THE TRAGIC ROAD OF POLAND

By H. M.

The history of the Polish people, so full of tragedy, reached a new tragic climax during the last few months, and from the graves in the forest of Katyn the Polish question has been resurrected. The discovery of the Bolshevik mass murder of Polish officers, the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of Poles dragged off into the vastness of the Soviet Union, and the conflict between Sikorski’s Polish émigré government and Moscow, have drawn the spotlight of world interest once again onto the Polish problem.

In Europe, as in other parts of the world, there have always been many unsolved national problems. How is it that the Polish question has disturbed Europe more than any other, and that, when an independent Polish state was revived after the Great War, this problem was further than ever from being settled and, in 1939, actually provided the spark for the present conflagration? Were it only a question of controlling the meager Polish soil, a durable “modus vivendi” could have been found long ago.

In order to comprehend the true reasons for this phenomenon of unrest, we must become acquainted with at least the rough outlines of Poland’s history and her relationship to the rest of Europe. We believe that the following article has solved the difficult task of presenting this outline in a clear, concise manner. The author is an outstanding expert on the Polish problem who has spent a large part of his life in Eastern Europe and has for many years dealt actively with this problem as a journalist and as a political observer.—K.M.

MOST people’s concrete ideas of European history do not begin until the period of those great individuals who were essential in forming the foundations for the chief nations of modern Europe. Among them are Louis XIV in France, and the three rulers to whom history has given the cognomen “the Great,” namely, Frederick in Prussia, and Peter and Catherine in Russia. They all lived in a time in which new, powerful rival states grew up on the ruins of the European unity that had been destroyed in the seventeenth century by the terrible explosion of the religious wars.

Poland’s share in this modern Europe was small. Her period of glory had vanished with the old Europe of the Holy Roman Empire. And there is an inexorable logic in this fact. For the powerful State of Poland, which had existed as such for about three hundred years, had its source of life, its claim to existence, only as a member of that old European solidarity, as an outpost and advance guard of the Occident in a territory in which non-European powers were constantly hurling themselves against the bulwark of Roman-Germanic civilization. And it is because of this decline that the fact of an undoubtedly existing Polish national individuality is scarcely known and sometimes even denied. Yet the reverberations of the energies created by Poland in past centuries are the driving force of that restlessness which never allowed the Polish problem to be forgotten.

LATE START

Poland entered upon the scene of European history about five hundred years later than Germany, but also about
five hundred years earlier than the Russia of Peter the Great. This very observation is enough to reveal what is most essential in the nature and fate of the Poles. In spite of their great adaptability and in spite of strenuous efforts, the Poles have never been able to overcome the deficiencies in their inner structure which separate them from their older western neighbors, especially with regard to cultural and social unity. On the other hand, living as they did on the outer edge of the Christendom of that time, they grew up from the very beginning under the influence of Western Christianity, to which they turned for protection and guidance. When, at the end of the tenth century, the German Emperor founded the first Polish episcopate in Gnesen, when the early Polish rulers carried out their disputes with their Slavic and Germanic neighbors according to Western forms and rules, Poland began her march into the Western world, to which, in spite of all differences, she has remained attached to this day.

Let us emphasize here that in those centuries the Poles never conducted anything like a national struggle for existence against the West. Recent historians have tried to represent the famous battle of Tannenberg of 1410, where the German Knights were defeated by the Poles, as a decisive struggle between the Germans and the Poles. This is by no means true. It was much more a struggle for the leading position in the hinterland of the Baltic between two opponents who were both members of the Western Christian world and neither of whom represented at that time a nationalism of any kind. The German Knights, although their members still consisted almost entirely of the scions of noble families of western Germany, were no longer an army of crusaders, but rather, after having subjected the native heathen population and safeguarded the land they had conquered, a stationary power employing foreign mercenaries and fighting alternately with the German Emperor and the Church.

THE LITHUANIAN PROBLEM

The real enemy of the German Knights was Lithuania, still heathen at that time, whose sphere of power reached from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Rome, however, knew of another means of conquering this last heathen power apart from the sword and armor of the autocratic German Knights: that of dynastic marriage. Rome succeeded in persuading King Jagiello of Lithuania that the Polish crown and the hand of the beautiful Princess Jadwiga of Poland were well worth a mass. Thus, as a result of this marriage, the Church vastly expanded the Western sphere of influence.

