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The Polish Duel and Its Last Apologia
Władysław Boziewicz’s Polski kodeks honorowy
(The Polish Code of Honor)

The “code of honor” as most people know it is a set of assumptions and expectations about what a person is entitled—indeed, is obliged by social custom—to do when “insulted” in order to preserve his personal self-respect and public dignity. In a word, to defend his “honor”—leading in more serious instances (nowadays, mostly in novels and films) to challenging one’s offender to a duel. However, few in our time would know how to stage a duel if called upon to do so. The Polski kodeks honorowy [Polish code of honor], a slim volume (suitable, say, for tucking into one’s weapons case) by Władysław Boziewicz (1886–1946), is the last and by far the best-written formal codification of the system of dueling growing out of centuries of practice on the territory of Poland.¹ Like almost no other, it is a work that needs to be examined in the context of the country and of the times in which the author lived, that is, interwar Poland.

Poland is a country where the two words, “Poland” and “Honor,” are inextricably linked in the nation’s self image and are often mentioned in the same breath.² As many Polish schoolchildren know, Prince Józef Poniatowski (1763–1813), nephew of Polish King Stanisław August Poniatowski, placed by Napoleon in charge of the

¹. Boziewicz, Władysław, Polski kodeks honorowy [Polish code of honor] (Warsaw-Kraków: Księgarnia J. Czernecki, eight editions 1919–39). The work is variously available in reprint, for example, by Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław, 1990; Wydawnictwo Bona, Kraków, 2012; and it may be found online (see notes 14 and 17). Page references here are to the Ossolineum edition.

². A cultural embeddedness of the concept of honor not unlike that of Poland has been described for the American antebellum South by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
French retreat from Russia in 1813, died while plunging into the Weisse Elster River near Leipzig, repeatedly wounded, shouting Bóg mi powierzył honor Polaków, Bogu go tylko oddam [God entrusted to me the honor of the Poles, and I will yield it only to Him]. To this day, the motto Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna [God, Honor, Fatherland], tracing back even farther than Napoleonic times, appears on the standards of the Polish Army. The 2008 Polish military code of honor contains on its cover page the words of interwar leader Marshall Józef Piłsudski: Honor służby jest jak sztandar, z którym żołnierz zostaje się wraz z życiem [the honor of service is like a standard with which a soldier parts together with his life].3 On the eve of World War II, Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Józef Beck's response to the demand of Adolf Hitler that Poland renounce the so-called Gdańsk corridor connecting Poland with the Baltic Sea rang similarly: “We in Poland do not know the concept of peace at any price. Only one thing in the life of people, nations, and states is priceless, and that thing is honor.”4 Probably no other representative of any other nation would have put the matter this way. Not that Beck's putting it any differently would have had any effect on Hitler's actions.

While the saying Ta zniewaga krwi wymaga [that slight demands blood] belongs to the national idiom, one possibly associates the subject of a duel over a “point of honor,” especially one of the lethal variety, more with Russian characters, fictional and otherwise, than with Polish. Evgenii Onegin and its author, Alexander Pushkin, come readily to mind. The romantic theme of the superfluously entered duel with tragic consequences is extensively exemplified in Russian nineteenth-century literature and life.5 Both Pushkin and his younger literary contemporary Mikhail Lermontov lost their lives to duelists' bullets, each after previously having tempted fate in multiple duels in which they came out the “winner.” Russian borrowed its word for duel, poedinok, from Polish pojedynek,6 which connotes something like “a one-on-one-er” or a “squaring off.” The borrowing apparently took place in the seventeenth century. In Poland, dueling traditions stretch back to the late Middle Ages. A duel as a possible court-ordered means of settling a dispute when lacking decisive witnesses, is mentioned as early as the thirteenth-century Księga elbląska [Book of Elbing].7 Gradually the practice of the pojedynek sądowy [court-ordered

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7. The Book of Elbing, written in German, describes how Polish common law was to be
due], due to its consistent opposition by the Church as violating the commandment against murder, gave way to extrajudicial duels over one's personal honor, whether condemned by the Church or not.\(^8\)

