

A TEAR FOR POLAND

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The recent influx of Polish migrants to the UK has sparked much debate, but just how far back do our links with Poland go? The answer might surprise you.

The Polish in Birmingham

In the last few years, some remarkable projects have explored cultural and historical connections between Birmingham and Poland. A range of inspiring and moving accounts of post-war migration were documented through oral history work developed under the theme 'In War and Peace, Collected Memories of Birmingham's Poles'. Linked to local exhibitions and a book publication, this powerful selection of stories and testimonies was assembled by the Polish community based at Millennium House, itself a hugely important site of Birmingham–Polish relationships. At the same time, a group called the 'Polish Ex-Pats Association' (PEA) began delivering a range of cultural, artistic and heritage-based activities,



Meeting of the Birmingham Political Union by Benjamin Haydon, 1832. Thomas Attwood is perhaps most closely associated with the BPU, formed to campaign for political reform.

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providing essential practical advice and guidance to families living and working in Birmingham since Poland entered the EU. These powerfully linked, yet very different projects, histories, voices and representations are a reminder of how much we have yet to learn about Birmingham's long relationship with the enduring but often overlooked contributions of Polish labour, skill, culture and ideas.

Most traditional histories of the West Midlands still tend to remain silent on the subject of more extended historical connections between Birmingham and places such as Warsaw, Kraków, Katowice or Gdansk. I want to hint at a much earlier historical association that can transform our perception of Birmingham's complex and powerful relationship with Poland.

The Thomas Attwood Connection

Social debates in early nineteenth-century Birmingham often reverberated with conflicts and struggles taking place across national, colonial and imperial borders. The political reform campaigns of Thomas Attwood furnish us with a vivid example of this phenomenon. Subsumed in his leadership of the Birmingham Political Union, Attwood's iconic campaign for greater local political representation was powerfully linked to tumultuous events taking place in Eastern Europe, and, in particular, Poland.

Surprising evidence of this connection continually resurfaces in his speeches and meetings held in the 1830s, as can be illustrated, for example, in the pages of the *Birmingham Journal* on 17 December 1831. During Attwood's talk concerning the progress of the 'new reform bill', two unnamed figures suddenly enter the scene: '[At this period two Polish Noblemen entered the room, and were received with long and loud shouts of applause]. Mr Attwood, on noticing the attendance of these illustrious strangers, entered into a warm eulogium on the conduct of their heroic countrymen.'

Why were these Polish noblemen greeted with such fraternity by one of Birmingham's most significant nineteenth-century figures? What does it suggest about the relationship between military conflicts in Poland, and the protests for social and political equality taking place in the West Midlands and Britain?



Poland in the early years of the nineteenth century. Conrad Malte-Brun, *Atlas complet du précis de la géographie universelle de Malte-Brun dressé conformément au texte de cet ouvrage et entièrement revu et corrigé par M.J.-J.N. Huot*. Paris: Aimé André, libraire-éditeur, 1837.



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Birmingham Man by Sioban Coppinger and Fiona Peever in Chamberlain Square, Birmingham. The memorial to Thomas Attwood who became Birmingham's first Member of Parliament.

Poland's 'November Risings'

Attwood's relationship with Poland at the start of the 1830s tends to exist only as footnotes in accounts by his biographers and critics. Yet what was happening in Poland at this time was a crucial issue for many reformers and radicals. What became known as Poland's 'November Risings' had many profound consequences felt throughout Europe, Britain, and ultimately in the streets of Birmingham.

In its fight with Russia for independence, Poland soon became regarded by Attwood as an oppressed victim of imperial tyranny, denied political and cultural rights, and ultimately deserving of British support in its quest for liberty and autonomy. The complex story of Poland's turbulent and painful crisis allowed Attwood to tacitly identify his own quest for greater political self-

determination with events enshrouding Poland, drawing both agency and urgency from the bloody image of European crises.

Of course, Thomas Attwood was no firebrand radical. His more managerial, middle-path agenda was a careful balancing act that incited empowered action on behalf of extending political and economic liberties, whilst carefully seeking to assuage dominant fears of violent social revolution against 'King and Country'. In this context, the Polish example could be used to galvanise the need for more peaceful political changes, tacitly endorsing social transitions operated through the safety-valve of reforms that could combine the otherwise opposing interests of the working and middle classes in a joint effort to displace the stranglehold of aristocracy.

Birmingham's 'Grand Polish Festival'

The symbolic entrance of two Polish exiles into Attwood's 'text' and the influence of European ideological struggles within his evolving political campaigns was no isolated incident. By 1832, Birmingham had its very own 'Birmingham Polish Association', and on 29 November the organisation staged a 'Grand Polish Festival' at Dee's Hotel.

With Attwood presiding over a range of civic figures, a fragmentary archival record of the event tells us how 'a large assembly room was hung round with wreaths of laurel, on festoons of black crape, figurative of the present subjugation but future triumph of the Polish nation'. The same document mentions how a migrant named 'Count De Platter' stated: "The Polish music and Polish flags change, this moment, Birmingham into Warsaw."

As if these images of nineteenth-century Birmingham being transformed into an eastern European city are not startling enough, perhaps the single most iconic image to be associated with Thomas Attwood also reveals itself to be literally inscribed with this unexpected connection. Looking closely at a large engraved image of *The Gathering of The Unions At Newhall Hill, 1832*, Poland has once again found its way into the landscape. At the back of the seething crowds and union banners from across the Midlands, there lies a crucial unnoticed detail reminding us of a wealth of forgotten historical connections. 'A Tear For Poland', declares one single raised flag, small, yet clearly visible, in the unacknowledged background of Attwood's triumphal march.

How Often Do We Not 'See' What Is There?

Today, the emergence of new community testimonies concerned with human migration, exile and resettlement are vital ways of acknowledging the many journeys and connections that underpin our collective social fabric. Only by continuing



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Engraved image of the meeting of the Birmingham Political Union in 1832 showing the 'Tear for Poland' banner.



'In War and Peace' – a recent project celebrating the contribution of the Polish community to Birmingham.

Courtesy, University of Birmingham

to bring to light obscured stories of global political exchange and recording human experiences of cultural diaspora can we work to undermine static and complacent readings of local myths.

How many times have we looked at the celebratory image of Attwood on Newhall Hill, and not been able to 'see' the presence of Poland? ●

Dr Andy Green is a freelance heritage researcher and oral historian.

Further Reading

The Papers of Thomas Attwood and Family (reference MS2685) at Birmingham Archives and Heritage contain numerous further references to Poland not mentioned in this article.

The website of the Polish Ex-Pats Association contains many valuable resources and links and can be found at: www.polishexpats.org.uk.

The Midlands Polish Community Association obtained support from the Heritage Lottery Fund to finance a project to collect the memories of Poles who had arrived in the area after the Second World War. The project obtained oral histories and created an exhibition: 'In War and Peace: Collected Memories of Birmingham Poles'. For further information see: www.mpca.eu/ The oral history collection and booklet, with the same name as the exhibition, can be found at Birmingham Archives and Heritage under the reference: MS4102.