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HOW TO KILL GHOSTS: POLISH ARISTOCRATS DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Abstract

This article is an attempt to represent the aspirations of the Polish aristocracy during the First World War by imagining the dreams of Maria Lubomirska – wife of Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski, arguably the most important Polish politician in Warsaw at the time. Lubomirska and her circle attended séances led by a popular medium, and they saw what they wanted to see, just as they perceived the changing political tides in the same way. Though aristocrats were in some sense already anachronistic at this time, they still wished to maintain their superior social and political position into the future. Lubomirska in particular envisioned an independent Poland led by a king. The idea of Poland becoming a monarchy may seem absurd in hindsight, but as the article shows, if we return to this moment in history without teleological presumptions it was a likely outcome until the last days of the war. Text in italics comes directly from Lubomirska's diary.

Key words: historiography, World War I, monarchism, narrative history

Słowa kluczowe: historiografia, pierwsza wojna światowa, monarchizm, narracja historyczna

The following essay is an experiment, but only insofar as all history writing is an experiment. Historians attempt the impossible task of communicating the past to a present audience. We choose a select narrative out of insufficient source materials that is meant to represent events and the massive changes that occur over time. In our purview, we trace the steps that make these shifts possible; often leaving aside the all-too-human emotions, past trauma and future dreams that make up historical inflection points. To be taken seriously as a systematic discipline (*Wissenschaft*), historians have mostly opted to separate themselves from those elements of fiction and poetry that, although ethereal,

still have the ability to convey truth. This decision is often taken at the expense of our human experience, which is far richer than the speeches, battles and grand gestures that tend to populate history writing. These 'verifiable' historical truths only represent a fraction of what can be reasonably considered reality. In order to arrive at some greater (inaccessible) truth, it is sometimes necessary to formulate a narrative that extends beyond what is available to us in the present.[1]

Moments of rupture and transition are especially difficult to capture because from our perspective in the present, we are fully aware of the outcomes. In rarefied moments of disarray, such as war and revolution, the possibilities as to what could happen to change the course of history multiply infinitely. The First World War was just such a time. Take, for instance, the question of what forms of government would rule the world in the post-war era.

When the war began in 1914, Europe was under the control or tutelage of a few imperial powers; and almost all had monarchs at their head. By the end of the war, a socialist revolutionary party controlled the largest country on earth by territory, and Europe's land empires collapsed allowing for the arrival of national republics. The French Revolution's promise to make the people sovereign came to fruition for many Europeans as a result of decisions made by key actors during and after the First World War. I argue here that this was actually a surprising and unexpected outcome.

In this essay, we return to that moment without presumptions of the outcome and ask what Europe was about to become. We know whither the tides went, but by locating contingency points we are better prepared to answer the ultimate historical question: Why? In this case, why did the new nation-states of Europe become republics and not monarchies?[2] The question may seem ridiculous, but right up to the very end of the conflict a transition to republican governance in the post-war period was a marginal political view in East Central Europe. As Arno Mayer convincingly argued, when the Great War broke out, democracy, labour movements and progressive modernity had done little to erode the power of aristocracy, feudal hierarchy or imperial rule.[3] In Adam Tooze's recent recasting of this period, *The Deluge*, he states flatly that 'Between October and December 1918 the old world of Europe collapsed'.[4] Indeed it was over these

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1 Much of what I state here has already been argued and explored by, among many others, Hayden White, Simon Schama, and Wallace Stegner. See: Hayden White, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality", *Rethinking History* vol. 9, no. 2/3 (June/September 2005): 147–157; Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

2 The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia, could be held up as an exception here, but I would object that it is not 'new' nor a 'nation-state' in the strict sense. It was a multi-national kingdom and an expansion of the already existing Serbian state, much like the Romanian Kingdom gained new territory in the post-war period.

3 Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

4 Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 232.

few months that aristocracy, monarchy and ancient social hierarchy lost their relevance and power. However, up until the end of the war, there was little reason to believe that monarchy would not survive. For Poland in particular, as I argue here, it seemed that if the country were to enjoy a separate existence, it would likely be under a crown of some kind.

It would seem then that we need to ask why the new states of East Central Europe did *not* become monarchies.[5] For generations, historical writing has tended to shrug off this question with some version of 'the tide of the times required democratic rule'.[6] Or as the American President Woodrow Wilson said, radical liberalism was the only way to save the world from Bolshevism and other excesses.[7] Certainly this was true in Germany and Austria where moderate civic groups brought their monarchs to heel, forcing them to accept defeat. But what of the rest? Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary all became republics, but did not pass through the same conditions.[8] As we shall see, Poland was unlikely to become a democratic republic until October 1918. How then can we take stock of a potential future – the emergence of a Polish Kingdom – that never was? Certainly there were many people who imagined the possibility of a monarchic state emerging after the war. Can we historicize their fleeting aspirations and dreams?

