



Original text published in Polish:  
Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka,  
1992, vol. 47, no. 3-4, p. 465-471  
PL ISSN 0037-7511

JERZY MARON, BOGDAN ROK

### An issue of "Looting" in Silesia during the wars of Frederick II

We want to present an issue of the Prussian looting in Silesia during the reign of Frederick II perpetrated in the course of the three Silesian Wars from a perspective of Silesia and the Commonwealth of Poland, relying on historical sources that shape the perception of public at large, particularly in Silesia and in the former Commonwealth of Poland. In 1740, just before the first Silesian War, Wrocław's Jesuit print shop published a large work by Władysław Łubieński, the then canon of Kraków and Gniezno, and a subsequent bishop, archbishop, and in the end, a primate of Poland. The work – that was a comprehensive geographical compilation – presented a picture of the world that was known at that time, also offering a relatively long description of the Silesian country. Following quite a lengthy historical introduction, highlighting that Silesia used to be a part of the Polish state, and emphasising that the bishopric of Wrocław was formerly affiliated with the province of Gniezno, the author went to depict that land as it existed in Anno Domini 1740. We read there about Silesia as: *a country that has numerous population, fertile land that grows all grains and offers grazing pastures. It has mountains called Reisenberg that are hoarding gold and has silver, and smith works, copper works, tin works, glassworks, forests full of game, numerous manufacturing plants, except for silks, in a word, it is a country that is best and most populous among the Austrian states.* That passage does not necessitate any further explanation. A factual description of Silesian wealthy resources requires no comment. It is a testimony to the author's sharp mind equipped with powers of observation and ability to convey information concisely and accurately. It is worth noting that the said canon crossed the Silesian country during his European journey, so the above description is a completely original account of the land as it existed at that time. Truly, when the work of Łubieński was written, Silesia, because of its abundant natural resources and a major economic development it enjoyed, became a particularly important part of Central Europe. The work that affected views that Polish noblemen had about Silesia on the eve of the Silesian Wars, was rewritten many times into home chronicles (*silva rerum*) then kept by nobility, so its readership must have been quite extensive<sup>1</sup>.

Somewhat earlier, in 1718, the Austrian Silesia was also mentioned in a diary by Polish nobleman Maciej Pawłowski from Wierzbna, who just happened to travel through Silesia with his tutor, while on the way to Vienna. In point of fact, however, the text was written by Benon Jan Dobieżyński, who was a preceptor of the young Pawłowski of Wielkopolska Province, and who was a party in that journey. It is worthwhile to quote a relevant passage that summarises experiences of young travellers after they had

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Łubieński, *Świat we wszystkich swoich częściach większych i mniejszych*, Wrocław 1740, p. 276; B. Rok, *Władysław Łubieński (1703-1767) o Śląsku* (Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka, 1974, No. 1, pp. 55-66); C. Grünhagen, *Schlesien in den letzten Jahrzehnten österreichischer Herrschaft 1707-1740* (Zeitschrift des Vereins für Geschichte und Alterthum Schlesiens, XV, 1880, book 1, pp. 32-62, *passim*).



passed through Silesia. *Note well. Everywhere here are buildings handsome, hospitable, made of stone like some castles, we saw no sowing field or a piece of untilled plot that had been not ploughed well, any every peasant Leader had a timber framing house with a wooden fence all around, such that one would come to think of it as if it were some kind of a manor house or palace.* The journeymen describe Oława, Grodków, and Nysa, referring to an aesthetic appeal and order prevailing in those towns. For example, they wrote about Oława saying: *The town was quite lovely, with brick and wooden houses. The town hall was made of brick with a clock tower pointing into two directions. No walls surrounding the town are there, only an embankment, but not much high.* The castle of Oława is *fine-looking into four corners, but it requires substantial improvement, and there is a 16-elbow high embankment and a water moat around it that is half a furlong wide, and that town has a hundred of dragoons.* Just like in a description of Grodków they emphasised that *the town is quite handsome, though not spacious*, to note further on that it was quite a well fortified one. In either case, the high embankment and the moat were compared to the fortifications in Wielkopolska Province's town of Leszno. A fairly larger account is finally made about the town of Nysa the size of which is compared to that of Poznań. And there were *high town houses ... a beautiful market square, beautiful town hall* and, more importantly, walls, and a sconce fortifying the town.

