

[1] Baron Wormser, *The Road Washes Out in Spring: A Poet's Memoir of Living off the Grid*. Hanover and London: Univ. Press of New England (www.upne.com) 2008. 200 pages. ISBN 13:978-1-58465-704-0. Paper. \$18.25 at Amazon.com. Pages 106–111. Reprinted by permission of University Press of New England.

Letters on Polish Affairs

Charles Sarolea

Editor's Note: Belgian-born Charles Sarolea (1870–1953) was a professor of French at the University of Edinburgh. He is most remembered for his political writings. He wrote on various nations in Europe including Germany (whom he viewed unfavorably), Russia (ambivalently viewed), France, England, and the relations between these nations. The *Letters on Polish Affairs*, with an Introduction by G. K. Chesterton, were originally published in Edinburgh in 1922. They are public domain and have been digitized by various entities, including the Internet Archive in 2007 with funding from Microsoft Corporation. They were also reprinted in 2012.

Professor Sarolea's preface is dramatic: "The following pages are not primarily a plea for Poland, they are a plea for Europe. There is one Leitmotiv which underlies them, namely, that the Polish Problem is not a national problem but an international problem To speak of Polish nationalism is a confusion of terms. For a Pole cannot be a nationalist. He never was a nationalist in the German sense of the word, and he has been the first to apply the federal principle in his relations with other nationalities living under the authority of the Polish State. Poland has suffered too much from the aggressive nationalism of Germany, Russia, and Austria, to be misled by the nationalist heresy" (2). What Sarolea has in mind is that "without the bulwark of a consolidated Poland, the old menace of a Russo-Prussian Alliance would once more become a formidable reality" (4). One wonders whence this Belgian professor of French in Edinburgh acquired his keen understanding of the problems smaller nations have with adversary propaganda. The answer suggests itself in the very question. Sarolea was Belgian, and Belgium experienced its share of malevolent injustice from its stronger and more-successful neighbors. As to Scotland, the repeated attempts to separate from the United Kingdom suggest that the eighteenth-century injustice and the defeat at Culloden in 1745 were remembered not only by the Scots but also by a sympathetic newcomer from Belgium.

The Second Letter in particular seems to make eerie references to the 2016 Polish public relations. In that country a small minority has fanned the flames of arrogance and asked for help from abroad (which in Poland brings back memories of eighteenth-century treasons) over a relatively minor issue: the number of judges appointed by one of the two largest parties. This has been blown into a crisis that threatens to disturb Poland's sovereign status. A lie that is repeated a thousand times becomes a fake truth; the monotonous drumming into people's ears of fantasies about breaking the rule of law in Poland is such a lie.

Portions of the Second and Fifth Letters are hereby reprinted. Orthography has been updated.

SECOND LETTER

THE ORGANIZED CONSPIRACY AGAINST POLAND

One does not require to be particularly observant or well informed to realize that the Polish government and the Polish people have not too many friends in this country or in any other country, except perhaps the Latin countries. Poland has today what may be called a very bad press. The fact is all the more remarkable because we might have expected a young state which is struggling into existence to be able to rely, if not on the support, at least on the sympathies and moral encouragement of its neighbors. Of such moral encouragement there seems to be very little trace. I do not refer here to frank and outspoken individual criticisms of the Polish people, nor do I suggest that all the accusations against the Polish government are unfounded. Indeed I am willing to admit that the Polish government have made some serious mistakes—such as the Kiev adventure in the summer of 1920. It would have been a miracle if that government had not made any serious mistakes. In a country which had been devastated by seven years of civil and foreign war, where everything had been levelled to the ground and had to be built up again, where the old rulers had been dismissed and where no new government had taken their places, the years of transition from the old to the new were bound to be much more difficult than in countries in possession of a settled government.

