

# Centenary (Poland)

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## Summary

Contrary to the Great War, the regaining of Polish independence in 1918 has long been rooted in Polish collective memory. Its celebration has become increasingly popular since 2010. The celebration of the centenary seemed to be well prepared. The year 2018 saw a plethora of various events ranging from official to unofficial, artistic to scientific, and some new topics were raised in connection with the celebration. The centenary was also inscribed into a political clash between the right wing party Law and Justice, which won the 2015 elections, and the opposition.

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## Introduction

11 November 1918 symbolically marked the regaining of Polish independence, which was lost when [Poland](#) was divided between the Habsburg Empire ([Austria](#)), Prussia, and [Russia](#) in 1772, 1793, and 1795. 11 November was first celebrated as Polish Independence Day in the interwar period and, after being banned by the communist regime after the Second World War, was reinstated in February 1989 shortly before the fall of communism. From that moment on, the event returned to official [memory](#) and became one of the most important Polish state holidays.<sup>1</sup> While some people who contributed to the reinstatement of Polish statehood after the First World War were honored and [commemorated](#) after 1989, the Great War itself as well as controversies and difficult topics related to the recreation of Poland after 1918 remained mostly forgotten in collective memory.<sup>2</sup> Independence Day marches, which

have become an important element of official celebrations, were introduced in 2010.<sup>3</sup> In 2014 there were practically no centralized commemorative ceremonies planned. The commemoration of the war and post-war period looked somewhat different at the local level. Many commemorative events, including historical picnics, cultural events, and currently popular reconstructions took place mainly in towns affected by wartime hostilities.<sup>4</sup> In 2018 the situation was different.

## Preparing for Commemoration

The centenary of the end of the Great War in 2018 in Poland took place in a different memory context than in 2014 and events were planned by the right wing authorities elected in 2015.

The preparations for the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence began with a precise study of the collective memory of Poles at whom the [government's](#) memory politics was to be subsequently directed. At the request of the National Center for Culture, a team led by sociologist Piotr T. Kwiatkowski examined the attitudes of Poles towards regaining independence and towards the celebration of that event in 2016. The research showed that regaining independence in 1918 was considered Poland's greatest success in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, another study showed that this event was indicated by only 40 percent of respondents as the most important for Poland in the last century, while the 1920 Battle of Warsaw and the First World War were considered as such by only 4 and 2 percent respectively, which clearly evidences the oblivion of the Great War in Poland.<sup>6</sup> The Kwiatkowski team's investigation showed that Poles were most proud of the figures associated with regaining independence: the first places were taken by the legendary commander of the [Polish legions](#) during the Great War and the postwar head of state [Józef Piłsudski \(1867-1935\)](#) (46.4 percent), famous musician and Polish prime minister after the war [Ignacy J. Paderewski \(1860-1941\)](#) (8.7 percent), the leader of the right wing [Roman Dmowski \(1864-1939\)](#) (7.1 percent), the leader of the peasant party and prime minister [Wincenty Witos \(1874-1945\)](#) (6.1 percent), and one of the victorious generals, [Józef Haller \(1873-1960\)](#) (3.7 percent). Contemporary figures followed, such as the leader of the anticommunist Solidarity movement and Polish president Lech Wałęsa (3 percent) and Pope [John Paul II \(1920-2005\)](#) (2.2 percent).<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that there was not a single woman among the top twelve people.

