

## Andrij Potebnia – a forgotten hero of Polish-Ukrainian relations

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### ABSTRACT

Poland and Ukraine have a lot of problems in establishing bilateral remembrance policy, first of all because of the history after World War I, and as well in topic connected to – mostly in frame of stereotypes – the history during The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Deep russification and anti-Polish state policy, which lasted from XVIII to XXI century, implemented by Russians in Ukraine should be underlined as well. Not only “Ukrainian” meant second category, but also word “Polski Pan” (Polish Lord) had a definite pejorative tone then – it was used even in propaganda during Soviet Invasion in 1920 and 1939. In article will ipso facto be presented one of the forgotten heroes (definitely in Ukraine) which can be a symbol of bilateral international relations. Andrij Potebnia should be one of main actors of building Polish-Ukrainian memory cooperation. The text not only reveals how memory of this officer is presented in Polish Internet today, but also how this forgotten hero of two nations is remembered by local communities in Poland.

### KEYWORDS

*Andrij Potebnia,  
memory policy,  
local historical tourism,  
Polish January Uprising.*

### Introduction

Modern Ukraine and Poland are neighborhood countries that build bilateral cooperation from 1991, especially after 2014, when Ukraine decided to join Poland on pro-Western way of joining EU and NATO. Despite the absence of conflicts related to politics after these countries regained independence, there still are historical problems which have an outstanding impact on international cooperation. On the Polish side, it is a broadly understood longing for changing the borderlands (Kresy) after 1945 – especially among the so-called “Kresowiaków” community and the older generation which still are the victims of war times. An important problem is also the question of the policy of remembrance towards ethnic conflicts that took place in the period immediately before and during World War II. On the other hand, we have hatred associated with the specific colonization policy of the “Crown” towards Ukraine during the existence of the First Polish Republic, and also a complete lack of understanding which turns into fear of the Polish narrative about the city of Lviv. As Maciej Mróz writes, Ukrainians and Poles were also split in some communities, which are still divided by the historical legacy and national aspirations, sometimes even territorial claims, negative stereotypes rooted in national consciousness and collective memory, and they are still vivid, especially on the border, making feeling mutually caused harm (Mróz, 2015: 119-120). As a result, most of the heroes of Poland and Ukraine cannot be called heroes of two nations, but it is worth noting that there are external narratives, i.e. Russian and Soviet ones, which built antagonism and created “evil characters” from potential heroes. Even such a figure as Michał

Tomasz Wiśniowiecki, Korybut Coat of Arms, The King of Poland of Ukrainian origin, which may testify to the thesis about the “Ukrainian King on the Polish Throne”, causes an avalanche of comments demonstrating lack of understanding. Although his ancestor, Dymitr Wiśniowiecki called “Bajda” came from the wealthy nobility of Kyivan Rus in a straight bloodline, and founded Sicz Zaporoska (little Hortica) (Włusek, 2016) as well, which clearly places him in the pantheon of “founding fathers” of contemporary Ukrainian national identity. This is just one example of how the common Polish-Ukrainian historical narrative that can builds positive historical policy is not used. However, the text should focus on modern times, and more precisely on the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Polish and Ukrainian territories were under the tsarist occupation. A candidate for a common hero will be the tsarist officer Andrej Potebnia, who came from the neighborhood of city Romny (today’s Sumy Oblast, back then Poltava Governorate). In 1862, in the Saski Garden in Warsaw, he made an unsuccessful attempt on the Russian governor of the occupied Kingdom of Poland, Aleksander Lüders (Szymaniak, 2019). A year later he took part in the Polish January Uprising. This young revolutionist was murdered while fighting for free Poland near the Polish city of Olkusz, and his humble memory lives there to this day. On the other hand, his story is practically not used in building a mutual history of politics, despite the fact that he has all the conditions to be a hero of two nations. Thus, the purpose of the article is to answer the question how and in what scale Potebnia is shown as the hero of two nations.

### Research methods

The figure of Potebnia is not described deeply in Polish or Ukrainian historical sources. His character is often mentioned in the subject of the battles in the Olkusz region during the January Uprising, but when looking for information in details, it is difficult to find a large amount of data. When looking for an answer to the question of how well-known he is in the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations, it is worth starting from the Internet sources, however, local memory and historical memorabilia dedicated to him are also useful. It is especially worth showing information on the vicinity of the places where the officer died, i.e. the cities of Olkusz and Skala (Lesser-Poland region). When analyzing the sources, first of all, it is needed to mark them as "official", such as information on the websites of local administration, news agency, non-governmental organizations, schools, etc., or those belonging to private persons like blogs or forums. The key of the search was to put the name and surname in Latin spelling, in Polish, in the most popular web search engine – [www.google.pl](http://www.google.pl). Of course, this action may be considered extremely simple, but this action may benefit the majority of potential Polish recipients of information about Potebnia.