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5 The literature on the fin de siècle leading up to the Great War emphasizes further the need to pose this question. For example, Anderson's work on elections in Imperial Germany, Judson's recent overview of the Habsburg Empire and Schorske's classic work all demonstrate the ways in which monarchy had adapted to the needs of mass politics prior to 1918. Margaret Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Carl Schorske, *Fin de Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

6 Beginning with the early 1920s, the teleological narrative supporting the idea that liberal democracy was a foregone conclusion can be seen throughout histories of the period. This is especially true in the history of Poland where elites hoped erase any semblance of collaboration with the occupying German army. Furthermore, historians have continued to focus on the power of socialism and nationalism for the formation of independent Poland – embodied in the two figures of Roman Dmowski and Józef Piłsudski – which further supports a teleological vision of the period leading to a state structure legitimized by democratic values, not monarchy. See, for example: Michał Bobrzyński, *Wskrzeszenie Państwa Polskiego: Szkic historyczny, 1914–1918* (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1920); Stanisław Kutrzeba, *Polska Odrodzona, 1914–1921* (Warsaw–Kraków: Gebthner i Wolff, 1921); Roman Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa* T. I–II (Warsaw: „Pax", 1988) [1925]; Piotr Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795–1918*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974); Janusz Pajewski, *Odbudowa państwa polskiego, 1914–1918* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1978); Władysław Konopczyński, *Historia Polityczna Polski: 1914–1939* (Warsaw: Ad Astra, 1995); Brian Porter-Szucs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

7 Tooze, *The Deluge,* 233–234.

8 The case of Hungary is somewhat exceptional. The country underwent a Bolshevik inspired revolution in 1918–1919. In the aftermath counter-revolutionaries chose a conservative monarchist constitutional order though they never named a king. Instead Admiral Miklós Horthy served as regent between 1920–1944.

The entry point here to address these questions is the diary of a Polish aristocrat, Princess Maria Lubomirska (1873–1934). As far as historical sources go, Lubomirska's diary is an extremely rich vein to mine. Just as every piece of writing is an entrée into the world of the author's imagination, through her recorded accounts and thoughts we are not only accessing a past-present, but also a past-future. At any given moment, there were manifold futures that could reasonably be envisaged. But as the days and weeks wore on, world historical events presented resistance to Lubomirska's preferred outcome, namely that Poland would be resurrected as a monarchy. Here I am not simply asking questions about the feelings of one aristocrat, but rather gaining access to how people envisioned the 'future' of Europe throughout the First World War, and how those reveries were shattered. Any further speculation on how the specific relates to the general here I leave for the reader to decide based on their own experience and perspective.

By examining Lubomirska's thoughts and trying to reconstruct how she felt I am attempting to gain access to a multi-verse of possibilities without falling into a teleological trap. Lubomirska's aristocratic pedigree and proclivities also present a limiting factor. We could just as well search for source material from another member of society and in other European cities or villages at this momentous time. For each individual who lived through this period of unprecedented change there were inherently emotional conflicts underway in search of the most beneficial resolution of the Great War for themselves personally and as part of a class, religious group or nation. Ukrainian-speaking peasants, urban Jews and Polish factory workers all hoped for an advantageous outcome and each of these ends of war were mutually exclusive. Lubomirska, for her part, places us in the halls of power. As a result, her fantasies of the future were not mere daydreams, but real political possibilities. In the following, I employ the concept of dreams to represent Lubomirska's visions of the future. They are, though, a figment of my own imagination, not of hers.

Consulting with Ghosts

In a dark drawing room, they sat at a round table, eleven of them, holding hands. Next to the Princess Maria Lubomirska and her husband Zdzisław sat actors, doctors, and professors. *A mixed group*, the Princess lamented in her diary the next day. Their spiritual guide and medium for the evening, Jan Guzik, was *dirty and deaf*, with skin as tough as the leathers he worked as a tanner. After loudly demanding silence, Guzik extinguished the candles on the table and fell fast asleep. His head and chest flopped onto the table, but his rough hands remained firmly gripped to the soul-seeking men at his sides. Conjured spirits rang a bell, and lights *swam around the walls like fireflies*. Princess Maria smelled phosphorous at that moment. Voices could be heard, but they were distant, as if from outside the house and down the street, yet audible somehow. Steps and

knocks further punctuated the sights and smells. Guests saw hands and arms grabbing and shoving. Some around the table received a kiss, others a punch in the chest. Animal spirits surrounded the Princess, luckily the more mischievous ghosts skipped over her. A phantom managed to reveal himself by holding up a mirror, casting his reflection around the table. Wearing a flowing white turban, the spirit named Józef humoured requests to draw crosses on the participants. Józef made the sign of the cross on Prince Lubomirski, and it stayed illuminated throughout their session. Suddenly one of the ghosts struck Guzik and then pounded the table. With a thud, the séance was over. The guests returned to February 1917; the third cold and hungry year of the Great War in German-occupied Warsaw.[9]

The next day, the Princess sat in their eggshell white eighteenth-century palace, emerging out of a preserved swath of green estate in the midst of overcrowded ramshackle urban sprawl. Princess Lubomirska experienced the war apart from the working masses. Surrounded by long portraits of Poland's great magnates and kings, Lubomirska put pen to paper and she dreamed.