Due to regional differentiation, collective memory is not uniform. The most important figure in the narrative of the center is Józef Piłsudski. In the Wielkopolska region it is Roman Dmowski and in Upper Silesia (in today's southern Poland) it is [Wojciech Korfanty \(1873-1939\)](#), one of the leaders of the anti-German uprisings in Upper Silesia after the Great

War. The key conclusion of the 2016 survey was the conviction of the majority of respondents that this public holiday should be celebrated jointly by all Poles who should suspend any feuds during this period.<sup>8</sup>

## Fathers and Mothers of Independent Poland

With detailed knowledge of the popular mood and social needs, the authorities began preparations. During a debate in the Sejm (the Polish parliament), representatives of the right wing president and the government emphasized that

Poland lacks a sense of a strong community. Poles still feel that more divides them than unites them. It is the activities aimed at strengthening the sense of civic community that should be the priority of the activities of public authorities.<sup>9</sup>

On 25 May 2017 the Sejm announced the year 2018 as the jubilee of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Poland regaining its independence and named the so-called fathers of independence: Józef Piłsudski, Roman Dmowski, Ignacy Paderewski, Wincenty Witos, Wojciech Korfanty, and the socialist politician [Ignacy Daszyński \(1866-1936\)](#).<sup>10</sup> Politicians did not mention any “mothers of independence.” Ultimately, the Sejm adopted a second resolution that recognized the first female parliamentarians and other advocates of the fight for equality.<sup>11</sup> However, only men were depicted on anniversary coins.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after, the government adopted the Multi-annual Program Niepodległa (The Independent), which according to the government defined three values that embody Polish identity: freedom, respect for human dignity and rights, and solidarity. The main goal of the Niepodległa program was to strengthen the sense of civic community among Poles.<sup>13</sup> The overall financing of the events in 2018 alone equaled 94.79 million PLN (approximately 22.25 million EUR). As part of nationwide projects 47.90 million PLN was spent (approximately 11.25 million EUR); 19.41 million PLN was spent on local projects and NGOs (approximately 4.55 million EUR) and 27.48 million PLN (approximately 6.45 million EUR) was spent on foreign projects.<sup>14</sup>

In a separate resolution in 2020, the Sejm also made 2021 the Year of Silesian Uprisings (1919, 1920, and 1921), which in fact marked the end of a long centenary of regaining independence, together with the 1920 [Polish-Soviet War](#). The resolution, as the only one among the anniversary resolutions related to the process of regaining independence, emphasized the obligation to remember when there are no more witnesses.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it did

indirectly refer to a different kind of remembering when the vivid communicative memory of the period around 1918 has transformed into cultural memory.

## Central/Official Commemorations

President Andrzej Duda was actively involved in the celebrations of the centenary of independence. A mobile multimedia [museum](#) was established on his initiative and in cooperation with the Niepodległa program. The educational aim of the exhibition was to strengthen patriotism and national pride.<sup>16</sup> The president also collaborated with researchers by organizing debates at the Belweder Palace (the previous seat of Marshal Józef Piłsudski and of Polish presidents) between 2016 and 2018.<sup>17</sup> The debates concerned the process of regaining independence during the First World War, including the international context, the very armed act itself, the creation of the state, and the role of the [church](#).

The official celebrations were entangled in contemporary political disputes. This was evidenced on 10 November by the unveiling of the statue of the former president [Lech Kaczyński \(1949-2010\)](#) at Piłsudski Square in Warsaw, one of the most prestigious and symbolic places in the city, where the 1925 [Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#) is located. The [monument](#) of Kaczyński, who died in an airplane crash near Smolensk in 2010, was situated in close vicinity to another monument at the square, dedicated to those who died in that airplane crash. This crash is the key element of the recent memory created by the right wing Law and Justice party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński and highly controversial in Poland. Therefore, the unveiling of the statue bore a strong political message. During the ceremony, President Andrzej Duda concluded his speech by stressing, “Since the times of Marshal Józef Piłsudski there has not been such a great leader of the Polish state [as Lech Kaczyński],” thus linking the present with a figure from 100 years ago.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, in a speech in Łódź, the former prime minister and the president of the European Council Donald Tusk compared the actions of the Solidarity movement and Lech Wałęsa (in political opposition to Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński) in regaining Poland’s sovereignty with regaining independence in 1918 and the actions of Józef Piłsudski. Thus, Tusk linked the centenary with a different stream of Polish history and memory.<sup>19</sup>

During the official celebrations on 11 November the representatives of the highest Polish authorities gathered at Piłsudski Square in Warsaw. The only leader of a foreign institution present was the Pole Donald Tusk. The main message of President Duda’s speech was unity, though the president did not welcome Tusk, previously an opposition politician holding a high EU position.