The image of the Polish cavalry officer (husarz, later ułan), saber at his side, ready to use it at a moment's notice to rectify any slight, real or imagined, permeates Polish romantic historical fiction through the nineteenth century. One need only recall the drawn-out torch-lit affair with sabers between Michał Wołodyjowski and Andrzej Kmiec in Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel Potop [The deluge, 1886], whose action takes place in the seventeenth century.\(^9\) Indeed, the dueling custom in Poland was in full swing in the mid-seventeenth century when Jan Chrysostom Pasek wrote his vivid description of it among Polish cavalrmen.\(^10\) Unlike in Russia (and, for that matter, in England and the United States), where pistols were the preferred instrument, Poland drew upon the traditions of France and Italy, which preferred the less-often lethal, but merely incapacitating, "biała broń" [white weapon]: in Poland, above all the saber (pictured below), modeled on Turkish and Hungarian arms, which over time acquired the status of the "Polish national weapon," and which contributed to the design of the cavalry saber across Europe. Pasek proves to be a veritable philosopher on the subject of the point of honor:

Whoever will fall heir to this book of mine, I admonish and exhort to model himself on my example and the examples of many like me, never to make light of the most trifling instance, so that—even though a man be tried and tested—trusting of his own powers and mettle, never should he provoke a duel and go to it in arrogance; for let him know that he is easy prey. But if in all humility he should defend his honor from injury, calling on God to aid him, he will always win. This is my experience and that of many others. Every time I gave provocation, I was always defeated; every time someone provoked me, I was always victorious.\(^11\)

applied to Poles living in the Zakon Krzyżacki [State of the Teutonic Knights] during the period of rozbicie dzielnicowe [division into districts] in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. An extensive extract may be found in Michał Golec, Pojedynki w Polsce [Dueling in Poland] (Warsaw: Bellona, 2011), 18–24.

8. Golec, Pojedynki w Polsce, contains a broad historical commentary and bibliography on dueling from earliest times, both in general and as it relates to Poland.


11. Ibid., 62.
On the same day that Pasek squared off with Marcyjan Nuczyński (breaking the taboo against a host's challenging a guest, and vice versa), fifteen duels broke out among the irritable cavalry officers of Pasek's regiment as they waited in camp for the arrival of their leader, Hetman Stefan Czarniecki. Judging by Pasek's colorful blow-by-blow description, a "duel" for him was a polite word for what amounted to little more than an alcohol-fueled one-on-one brawl, not the strictly ritualized formal affair into which it grew over the course of the next 250 years, with all the niceties of the visitation of seconds, courts of honor, sterilization of weapons, and the drawing up of written protocols. From the legal point of view, even in the old Rzeczpospolita [Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth], only the king had the power to grant that a dispute be settled by a duel, and permission was not often forthcoming. Pasek reports having to pay a 1,200 zloty fine for his infraction, as well as being required to cover his defeated opponent's medical costs.

Dueling always had its critics in Poland as well as its adherents, beginning especially with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Jan Potocki's Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie [Manuscript found in Saragossa, 1809] lampoons the code of honor on almost every page.12 Ignacy Krasicki's Mikołaja Doświadczynskiego przypadki [The adventures of Nicholas Wisdom, 1776]—Poland's first novel—parodies dueling as a kind of French-inspired foppishness.13 Incidentally, one of the most famous duels in Poland at this time involved the Venetian Lothario Giacomo Casanova who, during a sojourn in Warsaw, challenged General Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, his rival for the attentions of an actress, to a duel with pistols. To his regret, Casanova seriously wounded Branicki, while himself taking a bullet in the arm. The two effusively made up afterward.14

In later nineteenth-century “positivist” fiction, the duel with pistols in Bolesław Prus's Lalka [The doll, 1887–89] and in Henryk Sienkiewicz's Rodzina Polanieckich [The Polaniecki family, 1894] are treated as laughably outlived romanticized relics of bygone days. The ultimate put-down in Polish literature of the dueling impulse

[Image of a Polish saber]

finds its expression in Witold Gombrowicz’s famous duel of grimaces in his novel *Ferdydurke* (1937), in which schoolboys face off and make increasingly disturbing faces at each other.

