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ON THE WAR

POLAND *and* BRITAIN

a study in constitutional development and collaboration, with an important survey of Poland's contribution to the Allied Cause.

by

**STEFAN
KLECZKOWSKI**

*former Warsaw Correspondent
of the Daily Mail*

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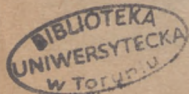
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PART I

A STUDY IN CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COLLABORATION

It is significant that in the second war of this generation against the forces of aggression threatening the world, Poland and Great Britain are fighting side by side. Throughout her thousand years of history Poland has always been among the champions of political freedom, independence and religious and cultural tolerance. In this respect she has very much in common with England.

Poland derived her civilization from Rome. In the tenth century her people embraced Christianity, and later the Italian Renaissance profoundly influenced their development. Although an island nation, the English, too, owed much of their cultural growth to the Roman tradition. Fresh forces came into play during the Tudor and Cromwellian periods, but both England and Poland were spared the bloodshed and turmoil of the prolonged religious wars which rent asunder many Western European countries.

Despite constant struggles with her aggressive neighbours Poland succeeded in developing her own free political and social institutions. The Roman Catholic Church, while playing a great part in this historical process, did not destroy the typically Slav character of the people, who throughout their history have manifested above all a deep attachment to individual liberty, tolerance and great courage, and alas, a certain lack of organizing ability. Poland may justly be termed one of the oldest democratic States of Europe, for as early as the fourteenth century she evolved a system safeguarding her social and political liberties. In 1374 the Statutes of Wislica for the first time codified certain civil, fiscal and penal laws at the expense of the royal prerogative. The Koszyce Pact of 1374 between the king and the nobles further curtailed the royal powers in military and fiscal matters. The Czerwinski and Jedlno charters of rights enacted the famous laws known as "Neminem Captivabimus", which preceded the similar "Habeas Corpus Act" by 250 years. In 1501 the "Privileges of Mielnik" first introduced the principles of republican government, based upon fresh concessions to the nobles. Four years later, in 1505, the first Polish constitution, known as the "Nihil Novi" Constitution, was enacted. It divided the supreme power between the king

and the two houses of parliament, the senate and the *sejm*, and established Poland as a modern and democratic state in Europe.

This democratic trend reached its zenith in the great Constitution of May 3, 1791. Voted by the Four Years' Parliament on the morrow of Poland's first political partition, this constitution was designed to strengthen the Polish State by basing it on principles of social justice, religious freedom and political franchise extended to all commoners, and by assuring the humblest peasants the protection of the State. While confirming the existing form of parliamentary government, consisting of the *sejm*, the senate and the king, it abolished the dangerous *liberum veto* principle which laid down that no bill could become law unless it was unanimously passed by the House, replacing it by the majority vote, and re-affirmed the immunity of the judges, first introduced in the reforms of Prince Czartoryski. Moreover, the elective monarchy was made hereditary. The new constitution, although beneficial, came too late to save the Polish state, but it served as an inspiration to the Poles during the 150 years of foreign rule.

Though partitioned and oppressed, the Poles throughout the nineteenth century never lost their sense of national unity and maintained their struggle for independence. Six generations witnessed three major rebellions against their oppressors, while thousands of Polish emigrants fought for liberty in all parts of the world. They were to be found in the revolutionary armies of America and France; later they took part in Belgium's struggle for independence in 1830 and in the Hungarian national revolution in 1848. They rose again in a bloody and hopeless rebellion in 1863, and finally in the national and social insurrection of 1905.

The names of many Poles who had distinguished themselves in these struggles are now household words with free nations. It is sufficient to mention Kosciuszko and Pulaski who fought under Washington, General Dabrowski who fought for Italy, General Bem for Hungary, and more recently General Haller, who fought in France during the first European war and General Sikorski in Great Britain during its second phase. The slogan on their standard has always been, "For our freedom and yours." Thus for over 150 years the Poles were in the forefront of the fight for the freedom of oppressed nations throughout the world. In 1914 the Poles formed their own army under Pilsudski, and after the Allied victory gained their independence in 1918. During the war a second Free Polish Army had been formed under Haller in France. In 1920 these two armies defeated the Red Forces. In 1939 the Poles took up arms against the German invader and fought with valour and resourcefulness for nearly five weeks until, invaded from the West and East, they were beaten in the unequal battle.

