

## The Partition of Poland

**P**OLAND—the Polish Polska—was till towards the end of the Eighteenth Century a large powerful kingdom, extending with Lithuania, which was incorporated in it, over the basins of the Warta, Vistula Dwina, Dneiper and Upper Dneister Rivers, and having under its dominion, in addition to the Poles proper and Lithuanians, and Baltic Slavs, White Russians and Ruthenians

Some claim that the name of Poland is to be identified with the tribal name Bulanes, mentioned by Ptolemy, in connection with a people said to have inhabited the above mentioned district about the Second Century after Christ. There can be no doubt about the derivation of the name, the country being one vast plain, and thus the Poles came to mean dwellers of the plain or field, (in Polish, “Poles.”)

In the Sixth Century we find that country settled by the Lekhs, who were the ancestors of the present Poles. We tread on no solid ground in the history of this country until the reign of Mieczyslaw the First, 962–992, all previous accounts being regarded as more or less mythical. Mieczyslaw married a Christian princess, the daughter of the Bohemian king, and in 980 the worship of idols was extirpated and Christianity introduced into the country. This prince acknowledged himself a feudatory of the German Emperor and resisted the encroachments of Russia, which resistance marks the beginning of the deadly feud between these two countries. He was succeeded by his son Boleslaw, surnamed The Great, who, although he defeated the Russians, spent most of his time administering justice. It was he who founded the Archbishopric of Ghesen, the chief seat of Poland. Nothing of importance happened until the Mongol invasion of 1240, but the tribes were subsequently diverted to Hungary after gaining the victory of Lignica in Silesia, 1241. They carried off a great amount of booty, and it is said that they

had nine sacks filled with ears of Polish slain. During their incursion, Boleslaw, the Polish king, like Ivan the Terrible at a later date, remained cloistered in a monastery.

During the reign of Casimar, justly surnamed The Great, whose reign was Poland's golden age, commerce was very active. Dantzic and Cracow, two of the most flourishing towns of Poland, entered the Hanseatic League. This League was a union between the North German and neighboring towns for the greater security of their commerce, the name being derived from the old German word "Hansa," meaning an assemblage either military or mercantile. The towns on the Vistula increased in number and importance, and it is now we first hear of Warsaw which was made the capital, in the reign of Sigismund the Third. Casimar founded the University of Cracow in 1364, and in 1347 the Statute of Wislica, which contained many things favorable to the peasant, was passed. He was successful in his wars against the Russians, Mongols and Lithuanians. He was succeeded by his nephew, Louis of Hungary. The daughter of this monarch—Jadwiga—married Jagiello, prince of Lithuania, thus uniting Lithuania with Poland, and, owing to the influence of this christian princess, the new sovereign and all his subjects embraced Christianity. His son, Wladyslaw, defeated the Turks at the siege of Belgrade securing a truce for ten years and all the Turkish conquests except Bulgaria. But the Polish king broke the truce, and after performing prodigies of valor, was completely defeated and killed on the bloody field of Varna, 1444. His successor, Casimar, conquered all East Prussia and succeeded in passing the Statute of Neiszawc which has been called the Polish Magna Charta. It is the great charter of the rights of the Polish nobility.

From 1501 to 1506 we trace the germs of the fatal "Liberum veto" which was the ruin of Poland. In a diet held at Radeom it was settled that henceforth all decisions must be made unanimous. In a federation like that of the Polish diet this measure could not but prove injurious, as the council was composed of all

the nobility of the kingdom ; and it is a recorded fact that once eighty thousand nobles gathered on the plain of Warsaw to deliberate on national affairs. Among such a number it is almost impossible to find absolute agreement, and on the face of it the thing seems rather preposterous.

The anxiety of the great officers, such as the Treasurer, Marshal, etc., who were appointed for life, to be clear of the influence of the diet was partly a cause. It was, perhaps, that great jealousy of personal liberty possessed by the Poles, that was the real prime factor. A nobleman could be brought to trial on a capital charge only before the diet. If, therefore, a criminal of this rank was indicted, it was very convenient for him to procure the dissolution of the sole tribunal that could convict him. Again, it was an admirable way for the rich land owning noble to oppose the necessary taxes imposed by long wars, and it was owing to this that Poland was almost continually on the verge of bankruptcy.