…Long processions of colourfully dressed peasants, bearing flowers and traditional bread for their queen, gather in front of Warsaw Castle. Lubomirska glances at her husband Zdzisław, now King Zdzisław I, covered in gold chains, jewels, and crimson velvet. Her back is straight and her head cocked off to the left revealing her strong chin and nose. Tucked tastefully into Maria's thick brown hair is a white gold crown. The clock tower of Warsaw Castle cast a long autumn shadow on their subjects, and Queen Maria lifts her dainty hand to greet them. They are the protectors of Poland, the embodiment of the great kingdom reborn…

But dreams are often born from a seed of reality. On November 5, 1916, the German and Habsburg Emperors declared their intentions with regard to the Polish lands: 'to create an independent state with a hereditary monarchy and a constitution'.[10] Princess Maria was there at the Warsaw Castle with her husband to witness this momentous event. *In a beautiful columned hall the General-Governor read, in German, the Act for the Creation of a Self-Governing Poland, afterwards Count Czapski repeated it in Polish, but unfortunately, he translated horribly. Then the screams of students in praise of Emperor Wilhelm were quickly drowned out by the roar of 'Long Live Independent Poland'.*[11] German soldiers donning their Pickelhaube helmets unfurled white and red banners in honour of the occasion, signalling that Warsaw Castle, once the seat of the Polish monarch, was Polish once again.

The German General-Governor of the occupation, Hans Hartwig von Beseler, came to Warsaw with little knowledge of Poland and the Poles. As luck

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9 Maria Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik księżnej Marii Zdzisławowej Lubomirskiej, 1914–1918* (Poznań, Wydawnictwo poznańskie, 1997), 467. Some of the details have been augmented from other accounts of Guzik's séances. See: Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 42–46.

10 Akt 5 listopada [Act of the 5th of November (1916)], General Governor of Warsaw, Hans Hartwig von Beseler. http://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Akt_5_listopada_(1916)

11 Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, p. 423.

would have it, von Beseler's close aide, Count Bogdan Hutten-Czapski, fostered an appreciation for Poland and the Poles. Though Hutten-Czapski traced his family's roots to Poland, he was a European aristocrat *par excellence*; born in Prussia, raised in Italy, schooled in Switzerland, Paris and at German universities. Though von Beseler regarded the Poles as being too 'immature' to rule for themselves, he envisaged a Polish kingdom under the auspices of the German Empire.[12] This constitutional monarchy, with its foreign policy subordinated to the Kaiser but with broad autonomy for the Poles, could be a beneficial arrangement, economically and politically. In the past Polish aristocrats had already accepted such conditions twice in exchange for even the illusion of self-government; once as a satellite of Napoleon's sprawling empire in the Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1815), and again within tsarist Russia as the Kingdom of Poland (1815–1832). In 1916–1917, one could easily imagine a free trade zone encompassing the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Poland and stretching as far east as the Dnieper River.[13]

Warsaw's cafes and bars suddenly found life again as the excitement of this prospect was palpable. Amid Polish flag waving and patriotic songs, Varsovians shared drinks and cigars while discussing what this declaration would mean.[14] Within Maria Lubomirska's aristocratic social circle, the significance was clear. After more than a century of living under foreign monarchs, they had a chance to rule again within the Kingdom of Poland, and of course every kingdom needs a king.

At Lubomirski's palace, Warsaw's elite raised a champagne toast, and the prominent lawyer Jerzy Skokowski declared: *It's now generally believed that the fate of Poland rests on two people: Lubomirski and Piłsudski (l'ange et la bête)*. To which Lubomirska reacted, *How awful! Darkness in heaven! Instead of overwhelming enthusiasm, I feel depressed.*[15] Józef Piłsudski was the man she referred to as *the beast,* in contrast to her husband, *the angel*. Piłsudski, in November 1916, was in charge of the largest Polish military force, the Polish Legions, which he had formed beside the Habsburg military. However, Piłsudski's biography was quite frightening for the Princess.

Piłsudski had begun his political career as a patriotic socialist in the 1890s in imperial Russia, and attracted the attention of the authorities, who sent him to Siberia. The isolation and cold were no match, however, since the Tsarist authorities inadvertently created an intelligentsia community out on the tundra, and Piłsudski returned west better educated and confident of his convictions.

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[12] Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015), 24.