The attacks against Poland to which I am here alluding do not refer to the occasional and

inevitable blunders of a new government; the attacks are general, they are systematic, they are deliberate, and they are organized. We have to deal with a conspiracy of denunciation, and the misrepresentations are leveled not only against the Polish Government but against the Polish people.

In the eighteenth century England had subsidized Prussia in order that she should wage a crusade against French Terrorism, but it was against Poland that Prussia spent the English millions.

The student of history never ceases to wonder when he sees how the same phenomena will reappear again and again in almost exactly the same form, without the present generation learning the lessons of the past. The present conspiracy against Poland has its parallel in counterpart in the anti-Polish propaganda which was raging during the whole of the eighteenth century, and a careful study of the methods which were then employed is of the utmost interest today. Just as today Russia and Prussia are mobilizing the public opinion of the world, so in the eighteenth century they tried to discredit the nation which they were about to destroy. And the success of that propaganda was amazing, if we judge it by what it accomplished. Today we are all agreed that the partition of Poland was a foul crime, and the fruitful parent of other political crimes. But the contemporaries thought very differently from ourselves. Indeed they are generally to be found on the side of the murderers. Frederick, yclept the Great, and Catherine, who is also yclept the Great, in carrying out their Polish policy were described as magnanimous and liberal minded sovereigns who were intervening only with a view to maintaining law and order, and to securing the rights of the "dissidents" or nonconformists. D'Alembert, Diderot, Grimm, Voltaire, all the French encyclopedists vied with each other in trumpeting abroad the achievements of those enlightened despots who were inspired with the loftiest motives in "partaking of the Eucharistic body of Poland."

The anti-Polish propaganda of the eighteenth century was marvelously successful. But I am not sure whether the present propaganda has not even been more successful. The enemies of Poland possess in the International Press an even more efficient instrument at their disposal, and present conditions are even more favorable than they were in the days of Voltaire. It is even easier today to prejudice public opinion against Poland. For, as the result of her seven years of foreign war, Poland finds herself, without any fault of her own, in an appalling situation. Her industries are stagnant. Even as in Belgium, the German invader has removed every engine from the factories. The whole land has been systematically looted. The very trunks of the trees on the public roads have been felled and leveled to the ground. The country is flooded with worthless paper money and has the worst exchange in the world. You are able to get six hundred Polish marks for one English shilling, twelve thousand Polish marks for one English sovereign. Trade is paralyzed because it can neither buy raw material to manufacture goods nor export those goods in order to improve its currency. The government and administration is disorganized. And that new Government, animated with the best intentions, including men of the highest native ability, is without experience, without financial resources, and without adequate authority. It is called upon to make bricks without straw. And it is confronted with difficulties which even the strongest Government might be unable to overcome.

In the presence of such awful conditions, nothing is obviously easier than to discredit both the Polish Government and the Polish people. To any fair-minded and impartial student, they are, of course, absolutely innocent. The Polish people have, as I said, no responsibility whatsoever for the present situation. That situation is partly the result of the Russian maladministration before the war. It is also the result of the devastating German invasion, and of a really devastating occupation. It is the result, finally, of the Bolshevik invasion. But the enemies of Poland have only to describe the terrible conditions as they are, and then, by practising an easy trick, to shift the responsibility for the chaos and paralysis and

bankruptcy, and they at once achieve their malevolent purpose. They discredit the new State. They undermine its moral, as well as its financial, foundations, and they create the impression that Poland is not destined to live. As the Polish workers who had to emigrate temporarily into German industrial districts were described as seasonal workers, the new Polish State is described as a Seasonal State. *Polen is ein "Saisonsstaat," Es ist "lebensunfähig."*

If any reader thinks that I am exaggerating or misreading the meaning of European history, let him study the *Memoirs of Bismarck*, which for fifty years have been the Law and the Gospels to every German student of *Realpolitik*.

