

# Heritage of Tadeusz Kosciuszko: a basis for Polish-American ties

by Kerstin Tegin-Gaddy

To representatives of an American-based journal in Warsaw, the question was put again and again by ordinary Poles: Why has President Reagan imposed sanctions on us? The logic of AFL-CIO chief Lane Kirkland, who demands "that the U.S. Government declare Poland in default of its debts and halt the flow of credits to the Soviet Union and its satellites," is not easily understood in Poland. Many are deeply offended to hear General Jaruzelski called "a Russian general in Polish uniform," as Secretary of Defense Weinberger recently did.

"If," one Pole said, "President Reagan wants Poland to abandon its relationship to the Western world and become more dependent on the Soviet Union and the Comecon countries, then of course the sanctions are the right tactic. But is that the case?"

Others were asking if Reagan wanted the Soviet Union to invade Poland, or if he wanted a civil war in Poland, one or the other of which would have been the consequence, had Jaruzelski not stabilized the situation by reluctantly imposing martial law.

Not even the most pro-American individual in Poland, and there are a lot of them, can find anything positive in the sanctions. They conclude that Reagan does not care about Poland as a nation, and simply considers it a chip in a game between the superpowers. As another Pole said, if Reagan wants to punish the Soviets why do we have to suffer?

For centuries, of course, superpowers have committed crimes against the Poles. Situated in the strategic center of Europe, Poland has again and again been crushed—by the Russians, the Prussians, and the Austrians. Time and again there have been attempts to eliminate the Polish nation, which came into existence after the third partition of Poland in 1797, and was about to re-emerge during World War II.

Now, Poles are starting to see U.S. policy as still another attempt to wipe Poland off the map. The economic consequences of the sanctions are felt by every Pole. Poland is treated as badly as or worse than Third World countries when it comes to credit. It has been cut off from any new credits, a policy which is aggravating the economic problems. In many cases, only one spare part, worth \$1,000 or so, but purchas-

able only for hard currency, is required to get a factory producing millions of dollars worth of goods; but the plant sits idle.

Most of all, the American sanctions are seen on the dining tables in Polish homes. Before the sanctions, the average Pole used to eat 8 kilograms (17.6 lb.) of poultry per year; now this is down to 2 kilograms. The reason is that the poultry industry depends on chicken feed imported from the United States, which was cut off.

Since it is clear that President Reagan's sanctions against Poland are counter-productive, as they only lead to hatred of Americans and force Poland into even tighter cooperation with the Warsaw Pact countries and into attempts at greater economic self-reliance, with resulting hardship for the population, the question arises: What is the real basis for American-Polish relations?

## The international American Revolution

In no other country in Europe, except perhaps France, is there a better understanding of the American Revolution and the question of nationhood. The fight for freedom in Poland went hand in hand with America's. This becomes vivid when one grasps the role of Polish national hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

Kosciuszko and another Pole, Casimir Pulaski, were among the best known of the European officers who fought in the American War of Independence. Kosciuszko arrived in America before any other European officer. He was already at sea when the Continental Congress passed the Declaration of Independence, and he arrived in America in August of 1776.

Educated at the first Polish military academy, the Szola Rycerska (Knights School), where he studied military engineering, fortifications and tactics, philosophy, mathematics, and Polish history, Kosciuszko had his first appointment as an engineer with the rank of colonel.

In America, Kosciuszko became acclaimed for his role in the Battle of Saratoga, where his construction and fortification of the camp enabled Gen. Horatio Gates and his army

to withstand two violent British attacks. The first American victory against the British, this was a strategic turning point in the war, since Kosciuszko helped prevent the British from cutting off New England—and with it the majority of the Continental Army—from the rest of the colonies.

Kosciuszko is probably best known for building the fortifications at West Point, where he was appointed Chief of Works not long after Saratoga.

He stayed there for two years, overseeing the fortifications, after which he spent three years in the southern campaigns of the Continental Army, under Nathaniel Green. In all, Kosciuszko was with the American forces for almost seven years, longer than any other European officer; his qualifications and accomplishments secured him the rank of general in the American army.