[13] Polish independence came with serious economic consequences if barriers to trade would separate it from its natural trading partners to the east and west. Rosa Luxemburg argued in her doctoral dissertation that an independent Poland would fail for this reason. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Industrial Development of Poland* (New York: Campaigner Publications, 1977) [first published Leipzig, 1898].

[14] Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw During the First World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 214.

[15] M. Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik,* 426.

Over the years, Piłsudski transformed from a publicist and propagandist for the cause of Polish socialism into a violent revolutionary. His credentials as more than a newspaper editor were forged during strikes and confrontations with Cossacks during the Russian Revolution of 1905–7. Piłsudski formed a fighting organisation attached to the Polish Socialist Party, which used terrorist tactics, attacked police officers, and even robbed postal trains carrying cash.[16] As the Russian army returned the area to order, Piłsudski and his associates escaped to Galicia in the Austrian Empire. A few years later when the Great War began, Piłsudski was able to present his insurrectionaries in training as an officially sanctioned fighting force. But the stink of Piłsudski's revolutionary pedigree was not easily washed away.

For aristocrats like Lubomirska, revolution was a dirty word. Every time one occurred, it was people like the Princess who seemed to suffer at the hands of an enraged and unbridled public. A revolution like the one Lubomirska lived through in 1905–1907 called for the dispossession of the landed families, and the end of the order that placed aristocrats at the top of the social and political pyramid.

The Search for a King

Just a few months after the November 5 declaration of the Polish kingdom, the occupying forces formed the Provisional Council of State, and Prince Lubomirski, who served as mayor of Warsaw since 1915, was an obvious choice to lead the group. This unelected legislative body was to write new laws and prepare the way for more permanent institutions of state. Among other things, they formed a commission to draft constitutions. One such project, written by legal experts Józef Buzek and Zygmunt Cybichowski, proposed a hereditary Catholic monarch who could call and dismiss parliament at will and held unchecked executive power.[17]

Just two days after the Lubomirskis sought solace at a séance with Guzik, the Prince and other senior members of the Council of State met with General-Governor von Beseler. The aging Prussian military man sat cordially with the Polish aristocrats in his office in Warsaw Castle. Prince Lubomirski looked tired. The war had turned all his hair white, including his bountiful whiskers. Through puffs on a cigar, von Beseler made it clear that the Council was not a government, and would not become one.[18] He left unsaid the true aim of German occupation: exploitation. The political distraction of a Polish king kept those with greater ambitions fairly busy. While Prince Lubomirski jockeyed for

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[16] Jerzy Pająk, *Organizacje bojowe partii politycznych w Królestwie Polskim 1904–1911* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1985).

[17] Jacek Majchrowski, *Ugrupowania monarchistyczne w latach Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* (Kraków, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1988), 11.

[18] Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 469.

position to claim a throne that did not exist, Germans extracted more than three--quarters of the raw material output of the Kingdom of Poland for their own industry in the Reich.[19] Employment fell to catastrophic lows because the occupiers dismantled all manufacturing in Poland, and massively deforested the countryside; Germany wanted a colony, not a kingdom.[20]

Outside the drawing rooms of Warsaw, the promise of a Polish king was a way to channel nationalism that could no longer be ignored. Underneath the surface, the Central Powers attempted to build loyalty to a Polish kingdom for which young men would be willing to fight. Short on recruits as they were, new blood was badly needed. Some Poles wanted a king, most wanted independence, but by late 1916 few people were willing to join the fight. From the German perspective this Polnische Wehrmacht experiment was an embarrassing failure; something to be suppressed.[21]

The Habsburgs vied for an 'Austrian Solution' of integrating the Kingdom of Poland with a king of their choosing. From their perspective, if anyone were to take the throne it was to be Archduke Karl Stefan, who had chosen to adopt a Polish identity for himself and his children for the very purpose of establishing his line in Warsaw.[22] Lubomirska knew of this possibility, and lamented about Karl Stefan, *it's a shame he is so ugly and old.*[23] And she certainly did not even need to mention that the Archduke was not a Pole.

In early 1917, the Princess recounted in her diary the rapid deterioration of her hopes for a bright future in monarchy, and her husband's increasingly depressed state. Maria Lubomirska dolefully observed as the Germans and Austrians pushed in different directions, and the hope of Polish self-rule seemed ever distant. Just as things seemed to be spiralling out of control, they arranged another séance. *Undoubtedly, the master of this situation is Guzik.* Prince Lubomirski wished to speak directly to the ghosts about how he could maintain control.[24]

The famous actor and theatre director Kazimierz Kamiński agreed to host that evening. They settled into their seats, grasped each other's hands, and the medium Guzik fell asleep. Almost immediately, a ghost appeared to them. *The unseen face, only an illuminated blur close up, its wheezy voice coming out with great effort, so that only a part of its speech could be understood*.[25] The spirit greeted Prince Lubomirski, and warned him twice: *be careful, do not trust anyone!* The Prince asked in a whisper, *Who should I be wary of? My own or foreigners?* A sepulchral voice replied, *Your own.* Prince Lubomirski began to