If such an impression were allowed to take possession of the public opinion of the world, if the present conspiracy were allowed to spread, it might inflict incalculable and perhaps irretrievable damage to the Polish Commonwealth. We have the evidence of recent German history, and of such pro-German authorities as Professor Hans Delbruck and Dr. Bernhard, in his standard prewar book, *Die Polenfrage*, that the Polish people in Poznań have been able to hold their own even against the might and majesty of the Prussian state, and that in tenacity, in discipline, and even in organizing power the Polish peasant is at least a match for the German peasant. Recent history has established beyond contestation that Bolshevism can strike no root in the Polish peasant communities, that the Pole has a sense of law and order, that he is a hard worker, so excellent a worker that he was everywhere in request in the German empire, that Westphalia alone absorbed hundreds of thousands of seasonal Polish immigrants. Recent history has also proven that he is thrifty, and that by his thrift he was adding to his acres even more rapidly than the Junkers. In other words, recent history has abundantly shown that the Pole need not be afraid of the German whenever the odds are even, when the competition is conducted fairly. But today the odds are not even, and obviously the Poles must be helpless against a

conspiracy of lies and misrepresentations, they are helpless against the antipathy and hostility of a prejudiced world.

In the face of such a conspiracy the Government of Poland must awaken to a sense of its responsibility. It can no longer look on with indifference. It cannot content itself with replying to a conspiracy of lies by maintaining a conspiracy of silence. Hitherto the Polish Government may have thought it beneath its dignity to answer those misrepresentations. They may have relied on the intrinsic justice of the Polish cause. They may have pinned their faith to the Treaty of Versailles. They may have believed that Europe in her own interest is bound to support them. They may have been too absorbed by their internal troubles to find the necessary time and energy to fight an invisible foe. But the anti-Polish conspiracy has now assumed proportions when it has become dangerous to the very existence of the Polish state. It is therefore urgent that to a propaganda of lies the Polish government shall oppose a propaganda of truth. If the systematic education of public opinion can be so powerful where its object is the diffusion of lies, what ought not to be its power if its object is the diffusion of the truth? A signal recent instance, the publication of Mr. Keynes's book has shown what one single work can do to lead or to mislead public opinion all over the world. Let the Polish government state the Polish case with candor and courage, let them state their difficulties with frankness, and I believe that the truth will prevail and that the Polish people will once more win that goodwill and those sympathies which they so urgently need and which they so fully deserve.

FIFTH LETTER

THE POLISH QUESTION IN THE LIGHT OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

We have seen how in the discussion on the recent Silesian incidents, the British Press with striking unanimity appealed to the Treaty of Versailles. It warned the Polish people that whatever happened the Treaty must be respected. The Polish Government have no reason whatsoever to dread or to shirk such an appeal. Poland will be safe as long as the Allied

Powers remember what they have been forgetting ever since 1919, namely, the spirit and the purpose of the Treaty. Poland will be safe as long as the Allies remember that the Polish question is not a national question but a European question.

For, indeed, it has been one of the main purposes of the Treaty of Versailles to make the Polish problem an international issue. Unless we accept that proposition, many of the essential propositions of the Treaty simply become meaningless. Already in 1917, President Wilson put the restoration of Poland in the forefront of his Fourteen Points. But the Treaty of Versailles went much further. It made the restoration of Poland an integral part of constructive European policy. The Polish Problem henceforth became something more than a question of sentiment or of ideal justice, its solution implied much more than a mere adjustment of frontiers. In the conception of the political architects, Poland was to be the cornerstone of the new international fabric; remove that cornerstone and the whole fabric must inevitably collapse.

So intimately were the policies of Russia and Prussia bound up that Bismarck could seriously think of entering the Russian diplomatic service even as Baron von Stein and Nesselrode had done before him. . . What insured the solidarity of Russia and Prussia and Austria was the division of the Polish spoils that necessarily kept the robbers united. The three empires could not afford to quarrel seriously with each other because they were committed to a common policy of oppression in Poland.

