

PRUSSIA AND THE POLES

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649408443

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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OTTO WENKSTERN

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I.

EVENTS too recent to require more than a passing allusion, have again mooted the question of the independence of Poland. The liberals in all countries are told, for the twentieth time at least, that this is the proper opportunity to redress the wrongs of the past, and that a nation which has been unjustly enslaved, should not in vain appeal to the generosity, the justice and the equity of Europe. Those who make this appeal cannot, must not, or will not understand that the wrongs they denounce may, in their time, have had the excuse of a paramount political necessity; that measures which at this moment are represented as wanton acts of aggression, were really measures of self-defence; that the causes which made the partition of Poland necessary, oppose its reconstitution; that a nation which, with all the

chances in its favour, forfeited its independence, and lost its possessions piecemeal through internal corruption and natural decay, is not likely to stand by its own strength, after it has been set up and propped up by the hands of united Europe, and that the task of resuscitating a defunct body politic is more impracticable even than that of preventing the decease of a moribund state. A lesson might have been learnt from the regeneration of Greece, which, in spite of the solicitude of the Great Powers, has not yet led, and is not, in all human probability, likely to lead, to those beneficial results, which were anticipated by the champions and advocates of Hellenic independence. The experiment has not proved successful enough to encourage the extension of its doubtful benefits, either to the Greek provinces which still belong to Turkey, or to the islands which denounce our protectorate. That the Hellenes should be subject to the harshness, the violence, and the caprices of the old Turkish rule was justly considered a hardship; but the disorder, the lawlessness, the moral and material degradation and corruption of the Greek kingdom, have made it an open question whether the latter evil is not worse than the first. The Great Powers cannot undo their own handiwork, nor can they allow any one else to undo it for them; but if the War of Independence had to be fought over again, it would certainly not be terminated by an intervention in favour of the Greeks.

To expatiate on the wrongs and to lament the

sufferings of Poland is a cheap display of political virtue. To enlarge in glowing terms on the wickedness of princes who conspired to invade and divide the territories of an unoffending neighbour and staunch ally, is a healthy exercise of the non-reasoning faculties; and the feat becomes the easier, in proportion to the degree of ignorance which the speaker or essayist may possess or assume for the occasion. The history of the decline and fall of the Polish kingdom remains yet to be written; but, even now, the truth of the matter is neither remote nor is it unapproachable. "There is no use in blinking the fact," says a late writer on the subject, "that the present bondage of Poland is the historical penalty for the evil deeds of its independent days. Had it possessed a decent government of any kind, so large a country and so valiant a people could not possibly have been cut into slices by its neighbours."

This matter-of-fact view of the partition of Poland is strengthened at every point by historical parallels. A nation which is fit to live an independent life, is not to be extinguished by a combination among its neighbours. Such combinations have attempted their worst in several cases. Sweden, Prussia, and England have in their day been marked out for conquest and partition; but in each case the hostile coalition was foiled by a determined, a persevering, and successful resistance. Poland dropped her provinces one by one, from sheer inability to hold them. Her vicious constitution, her divided councils,

the factious spirit of the ruling caste, the selfish intrigues of her leaders, and the domestic treasons which in all her internal dissensions invited foreign interference, brought her to that pass that her existence as an independent country could no longer be thought of. Her absorption into the Russian empire, was a mere question of time, and her partition among Austria, Prussia, and Russia, became a necessary measure of precaution on the part of the two first-named countries.

It was not a vain alarm which impelled two of the parties to the partition to burden themselves with barren, impoverished and devastated tracts of land, with a peasantry brutalised by the oppression of centuries, and with a gentry of proverbial fickleness and turbulence. The disruption of the body politic of Poland was steadily progressing, and all the parts that fell off, fell to the share of Russia. With the most friendly feelings to that power, Austria could not wish to see the Russians established in Galicia. Nor could Prussia look forward with equanimity to the time when her allies and rivals—who had but recently been her foes—should shelter their navy in the port of Dantzic, establish their strongholds in Posen, and overawe Breslau on the one hand and Berlin on the other. The relations of friendly powers are necessarily based on a certain degree of equality. When all the strength is on the one side and all the weakness on the other, a good understanding may still exist, but it is the good understanding of a chief and his retainer; it is

based on the forbearance of the one, and the obedience of the other. Such a vassalage was distasteful to Prussia and to Austria. It is easy to blame them; it is still more easy to call the partition of Poland "the greatest political crime that ever was committed," but those who judge of these matters in so off-hand a manner ought to consider the terrible dilemma in which the statesmen of 1772 were placed. Should they make war upon a powerful neighbour for the protection of another neighbour who had long ceased to protect himself? Or were they to stand by and allow a friendly and formidable country to advance to within a few days' march from Berlin and Vienna? Wearied and worn with the protracted struggle for Silesia, they were in bad condition to engage in a fresh war. If they stood by and let Poland fulfil what manifestly appeared to be her destiny, their inaction would make them mere satellites to the greatest power on the continent. They elected to connive at what they could not prevent, and, by claiming their share of a dying kingdom, to mitigate the evil consequences which were sure to follow on the extinction of Poland.

II.

NOTHING short of a paramount political necessity could excuse the partition of Poland—such a necessity only could prompt that measure. Poland—such as the partitioning powers found it—was not a desirable prize; the factious gentry who had wrought the ruin of their country, were not desirable subjects. The towns—few and far between—were almost void of inhabitants; only a small portion of the land was cultivated in a savage and barbarous manner. Two-thirds of the country were swamp, moor, scrub, and bush, the haunt of wolves and robbers, whose numbers were only checked by the scanty flocks and the poverty of the villages on which they preyed. The land was without roads; the rivers without bridges and ferries. The rural population, serfs to a man, were ground to the dust by the exactions, the ill treatment and the systematic debasement of many generations of masters. The gentry—it is enough to say, that by them, and through them, had the country been turned into a wilderness.

“The majority of the towns,” says Dr. Freytag,* “were in ruins; so were by far the greater number of farms in the plains. Bromberg, originally a German

* *Neue Bilder aus dem Leben des deutschen Volkes*, pp. 400-402.

“ colony, was a mere heap of rubbish; to this day
“ it is impossible to ascertain how that town
“ was so reduced. The details of the hardships
“ suffered by the whole of the Netze district,
“ within the ten years previous to the Prussian occu-
“ pation, are altogether unknown; no historian, no
“ document, not even a memorandum, reports on
“ the destruction and the butcheries which have
“ taken place. The presumption is, that this district
“ was the battle-ground of the Polish factions, and
“ that famine and distempers consummated the work
“ of the fire and the sword of the patriots. The city
“ of Kulm preserved its strong walls and stately
“ churches; but, of the houses, the cellars alone
“ gaped amidst the broken rooftrees and crumbling
“ masonry of ruined buildings. Whole streets con-
“ sisted of nothing but such cellars, which sheltered
“ a few famine and fever-stricken wretches. Of the
“ forty houses which surrounded the Market Square,
“ twenty-eight had neither doors, nor roofs, nor
“ windows. No one owned them; no one claimed
“ them. Many other towns were in a similar
“ condition.

“ The majority of the rural population, too, were
“ in a most miserable plight, more especially near
“ the Pomeranian frontier. On his approach to a
“ village, the wayfarer beheld hovels covered with
“ musty straw, mere molehills on a treeless and
“ gardenless plain. The hovel, made of wattled clay,
“ had but one room and no chimney; stoves and
“ candles were unknown; a piece of resinous wood