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19 Wandycz, *Lands of Partitioned Poland*, 340.
20 Ibid., 341.
21 See: Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance*, passim.
22 Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke* (New York, Basic Books, 2008).
23 Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 469. She writes explicitly here that she does not believe in an 'Austrian Solution' at all.
24 Ibid., 474.
25 Ibid.

grumble about how difficult things have been for him, but the ghost cut him off. *Do not complain, it will get worse. May will be the hardest, June a turning point – the army will not give up the city.*

In the darkness, the Princess lost track of time watching her husband take advice from a conjured spirit. The host Kamiński remembered that he needed to attend a charity ball that evening, so he asked the ghost to wake Guzik at ten minutes to the hour. The spell was lifted punctually and they composed themselves while Kamiński ran off to his engagement. The Princess left the house confused and scared for their future, mulling it over throughout a sleepless night. Her diary entry recounting the evening ends with a characteristically understated declaration: *Ce n'est guère réjouissant!*[26]

For the Princess, Guzik and the power of the occult embodied her hope for the future. In March 1917, she heard that the famed medium was heading for Vienna *par la soif du merveilleux*. Guzik would lead a séance for Habsburg archdukes and the Emperor-King Karl I. Princess Lubomirska delighted in the thought that their medium would have the ear of those she considered most important for the future of Europe.[27]

On March 13, 1917, hours after the February Revolution in Petrograd ended tsarism, the Princess noted the greatest sensation of the day: Guzik was exposed as a fraud. Experts revealed that Guzik had tricked his audiences with gases and electric lights. *Beyond the sham still remains the inexplicable reality.* Princess Lubomirska was not easily convinced that her perception of the world was fundamentally incorrect.

Meanwhile, Russia erupted in democratic fervour. The 'people' could finally find a voice in elections to constituent assemblies and local councils called soviets. Widespread starvation and weariness with the war – the conduct of which was completely in the hands of an aristocratic officer corps and courtiers – led to this democratic reaction placing far more emphasis on the people's ability to decide their own fate. Similar echoes could be found all over the world, including in Warsaw. May 1917 saw food riots, as people attacked police officers and pillaged warehouses. The 'war bread' Varsovians had been forced to consume contained more sawdust, potato peels, peas and chestnuts than flour. Not only was it barely edible, it lacked necessary nutrition and calories. Berliners too were complaining about the food, but people in Warsaw consumed about half as much as their German counterparts.[28]

In July 1917, Maria and her husband took the long train ride from Warsaw to Vienna, held up at various points to allow the passage of military transports. At Vienna's Hauptbahnhof the couple entered at the edge of the city's concentric circles that placed the imperial palace, the Hofburg, at the centre. Just at the edge of the palace lay the august homes of the Austrian, Polish, Czech and Hungarian aristocracy. Beyond them, near the Ringstrasse, the upper middle

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26 Ibid., 475.
27 Ibid., 477.
28 Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 88–89.

class and masters of industry built their residences, remaining close to the halls of power.[29] Viennese architecture and city planning was a monument to the Habsburg monarchy and the empire they ruled. A keen reminder as they travelled to meet the last Emperor of Austria.

The Poles scheduled their meeting with Kaiser Karl to request amnesty for political prisoners. When they arrived at the monarch's Schönbrunn summer residence, Karl appeared docile and sad; he was an anachronism in a crumbling world. The Emperor had already decided to break with the ancient traditions and thus, in the eyes of Princess Lubomirska, he had admitted defeat. During their meeting, he displayed unrefined habits, smoked cigarettes, received them in a garden, and even left abruptly at one point to play with his children.[30] His predecessor, Franz Joseph, always received his subjects standing in his office, and in his old age this meant every meeting was brief. So attached to tradition was Franz Joseph that he even refused to ride in an elevator. Even in his absence, the great halls at Schönbrunn Palace were vivid reminders of the world the Princess longed for. And once again she dreamed…

… In the vaulted corridors at Schönbrunn, Queen Maria walks delicately beside the Tuscan-born Empress Zita. As they both pause to look out the tall windows, before them are pristinely kept gardens with rose bushes and lavender, and the greenest grass. Beyond is a great pool in the shape of a trapezoid, and reflecting the image of the gloriette, its marble columns and arches on either side framing the grand glass garden party ballroom. Atop is the Habsburg eagle, holding a crown in his beak, wings gloriously spread wide. And past the palace gates lay the city, Vienna, and the whole of the Empire. Surely, such power is impervious to uncouth populist politicians, riling up unsatisfied people across Europe. The Habsburgs ruled for a thousand years, and they would withstand this test to see another millennium in power…

