

The Second Partition of Poland (1793)

IT is a fact not very generally recognised that, so late as the last decade of the eighteenth century, Poland might have been saved. The first partition, 5 Aug. 1772, was a rough but real awakening, and during the ensuing twenty years' respite the startled nation broke deliberately with the past and recast her whole political system to correspond to present needs and obviate future perils. Circumstances singularly favoured the courageous reform; well-considered alliances cemented it: success seemed absolutely certain, when the cowardice of the king ruined, at the last moment, the hopes of the nation, and Poland was irretrievably lost.

It is this catastrophe that we shall now briefly consider. The literature on the subject is naturally voluminous enough, and shows no sign of diminishing;¹ but, as the main sources (Polish and Russian) are necessarily tainted by passion or prejudice, we must depend upon the more or less fragmentary reminiscences of the foreign ministers at Warsaw during this period.² Conspicuous amongst these diplomatists was the Swedish envoy Johan von Engeström,³ whose special mission it was to counteract Russian intrigues, stimulate Polish patriotism, and if possible bring about an alliance between the republic and Sweden. Engeström was a man of solid rather than brilliant talents, who, lacking the graces and despising the artifices of the conventional diplomatist, trusted entirely to his native shrewdness and intense force of character.

¹ The latest contribution on the Polish side is Kalinka's *Sejm czterdziestolecia*.

² Supplemented, of course, by such works as Ostrowski's *Les trois Dismembrations de la Pologne*, Brückner's *Katharina die Zweite*, Brüggens's *Polen's Auflösung*. Particularly valuable, too, is Khrapovitsky's *Dnevnik*, or *Diary*, 1782-93, as containing the private, unofficial utterances of the empress. By far the best Russian historical work on the subject is Soloviev's *Istoriya padeniya Pol'shi*, which, however, must be read with caution; and the same remark applies to the Polish *Szkic historyczny dziejów 30-letniego panowania Stanisława Augusta* and Paszkowski's *Dzieje Tadeusza Kościuski*. The psychology of the Polish character is analysed with his usual acumen by the great Danish critic G. Brandes in his recently published *Indtryk fra Polen*.

³ Born 1761. Swedish minister at Vienna, 1783-88; Warsaw, 1788-91; London, 1794-95. Minister of State, 1809-10.

He has left us ⁴ a vivid picture of King Stanislas and his court, and on all questions relating to contemporary politics he speaks with the authority of an eye-witness. The lighter side of Polish society is depicted, *con amore*, by the famous Gustavus Maurice Armfelt,⁵ who, in 1779, passed through Warsaw on his way to Paris; while the brief but masterly report⁶ which J. C. af Toll⁷ drew up at the request of Gustavus III, in 1782, is still incomparably the best work on the economic situation of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century.

Engeström arrived at Warsaw on 28 Jan. 1788, and a few days later was presented to King Stanislas, whom he thus describes:—

The king of Poland had the finest head I ever saw, but an expression of deep melancholy took away from the beauty of his countenance. He looked miserable and his hair was already quite grey.⁸ He was broad-shouldered, deep-chested, and of such lofty stature that his legs seemed disproportionately short. He had a remarkably vigorous constitution, but trouble and his mode of life had undermined it. . . . He had all the dazzling qualities necessary to sustain his dignity in public. He spoke the Polish, Latin, German, Italian, French, and English tongues perfectly⁹ . . . and his conversation filled strangers with admiration. As a grand master of the ceremonies he would have done the honours most brilliantly. He gave presents to learned men, who kept him well supplied with extracts from new books, so that he could criticise without taking the trouble to read them. He also had well-paid spies everywhere, and was certainly one of the best informed princes in Europe. . . . Although a spendthrift he was not generous.¹⁰ He did not want to make gifts, but could never say No. Moral courage he altogether lacked and allowed himself to be completely led by his *entourage*, which for the most part consisted of women. . . . Gallantry was his besetting passion. His eagerness to lay hands upon all pretty women, and the levity with which he afterwards abandoned them, procured him many enemies, for, as ladies in this country have great political influence,¹¹ the forsaken beauties generally lend their

⁴ *Minnen och anteckningar*, vol. i. ch. iv.

⁵ *Studier ur Armfelt's efterlemnade papper* . . . af E. Tegner vol. i. ch. i.

