



Written by on October 2, 2009

Tadeusz Kosciuszko: Premier Polish Patriot

British General John Burgoyne must have been bitterly disappointed one day in July 1777 in the upper Hudson Valley — the day his army, hot in pursuit of the Americans they had just driven from Fort Ticonderoga, ran into a lake that wasn't supposed to exist.

This part of upstate New York had already been thoroughly explored and mapped, yet the Redcoats, confident of speedily overtaking and finishing off the American force, suddenly found themselves blocked by a brand-new body of water where dry forest and field was supposed to provide swift passage. The British must have soon ascertained, as they tried to find a way around the unexpected obstacle, that the lake was the work of the Americans; somehow, the Continentals had figured out how to swiftly divert a river into the path of a pursuing army. They probably had no idea who was responsible, but the water, along with large tangles of trees deliberately felled to create impenetrable barriers, bought the Americans enough time to escape and fight another day.



The architect of the Americans' remarkable escape after the debacle at Ticonderoga was in fact not an American at all, but a brilliant young Polish military engineer, Tadeusz Kosciuszko (pronounced kosh-CHOOSH-ko). A product of Prussian and French military schooling, Kosciuszko, who had become a passionate partisan of liberty while studying in Paris, volunteered his services and technical expertise to the American cause in 1776. So great was his genius for building fortifications that the man Thomas Jefferson once called "as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known," and who is today regarded as a national hero in four countries — the United States, Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus — was probably as instrumental as any single man could have been in assuring the success of the American cause.

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Path to America

Kosciuszko was born in 1746 near the town of Kosava in what was then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and is now part of Belarus. His family was Polish nobility — albeit not exceptionally prominent — which enabled him to enroll in Polish military school, where he studied history, languages, economics, and philosophy in addition to military science. As testament of his military precocity, he received the rank of Captain of Artillery upon graduation, and soon left for Paris on a scholarship to study art and architecture.



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Kosciuszko's first love, however, was military science, and although as a foreigner he was unable to formally enroll in any French military academy, he educated himself as best he could in all things military, especially engineering, by attending lectures and reading whatever French works on the subject he could lay his hands on in the many libraries in Paris. At the same time, Kosciuszko became acquainted, seemingly for the first time, with the doctrines of liberty in circulation in mid-century France. We may assume that he studied the likes of Montesquieu and Locke, whose writings on liberty and limited government were also having a profound effect in the American colonies.

He returned to Poland in 1774, where he attempted to find gainful employ in the Polish military. Two years previous to his return, however, Russia, Prussia, and Austria had partitioned Poland, reducing its territory by 30 percent and compelling the Polish to submit to humiliating reforms in the structure of the Polish government and military that would prevent the upstart Poles from trying to throw off the yoke their more powerful neighbors had imposed on them. Kosciuszko found, doubtless to his dismay, that there was to be no place for him in a drastically reduced and denatured Polish military. After less than two years in his homeland, during which time he attempted to elope with a young female student but was apprehended and punished, Kosciuszko once again headed for the West.

At first he tried to find military employ in Saxony, but failing that, he returned to Paris, where he learned of the revolt against Britain in the American colonies. Kosciuszko left almost immediately for America, sensing at last an opportunity to put his remarkable talents to use for a cause that he wholeheartedly supported. He was warmly received by the American Continental Congress in late summer 1776, and also met and befriended Thomas Jefferson after reading and being profoundly moved by the Declaration of Independence. Kosciuszko was able to produce a letter of recommendation from a Polish prince, and Congress, desperate for military engineers in the early months of the war, inducted him into the Continental Army.

In October, Kosciuszko was made a Colonel of Engineers, and promptly set to work fortifying the city of Philadelphia, which the British, already masters of most of New York City, northern New Jersey, and Long Island, were soon expected to attack. Kosciuszko concentrated his energies on fortifying the city's river defenses, building a series of formidable aquatic blockades that apparently stymied the British; when they ultimately took Philadelphia in September of 1777, they did so by land.