Princess Maria found herself alone in a long hallway. Most of the footmen had gone off to fight, or stopped showing up to work. Vienna was starving, and serving the Imperial family would have been seen as treachery in the lower class districts of the city. In their hotel, the Lubomirskis were getting a taste of life in Vienna. *There is little bread, and it's very expensive. However, potatoes, sugar, chocolate, butter, rice and so on, are not available at all. Only at Laufer's is it always happy and swarmed with people. And above us, chaos; in all the many languages of the monarchy les peuples deviennent insupportables et crient comme dans une volière.*[31] The malnourished masses were tired of their cage, as she put it, and more importantly, the government's inability to deal with its subjects' most pressing issues had caused an unravelling of legitimacy.[32]

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29 Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, tr. Anthea Bell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009 [1942]), 38–39.

30 Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 516–517.

31 Ibid. 518.

32 Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

After they left Vienna, the Lubomirskis vacationed in the Bohemian spa town of Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně), while Piłsudski began his holiday at Magdeburg, in prison. Concerned with the growing cult around Piłsudski, German authorities arrested Piłsudski and his close assistant Sosnkowski at the end of July 1917. Immediately following their arrest, German authorities asked the Polish Legions to take an oath of loyalty, which the soldiers promptly refused. Imperial troops then corralled thousands of Polish soldiers into prisoner-of-war camps, and Austrian authorities disbanded the Legions. The plan backfired as Piłsudski's imprisonment, and the internment of his soldiers, made them martyrs for Poland, and increased Piłsudski's popularity. Four days after the arrests Lubomirska wrote, *It's a shame he wasn't removed earlier, there would have been less disturbance in the nation.*[33] With Piłsudski, *the beast*, out of the way, it was time for *the angel* to take the throne.

In September 1917, the Central Powers called together the Regency Council to rule until a Polish king could be chosen. Three men were selected for this honour: Archbishop of Warsaw Aleksander Kakowski, Count Józef Ostrowski, and Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski. The Regency Council presided over a cabinet of ministers, issued decrees and wrote new laws. Legally speaking, the Regency Council was the executive of this government; a trinity king, one executive in three persons. The Princess was thrilled. There hadn't been a king or queen of Poland since 1795, and it seemed to Lubomirska this dream could be realised soon. Or so it was reasonable to think at the time, the world of 1917 was still a world of monarchy.

Within her own lifetime, Lubomirska (born 1873) took note of how the trapped nations of Europe found freedom and expression in their own state. Over the course of the nineteenth century, nationalism played a role in the end of Ottoman rule in Europe. The Congress of Vienna established new national monarchies in Serbia and Greece, later Bulgaria, Romania and others would follow. And though these countries were established as puppet states, with monarchs chosen from the great families of Europe – such as the first Romanian king Carol I, born a German royal – true independence came with time. There was no reason, then, that Poland would not follow the same path with a monarchy under the suzerainty of Germany, until such time as the Polish royal would break out in the same way that Romania, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria had.

The imagination closed in on the future. Despite the assessments of experts Lubomirska believed the séances with Guzik were not an illusion and neither was a Polish monarchy; they were a vision of a reality within reach. But there were far more frightening spectres waiting in Petrograd.

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[33] Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 522.

Nightmares Come to Life

A few weeks after Prince Lubomirski joined the Regency Council, Vladimir Lenin led a Bolshevik coup with some popular support and overthrew the Provisional Government in Russia that had replaced the Tsar Nicholas II. One of the most politically stagnant societies in the world became engulfed in a socialist revolution. Like many others at the time, Lubomirska believed Lenin was a German spy, but his actions seemed to muddle German plans. The Kaiser certainly did not want a socialist state on his eastern border; he had enough problems with his own socialists. Meanwhile, Lenin propagated a simple slogan: land, bread, and peace. The Bolsheviks seemed true to their word and began negotiations with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk very soon after claiming control of Russia's central cities. Lubomirska had been waiting for peace throughout the whole war, but the Bolshevik Revolution presented a different outlook for the future. *Peace is so far from calm – reconciliation could be the beginning of a terrible class war in all of Europe. Lenin negotiating with monarchies! He, the propagator of the craziest utopia – pure fantasy!* The unimaginable was becoming real. Several days later, in December 1917, Lubomirska saw a photograph in the newspaper documenting the peace negotiations. *A Bavarian Prince sat at the table with women on his left and a peasant with a beard on his right!* The peasants and the women dazzled their aristocratic negotiating adversaries with long speeches and outrageous requests. All the while, the Bolsheviks used the time to form loyal soviets (councils) all over Russia and build the Red Army. For the Central Powers, this period was an opportunity to creep further east and claim as much territory as possible for their future empire; the Kingdom of Poland could still have a bright future in this vast land.