This detestable privilege, judging from the effects attributed to it by history, was first exercised in 1652, but it became far too common in later years. Its ill effects were felt as early as 1670 and the members of the diet bound themselves together by oath not to exercise the privilege ; yet in spite of this, that very diet was brought to an end by the appeal of a nobleman from Podolia. This it was that neutralized the plans of the great Sobieski—plans which might have made Poland the greatest nation of Europe ; plans which might have, yes ! surely would have, prevented the partition foreseen by that hero. Thus were the arrangements of the greatest military genius of his time brought to nought by the single word of a self-seeking nobleman.

It seems, while bearing the historical facts in mind, that this custom was absurd, and it is an undoubted fact that it introduced an element of confusion and disintegration into all meetings, and no matter how important the debate, a venal nuntius could put a end to it ; for it was indeed possible to buy a vote as the



majority of the Polish nobility seemed to have had their price.

In 1506 Sigismund the First ascended the throne and reigned until 1548, and during his wise rule Poland attained a high degree of prosperity which she maintained for nearly one hundred years. At this period flourished Copernicus whose name and fame has resounded throughout the world. In the next reign Poland reached the zenith of her outward good fortune; she extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the Oder to the Don, and by the diet of Lublin in 1569 a closer union was effected between Poland and Lithuania.

With Sigismund the Second ended the line of Jagiello, and Henry de Valois, brother and heir to the king of France, was elected king and crowned in 1574, but in five months he left to assume the reins of government in his native land, and Stephen Batory, Prince of Transylvania ascended the throne. He was a wise ruler, and by defeating the Russians and Prussians reconquered Livonia. He also founded the University of Vilna in 1586 and died in the same year.

In 1640 the Cossack subjects of Poland, who had been gained over by the vigorous policy of Stephen Batory, revolted under Bogdan and now transferred their allegiance to Alexis of Russia. They had long felt uncomfortable under Polish domination, and the erection of the fortress of Kaduak together with the execution of their chief, excited their suspicions, and led up to revolt. Shortly after this the ancient line of Jagiellos and Vasas, who had shaped the destinies of Poland so long, became extinct.

In 1673 the great John Sobieski, the Terror of the Turks and saviour of Europe, who had rendered the previous reign illustrious by his success against the Mongols and Turks, and whose leading idea was to drive the Turks out of Europe and resuscitate the Byzantine Empire, came to the throne. In 1683 the Turks invaded Hungary, and driving everything before them soon appeared before the walls of Vienna. The Emperor and his court fled, and Leopold personally solicited the aid of John Sobieski. He arrived at the moment

the Turks had almost completed the ruin of the devoted city, and completely defeated them in a pitched battle ; but meeting with the ingratitude of Leopold could not follow up his success. The dissensions of his family and the diet which embittered his private and public life, indirectly caused his death which took place on the 17th of June, 1696, and with him sank the glory of Poland which was now rapidly hastening to its fall. In the succession, his son James was passed over because of the opposition of that prince's mother, and Frederick Augustus, Elector of Saxony, was elected king after a year's interregum. But the new ruler, becoming embroiled with Charles the Twelfth of Sweden, was defeated and compelled to abdicate. He, however, displaced his successor Stanislaw and regained his dominions which passed to his son, at whose death, Frederick Augustus the Third, the last king of the Saxon line, ascended the throne and reigned thirty years.

In 1764 Stanislaw August Poniatowski, a man of refined manners and elegant mind, but a mere puppet in Muscovite hands, was elected, chiefly by the machinations of Russia.

We now come to the most important and outstanding feature of Polish history, namely — "The Partitions." These three, which took place respectively in 1772-'93-'95, are perhaps the greatest crimes ever committed in the family of nations. Centuries before the partition, at the close of the Eighteenth Century, the distracted state and palpable weakness of the Polish Republic had suggested to neighboring powers the project of dividing its territory. Authentic documents show this design to have been entertained in the time of Louis the Fourteenth and that the great name of Sobieski was then all that saved the country.