Courage and endurance stood the country in good stead in its thousand years of changing history. Flanked by two aggressive neighbours, Germany and Russia, Poland had managed in the past to repulse their constant inroads and had laid the foundations of a great state that survived for nearly 900 years. She had performed great feats of arms in the battles of Płowce in 1331, and of Grunwald in 1410, when the Teutonic Knights, led by Konrad von Jungingen, were completely routed.

In her association with Lithuania prior to Grunwald, Poland first introduced the principle of personal union between two sovereign states. Under the treaty of Horodlo of 1413 the Polish nobles agreed to grant equal privileges to the nobles of Lithuania and White Ruthenia. The union was consummated in the Act of Lublin in 1569, when a joint Senate and Lower House were established and a number of government offices were duplicated. This policy culminated in the Constitution of May 3, 1791, when the two countries were declared to be completely and formally united. The wars with Sweden and Russia beginning in the seventeenth century continued with long intervals until the end of the eighteenth century, when the conspiracy of Frederick of Prussia and Catherine of Russia put a temporary end to Poland's political existence. The victory of Smolensk in the reign of King Stefan Batory in the sixteenth century was Poland's greatest military triumph, and the crushing defeat which Sobieski inflicted on the Turks at Vienna in 1683 saw Poland at the height of her power and military glory.

During all these centuries Poland stood as a bulwark of Western civilization. After her restoration at Versailles she continued to play the rôle of a rampart between Germany and Russia. The war against Soviet Russia in 1920 was won without adequate equipment; and the battle of Warsaw, later called the "miracle of the Vistula", testifies to the fighting qualities of the Poles. In the present war Poland was the first to take up arms against the aggressor that had in the past tried unsuccessfully to destroy her. In resisting the aggressor she kept her engagement with France and Great Britain. Despite the result of the struggle Poland is unbeaten, and her army continues the fight in Great Britain.

To find the source of Poland's spiritual strength, which led to her regeneration in 1918 and which sustains her in the present struggle, we must turn to her poets, artists, philosophers and composers. In the hour of her greatest need Poland always found men with brilliant minds and understanding hearts to guide her and assume the leadership of a nation in chains. They showed her the road towards the goal of their struggles and aspirations.

The great Polish national poets Mickiewicz, Slowacki and Krasinski; philosophers like Hoene-Wronski and Cieszkowski; musicians like Chopin; painters like Matejko and Wyspianski;

historians like Lelewel and Szujski ; writers and novelists like Prus and Sienkiewicz and later Reymont, Zeromski and Kasprowicz ; these for 150 years led Poland as prophets and teachers until the nation again secured its liberty. Especially to the three great national poets, contemporaries of Shelley, Byron and Wordsworth, did the Poles always turn for guidance and encouragement in the fight against the three predatory empires. In our own days the fight was carried on by Ignace Paderewski, musician, statesman and diplomat, the first Prime Minister in resurrected Poland. The achievements of these men have been commemorated in national memorials, which are now, however, being torn down by the invaders.

The poetry of the "Great Emigration", so called because most of its representatives lived in exile in France, gave expression to a national philosophy which envisaged Poland as the Messiah of the oppressed nations and whose sufferings were to redeem liberty and democratic institutions from thralldom. Mickiewicz, who is buried in the vaults of the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow beside Poland's kings and generals, was the greatest exponent of this spirit of ardent patriotism. Slowacki, who was influenced by Byron's poetry and is known in Poland as "the master of the poetic word", preached spiritual regeneration for his country. He appealed to Poland's youth to fulfil this mission. Krasinski in his dramas advocated solutions for various social ills troubling Poland in that period. Hoene-Wronski, the philosopher, and Mickiewicz, the poet, evolved the theory of Poland's messianic mission as the nation destined by the Almighty to suffer for all other martyred nations and through its sufferings to redeem the world from the wrongs of the predatory Powers.