Here is not the place to discuss in detail the philosophy of dueling, whether in Poland or in general, nor to argue the point that it is, frankly, a questionable practice, in that it can involve taking another person’s life over some issue of intangible and often negligible value. It has been both against the law (even if not always punished) and condemned by the Church in almost every age. A duel gives no assurance that a grievance will be adjudicated fairly (despite Pasek’s assurances, the better fencer is not necessarily the one with the moral right); nor is it clear that, instead of promoting gentlemanly behavior, the code of honor is not just as likely to encourage touchiness over incidents of no consequence.

Władysław Boziewicz’s *The Polish Code of Honor* was first published in 1919 and had eight editions through 1939. It “replaced” earlier Polish codices of honor such as Józef Naimski, *O pojedynkach* [On dueling] (Warsaw, 1881); Witold Bartoszewski, *Pojedynek, jego zasady i przykłady* [The duel: its principles and examples] (Kraków, 1885); and Wilhelm Feldman, *Kodeks honorowy i reguły pojedynku* [The code of honor and the rules of dueling], edited by Z. Pomian (Lwów, 1899)—all of them being works that, according to Boziewicz, justly deserved to molder on the dusty shelves of libraries.15

Long considered a classic in its own country, even if it is mostly unknown elsewhere, Boziewicz’s thin businesslike volume is one of the last serious works to be devoted to the rules and etiquette of dueling as a means of settling disputes between men of high birth or accomplishment, that is, “men of honor.” It was widely employed in Poland through the late 1930s as the chief arbiter on questions of honorable procedure, whether in the political or military arenas, or in the squabbling fraternities at Polish universities, although in the last instance, another honor code also came into use (see further below).

Boziewicz’s *Code* was only one of many such appearing in print at this time; there were at least half a dozen others.16 Probably most remarkable among these

15. Major Polish codices of honor are listed and extensively discussed on the Web site http://czasgentlemanow.pl/ksiazki/ (accessed February 16, 2013), along with the complete texts of some works. The site in general is a valuable compendium of information relating to “Polish honor.” More discussion of the topic can be found under the subheading http://czasgentlemanow.pl/honor.

also-rans was Jan Gumiński’s countercode, *Powszechny kodeks honorowy* [The universal code of honor, Warsaw, 1930], under which both men of lower social rank and women had equal rights with “gentlemen.” It was sponsored by the League for the Reform of Honorable Procedure, an umbrella organization consisting of an assortment of mainly women’s groups, including soldiers’ wives (and, one may imagine, their widows). Its cover motto reads *Coby ludzie nie zginęli* [So that people not die]. The “universal code” gave women for the first time the right to deliver insults in their own name, not merely in that of their male next of kin—a situation that sometimes left men defending the honor of their female partners over matters they little understood. Affairs of honor under this code were settled either in state courts or by specially convened tribunals of honor. Not that such tribunals ever caught on.

Władysław Boziewicz was born on December 4, 1886, in Bogusz in Grzybów Township near Nowy Sącz, to a gentry family. Relatively little is known of him; apparently only one photograph of him, from his World War II *Kennkarte*, reproduced below, has survived.17 His father was Alexander, and his mother was Maria Borowska. He graduated from the Jan Sobieski Secondary School in Kraków in 1908, and undertook legal studies at the Jagiellonian University, obtaining in 1914 a certificate of completion with a specialization in history.

At the outbreak of World War I, Boziewicz volunteered for the Austrian army for a one-year stint (Galicia being at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy). He received a field promotion to the rank of second lieutenant. Immediately following the war he enlisted in the Polish army with the rank of lieutenant, and was subsequently promoted to the rank of captain. Oddly, given his dueling interests, Boziewicz served in the quartermaster corps, whose duties consisted mainly in provisioning the troops. Despite his intense interest in affairs of honor, Boziewicz seems himself never to have been the subject of a court of honorable inquiry or a participant in an honorable dispute, although on June 30, 1923, he was vetted for possible such action by a military court of honor. The nature of the matter remains unknown.

Boziewicz was married to one Zofia Czesz; they had no children. During the German occupation of World War II, he ran a small grocery store in Kraków, serving several months in prison for giving aid to Polish partisans. He died in Kraków immediately after the war in 1946, and, for all practical purposes, Poland’s dueling tradition died with him.