The diary also made a note of the beautiful Silesian landscape, especially the Sudetes. We encounter references to rocks and mountains, often overgrown with trees, particularly existence a large number of beech trees was mentioned. It was also stressed that the mountains hid valuable minerals, such as gold, silver, and copper. The travellers were surprised to notice a larger number of watermills, instead of windmills that they had known in the Polish landscape.<sup>2</sup>

The printed text on Silesia by W. Łubieński and the account of the travellers from Wielkopolska Province that is found in the 18th manuscript are evidence of interests of Polish nobility in the issues of an old Polish region. Sharpness of insights of noble witnesses writing about the land that was alien to them should be emphasised. Also, the said authors show their broad interests in details of the historic and geographic situation of Silesia.

The above statements are evidence about a high level of development of the Silesian region in the first half of the 18th, i.e. still under the Austrian rule. In the mid-18th century, owing to its riches and the level of civilisation, Silesia became an extremely important and valuable province for Prussia. The Silesian Wars conducted by Frederick II were, by and large, waged within an area of that province; hence the inhabitants of Silesia came to know all aspects of wars waged at that time.

Like many other conflicts in the mid-18th century, the nature of the Silesian Wars waged by Frederick II differed from horrendous experience that the Silesian population suffered in the Thirty Years' War. At least in theory, wars of "the age of light" remained the "wars of kings" only.<sup>3</sup> All great condottieri like Ernest von Mansfeld and Albrecht Wallenstein<sup>4</sup> disappeared from the battlefields of Europe. Rulers in most of the European countries, including the imperial and Berlin courts, noticeably limited the

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Karwowski, *Pamiętnik podróży kasztelanka Macieja z Werbna Pawłowskiego z 1718 r.*, published by S. Karwowski, Poznań 1915. Cf. *Polskie podróże po Śląsku w XVIII i XIX wieku (do 1863 r.)*, selected and edited by A. Zieliński, Wrocław 1974, p. 27 et seq.

<sup>3</sup> M. Howard, *Wojna w dziejach Europy* [original title: *War in European History*] Wrocław 1990, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> F. Redlich, *The German Military Enterpriser and his Work Force*, vol. II, Wiesbaden 1965, pp. 104, 105.



possibilities of operations by military enterprisers of lower rank – commanders, owners of regiments, and companies.<sup>5</sup> "Private undertakings" by soldiers and officers were replaced by discipline the extent of which had been unknown.<sup>6</sup> In theory, subjects were treated as a potential source of the state's financial income, regardless of the state they belonged to. Exaggeratingly, one may conclude that they were left undisturbed, and were even protected to have their potential capabilities realised in practice.<sup>7</sup>

Introduction of a system of universal military conscription was another major novelty that significantly changed the shape of war. Thus, an autonomous, self-driven mechanism of exploiting people was abolished. Despite that, as a result of having no appropriate technical measures, the then prevailing conditions made it impossible to stage military operations relying on the resources of own country only. Costs of war were consequently distributed among own population and that in the conquered territories through a system of taxes and contributions that had been developed by the state and controlled by bureaucracy.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, Prussia was the European leader in that respect.

Relevant acts of law would determine the so-called service, or the amount of charges paid by population for the army and the type and amount of taxes that was allocated to that purpose (mainly excise tax).<sup>9</sup> Thus, brutal robbery was replaced by systematic "looting".

Seen in all three Silesian Wars, a "conventionalisation" of war was one of the most important, but not the most significant element of danger for the population in provinces. The threat of destruction of towns and fortresses during sieges still persisted. Perhaps, that was an underlying precept of a favourable attitude of Silesian townspeople towards the Prussian military.<sup>10</sup> For village people not only financial obligations made a serious burden – marching of soldiers through their place would result in substantial losses, primarily in crops. During the winter campaign of 1740/41, peasants particularly severely suffered the burden of war despite that there were military warehouses in Silesia. Foods collected in granaries and barns fell easy prey to not well paid Prussian soldiers.<sup>11</sup> No wonder that a response came as a rebellion staged by Upper Silesian peasants that was powerfully crushed by soldiers: *alles Volk zwischen Neisse und Oder ist EW. Majestat geschworener Feind*.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the province changed the state it belonged to was a major factor that affected the nature especially of the last of the Silesian Wars. Silesian people felt that not only in economic terms, but also in human aspects. They were subjected to compulsory military conscription to the extent that had been unknown to them.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 106, 107.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 106; Redlich, *op. cit.*, pp. 206, 207.

