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## **The myth of the American Revolution and the heroic representations of Tadeusz Kościuszko in the American press of the Early Republic<sup>1</sup>**

Wars, harrowing events leading to human suffering and material destruction, may, nevertheless, have a powerful constructive potential for national and cultural identity. Edward Tabor Linenthal claims that American wars “have often been portrayed as creative events, that bring new life out of chaos”.<sup>2</sup> Looking at the history of American wars, one can easily notice that they have had a tremendous impact on the restructuring and reinvention of American national identity in virtually all historical epochs.

Indeed, when one considers the early history of the United States, it is evident that the American foundation myth, the grand narrative within which both American statehood and nationhood could be demarcated and pre-established, was largely constructed around the story of the War of American Independence. While in fact the conflict with Britain began with non-violent campaigns to repeal anti-colonial legislation, it was the Revolutionary War which was most frequently presented as the defining moment in the creation of America. Since the 1780s, the story of the beginnings of American independence has been told as what Richard Slotkin calls “a constellation of compelling narratives”<sup>3</sup>, making up a powerful myth, which offered a dramatic and expressive view of historical events. The cultural significance of myth consists in its power to explain experiences in meaningful ways, define a

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism*, New York 1982, p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, Middletown 1973, pp. 6-7.

culture's world view, and explain, through persuasive examples, what it means, in this case, to be a good American.<sup>4</sup>

The writing of the myth is a process based on selection of facts, exclusion, exaggeration, and fabrication. The myth of the American Revolution is the account of a just war and individual heroism. The war with Britain was, undeniably, also a tale of civil war, treason, military inefficiency and incompetence, unnecessary loss of life, and private interest. In the storytelling, however, facts which could complicate and obscure the heroic and grandiose interpretation of the colonies' military conflict with the mother country were often down-played, omitted, and suppressed. The American foundation myth is based on well-known formulas, the most important of which is the use of the motif of individual heroism and personal sacrifice which serves the good of the public. It tells stories about the exploits of heroic figures, special deeds by exceptional protagonists distinguished by unique qualities, who, as heroes, represent the best features of the group.<sup>5</sup> In the foundation myth of the United States, the American heroes of the Revolutionary War are featured as courageous characters who sacrificed their lives to save the newly created republic, pursue its values, defend its freedom, and, thus, give an assurance of life to the new nation.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, persons such as George Washington, Paul Revere, Harry "Lighthouse Harry" Lee, Henry Knox, Crispus Attucks, and many other American combatants, both commanders and common soldiers, became protagonists in heroic narratives, which, collectively, constructed the myth of the birth of the Republic. Individual stories would frequently contain the characteristic Campbellian motif of the hero's journey, including such component stages as the call to action, challenges faced in the battlefield, and return to the original community, either as a victor, or as a martyr who has sacrificed his life fighting for the country. The hero would triumph in the extreme conditions of the war, either literally, or symbolically, the narrative of his adventures giving Americans a message about morality and the sense of life. Such mythical narratives have a serious, almost religious tenor, which produces a context for group celebration and reinforcement of dominant cultural values.<sup>7</sup> The narratives of the American Revolution, such as the stories about George Washington or Paul Revere, had a function which was even more

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Mugridge, *Myth-Making and History*, "The International History Review", vol. 5 (1983), pp. 318-321; Gray Cavender and Sarah Prior, *Constructing the Military Hero*, "International Journal of Criminology and Sociology", vol. 2 (2013), p. 469.

<sup>5</sup> Orrin Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools as Agents of Social Control*, "American Sociological Review" 19(1954), pp. 56-62.

<sup>6</sup> Linenthal, op. cit, p. viii.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton, 1949; Klapp, op. cit; Cavender and Prior, op. cit.

important, because it was through them that the cultural values and moral ethos of America as a nation were pre-established and first circulated.

