

THE POLES AND PRUSSIA

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THE Polish Question is not, as most Englishmen imagine, a closed chapter in European History, nor is it a mere subject for the sentimental attention of idealists. It happens to be a substantial actuality from which the eyes of Western Europe would hardly be averted if its significance were understood.

To England the Prussian aspect of the Polish Question should be of particular interest; yet it is almost impossible to detach from the various Year-Books consulted by the British Public the simple fact that Poland in Prussia exists, that the Eastern Provinces of Prussia are in fact not Prussia at all, only an unassimilated part of that ancient Kingdom of Poland which, at the close of the 18th century, was arbitrarily cut into three by Russia, Prussia and Austria, greedily swallowed, but never digested.

If, as is perhaps at the present juncture desirable, we are to understand the relations between Pole and Prussian to-day, we had better begin by trying to remember the origins of Prussia.

During the 9th and 10th centuries, that vast territory which lies north-east of an imaginary line drawn roughly from Hamburg to Leipzig, was peopled by various discon-
nected Slav tribes. Europe in the making was then a seething crucible, and these Slav peoples, scattered, detached,



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were the elements merely of future nations. Every ephemeral power that sprang into existence, disintegrated at the death of the leader who had brought about momentary cohesion.

The chronicler Hetmold tells us that the Slav was kindly and peaceable: "*cacterum moribus et hospitalitate nulla gens honestior aut benignior potuit inveniri.*" The German his neighbour was not more civilised than himself but more violent, more aggressively cohesive, more prone to accept leadership. It came to pass, therefore, that this German neighbour invaded immense tracts of Slav territory, brutally mastering an almost unresisting population.

In the face of massacre and rapine, the independent and indolent Slav began to understand the value of solidarity and to practise self-defence, offering in due time effective resistance to the invader. Organised States came into being, the principalities of Pomerania, of Silesia, the Kingdoms of Poland and of Bohemia, emerged slowly from chaos. True that in course of years German force gained final mastery in Pomerania, in Silesia and in Bohemia, which fell permanently under Austrian sway. But the Kingdom of Poland grew in strength and power.

We are not concerned in this brief and necessarily restricted survey with the relations of Poland to her Eastern neighbours, to those numerous Russian principalities which were the scene during long centuries of her successive struggles against Tartar and Muscovite. We are only concerned with them in so far that constant pre-occupation on her eastern frontier, combined with the safe-guarding of her western boundaries, rendered Poland incapable, in the 13th century, of doing justice to a Northern problem.

The people of Borussia, occupying those territories known

to-day as the Eastern Provinces of Prussia, had long obstinately refused to accept the advantages of Christian civilisation offered by the Poles, answering every peaceable advance by violence. Fully occupied elsewhere, Poland found herself unable to systematically repress the murderous raids of these barbarians; it seemed wise to seek some definite remedy. Therefore she invited to those regions, and established on her Borussia frontier, the Knights of the Cross.

At the close of the Crusades, the various Orders of Religious Knights had been forced to quit Palestine. The Princes of Europe then vied with one another in offering fit hospitality to these champions of Christendom, encouraging the establishment of the Knights within their boundaries, often—as at Malta and in Transylvania—bestowing free territories upon their guests.

Hospitable at all times to the stranger, Poland endowed the Knights of the Cross with lands, and entrusted them with the conversion to Christianity of her stubborn Northern neighbours. There seemed nothing unwise in this move. What reason could there be to fear that the Knights at any time would interfere in the affairs, external or internal, of the Nation? They were bound by strict vows and by rules which forbade them to bear arms against fellow-Christians, to amass wealth by any means whatsoever, or to marry, which prohibitions might be taken as standing definitely between them and any dream of forming an independent State. Moreover, these Knights were recruited from among all the Nations of Christendom; it might safely be assumed that devotion to the Faith and its defence were the only bonds that held them together.

In 1235 and 1236 therefore, we see the Teutonic Knights, or Knights of the Cross, established in Poland, and embarking

upon a Northern Crusade against the heathen peoples of Borussia and Lithuania.

The result was other than had been anticipated. The Knights threw all laws to the winds and became monsters of greed and ambition. They subdued the Borussians, but proved such cruel masters that the country was in a state of constant rebellion; they then determined to put an end to the Borussian people, which enormity they accomplished by means of murder and mutilation inflicted on the fathers of the race.

In the mean time Lithuania had yielded to Poland's unaided efforts and, accepting Christianity, had become her close ally. When therefore the Knights of the Cross, metamorphosed as it were by covetous desire of land and power, turned against Poland as the main obstacle to their ambition, Lithuania and Poland together met this renegade foe.