Of the powers that effected the dismemberment of the ancient republic, all had grown out of its ruins or had been spared by its arms. Prussia, long a province of Poland, had arisen from the spoils of her old time ruler. Austria owed her very existence to the hand of the Polish hero Sobieski who scattered the mighty Mussalman host and forever broke the power of the Crescent on the plains of Vienna. Long before the



eagles of France had stretched their mighty talons to Kremlin, Moscow had been offered a holocaust to the vengeance of her Polish invaders.

Yet after all these glorious victories the old internal wounds could not be healed. No efforts could establish a permanent force for public safety and the defence of the frontiers was still in the hands of a few reckless and undisciplined horsemen.

The Poles, brave and patriotic as they are, could never submit to anything that looked like an infringement of their liberty. Thus it is that the deadly *Liberum Veto* was never revoked until too late, and in this state of affairs no form of stable government could be instituted. Poland given over to the factions of a plebian noblesse was always distracted and afforded ample opportunities for the machinations of the neighboring powers. The princes who followed Sobieski were mere puppets to be toyed about at will by the Muscovites, Prussians and Imperialists.

In 1768 Russia, in her war with Turkey, had seized the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia bordering on southern Austria, who at that moment hated and distrusted Russia very much and who opposed most strenuously the idea of having Russia as her southern neighbor. The wily Frederick of Prussia, although in alliance with Russia, secretly favored the Sultan and at this moment saw his way clear for a threefold advantage, namely—to appease Austria and Russia, to save Turkey, and greatest of all, to aggrandize Prussia. Now, Frederick, by some called The Great, judged the time ripe to unfold his dastardly scheme, viz.—the partition of Poland. Several obstacles stood in the way but Frederick soon surmounted them. Austria and Russia were almost on the verge of war, and their co-operation was essential to the success of the project, but the Machievellian craft of the Prussian king in becoming their mediator, unfolded the plot to each and was successful. The spoils were so tempting and so easily obtainable because of the terrible dissensions in Poland that the plan was even received with enthusiasm.

The three powers now advanced territorial claims

based upon the flimsiest pretensions and pleaded that their invasion was to be for the pacification of the country. The Austrians first laid claim to and seized the district of Zips, and, ignoring the protestations of Stanislaus, went on with the demarcation of the frontier. This open encroachment was a fatal precedent. Catherine and Frederick had the excuse of tranquilising and only seizing temporally, while that of Maria Theresa was a permanent one.

Frederick has strenuously tried to put the odium of the injustice, as he himself calls it, on Austria but only adds to his own guilt with hypocrisy.

The three powers now fully understood each other's designs. Henry, Frederick's brother, went to Russia and succeeded in making Austria arbitrator between Turkey and Russia. It was in these conferences that the fate of Poland was decided. While as yet the Russians hesitated about the terms Austria proposed, namely—the renunciation of Wallachia and Moldavia—the news of the Austrian occupation of Zips arrived. The other powers, frightened lest they lose the anticipated spoils, hastily followed the Austrian example. Catherine had promised to support and maintain Poland's integrity, but with her traditional unscrupulousness soon set aside the agreement. On the 5th of August, 1772, the infamous plot was consummated and the treaty of partition was signed in St. Petersburg. Russia seized all the territory as far as the Dwina and Dneiper; Austria had Galicia and Little Poland as far as the Vistula; and Prussia was content with Polish Prussia and Great Poland as far as the Notec River. The remainder was left with Stanislaus.

The powers published some very suspicious documents in defence of their seizure, but no one can rise from their perusal without feeling more strongly than ever their injustice, and resentment for their hypocrisy. In 1778 the three powers compelled Poland to sanction her loss by legislative enactment. 'Iniquity almost invariably pays virtue the compliment of attempting to assume her semblance, and the three wholesale plunderers, Russia, Austria and Prussia determined, therefore, to give some show of justice to their violent



seizure by wringing from their victim a ratification of their claim. But the children of this world with all their wisdom cannot always preserve consistency, and cunning as the villian may sometimes be, he will at some time or other make the most disgraceful mistakes.'