After the failure of the rebellion of 1863, a doctrine of "positive effort" for the country's regeneration, taking account of realities, was evolved. This school of thought advocated unspectacular but real work of reconstruction and organization in preparation for Poland's liberation.

In music Chopin interpreted Poland's soul in all its moods. Matejko's historical pictures were designed to inspire the down-trodden nation with hope and fresh faith in its destiny. His battle scenes and other historical paintings enabled the Poles to re-live the glories of their past when their country was among the most powerful European states. Like Matejko in his paintings, Sienkiewicz in his novels extolled the military prowess of Poland. Prus, on the other hand, drew realistic pictures of contemporary life with a philosophic insight.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the period of "positive effort" was superseded by a fresh literary movement known as "Young Poland", with its centre in Cracow. Wyspianski, the poet,

painter and dramatist. Zeromski, the epic novelist; and Kasprowicz, the poet, were its exponents. They were the forerunners of Poland's struggle for independence before the last war.

The entire literary and artistic production of Poland during the period of foreign domination was imbued with deep political meaning, camouflaging, so to speak, Poland's foreign and internal policy in literary form. No Pole could misunderstand the significance of these works. In the years from 1918 to 1939, Polish literature lost to a large extent its influence upon the political thought and life of the country. It came into its own again in this war, first in France, before the collapse of that country, and now in Britain, where the second "Great Polish Emigration" has found refuge.

Throughout her history Poland has consistently striven after freedom, democracy and parliamentary government. From the point of view of the social progress and free institutions, Poland before her first partition far outstripped France and England, where the last vestiges of dictatorial régime still lingered. It is true that serfdom existed until the May Constitution, but the treatment of the peasants by the nobility was such that there were no special upheavals, for the *szlachta*, as the Polish gentry was called, was not a small privileged class, but a very large section numbering nearly one million, or 10 per cent of the population ; it included many families of ennobled peasants. This class was simply a cross-section of the entire population, its main duty was the defence of the country.

The accusation that the nobles through their excessive privileges and their power of veto caused the downfall of Poland is not borne out by facts. The political turmoil preceding Poland's final collapse at the end of the eighteenth century was produced by foreign intriguers, Prussian and Russian, who coveted the rich lands of the Vistula basin. As a reaction the Polish *szlachta* formed the so-called Bar Confederation to stem the forces of foreign aggression trying to exploit Poland's internal strife for their own benefit.

As soon, however, as the May Constitution had removed these abuses, Germany and Russia attacked Poland for fear that the new reforms might help to consolidate her internal position and stiffen her resistance. These Powers tried to destroy the reform movement before the country had time to reap full benefits from the valuable changes brought about by the great Constitution.

During the years of Poland's independent existence the provisions of the May Constitution were embodied in the liberal Constitution of March 17, 1921. Subsequent legislation further extended existing liberties and social and economic benefits by guaranteeing the freedom of press, speech, assembly and association. An eight-hour working day with fully-paid holidays from two weeks to one month a year was made compulsory ; special

protection was provided for women and children, and for expectant mothers who were granted six weeks' fully paid leave of absence from their employment. Free clinics for the poorer classes were opened and unemployment insurance and old age pensions were introduced. One of the most important enactments was the introduction of the "agrarian law", reducing the size of large estates for the benefit of the peasants.

In foreign policy Poland adopted the principles of good neighbourhood. Before the present war, she concluded non-aggression pacts with Germany and Russia and based her policy upon the League Covenant. It was her aim to build up between her two powerful neighbours a bloc of peaceful nations, developing politically and economically without interference from either side. Recently the Government of General Sikorski concluded with the provisional Czechoslovak Government a far-reaching agreement for close and peaceful collaboration between Poland and Czechoslovakia in the future. The Poles have always shown in both private and public life and deep attachment to the principles of Christian morality and opposed the forces which have recently found their expression in totalitarianism.

PART II

POLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALLIED CAUSE*

POLAND'S contribution to the Allied cause may be summed up under the following headings: moral and spiritual, political and strategic, diplomatic and economic.