The fact that King Jagiello defeated the German Knights at Tannenberg with the aid of his countrymen as well as of Poles, Tartars, and other allied peoples, was no doubt a matter of satisfaction to Rome. For it was part of Rome’s policy to have a strong, powerful
state arise in the East under the capable and reliable dynasty of Jagiello. As for the German Empire, that had other worries with its domestic quarrels than to bother about the fate of the German Knights at their distant outpost. At any rate, contemporary sources show that the attitude of the rest of Germany towards these events was remarkably indifferent. Moreover, those times saw nothing disgraceful or even unusual in someone becoming the vassal of a foreign monarch.

In any case, it is a bad anachronism and, what is more, a dangerous one, to try to make out these struggles to have been a national issue between the Germans and the Poles; and it is only the Polish intellectuals of recent times who have represented the homage paid by the Prussian Duke of Hohenzollern (the successor of the German Knights) to his Polish feudal lord as a triumph of victorious Poland over vanquished Germany.

POLAND AND GERMANY

No, at this stage of its growth the Polish-Lithuanian State, in which the Lithuanian element was rapidly Polishized with the aid of the Church, hardly knew any national, much less nationalistic ideas. The very fact of Poland's dependence on Western, especially German, culture in those times shows this most clearly. The Polish princes and great nobles, whose courts were, in view of the lack of urban elements, for a long time the only centers of cultural life, introduced such numbers of German townspeople because of their skill and knowledge that at times the arts and trades of Poland were purely German. New towns were developed according to German patterns and German laws, and German remained the language of their administration up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. All this indicates that there could hardly have been any feeling of antagonism but only a desire for assimilation and understanding.

For many years the nationality of two such geniuses as Copernicus and the sculptor Veit Stoss has been bitterly disputed by German and Polish publicists. The Poles have claimed both because they lived under Polish sovereignty. Veit Stoss worked in Cracow by commission of the Polish court and created his greatest masterpieces there. On the other hand, there is no doubt that both men came from German families. However, to us this dispute over their nationality seems utterly senseless, since it attempts to create contrasts where only a community of interests is to be found. Should we not rather see in the Polish determination to claim Copernicus and Veit Stoss for themselves a proof of the fact that the Poles feel themselves one with Western culture?

CHOPIN AND MARIE CURIE

However, this dependence of the Poles on the West does not mean that they themselves were unable to produce their own creative works in the sphere of the arts and sciences. All European nations enjoyed a constant exchange of inspiration and influence during the great epochs of their culture. In Poland, this dependence was more apparent; for, during the baroque and rococo period, it was mainly Italians and, to a lesser extent, Frenchmen who took the place formerly held by Germans. The reason for this more apparent dependence is to be found, on the one hand, in the fact that the Poles had, so to speak, to catch up five hundred years, and on the other in the peculiar social structure of Poland. The center of gravity of this structure has always been the exceptionally numerous minor rural aristocracy, whose members were not allowed to carry on a trade, with the result that a cultivated bourgeois middle class was very late in forming.

Nevertheless, many examples of a typically Polish development are to be found, especially in architecture; and the nineteenth century produced a number of outstanding personalities with a purely Polish stamp such as Chopin and Marie Curie, to mention only two names of international renown. Even they were so closely linked to Western Europe that
their Polish character is only visible under a French veneer.

The form of art, however, in which the Poles have shown an exceptional talent is dancing. There is probably no other nation that has developed so many forms of the dance to have found acclaim throughout Europe. We need only mention the stately promenade of the polonaise, the swift, breathless polka, the charming mazurka—a rural variation of court dancing—and the wild, passionate krakowiak.

THE GREAT LORDS

But let us return to the unfolding of Poland’s history. After having gained feudal sovereignty over the German Knights in the fifteenth century, the entire energy of Polish politics was turned exclusively against the East, in alternating attack and defense. At the end of the sixteenth century, King Sigismond III of Poland, a prince of the Swedish royal house of Vasa, moved the capital of the country from Cracow, which now lay on the western border, to a place which lay on what had formerly been the eastern border, namely, Warsaw. This town, the former capital of the principality of Masovia, had, many years before this event, become the political center of Poland.

The history of those centuries in which the Poles fought against Tartars, Cossacks, Muscovites, and Turks is written in blood, much blood. The chaos that resulted in Eastern Europe from the collapse of the rule of the Tartar Golden Horde held threats and enticements for Poland, the eastern outpost of western Christianity, and led her conquering armies far beyond the Dniepr and at times as far as Moscow.