<sup>8</sup> *Der Siebenjährige Krieg 1756-1763*, vol. I, Berlin 1906.

<sup>9</sup> C. Grünhagen, *Schlesien unter Friedrich dem Grossen*, vol. I, Breslau 1890, pp. 394, 395, 396. A soldier would receive some 8 groszes a month (a married one would get 12), while a cavalier 12 and 12 groszes, respectively, paid by inhabitants. In addition, towns would pay excise tax at different rates, and holders of offices 1% of their income.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. an example of Zielona Góra. C. Grünhagen, *Geschichte des Ersten schlesische Krieges*, Gotha 1881, p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Grünhagen, *Geschichte...*, p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Grünhagen, *Schlesien unter Friedrich...*, p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 391.



JERZY MARON, BOGDAN ROK : An issue of "Looting" in Silesia during the wars of Frederick II

Despite significant improvements in the provision of supplies that was extremely effective, which must be stressed, especially in Prussia, the fate of conscripted soldiers had not radically been bettered compared with the previous century. In times of prolonged military operations, supply lines were defective, soldiers' pay was too small in comparison to their needs. A perfect system of providing for shortages was to use the local resources to the last grain.<sup>14</sup> Though source accounts provide a number of traces that show a particularly positive attitude to service in the Prussian army among veterans, however, it must be stressed that living conditions of soldiers and a high percentage of losses (running up to 20% even) resulted in a brutalisation of behaviour.<sup>15</sup> During the Seven Years' War these developments were so much intense that its nature is compared to the tragic battles of 1618-1648.<sup>16</sup>

A concise expression of the Silesian soldiers' attitude to war was not so much desertion, as it was a malady that all armies suffered from at those times, but outcries like "Vivat Maria Theresa" made by the defenders of the Kłodzko fortress when seeing the approaching imperial troops.<sup>17</sup>

A similar phenomenon was more broadly reflected in public awareness in a popular prayer of Silesian people. Titled the *Silesian Prayer*, it straightforwardly says<sup>18</sup>:

W tey naszej biedzie niech nam Bóg pomoże  
przed Tobą z żalem skarżem się Boże – w niebiesiech  
Iż pruska woyna jest nam tak niezbożna  
że w niej nic znaleźć komu mówić można – święć się.  
[In our poor condition, let us help God, we please  
wailing, we complain, before you, oh God, in heaven  
That the Prussian war is so ungodly for us, even  
As there are no things in it for one to say – Hallowed be.]

In its subsequent part, "Prussian military troops" were recognised as being greedier and doing more looting than "Wallachian or Turkish" soldiers. Complete destruction of villages without "any reason whatsoever" was complained about, stressing also that:

Woysko Prusaków jako w Szląsk wkroczyło  
ozdobę zdarło, gdzie prawie tak było – jako w niebie.  
[As the Prussian army marched into Silesia  
decorations were torn down, with things almost being – as it is in heaven.]

Evidently, stationing of the "Prussian military" was strongly opposed to. Grievances against all robbery, seizures, and rapes of women were also made:

Przy swych swobodach taką wolność mają

---

<sup>14</sup> Redlich, *op. cit.*, p. 243. The purchase power of the Prussian soldier's pay in 1756-1763 declined over 2 times.

<sup>15</sup> In the victorious Battle of Prague waged on 6 May 1757 out of 64,000 Prussian soldiers, 12,498 were killed and wounded; *Der Siebenjährige Krieg...*, vol. II, Berlin 1901, p. 127, Anlage 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Historia Śląska*, vol. I, part 3, ed. by K. Malecziński, Wrocław 1963, p. 518.