⁶ *Relation om ställningen i Polen*, 1782.

⁷ General, afterwards Field Marshal, af Toll, born 1748, died 1817, Gustavus III's greatest and worst-treated minister. Toll was sent on a secret mission to Warsaw in 1782, and was accredited minister there in 1794.

⁸ Stanislas was now fifty-seven years old, and had already reigned twenty-five years.

⁹ Compare Armfelt: 'He [the king] speaks Latin, French, Italian, German, and Russian . . . like his mother tongue. One can scarcely imagine a man more amiable in society, but he was certainly never meant to wear a crown.'

¹⁰ Engeström, however, admits the king's generosity to his friends, and the following anecdote of his lavishness recalls the legends of the Caliphs: 'He had often visited the famous Madame Geoffrin at Paris. After his accession he invited her to Warsaw, where, on her arrival, she found rooms provided for her at the palace exactly like those she had left at Paris—the same size, the same kind of carpets, the same furniture, down even to the very book which she had been reading the evening before her departure, in the same binding and placed exactly as she had last left it 'with a marker at the very place where she had left off.'

¹¹ This is as true now as then. Bismarck regards the Polish women as a greater danger to the unity of the German empire than the Polish men.

strength and bitterness to the opposition. This would often have proved dangerous but for the influence of Russia and the means of corruption which the king always had in his hands.¹²

But, whatever might be thought of the king, all connoisseurs were agreed that his court was the most delightful spot in Europe. Armfelt enthusiastically pronounces it 'an enchanted island,' 'an earthly paradise,' where all the men were models of chivalry and courtesy, and all the women were divine. The social graces of Versailles, the refined philosophy of the 'Age of Reason' were here combined with that naïve, original, half-oriental element peculiar to the Polish character, and the result was an indescribable but irresistible charm to be met with nowhere else. It is true that Polish society was as corrupt as it was brilliant. Armfelt was one day at a select *salon*, where out of twenty-five noble married ladies no less than fourteen were living apart from their husbands.¹³ The Saxon minister Von Essen complained that he could not put his hand on three Poles who were at the same time honest and eminent, and it was no uncommon thing for ministers of state to pawn their plate or for palatines to abstract their neighbours' watches. But it should always be remembered that in so decentralised a country as Poland the influence of the court was confined almost entirely to the capital. The mass of the country gentlemen was much the same as it had ever been.

And the gay capital itself was sporting on the edge of a precipice. The Polish magnates might comport themselves as sovereign princes,¹⁴ but the proudest of them could be humbled by a single glance from the Russian ambassador, Count Stackelberg. This tremendous personage had for the last ten years been the virtual ruler of Poland, and all Warsaw cowered before him. The ministers of state took their orders from him daily, and he was the source of all preferment. His pomp and splendour eclipsed the king's. Whenever he took the air it was in a carriage and six with outriders. Whenever he entered a ballroom the music ceased, the company pressed forward to kiss his hand, and no one dared to sit

¹² Stanislas was one of the richest princes in Europe. His private annual income, guaranteed by Russia, amounted to eight millions of gulden. Yet he was always in debt, and therefore dependent on the bounty of Catherine II, who gave or lent millions to her cast-off lover.

¹³ Armfelt's own *liaison* with the countess D—, a married woman, is most characteristic of the time and place. The first *billet doux*, containing the words, *Je ne serai qu'à toi*, was thrust into his hands at church, the lady subsequently explaining that she regarded a promise made in the 'temple of the Lord' as more binding. Let us add that the first assignation was made in the chapel of a monastery, the walls of which Armfelt had to scale at midnight.

¹⁴ Engeström tells us that the princess Sangusko once said to him, 'Everyone at our court is friendly towards Sweden except the doctor.' 'I fancied she was speaking of the Polish court—nothing of the sort. She alluded to her grandfather's court . . . for all the Polish magnates call their houses "courts."' He adds that even their menials were of noble birth and ate at their table.

down till he had first taken his customary armchair. Engeström describes Stackelberg as a fat little man who had ruined his digestion by habitual over-eating, pleasant enough to his toadies but insufferably insolent to everyone else. The Swedish minister very soon had the misfortune to offend his Russian colleague, and social ostracism was the immediate consequence. If the king himself dared not notice the man upon whom the satrap frowned, we can readily believe that every door in Warsaw was closed against the presumptuous offender. Fortunately Engeström's enforced seclusion lasted only a few months. In October 1788 the *sejm*, or diet, assembled at Warsaw, and the whole face of things was swiftly and completely changed.