Thus Kosciuszko was an important member of the international conspiracy that planned and carried out the American revolution. He was a founding member of the Society of Cincinnatus, established in 1783 and consisting of officers who had fought in the American War of Independence. General Lafayette, as a leader of the organization, was determined to use the victory in America to fight for humanist republics also in Europe.

When Kosciuszko returned to Poland in 1784, he found his country in misery, owing to the first partition of 1772. Now Kosciuszko was resolved to bring the American system to Poland. Before his journey to America, he had written about his mission to fight for republican ideas: "Throughout my five years in foreign lands [studying in Paris—K. T. -G.], I studied in order to become proficient in economics and military matters, for which things I had a native passion, so as to discover what was necessary to attain durable government and the due happiness of all."

### **A Polish national bank**

The influence of the American System in Poland came to its peak during the four-year Sejm (parliament) of 1788-92. It adopted a constitution, expressly designed on the model of the American constitution—the second of its kind in the world. Among other policies, Poland's constitution incorporated Alexander Hamilton's ideas on national economic policy: it provided for creation of a national bank. This bank was to grant long-term loans at low interest rates—below 4 percent—for industrial investment, while the general interest rate level was to be no more than 5 percent to stimulate investment.

The Sejm program was not accepted by either the Anglophile geopolitician Tsarina Catherine the Great of Russia or the Polish aristocracy. These two forces formed an alliance to abolish the new constitution, an alliance which resulted in a Russian invasion of Poland to restore the old order. The outcome was the second partition of Poland—by which Poland was reduced to a minuscule entity controlled by Russian satraps.

Kosciuszko, now a Polish general, developed plans for

the liberation of Poland, to make it free from foreign occupation and able to grow as a republic founded on the principles of the American constitution. Schooled in the American war, Kosciuszko well understood that to win that fight would require foreign aid, and he sought assistance from France when he went to Paris in early 1793. It was not forthcoming.

Without outside support, Kosciuszko knew that an attempt at rebellion would start from a very weak position; but he did not have the capability to direct the national movement scientifically. By means of a combination of peasant unrest and campaigns by the "Jacobin Club" in Warsaw—co-thinkers of the British agents who were wreaking terror in France, the 1794 uprising was launched in Poland. The Russians, Prussians, and Austrians possessed resources vastly superior to those of the Poles; in battles outside Warsaw, 20,000 Polish soldiers faced 40,000 Russians and Prussians.

Kosciuszko attempted to salvage the situation by taking command. He arrested 1,000 Jacobin partisans, and also rallied the peasantry to the side of his army by releasing them from feudal obligations, reducing their work dues and granting personal freedom. It was largely thanks to Kosciuszko's fortifications around Warsaw that the occupying armies were staved off from March until November, but the enemy finally broke through.

After the defeat of the Polish national forces, Kosciuszko was imprisoned in St. Petersburg until his release by Tsar Paul I; he lived in exile until his death in 1817. In 1795, Poland was partitioned for the third time, and this time it disappeared from the map of Europe. The partitioning powers even included a secret clause in their agreement, wherein they pledged that the very name of Poland would be erased from the vocabulary of international law. It was not the last such attempt, as Poles bitterly recall. Reestablished as a nation after World War I, Poland experienced another attempt at its final destruction under Nazi occupation during World War II.

Throughout the intervals of foreign occupation, the struggle for Polish national independence was always inspired by Tadeusz Kosciuszko. The first division of the Polish Army that fought with the Soviets against the Nazis was called the "Tadeusz Kosciuszko Division"; that is the unit in which Gen. Jaruzelski fought as a young officer.

When we visited the Polish Army Museum, we saw, in the center of one of its main halls, the one devoted to the 1794 uprising, a display case with the Order of the Society of Cincinnatus that belonged to Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

The Polish population's memory of Kosciuszko is as much linked to his fight for the republican ideas that established the United States, as it is to his fight for Polish independence. If those fundamental principles were remembered, I reflected as I stood in this hall, Americans would support Poland in doing today what Alexander Hamilton did to solve the economic crises of the late 18th century. In 1791, it was Hamilton who forced through a radical reorganization of the enormous debts then burdening the young American republic.