The Knights were defeated in many encounters, notably at Grünwald in 1410. Forced presently to modify their tactics, they set about strengthening their position and accumulating wealth at the very doors of the tolerant Pole, who never took full advantage of a victory. The geographical position of the once Borussian lands was admirably adapted for intermediate trade between North and West; a putative Papal Bull, dated 1257 (which the Holy Father declared to be a forgery), made it lawful for the Knights of this Order to engage in commerce; and they prospered apace.

With the advent of the Reformation the Teutonic Knights openly threw off their vows, embraced Protestantism and were secularised. Their last Grand Master, a Hohenzollern, was proclaimed Prince under the suzerainty of Poland, to whose Kings his descendants paid homage until the close of the 17th century. Later, that branch of the Hohenzollerns having

become extinct, the Brandenburg branch came into power, and around the future Kings of Prussia no memory lingered of the vanquished Borussian but the altered mantle of his name.

So much for the origins of Prussia. The enmity of this once tributary state towards Poland, its former host and suzerain, is an outstanding fact of modern History. This hatred culminated in the vindictive part played by Prussia in 1772, when that great European drama known as The Partition of Poland was enacted—a political crime which even a German, Prof. Sybel, has characterised as the greatest crime in history.

The territories acquired by Prussia through this and subsequent partitions, which almost doubled the area of the Kingdom, together with vast increase of war material in the shape of population, enabled Prussia to acquire a strong position amid the German States, to dominate the greater part of Northern Germany, to circumvent Austrian influences, and, finally, to triumph over France in 1870. It may be worth remembering that, in this campaign, Polish regiments were sent foremost under fire, marching under Prussian band-masters to ungermanic music that recalled to every Pole the days of Poland's freedom.

Thus did Poland contribute in no small measure to the establishment of the new German Empire under the hegemony of Prussia. Let us see how Prussia, having realised her dreams and become conscious of her strength, thought fit to pursue towards her Polish subjects a policy of unremitting hatred.

The Treaty of Vienna, as is well known, was signed in 1815; its main object was the necessary adjustment, after

Napoleon's fall, of European boundaries. This treaty contained a clause, which has never been rescinded, regulating the Polish question; by this clause the six principal powers of Europe bound themselves to be the guardians of certain liberties guaranteed to the Polish Nation. The actual text of Art. I. runs thus: "*Les Polonais, sujets russes, autrichiens et Prussiens, reçoivent une représentation et des institutions nationales.*"

The Protocol of Vienna, which is as it were a commentary on the Treaty, specifically declares that the nationality of the inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Posnania (Posen) and of Eastern Prussia should be respected. "*La nationalité des habitants doit être respectée. Il leur faut assurer que leur langue maternelle aura plein droit à côté de l'allemand; qu'ils seront libres à concourir à tous les postes et dignités du pays entier, et qu'en cas d'équité dans les aptitudes ils seront préférés pour les emplois publics de leur territoire.*"

The Prussian government of to-day has forgotten all this, together with the royal words of that Manifesto of May 15th, 1815, which opened with an assurance of the King's regard for Polish patriotism. "You too have a country, and through this very possession have gained my esteem, by reason of the love and devotion you show to it."

War against the Polish element was tacitly declared in the early days of the new German Empire. The Poles were by slow degrees ousted from the government offices, the Polish language was further and further banned from the schools, public administration indulged in a grievous policy of provocation, inflicting upon Poles every hardship and annoyance with which it was possible to harass them without openly stepping out beyond the pale of apparent legality.

Presently a number—happily as yet restricted—of learned

men, with the historians Mommsen and von Treitschke at their head, set about elaborating a theory concerning nations of inferior quality—"der minderwertigen Nation"—which, calculated to justify the government, urged it further yet in its anti-Polish policy.

Action inevitably provokes re-action. Prussian aggressiveness did not fail to call forth Polish resistance. This resistance was strong but prudent. There was no law-breaking. The glorious annals of Poland were there to answer official theories; the Poles of Posnania met the galling treatment of their rulers by the development of their own forces, by increasing moral uplift, by the unification of party politics, by indomitable efforts in the field of economics, and by a ceaseless revivification of patriotism among the people.

It ensued that, in spite of growing oppression, the Polish element did not diminish in Posnania. On the contrary it literally gained ground. The Jew, always apt to side with those in power, showed a tendency to move westward; the Polish artisan and labourer seeking work in America or the Rhine Valley sent home his savings. And there was a slight increase of territory in Polish hands.

Realising that repression within the bounds of the law was of little avail, the Prussian Government then bethought itself of methods unheard of in history. It set about preparing Laws of Exception, and this in time of peace, against subjects guiltless of insurrection, who had never raised their arms in self-defence.

