

What did Benyovszky do in Poland?

Andy Drummond, March 2025

Móric Benyovszky was captured by the Russian army in Poland in the Spring of 1769. Since the summer of 1768, he had been serving in the army of the Polish Confederation of Bar, at that time fighting for independence from Russian interference. After his capture, he was exiled to Kamchatka, then escaped by ship back to Europe. In 1772 Benyovszky began writing his *Memoirs*, covering his life thus far. A significant part of these *Memoirs*, which were published posthumously in 1790, dealt with his army service in Poland.

Benyovszky's account of his military service is lengthy and frequently tedious. It will serve no purpose to detail here what he said; anyone with access to digital copies of his memoirs can read them for themselves.¹ It will suffice here to summarise them, along with some salient dates. There is very little independent corroboration – or otherwise – of what he tells us; but there is some concrete evidence provided by others with which to undertake some verification.

Before we embark on that task, however, a reasonable question to ask would be: why not just take Benyovszky's word for his years in Poland? Why should there be any doubt? To which the simple answer is that Benyovszky's *Memoirs* are full of misleading or fictitious anecdotes, erroneous dates, invented places and unrecognisable names. Even the very first sentence of his published autobiography contains a false statement – that he was born in 1741; as birth records show, he was born in September 1746.² So why should his description of the Polish campaign be any more truthful? Not to challenge his account would be an offence against historiography. And in these days of highly flexible 'truth' and 'facts', any grip we can take on actual truth and hard facts is to be welcomed.

To avoid total confusion, we will not investigate Benyovszky's claims to have taken part, as a 14-year old Lieutenant, in the Seven Years War against Prussia.³ According to this claim, his first battle was at Lobositz (Lovosice) in October 1756, and this was followed by three further battles in the following two years, at Prague, Schweidnitz (Świdnica) and Domstadt (Domašov). This was followed by training in navigation in Gdansk, with sea-voyages to Hamburg, Amsterdam and Plymouth (up to 1767). Given the fact that he was born in 1746, participation in the battles of 1756-58 is hard to credit; neither is there any evidence of Benyovszky being trained in a naval college – and he gives no further details. Which is not to say that the latter did not happen.

Benyovszky's account

Let us take as our basis, then, Benyovszky's published account. As always with Benyovszky, the account is peculiar for more than one reason. Not the least of the mysteries here is that this section alone of his *Memoirs* – the opening 52 pages of the 1790 London edition – is written in the third person. This has led to speculation that that entire section was written by someone other than Benyovszky. But no plausible secretary, historian or other writer has ever been identified; so we must assume that it is all his own work, perhaps placed in the third person to lend it an air of authentic history. Certainly the boastful style sounds very like him.

According to this account of Benyovszky's service with the Polish Confederation – and it contains a number of errors, editorial or otherwise – the following chronology can be established:

- July, arrives in Warsaw at the personal invitation of “the Magnates and Senators of Poland ... in order to join the confederation then forming” – i.e. either the Confederation of Bar, which in fact was not officially formed until February 1768.⁴
- December, having signed up to the Confederation, he travels to Vienna in the hope of settling some family affairs. He did not succeed in his hopes, but in April 1768, he met and married a girl, Anna Hónsch, in the county of Spiš (now in eastern Slovakia), and settled down there for several weeks.⁵

1768

- June, summoned (personally) once more by the leaders of the Confederation, he returned to Poland, and reached Krakow, to join the forces of Marshal Czarnecky, then defending the town against the Russians. Here he was immediately appointed “Colonel-General, Commander of Cavalry, and Quarter-Master General”. Shortly afterwards, he was promoted to “Muster-Master General”.⁶
- late July, he leads a battalion to take the town of Landskron and then defeats a party of Russians at Viececka. Returns to Krakow on 29 July. (Curiously, the account then goes on to say that on 23 July, he left Krakow again...)⁷
- 7 August, Benyovszky is captured by the Russians at Viececka. The Russian general, Apraxin, however, had developed a high opinion of Benyovszky, and allowed him to be ransomed, whereupon he returned to Krakow to a warm welcome.⁸
- 22 August, leaves Krakow in order to seize the castle at Ľubovňa. Due to leaked intelligence, Benyovszky was again captured, only to be freed by a passing Confederate contingent.⁹
- Between October and late December, he is involved in a leading role in a series of successful skirmishes and battles against Russian forces.¹⁰
- 21 December, arrives in Żwaniec and is appointed Commander in Chief of the town, as well as Commandant-General of Cavalry.¹¹