There is no reason for supposing that any one of the peacemakers of Versailles had made any very profound study of European history. And yet they acted as if they did understand and as if they implicitly accept what is perhaps the most impressive lesson which the history of modern Europe can teach us. That lesson is what may be called the Polish lesson. For one hundred and fifty years Poland had been wiped out from the map of Europe and had become only the shadow

of a name. Yet the Polish ghost continued to haunt every European Chancellery. The Polish enigma continued to be the riddle of the European sphinx. Those who failed to solve that Polish riddle, failed to grasp the deeper meaning of the groupings of the powers, the deeper motives of statesmen. To use the language of scholasticism, Poland is one of the "universals" of political science. It must be conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The clear realization on the part of political thinkers of the vital importance which the Polish question has played in modern diplomacy, may be said to date from the appearance of two epoch-making historical works which were published in the early seventies. I refer to *La Question d'Orient au XVIII^e siècle, le partage de la Pologne et le traité de Kainardj* by Albert Sorel, and to *Le Secret du Roi: correspondance secrète de Louis IV avec ses agents diplomatiques, 1752-1774* by the Duc de Broglie. Both works abundantly prove that already, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Poland had become the center of gravity of European politics, and that already in the days of Voltaire and of Mme. De Pompadour there was the closest interdependence between Polish history and universal history. That interdependence has continued uninterrupted for two hundred years. We can trace it in the French Revolution. We can trace it in the wars of Napoleon. We can trace it in the diplomacy of the Holy Alliance, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in the diplomacy of the Triple Alliance at the end.

Let us consider first one extraordinary anomaly of the Wars of the Revolution which hitherto has been strangely concealed from English readers, and which Lord Eversley, in his excellent book on the *Partitions of Poland*, has perhaps been the first English publicist to emphasize. In 1793 England embarked on that war of the giants which was to rage over two continents for a quarter of a century. That war began with the disaster of Valmy of which Goethe, an eyewitness, justly said that it opened a new era in the history of mankind. The allies of England seemed to hold every trump card. Yet they were ignominiously beaten. France seemed on the verge of the abyss. Yet she was victorious.

Historians explain the unexpected victory as one of the miracles of the revolutionary faith. The true explanation is to be sought not in the forest of Argonne, but in the plains of Eastern Europe. The explanation is that the Allies of England were not interested in the subjugation of revolutionary France. They were only interested in suppressing Poland. England had subsidized Prussia in order that she should wage a crusade against French Terrorism, but it was against Poland that Prussia spent the English millions. It was for that reason and for no other that the Allies were beaten. England had been bleeding *pour le Roi de Prusse*. The French REvolution was saved not mainly because of the heroism of the *Sans Culottes*, but because at a critical moment Poland diverted the main forces of the enemies of liberty. Not for the first time nor for the last was Poland sacrificed to the cause of liberty.

The interdependence between Polish history and European history continues all through the wars of the Napoleonic empire. Two distinguished writers, Albert Vandal in France and Szymon Askenazy in Poland, have studied the diplomatic and political aspects of those wars. Their two works are complementary because Askenazy leaves off at the precise point where Vandal begins. Both works reveal the philosophy and deeper meaning of the gigantic struggle. There is the duel by sea between France and Great Britain, and there is the duel by land between France and the three central empires of Europe. But whilst the issue of the maritime war is the naval supremacy of England, the issue of the continental war is the supremacy of Russia and Prussia. And the stake in the continental struggle is the independence of Poland. On vain does Napoleon establish the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. The Corsican failed to make of an independent Poland the condition *sine qua non* of peace. On this single occasion in his career, the Man of Destiny followed divided counsels, he hesitated between two conflicting policies. And we know from the Memorial of Saint Helena how bitterly he regretted this great blunder of his career. That blunder was the exact counterpart of that which the Allies are in danger of committing today. The establishment of a Grand Duchy of Warsaw was indeed sufficient to alienate Russia and

Prussia, but the Duchy was not strong enough to be a bulwark against Russian aggression. How different would have been the history of Europe if Napoleon, remembering the heroism of the legionnaires of Dąbrowski and Poniatowski, had thrown in his lot with Poland and had followed a consistent Polish policy.