The War of American Independence had several foreign, European heroes, whom America adopted into its pantheon of the champions of liberty: Marquis de Lafayette, Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Johann de Kalb, and Kazimierz Pułaski. Tadeusz Kościuszko belongs to the same group, as a hero of the American Revolution, whose two sojourns in America lasted for no more than eight years, but who was made into one of the iconic figures of American history. In 1813 a New York newspaper published an article describing the foreign heroes of the Revolution in this manner:

Pulaski and Kosciusko were Poles; La Fayette a Frenchman; Steuben a German, and Montgomery an Irishman and yet these men were invested with high offices, enjoyed the confidence and esteem of Washington, and received the greatest plaudits of the nation. (*Military Monitor, and American Register*, April 19, 1813)

The process of writing and performing the American foundation myth was taking place on several different, co-existing and intersecting planes. Oral culture definitely played the most important role, but several historical studies discuss other practices serving the same purpose. For example, Simon Newman points to the significance of such celebratory practices as parades and pageants in establishing the popular understanding of the United States. Peter Thompson writes about the role of entertainment rituals held in drinking places in creating and spreading political views. One should mention the art of oratory and public speaking; moreover, there was a rich visual culture in the eighteenth century which offered the iconography of the Revolution and official images of the Founding Fathers. As Konstantin Dierks and David S. Shields argue, letter writing resulted not only in exchange of information, but also in forming communities, geographically separated, but welded together by a common sense of identity.<sup>8</sup> The list of such myth-making, identity-formation practices is, of course, longer, and includes, for example, literary representations of the struggle for independence of the new nation, sometimes contained in such apparently inconspicuous genres as romance and melodrama. One should also mention professional historians, who, as early as in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century strived to provide an official interpretation of the Revolution, with

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic*, Philadelphia 1997; Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*, Philadelphia 1998; David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, Williamsburg 1997; Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America*, Philadelphia 2011.

David Ramsey, for example, publishing his two volumes of *The History of the American Revolution* in 1789.<sup>9</sup>

The press became a powerful channel in the shaping and circulation of the myth in question. The role of newspapers was essential in the creation of the public sphere in eighteenth-century America and the press was an active agent in making Americans a nation and body politic. As Jürgen Habermas argues, the appearance of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) was the final stage of many 18<sup>th</sup>-century social and political developments, which finally put an end to the remnants of feudalism, with rulers becoming public bodies, with the bourgeois developing into an autonomous entity, and with new national and territorial allegiances coming to the fore. The public sphere is this social area where individuals come together to freely discuss and identify common problems, and such discussion can influence politics.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the development of the press, the circulation of knowledges, the confrontation of varied points of view, and the rhetorical practices of political persuasion created a space within which readers of newspapers were able to forge a common understanding of Americans as a nation.

It was thanks to the – relative – freedom of printing and publishing that the fashioning of America as an imagined community could take place on the pages of newspapers. American newspapers produced a community of readers, exposed to the same mental world and a system of shared values. Charles E. Clark, in his study of colonial newspapers, identifies the process he calls ‘creative consumption’ of the press, showing how wide the use of newspapers was. Copies of periodicals were available in public places (coffeehouses, inns, and ordinaries) not just to gentlemen, but also to people of the lower orders. Newspapers were collected for different purposes, articles were annotated, press news was circulated in private correspondence and was commented on in personal diaries. Literacy was more widespread in America than in Europe. The function of newspapers might have initially amounted to little more than reinforcement of oral culture, but in times of political crisis newspapers’ impact grew tremendously.<sup>11</sup> Newspapers offered a picture of provincial life in America, which, while still situating the colonies within

<sup>9</sup> Moses C. Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution: 1763–1863*, New York 1957; Steven Blakemore, *Literature, Intertextuality, and the American Revolution: from Common Sense to “Rip Van Winkle”*, Lanham 2014; David Ramsey, *The History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols, Philadelphia 1789.

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740*, New York 1994, pp. 243-256. See also David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content*, Newark 1997 and Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833*, Westport 1996; Lawrence H. Leder, *The Role of Newspapers in Early America: “In Defense of Their Own Liberty”*, “Huntington Library Quarterly”, vol. 30 (1966), pp. 1-16.

the imperial world, produced a vision of solidarity and commonality of interests. After the outbreak of the conflict with Britain, the awareness that it might lead to the independence of the colonies came slowly, and it was the press that gave the public space for debating this issue. Later, after the break up with London became imminent, the American press provided a sphere where the discourses of nationhood could develop and the essence of nationalism could be discussed. Through the readership practices of the growing numbers of Americans who were literate and politically engaged, there emerged a concept of America as a nation, a textual construction in the shape of a powerful foundation myth.<sup>12</sup>