<sup>17</sup> *Scriptores rerum Silesiacarum*, ed. by F. Wachter, vol. XVI, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Pacierz śląski*, ed. by L. S. Nowak (Zaranie Śląskie, VI, 1930, pp. 201-203).



u naszych żonek tak właśnie sypiają – jako i my.  
[Their freedoms rein untamed so much  
Finding their way to our wives – as we do.]

In the ending part of the prayer, Silesian people clearly opposed the Prussian rule:

Jednostajnymi głosami wołamy  
broń takiej zwierzchności panic nad namy – i wódź nas.  
[Unanimously we cry out loud  
deliver us from such dominations over us – and do lead us.]

The final line of the prayer reads as follow:

Niech idą z Szląska do diabła Prusacy – Amen.  
[Let them Prussians go to hell away from Silesia – Amen.]

News of a tragic nature of the Silesian Wars crossed the borders of the former Commonwealth of Poland. In home chronicles of Polish noble families we have encountered an interesting little poem, *Na samego króla pruskiego* (Fryderyka Wielkiego) [*On the Prussian King* (Frederick the Great)]<sup>19</sup>:

To nie dziw, że król monarcha uczony  
Bo w różnych sztukach biegły i to w piśmie uczony  
To filozof, to medyk, to poeta dobry  
To gospodarz z cudzego na swe czeladź szczodry  
Lecz nie mąż ku boskiemu sercu ni ku żonie.  
[No wonder that the monarch king is a man of learning  
Being skilled in various arts, so he must be a learned scribe  
He is a philosopher, medician, and a good poet at that  
A ruler generous for his servants not out of his own wealth  
But not a man who is inclined towards God's heart or wife.]

By highlighting that the king was a "man of learning", his comprehensive education and achievements in many fields of arts and science, an anonymous Polish observer also draws attention to moral deficiencies in the king's conduct.

In home chronicles of Polish noble families we have found other, an even more blatant political pamphlet that points out to an amoral rapacity of Frederick II. There, the Prussian monarch is even accused of atheism. Imperial inclinations of the ruler are exposed and countries such as Poland, Austria, Hungary, Saxony, and even Moscow are forewarned of them. A voluminous pamphlet in the form of a dialogue tellingly entitled *The Genius of the Prussian King Reasoning on Famous Victories with a Polish Satyr*.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, during the Seven Years' War, the Polish public at large was presented with a new reprint of the work by W. Łubieński on Silesia that has been referenced above. It was published in calendars of Stanisław Duńczewski that were

<sup>19</sup> The Czartoryski Library, Kraków, MS 3515, p. 706.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 706-709.



JERZY MARON, BOGDAN ROK: *An issue of "Looting" in Silesia during the wars of Frederick II*

popular in those times. Relevant passages from the immortal work of Łubieński are found in the year-books for 1755 and 1761. It is worth mentioning that nothing was changed in comparison to the first printing, and thus Silesia was still treated as a country in the Habsburg Monarchy. Also natural resources of Silesia were mentioned and its specific economic growth. Obviously, after the three Silesian Wars the province that used to flourish suffered serious destructions. The Prussian looting left its mark in all spheres of the country's life. Unfortunately, Duńczewski, who was a professor of the Zamojski Academy, does not inform about contemporary political developments. By making compilations from many works then available, he did not much care about updating political news.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the Polish public at large would receive important historical and geographical information about Silesia in the mid-18th. Readers from various parts of the Commonwealth of Poland became acquainted with issues of the former Polish province, and the past when Silesia belonged to the Commonwealth was particularly strongly emphasised in the referenced geographical work.

Tracking Polish and Silesian historical sources that present the mind-frame of the public at large on the matters of the Silesian Wars of the 18th allows concluding that ruthless developments occurring during those wars evoked animated responses, especially among the Silesian population. Simultaneously, observers coming from the Polish nobility of the former Commonwealth of Poland became interested in those issues, too.

translated by Katarzyna Hussar

---

<sup>21</sup> S. Duńczewski, *Kalendarz polski i ruski... na rok pański. 1755...*, Zamość 1755; idem, *Kalendarz polski i ruski ... na rok pański 1761...*, Zamość 1761; cf. Rok, *op. cit.*, p. 64.