

A NOTE ON THE POLISH PROBLEM--1916

We must start from the assumption that promises made by proclamation at the beginning of this war may be binding on the individuals who made them under the stress of coming events, but cannot be regarded as binding the Governments after the end of the war.

Poland has been presented with three proclamations. Two of them were in such contrast with the avowed principles and the historic action for the last hundred years (since the Congress of Vienna) of the Powers concerned, that they were more like cynical insults to the nation's deepest feelings, its memory and its intelligence, than state papers of a conciliatory nature.

The German promises awoke nothing but indignant contempt; the Russian a bitter incredulity of the most complete kind. The Austrian proclamation, which made no promises and contented itself with pointing out the Austro-Polish relations for the last forty-five years, was received in silence. For it is a fact that in Austrian Poland alone Polish nationality was recognised as an element of the Empire, and individuals could breathe the air of freedom, of civil life, if not of political independence.

But for Poles to be Germanophile is unthinkable. To be Russophile or Austrophile is at best a counsel of despair in view of a European situation which, because of the grouping of the powers, seems to shut from them every hope, expressed or unexpressed, of a national future nursed through more than a hundred years of suffering and oppression.

Through most of these years, and especially since 1830, Poland (I use this expression since Poland exists as a spiritual entity to-day as definitely as it ever existed in her past) has put her faith in the Western Powers. Politically it may have been nothing more than a consoling illusion, and the nation had a half-consciousness of this. But what Poland was looking for from the Western Powers without discouragement and with unbroken confidence was moral support.

This is a fact of the sentimental order. But such facts have their positive value, for their idealism derives from perhaps the highest kind of reality. A sentiment asserts its claim by its force, persistence and universality. In Poland that sentimental attitude towards the Western Powers is universal. It extends to all classes. The very children are affected by it as soon as they begin to think.

The political value of such a sentiment consists in this, that it is based on

profound resemblances. Therefore one can build on it as if it were a material fact. For the same reason it would be unsafe to disregard it if one proposed to build solidly. The Poles, whom superficial or ill-informed theorists are trying to force into the social and psychological formula of Slavonism, are in truth not Slavonic at all. In temperament, in feeling, in mind, and even in unreason, they are Western, with an absolute comprehension of all Western modes of thought, even of those which are remote from their historical experience.

That element of racial unity which may be called Polonism, remained compressed between Prussian Germanism on one side and the Russian Slavonism on the other. For Germanism it feels nothing but hatred. But between Polonism and Slavonism there is not so much hatred as a complete and ineradicable incompatibility.

No political work of reconstructing Poland either as a matter of justice or expediency could be sound which would leave the new creation in dependence to Germanism or to Slavonism.

The first need not be considered. The second must be--unless the Powers elect to drop the Polish question either under the cover of vague assurances or without any disguise whatever.

But if it is considered it will be seen at once that the Slavonic solution of the Polish Question can offer no guarantees of duration or hold the promise of security for the peace of Europe.

The only basis for it would be the Grand Duke's Manifesto. But that Manifesto, signed by a personage now removed from Europe to Asia, and by a man, moreover, who if true to himself, to his conception of patriotism and to his family tradition could not have put his hand to it with any sincerity of purpose, is now divested of all authority. The forcible vagueness of its promises, its startling inconsistency with the hundred years of ruthlessly denationalising oppression permit one to doubt whether it was ever meant to have any authority.

But in any case it could have had no effect. The very nature of things would have brought to nought its professed intentions.

It is impossible to suppose that a State of Russia's power and antecedents would tolerate a privileged community (of, to Russia, unnational complexion) within the body of the Empire. All history shows that such an arrangement, however hedged in by the most solemn treaties and declarations, cannot last. In this case it would lead to a tragic issue. The absorption of Polonism is unthinkable. The last hundred years of European History proves it undeniably. There remains

then extirpation, a process of blood and iron; and the last act of the Polish drama would be played then before a Europe too weary to interfere, and to the applause of Germany.

It would not be just to say that the disappearance of Polonism would add any strength to the Slavonic power of expansion. It would add no strength, but it would remove a possibly effective barrier against the surprises the future of Europe may hold in store for the Western Powers.

Thus the question whether Polonism is worth saving presents itself as a problem of politics with a practical bearing on the stability of European peace--as a barrier or perhaps better (in view of its detached position) as an outpost of the Western Powers placed between the great might of Slavonism which has not yet made up its mind to anything, and the organised Germanism which has spoken its mind with no uncertain voice, before the world.