By requiring this they admitted the superficiality of their anterior claims, and common sense might have told them, if the former were not just, the latter depending on the same title were rendered still less so by aggravated violence.

The partition was not one of these equivocal acts which seem to oscillate between right and wrong, justice and injustice, and demand the most accurate analysis to find on which side they preponderate. Argument is thrown away on such a subject.

The effects of the mutilation viewed by the despoilers were very good. Prussia now had a consolidated territory ; Russia had seized part of the long coveted provinces of the Vistula ; while Austria, besides getting rid of her Russian neighbors, had made a very valuable territorial acquisition. Viewed by the victim it was a terrible calamity : It exposed the weakness and dissensions of the country ; it cut her off from the sea and left her surrounded by her mortal enemies, and was indeed ominous of future spoliations.

For a short time there was tranquility for the terrible lesson had not been received in vain. On the 3rd. of May, 1791, a constitution, making the throne hereditary, abolishing the *Liberum Veto*, granting religious toleration and emancipating the burghers and serfs, was promulgated. The Polish reform was the opposite of the French and left not a pretext for the partitioning powers in the mournful catastrophe that followed. Burke says, "In contemplating the change humanity has everything to rejoice and glory in nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to suffer." Alas it was too late. The freedom and prosperity of the Poles could never be again. Incompatibility with the designs of too strong neighboring powers and the weakness entailed by its long anarchy was too great to admit of it's being restored to an independent rank. Like those



who discover the error of their ways on the verge of the grave, the Poles continued the passions of their youth down to the time when amendment was impossible and repentance fruitless. Had this reformation been accomplished in the time of Sobieski the history of Europe might show a different phase.

Their last struggle, like all other struggles, originated in their own quarrels. The partisans of the old regime revolted against the constitution and invoked the aid of the Empress Catherine to re-establish a system from which she had gained so much. The second partition speedily ensued in which Russia and Prussia took part. Poland being over-run by two of the most powerful military nations of Europe.

Perhaps it is in the time of greatest calamity and danger, when a rapidly sinking state has almost reached the end, that the greatest and most glorious enterprises and the grandest men are brought out, which throw that halo of glory that accompanies the passing of all great states. To this state was Poland reduced. Abandoned by the whole world; without fortresses or resources; torn by intestine warfare excited by her neighbors, and environed by gigantic enemies, the noble patriots sought to make a last effort to deliver their unhappy country. They were still the courageous soldiers who had shattered the power of the Mohammedans under the walls of Vienna; who had carried their eagles in triumph through the Kremlin, and who had boasted that should the heavens fall they would support them on their lance-points. The patriots elected Kosciusko as their commander. For eight months he maintained the fortunes of the republic, but at last he fell into the hands of the Russians on the disastrous field of Maciejowice and on the 6th, of November, 1795, the bloody Suwarroff made his triumphant entry into Warsaw. Stanislaus, the last king, was exiled, and the final remains of Polish territory were sacrificed to the rapacity of the three powers.

“Such,” says Alison, “was the termination of the oldest republic in existence—such the first instance of the destruction of a member of the European family by its ambitious rivals.”

Poland was no longer remembered for her folly, her anarchy or the irretrievable defects of her constitution, but as the bulwark of Christendom against the Turks she appeared as the succoring angel under Sobieſki. To behold a people so ancient, so gallant, whose deeds were associated with such heart-stirring recollections, fall a victim to Austrian ingratitude, Prussian cupidity and Muscovite ambition, excited the greatest indignation.

“ Oh ! the bloodiest picture in the book of time  
Sarmatia fell, unwept, without a crime ;  
Found not a generous friend, a pitying foe,  
Strength in her arms or mercy in her woe !  
Dropped from her nerveless grasp the shattered spear,  
Closed her bright eye, and curbed her high career ;  
Hope for a season bade the world farewell,  
And freedom shriek'd—as Kosciusko fell.”