Among the many celebrations, perhaps the most important, the most spectacular, and at the same time controversial was the March of Independence. Since 2010 these marches have attracted mainly conservative right wing circles and provoked counter-marches, scuffles, and even regular street fights. The march in 2018 was also organized mainly by the right and far right wing (officially there were two marches: one organized by the president and government authorities and the other, 500 meters behind it, by the far right).<sup>20</sup> According to police estimates, about 250,000 people marched with flags from the Dmowski Roundabout in the Warsaw city center (thus emphasizing the importance of one of the “fathers of independence”) to the National Stadium under the slogan “For you, Poland.” There were flares, the flag of the European Union was burned, and [anti-Semitic](#) slogans appeared. In his speech during the march, the president stated that Poland was neither white nor red, thus underlining an important anti-communist aspect of the anniversary which also clearly appeared two years later in connection with the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw against the [Red Army](#). The leaders of the largest opposition party – the Civic Platform – showed a different approach by laying flowers at the monument of Marshal Piłsudski in front of the Belweder Palace and then at the graves of President [Ignacy Mościcki \(1867-1946\)](#), Ignacy Jan Paderewski, President [Gabriel Narutowicz \(1865-1922\)](#), and in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Some form of official ceremony was undertaken by numerous public institutions, which posted information about the history of regaining of independence in 1918 on their websites, organized cultural events, published books, and created educational materials or games. A practical example of an attempt to involve the whole of society was the action “Niepodległa do hymnu” in which, on the initiative of the Niepodległa program office, the Polish national anthem was sung throughout the country at noon on 11 November 2018. Moreover, on the same day, a monument to Ignacy Daszyński was unveiled. This could be considered one of the more conciliatory events, as the opening ceremony was attended by representatives of various political circles.

## Historiography, Culture, and Local Celebrations

The centenary of regaining independence has been commemorated by hundreds or even thousands of cultural activities. There were many mass events: festivals, reconstructions, independence marathons, concerts, and religious celebrations. There were also numerous initiatives of doing a hundred activities of certain kind to celebrate the centenary across the country.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, shortly after the main celebrations, two historical feature [films](#) about Poland regaining independence were released in Polish cinemas: *Piłsudski* and *The Legions*.

Exhibitions organized by cultural institutions were important events, which lasted longer than

other festivities and were very often supplemented by catalogues. They were organized in large and small towns; hence, culture provided a link with the local dimension of commemorating independence.

One of the first exhibitions belonged to the series “3xNiepodległa” presented at the National Museum in Warsaw. The series was organized under the patronage of President Andrzej Duda and was co-financed by the Niepodległa program. The third and most spectacular exhibition was “Krzyżąc: Polska! Niepodległa 1918” (“Shouting: Poland! Independent 1918”) (26 October 2018 to 27 January 2019). The exhibition was an extremely successful attempt to expand the Polish memory related to the period of the formation of the Polish state. Selected works referred to often completely forgotten events. There were shown, inter alia, Polish military experiences of the First World War that go beyond the popular legend of the legions. Visitors could see the horrors of war experienced by Polish soldiers fighting in the imperial armies and by civilians, including [refugees](#), or pogroms against the Jewish population. The collected works of [art](#) also concerned the war of 1920 and the formation of Polish statehood, [national minorities](#), the Sejm, the assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz, and the cult of Marshal Piłsudski.<sup>22</sup>