The power and wealth resulting from these campaigns simultaneously produced the first manifestations of decline: the rise of the magnates, rich, powerful owners of huge estates, whose might and pomp began in the baroque period to outshine the royal throne. When the emissaries of other powers were sent to the Polish court, they made haste first of all to call upon the great feudal lords on their estates. It was at the country seats of the Lubomirskis, the Hutten-Czapskis, the Potockis, and the Radziwills that the fate was actually decided of a country which had pushed its frontiers to the Gulf of Riga and Lake Peipus in the north and to the mouth of the Dniepr in the south.

An idea of the display of luxury of those times can be gleaned from the forgotten little town of Zamosc on the road between Lublin and Lemberg. Situated among poor villages in a part of the country which is very eastern in character, we find a replica of a town of the Italian Renaissance. In the market square there is a town hall with wide, nobly curving flights of steps. The streets run, according to a careful plan, between a number of palace-like buildings constructed of precious materials. One of the Counts Zamoyski, who owned the surrounding estates, realized his plan here of founding a private university, the inspiration for which he had obtained on a journey through Italy. Although this enterprise did not enjoy a very long life, its stone witnesses as well as the great cities of eastern Poland—Vilna and Lemberg—forcefully demonstrate the extraordinarily strong desire for Western culture of those days.

OUTPOST OF THE WEST

Every one of the great currents or upheavals which shaped the rest of Europe during those centuries had its echo, its reverberations, in Poland. The greater part of the Polish aristocracy joined Luther’s Reformation, only later to become once again the standard-bearers of the Catholic counter-Reformation, during which Poland reached the zenith of her power in Europe. In history, this period had its strongest manifestation in the arrival of the Polish king Jan Sobieski before Vienna during the Turkish siege of that city. This campaign has also given rise to historical disputes. While Polish historians claim outright that the Polish army liberated Vienna from the Turks, thus saving the Occident, the other historians of Europe
are considerably more skeptical as to the importance of the Polish relief action.

In this case, too, we repeat what we have said with regard to the Copernicus and Veit Stoss dispute: What is essential is not so much the actual event as the place which this action of European solidarity has found in Polish thought and sentiment. The threat offered to the Cross of Rome by the Crescent was felt more strongly by the Poles than by the rest of Europe; for the Poles had become neighbors of the Ottoman Empire on the Black Sea, and they had been joined dynastically long enough with Hungary, which had been overrun by the Turks, to be able fully to gauge the immensity of the danger.

POLISH DECLINE

But now a new era arose. The German emperors had lost their undisputed leading position in a Europe that was expanding into other continents and that was split up by opposing confessional, dynastic, and economic interests. The Polish crown, which obtained its brilliance from the stronger light of the West like the moon from the sun, was now at the mercy of various political combinations, since the jealousy of the great noble families had made the rise of a strong Polish dynasty impossible. The country, in which, aside from the rural aristocracy, the masses of the serf-peasants lived in abject poverty, was being exhausted economically by the extravagance of the magnates. The all-surpassing love of luxury of the new Saxon dynasty on the Polish throne and the devastation caused by Charles XII’s Swedish armies, which ravaged the Polish countryside in their adventurous campaigns between the Baltic and Turkey, dealt a deathblow to Poland’s financial well-being.

It was at this time that many Poles began to think of a new political constitution and the restitution of the lost rights of the population. These ideas
were the result of a deep patriotic grief over the obvious disintegration and decline of the state. Indeed, Poland had lost most of her former power and possessions, notably her feudal sovereignty over the duchy of Prussia; the grand duchy of Kiev; and Livonia. Both the latter went to Russia, the newly arisen power. For in Russia history had made a tremendous leap when Peter the Great definitely turned the face of the Tsars towards Europe. From that moment on, Europe’s border was the Urals. But it was no longer the old Europe that had grown on a common foundation.

**THE PARTITIONS**

Poland now suffered from almost the same weakness which, more than three centuries earlier, had brought the might of the German Knights to an end: the lack of a real justification for her existence. The former great eastern outpost of Europe had suddenly become a weak, second-rate state without firm dynastic leadership, without a strong, mobile army, and surrounded by monarchies whose rulers were determined to co-operate closely and at the cost of Polish territory.

The first partition of Poland by Russia, Prussia, and Austria took place in 1772, and only the Polish border territories were affected by it. Indeed, Poland even experienced a short period of apparent flourishing under King Stanislaus Augustus who, though politically weak, was a lover of arts and sciences and made Warsaw one of the most beautiful cities of his time.