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17. Bibliographical information here is taken from Jerzy Rawicz, *Do pierszej krwi* [Till first blood] (Warsaw: PIW, 1974).
Although Boziewicz’s *Code* has no literary aspirations—it is written in terse legalistic prose—the book nevertheless appears alongside the classics of Polish literature on the University of Gdańsk’s selective Internet library\(^{18}\) as a work of both historical interest and collateral literary merit. It can still be read today with pleasure, and on several levels. First, it provides a fascinating glimpse into a world still quite proximate to us in time and space, but far removed in cultural distance. This is a world in which, for example, a chance jostle on the street is apt to end up getting oneself badly slashed or shot; where a woman’s honor cannot be defended by herself but only by a male relative or escort; in which everyone of note is expected to have within easy reach a matched set of dueling instruments, and to know how to use them; a world, in short, in which something called “honor”—instinctively understood by those who needed to understand it—still mattered.

Second, the *Code* provides a practical and highly informative guide to the nuts and bolts of how a duel is to be conducted. One is instructed on things such as: how one delivers a challenge (no room here for the silly slap on the face with a glove); how long one can wait before responding to a challenge; what person may substitute for another in a duel; which moves are allowable in a duel with sabers (no thrusts unless agreed-to in advance); what the minimum allowable distance is between the combatants in a duel with pistols; which blood relatives are prohibited from dueling with each other; and many other such fascinating dos and don'ts. Boziewicz has no patience for what he considers to be “foreign accretions,” such as the right of the challenger to choose the weapon. Anything else is an “impermissible aberration,” he avers. He openly scoffs at what he calls the “American duel” (consisting in drawing lots for the first shot), as well as at many other variations on the classical one-on-one contest, proclaiming that “they bring dishonor to all persons taking part in them.”

Finally, but actually first and foremost, the *Code* is a good read. Its subject matter resonates with our culturally embedded sense of right and wrong, and its detailed stage-by-stage description evokes in us a visceral response, as we vicariously become drawn into an inexorable process whose rules and regulations Boziewicz sets down so scrupulously.

Even though it is not an overtly literary work, the *Code* has a clear dramatic structure to it. Chapter by chapter, tension slowly builds, as earnest efforts to resolve a dispute involving a person's honor amicably come to naught (Part 1), leading to the inevitability of a duel (Part 2). The chapters describing actions preparatory to a duel (the visitation of the seconds; the choosing of the weapons; the settling upon the conditions; the preparations of the physicians) epically retard the action, heightening suspense before the chapters the reader has been waiting for all along, describing the duel itself—first one with swords (preferably, saber; possibly rapier), then one with pistols (in ascending order of lethality). A curious interlude is provided by a discussion about what to do when the insulted gentleman (who by right chooses the weapon) belongs to a country where the rapier, saber, and pistol are not among the preferred weapons. The reader’s mind is left to wander as to the possibilities. Probably no such duels ever took place. At least none are mentioned by either Golec or Rawicz, in their chronicles of duels in interwar Poland.

The structural position of the denouement is occupied by the final two chapters describing cleanup operations, including drawing up the final report, in which a determination is made as to whether the principles of honorable satisfaction have been met.

One might have expected that Boziewicz’s work, first published in 1919, would have been received as a quaint relic of bygone days—and in some quarters it was. The renowned literary critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, in his review of the 1928 edition, derided in particular its vain attempt to define what is meant in the twenti-
eth century by a “person of honor,” that is, a person not only entitled, but obliged, to defend his and his family’s good name against any affront. Does a gimnazjum [middle-school] diploma qualify? Is noble birth an automatic ticket of entry, even if one lacks a school diploma? Boziewicz does make a certain attempt to adapt to modern times. For example, he grants honorable status to a farmer who, despite his humble origins, now plays an important role on the political stage (he may have had in mind the agrarian politician Wincenty Witos). A total of twenty-eight categories are excluded by Boziewicz from the “community of persons who can give honorable satisfaction,” including men of the cloth. In practice such matters sort themselves out without much prescriptive intervention. In cases of indecision there are always the Tribunals or Courts of Honor, which are assigned such a strikingly important role in Boziewicz’s system. The author is successful in defining the different degrees of insult; the order of male relatives obliged to defend a lady’s honor; the question of who is not a person of honor (deserters from the army or homosexuals need not apply); and many other such matters. Of special interest is Boziewicz’s concept of the obraza [insult], which in his view exists solely in the mind of the person “insulted”:

By an insult one means any action, gesture, or expression, whether delivered in spoken, pictorial, or written form, that is capable of offending the honor or self-esteem (in French, “amour propre”) of a person, without regard to the intent of the person committing the insult. Note: The concept of an insult is, therefore, entirely subjective. For that reason one must consider as insulting even the most trivial of injuries to a person’s self-esteem. In a word, it is anything that the person considers to be an insult, even if another in his place would not have considered himself insulted. However, in such instances the insulted party is obliged to give a precise and exhaustive justification for why he considers himself to have been insulted.  

The fact that so an eminent a critic as Boy-Żeleński would have devoted so many pages to the Code’s debunking testifies to the state of acceptance it enjoyed at the time in the settlement of Polish affaires d’honneur. The Code’s eight editions exactly spanned the interwar years, the last appearing in 1939. This was the year in which Germany invaded Poland, inaugurating six years of oppression, slaughter, and destruction of such unprecedented magnitude and dishonorable nature that it placed for all intents and purposes a grave marker over the age of dueling, whose last great stand in Europe was made, it seems, in Poland.

As described in running detail by Michał Golec, Boziewicz’s work presided over a veritable epidemic of duels that erupted in Poland upon the conclusion of World War I, and the regaining of Polish independence, in the fractious realms of politics, journalism, academics, and (of course) the military. Those in the military found themselves in a curious bind. Whereas civil law meted out severe punishment, including imprisonment, for merely participating in a duel, under the

20. Boziewicz, Kodeks, 16
Austro-Hungarian military code still in effect from before the war, officers were required to defend their honor when called upon to do so, under penalty of being drummed out of the regiment.

While most adversaries during this period went to a duel—as Golec describes it—with Boziewicz in one hand and weapon in the other, his work often struck the hotheaded members of Poland’s exclusive university korporacje [fraternities] as too complex. For them another, more university-compatible code was written in 1924 by Tadeusz Zamoyski and Eugenjusz Krzemieniewski, themselves fraternity brothers of aristocratic background. They resolved the question of honorable qualification simply: one had to be a university student and at least twenty-one years of age. Their code went through three editions. Boziewicz goes out of his way on several occasions to condemn what he views as the German-imported (and, in fact, still not illegal in Germany) practice of the menzura (German Mensur), turning dueling into a virtual college sport, where getting a nick or a scratch entitled one to parade as a “cheap hero.”

Not for Boziewicz was the duel “to first blood.” He preferred to go for second or third blood, or to the point of complete incapacitation of the adversary, emphasizing the no-nonsense seriousness of the affair. However, he specifically prohibits a duel that sets as one of its conditions the death of one of the two participants (although, given the state of emergency medicine at the time, this could easily happen). Boziewicz additionally rejects the practice of using pistols with rifled barrels for greater accuracy. For him, the accuracy of the shot should depend on the shooter and the precision with which the bullet has been hand-molded.

The end of World War I, and the regaining of Poland’s long-absent independence, unleashed a multitude of pent-up emotions, resentments, rivalries, and ambitions that found expression, on the one hand, in lively political debate and a free-ranging press, and, on the other hand, in social and ethnic friction and scurrilous personal attacks, both directly and by innuendo, both in print and by rumor. Boziewicz devotes an entire chapter to the question of whether and when an author, editor, or publisher is honorably answerable for what he prints. In fact, about half of the interwar duels chronicled by Golec took place between disgruntled personages and journal or newspaper editors. The first president elected in the new Polish Republic, the respectable compromise candidate Gabriel Narutowicz, accused by some of being in the pockets of the national minorities, was assassinated within five days of his accepting office. In this context, the Polish Code of Honor does not seem out of place. Among its guiding principles are fair play and the amicable resolution of conflicts if at all possible, before they get to the violent stage. But


23. A competing academic code of honor was that of Juliusz Sas-Wiłocki; see earlier.

24. Golec, Pojedynki w Polsce, in the chapter “Pojedynki w II Rzeczypospolitej” [Duels in the Second Republic].
if they do, at least let one be civilized about it and not “attack from behind or by stealth,” as Boziewicz puts it.