So fell Poland, not unwept and without a crime, but the victim of her own dissensions ; of a chimera of equality and aristocracy insanely pursued and unceasingly maintained. She fell because she thwarted all the ends of social union ; because she united the turbulence of democracy with the exclusiveness of aristocracy ; because she exhibited the vacillation of a republic without its energy and the oppression of a tyranny without its stability. She had never passed through the terrible but necessary ordeal of submission such as the Norman conquest was to England. Yet she will learn in time that the extremity of temporary disaster is but the severe training for ultimate improvement.

Thus was a brave and independent nation crushed out of existence by the unjust and wicked rapacity of its stronger neighbors, and although the name of Poland has been stricken from the list of nations by the ruthless hands of despotic rivals, that name will ever awaken feelings of respectful sympathy in the hearts of all who honor courage and patriotism.

Their lot since the fall of their country has been a hard one and great numbers have taken refuge on this side of the Atlantic. Russia and Prussia have done



their utmost to denationalize the Poles but their success has been rather meager. The greedy powers indeed received acquisitions of territories and population but they have lost that which should be dearer to a nation than any material gain howsoever great—their honor. In Austria they have been treated a little better but they still lack that greatest and most loved privilege,—freedom. The Poles still yearn for this long lost jewel and in every country where they have settled they have always been identified with the cause of liberty.

In 1830 and again in 1863 the Poles made determined but unsuccessful attempts to regain their independence. Since the opening of the present gigantic conflict in Europe we are lead to believe that Poland may receive her autonomy. In fact it has been promised by Russia, but whether this is only a promise made to hold the allegiance of the Poles during the war we do not know ; yet we sincerely hope that the long dream of Poland's freedom may be realized.

We pity bleeding Belgium but by all accounts the situation of Poland is much worse. The war devastated their homes and fields in the latter part of the summer and no harvest could be gathered, and at the present time thousands are starving. Perhaps when the history of 1915 comes to be written the name of Poland will stand out the equal of Belgium for the gallant heroism of her people.

The partition of Poland and the scandalous conduct of the iniquitous powers who profited by the unjust fruits of the infamous partition have been subject to the scathing contempt of European historians, but the connections between the terrible event and the subsequent disasters of the partitioning powers is clear. It was this that brought all the misfortunes on Europe ; this it was that made Germany a prey to the French eagles, that brought the Napolenic legions to Vienna, Berlin and the Kremlin.

Had the forces of Catherine been added to the armies of Prussia in 1792 instead of consummating the ruin of Poland, or to those of England and Austria in Flanders in the year 1793, or even had there been a

cordial co-operation of these powers at the field of Landrecy in 1794, the French Revolution might have been prevented from becoming dangerous to European liberties. But the prospect of easy gain in Poland kept them away during the crisis of the campaigns.

The consequent fate of the partitioning powers presents a striking instance of the retribution which sooner or later overtakes nations as well as individuals after a flagrant act of injustice. To effect the destruction of Poland, Prussia paralyzed her armies on the Rhine and threw on England and Austria the whole weight of the contest with republican France. She thereby permitted the growth of its military power and the Battle of Jena, the Treaty of Tilsit and six years of bondage were the consequences.

The infamous Suwarroff entered Warsaw, the noble capital of a noble nation, when its spires were as yet gleaming with the fires of Praga, and while the Vistula ran red with Polish blood. And before twenty years had yet expired a Polish army revenged on the Mawska that inhuman massacre and the sack of Warsaw was forgotten in the conflagration of Moscow. Austria hurriedly left Flanders to secure her share of torn Poland and twice in succession did the tricolor wave in triumph from the palaces of Vienna.

The connection between this greatest and guiltiest act of European history and the quickly following disasters to the spoliating powers is evident and it is the duty of history to signalize that great instance of just retribution for the eternal warning and instruction of mankind.

Yet even now the anticipation of the poet is about to be realized :

“Yes ! thy proud lords, unpitied land, shall see  
That man hath yet a soul, and dare to be free !  
A little while, along thy saddening plains,  
The starless night of desolation reigns ;  
Truth shall restore the light by nation given,  
And, like Prometheus, bring the fire from Heaven.  
Phone to the dust oppression shall be hurled,  
Her name, her nature, withered from the world !”

J. J. R. H. FLEMING, '16,