Dziennik (Diary)*, vol. I, Londyn 1967, p. 109.

land, a few others. Thus the creators of the American Revolution were convinced that they had created the first free nation and state in the world. Over ten years later revolutionary France declared that it was her duty to disseminate all over Europe the principles of social justice on the one hand, and her culture, leading in all respects, on the other. In the 19th and 20th centuries many English writers (with Rudyard Kipling at the head) boasted of their country's mission of disseminating the white man's civilization on other continents.

One could reasonably argue that the juxtaposition of all those doctrines with the history of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity and European civilization is not quite justified, since in France, England or the United States they were short-lived, while the term *antemurale* is over five hundred years old. In respect of its impact and longevity it can only be compared to the idea of Moscow as the third Rome. However, the difference is much deeper than the duration period of the faith in the historical mission of a given state or nation. It seems to be the essence of the matter that the missions claimed by other nations generally served their expansion into the territory of neighbouring states (the idea of the third Rome), the whole of Europe (the slogans of the French Revolution) or other continents (those "outposts of progress" created by the white man in Asia and Africa according to Joseph Conrad. In inter-war Poland the so-called Jagiellonian idea was of such an imperialistic and aggressive character. While justifying Poland's right to the reconstruction of the state reaching "from sea to sea", it based it among other things on the role of the bulwark, played by the gentry's Commonwealth. However, in the times of the 1st Commonwealth, the *antemurale* was almost as a rule of a defensive character. In the 19th century, in the days of national captivity, it was a desperate cry for Europe's help to the country that was once its sword and shield. In Russia, France or England the idea of mission accompanied continental and colonial conquests; in enslaved Poland the *antemurale* gathered strength and glamour hand in hand with her successive national calamities, it was a compensatory idea, a reply to the sequence of lost uprisings and repressions that followed them. Just as the historical novel, it served "to hearten the [Polish] souls". The mission of the great powers found its reflection in the current political maps of the world while the

Polish bulwark could only be found in historical atlases. Its memory was heartening, but at the same time it remained outside the orbit of realistic political thought. The liveliness of this myth was due to the fact that apart from the religious it was also of a politico-ideological character, which, it has to be admitted, clearly gained the upper hand in all the deliberations on the *antemurale* in the 19th century. What we understand by myth is a certain stereotype of our conceptions of the past, a stereotype which clearly passed from the white to the black legend of the *antemurale*¹⁸. Both these legends can be reduced to the glossing over of the same, colourful and multi-dimensional series of historical events¹⁹.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

¹⁸ Cf. T. Biernat, *Mit Polityczny (Political Myth)*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 213-227: *Mit przedmurza (The Bulwark Myth)*.

¹⁹ A useful compilation of source material and previous research on the bulwark can be found in Urszula Borkowska's work *The ideology of antemurale in the sphere of Slavic culture (13th-17th centuries)*, in: *The Common Christian Roots of the European Nations. An International Colloquium in the Vatican*, Florence 1983, as well as in Jadwiga Krzyżaniakowa's dissertation, *Poland as "Antemurale Christianitatis"* ("Polish Western Affairs", vol. XXXIII, N° 2, 1992). Cf. my book *Poland as the Rampart of Christian Europe. Myths and Historical Reality*, Warszawa 1989, as well as Wiktor Weintraub's *Renaissance Poland and antemurale christianitatis*, "Harvard Ukrainian Studies", vol. III/IV, 1979-1980 and P. W. Knoll, *Poland as antemurale christianitatis in the late Middle Ages*, "The Catholic Historical Review", vol. LX, N° 3: October 1974.