The present paper looks at the early stages of this myth-writing process. Its aim is to study the heroic construction of Tadeusz Kościuszko in American newspapers during the Revolution and in the period of the Early Republic (1776-1820). It is claimed here that American press representations of Kościuszko show him as a heroic character in a large-scale narrative about the birth of the American Republic. The creation of the hero, although spanning decades, consisted in re-writing Kościuszko's biography so that, although a foreigner, he could be situated within the American nation and turned into a powerful and compelling character, whose life story, as told by the press, served to reinforce American national values.<sup>13</sup>

The material for the present study comes from *Readex America's Historical Newspapers*, the largest digital collection of early American newspapers, which features more than 2,000 titles.<sup>14</sup> It must be remembered, however, that the *Readex* collection does not include all newspapers from the period. Although extensive, it is still only a selection of the surviving newspaper material from early America. For this reason, no statistical analysis of the press material was attempted. Nevertheless, the corpus of newspaper texts offered in the database can be definitely considered representative of the print culture of the time, also because of the fact that it was a common practice that many articles were reprinted and circulated in several newspapers, the issue of originality and publishing rights not being of primary importance to publishers. In the first step of the analysis, a search was made of the database using the name "Kościuszko" (in several different spellings) as a tag word. The time span for the search was 1776-1820. This procedure produced a corpus of more than 700 articles, which then were subject to qualitative analysis.

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, op. cit., esp. pp. 254-256; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776*, New York 1958; Joseph M. Torsella, *American National Identity, 1750-1790: Samples from the Popular Press*, "The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography", vol. 112 (1988), pp. 167-187.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the Polish myth of Kościuszko see Magdalena Micińska, *The Myth of Tadeusz Kościuszko in the Polish Mind (1794-1997)*, "European Review of History - Revue Européenne d'Histoire", vol. 5 (1998), pp. 191-196.

<sup>14</sup> Early American Newspapers, Series 1, 1690-1876, *Readex America's Historical Newspapers* [Online]. Available at:<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/>.

As it was a common practice in the eighteenth century to reprint articles in several newspapers, the actual number of the texts studied in detail amounted to more than one hundred. The methods used included narrative analysis, lexical analysis, and identification of the most important discourses within which the press persona of Kościuszko was represented. The page layout was ignored, as in the periodicals of the period news came up in the order in which a printer received it, within conventionally arranged sections and columns.

Newspapers shaped a collective American mentality, but the question arises about the strategies the press used in creating a picture of the world. It is important to point to at least two aspects of these processes. Firstly, it was that narrative was the natural ordering device adopted in the press as the principal method of representing the world: a linear, chronological succession of events. Secondly, whatever the topic was, there was demand for strong, distinct, identifiable individuals who would feature as principal characters in the storylines. Thirdly, the large mental world of the readers of American newspapers was “heavily weighted towards Europe” as far as percentage of news and news space is concerned.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, when it came to the figure of Tadeusz Kościuszko, there would be nothing unusual in adopting him, a famous European, involved in numerous significant events, as a major character in American press narratives. The specific questions one needs to address concern the chronology of this process, the precise aspects of his biography and character which made him a hero, and the structure of the narratives within which his persona appears.

The first striking conclusion from the initial analysis of the material in the database is that the name of the Polish hero fails completely to appear in reports from the period of the Revolution, despite the fact that Kościuszko served in the Continental army for more than seven years, distinguished himself several times, and was a well-known figure in the military. The first mention of Kościuszko in the database appears only in 1794, in stark contrast to another Polish commander of the Revolution, Kazimierz Pułaski, whose military exploits were widely reported during the war.<sup>16</sup> When one compares the two Poles, it becomes apparent that the different treatment they received may not only be due to the simple fact that information about Kościuszko’s military achievements would have been less accessible for the press. The newspaper’s reporting strategies were certainly at work here. Pułaski was, after all, a picturesque figure, a brave cavalry officer, actively involved in actual fighting. In contrast to him, Kościuszko’s achievements as an engineer, such as securing the safe retreat of Major General Horatio Gates’ troops from Fort

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<sup>15</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-242.

<sup>16</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, July 2, 1794. American press representations of Kazimierz Pułaski from the same period are discussed in the article by Irmina Wawrzyczek in the present volume.

