For years, Poland played the role of unwilling lackey to the superior powers that surrounded her, constantly going back and forth between which state was her puppeteer. Leading up to the first World War, Poland was divided into three sections: Austrian-owned, German-owned, and Russian-owned. During the course of the war, the Central Powers occupied most of ethno-Poland, effectively controlling its fate. It was during this tumultuous time in the country’s history that it finally gained traction in its battle for true independence, mainly due to the actions of the Russian Provisional Government (RPG). The reason the RPG gave for standing behind Poland’s renewed vigor toward gaining independence was that the Russian people, freed from their own former bondage of the Tsar now stood for the equal rights of their brothers who
suffered under the monarchist regime as well. While these were the public reasons for supporting Poland, there were many more factors working behind the scenes. The Russian Provisional Government pursued a policy in favor of Polish independence in order to nullify and supersede the Austro-German plan for an independent Poland, quell domestic influence of the communistic soviets, and gain in favor with both the international community and Polish people.

The quest for Polish independence tried the avenue of appealing to the Russian Tsarist government, to no avail. After the Revolution of November, 1905, Poland was put under martial law for a short time because of a naval mutiny that took place within its borders. Writing in 1918 A.J. Sack contends, “The country did not receive even elementary political rights… Poland was as oppressed as before.” Germany, Austria, and pre-revolutionary Russia were all loathe to grant Poland any level of autonomy, which led to harsh, submissive policies that gave the Poles little in the way of political expression and, in some cases, no access to basic rights such as schools and agricultural societies. Because of these adverse policies and a long history of foreign political domination, the Polish people were intent on finding a way to freedom. Bronislaw D. Kulakowski summarizes their beliefs during this time,

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2 Ibid., 158.
“The political goal of every Pole is the reestablishment of a completely independent and free Polish State, under a single indivisible government elected by the nation on the basis of free suffrage exercised by all adult citizens without any discrimination…”

When the Central Powers put forth the Austro-German plan of a free Poland in November of 1916, some Polish political parties saw it as the only practical way to fulfill this pervasive desire shared by all Polish people. At the beginning of the war Tsar Nicholas II asked for Polish support against the Central Powers in return for the possibility of extended freedoms after the Entente was victorious. In reality, the war turned into, “for Poland a bitter period of fratricidal strife, in which the three emperors flung their forces, with Polish contingents in each, at one another in the hope of a speedy victory.” Given their history with Russia and its lack of implementation of actions that would bring about legitimate independence, many in favor of Polish democracy thought their salvation would come about through their neighbors to the west. This belief was so strong that in addressing the RPG’s reaction to the Austro-German plan, the Polish Congress in Moscow stated that in late 1917, “It [Polish democracy] thought that history went through Austria

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4 Ibid., 176.  
and Germany to the independence of Poland.\(^6\) Taking into account the bad blood between Poland and the Russian Tsarist government, Austria and Germany saw the “Polish Question” as the perfect opportunity to undermine Russian influence in the area while at the same time bolstering their own power both in Poland and among the international community as the champion of the right of a nation\(^7\) to be self-governed.\(^8\)

The Austro-German plan was publicly announced November 5, 1916 in the “November Manifesto” jointly issued by the emperors of both Germany and Austria which created a new and independent Poland from the Russian Polish districts which the Central Powers occupied during the course of the war. This declaration brought mixed results at first among Polish patriots, but quickly gained in desirability among the activists in Russian Poland as they saw an opportunity to achieve their goals and take a shot at the Tsarist government that had oppressed them for so long. Even the “pro-ally” groups, those in favor of a Russian path to political freedom, reluctantly accepted the proposal of the Central Powers only to stop the occupation.\(^9\) Austria and Germany’s plan, which was not made with purely altruistic intentions as part of the deal to

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\(^7\) Nation is used in this context not in the colloquial sense referring to a country, but rather in manner that delineates a certain nationality.