As regards Poland's moral and spiritual contribution, no finer tribute could be found than that in the editorial article of *The Times* of September 1, 1941, entitled "The Cause of Poland", which said: "Hitler by a margin of two days conferred on the Polish nation the honour of precedence when attacking it." It also dwelt on Poland's extraordinary sufferings and privations, when it declared: "No other country which dared to oppose Hitler suffered more appalling devastations in the brief period of gallant armed defence against overwhelming force. No other country has since been subjected to more ruthless methods of oppression at the hands of the Nazi occupying armies and the Nazi administration."

* By permission of the Editor of the *Contemporary Review*.

This timely reminder would in itself be enough to emphasize before the world the painful glory of Poland's self-sacrifice in her own as well as the Allied cause and to guarantee a debt of honour for the first and most gallant stand which that country offered to the most ruthless, merciless and rapacious of conquerors. For five weeks, almost alone for all practical purposes, Poland withstood the whole concentrated might of the German armies in the hope of saving her own independence. In so doing, Poland lost her liberty, but undoubtedly served the cause of Western civilization. This great historical fact, like the "Miracle of the Vistula" of 1920, proclaimed by Lord d'Abernon as the "eighteenth most important battle of the world" will certainly rank in history as one of the crucial periods of the second world war.

This truth finds complete substantiation in the fact that it took Germany nearly eight months to recover from the short but extremely bloody and wasteful Polish campaign, so that thereafter she might turn westwards and attack Poland's Western Allies. In this way, eight precious months were gained by the Allies in which to prepare. France, hiding behind her Maginot Line, took no sufficient heed of this golden opportunity and paid a terrible price for her great mistakes, but Britain, quickly arming, was ready, especially in the air, when the "Battle of Britain" began. Thus, the Polish campaign gave Britain sufficient time in which to organize her defences and to beat off the first German attack. By her courageous and indomitable stand, Poland undoubtedly saved Britain from an attack which, if launched in September 1939, might have had more serious consequences than it did in the autumn of 1940. Britain's "Battle of the Marne" was thus won on the banks of the Vistula River, and fully confirmed Poland's ancient conviction that the security of Europe is indivisible and that "Britain's first line of defence is not on the Rhine, but on the Vistula".

It may now, therefore, be taken for granted that in offering five weeks' resistance to the German avalanche, Poland was stemming and exhausting forces which might primarily have been used against the Western Democracies, with a result which was not difficult to foresee, especially as far as France was concerned. In her state of unpreparedness, France would have been wiped out much more quickly than she actually was, and Britain might have been subjected to joint air and land attack on a much more formidable scale than was actually the case. Through this initial mistake Hitler, therefore, jeopardized from the start his whole campaign. When he attacked in the West, he found Britain at least prepared, both fighting and hitting back again.

In this way, through her decision to oppose Hitler, Poland rendered the Western Democracies, that is, principally the Britain of today, a priceless service. By throwing in thirty-nine not well-

armed, but fully trained divisions of infantry, cavalry, air force and motorized units, Poland blunted the initial thrust of the German attack, causing Hitler serious losses in man-power and military equipment. Had Poland failed to oppose him, all this large army would have become Germany's war booty and it would have been used eventually against France and Britain, as Rumania's forces are now being used against Soviet Russia.

Again, if Poland had not taken up Hitler's challenge, the fate of the war might have been settled in advance. France would have been conquered and Western civilization put permanently under the Teutonic domination. One might also venture a suggestion that there might have been no war at all, and that Hitler would have got the whole of Europe and everything else he then coveted by "peaceful persuasion". After scoring so many successes through his policy of penetration, infiltration and conquest through internal disruption of his prospective victims, he would then have continued his progress practically unopposed.

Poland fortunately, however, spoiled his game of world conquest by intimidation, blackmail and treachery, and accordingly played its rôle of the saviour of the entire structure of the Western conception of life, freedom and justice.

In the light of this essential fact, the German suggestion that the war was started on account of the Polish "Corridor" (Pomorze) and Danzig, is ludicrous and cannot be taken seriously by the students of history. Hitler used this argument as a pretext to start a war for world domination; and in its absence, some other equally plausible excuse would certainly have been found. There was never any doubt in Polish minds on that score, for the Poles had been forced to oppose the German aggression for nearly 1,000 years and knew full well all the tricks the Germans were likely to resort to in order to conquer a given territory. Poland's nine centuries of history are a pathway of constant struggle against the Teutonic encroachments, which gained in strength and ruthlessness as Germany expanded internally and the progress of civilization gave it fresh tools with which to destroy her peaceful neighbours.