The death of Frederick the Great (17 Aug. 1786) had quite deranged the balance of power in Europe. The long-standing accord between Prussia and Russia came to an end, and while the latter drew nearer to Austria the former began to look to the western powers. In August 1787 Russia and Austria provoked the Porte to declare war against them both, and two months later a defensive alliance was concluded between Prussia, England, and Holland as a counterpoise against the alarming preponderance of Russia. In June 1788 Gustavus III of Sweden also attacked Russia, invading Finland with 50,000 men, while in the south the Turks held the Muscovites at bay beneath the walls of Oczakov, and drove back the Austrian invaders into Transylvania. Prussia, emboldened by Russia's difficulties, went so far as to invite Poland also to forsake the Russian alliance, and placed an army corps of 40,000 men at her disposal.

It was under these exceptionally favourable circumstances that 'the four years' diet' assembled. Its leaders, Malachowski, Kollätaj, and Ignatius Potocki, were men of character and capacity, and its measures were correspondingly vigorous. Within a few months of its assembling it had abolished the council of state, by means of which Russia had hitherto ruled Poland; raised the army to 100,000 men—on paper¹⁵—opened direct negotiations with the western powers; rejected an alliance which Russia, alarmed at the rapid progress of events, had hastened to offer; declared its own session permanent, and finally settled down to the crucial task of reforming the hopelessly vicious constitution. But the difficulties of the patriots were commensurate with their energies, and although the new constitution was drafted so early as December 1789 it was not till May 1791 that it could be safely presented to the diet. Mean-

¹⁵ The expenses of mobilisation were to be defrayed by a fresh land tax; but the estates of the gentry were found to be so encumbered that the army was ultimately reduced to 65,000. Still this was an improvement on the 18,000 fixed by the first partition.

while Poland endeavoured to strengthen her position by an advantageous alliance with Prussia, the only state which seemed able and willing to help her.

In the beginning of 1790 [says Engeström] the position of Prussia was the most brilliant imaginable. Her army was better than it had ever been. The ravages caused by Frederick II's long wars had been repaired. Her generals were able. Her treasury was full. The condition of her provinces was as flourishing as the poverty of the soil would admit. . . . Prussia was closely allied with England and Holland, and the three powers acted in concert. . . . The emperor [Leopold II.] desired peace. . . . The German Bund was devoted to Prussia. Russia was involved in war with Turkey and Sweden at the same time. The first of these wars cost her much men and money, and the second was being waged at the very gates of St. Petersburg. A Prussian army corps lay at Nimmersat, on the Russian frontier, and all the border provinces were defenceless. If the king of Prussia had then declared war, the Polish light troops could have penetrated into the very heart of Russia without meeting any resistance. In fact, the king of Prussia held the fate of both empires, Russia and Austria, in his hands.

But the old pedant Hertzberg,¹⁶ who then directed the councils of Prussia, was incapable of even conceiving an imperial policy. His plan was to grab land gratis from his neighbours by means of an intricate and speculative system of international barter and exchange. Thus Sweden was to cede her part of Pomerania to Prussia, and take Finland and Livonia from Russia; Poland was to surrender Dantsic and Thorn to Prussia, and receive back Galicia from Austria, who, in her turn, was to be compensated at the expense of Turkey, who was then to be left to settle as best she could with Russia. Such a plan, which required as its very first condition of success the support of England and Holland, the acquiescence of Austria and Russia, the alliance of Poland, and the benevolent neutrality of all the other European powers, was obviously impracticable, yet Hertzberg clung to it with fanatical tenacity, and, as he hoped to obtain most from Poland, it was in Poland that his diplomatic activity was particularly noticeable. The Prussian minister at Warsaw, the marquis Lucchesini, was instructed to caress and flatter the Poles to the top of their bent and insinuate the Dantzic-Thorn exchange project at every convenient opportunity. But although the subtle Italian exhausted all the artifices of diplomacy, and although very strong pressure from without¹⁷ was brought to bear upon the Poles, they could not

¹⁶ Engeström.