The exhibition entitled “Thread. Weaves of Freedom. Exhibition on the 100th Anniversary of Poland Regaining Independence” presented by the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk went beyond the very year 1918. The creators of the exhibition not only drew attention to the attempts to regain independence before 1918, but also showed the continuity of Poles’ experiences in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which culminated in the (second) “regaining of independence” in 1989. The authors drew attention to the universal importance of such values as human rights, freedom of speech, the rule of law or compromise, and pointed to the current threat of the return of authoritarian systems from the interwar period.<sup>23</sup>

Some exhibitions went beyond the traditional national framework to present the experience of the Central European region. One such project was the outdoor exhibition “After the Great War. A New Europe 1918-1923” created by the European Remembrance and Solidarity Network with a Niepodległa program subsidy. It showed the complicated formation of a new order in Central and Eastern Europe in the first years after the Great War as well as the diverse experiences and memories of the region’s societies.<sup>24</sup> A similar regional approach was shown in two exhibitions that concerned monuments and architecture. The first, “Architecture of Independence in Central Europe” created by the International Cultural Centre (ICC) in Kraków with co-financing from the Niepodległa program (9 November 2018 to 10 February 2019), presented the functions of architecture and the creation of public space in the region in the interwar period. According to Agata Wąsowska-Pawlik, director of the ICC,

the heritage of the Second Polish Republic (1918-1939) is the most important topic that should be discussed during the centenary of regaining of independence. In her opinion, one should remember not only the hardship of reconstruction, but also the dark pages in that period, the inequalities, the lack of recognition for minorities, and the slide towards authoritarianism.<sup>25</sup> The Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture presented an exhibition called "Monument. Central and Eastern Europe 1918-2018," also co-financed by the Niepodległa program. The curators of the exhibition presented various monuments in the region from the last century which served or were to be used to form the identity of local societies. It was thus another exhibition emphasizing the construction of identity. This was also the purpose of the series of exhibitions entitled "Identity. 100 years of Polish architecture" organized in five cities: Kraków, Warsaw, Lublin, Poznań, and Katowice, where various issues related to the influence of architects and urban planners on the Polish cultural landscape and identity were discussed.<sup>26</sup>

Some exhibitions also dealt with topics excluded from the collective memory. In 2017, on the occasion of the centenary of the closure of the camp in Talerhof in Austria where Lemkos were imprisoned, a special educational path was created in the Low Beskid mountains where these people lived.<sup>27</sup> The already mentioned exhibition "Shouting: Poland! Independent 1918" also included forgotten stories from that period. The Museum of Modern Art (MSN) in Warsaw presented an exhibition entitled "Independent. Women and the national discourse" (26 October 2018 to 3 February 2019). MSN drew attention to the absence of women in storytelling and to their agency. The exhibition showed women who fought for independence in various countries after 1918.<sup>28</sup> The role of women in historical events was also highlighted at the exhibition "Unforgettable. Women during uprisings and plebiscite in Upper Silesia" (3 May 2019 to 5 January 2020), organised by the Silesian Museum in Katowice on the centenary of the First Silesian Uprising. In a similar trend, Anka Leśniak's exhibition "PatRIOTki" (The PatRIOTs) (31 July to 14 September 2020) was presented at the Art Exhibitions Office in Jelenia Góra. It drew attention to the Polish female terrorists who fought for the independence of Poland with the partitioning powers before 1918.<sup>29</sup> The centenary of women's rights was also an important part of the independence celebrations in Gdańsk, Wrocław, and Zielona Góra.

The centenary of regaining independence and beginning of the reconstruction of the state was also an occasion to discuss the obligations of being a citizen of Poland. This was the subject of the exhibition "In King Matt's Poland. The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Regaining Independence" shown at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (9 November 2018 to 1 July 2019).<sup>30</sup> The exhibition pointed out that the freedom regained in 1918 was not only

freedom from the invaders, but also freedom to build, and it is also valid today. The exhibit presented a story about the state, society, and community building. Due to its unique structure, it was aimed at adults and [children](#) alike.