1769

- 24 January until 8 February, engaged in manoeuvres against the Russians around Konstantinov (now Starokostiantyniv in western Ukraine), where a battle took place.¹²
- 15 February, took the castle of Medzibors. 28 February, arrives at Grodek.¹³
- During March, Benyovszky on manoeuvres around Żwaniec, defeating the Russians on 24/25 March.¹⁴
- 20 May, captured by Russians at the village of Szuka.¹⁵

All of this excitement covers thirty pages in the published volume. The narrative is full of detail, most of which is designed to demonstrate Benyovszky’s prowess as a military tactician and leader of armed forces. His victories are always brilliant, and usually against fearsome odds. He acts with chivalry and courtesy, as do most of the Russian generals he meets. His promotion through the ranks is astonishingly fast, and he was clearly held in the deepest respect by the military leaders of the Confederation.

Contemporary letters and documents

How much of all this is not false, is hard to gauge. As yet, few documents with an independent view of Benyovszky have come to light. This could, of course, mean that nobody else in the Confederation thought him important. Or it could simply mean that relevant archives have been lost in the intervening years. Fortunately, a Polish historian has collected a clutch of letters – some written by

Benyovszky himself – relating to the Polish campaign. Szymon Dzej’s collection of thirteen documents and letters relating to Benyovszky’s early life and his time in Poland produce some interesting results.¹⁶

In a document dated 23 July 1768,¹⁷ written authority is given to Benyovszky to act in the name of “His Majesty” to gather in supplies from surrounding towns and cities in the Spiš region, and send those supplies to the castle at Ľubovňa (now in north-eastern Slovakia). He was also authorised to recruit soldiers for the army. The document is signed by Major J. Elstermann. Thus, Benyovszky appears in the role of a quarter-master. But the most curious thing about it is that Elstermann was in the service of the Polish King – the very one installed by the Russians and against whom the Confederation of Bar (and presumably also Benyovszky) was fighting. Benyovszky, in a reply to Elstermann dated 24 July,¹⁸ says that he is eager to obey the orders, but reports that representatives in the “Thirteen Towns” in the region were “inconstant, disobedient and even disloyal”. Benyovszky goes on at some length, describing what demands he made of the towns’ representatives and how he intends to ensure that the orders were carried out.

So far, so very mysterious. Was Benyovszky acting as a double agent? It is not clear. At any rate, it is not an episode that makes it into the *Memoirs*, except rather obliquely (“[Benyovszky] even ventured to visit the commanding officer of the castle, who was not apprehensive of the least danger.”¹⁹

Neither does the next episode, revealed in documents recording interrogations. The first of these, dated 30 July 1768, recorded the interrogation (no torture was involved: *benevolum examen*).²⁰ The man being questioned was Paweł Hóńsch, who was the brother-in-law of Benyovszky. This reveals that the pair had arrived in Krakow around 21 June, just after the city was taken by the Confederate army. Benyovszky – described by the interrogator as a *Rittmeister*, an equivalent rank to ‘Captain’ – was promptly arrested because he was a Lutheran: the Confederation was fiercely Catholic and anti-Protestant/Orthodox. By virtue of his religion, Benyovszky was suspected of being a spy. According to Hóńsch (although also a Protestant, he was not arrested) Benyovszky was kept prisoner in the castle for thirteen days, and then released after having managed to persuade the marshal of Krakow that he had recruited fifty soldiers in the “Thirteen Towns” of Spiš.

After that, according to Hóńsch, Benyovszky teamed up with another soldier named Jungburg, and the pair had undertaken minor actions against the Russians, as well as attempting to recruit more men for the Confederation. Paweł’s answers to the final questions reveal that Benyovszky and Jungburg did not hold out much hope of succeeding in their military tasks, and had made their way southwards, intending to make their fortune in England by “taking up alchemy”. But they were prevented from doing so. Benyovszky was arrested by Elstermann, who by now had seen through his ruse, and Jungburg by the Austrian army.