¹⁷ Oginski, the Polish minister at the Hague, was summoned to London, where Pitt endeavoured to persuade him that Thorn and Dantsic were useless to the republic and the protection of Prussia well worth so small a sacrifice. 'I will speak plainly,' Pitt is reported to have said: 'I mean to coerce Russia if you will oblige Prussia.' Fox, however, prophetically warned Oginski to put no trust in Prussia.

be made to see the expediency of exchanging their only great commercial cities for a treaty of commerce and vague expressions of benevolence. At last, fearful lest Poland should escape him after all, and alarmed at the growing interest of Austria in the welfare of the republic,¹⁸ Hertzberg took the extreme step of entering into a definite political alliance with Poland. On 20 March 1790 a defensive treaty was concluded between the two powers, whereby they engaged to guarantee each other's possessions, and render mutual assistance in case either of them was attacked. The Poles were jubilant, and Lucchesini received from the republic the order of the White Eagle set in brilliants.¹⁹

But external aid was next to useless so long as Poland was hampered with the vicious and anarchical constitution which had been the cause of all her misfortunes. The patriots knew this; but they also knew that to expect a diet of noblemen to abolish the very constitution which guaranteed all their extravagant and exclusive privileges was to expect too much from human nature. Nor had the proceedings of the diet hitherto been encouraging. The most indispensable reforms had been frantically opposed. A war commission could only be appointed after six months' wrangling, and the debates on the reorganisation of the army lasted still longer. It was only by an audacious surprise that Kollataj and his associates contrived to carry through the new constitution, which they felt to be necessary to the salvation of their country. Taking advantage of the Easter recess, when most of the malcontent magnates were out of town, they (3 May 1791) suddenly brought the question before the diet, and demanded urgency for it. Before the opposition could remonstrate the grand marshal produced the latest foreign despatches, which unanimously predicted another partition, and while the sensation caused thereby was at its height Ignatius Potocki arose and solemnly adjured the king to provide for the safety of the republic. Stanislas Augustus, in a fervid speech from the throne, forthwith exhorted the deputies to accept the new constitution as the last means of saving their country, and himself set the example by taking the oath to defend it on a copy of the gospels. The diet, in an access of enthusiasm, followed suit, whereupon the whole assembly marched in procession to the church of St. John, where a *Te Deum* was sung amidst salvos of artillery.

The revolution of 3 May 1791 converted Poland into an hereditary²⁰ limited monarchy, with ministerial responsibility and duen-

¹⁸ At the congress of Reichenbach in 1790 Austria offered to restore most of her Polish territory if Prussia would do the same, but Prussia refused.

¹⁹ Engeström.

²⁰ On the demise of King Stanislas the crown was to pass to the family of the elector of Saxony.

nial parliaments. The *liberum veto* and all the intricate and obstructive machinery of the anomalous old system were for ever abolished. All invidious class distinctions were done away with. The franchise was extended to the towns. Serfdom was ameliorated, preparatorily to its entire abolition; absolute religious toleration was established, and every citizen declared equal before the law. The most eminent foreign critics pronounced the new constitution admirable. Burke described it as 'a calm and majestic reform.' Fox considered it 'a work which all friends of rational liberty ought to take to heart.' The king of Prussia officially congratulated the king of Poland on the success of 'the happy revolution which had at last given to Poland a wise and regular government,' and declared that it should henceforth be his 'chief care to maintain and confirm the ties which unite us.' But the alarm of Russia was the most flattering testimony to the wisdom of the new Polish constitution. Cobenzl, the Austrian minister at St. Petersburg, writing to his court immediately after the reception of the tidings at the Russian capital, describes the empress as full of consternation at the idea that Poland under an hereditary dynasty might once more become a considerable power. For the present, however, Catharine dissembled her wrath. Although the peace of Värälä²¹ (14 Aug. 1790) had enabled her to 'draw one paw out of the mire,'²² Turkey, with whom she was now engaged single-handed,²³ still remained unvanquished. She was therefore obliged to watch in silence the collapse of her party in Poland, and submit to the double humiliation of recalling her ambassador and withdrawing her army from that country. Even when the peace of Jassy (9 Jan. 1792) finally freed her from the Turk, and she had involved all her neighbours in a war with revolutionary France, she waited patiently for the Polish malcontents themselves to afford her a pretext and an opportunity for direct and decisive interference. She had not to wait long. The constitution of 8 May 1791 had scarcely been signed when Felix Potocki, Severin Rzewuski, and Xavier Branicki, three of the chief dignitaries of Poland, and therefore most affected by the recent changes, hastened to St. Petersburg, and there entered into a secret convention with the empress, whereby she undertook to restore the old constitution by force of arms, but at the same time promised to respect the territorial integrity of the republic. On 14 May 1792 the conspirators formed a so-called confederation²⁴ at the little town of Targowicz, in the Ukraine, protesting against the constitution of 8 May as