“After the Polish Republic surrendered the shores of the Black Sea to Russia, all her rivers and all her highways henceforth ran through Prussia. . . The Vistula was the last artery of the Republic and Prussia was in the possession of the mouth of that river. In fact, one does not see how Poland could live as an independent state apart from Prussia. . . Woe to the nation whose life depends on a piece of paper in which it does not find a safeguard in its own strength!”

German Field Marshal von Moltke in 1832

The interdependence between Polish and European history which is thus strikingly revealed both in the wars of the Revolution and in the wars of the Empire, is maintained all through the nineteenth century. If you take a broad view of that history, it appears as one prolonged struggle between the two opposite principles of liberty and despotism. France and Great Britain (to which at a later period Italy was added) stand for liberty. Austria, Russia, and Prussia represent reaction. In the first half of the nineteenth century the liberal principle on the whole prevails and European peace is insured. With 1848, the *annus mirabilis* of social upheavals, comes the crisis of liberty, and from that year despotism is on the ascendant in Europe. And the reason for the defeat of liberty and for the triumph of despotism is an obvious one: in the second half of the nineteenth century the forces of liberty are hopelessly divided. On the one hand liberal Italy joins and supports reactionary Prussia, thus betraying the cause of France which has so generously helped to liberate her. On the other hand liberal England supports both Prussia and Austria. A brilliant English thinker, Mr. Gilbert K. Chesterton, during the war wrote an illuminative book on

what he calls the *Crimes of England*. The main thesis of Chesterton is something more than a paradox. As Mr. Chesterton says, the main crime or, as we would rather say the main blunder, of England was that in almost every crisis of modern history until 1914 she was the staunch ally of Prussian militarism.

The crime and the blunder were all the more fateful because, whilst the forces of liberty were divided, the forces of despotism, on the contrary, were indissolubly united. The *Drei Kaiserbund* was one solid block. The three reactionary powers might occasionally appear to quarrel, but at the decisive moment the quarrel was always made up. So intimately were the policies of Russia and Prussia bound up that Bismarck could seriously think of entering the Russian diplomatic service even as Baron von Stein and Nesselrode had done before him. He knew that even though he might serve the Tsar of all the Russians, the Tsar himself was in the service of the King of Prussia—I have developed this argument in my book, *German Problems and Personalities*.

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And what insured the solidarity of Russia and Prussia and Austria, was mainly the Polish question. It was the division of the Polish spoils that necessarily kept the robbers united. The three empires could not afford to quarrel seriously with each other because they were committed to a common policy of oppression in Poland. And they could not afford to give liberty to Poland as they were pledged under the Treaty of Vienna, because liberty for Poland would have meant liberty for their subjects.

If any reader thinks that I am exaggerating or misreading the meaning of European history, let him study the *Memoirs of Bismarck*, which for fifty years have been the Law and the Gospels to

every German student of *Realpolitik*. From the beginning to the end of his career, the Polish-Russian policy of Bismarck stands in the forefront of his preoccupation, and it is his Russian policy which was one of the causes of his dismissal.

And just as Poland kept Russia and Prussia united before the war, so she will keep them united in the future, for neither Russia nor Prussia can accept the establishment of an independent and strong Poland. The causes which have been operative all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Central Europe constitute to be operative today.