Ticonderoga, designing the fortifications at West Point, and the construction of earthworks before the battle of Saratoga, despite their unquestioned military significance, may have seemed rather dull topics, not inspiring enough to produce heroic press accounts of Kościuszko's service in the Continental Army.<sup>17</sup>

Actually, the military career of Kościuszko in America had its ups and downs, with the Polish Colonel – later Brigadier General – getting involved in several controversies, caused, for example, by his loyalty to the often-criticised Horatio Gates, and by conflicts with and intrigues by French officers in charge of the corps of engineers.<sup>18</sup> To put it bluntly, it was death on the battlefield that made Pułaski a heroic figure, with the story of his tragic demise during a widely publicized military campaign widely circulated and interpreted as an example of ultimate sacrifice to the cause of the Revolution. Kościuszko survived the war, and his claim to fame could have been further hampered by yet another simple factor: his surname. In the primary texts studied for the present project, the name of the Polish engineer in the American service and the future leader of the 1794 Polish uprising appears in more than a dozen different forms, such as *Kosciuszko*, *Kosciusko*, *Kosciusko*, *Kosciusco*, *Koscuiszko*, *Koshiosko*, *Kusciasco*, *Cosieski*, *Kizieska*, *Kosciouski*, *Kosciousko*, *Kusciozso*, *Cosciusko*, *Kuscuisusco*, and *Kotkouski*. For contemporary readers, the variability of the name could actually have cast doubt about whether press articles and reports referred to the same person.

The first mention of Kościuszko in the Readex database comes from July 2, 1794, when the *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser* published a translation of his proclamation of March 24 in Kraków's Main Square, the text which was later widely reprinted in many other newspapers. Thus, Tadeusz Kościuszko entered the American public sphere not as a hero of the American Revolution, but as a Polish national leader, *Thaddeus Kosciusko*, who called his countrymen to arms to oppose the oppression of Poland by Russia and Prussia. He is a noble, courageous warrior, showing bravery in a noble quest to win freedom for his native country.

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<sup>17</sup> There are several biographies of Tadeusz Kościuszko written in English, in which his stay in America and service in the American military are extensively discussed: Alex Storozynski, *The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution*, New York 2010; Francis C. Kاجencki, *Thaddeus Kosciuszko: Military Engineer of the American Revolution*, El Paso 1998; James S. Pula, *Thaddeus Kościuszko: The Purest Son of Liberty*, New York 1999; Miecislau Haiman, *Kosciuszko in the American Revolution*, New York 1975.

<sup>18</sup> The only identified press references to Kościuszko from the period of his service in America, including his own letter, appeared in a local newspaper, (Fishkill, September 17, 24, October 8, 1778), and concerned the quarrel and duel between Major General Horatio Gates and Major General John Wilkinson, in which Kościuszko became involved. Kościuszko's letter to the newspaper is one of these texts. See W.M. Kozłowski, *Kościuszko w West-Point*, „Przegląd Historyczny”, vol. 10 (1910), pp. 232-239 and Storozynski, op. cit., p. 66. The database used in the present research project does not include the articles from the *New York Packet*.

Detailed accounts of the campaign in Poland soon started to appear in American newspapers, with Kościuszko featured as an able commander of the uprising, fighting against the superior forces of the despotic regimes, bravely facing what seemed to be an inevitable defeat. The news from Europe offered comprehensive accounts of the major battles and movements of the military forces in Poland, as in the report about the battle of Szczekociny:

A messenger arrived here this day from the Prussian army in *Poland*. He brings intelligence that on the 6<sup>th</sup> instant, his Prussian Majesty attacked the Polish patriots, under General Kosciusko, near *Geeckozing* (sic). After a bloody battle of four hours, the Polish General was forced to yield to the superiority of the Prussian force, and to retreat. His retreat, however, was conducted in a masterly manner, and his Prussian Majesty did not think proper to follow him. The number of killed and wounded on the part of patriots was 1000. (*Columbian Centinel*, Boston, August 23, 1794)

Developing the tale of the Polish insurrection, the press focused on the figure of its leader, characterizing him as a person of great courage, putting his life in danger for the sake of the freedom of the mother country. The newspaper reports abounded with extremely positive nominal phrases referring to Kościuszko:

brave Kosciusko, the revered Kosciusko, the gallant Kosciusko, the generous Kosciusko, the gallant but unfortunate Gen. Kosciusko, brave hero of unhappy Poland, this great patriot, the gallant and patriotic Kosciusko, the illustrious Kosciusko, the virtuous patriot and gallant general, the illustrious defender of Sarmatian liberty

An article in a New Hampshire newspaper presented Kościuszko in the following manner:

Amidst the darkness of this prospect, KOSCIUSKO arises, and with the energy of a Hero and an insulted Freeman, who feels his country's wrongs, rallies his fellow-citizens around the standard of National Rights, and discard the gailing yoke of Imperial slavery. How glorious the enterprize! with what emotions of joy did we hear the intelligence of POLAND IN ARMS! ! – Kosciusko was hailed as the deliverer of his country and numbered with the WASHINGTONS of the age! (March 11, 1795, *The Oracle of the Day*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire).