When, however, the waves of the French Revolution swept across Germany into Poland, and the younger generation of the Polish aristocracy and middle class enforced a liberal constitution on May 3, 1791—the second of its kind in Europe—this was the signal for the dynasties of the surrounding states to remove this center of unrest in their midst. In this they were supported by the greater part of the Polish feudal lords, who saw their ancient privileges threatened by the Revolution. The partitions of Poland in 1793 and 1795 put an end to the Polish State.

The last King of Poland obeyed the orders of Catherine the Great of Russia. He paid with the honor of his nation for the pleasure of being her personal favorite. When, in the autumn of 1795, he was forced to abdicate and sign the *finis Poloniae*, he went to St. Petersburg and ended his days as a guest at the court which, in succession to the Polish crown, had become the center of power in Eastern Europe and at which the abdicated rulers, nobles, and adventurers of a declining period of Europe were beginning to collect. It was a play of fate that the end of this European role of the Tsars some 125 years later also meant the temporary resurrection of the Polish State.

At the instant at which the political independence of Poland ended, the struggle for liberty of the Polish patriots began, a struggle turned exclusively against one of the partitioning powers, against Russia. The first to raise the flag of freedom was Tadeusz Kosciusko, who had participated in the American War of Independence as Washington’s aide-de-camp. He raised a Polish peasant army, an unheard-of undertaking in those days, and inflicted sanguinary defeats upon the Russian troops, until he was wounded and taken prisoner by the Russians. The revolt ended with the capture of Warsaw by General Suvorov, to whom history has accorded a tragic fame because of the blood bath which he caused in that city.

**INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN AIMS**

In the meantime, thousands of Polish refugees had collected abroad and, under General Dombrovski, offered their services to General Bonaparte, who formed them into the first Polish legion in Italy. These Poles, in whose ranks the Polish national anthem “Poland is not lost yet” was born, fought for the ideals of the French Revolution in the belief that it would sweep away the dynasties of the partitioning powers just as it had swept
away the French royal house, and that it would help to create a new, free Poland.

They fought first in the Napoleonic campaign of 1799/1800, suffering terrible hardship and losses and being almost entirely extirpated. Then, when Napoleon returned from Egypt, a new Polish legion, 15,000 men strong, placed itself at his disposal. He was only too glad to accept their services, but brusquely refused the demand of the Polish leaders that the legion be employed for the liberation of Poland. Deeply disappointed, a part of the officers’ corps thereupon resigned. The Polish question, the demand of the Poles for the restitution of their former political independence, began to cause difficulties to Napoleon in his negotiations with the Austrian Emperor and the Tsar. The easiest and cheapest way out was, of course, to sacrifice the Poles. So the Polish legion was dissolved. Part of what could still be used of its soldiers was put into French regiments; another part was sent to San Domingo to quash a negro uprising, and most of those men perished there. Thus ended the first Polish experience with a foreign power for whose apparently so ideal war aims Polish emigrant troops fought in far-off countries.

NAPOLEON’S TOOL

The subsequent development of the Napoleonic empire turned out to be a series of similar disappointments for the Poles. The more France under Napoleon moved away from the original ideas of the Revolution, the more apparent became the stark opportunism which solely ruled her attitude towards the problems of the individual European nations. As soon as Napoleon deemed a military conflict with Russia unavoidable, he began to encourage the Poles first to organize an insurrection against Russia and then to raise a volunteer army.

On November 19, 1806, he received a group of Polish nobles from Posen in Berlin, which was then occupied by French troops. He explained to them that he was a friend of Polish independence but that it was up to the Poles to show that they were worthy of regaining their independence by raising an army of at least 40,000 men and placing it at his disposal. Soon after, Napoleon appeared in Posen himself in order to speed up the recruiting of Polish troops and kindle Polish enthusiasm with vague promises. And a few weeks later, in the winter battle of Preussisch-Eylau, Polish lancers were already fighting again for the greater glory of the French tricolor.