As an ancient Christian and Western nation, Poland throughout the centuries endeavoured to offset these German appetites and efforts, thus barring the way to the progress of a sinister force which forever threatened Western civilization with destruction and annihilation.

As an heir of ancient democratic liberties, Poland was predestined to undertake this rôle: her religion, traditions and free national institutions conferred upon her the task of putting up a wall of resistance against a nation that made "war a national industry". Therefore, by the very nature of her past and present development, Poland was obliged to range herself on the side of

those Western powers for which the love of freedom and democratic justice possess identical meaning. If she took up arms against modern Germany, it is for the sake of the same ideals for which France, a year ago, Britain today, together with America, will fight and conquer.

It can also be taken for granted that the mistakes committed by the Western Democracies in trying to appease Hitler by sacrificing Austria and Czechoslovakia, would have been fatal for them had not Poland made up her mind to retrieve the lost positions by striking back at Hitler. In his unbounded conceit and megalomaniac self-assurance, Hitler expected that the mere threat of German attack would force Poland into submission, while some local "quisling" would complete the rest of the job assigned to him by Berlin. This powerful resistance completely upset Hitler's time-table and forced him to abandon for the time being the fight which he intended to launch in the West. As we all know, his losses in Poland have been great and amounted to half a million men, thousands of aeroplanes and tanks, and no quisling appeared to finish the job. The Polish nation showed a united front to the invader and fought desperately till the last, until all hope had disappeared. Strengthened by her alliances with France and Great Britain, she put up a magnificent fight, and is continuing to fight on British soil as well as organizing acts of sabotage at home. When the German attack came, there was no panic or quick collapse: Polish troops fought like their finest forbears in ages past. Despite completely inadequate help from the Allies, Poland did not give in of her own free choice.

The acceptance by Poland of an alliance with Great Britain was in itself a proof that Poland acted in accord with her centuries-old traditions of free democratic institutions. It is obvious that she could never have been led permanently into the totalitarian camp despite many efforts to inveigle her in that direction. By throwing in her lot with France (since 1921) and with Great Britain (since August 25, 1939), she became a partner in a great alliance that was intended to preserve the peace of Europe. The risks of such a stand were obvious, yet the Polish nation never hesitated in her choice and enthusiastically accepted the British Alliance when it was announced. Her instinct, political sympathies and conscious reasoning made this task easier. When she came to choose definitely between Hitler's dubious offers of a joint conquest of Russia, and a friendship and alliance with Britain, Poland unhesitatingly chose the latter. That it was a wise choice, nobody with any sound political sense could ever dispute, although at the time of the German invasion many Poles were disappointed at the half-hearted help given to Poland in her hour of her greatest need. It should be stressed, however, that Britain's acceptance of an

alliance with Poland was preceded by an almost revolutionary change of public opinion in this country in favour of such a step.

It is now perfectly clear that this loyal Polish stand greatly strengthened the position of her Western Allies. A nation of 35 millions had placed all her resources at the disposal of their joint cause and so made Hitler ponder before taking the final leap. If Poland had rejected the British offer, Hitler would have succeeded in launching a much more powerful attack in the West, or perhaps he might have succeeded in breaking up the Franco-British Alliance and attacking the British Empire direct. Instead, he attacked Poland first, and while in the West people were talking about a "phoney war", Poland was bleeding and dying out of loyalty to the Allied cause.

In this cruel fashion, Poland was footing the bill with innumerable bodies of her young sons, rich economic resources and with an indomitable spirit that knew no complacency or a helplessness and weakness born out of shortsightedness, and for the shortages in the Allied military equipment, as well as their general lack of preparedness and their thousands of instances of "wishful thinking" that nearly brought them all to the brink of disaster. By this Polish "example" the Allies were to learn the perfection of the German totalitarian war of annihilation and exploitation and by Poland's cruel fate they were to be told what awaited them should Hitler conquer them as well.

