

The national mourning in the age of the January Uprising in the context of gender inequalities in contemporary Polish history textbooks

In the early 1860s, the memory of the November Uprising of 1830 was still painfully clear. The armed rebellion against the Russian Empire, unable to secure either recognition and support from the United Kingdom and France or neutrality from Austria and Prussia, suffered a disastrous defeat. Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, presiding over the Polish National Government, failed in his attempts to find any allies and had to flee to France. Even the pope condemned the revolutionaries as “deceitful men and promoters of novelties [...] who take advantage of the credulity of those who are naive and rash, so that they may have them as blind servants”. The prevalent attitude towards the November Uprising was probably best expressed by Horace Sébastiani. Upon receiving the report that the Polish capital fell into the hands of the Russians and the uprising virtually collapsed, the French minister for foreign affairs concluded: “L’ordre règne à Varsovie”.

In 1863, when the next uprising broke out, Władysław Czartoryski, acting as the main diplomatic agent of the revolutionary National Government (minister of foreign affairs), was mindful of this experience and fully aware that **the most important battlefield for “the Polish cause” will be the court of public opinion**. And in order to win hearts and minds of the public, he needed a symbol — something that could capture the attention of the societies of foreign empires, influence them and translate into financial and military support. He embarked upon mourning dresses.

Polish women first started wearing them as a sign of support for the national cause on 11 June 1860, when the funeral of Katarzyna Antonina Sowińska — the widow of the general who had fallen defending Warsaw thirty years earlier — took place. This ceremony was a detonator for the events to come. The funeral transformed into a mass demonstration, described by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski in *The child of the Old Town*. Women, dressed in black, participated in this event in great numbers.

Not even a year later, in February 1861, a next demonstration was staged. This time, the Russians decided to bloodily suppress the crowds. In response, “Warsaw got covered with a black pall throughout its length and breadth”. A ban on mourning dresses, put in place after the victims’ funeral, turned out to be counterproductive. First as a gesture of support, then out of sense of fashion, women in many foreign countries started to wear black. As probably never before or since, Warsaw — along with London, ruled at the time by Victoria of Hanover, “the widow of Windsor” — dictated fashion to Paris.

In 1863, thousands of women were wearing black on a daily basis, and some of them were even getting married in black dresses. Although, at this point, distinguishing patriots from fashion followers was nearly impossible, the Russian government did not concede. They imposed fines and imprisonment on the mourning women and called agents from the entire Kingdom of Poland to tear apart their dresses with hooks. When the Poles, trying to avoid persecution, had decided that grey will be the new black, the Russians forbade them to wear it, too; subsequently, brown suffered the very same fate. The police had even arrested a woman wearing green. She was accused of deliberate use of colour representing hope and sentenced to a two-hundred-ruble fine.

Thanks to the national mourning, Władysław Czartoryski aroused sympathy for “the Polish cause”, proved that the uprising must not be disregarded as an interior affair of the Russian Empire and demonstrated that entire Poland acts as one. Over half a century later, it contributed to regaining the state’s independence; some might argue that **women’s mourning dresses were as essential** for achieving this goal **as men’s rifles and scythes**. Nevertheless, this story never has got the attention it deserved — mainly because it was left out of textbooks. Generations of students of Polish have not had a chance to grasp the extent of women’s role in securing this success.

This research project consists of two equal parts. The first one, strictly historical, concerns the national mourning in the age of the January Uprising — an event of cardinal importance for the restoration of Poland’s independence and Polish women’s emancipation. The second one, related to critical pedagogy, builds on that and regards the image of women’s participation in the January Uprising in contemporary Polish textbooks (with some attention given to teaching materials from neighbouring countries as well). The effects of the project include a monograph, an anthology of women’s personal documents referring to the January Uprising, articles in journals and talks on international conferences. Most of the articles and talks will be delivered in English.