The Połock Academy (1812–1820)
An Example of the Society of Jesus's Endurance

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The history of the Jesuits’ Połock (Polotsk) academy, located in the eastern borderlands of Belarus, or White Russia, can be summed up in the following words: endurance, growth, dispersal, and rebirth.

The academy grew out of the Jesuit college in Połock, founded by the Polish king Stefan Batory (Stephen Báthory) in 1580, and played a major role in the order’s history during the suppression era.1 A year before the order’s suppression (1773), the First Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was ratified. The eastern territories, including Belarus, came under the control of the Russian empire, where Catherine II did not permit the brief of suppression to be promulgated. Thus the Połock college persevered in its educational, pastoral, and cultural missions, with an additional duty to maintain a fragmented Polish identity.

In Belarus, Jesuit activity was focused on its educational mission. The moment it opened a novitiate in 1780, the Połock institution became a center of possible plans for the future restoration of the Jesuit order. There was a substantial influx of candidates for the priesthood and of former Jesuits from many countries who wished to retain links with this surviving outpost of the Society. Not all could be accepted.

Nonetheless, the province in Belarus became multinational. Besides Poles, Lithuanians, and Latvians, there were Jesuits from Germany (forty-one), France (twenty-five), Belgium (twelve), Italy (seven), and Switzerland (five). In addition, there was one Jesuit from each of the following countries: England, Dalmatia, Bohemia, Holland, Portugal, and Hungary. In 1820, a total of 358 Jesuits were active in the Russian empire.2 In the years between 1778 and 1829, 617 members of the order were registered in Połock.

1 Stephanus Rex Poloniae, Magnus Dux Lituaniae, Russiae, Prussiae, Masoviae, Samogitiae, Livoniae ect., Diploma Fundationis Collegij Polocensis Societatis Jesu, Ms. ATJ Kr. 1466 (Archiwum Prowincji Polski Południowej Towarzystwa Jezusowego, Cracow), 14–15.

2 Catalogus Personarum et Oficiorum Soc. Jesu in Alba Russia, Ms. ATJ Kr. 2445 – 1/8; Nomina Patrum ac Fratrum qui Societatem Jesu ingressi Albam Russiam incoluerunt ab Anno 1773 ad Annum 1820 et in eadem Societate Jesu vita sunt functi. Rollarii Flandrorum (1914), Ms. ATJ Kr. 2816; Inglot, 1997, 7–8; Miscelanea Historiae Pontificiae vol. 63 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana).
Those who came to Połock brought their knowledge, their skills, and their sense of mission. They also brought their valuable collections of books and scientific instruments. They immediately started to learn the local language in order to communicate with the faithful and with their pupils. They exchanged the banks of the river Daugave (or the western Dvina) for those of the Tiber, and from 1801 Połock was the residence of the superior general of the Jesuit order. Sometimes, however, the euphoria that accompanied these arrivals was accompanied by a note of nostalgia, which can be seen in correspondence from the period.

The institution’s growing prestige was confirmed when the college was elevated to the level of an academy. The charter was granted by Tsar Alexander I in January 1812, and was published in March of the same year. The institution now had the status of a university to which all Jesuit schools in Russia were subject.

However, these high academic privileges were suddenly and violently withdrawn by the same Alexander I on March 13, 1820. He issued an order for all Jesuits to leave the Russian empire. All property of the order was seized by the state. This decision ended 240 years of Jesuit activity in Połock. Those expelled from Belarus were forbidden by the tsar from settling in former Polish territory. Many went to Galicia. Others were scattered all over Europe, many reached America, and some found their way to the Middle East and Africa.

Polish scholarship has neglected the Połock academy for decades, and the few mentions made were influenced by the hostility of academic circles in Vilnius which were once in competition with the academy. However, words of high regard for the Połock college are to be found in the written recollections of pupils, students, and alumni, who came to know the institution during their studies and fondly recalled their professors there. An objective evaluation of the academy relies on documentation and source materials that are today scattered throughout many European archives and libraries.

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3 Przywilej Najmiłościwszego Imperatora i Samowładcy Wszech Rossyi na Jezuicką Połocką Akademią, Ms. ATJ Kr. 1364, 70–73.

4 Nomina Patrum ac Fratrum.


6 A list of the most important archives and libraries:

- **AGAD** Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, Warsaw
- **ARSI** Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome
- **ATJKr.** Archiwum Prowincji Polski Południowej Tow. Jez., Cracow (formerly APPP)