Looked at in that light alone Polonism seems worth saving. That it has lived so long on its trust in the moral support of the Western Powers may give it another and even stronger claim, based on a truth of a more profound kind. Polonism had resisted the utmost efforts of Germanism and Slavonism for more than a hundred years. Why? Because of the strength of its ideals conscious of their kinship with the West. Such a power of resistance creates a moral obligation which it would be unsafe to neglect. There is always a risk in throwing away a tool of proved temper.

In this profound conviction of the practical and ideal worth of Polonism one approaches the problem of its preservation with a very vivid sense of the practical difficulties derived from the grouping of the Powers. The uncertainty of the extent and of the actual form of victory for the Allies will increase the difficulty of formulating a plan of Polish regeneration at the present moment.

Poland, to strike its roots again into the soil of political Europe, will require a guarantee of security for the healthy development and for the untrammelled play of such institutions as she may be enabled to give to herself.

Those institutions will be animated by the spirit of Polonism, which, having been a factor in the history of Europe and having proved its vitality under oppression, has established its right to live. That spirit, despised and hated by Germany and incompatible with Slavonism because of moral differences, cannot avoid being (in its renewed assertion) an object of dislike and mistrust.

As an unavoidable consequence of the past Poland will have to begin its existence in an atmosphere of enmities and suspicions. That advanced outpost of Western

civilisation will have to hold its ground in the midst of hostile camps: always its historical fate.

Against the menace of such a specially dangerous situation the paper and ink of public Treaties cannot be an effective defence. Nothing but the actual, living, active participation of the two Western Powers in the establishment of the new Polish commonwealth, and in the first twenty years of its existence, will give the Poles a sufficient guarantee of security in the work of restoring their national life.

An Anglo-French protectorate would be the ideal form of moral and material support. But Russia, as an ally, must take her place in it on such a footing as will allay to the fullest extent her possible apprehensions and satisfy her national sentiment. That necessity will have to be formally recognised.

In reality Russia has ceased to care much for her Polish possessions. Public recognition of a mistake in political morality and a voluntary surrender of territory in the cause of European concord, cannot damage the prestige of a powerful State. The new spheres of expansion in regions more easily assimilable, will more than compensate Russia for the loss of territory on the Western frontier of the Empire.

The experience of Dual Controls and similar combinations has been so unfortunate in the past that the suggestion of a Triple Protectorate may well appear at first sight monstrous even to unprejudiced minds. But it must be remembered that this is a unique case and a problem altogether exceptional, justifying the employment of exceptional means for its solution. To those who would doubt the possibility of even bringing such a scheme into existence the answer may be made that there are psychological moments when any measure tending towards the ends of concord and justice may be brought into being. And it seems that the end of the war would be the moment for bringing into being the political scheme advocated in this note.

Its success must depend on the singleness of purpose in the contracting Powers, and on the wisdom, the tact, the abilities, the good-will of men entrusted with its initiation and its further control. Finally it may be pointed out that this plan is the only one offering serious guarantees to all the parties occupying their respective positions within the scheme.

If her existence as a state is admitted as just, expedient and necessary, Poland has the moral right to receive her constitution not from the hand of an old enemy, but from the Western Powers alone, though of course with the fullest concurrence of Russia.

This constitution, elaborated by a committee of Poles nominated by the three Governments, will (after due discussion and amendment by the High Commissioners of the Protecting Powers) be presented to Poland as the initial document, the charter of her new life, freely offered and unreservedly accepted.

It should be as simple and short as a written constitution can be--establishing the Polish Commonwealth, settling the lines of representative institutions, the form of judicature, and leaving the greatest measure possible of self-government to the provinces forming part of the re-created Poland.

This constitution will be promulgated immediately after the three Powers had settled the frontiers of the new State, including the town of Danzic (free port) and a proportion of seaboard. The legislature will then be called together and a general treaty will regulate Poland's international portion as a protected state, the status of the High Commissioners and such-like matters. The legislature will ratify, thus making Poland, as it were, a party in the establishment of the protectorate. A point of importance.

Other general treaties will define Poland's position in the Anglo-Franco- Russian alliance, fix the numbers of the army, and settle the participation of the Powers in its organisation and training.