

POLAND, THE UNKNOWN

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Poland, the unknown by K. Waliszewski

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K. WALISZEWSKI

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THE UNKNOWN**

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
OF
K. WALISZEWSKI



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

OF all the questions presented for settlement to the Congress of 1919, none was more momentous than that of Poland. Civilization has had to defend itself against Germany—a Prussified Germany. For forty years before the Great War Germany had been penetrated, hypnotized, dominated, possessed, by the evil spirit of Prussia. But the fabric of Prussia was originally reared on the ruins of Poland. Prussia only existed as a real power in Europe because, and when, Poland had ceased to exist. The Polish question is the Prussian question on its reverse side. Whatever Governments may say or do, the feeling of the peoples who have suffered from the Hohenzollerns is *Delenda est Borussia*. But the cry “Down with Prussia” is equivalent to the demand “Up with Poland.”

Of the Three Tyrannies that broke up and absorbed Poland there were two of which it could not be affirmed that their Polish acquisitions were more than valuable additions to the terri-

ories they held already. The case of Prussia was absolutely different. A slice of Poland was merely *de bene esse* of Russia or Austria; of Prussia it was actually *de esse*. Until half a century ago a Prussia minus its Polish provinces would have been a petty State. By her seizure and assimilation of her Polish prey she gained and gathered the strength for future depredations. It was not the first of her criminal exploits; but it was her first venture in pillage on the grand scale.

The statement is perhaps more true of Prussia than of any other State—at any rate in modern times—that she was born in robbery, was nurtured in robbery, and has lived through her whole career in and on robbery. Among ethnological mysteries there is none greater than that the proto-Prussians, the Borussi, a squalid non-Teutonic race of Ugro-Finnic stock, never Christianized, never more than half civilized, hailing from some point in Northern Asia, should first have imposed itself on the Teutonic peoples to their utter undoing, and next have led the whole civilized world to the brink of the most frightful catastrophe in human annals.

It was the crime against Poland that enabled

Prussia to absorb in turn Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein, Hanover, Austrian Silesia, and Alsace-Lorraine. A just Nemesis, whatever other penalty it inflicted on the Robber Nation, was bound to insist on the disgorgement of her Polish spoil. The historic interest of the Polish question lies in the fact that Prussia thrived on Poland's downfall. The practical interest of the Polish question to-day lies in the fact that in a strong Poland, restored to her full heritage—from the Baltic to the Euxine—lies one of the greatest securities to the cause of Civilization. A strong Poland is Europe's advanced post against Eastern aggression; she is needed to do again, if necessary, what her hero, John Sobieski, did in his day. A strong Poland, with other neighbouring States composed of free nations, is an effective barrier to plans of the Mittel-Europa order and to intrigues having Egypt and India for their objective.

Such is the interest which the Polish question possesses for the world at large. Poland's own interest in it is derived from the inalienable right of every people to be free to live its own life. It is unthinkable that a great and noble nation such as the Poles should any longer be denied

the elementary, God-given privilege of its independence. Europe, sadly in arrear with its debt to this long-suffering country, resolved that the great wrong done at Vienna should be wiped out and righted at Versailles.

The author of this essay has stated the case on behalf of his country with an ability and a candour that will carry conviction, and an eloquence that must awaken sympathy. The veteran patriot admits that the history of Poland is a chequered story of prosperity and disaster, that her regrettable internal dissensions rendered her an easy prey to foreign aggression, and that to this day the want of unity amongst her sons may yet prove a grave obstacle to her future well-being. But M. Waliszewski also shows us the other side of the shield. He proves his countrymen to have been far in advance of other nations, not only in their realization of the great principles of national liberty, but in expressing and embodying those principles in concrete institutions and definite organisms. Some, at least, of Poland's troubles were due to her premature liberalism, and to the consequent

jealousy of absolutist neighbours who regarded her people's love of freedom—admittedly excessive—as making for anarchy.

On the other hand, the ultra-Revolutionists of eighteenth-century France were no less disconcerted to find that in Poland their advanced views found little favour among a people who had learnt by experience to draw a firm and decided line between Reform and Revolution.

Nothing could be more effective than M. Waliszewski's scathing indictment of the tactics of the anti-Polish conspirators, who, having marked down their prey, proceeded by secret agencies to corrupt their victim, to foment "anarchy," and then to make "anarchy" the excuse for intervention. The author's picturesque account of the external causes and internal tendencies which by slow degrees reduced Poland from the rank of a first-rate European Power, deserves attentive study. What he terms the Enigma of Poland consisted in the curious double anomaly of a Republican Constitution in which a King played the part of the merest figure-head; and of a "nobiliary *demos*"—a social caste of land-owning nobility which in status was democratic.

On the whole, M. Waliszewski conveys the impression that Poland was a sheep among wolves; that her people were a simple and confiding folk whose domestic differences weakened their defence against the enemy without; yet withal a race whose history showed fine traits of national character, and whose constancy in unmerited suffering affords good hope, under favourable conditions, of restored prosperity. Whether the conditions will or will not be favourable is the grave question that haunts all Poland's well-wishers.