Engineering Greatness

Congress, impressed by Kosciuszko's early work, assigned him to assist the beleaguered Northern Army operating in northern New York State. Kosciuszko, as Chief Engineer, supervised the fortification of various sites along the Canadian border, but his first truly indispensable contribution came at Fort Ticonderoga in July 1777. An American force of fewer than 3,000 men under General Arthur St. Clair defended the fort located near the southern end of Lake Champlain, and British General John Burgoyne (nicknamed "Gentleman Johnny" for his love of fine clothing and other civilized niceties) was bearing down on Ticonderoga with an army of 7,000 seasoned regulars plus another thousand or so Canadian and Indian volunteers.

Kosciuszko noticed upon arrival at Ticonderoga that a nearby hill, Sugar Loaf, was actually higher than the fort and might provide a vantage point for the British to shell the fort. He recommended to St. Clair that the Americans occupy and fortify the top of the hill, but his suggestion was rejected. When the British arrived, they lost no time securing Sugar Loaf and, as Kosciuszko had predicted, began fortifying the heights, hoping to have cannons in place before the Americans discovered what was going on. Fortunately for St. Clair and his army, some careless campfires lit on Sugar Loaf alerted the Americans



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to what the British were doing. After an agonizing council of war inside the fort — in which St. Clair admitted that his only options were to “save his honor and lose his army” (i.e., try to defend the fort against hopeless odds) or “save his army and lose his honor” — the Americans decided to withdraw before the British could surround them entirely. They abandoned Fort Ticonderoga under cover of darkness and managed to make a clean getaway, thanks in no small measure to Kosciuszko’s delaying tactics.

As General St. Clair had anticipated, the political outcry over the largely bloodless British victory at Ticonderoga was considerable on both sides of the Atlantic. A jubilant King George is said to have rushed into his wife’s bedchamber while she was dressing, shouting, “I have beat them! I have beat all the Americans!” European powers antagonistic to the British, like France and Spain, had been biding their time, reluctant to risk a war with Britain over a hopeless cause. The ignominious retreat at Ticonderoga seemed to vindicate their skepticism. In the Continental Congress, meanwhile, the Americans despaired of ever mustering the fortitude to defeat the British in a stand-up, set-piece battle. John Adams gloomily opined that “we shall never be able to defend a post until we shoot a general.” St. Clair, although later exonerated in a court-martial, was summarily relieved of command and never again served in the field. It was left to General Horatio Gates to restore some semblance of order and dignity in the Northern Army.

The American forces withdrew to the vicinity of Saratoga. On a steep hill overlooking the Hudson River, known as Bemis Heights, Kosciuszko went to work, constructing elaborate fortifications that he believed would withstand anything the British could throw at them. During the hectic period of preparing for another stand against General Burgoyne’s formidable army, Daniel Morgan arrived in Saratoga with a considerable force of riflemen from Virginia.

Burgoyne, meanwhile, was feeling hard-pressed. His army had suffered numerous delays attempting to transport cannons and other material from Ticonderoga, and was low on food and other essentials when it finally reached the vicinity of Saratoga.

As the Americans expected, Burgoyne could not afford to settle in and wait for reinforcements. He attacked the American positions shortly after his army’s arrival, knowing that only a swift victory would avail his men after the hardships of the march from Ticonderoga and with food almost gone. In what is variously known as the First Battle of Saratoga or the Battle of Freeman’s Farm, Burgoyne’s forces, attempting to surround the American forces entrenched behind Kosciuszko’s works on Bemis Heights, did achieve a Pyrrhic tactical victory, wresting control of the eponymous farm from American forces on September 19, 1777 at very considerable cost in men and morale. Daniel Morgan’s rifle-toting sharpshooters in particular took a terrible toll, killing large numbers of British officers and artillerymen.

Burgoyne withdrew in frustration, hoping for reinforcements, but by early October, it became clear that none would be forthcoming. His army reduced by casualties and desertions to around 5,000, he decided again to launch an attack on the heavily fortified American positions on October 7, in what is known to history as the Battle of Bemis Heights or the Second (and final) Battle of Saratoga. This engagement ended disastrously for the British. One of their ablest generals, Simon Fraser, fell in battle, along with roughly 400 other British soldiers. Burgoyne himself was nearly killed as his forces retreated in disarray to their defenses, and within a few days, the Americans had the British surrounded and beaten. Offered honorable terms, Burgoyne formally surrendered on October 17. The victory at Saratoga was the first time the Americans defeated the British in a set-piece battle, and it marked a turning point in the war. For the first time, the Americans had demonstrated to skeptics abroad that they could hold their own in



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every respect against the British military, prompting France to throw in with the Americans a few days after learning of Saratoga.