The interdisciplinarity of the text makes it necessary to explain some factors, such as, for example "Collective Memory". Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) is considered to be the precursor of research on collective memory topic. This French sociologist and cultural scientist was a student of Henri Bergson and Emile Durkheim who analyzed the phenomenon of memory primarily in the works "Le mémoire collective" and "Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire". Collective memory, according to M. Halbwachs, is not a mechanical ability to register the observed phenomena, it consists in reconstructing the past by remembering the subject. This is possible because the subject is a member of a community that provides him with a certain social framework (*cadres sociaux*) in which he then places the memorized facts. Change in group affiliation entails reconstruction of memories, and it is not possible without members of the community, because together with them, experiences arise that can later help in recalling events lived together ([Halbwachs, 1985: 24](#)). Undeniably, the memory of Potebnia has survived in local history, and partially entered the collective memory. The question, however, is how to transfer and extend this historical memory beyond a smaller community. Until now, unfortunately, it has not been so successful in considering Potebnia as one of the pantheon of heroes fighting for the freedom of Poland and Ukraine.

### Results and Discussion

First of all, we should present the figure of Potebnia, unfortunately, a lot of information is available not in Polish, but in Ukrainian or Russian sources. The only information is based on two books published in the last century. Translating from Russian language, we can make small biographical note about the youth officer: Potebnia Andrey Afanasyevich [19 (31) August 1838 - 20 February (4 March 1863), Russian revolutionary. From noble family. Born in the village of Perekoptse, Poltava province (now Romensky district, Sumy region). Brother of the philologist A. A. Potebnia. In 1856, he graduated from the Konstantinovsky Cadet Corps. He served in the Shlisselburg regiment as a lieutenant. In 1862, he headed a revolutionary organization of officers in Poland. In the summer of the same year, after leaving the regiment, he

went into hiding. In November 1862, together with the organization, he entered the "Land and Freedom". He was one of the authors of a number of revolutionary proclamations from the Committee of Russian Officers in Poland. He kept in touch with A. I. Herzen and N. P. Ogarev. During the Polish uprising of 1863-64, he came to London to meet with them. Unsuccessfully tried to organize a Russian legion in the ranks of the insurgents. He died heroically in a battle with the tsarist troops at the Pieskowa Skala (in Poland) ([Djakow, Miller, 1964](#), and [Lejkina-Swirskaja, 1963](#)). Of course, Potebnia is especially popular in Ukrainian online newspapers after 2013. Above all, it fits in with the myth of a Ukrainian patriot with anti-imperial (presumably anti-Russian) and pro-national liberation views. As we know from other source, A. Potebnia found friends in army which were open-minded people as well as he was. Being in the international corps of tsar army, he had the opportunity to communicate with people of different nationalities and social groups. There were many Poles around him. Some of them were relatives who took part in Polish liberation movement of 1830-31 called the November Uprising, which was definitely inspirational for young freedom fighter. Potebnia was friend of Poles Jarosław Dąbrowski and Zygmunt Padlewski. He became a supporter and initiator of cooperation between Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, Belarusians and Lithuanians who had revolutionary views ([Kulynyak, 2013](#)).

When analyzing Polish Internet sources, the most noticeable problem is the nationality of Potebnia. Interestingly, in most local sources from places where the memory of him is still cultivated ([Olkusz, Skala, etc.](#)), he is unequivocally called a Ukrainian, but in texts which have level of national source, he is often described as a Russian. For example, on the page describing the Jurassic Strongholds, describing the Pieskowa Skala castle, around which the battle took place in 1863, it was written that "Skala was a battleground of the insurgents under the command of Marian Langiewicz with the Russian army, during which the Russian colonel Andrij Potebnia, who fought on the Poles' side, was killed" ([Zamek w Pieskowej Skale](http://www.jura.pozukiwania.pl/zamek-w-pieskowej-skale.html), <http://www.jura.pozukiwania.pl/zamek-w-pieskowej-skale.html>). The local hotel also presents wrong knowledge in its description of the area on the website, using data from one of the most popular Polish websites ([wp.pl](http://wp.pl) – makes the same mistake by writing that he was a "Russian colonel", without providing a specific link<sup>1</sup>. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the place of the battle in Poland is extremely touristic in connection with the nearby Ojców National Park, and of course, the already mentioned Castle in Pieskowa Skala. The same mistake appears in the description of the Castle on the website [www.szkolnictwo.pl](http://www.szkolnictwo.pl), although it is a commercial website, it is created for teachers, which may also be misleading in their job with students<sup>2</sup>. So why the opinion that Potebnia was a Russian is so widespread? It is caused by the Wikipedia article editing about the Castle in Pieskowa Skala from September 26, 2002, when a user named Topora entered data into Wikipedia, describing Potebnia as a Russian Citizen<sup>3</sup>. This information was on