One week later, on 8 August, “former lieutenant” Jungburg was also interrogated by his captors, under the command of Lt-Col. Abschatz; Jungburg revealed that Benyovszky was currently imprisoned in Ľubovňa, as a suspect.²¹ The reason for this? “He was arrested because he refused to return Major von Elstermann’s letter of enlistment authorising him to recruit in the Thirteen Towns about 100 footmen and 50 riders.” This was the document of authority written on 23 July. A note added here at the bottom of the interrogation report indicates that the letter was in Jungburg’s hands at the time; it was then taken from him and given to the local commandant. In a rather panicky letter dated 9 August,²² Elstermann himself wrote to Abschatz, asking if he could have this letter returned to him. Elstermann stated that Benyovszky had deceived him, and had dictated the wording of the letter; this was now a severe embarrassment to Elstermann, and he was worried lest it fall into the hands of his superiors. Could he have it back, please? But Abschatz apparently thought that the incriminating letter would do more good at the Austrian army HQ and sent it on to Vienna in December.²³

Benyovszky, meanwhile, was either handed over right away to the Russians by Elstermann; or he was simply kept prisoner in Ľubovňa for several weeks or months, as a hostage, while Elstermann waited for his precious document to be returned. When it became clear that the letter was on its way to Vienna, Elstermann then handed Benyovszky over to the Russian General Apraxin. But there is no clarity on how, when or why the Russians released Benyovszky; it could possibly have been because

their prisoner swore an oath not to take up arms again, a common way of neutralising military opponents.

To say that all of this is very messy rather understates the case. Benyovszky, arrested as a Lutheran just as he was hoping to join the Confederation; then apparently persuading an enemy officer that he was working for the Polish King; then thinking of abandoning the cause to pursue alchemical riches; then being arrested again, this time by the enemy. It certainly was not an auspicious beginning, and at present we have no idea how he finally managed to extricate himself from the situation. But one thing is evident: he was certainly not immediately welcomed with open arms by the leaders of the Confederation, and he was certainly not propelled into high-ranking positions as soon as he arrived in Krakow.

As a result of all this, Benyovszky is unlikely to have become a useful soldier of the Confederation – if indeed he ever did – until very late in 1768. There is a record of Benyovszky serving Franciszek Pulaski (one of the sons of a leader of the Confederation army), on 10 January 1769, using the code name “Móric Hadik” – more of which below.²⁴ The younger Pulaski was embroiled in military activity in the Podolia region (now in western Ukraine), and one document attests that a detachment led by Pulaski and one ‘Graff Hadyk’ ambushed and robbed a merchant of money and military equipment.²⁵ Pulaski and his troops, however, were obliged to retreat from advancing Russian forces, and eventually return to south-west Poland, where the Confederate troops were still in control. In his *Memoirs*, Benyovszky states that his own troops were defeated in battle by the Russian Major Brincken and he himself was captured, so beginning his long period as a PoW.²⁶ However, he states that his capture occurred on 20 May; Russian documents record Benyovszky’s interrogation on 7 April.²⁷ (Benyovszky seems to have concealed his identity from the Russians, posing now as “Bičevský”, perhaps because he was theoretically under oath to them not to take up arms again? Whether that slight change fooled the Russians, is not known.) It is not impossible that the Russian documents were using the “Old Style” calendar (Julian – used by Russia until 1918), which at that time was eleven days behind the “New Style” calendar (Gregorian) which was used by the Catholic Poles. This would date the interrogation to 18 April – which is still not 20 May. But it is closer.

There is another interesting letter, dated 13 March 1769.²⁸ This was written by Benyovszky to General Casimir Pulaski, one of the leading members of the Confederation, and yet another son of the famed grizzled military veteran and Polish hero. It recommended that Pulaski seeks out Elstermann (“Lutheran”) and the commander of the garrison at Lubovňa (a “very good Catholic”). The commander, one “Tóthy, Hungarian”, would give his full cooperation; Elstermann, on the other hand, was not to be trusted. The castle contained plenty of arms and munition, and money was readily available on request. Benyovszky also named a number of towns in the neighbourhood, where money could also be raised with no difficulty. Benyovszky references Pulaski’s brother, with whom he had just seen service. Oddly, the letter is signed by “Count Hadik, General”. Not Benyovszky, one might think; but it was. For reasons that must remain completely unclear, he had been given, or adopted, the surname of a Hungarian military hero, András Hadik. It has been proposed that the codename was suggested to him by Jerzy Marcin Lubomirski, who was the father-in-law of Hadik’s daughter.²⁹ But that remains supposition.