At the start of 1918, Lubomirska perceived that the Bolsheviks had emboldened the masses. War weary and hungry people terrified her and Maria became a recluse. All the same, Lubomirska would not have her dreams scuttled by a German agent and a bunch of peasants. There was a sense in her circles that the *legitimate* governments – those justified by station and class – would win out. Polish aristocrats sold themselves a genealogical myth that they were descended from Sarmatians – an ancient Iranian tribe – that conquered vast territories in Europe.[34] The blood that flowed their veins differed from the peasants and justified a certain hierarchy that could not be trifled with. Some people are born to rule and others cannot be trusted with such power. *Vain, vain is our society. We are like slaves released from chains, unpredictable in the way we will use freedom; we are mean, contrarian, and petty…*[35]

… Princess Lubomirska looks furtively out the windows of their palace in Warsaw. Hundreds of filthy men are chanting at her, emaciated faces not demanding relief, but the resignation of the Regents. Maria turned back inside

[34] Tomasz Kizwalter, *W stronę równości* (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 107–108.
[35] Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 701.

and ran to her husband's arms. He held her and then separated himself, looked coldly into her eyes, and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. She noticed at that moment the Sarmatian sash across his waist. They were not like those dim workers outside. Aristocratic breeding destined her for the halls of power. Even if the riffraff take control of Poland, they will fail…

The Bolsheviks were not the only ones negotiating an end to the war at Brest-Litovsk. By February 1918, the Ukrainian Rada government in Kiev came to a separate treaty agreement with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk, and for Lubomirska's conservative circle this was the peak of disillusionment with their German partners. The treaty's territorial arrangements were unacceptable, since the Central Powers ceded the Chełm region to Ukraine. This borderland was home to Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, but it was already included in the borders of the Kingdom of Poland. This 'fourth partition' was condemned roundly by all political groups in Poland, including the Regency Council. And as 1918 wore on, the treaty showed itself to be a fictive agreement. Instead of recognising the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine, Germany pressured the Rada government for massive contributions in foodstuffs. When the Rada showed themselves incapable of making deliveries on time, Germany staged a theatrical coup d'état, installing a puppet regent, Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi. For Polish observers Skoropadskyi was a disappointing vision of their future under tutelage. The thought of Poland's king being a mere expression of German power caused the staunchest loyalists to question their position. In the summer and fall of 1918, Germany's failures on the Western Front showed that Poles in Warsaw needed to make their own future. The Americans had entered the war several months before and broken the stalemate. Germany was pushing for a lost cause.

On October 7, 1918 the Regency Council decided to declare an independent Poland, and even called for their own resignation.[36] The declaration envisions the creation of a parliament representing the heterogeneous views and positions of the nation, elected on the basis of 'democratic principles'. The Regency Council would still act as the executive of the state for the time being. While still envisioning a place for themselves, Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski and his circle responded to the need to placate the democratic wave coming from the east (the Russian Revolutions) and the west (the United States). The declaration specifically references the principles of laid out by President Woodrow Wilson. The American president made his Fourteen Points speech in January 1918, calling for national self-determination, including an 'independent Polish state' constituting all the 'Polish lands'. The masses of Europe would no longer wait for a ruler to decide, but take their fate into their own hands.

At the end of October and start of November, the waves of the Russian revolutions rippled westward forcing abdications and dethronings across Europe. During the night of October 31, 1918, soldiers commanded by a self-governing council in broke into a luxurious Budapest apartment and killed a man. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Count István Tisza, Lubomirska's close

36 Rada Regencyjna do Narodu Polskiego, *Monitor Polski*, 7 October 1918.

friend and confidant in Hungary, was shot dead after three previous assassination attempts. A revolution – just as she feared – had begun in Hungary, inspired by the Bolsheviks in Russia. Sailors in Germany mutinied at Kiel, and by November 8, Wilhelm II had abdicated his throne, making way for the establishment of a republic the next day. The German Kaiser fled to the Netherlands, trading four centuries of rule over Prussia and Germany for a provincial life in exile. Perhaps most disconcerting to Lubomirska was that the Habsburg Emperor Karl I never abdicated, but a government formed of bourgeois elites established a republic and surrendered. Karl continued to deny the validity of their declarations and even returned to Hungary twice to try to reclaim his throne. (He was, after all, the King of Hungary too.)

The war was over, but it had unleashed all of the Princess's greatest fears. Revolutionaries in Germany released Józef Piłsudski and his confederates from prison in Magdeburg and he boarded a train for Warsaw. Prince Zdzisław arranged to be the first to greet the returning hero at the train station, but no adoring crowds accompanied the welcome party since few people knew of his arrival. Piłsudski, up to that point, had only been a symbol of resistance and Polish military prowess, but when he arrived it was as a saviour. Piłsudski abandoned his assistants and then perhaps disappointed them as he decided to climb into a carriage with Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski, and rode away to the Frascati Palace.