For their newfound expertise in military engineering, the Americans had Kosciuszko to thank. He had designed and supervised the building of the works at Bemis Heights against which Burgoyne's army had broken its teeth, and was to provide Washington's army again and again throughout the war with invaluable insight and engineering expertise. His next task after Saratoga was to fortify the lower Hudson River, for which he designed numerous all-but-impregnable forts and defensive positions. Perhaps recalling the great chain that blocked the Golden Horn (the harbor of Constantinople) for the better part of a thousand years, Kosciuszko even had an enormous chain extended across the Hudson that could be raised above the water to block the passage of invading ships.

His best work was reserved for West Point, whose fortifications (which still stand) proved too much for the British even to contemplate attacking. During his time at West Point, Kosciuszko is said to have been gifted a slave (one Agrippa Hull), whom he immediately freed.

In 1780, Kosciuszko was transferred to the Southern Army under General Nathanael Greene, where he continued to contribute his engineering and tactical skills to helping the depleted and demoralized American forces avoid total defeat in several successful tactical retreats across major rivers. In the South he was also given his own command for the first time, leading men into battle and planning campaigns. He organized the blockade of Charleston that led to eventual victory over that British stronghold and to the final collapse of the British war effort in the South. After the war's conclusion, Kosciuszko was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and awarded a sizable plot of land by a grateful Congress.

Heading Home

Kosciuszko, however, felt the summons of his homeland. True to his republican principles, he directed his good friend Thomas Jefferson to dispose of his land and to use the monies from its sale to free as many slaves as possible and to educate them (his request was never carried out, and in 1852 the Supreme Court awarded his property to his descendants). In July 1784, Tadeusz Kosciuszko returned to his native Poland.

Emboldened by the successes of the American Revolution, he soon undertook to secure the same blessings of liberty for his countrymen. In 1791, the Polish Commonwealth became the first modern European nation to adopt a written constitution, and withal one that enacted significant reforms aimed at eliminating serfdom once and for all. Many of the Polish nobility objected, however, and, after forming the treasonous Targowica Confederation, invited the Russians to invade Poland to do away with constitutional government. Kosciuszko, commander of an entire division of the Polish army, engineered three impressive victories over the numerically superior Russian army — at Zielence, Wodzimierz, and Dubienka — before the Polish king, Stanisław August, went over to the side of the Targowica Federation and betrayed his country to the Russians.

Dismayed but undeterred, Kosciuszko fled abroad where, along with other like-minded Polish exiles, he began planning an uprising against Russian rule in Poland. The uprising, known to posterity as the Kosciuszko Uprising, came in March 1794, and saw Kosciuszko elevated to the leader of all Poland. After his brilliant victory at the Battle of Racavice in early April against a larger and better-armed Russian force, Kosciuszko promulgated in May the famous Proclamation of Poaniec — doubtless modeled in some respects after the American Declaration of Independence — which, among other



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things, freed the Polish serfs.

Unfortunately both for Kosciuszko and for Polish serfdom, neither the uprising nor the Proclamation were successful. Kosciuszko's luck ran out at the Battle of Maciejowice, where he was wounded, captured, and imprisoned in St. Petersburg. The Polish uprising, bereft of its leader, collapsed soon afterward. Kosciuszko languished for two years in a Russian prison before being pardoned and released by Czar Paul I. He spent the balance of his life agitating for Polish freedom and for republican principles generally. He died in Switzerland in 1817 from typhoid fever.

Kosciuszko probably contributed more than any other foreign national save Lafayette to the cause of American independence, and his name today graces a bridge in New York City, a county in Indiana, and an island in Alaska, as well as numerous streets and monuments. In Poland, scarcely a town or village exists without a street or square named in his honor, and streets bearing his name are found as well in Belgrade, Vilnius, Budapest, and even St. Petersburg. Nor are these accolades ill-deserved; for Tadeusz Kosciuszko — general, engineer, artist, architect, and noble son of liberty — was certainly one of the greatest souls ever born on European soil, and one to whom both Americans and Poles owe a great debt for the gift of liberty.



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