It can be easily noticed that the reports showed Kościuszko's Insurrection (as the uprising was called in Poland) in a manner strikingly similar to the portrayals of the American struggle for independence from Britain. In the American press, the insurgence was virtually always referred to as the "Polish Revolution" and the Polish side was addressed as "patriots". Other analogies were numerous: the motif of oppression by authoritarian powers, the discourse of liberty, and the praise of individual sacrifice for the sake of the public, to mention only the most important ones.

It is within this mode that Kościuszko's contributions to the cause of American liberty are remembered. The first mentions of Kościuszko's participation in the War of American independence appeared only a few years later, when the Polish general, after the defeat of the insurrection, was in exile and on his way to the United States.

Kosciusko speaks but little, like all men who feel and think much. His gentle, calm, and intuitive look depicts a mind constantly preoccupied with great idea, and sometimes pregnant with great designs. His conversation bespeaks one who has penetrated into the spirits and the vents of the revolutions, of which he either has read the history, or personally witnessed the occurrences.

Kosciusko greatly contributed to the revolution in America; he was present at the French revolution, and gloriously began that of Poland. His political principles cannot be extravagant, since they are fruits of long and profound meditation. They are those which are professed in France, that is to say, those of the constitution of 1795, principles which he did not wish, at first, to be applied in their full latitude, to Poland (sic). His maxim was to begin first by making men of slaves, and to form afterwards citizens of men. (*Federal Gazette & BALTIMORE Daily ADVERTISER*, April 8, 1797)

Thus, the depiction of Tadeusz Kościuszko places him among the great figures of his age, as a philosopher, a sage, and a great revolutionary. There emerges a more detailed picture of Kościuszko as a person: he is unique in being involved in the revolutions in three different countries, in various roles, but appears to be a demure, slightly withdrawn gentleman in social situations. It is remarkable, however, that no detailed information about the General's service in America is given.

More descriptions of the general were published after Kościuszko arrived in the United States in August 1797. The knowledge of his leading role in the Polish Revolution must have been widespread, as reflected in the enthusiastic welcome he was given by Philadelphians. The press reported his arrival and gave more information about the great General: "a man, a hero, a statesman, and a philosopher". Kościuszko is a heroic figure of global significance, fighting for liberty and happiness of others, and yet an unfortunate, slightly reserved man, all the time contemplating "his country's unhappy state" (*The Diary or Loudon's Register*, New York, September 16, 1797). The Polish hero is a paragon of these virtues on which the foundations of the American nation and statehood were supposed to rest, and readers are summoned to accept him as their compatriot, because it was expected he would stay to live in the United States (*New-Jersey Journal*, September 27, 1797).<sup>19</sup>

It appears then that Kościuszko was "naturalized" by the American press because of his revolutionary actions and political beliefs, which fitted well within the American republican ideologies and national ethos at the end of the eighteenth

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<sup>19</sup> See also "General Kosciusko", *The Time Piece* September 18, 1797.

century, rather than for his contributions to the American war against Britain.<sup>20</sup> The facts about his role in the Revolutionary War began to slowly enter the public discourse after 1794. A November 1797 article in *American Mercury* was one of the first brief journalistic accounts of Kościuszko's participation in the American Revolution:

At that period, the late unfortunate war with England was carrying on with full vigor. Kosciusko offered himself a volunteer to Washington, and was honoured with an important command in his army. After the peace he returned with the Marquis de la Fayette to France, where the French officers who served in America, and Dr. Franklin, always spoke of him as a man of equal magnanimity, fortitude and courage, and to whom the United States was greatly indebted for his services. (*American Mercury*, Connecticut, November 13, 1797).<sup>21</sup>