Finally, another letter from Benyovszky, also written to Pulaski; but this time written in French and dated 20 August 1772, when Benyovszky was in France, having arrived there from Kamchatka.³⁰ By then, the Confederation of Bar had already been defeated, and Pulaski himself had fled to Silesia, and stripped of all honours and wealth *in absentia*. Nonetheless, Benyovszky advised Pulaski at some length of his capture, exile to Kamchatka and escape to France. Should Pulaski not remember him straight away, he jogged his memory by stating that he, Benyovszky, was one and the same as “Hadek [sic], adjutant-general”. Quite what the purpose of this letter was, is not clear. But the idea that Pulaski might have forgotten him rather suggests that Benyovszky’s role during the brief war against the Russians was not quite as brilliant and unforgettable as he later outlined in his *Memoirs*.

Conclusions

Benyovszky's own narrative about his service for the Confederation of Bar is full of detail, much of it rather repetitive and pointless. In it, our hero is propelled instantly to positions of high authority within the army. He never makes a military blunder, but rescues his comrades from their own blunders. He engages to great effect with the enemy, is captured and then ransomed and – on at least one occasion – acts as a double-agent in their midst. He is on personal terms with the great names of the war – the Pulaski family in particular.

Sadly other documents indicate something less glorious. He was initially viewed with the greatest suspicion by the leaders of the Confederation, who even took the precaution of locking him up. His enthusiasm was understandably dented by this early setback, and he even contemplated making his way to England to set himself up as an alchemist. He then attempted to play the double-agent among the Polish-Russian forces, but was discovered and captured. He may well have been in captivity for up to a third of that entire eleven-month period of military service.

That he did serve in the forces of the Confederation is not in doubt. He at least knew some of the geography, and there are oblique references to the same facts that were reported by third-parties. But he was surely not the all-conquering hero, nor the Colonel-General, Commander of Cavalry, and Quarter-Master General of his fantasies.

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- 1 The Memoirs and Travels of Mauritius Augustus, Count de Benyowsky. Translated from the original manuscript (by W. Nicholson). 2 vols., London, 1790. Available online at <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Rr0NAAAAQAAJ> and <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=r70NAAAAQAAJ>
 - 2 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.1
 - 3 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.1-2
 - 4 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.3-4
 - 5 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.4
 - 6 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.5
 - 7 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.7-8
 - 8 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.9-10
 - 9 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.10-11
 - 10 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.12-18
 - 11 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.15
 - 12 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.19-20
 - 13 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.21
 - 14 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.22-27
 - 15 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.34
 - 16 See Szymon Drej, *Maurycy August Beniowski Wybór Listów I Dokumentów*, 2004. Available online at <https://epdf.pub/wybor-dokumentow-i-listow.html>
See also Patrik Kunec, *Účasť Mórica Beňovského v bojoch Barskej koľnederácie v rokoch 1768—1769: Sumarizácia historických fak. tov.* (2008) Available online at <https://dokumenty.osu.cz/ff/journals/historica/1993-2009/Historica15.pdf>
Also relevant is: T.E. Modelski, *Uwięzienie hrabiego Beniowskiego i barona Jungburga na Spiżu w r. 1768.* In: *Przewodnik Naukowy i Literacki* 45, 1917, 43
 - 17 Drej, document [2]
 - 18 Drej, document [3]
 - 19 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.10
 - 20 Drej, document [4]
 - 21 Drej, document [5]
 - 22 Drej, document [6]
 - 23 Kunec (2008), pp.132-133
 - 24 Kunec (2008), p.133
 - 25 Kunec (2008), pp.133-134
 - 26 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.34
 - 27 Kunec (2008), p.135
 - 28 Drej, document [7]
 - 29 Kunec (2008), p.129
 - 30 Drej, document [13]