Article 242 of Boziewicz's handbook clearly states: a duel held immediately after an insult is not permitted. Had Shakespeare’s Romeo and Tybalt only been governed by the Polish Code of Honor, the outcome of Romeo and Juliet would surely have been different. The youths would have named seconds to negotiate on their behalf who, besides giving their clients the necessary time to cool off, would have done everything in their power to point out to them the trivial nature of their dispute (in essence, over a gate-crashing) and to persuade them of the pointlessness of shedding blood over it. All would have ended with a handshake. The modern reader is likely to be struck by the symmetry of the Code in this respect, giving equal consideration to both options: amicable reconciliation or implacable retaliation.

For all its questionable aspects, the dueling tradition in Europe ultimately grew out of the chivalric spirit, a belief in transcendent right and wrong, and the sense of one's individual self-respect and the need to defend it—and the topic can still appeal to the modern reader on this basis. For several hundred years in Europe, the dueling custom answered a strongly felt societal need by affording an avenue of redress for harms keenly felt, but for which the regular state judicial system had no satisfactory remedy. In Boziewicz's words,

... for as long as the legal culture of our modern societies offers as punishment for an insult done to a gentleman nothing more than twenty-four hours of detention or the payment of a five-crown fine, this alternative judicial method, supplementary to that of the state judicial system, will continue to exist. Indeed, it seems to me that it will exist for a long time to come.²⁵

That Boziewicz was wrong in his prediction is hardly to be lamented, as much as one can still sympathize with the moral quandary he raises. Rather surprisingly in view of the upheavals and displacements caused by World War II, Messrs. Zamoyski and Krzemieniewski, authors of the 1924 code of honor for use in Polish universities, were still alive and living in Warsaw in 1974 when Jerzy Rawicz was writing his book on the history of the duel in Poland. In his interview with them, they too agreed that the days of dueling are best left behind.

Whether Boziewicz himself would be pleased to learn that his Code now resides more on bookshelves than in gun cases is for anyone to surmise. However, he would be almost certain to rue the afterlife his book enjoys today in at least eight novelty editions issued by a variety of publishers, most featuring quasi-vintage covers in flagrant disregard of the book's contents. The Ossolineum edition, for example, features two back-to-back gentlemen in top hats with pistols drawn, ready to pace off a prescribed number of steps before turning and firing—a ritual that is nowhere described or sanctioned in Boziewicz's code. In another edition, mirror-imaged...

²⁵ Boziewicz, Kodeks, 5.
right-side-up and upside-down gentlemen in bowler hats appear as if on the back of a set of playing cards. In another, caricatures of seventeenth-century Polish noblemen in Sarmatian garb have at each other with sabers à la Pasek. The cover of yet another wildcat edition features two conventional bullets racing toward each other, although the kind of pistol specifically prescribed by Boziewicz fires only hand-cast lead balls.

Nor could Boziewicz necessarily take heart from representative Zbigniew Kozak’s January 18, 2011, criticism of Premier Donald Tusk for his handling of the Smolensk air disaster investigation.26 “Are you and your ministers familiar with Władysław Boziewicz’s The Polish Code of Honor?” the deputy asks rhetorically. It is questionable whether Boziewicz would have approved the honorable challenge of a duly elected public official earnestly performing his offices, as long as such performance did not “bring out facts concerning the private lives of individuals,” as he stipulates. However, it is also doubtful whether any parliamentarian of any other twenty-first-century nation would close a speech by using honor and a dueling manual as his final argument. This incident from less than two years ago suggests how deeply the need for honorable satisfaction still resides in the Polish national consciousness.

26. As reported on Kozak’s Web site, http://zbigniewkozak.pl/2011/01/21/2751/ (accessed February 16, 2013). The Smolensk air disaster refers to the airplane crash on April 10, 2010, in which ninety-six people, including President Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and most of the Polish general staff perished.