The process of Kościuszko's "Americanization" continued, because his political beliefs coincided with the dominant ideals of American democracy. He was described as an unyielding republican. An extract from January 15, 1811, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania described how, when invited by Napoleon Bonaparte to accompany the French Emperor to Poland, Kościuszko "declined the honour, alleging with great truth, in the first place, his infirmities; and secondly, *that he had been accustomed to address his countryman as a REPUBLICAN, and therefore could not now be the follower of a crowned head*".<sup>22</sup> Another mode of representation was to associate the name "Kosciusko" with the idea of liberty. One could even say that in press discourse Kościuszko became a symbol of liberty as a political and philosophical ideal. The Polish General was addressed as "the martyr of liberty", "the champion of liberty", "soldier of liberty", "the warm friend of liberty and mankind".

While the texts from the 1790s fail to provide any particulars of the General's service in the American army, a new set of designations can be identified in them, firmly associating Kościuszko with the history of the War of Independence and with its most notable heroes:

*this gallant pupil of Washington; America's old friend; intrepid Kosciusko;*

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that, although Kościuszko was greeted with general enthusiasm by the populace and was treated as a celebrity by the Philadelphian elite, he was viewed with suspicion by the Federalist government, who remembered Kościuszko's connections with the powerful figures in the Democratic-Republican Party, particularly with Thomas Jefferson. In the leading Federalist newspaper *Porcupine's Gazette*, William Cobbett bluntly attacked Kościuszko, stating that the motives of his visit to America were purely monetary (*Porcupine's Gazette*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 8, 1798).

<sup>21</sup> Not all facts reported about Kościuszko were accurate. For example, in 1794 a New Hampshire newspaper wrote that Kościuszko had "a considerable estate in America (*The Oracle of the Day*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, November 8, 1794).

<sup>22</sup> *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 15, 1811.

*the pupil of Washington, and the brave defender of the liberties of America  
(Of Kosciuszko and Lafayette): the two heroes who have fought under the banners  
of the immortal Washington for the cause of freedom in the old and new  
world; the Washington of Poland*

Furthermore, American newspapers published reports from public events in which Kościuszko was celebrated as an American hero. Festivities such as those for Independence Day provided opportunities for formal toasting of national leaders and heroes, and Kościuszko's name was frequently included. In a typical example, at a meeting in September 1794 the Philadelphia Tammany Society drank a toast to "Kosciusko, and the liberties of Poland".<sup>23</sup> At a dinner given to President John Adams by the city of New York in 1797, a toast was again directed to Kościuszko: "May private friendship and public Honor soothe the wounds he has received in the Cause of FREEDOM".<sup>24</sup>

American newspapers published also several poems devoted to Tadeusz Kościuszko. In formal fashion, typical of classicist genres such as odes and lamentations, these solemn texts presented the General as a tragic hero of semi-divine status, indomitable in his fight for freedom for his country and for humankind, praising his courage and mourning his death.<sup>25</sup> "The Address to Kosciuszko. Late Commander in Chief of the Armies of Poland, and DEFENDER FOR THE RIGHTS OF MAN" began with the following stanza:

Hail, noble patriot, brave, illustrious chief!  
By tyrants exiled from thy native land;  
The generous bosom swells with tender grief,  
To see fell despots o'er thy right command.<sup>26</sup>

A romanticized picture of Kościuszko is present in several prose accounts. In May 28, 1808, *The Guardian*, Albany, New York reprinted the story of a Bristol baker, who wanted to pay honour to Kosciuszko, newly released from a Russian jail, by offering him a plum cake. The baker was told that Kościuszko "was lying on the sofa, for his wounds were not at that time healed, and was too much fatigued and too unwell to see anyone". The baker made his way to Kościuszko's room anyway, but

<sup>23</sup> *General Advertiser*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 26, 1794.

<sup>24</sup> *The Centinel of Freedom*, Newark, New Jersey, October 25, 1797

<sup>25</sup> In 1794 there were several erroneous reports stating that Kościuszko was killed in the battle of Maciejowice.