In one of the most illuminative passages of the book to which we refer in a later letter, the Prussian Field Marshal Moltke admits with cynical frankness that the independence of Poland is incompatible with the power of Prussia. "After the Polish Republic surrendered the shores of the Black Sea to Russia, all her rivers and all her highways henceforth ran through Prussia. Prussia cut it off from the sea and from the world. The Vistula was the last artery of the Republic and Prussia was in the possession of the mouth of that river. In fact, one does not see how Poland could live as an independent state apart from Prussia. No one would maintain that this independence could be secured by the mere possession of Danzig, or by the freedom of the Vistula. Woe to the nation whose life depends on a piece of paper in which it does not find a safeguard in its old strength! In one word, sooner or later, either Prussia had to become Polish or Poland had to become Prussian, The Republic had to cease to exist" (Moltke, vol. 2, p. 135).

These prophetic lines were written in 1832 by the future Prussian Field Marshal. No doubt they would still be endorsed by the successors of Moltke. They still ought to warn us as to what would be the fate of Poland if Germany once more had the power to determine that fate.

When we think of the future of the Treaty of Versailles, our thoughts involuntarily hark back to that other great European Treaty which concluded the Napoleonic wars. At the Congress of Vienna, just as at the Congress of Versailles, the Polish issue was the dominating issue. We

may add that the statesmen of Vienna, just like the politicians of Versailles, solved the problem in the sense of Polish liberty and autonomy. Poland became a constitutional kingdom under Russia. Unfortunately, the autonomy of Poland proclaimed by the Treaty of Vienna and solemnly guaranteed by all the signatory powers, remained a dead letter. And this violation of the Treaty was a foregone conclusion. One could not, with impunity, entrust the liberties of Poland to the despot of all the Russias. One might apply to Russia what Lincoln said of the United States before the war of secession: Russia could not be made half slave and half free. It was impossible to grant freedom to Poland whilst freedom was withheld from all the rest of the Russian Empire. The compromise of Vienna, from the nature of things, was therefore doomed to fail, as compromises are apt to fail when they embody two contradictory principles. In vain did the Powers remind the Russian tsar again and again of the provisions of the Treaty of Vienna. In vain did the Polish people rise again and again to defend their rights, which were guaranteed by Europe. No doubt if the Powers which had signed the Treaty of Vienna had acted together, Polish freedom might have survived and the cause of liberty would have triumphed, not only in Poland but in Europe. But here once more the forces of progress were divided. France followed one policy and Great Britain followed another. In 1863, when a ruthless Russian soldiery was shooting down the Polish insurrectionists in Warsaw, France made a solemn protest even at the risk of embroiling herself with a powerful potential ally, and called on Great Britain to intervene. But England refused to discharge her international obligations. But whilst England refused to support France on behalf of Poland, Prussia did intervene to support Russia against Poland. Once more the liberties of Poland were suppressed and drenched in the blood of her children.

Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht (the history of the world is the Supreme Court of humanity), a court from which there can be no appeal. The broad facts which we have given are an eloquent commentary on the philosophy of contemporary European politics, and on the supremacy of moral law in the governance of the

world. They are a challenge to the apostles of the *Realpolitik*. They are a convincing demonstration of the significance of Polish liberty in the international order.

Again and again crimes and blunders have been committed. Again and again inexorable retribution has followed every blunder and every crime. And the longer the punishment was delayed, the heavier the penalties. Again and again, the Liberal Powers of Europe have failed to be true to themselves and to fulfill their international obligations. Again and again, Great Britain, following a policy of splendid isolation or of mistaken self-interest, has betrayed the cause of freedom.

Will the same blunders be repeated? Will England in 1921, as she did in 1863, go once more her own way, leaving France to follow the opposite policy? Will Poland once more be surrendered to the tender mercies of her enemies?

Every Liberal who knows the issues which are involved must devoutly hope and trust that at the eleventh hour the present dissension between Great Britain and France will make place to unity, and to a rational and a consistent and a European policy; that they may revert to the constructive aims of the Treaty of Versailles; and that they will jointly pledge themselves to defend the cause of Poland which always was, and which remains, the cause of freedom and civilization. Δ

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Poland, 1980–1989

Solidarity, Martial Law, and the End of Communism in Europe

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