A look at the portals of even the smallest towns shows that the anniversary of regaining independence was widely commemorated locally. Celebrations marking the centenary of a series of uprisings were also organized, which were part of the creation of Poland's borders after 1918. Apart from the celebrations organized entirely locally some were also attended by the central authorities. President Andrzej Duda presented the Medals of the Centenary of Regained Independence in Poznań and the highest authorities participated in the celebrations at Poznań's Freedom Square, which continued afterwards in Warsaw, and their formula was very similar to the celebration of the Independence Day itself. An even greater impact of the center in the region was seen in 2019 in Katowice, the capital of Upper Silesia, where on 15 August on the occasion of Polish Army Day a parade was held, which is usually conducted in Warsaw. Under the slogan "Faithful to Poland," the parade was also a commemoration of the centenary of the First Silesian Uprising of 1919. The centralized character of these "local" celebrations in Katowice was demonstrated by, among other things, not using regional flags at the ceremony. The central authorities were also involved in the centenary celebrations of the subsequent Second and Third Silesian uprisings.<sup>31</sup>

While Poznań and Katowice were placed within the borders of the Second Polish Republic, the celebrations of the anniversary of the centenary of the independence in the areas that were incorporated into Poland only as a result of the Second World War seemed to be more challenging. This was solved in an interesting way by the authorities of Szczecin (incorporated into Poland in 1945), which organized the celebration of the centenary under the slogan "We create Poland every day." As part of the celebrations many cultural projects were organized, but as emphasized by the city's president, Piotr Krzystek, "We focus on the contemporary experience and practice of patriotism, one that is expressed in civic commitment to common matters, the city, the region, the country."<sup>32</sup> In other cities in the western lands, however, the celebration was fairly traditional and similar to the rest of the country, according to a preliminary inquiry.

The prolonged centenary celebrations helped extend knowledge of the chronological and geographical boundaries of the Great War.<sup>33</sup> A number of scholars - [Jochen Böhrer](#), [Włodzimierz Borodziej](#), [Robert Gerwarth](#), [Maciej Górny](#), [Jay Winter](#), and others - "discovered" the region of East Central Europe, as well as the prolonged [warfare](#) in that region, which reached beyond 1918. In particular, the book by Borodziej and Górny *Nasza wojna (Our War)* helped retrieve the Great War from oblivion in Poland and extended its duration until 1923.<sup>34</sup>



Among the many works which were published in reference to the centenary, one should name the catalogues of the exhibitions mentioned above as well as the outcomes of some of the conferences organised in 2018.<sup>35</sup> These were devoted to local aspects of the regaining of independence<sup>36</sup> as well as to the broader changes in East Central Europe.<sup>37</sup> Some of the conferences dealt with the creation and redefining of Polish national identity,<sup>38</sup> as well as the recreation of the Polish state.<sup>39</sup> A fairly new topic related to the centenary was gender and women's rights.<sup>40</sup> The KARTA Center published a two volume work devoted to the most important events that happened each year during the centenary.<sup>41</sup> A summary of the state of the latest research devoted to the Second Republic of Poland (1918-1939) was presented in a volume published in 2019.<sup>42</sup>