<sup>26</sup> See also "Kosciusko", *The Independent Chronicle*, Boston, Massachusetts, May 23, 1803. Francis E. Zapatka offers a wider analysis of literary representations of Tadeusz Kościuszko in *Kościuszko in Early American Literature*, "Polish American Studies", vol. 47 (1990), pp. 55-73.

when he saw the great man whom he was come to honor, lying on a couch, with his countenance pale, painful, and emaciated, yet full of benevolence, the sight overpowered him: he put down his cake, burst into tears like a child, and ran out of the room, without speaking a single word.<sup>27</sup>

The story brings to mind the famous painting by Benjamin West, “General Thaddeus Kosciuszko” (1797), which shows the wounded general in a domestic environment, reclining on a couch, vulnerable and suffering. Both the newspaper text and the painting, apart from displaying the individual suffering of Kościuszko, suggest a more general comment on the sacrifice the hero always has to make for his people.

After Tadeusz Kościuszko’s death in 1817, American newspapers published numerous obituaries and longer articles remembering the life and deeds of the General. He is presented in them as a hero of all humankind and his significance for the spreading of the ideal of liberty is acknowledged. The articles do not bring new details about the service he did for America. They are still fairly vague in describing the extent of his contributions, but he is presented as one of the important military leaders of the American Revolution. Characteristically, one extract suggests that while Kościuszko was a famous person and a household name (whatever the spelling) in the United States, knowledge of precise facts from his military career was rather limited:

GENERAL COSCIUSKO. The last French papers announce, that on the 15<sup>th</sup> October, the Warrior KOSCIUSKO – renowned in Polish and American war annals – died of an advanced age in *Switzerland*. His patriotic but unsuccessful exertions to prevent the first dismemberment of Poland, in 1773, are well known. During the War of the Revolution he joined the American standard, and continued under it to its close, as we believe, chief of the Engineer department.<sup>28</sup>

Many American newspapers printed the full text of the speech Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz gave at Kościuszko’s funeral and provided detailed descriptions of the funeral service itself.<sup>29</sup> One reporter emphasized the fact that “The Americans also paid tribute due to the memory of the friend of WASHINGTON, of the hero who shed his blood in their defence, and was one of those to whom they are indebted for the independence of their country”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *The Guardian*, Albany, New York, May 28, 1808.

<sup>28</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, Boston, Massachusetts, December 31, 1817.

<sup>29</sup> See for example “Kosciusco”, *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, Alexandria, Virginia, March 3, 1818; “General Kosciuszko”, *Plattsburgh Republican*, Plattsburgh, New York, January 17, 1818.

<sup>30</sup> *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary*, Norfolk, Virginia, June 12, 1817.

Another text which appeared in numerous newspapers was the address of General William Harrison (future U.S. President) to Congress, proposing a resolution honoring the memory of Kościuszko. Harrison, commending Kościuszko, said:

“[w]hen very young, he was informed by the voice of fame, that an insulted and oppressed people had determined to be free, or perish in the attempt. His ardent and generous mind caught with enthusiasm, the holy flame, and from that moment became the devoted soldier of liberty”.

The passage attributes the origin of Kościuszko’s love of liberty to his experience as an officer in America, where “he was idolized by the soldiers for his bravery, and beloved and respected by the officers for the goodness of his heart, and the great qualities of his mind”. Harrison’s speech represents an attempt to place Kościuszko as a character in a grand narrative even larger than the American foundation myth, the story of American exceptionalism. The assumption is that the true ideal of liberty was shaped in the United States and from there it resonates all over the world, through such exceptional people as General Kościuszko. Hamilton said that Kościuszko, “in the revolutionary war ... drank deeply of the principles which produced it”. Furthermore, “[i]n his conversations with the intelligent men of our country, he acquired new views of the science of government and the rights of men”.<sup>31</sup>

Summing up, this study shows that, taken as a whole, American newspapers presented the figure of Kościuszko in a narrative of heroism, a constituent component of the national foundation myth. The classical motifs of the journey, of the trials that the hero is required to go through, and of the sacrifices he pays are distinctly present. It may be ironic that Kościuszko, despite the undisputed significance of his devoted service in the Continental Army, was not initially recognized as an important military leader of the Revolution and his name did not enter the American public sphere. He was re-discovered as an American hero only after he had distinguished himself as a national leader in Poland. The American press, however, often associated the heroic qualities he exhibited during the fight for Poland’s independence with Kościuszko’s encounter with revolutionary America, and retrospectively, “remembered” his exploits and military achievements during the War of Independence. Thus, in the press stories, Kościuszko’s bravery manifested itself first of all in standing up to and confronting the oppressive powers of European regimes in the name of liberty and on behalf of the poor and underprivileged. His sojourn in America was then re-interpreted along the same lines and his friendship with the American Founding Fathers further testified about his superior, one could even say superhuman, qualities.