<sup>1</sup> Atrakcje okolicy, <http://skalnydwor.pl/atracje-okolicy/>

<sup>2</sup> Pieskowa Skala, <https://www.szkolnictwo.pl/szukaj/Pieskowa-Ska%C5%82a>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zamek\\_Pieskowa-Ska%C5%82a&offset=20171017200322%7C50633954&limit=500&action=history](https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zamek_Pieskowa-Ska%C5%82a&offset=20171017200322%7C50633954&limit=500&action=history)

the Polish Wikipedia page for 14 years, often mentioned as seen above. Only on January 27, 2016, a user probably from Ukraine named “Бучач-Львів” changed the metadata by adding the Ukrainian origin of Potebnia<sup>4</sup>. However, this was not the first time the Ukrainian nationality of Potebnia was taken away. As the castle in Pieskowa Skała itself was a destination for school trips during the Polish People’s Republic, the image of a young Ukrainian was used for political purposes. The grave at the slope of the castle was arranged in 1953 on the ninetyeth anniversary of the uprising. At that time, the ashes of the buried insurgents were removed from the mass grave in the Skała, city cemetery, and placed in the insurgent grave under the castle in Pieskowa Skała (about 6 km distance). The tomb was established to serve the purposes of political propaganda – precisely the Polish-Soviet friendship. The inscription on the tombstone at that time is as follows: “Here sixty five unknown Polish insurgents rest from 1863, and among them there is Russian captain Andrzej Afanasjewicz Potiebnia which sacred a covenant between Poles and Russians with his blood, eternal glory to the fighters for your and our freedom”<sup>5</sup>. During the Polish People’s Republic, however, it was not something strange, there is no doubt that Polish-Russian/Soviet relations, and in principle care for their condition, were considered one of the priorities of the cultural and historical policy during the Polish People’s Republic ([Habielski, 2009:106](#)). The first return to the national roots lasted much longer, almost 50 years, until 2000, when in the presence of representatives of the Consulate General of Ukraine in Krakow, the old tombstone was replaced with a new one. It contains correct information about the nationality and the spelling of the name Potebnia. The following inscription is carved on the new granite slab: “Here 65 polish insurgents rest from 1863, among them, there are academic Stefan Zaleski, and Ukrainian Andrij Potebnia, former officer of the Russian army, collaborator of Aleksander Hercen, in glory to the fighters for your and our freedom” ([Habielski, 2009:106](#)). And this information and history can only be received from local sources. For example, Bernard Bednorz from the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław describes why, according to him, the letter “i” disappeared from the officer’s surname. “For other reasons, the name of Andrija Potiebnia Street, a Russian who fought in the January Uprising, was changed. Today, in Wrocław’s Sępolno district, we can find Andrzeja Potebnia Street. As Bernard Bednorz explains, the name of the revolutionist lost one letter because the name was pronounced incorrectly ... had a bad association” ([Józefiak, 2013](#)). At this point, however, it is reasonable to make a bold thesis that the more further from the Olkusz land where Potebnia died, the worse the knowledge of history of this topic is. Bednarz, an employee of the museum in Wrocław, should not only mark the letter with Russian origin, but also protest using the word “Russian” in the text, especially since it was published in 2013. At this point, however, it is worth adding that the street named after the Ukrainian officer is located not only

in Wrocław, but also in the Krakow district of Podgórze – but with the correct spelling.

The character of Potebnia is often presented as an opportunity to show Ukrainian participation in the Polish national liberation struggle, as it happened during the meeting of the Polish-Ukrainian Commission of Experts for the improvement of the content of school history and geography textbooks on September 23-27, 2013 in Dnepropetrovsk. However, there is no great success in this issue<sup>6</sup>. One of the few commemorations of Ukrainian heroes were events which took place in April 1999 in Olkusz as a part of the Common Fatherland project, the Ukrainian Day was held in Pub “Baszta”, during which a lecture was given about Mitrofan Podhaluzin, the second Ukrainian commander of the Olkusz squadron in the January Uprising. He is an interesting, slightly forgotten figure, and yet worth mentioning no less and perhaps more than famous Andrij Potebnia. There was also an interesting exhibition of photos of the Ukrainian countryside, namely from the Chernobyl region, and its inhabitants during field work or on farms. The band Drevo gave a memorable concert, which initiated the trend of “authentic music in Ukraine”<sup>7</sup>. As we can see from this description, there were meetings where local history was cultivated in Olkusz, even describing other Ukrainians fighting alongside the insurgents in 1863. It is definitely not enough to open a common Polish-Ukrainian memory of the mutual heroes who unite but not divide. The memory of Potebnia is also used on a micro scale, as an evidence of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation for foreign delegations from Ukraine visiting the Olkusz region<sup>8</sup>.

### Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the figure of Potebnia is a great opportunity to show that Ukrainians and Poles are also connected by a common history and the struggle for independence. Today it is a particularly important date when the international situation encourages deepening bilateral cooperation. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian revolutionist is well-known only in the historic Olkusz lands where he died and where he rests for eternity, and from time to time, there are some articles about him in Ukrainian media. It is worth mentioning that for modern Ukrainian youth, the greatest heroes are Taras Shevchenko and Bohdan Khmelnytsky since the Soviet times when they were very famous historical characters as well ([Kamionka, 2020: 57](#)). Today we do not have to forget about “old” heroes, but because Ukraine is free and on Westernization road, government should as well look for new heroes in history – which can be called European. Natalia Sofyak understood how interesting person Potebnia is, and in her science work “Two brothers, two shares: Alexander and Andrei Potebni” she wrote that Andrij was one of the most famous participants in the January Polish uprising of 1863. The path taken by the

<sup>4</sup> [https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zamek\\_Pieskowa\\_Ska%C5%82a&diff=44787866&oldid=44720283](https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Zamek_Pieskowa_Ska%C5%82a&diff=44787866&oldid=44720283)

<sup>5</sup> Mogiła powstańców styczniowych, <https://malopolska.szlaki.pttk.pl/sk/1876-pttk-malopolska-mogila-powstancow-stycznowych>.

<sup>6</sup> Protokół XVI posiedzenia Polsko-Ukraińskiej Komisji Ekspertów do spraw doskonalenia treści podręczników szkolnych historii i geografii Dniepropietrowsk, 23-27 września 2013 r. s. 7

<sup>7</sup> <https://przeglad.olkuski.pl/ze-wspomnien-bywalca-olkuskich-olkali-gastronomicznych-od-pznego-prl-u-do-wsplczesnosci-cz-3-kawiarnia-baszta/>

<sup>8</sup> Powiat Olkusz: Witamy gości z Kałusza, <https://olkuszonline.pl/20191017237006/powiat-olkusz-witamy-gosci-z-kalusza1571348343>.

empire contradicted the free, democratic development (Sofyak, 2019: 43). The character of the hero should be shown as an example and inspiration for Polish-Ukrainian projects, festivals, events, and also as a military symbol of patron of common military initiatives. However, Potebnia is so needed for all nations not only because he was a supporter of the freedom of nations, a democrat who gave his life for the freedom of a brotherly nation, but also because he is a symbol of European values of Central Europe.

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## Андрій Потєбня – забутий герой польсько-українських відносин

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Польща та Україна мають чимало проблем у формуванні двосторонньої політики пам'яті. Насамперед так сталося через розвиток історичного дискурсу після Першої світової війни, а також через історію часів Речі Посполитої, повну стереотипів, що мали негативний вплив на українсько-польські відносини. По-сприяти проблемам із формуванням спільної політики пам'яті також глибока русифікація та антипольська державна політика, що тривали з XVIII по XXI століття, запроваджені в Україні росіянами. Не лише «українець» означав «людину другого сорту», а й вираз «польський пан» тоді мав негативний відтінок – його використовували навіть у пропаганді під час радянської навали у 1920 та 1939 роках. Через це, як ніколи доречним є дослідження біографій постатей, важливих як для України, так і для Польщі, наявність яких дозволяє говорити про спільне минуле та прагнення до демократичних цінностей. У статті представлено біографію та особливості розгляду минулого одного з забутих героїв, який може постати символом для встановлення двосторонніх відносин та спільної політики пам'яті. На думку автора, Андрій Потєбня має бути одним із головних акторів побудови польсько-української спільної пам'яті. Мета дослідження – продемонструвати, яким чином Андрій Потєбня може бути представлений як герой обох націй. У тексті йдеться не лише про те, як сьогодні в польському Інтернеті представлена пам'ять про діяльність цього офіцера, а й про те, як цього забутого героя двох націй демонструють місцеві громади Польщі. Розкрито причини помилкового зображення Андрія Потєбні як «росіянина» за походженням, що довгий час заважало залученню його до формування спільної історичної пам'яті України та Польщі. Створення нових польсько-українських проєктів, фестивалів, заходів тощо з залученням інформації щодо діяльності Потєбні, а також використання його образу як символу спільних військових ініціатив є важливим у формуванні двосторонньої політики пам'яті, адже Потєбня постає не лише героєм, що підтримував свободу націй, а й носієм європейських цінностей.

**Ключові слова:** Андрій Потєбня, політика пам'яті, місцевий історичний туризм, Польське Січневе повстання.

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