The first act of this monstrous policy was the expulsion from Posnania of all Poles not actually Prussian subjects. Following upon a ministerial decree dated March 25th, 1885, over 30,000 men, women and children were put across the frontier before the year's close, with orders never to return.

Some 10,000 more followed later. Most of these exiles had been in the country since childhood, and there possessed what made life worth living—family, friends, flourishing industries, even property.

Strong feelings of indignation were aroused in the Reichstag and, in spite of a violent speech from Bismarck, a motion by Dr. Windhorst was carried (January 26th, 1886) condemning the expulsion of the Poles as "unjust and detrimental to the interests of the Empire." This measure was one of particular importance to Poland because, although partitioned under three governments, it had remained at heart a single nation which no artificial frontier had been able to divide. In seeking to put an end to the easy exchange of relations between the Poles of Posnania and their brethren across the border, the Prussian Government succeeded in ruining and embittering the future of thousands of families, without impairing the strength of that blood-tie which had defied all politics for over a hundred years.

On April 26th, 1886, the Prussian Diet—which, elected on a very narrow franchise, does not actually represent the country—passed a bill known as the Colonisation Bill. A Royal Commission for the Colonisation of the Eastern Marches was empowered to purchase Polish lands and convert them into German settlements. For this purpose, credit of 100 million marks was voted which, by successive instalments, reached a total little short of 1,000 million. Here was war undisguised.

Let it be understood that commerce and industry were at that time but feebly developed in Posnania. It was the earth that fed the Pole; nurse as well as mother, the earth repaid his whole existence. Wrench a Pole from his soil and you send him adrift, like a leaf torn from its tree, to do battle

with unknown winds. This new law was not aimed primarily at the rich landowner, but at the son of the soil. It was intended to dismay the peasant-owner of humble acres, to drive the poor hired-labourer afield.

The Pole was struck, therefore, at his most vulnerable point. He had already been forced by poverty to sell land; between the years 1861 and 1886, Polish property in Posnania had diminished by some 730,000 acres (293,378 hectares). The Commission, between 1886 and 1897 bought 335,383 hectares.

And yet the total acreage of property in Polish hands was not seen to diminish. Once more repression had been met by self-defence. Private enterprise, admirably organised, had met the Royal Commission on its own ground; the Pole had commenced buying out the German proprietor settled in Posnania; and presently the Pole bought out the German a little faster than the German bought out the Pole. Between 1897 and 1900 the Germans bought 32,697 hectares, and the Poles 63,314—a net gain of 30,617.

The Prussian Government was forced to recognise that its policy was not quite a success. Therefore it set about improving matters. The Royal Commission was henceforth to concentrate its efforts in those districts where the Polish element was weakest. Later, in order to strengthen the position of the German settler, a system of entail was introduced into the small German colonies (June 8th, 1896) by which the Government reserved to itself an "*Anerkennung*," or right of pre-emption over those properties at every change of hands. Since that date, land once acquired by the Commission is lost to the Pole for good and all.

Still the German colonist came forward in disappointingly small numbers, whereas the Polish peasant, enriched by

labour abroad, bought up more and more of his native soil. So a new Law of Exception was voted. (June 30th, 1907.) In long-winded and deliberately involved phraseology, it forbade a Polish peasant to build on his own land without first obtaining official authorization. This meant that, after toiling all his life to amass a humble fortune, no working-man might dream of ending his days beneath a roof of his own, on that modest strip of the land of his fathers which he had bought with his sweat. Again the Polish peasant was unquerable; he fashioned, gipsy-like, a home on wheels, and continued to live on the earth he loved.

The Government, apparently at the end of its resources, now consulted the political economists.

Herr Bernhard (who afterwards received a chair at the Berlin University in spite of formal opposition on the part of his future colleagues), was entrusted with the task of studying the situation. The result of his labours, to which were added those of Prof. Ernest Hasse, of Munich, and of Herr Cleinow, served to convince the Prussian Government that the only means of victoriously combating the Polish element was to uproot it from the soil, by brute force if need be.

Then did Prince Bülow introduce a bill, known as the Expropriation Bill. The government was hereby empowered to take possession of the ancient Polish hereditaments, even if these were not for sale, by the forcible expropriation of the owner. After lengthy discussion this notorious bill was passed by the Prussian Upper House. It is worth recording perhaps that, on this occasion, eighteen Prussian doctors and professors, men of standing in the world of science and of letters, voted for the Government, turning the scale towards injustice. (The bill was passed by a majority of 28.) They were acting, let it be said, against the honourable ranks of their colleagues

who, not yet Prussianised, but true to the noble traditions of German culture, raised their voices in protest against this most iniquitous measure.