France, unfortunately, took her lesson a little too late to serve any useful purpose. The Polish General Staff in France under General Sikorski placed at the disposal of the French General Staff full details concerning German invasion strategy and tactics, but the French military authorities dismissed the whole thing as unworthy of their serious attention. Their "Maginot Line" complex blotted out of their consciousness any idea of the danger which might threaten France from the German hordes. The Polish military plan submitted in Paris at that time was thus rejected, although later it was realized that it possessed very serious chances of success.

But this was not the only Polish contribution to France's military effort before her collapse. General Sikorski succeeded in bringing together and equipping on French soil an army of nearly 80,000 and placing it at the disposal of the French High Command. There also the Poles fought to the very end, while many Frenchmen gave up the fight before the battle was well-nigh begun. Attached to various French armies, Polish troops strewed with their bodies every department of France where the war raged, and only the remnants were evacuated to Britain. They were found fighting gloriously in Narvik, defending an important sector of the Scottish coast, and in the Near East, and above all, display-



ing unusual fighting qualities in the air and on the sea. Apart from this Polish war effort, new Polish armies are now being formed in Canada and in Soviet Russia in order to take an early part in the struggle to free the world from Nazi enslavement.

The Polish forces in Great Britain represent a total of about 30,000 officers and men in all the three fighting Services: i.e. Army, Navy and Air Force. The bulk of the Polish Army is still here and is being steadily increased by the influx of new recruits from Canada, the U.S.A. and other American republics. A considerable force led by General Kopanski is taking part in the Libyan campaign and has already distinguished itself in the defence of Tobruk. It is expected that the third and largest Polish Army will come into being on the territory of the U.S.S.R. where, since Poland's defeat, over 1,500,000 Polish exiles of both sexes, including fully trained officers and men, have been imprisoned for the past two years. Freed from the Soviet concentration camps under the Polish-Soviet Agreement of July 30, 1941, supplemented by a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance of December 4, 1941, concluded by Stalin and General Sikorski, the new Polish force is expected to reach a total of 200,000 fully trained and equipped men to be employed against Poland's and Russia's joint enemy, while Polish airmen from Russia will be incorporated in the Polish Air Force in this country. The Polish troops in Russia will be equipped with British and American weapons under the Lease-and-Lend Bill. This new army will be autonomous and will be under the Polish command.

The Polish Navy, which since the outbreak of war has been acting under the orders of the British Admiralty, has been doing a silent but very useful work convoying troops and food ships and taking part in various naval engagements in the North Sea, the English Channel, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. One Polish naval unit scored a signal success by spotting and shadowing the *Bismarck* until the British Fleet finished it off. Polish submarines have also figured in many heroic exploits, of which the escape of the *Orzel* through the mine-infested Skagerrak is not the least important.

The Polish Air Force is by far the best known and is responsible for the high reputation in which Polish soldiers are held all over the world since their grand, if hopeless, fight for the independence of their country in September 1939. Although highly depleted after France's collapse, the Polish Army, nevertheless, was quickly reconstituted on the British soil into a fighting force of the first order. When the Battle of Britain opened, it soon became known for its indomitable courage and fighting spirit, recalling the greatest deeds in Poland's glorious military history. Heirs to the traditions of the Polish knights of the Middle Ages until the Napoleonic

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period, Polish airmen have always been in the forefront of all combat, sparing neither life nor machines in an effort to destroy the most hated enemy. They scored particular successes in the defence of London and are credited with having brought down so far nearly 600 enemy machines in various combats over France and Germany. The highest individual score for one single squadron was 165 enemy machines shot down.

It is primarily they that made the name of Poland famous once more all over the world, because, fighting side by side with their famous British colleagues, they now share the honour of having been in the front line of the struggle for the independence of these islands upon which the hopes of all liberty loving people are pinned.

Let us hope that these great efforts will not be forgotten, and that after a victorious war Poland will once more regain her rightful place in the family of European nations as a bulwark of Western and Christian civilization, as a wall against German aggression and as a trusted and loyal friend of Britain in an attempt to build a lasting peace in Europe.

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