The defeat inflicted upon Napoleon at Preussisch-Eylau and the necessity of shortening his lines during the critical winter months now decided him immediately to resume negotiations with Prussia and Russia, negotiations in which he unhesitatingly assured these two countries that he was not at all interested in the restitution of an independent Poland and that he was convinced that the Poles were incapable of governing a state of their own. In the peace of Tilsit, in July 1807, the “Grand Duchy of Warsaw” was created and placed under Napoleon’s indirect control. Napoleon assured the Tsar that he would henceforth completely suppress the word “Poland” and bury any possible ideas of a restitution of such a state. This adjustment was made at the expense of Prussia, who had been in possession of the territory around Warsaw since the third Polish partition. The Prussian part of this territory, however, which was given to Poland a hundred years later at Versailles, was left in the hands of the Hohenzollern monarchy, even at this hour of its deepest humiliation, because of the purely German character of that strip. For political reasons, the Galician possessions of Austria were not touched for the time being.

1812

It would lead too far to describe here all the subsequent phases of Napoleon’s treatment of the Polish problem. The Poles remained important to him, on the one hand, as the suppliers of soldiers and foodstuffs and, on the other, as political bait to be offered according to convenience to the Austrians or the
Russians. Two factors, however, remained unchanged throughout the years of Napoleon's glory: the constant anxiety of the Tsars that the Polish State with its old territorial ambitions might come into existence again, and, on the other side, the unconquerable distaste of leading Polish circles for any sort of an understanding with Russia.

It is obvious that, before his Russian campaign of 1812, Napoleon did not fail to make promises to the Poles again. We know that he closely studied the history of the Russo-Polish conflict and that it was his intention to bring about the very thing Tsar Alexander feared so greatly: the restoration of a Polish State with a territory reaching to the eastern borders of 1772, to the Dniepr and Kiev in the south, and to a line including Minsk and Smolensk in the north.

There are many proofs to show that it was Napoleon's desire to beat the Russians decisively to the west of this line and then to remain there over the winter. He himself intended to stay with his court in Vilna, whose cultural wealth and architectural beauty he admired and which he wanted to turn into a "second Vienna." He had already instructed the Paris opera company to give guest performances in Vilna during the winter months. So sure was he of being able to force the Tsar to a compromise which would give him, the ruler of the West, all that belonged to the West. He had no intention of marching into the vast spaces of Russia, of capturing Moscow.

But the Russian strategy of avoiding all decisive battles forced him to march on Moscow, and instead of the brilliant court at Vilna there came the collapse of the Grand Army, a collapse which simultaneously buried the hopes of the Poles—who fought desperately to the last—in the snow of White Russia and under the ice of the Beresina.

A CENTURY OFF THE MAP

The Vienna Congress, which decided over the fragments of Napoleon's realm, confirmed the former partitions of Poland, though with some alterations. The victorious Tsar wished to retain control over the central areas of Poland. Thus Warsaw, which under Prussian administration had just begun to participate in the new artistic and cultural currents of the times, and a large part of central Poland, were joined to Russia and were made a "kingdom"—with the Tsar as its king. The Lithuanian, White Russian, and Ukrainian territories of the old Polish empire remained parts of Russia. Posen and West Prussia remained Prussian, and Galicia Austrian.

Thus Poland disappeared for a century from the map of Europe. But the Polish problem never disappeared from European politics. It formed the bond of solidarity between Prussia (later Germany) and Russia. It made itself felt in every convulsion that changed Europe in the nineteenth century and helped to prepare the crisis of the twentieth. The Poles themselves, however, continued to concentrate all their political energy on their defensive struggle against that one of the partitioning powers which they considered their hereditary enemy, the enemy most opposed to their own nature and most dangerous to their own national aspirations: against Russia.

This does not mean that the Poles in Prussia and Austria had simply resigned themselves to the way things were and had become loyal subjects of their respective dynasties. In Prussia, where the power of the state usually confronted the Catholic Poles with a pronounced Protestant attitude, there was much friction and vacillation in the policy towards the Poles. Nevertheless, the Poles, who rapidly adopted the standards of their German surroundings in their way of living, participated fully in the rising prosperity of Germany.

In Austria, the state of many nationalities, there was ample room for maintaining Polish individuality. The Polish aristocracy felt as much at home at the court of Vienna as in Paris and occupied many high government positions, especially in the diplomatic service. The lower and middle officialdom in Galicia was
almost exclusively Polish; and in East Galicia the Polish minority served the Hapsburg monarchy as a factor of security against the Ukrainians, who were suspected of Russian sympathies. The Ukrainians, in turn, who formed the economically declining small peasantry of those districts, fought against the large Polish landowners and against the Polish monopoly of education. Lemberg, the beautiful cultural center situated at the foot of the Carpathians, was the focal point of the struggle between the two Slavic peoples, the Poles and the Ukrainians, under one crown. With every tension in the relations between Vienna and St. Petersburg, the pro-Austrian feelings of the Poles were automatically intensified.