## Public Diplomacy

An analysis of the addresses of the Polish ministers of foreign affairs from 2014 to 2018 shows that before the 2015 elections the anniversary of the war and regaining independence was not used in speeches to construct the image of Poland. This could be due to the fact that the war itself was basically not remembered in Poland. In 2018, the new minister of foreign affairs, Jacek Czaputowicz, informed about a series of activities promoting Polish culture and political traditions during the centenary of regaining independence, with particular emphasis on the civilizational achievements of Poland as one of the oldest parliamentary democracies in Europe.<sup>43</sup> The Adam Mickiewicz Institute was responsible for foreign promotion of culture. In four years the institute carried out over 400 projects in over twenty countries. Their goal was to "strengthen the image of Poland as a country with rich traditions, with modern culture drawing from the past, constituting an important element of a common European identity."<sup>44</sup> In cooperation with the Niepodległa program, various activities were carried out in Europe, Asia, and the [USA](#). Among others, a series of concerts and exhibitions, including an exhibition at the Pompidou Center (24 October 2018 to 14 January 2019) devoted to the artists [Katarzyna Kobro \(1898-1951\)](#) and [Władysław Strzemiński \(1893-1952\)](#), was presented. On 10 and 11 November concerts by Sinfonia Varsovia took place in Usan and Seoul. Also on 11 November at the United Solo festival on Broadway in New York the multimedia performance "The Auschwitz Volunteer: Captain Witold Pilecki" was presented, which was a combination of three different stories: regaining independence in 1918, the history of Poland during World War II, and the Holocaust. There was also a concert at New York's Carnegie Hall that the "Paderewski Cycle" organized in the USA (28 November to 6 December 2018).

Many events took place in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. For example, the

highlight of the autumn program in [Ukraine](#) were the Polish-Ukrainian concerts entitled “Music of Independence.” The main idea of the project was to juxtapose Polish and Ukrainian [music](#) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The program prepared with Lithuanian partners included presentations based on common cultural heritage, such as the exhibition “Angel and Son” dedicated to Witkiewicz (20 September to 18 November 2018) and the exhibition “Lithuania, my Fatherland ... Adam Mickiewicz and his poem Pan Tadeusz.” On 17 November, in turn, the NOSPR and Szymon Nehring concert took place in the Golden Hall of the Musikverein in Vienna.<sup>45</sup> Poland was also promoted abroad with a controversial yacht, “I love Poland”<sup>46</sup> and through the anniversary cruise of the Polish tall ship Dar Młodzięży, which sailed around the world.<sup>47</sup> As part of the promotion of Polish history abroad, an exhibition devoted to the century of women’s electoral rights in Poland was opened in the European Parliament.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

From a statistical perspective the centenary celebrations can be assessed positively. As many as 40 percent of those polled by CBOS believed that the most important national event of 2018 was the celebration of the centenary of Poland regaining independence. It is also worth noting that the local elections took second place (only 6 percent of respondents), while all other events did not exceed 2 percent. On the other hand, 38 percent of respondents could not indicate such an event and for 5 percent nothing important happened.<sup>49</sup>

The Niepodległa program, mentioned many times, played an important role in promotional activities and in financing events throughout the country and abroad. The program was supported by a large budget which ensured the long-term financing of projects, largely bottom-up initiatives. Due to the richness of the content it is difficult to make an unequivocal assessment of the implemented activities. Observers from various political milieus criticized that the celebrations did not have a central point – the main events of the centenary were spread among thousands of smaller initiatives. However, this can be seen as a positive feature, because it made the celebrations more inclusive. Certainly, there were no critical or even polemical references regarding the history of regaining Polish independence on the Niepodległa program’s website. However, these were not the goals of program referred to above. On the other hand, a large part of the most interesting cultural events described here, including exhibitions, were financed by this program. A big drawback was that the Polish authorities did not manage to invite foreign participants to the central celebrations in Warsaw. The wide efforts of Polish public diplomacy were also largely destroyed by the dispute over the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance in the anniversary year 2018 and the controversial changes to the Polish judicial system.

Considering the way cultural events were organized, it can be seen that many duplicated the already known ways of celebration and popular myths. Apart from a few exceptions, there was no mention of Poles' non-legionary experiences of war, almost no mention of other groups, including the dramatic experiences of the Jewish population or similar experiences with regaining independence in other countries. Local celebrations turned out to be slightly different from the central ones, especially museum exhibitions, which reminded, among other things, of the role of women. Due to the heated political disputes in Poland, it is also debatable whether official memory politics accomplished the goal of uniting people around the centenary of regaining independence.

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## Notes

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