²¹ Concluded with Gustavus III of Sweden immediately after his signal naval victory at Svensksund.

²² Catharine to Potemkin.

²³ Austria retired from the struggle 4 Aug. 1791 by the peace of Sistova.

²⁴ It consisted, in the first instance, of only ten persons besides the three original conspirators.

tyrannous and revolutionary, and almost simultaneously the new Russian minister at Warsaw presented a formal declaration of war to the king and the diet. The diet met the crisis with characteristic dignity and firmness. The army was despatched at once to the frontier; the male population was called to arms; Ignatius Potocki was sent to Berlin to obtain the assistance stipulated by the treaty of 19 March 1791, and, after declaring the king dictator so long as the war lasted, the diet dissolved, so as to leave the executive perfectly free. A few days later Ignatius Potocki returned from Berlin empty-handed. The king of Prussia, in direct violation of his oaths and promises, now declined to defend a constitution which had never had 'his concurrence.' Poland therefore could no longer count upon him. This shameful apostasy was a terrible blow; but even now the situation of Poland, though most critical, was not absolutely desperate. As yet she had only one open foe to deal with; her own resources were sufficient to have kept that foe at bay for at least two campaigns, and two such campaigns would have encouraged foreign intervention and thrown well-nigh insuperable difficulties in the way of a fresh partition. Had the king of Poland only done what everyone expected him to do—had he utilised the patriotic fervour²⁵ of the nation, formed a camp close to the capital, called out the reserves and hastened at their head to the assistance of the hardly pressed army—the first invasion would have been repelled and the bogus confederation would have instantly collapsed.

What might have been done under favourable may be judged from what the army actually did under the most unfavourable circumstances. The Polish forces actually in the field, 46,000, had to defend a frontier extending from Riga to Moldavia against 100,000—an obviously impossible task. To fall back slowly on the capital, so as to give the king time to come up with the reserves, was therefore the Polish generals' best strategy, and they carried it out with equal courage and success. For three months the southern army, under the king's nephew, Prince Joseph Poniatowski,²⁶ and Thaddeus Kosciuszko, kept back the invader; constantly retreating, indeed, but disputing every vantage point and turning on the pursuer whenever he pressed too closely. At Polonna

²⁵ It is estimated that, with the means actually at his disposal, the king could have raised 100,000 men in three months. The gentry offered to pay double the subsidy demanded of them, besides giving personal service.

²⁶ Created a marshal of France, much against his will, by Napoleon in October 1812. His heroic defence of Elster bridge, February 1813, with 800 Poles (the fragments of his corps of 8,000), to cover the retreat of the Grande Armée, is comparable to the defence of Thermopylae. Had he escaped the river he would have died of his wounds. Toll in 1782 describes him as 'a noble young fellow, manly, agreeable, unaffectedly polite, liberal and upright, a reliable friend, and so natural in all his ways as to deserve the love and esteem of all men.'