Piłsudski entered the palace a meek man out of his element. More than a year in a German prison had taken its toll on the old revolutionary who, despite his airs, was rather frail and unhealthy. He walked unsteadily, and a footman approached him asking to take his hat and cane. Piłsudski acted as if he did not hear, and headed towards the blazing fire in the drawing room, hat in hand. The train from which he had just disembarked was not heated, and the November chill had started to settle in his rheumatic knees. And this *great threat* appeared so harmless in that moment. He was a sick man whose popularity in the streets was still no match for the stiff strictures of aristocratic society.

The conversation between Prince Lubomirski and Piłsudski was never recorded, but the next day, the Regency Council ceded all of its authority to Józef Piłsudski. Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski—who would be stripped of his princedom a few months later by a decree voiding all aristocratic titles—handed Piłsudski a sceptre in a symbolic transfer of power in a public ceremony. Piłsudski became the 'head of state', legally occupying the executive position a king would have.

Piłsudski alone ultimately decided that there would be no Polish monarch. After meeting with representatives of all the major political parties, on November 24 he issued a decree that announced Poland would be a republic.[37] He seemed to say, as most people thought, that the time for monarchy had faded, the people would become the sovereign.

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[37] „Dekret naczelnego dowódcy Józefa Piłsudskiego z dnia 14 listopada", *Dziennik Praw Państwa Polskiego* (1918), nr. 17, poz. 40.

> Now no surge is coming – they retreat – the tumult of voices goes silent… Through the newspapers, throughout the streets, among friends we learn for ourselves what unfortunate incident is occurring. Hitherto WE were the source of history in Warsaw and FROM US the sacrificial fire was burning. And today Zdzisław is removed from civic cooperation, called a criminal.[38]

Ultimately Guzik's prediction that Prince Lubomirski had to fear *his own* more than anyone else came to be true. While he and other aristocrats felt themselves devoted to the cause of Polish statehood, the press labelled them collaborators and traitors to the nation. Heroics became tragedy. And when Maria Lubomirska looked at her own visage in the mirror all she could see was a ghost.

Dénouement

At the end of this experiment, I want to reflect on the absurdly difficult balancing act that historians have laid out for themselves. We demand objectivity from each other, though we all intuitively recognise that is impossible. Our experiments will never be 'repeatable' in the Newtonian sense. And while we may set out to 'prove' a certain point, we cannot offer mathematical proofs. Objectivity is the illusion that we sell ourselves to feel as though we are accomplishing something greater than a self-serving venture into a topic that caught our interest. The irony is carried further by the fact that we attempt to 'prove' our 'objective' theses with the use of entirely subjective (and flawed) source materials.

Rather than attempting to throw off the scent of any agenda, ideology or proclivity, perhaps we could lean into the idea of historical subjectivity. I contend that all history writing is imbued with multi-layered perspectives. The historian comes into conversation with sources, to paraphrase E.H. Carr, and what comes out is not magically objective; it is the sum of its subjective parts.[39]

Lubomirska's story shows that possibility is an open process, a synthesis of objective and subjective views of the world. Our 'omniscient' view of the past allows us to see to what degree Lubomirska's dreams may have been impossible long before the war ended. While we can all agree that certain elements of the tale are objective facts – such as dates of declarations and even what (long-term) effects those decrees had – it is hard for us to separate effects from the 'objective facts'. The omniscient narrative then becomes a kind of subjectivity, clouding our judgement even as we attempt to remain impartial. But that which is most enlightening is no longer accessible, and in most cases lacks any material remains. I can recognise that Lubomirska faced down a shrinking set of feasible options for the political future of the aristocratic class. Of course, her dreams had to meet a sharp edge at some point. However, if our stated goal as

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[38] Lubomirska, *Pamiętnik*, 716.
[39] Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Penguin, 1961).

historians is to at least attempt objectivity, it is necessary to rid ourselves of the impending vision of what happens next. Instead, we can observe the time as it unfolds along with her, opening a window toward multiple potentialities ahead, and thus allowing us to pinpoint the precise points of contingency that irrevocably transformed the world we live in today.

Summary

This article addresses general issues in the field of history, while also pursuing a minor revision in the historiography of the First World War and its aftermath. The meta-issues concern challenges that history faces to represent the past through writing in the present based entirely on imperfect sources. The choices that historians make to use certain texts, or other repositories of the past, present inherent limitations. Academic historians tend to impose further restrictions by attempting to mirror the demands of 'scientific' disciplines. The article calls for – and puts into action – a rethinking of this approach through one aristocrat's experience during the Great War, Princess Maria Lubomirska. The diary that she left behind serves as the main source for this exploration. The author attempts to reconstruct her shifting dreams, hopes and, ultimately, disappointments throughout the course of the war. The narrative presented here offers a new representation of the march toward liberal democratic government to suggest that monarchy seemed likely to survive the Great War to become the basis for new nation-states in east central Europe.

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