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<sup>31</sup> *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, January 24, 1818. Hamilton’s resolution failed to pass Congress.

The most significant part of the process of mythologization consisted in recognizing that Kosciuszko was not only a brave soldier, but that his life could be interpreted as an expression of those values which laid the foundation of the United States: liberty, equality, and republicanism. What made Kościuszko stand out among other heroes of the Revolution was the price that he paid for these ideals with his personal sacrifices: he became an indomitable martyr for the cause which transcended the interests of one country. Kościuszko's love of liberty made him a figure ahead of his times: his condemnation of slavery and serfdom and his personal actions to put an end to these abominable practices went much further than those of his American friends. In later decades, newspapers circulated information about Kościuszko's last will and the fund he left to Thomas Jefferson to be spent on the manumission of slaves, and that his wish was not fulfilled.<sup>32</sup>

The mythologization of Tadeusz Kościuszko in American culture continued in the following decades, and his name was circulated in the press in new ways, when, for example, the practice of eponymization appeared. "Kosciusko" started to be used in names of geographical places: the first one, Kosciusko County, Indiana received its name in 1836.<sup>33</sup> Myth-making is a continuous process: it gathered new speed whenever important events, such as the 1830 uprising, happened in Poland. On such occasions Kościuszko would be instantly mentioned in the press as an easily recognizable figure for American readers. It is in this period when more information about Kościuszko's role in the American Revolution came to light, and the account of the Pole's military adventures in America started to be more comprehensive and replete with additional details, for example such facts as the General's friendship with his black personal aide, Agrippa Hull.<sup>34</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century the situation changed when Polish immigrants arrived in America in large numbers: they would be a new force shaping the cult of Kościuszko in America. They brought with themselves the myth of Kościuszko as a national hero of Poland only to discover that he had already been adopted in a similar role in American culture.

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<sup>32</sup> *American Watchman*, Wilmington, Delaware, March 11, 1820.

<sup>33</sup> Actually, a number of race horses called "Kosciusko" are also mentioned in the press: *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Charleston, South Carolina, March 12, 1821; *Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, Virginia, December 28, 1831 and February 26, 1835.

<sup>34</sup> *The Pittsfield Sun*, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, September 16, 1841. See Gary Nash and Graham Russell Hodges, *Friends of Liberty: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and the Betrayal that Divided a Nation: Thomas Jefferson, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, and Agrippa Hull*, New York 2008.

## **The myth of the American Revolution and the heroic representations of Tadeusz Kościuszko in the American press of the Early Republic**

### **Summary**

The article offers an analysis of the representations of Tadeusz Kościuszko in early American newspapers (1776-1820). The study shows that the American press presented Kościuszko as a heroic figure, significant in the making of America as a nation through his participation in the War of Independence. Kościuszko was not initially recognized as an important military leader of the Revolution, but he was re-discovered as an American hero after he had distinguished himself as the leader of the 1794 uprising in Poland. The mythologization of Kościuszko consisted in interpreting his life as a struggle for liberty, equality, and republicanism, the values which laid at the foundation of America as a nation.

**Key words:** Tadeusz Kościuszko, national hero, myth, American nation, American newspapers

## **Mit Rewolucji Amerykańskiej a heroiczny wizerunek Tadeusza Kościuszki w amerykańskiej prasie w okresie Wczesnej Republiki**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł stanowi analizę wizerunku Tadeusza Kościuszki we wczesnej prasie amerykańskiej (1776-1820). Wyniki badań wskazują, że prasa amerykańska przedstawiała Kościuszkę jako bohatera, postać ważną dla procesu tworzenia się (powstawania) Ameryki poprzez jego udział w Rewolucji Amerykańskiej. Początkowo Kościuszko nie był uznawany za wojskowego przywódcę Rewolucji, ale został okrzyknięty bohaterem amerykańskim po tym jak wsławił się jako przywódca powstania z 1794 roku w Polsce. Mitologizacja Kościuszki polegała na przedstawianiu jego życia jako walki o wolność, równość i republikanizm, wartości które leżały u podwalin amerykańskiego narodu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Tadeusz Kościuszko, bohater narodowy, mit, naród amerykański, prasa amerykańska

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