the Russians were repulsed, with the loss of 3,000 men. At Dubienka Kościuszko with only 4,000 men defended the line of the Bug against 20,000 for five days, and Kochowski's unsuccessful attempt to cut off the hero's retreat cost him 4,000 men. The northern army too, under Judycki, made good its retreat through the fens and forests of Lithuania, against even greater odds but with somewhat less of fighting, and both armies, in perfect order, finally converged on Warsaw, and were preparing for a general engagement when a courier from the capital informed the generals that the king had acceded to the confederation of Targowicz, and had at the same time guaranteed the adherence of the whole army. All hostilities were therefore to be suspended. This base and cowardly defection was decisive. After an indignant but fruitless protest²⁷ Joseph Poniatowski, Kościuszko, and most of the other officers threw up their commissions; the rank and file were parcelled out all over the country; a Russian army entered Warsaw; Ignatius Potocki, Kollataj, and Malachowski were forced to fly, and the confederation of Targowicz, emboldened by the adhesion of the king, abolished the constitution of 3 May as 'a dangerous novelty.' Throughout the autumn the Russians poured into eastern Poland, while Prussia at the beginning of 1793²⁸ occupied Great Poland. The mask was then thrown off; the two powers publicly declared their intention of annexing the occupied territory, and summoned a carefully selected assembly of renegades and reactionaries to Grodno, 'to come to an amicable understanding on the subject.'

The Grodno assembly was the merest effigy of a diet.²⁹ It represented only seventeen out of thirty-two palatinates. Its members, carefully selected beforehand from among the compromised partisans of Russia, were either insignificant or infamous. Interned in the midst of a Russian army corps, they were absolutely at the mercy of the ministers of the partitioning powers, and every conceivable means of intimidation was unscrupulously used against them. Yet even this helpless and debased assembly revolted against its tyrants. Only after six weeks of the most brutal violence could the Grodno diet be brought to consent to the formal cession of the territory demanded by Russia, and for six weeks longer it still refused to reward the treachery of Prussia with some of Poland's fairest provinces. At last, on the night of

²⁷ Joseph Poniatowski told his uncle that it was not too late to save the country, as the army was ready to shed the last drop of its blood.

²⁸ As late as the autumn of 1792 the attitude of Prussia was uncertain, but the failure of the first coalition against France, and the sudden collapse of the Polish defence, decided her to indemnify herself at the expense of the unfortunate republic.

²⁹ The fifteen occupied palatinates were not allowed to send deputies to the diet. No one who had consented to the new constitution or blamed the confederation of Targowicz was allowed to vote in the remaining provinces, and there were consequently so few electors that they had to be recruited from the prisons.

23 Sept. 1793, the Russian minister Sievers seized four of the recalcitrant deputies; surrounded the castle of Grodno with two battalions of grenadiers, pointed cannon at the doors, and demanded the instantaneous signature of the partition treaty with Prussia. The diet retorted by requiring the release of its deputies and suspending a session which was no longer free. Sievers, beside himself with rage, ordered the Russian commandant, Rautenfeld, to enter the chamber and not allow a deputy to leave it till the treaty was signed. The house received this fresh menace with perfect silence. Rautenfeld then pressed the king to open the discussion, but Stanislas declared that he could not make the deputies speak against their wills. Finally, at three o'clock in the morning, Rautenfeld arose to bring in his grenadiers, when Ankiewicz, the deputy for Cracow, implored the marshal to put the question to the diet whether it approved of the treaty with Prussia, and receiving no answer declared that, there being no opposition, the treaty might be signed. Rautenfeld then thrust a pen between the king's fingers and guided his hand while he signed the treaty. Thus it was that Poland lost 5,600 square leagues more of her territory and nearly 5,000,000 of her remaining population.

The second partition irrevocably sealed the fate of Poland. Even Kosciuszko's prodigies the following year could only save the honour but not the life of the nation. The conditions of the struggle were too unequal, the odds against Poland far too overwhelming. Yet it was better, perhaps, that the most chivalrous of nations should die fighting, sword in hand, behind her shield, rather than slowly bleed to death in ignominious bonds. There is one feature, however, of the last struggle which is too often overlooked. It was purely popular. The king had nothing whatever to do with it. Cowardice is the one vice of which the Poles are absolutely intolerant, and after his adhesion to the confederation of Targowicz the cowardice of Stanislas Augustus was patent to all his countrymen. During the Kosciuszko rising, therefore, the king was simply ignored, and, though treated with outward respect by the dictator, was absolutely forbidden to appear in the camp. Toll, then Swedish minister at Warsaw, had this from the king's own mouth, and Stanislas added, with unconscious irony, 'It is my duty to tell you this, so that impartial persons may know the true cause of the singular circumstance that I do not show myself to the army at the very moment when it is sacrificing everything for the fatherland.'

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