\(^8\) Graham, 422.

establish a new Poland, meant that the Poles would have to give up their claim to more than half of what was considered traditional, ethno-Poland. This gave the Central Powers the leverage it needed to secure legitimate and uncontested rights of the lands to their east they had been coveted for decades.¹⁰

When the Provisional Government came to power in March, 1917, they had to face many challenges, including now semi-hostile Polish nationalists who had found a champion in the Central Powers. In addition to the obstacle of the competing plan for independence, the RPG faced domestic issues in the form of the Soviets. A relatively new invention in Russian society, the many different soviets that sprung up in the time preceding the March Revolution gained in their legitimacy now that the monarchy was no longer in existence. In the first months of the RPG’s existence, the soviets, particularly the Petrograd Soviet, actually worked in tandem with the fledgling democracy and backed many of their policies. In the days immediately following the ascendance of the RPG to power, the Party issued a declaration admonishing citizens to, “trust this government, combine your efforts… let the government… perform its great work of liberating Russia from the external foe and of establishing internal peace within the country based on the principles of

¹⁰“Free Russia and the Polish Question,” Editorial in Russkiia Vedomosti 61 (March 17, 1917) 3, quoted in Browder, vol. 1, 324.
justice, equality, and freedom.”\textsuperscript{11} Various workers’ groups, soviets, and editorials throughout Russia echoed this sentiment during the month of March.\textsuperscript{12} This did not mean that the Party had permanently committed itself to the RPG’s corner no matter what the situation. The Communists wisely left room for political maneuvering for when they would decide to enter into the second stage of the revolution later in the year. One editorial stated the malleable position of the Party with ominous undertones, “This decision in no way obligates the Party to support the new authority under all circumstances. The Party ‘reserves the right to change its attitude toward the Provisional Government should it deviate from the fulfillment of its outlined program.’”\textsuperscript{13}

In regard to the Polish Question, the Party came down solidly on the side of Polish independence by means of a Russian plan as opposed to following the Central Powers. As a shrewd power play, the Petrograd Soviet adopted their declaration March 14 and issued it March 15, one day prior to the landmark proclamation issued by the RPG on March 16. While there was no stated reason for this date of release, the logic is obvious; if the Polish people and the international community see the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 1204.
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Soviet’s declaration first, they have effectively established a hierarchy of power between them and the RPG, and positioned themselves at the top. By this action the Soviet gained valuable political capital that it could later use toward its ultimate goal of a proletariat revolution. Their declaration is ripe with language that is meant to subtly undermine the power of the RPG and affirm the superior position of the Soviet:

“Notifying the Polish people of this victory of freedom over the All-Russian gendarme, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies declares that Russian democracy stands for the recognition of national-political self-determination of peoples, and proclaims that Poland has the right to complete independence in national and international affairs.”

Coupled with their immense popularity and statements pertaining to their conditional approval of the RPG, this proclamation gave the Soviets considerable political prestige within Russia.

Acknowledging both the threat of losing Polish loyalties to the Central Powers and the Soviet challenge to its authority, the RPG acted quickly to reaffirm its position as both the rightful granter of Polish independence and the legitimate government of Russia, recognized by both the people and the international community. On March 16, 1917, the RPG issued its, “Proclamation of the Provisional Government to the Poles” of Polish Freedoms. This landmark declaration covered all aspects of the Polish Question: the oppression of the Poles by the Tsars, the common bond shared by the formerly oppressed Russians and the Poles,

the Central Powers manipulation of Polish patriotism for their own gain and the lack of inclusion of all three ethno-Polish territories, the doctrine of self-determination, and the establishment a free and independent Poland outside the influence of foreign states. With strong, powerful language the proclamation clearly delineates Russia’s policy toward Poland and is perhaps surprising in how forceful it is:

“Poles! The old political regime of Russia, the source of our own servitude and disunion and of yours, has now been overthrown forever. Liberated Russia… hastens to send you a fraternal salutation and to call you to a new life and to liberty… The Central Powers… with the sole object of enlisting you on their side against Russia and her Allies… gave you illusory political rights, which they extended not to the entire Polish people but only to a part of Poland temporarily occupied by the enemy. The Russian people… recognizes equality for the fraternal Polish people all the plenitude of rights defined by its own will… The Polish nation, liberated and unified, will settle for itself the nature of its own Government by means of a Constituent Assembly convoked on the basis of universal suffrage in the capital of Poland.\(^1\)

In spite of its fledgling status, the RPG’s words regarding a free Poland were taken very seriously, not only by Russians and Poles, but by the Central Powers as well. During its long reign, the Tsarist government has issued many documents and reports iterating its intention and determination to grant Poland its wish of freedom with many of those papers freely printed and conveyed in all parts of Poland, including the Prussian and Austrian areas. The Central Powers were lax in their

censoring of Russian proclamations in their Polish territories because they knew that the Tsarist government would never follow through with any of the promises it made to the indentured country and so had no fear of any patriotic or revolutionary tendencies it may inspire. The new declarations by the RPG were not treated so lightly as an editorial in favor of Polish independence recounts, “The German government treated differently the publication of the act concerning Poland issued by our present government. The Germans postponed its publication in order to issue it with an accompaniment of myriad derogatory remarks.”