The Expropriation Bill was passed (March, 1908) in time of peace, a thing hitherto unheard of in history. It was dictated by sentiments of hatred, not of public utility, and was in fact the culmination of a policy of hatred, striking rich and poor alike, following no logic, either social or socialistic, directed in defiance of the laws of nations against a people who did not even ask for "a place in the sun," but passionately desired to remain, even under the shadow of affliction, on the soil of its fathers.

It may be remembered that, in answer to an appeal made by the celebrated Polish novelist, Henryk Sienkiewicz, voices were heard throughout the world protesting against this law. For reasons which have not transpired, it was not immediately put into execution. The Prussian Government, having passed the measure, reserved it for future use.

Suddenly, in October, 1912, four Polish proprietors simultaneously received letters informing them that their properties were about to be purchased by the Royal Commission. One of these is the son and grandson of men who, in Prussian uniform, fought for the honour and glory of Prussia. Another is a widow, the mother of young children.

The repression of all legitimate manifestations of national life had meanwhile been keeping pace with economic oppression.

There is no need perhaps to refer to the dark period of the "Kultur-kampf," with its imprisonments, its persecution of the clergy, its expulsion of Bishops. This movement, although it struck Poland at the heart, cannot be classed as purely anti-

Polish; it was a part of Bismarck's general policy, and was aimed against German Catholicism in general, not against Polish Catholicism in particular. The "*Kulturkampf*" served to strengthen among the Poles not only their faith but their national consciousness. It widened the breach between Pole and German. We find, for instance, that it directly affected inter-marriage, marriages between Pole and German having indeed never ceased since then to diminish in numbers.

The struggle between Polish National sentiment and the Prussian Government may be said to have begun in earnest after the "*Kulturkampf*" had practically suspended its activities. It was then that the Germanisation of the schools was taken seriously in hand. The Polish language, after having been entirely banished from the secondary schools, was excluded from the elementary schools by a ministerial decree, Sept. 7th, 1887. After that date, it could only be used outside the school curriculum, or for the imparting of religious instruction. In 1905 even this poor privilege disappeared; and now the sound of the Polish language is no longer heard in Polish village schools, where Polish rate-payers must pay, perforce, to have their children taught the catechism in a strange, to them almost unintelligible, tongue.

A children's strike ensued. In the course of a year some 100,000 children refused to be taught religion in a foreign language; whereupon the Government issued a circular commanding the punishment of these young offenders. First the parents were taken in hand and heavily fined; next the children were dealt with by the teachers and flogged without mercy. The brutality shown at Wreschen in particular aroused for a brief instant the indignation of the European press which—thrilled with horror at the thought that little

children could, in our enlightened days, be crippled for life or even killed outright for patriotic faith—raised a passing outcry and then—forgot.

In order to encourage the Prussian functionary at his unpleasant task of Pole-worrying, every German accepting office in the Polish Provinces receives extra pay (*Ostmarkenzulage*), and German settlers in general are offered substantial advantages.

It is difficult to enumerate the many forms of petty tyranny exercised in Posnania to-day. Letters may not be addressed in Polish; a Pole wearing Prussian uniform is forbidden the use of his own tongue with a comrade in barracks; the language is taboo in public offices; indeed all officials, down to the humblest, are Germans. Since May 15th, 1908, the use of Polish has been strictly forbidden at meetings in all districts where the Poles do not exceed 60 % of the population. Polish towns are disguised by a Prussian veneer; Polish shopkeepers in Polish streets (bearing German names) display their wares behind German inscriptions. The time-honoured names of Polish towns and hamlets are Germanised beyond recognition; Innowroclaw, for instance, the seat of a historic Palatinate, has become—Hohensalza.

Further enumerations are unnecessary. It will be felt that we are far already from the Treaty of Vienna. The possession of a country by the Poles no longer calls forth Royal Manifestoes expressive of regard for Polish Patriotism.

The situation is hardly one to be overlooked. England, closely interested as she is in Prussian activities, should be the last to turn her attention entirely away from matters that throw so much light upon Prussian methods of Empire-building.

NOTE.

There are about 23 million Poles in the world at the present moment, all speaking the same language, and—with the exception of some 700,000 Protestants of various denominations—all professing the same Catholic faith. Numerically, they occupy the seventh place among nations speaking a European tongue. They therefore outnumber the united populations of Bulgaria (5,400,000), of Servia (9,200,000), of Greece (5,000,000), and of Turkey in Europe (1,600,000).

The territories occupied by ancient Poland extended over more than 800,000 square kilometres. The Poles are to-day in absolute majority over an area of at least 250,000 sq. km., and constitute a full half of the population over another 300,000.

There are about 4,100,000 Poles in the German Empire, 4,200,000 in Austria, 12,000,000 in Russia: to these must be added some 3,000,000 living in America and elsewhere.

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