This acidic response to the RPG’s stance on the Polish question illustrates how determined it was and how successful it could have been in implementing its policies. Fear of the Central Power’s reaction to this vigorous claim was not existent in the RPG as they had the backing of the Triple Entente and were already at war with Germany and Austria at the time.

The major institution set up by the RPG’s proclamation was the Polish Liquidation Committee which was in charge of “liquidating” Russian governmental structures in Poland and slowly turning over power to the new constituent assembly and duma. To head this important committee, the RPG chose the established Polack leader, A.R. Lednicki who had been an outspoken proponent of self-determination theory and

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Polish independence for many years.\textsuperscript{17} Speaking in August, Lednicki comments on the continued backing of Polish independence by the RPG, calling their efforts a consistent striving “for the complete realization of this demand.”\textsuperscript{18} Although the liquidation commission did not fulfill its stated goal due to a vague mandate, little actual power, and practically no structure to the committee itself,\textsuperscript{19} the fact that Russia started down the path to realizing Polish independence was a major step for the country and gave Poland a spark of hope that they may finally see the own autonomous fatherland they had dreamt of for so long.

The international reaction to the Russian declaration on Poland, with the exception of the Central Powers that has already been noted, was positive and encouraging. President Wilson of the United States had issued his own opinion on the Polish Question in January of 1917, stating that the US was in favor of the self-determination of nationalities and that they would be behind a united and independent Poland, although it did not favor a particular plan as the US was still neutral in the war at this point.\textsuperscript{20} Since its western allies had already recognized the RPG as the legitimate government of Russia prior to the declaration on Poland, it was not necessary for it to follow the principles espoused by the US, UK,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Graham, 50.
\item \textsuperscript{19} The Liquidation Commission, “Report on the activities of the Liquidation Committee for the Polish Kingdom zaczas from 15th June to 1st August,” (August, 1917): 1, quoted in Browder, vol 1, 328.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Graham, 427.
\end{itemize}
and France. It did, however, add to the prestige and admiration of the Provisional Government in the eyes of the West that it took such a determined and unwavering stance in favor of a united Poland.\(^{21}\) Prior to this declaration, Russian-Polish relations had always been a matter of domestic or even familial policy given the extremely close and even symbiotic relationship between the two nations. With the advent of the RPG and their establishment of the Liquidation Committee, these relations, “ceased to be domestic, and became international.”\(^{22}\)

One of the primary reasons for the Russian stance on an independent Poland was to create an effective buffer state and strong ally against the incursion of the Central Powers into Russian territory. For this desired outcome to transpire, the RPG needed Poland to favor their plan over the Austro-German outline for independence. Since the first plan to be vocalized was the latter, the Poles supported it simply by default; the announcement of the Russian proposal gave them a different, and more desirable option. When the RPG’s plan came out, the Polish people immediately issued a response in favor of this plan over the Austro-German one and endorsed the Polish National Democratic Party’s platform that claimed Polish independence could only be realized by the destruction of the German hold on their land.\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Browder, 331.
The Poles believed their initial policy of supporting the anti-German coalition would “mean that victory of these nations, which have proclaimed the unification of Poland... would necessarily result in the realization of the cherished aspiration of the Polish people – the restoration of a unified and independent fatherland.”

This declaration made in the “Dispatch from the Poles” in early March shows the initial Polish policy regarding the War and which side they favored. Throughout the year, this position changed, first in April when the Temporary Council of State in Warsaw issued a statement delineating Polish international policy: “It is our desire to have good neighborly relations with the Russian state, but we must make it clear that we will oppose any influence that would push us in the direction of war with the Central Powers, whose monarchs guaranteed our independence.”

By July, this neutral stance had become the prevalent opinion of the Polish people, much to the disappointment and aggravation of the Germans. The Polish Congress in Moscow, an extra-governmental organization in exile in Russia, comments on Germany’s designs for Poland and the Poles’ response: “Germany needs, not a neutral Poland, but an obedient tool in

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25 This body was actually established by the Austrian and German governments as a first step toward their plan for Polish independence. At first, this body was seen as illegitimate and pocket of the German government. After the March Revolution, it changed positions to fall more in line with Russian Policy, but still had to balance its polices between Russia and the Central Powers.
her hands. But the Polish people do not wish to be a tool in the hands of Germany. And when the State Council proved to be too compromising with respect to the German authorities, it immediately lost its popularity.”

By August, the Polish people had left the position of neutrality, abandoned the Council of State for the Congress in Moscow, and had returned to favoring a Russian victory in the war. The Congress summarizes Poland’s newest stance:

“To attain (a unified Poland) it is indispensible to break the hegemony of Germany in Europe… and to tear away from the Central States the Polish lands which they have in their possession. Poland is thus directly interested in the victory of the anti-German coalition and in the realization of the program of the new European regime defined by the United States and accepted by the other allies…”

To Russia, this news was quite welcome and fell directly in line with one of their major reasons for declaring Polish independence in the first place. While the initial proclamation of the RPG touted a “fraternal union” between the two countries as a major motivating factor in taking the stance, their main intention was to ensure international superiority in the Poland and establish the country as a buffer state against the Central Powers. After the Declaration of the RPG, “The relations of the future Poland to Russia were further defined as involving a ‘free military union’

27 The Polish Congress in Moscow, “Article” Vlast’ Naroda 78 (July 28, 1917): 1, quoted in Browder, vol 1, 331.
28 “Resolutions of the Political Congress of Moscow,” (August 9, 1917), quoted in Graham, 752.
whereby Poland would be ‘a solid rampart against the pressure of the Central Powers.’\textsuperscript{29} There were also multiple editorials and article written in Russia that urged Poland to consider the Russian path to independence over the Austro-German plan. One such editorial written in early March declared that a unified Poland could, “be created only by Russia and her allies.”\textsuperscript{30} On March 18 an article entitled “Polish Freedom” emphasized that to, “maintain federal connections between Poland and Russia… would be entirely to the advantage of both sides.”\textsuperscript{31} And finally near the end of March an editorial attempted to blend all the RPG’s reasons into a more desirable and balanced rational: “The Russian people, together with all the democracies of Europe, Australia, and America, decided to restore the unified national existence of Poland, and this decision is irrevocable because it is inspired in equal parts by the sense of justice, international agreement, and mutual benefit.”\textsuperscript{32}

Right before the second revolution, the Provisional Government issued a statement affirming, “anew its unshakable intention to work for the realization of… an independent Polish State embracing all the territories inhabited by a majority of Poles, with the right of the Polish nation to dispose of itself freely and in conformity with the ethnographic

\textsuperscript{29} Graham, 49-50.
\textsuperscript{30} “Free Russia and the Polish Question,” Editorial in Russkiia Vedomosti 61 (March 17, 1917): 3, quoted in Browder, vol 1, 324.
\textsuperscript{32} Novoe Vremia, 5, quoted in Browder, vol 1, 323.
principle.” Unfortunately for Poland, before the RPG could fully realize these plans, it was overthrown in the Bolshevik Revolution and removed from power. Even though the Soviets had claimed solidarity with Poland earlier in the year, they abandoned their statements in their attempt to come to a peace agreement with the Central Powers. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the new Russian Soviet government gave up its claim to Poland and agreed to abstain from interfering in its affairs while the Central Powers determined the fate of the country, effectively ending Poland’s bid for independence until the following year when the Central Powers were defeated by the members of the Entente.

Although its plan was derailed by the second revolution, RPG did attain its political goal of international respect and security against the Central Powers and their limited plan for Polish independence. They temporarily countered the growing political strength of the Soviets by taking a strong and decisive stance toward Poland while gaining popularity and support among the Russian people. Finally, the RPG’s comprehensive and determined plan that outlined a free Poland, including all sections considered “ethno-Polish” in population, won the Poles over to their side and helped the RPG gain in political stature, even if such a gain was to be short-lived.

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