AGAINST RUSSIANIZATION

In Russia the pressure of the Russian administration increased after every unsuccessful attempt at revolt on the part of Polish patriots; and after the sanguinary fighting of 1863 even the last-remaining, semi-independent Polish territory vanished: the kingdom of Warsaw, called “Congress Poland” because its existence had been established at the Vienna Congress, was turned into several Russian gouvernements. Gradually the Polish schools and other educational institutions disappeared; the Russian language became compulsory in public life; and strong Russian garrisons gave a Russian stamp to the towns. At one time the Russian administration even drew a customs frontier right through Poland as a measure of forcing the Poles to their knees. The fact that the Polish ideas remained alive, and that the Poles proved themselves superior to the measures of the Russian administration, shows that there must have been forces at work which could not be destroyed by the Russian methods. These forces were at work within as well as outside of the country.

Perhaps the strongest of the forces within the country was the Catholic Church. Ever since the Poles had been Christianized, there had been a strange, mystic connection between the Church and the Polish national idea. The Mother of God was regarded as nothing more or less than the Queen of Poland, blessing the Polish arms. The Russians, devoted with equal fanaticism to their own Orthodox Church, found that there was a deep chasm between Rome and Byzantium which simply could not be bridged. And, in spite of all Russian decrees and ukases, the Catholic Church found the means, not only of binding the people to itself, but also of continuing to educate it in the Polish spirit, indeed, of schooling it politically.

Another force was at first located outside of the country, among the Polish émigrés, whose main center throughout the nineteenth century was in Paris. Practically everything which these decades have to show of intellectual achievements on the part of Poles was created here and faithfully reflects all the developments and trends which made that city the capital of European civilization at that time. Within the circles of Polish émigrés there were the same political groups, intrigues, and combinations to be found as among the French bourgeoisie. In the latter part of the century, those circles which still felt Polish had exhausted their forces in these fruitless disputes, while a large part of the next generation had fallen victim to a natural process of assimilation and had been absorbed by the French.

DMOWSKI CO-OERATES WITH ST. PETERSBURG

In the Russian parts of Poland, two forces now began to struggle for leadership which again reflect the entire European development of their time: bourgeois liberalism and socialism. The first group began its political activity within the system of Russian parliamentarism. Its most important representative was Roman Dmowski. His struggle was no longer directed at the regaining of political freedom by the use of force; he desired to obtain Polish autonomy above all in the cultural spheres. In the Duma (the Russian Parliament) his group de-
voted itself to being loyal subjects and to co-operating with the Russian liberals. For many years, Dmowski's ideal was an autonomous Poland in a liberal Russia which was to co-operate with the western democracies against Germany, the country he hated. Indeed, in order to further this aim, his group appeared in 1908 at the Congress of Slavs in Prague, which raised the banner of the Pan-Slavic idea of Russian coinage, in contrast to the customary attitude of the Poles, who had always unconditionally rejected Pan-Slavism as a "romantic chimera." For the Poles were fully aware that the simile—so popular among the Russian doctrinaries—of the manifold Slavic streams which were to flow into the Pan-Slavic sea had as its final goal the absorption of the utterly different western Slavs by the Russians.

**PILSUDSKI BECOMES A SOCIALIST**

On the other hand, Polish socialism developed parallel to the labor movements of other countries. In view of the comparatively small proportion of industrial population in Poland, this socialism would probably have remained without significance if there had not been a personality who had used it as a basis for his revolutionary struggle. This personality, undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in Polish history, was Josef Pilсудski. He came from an aristocratic family of landowners of Lithuanian origin. Born in the Vilna territory, the northeastern frontier area of Poland, he was brought up by his mother, a woman of remarkable personality, in an ardent love for Poland and a burning hatred for the Russians. Even as a schoolboy and a young student, he was on the lookout for revolutionary associates and had to discover that he would hardly find them among the class of landowners and bourgeoisie. Expelled for his political activities from what was then the Russian University of Vilna, he joined the socialist movement. For he clearly realized, not only that he would find relentless and self-sacrificing fighters in the ranks of the workers, but that their struggle against the domestic political system of the Tsarist rule offered at the same time the best chances for a collapse of Russian power as such and thus for the liberation of Poland.

Pilsudski's struggle against the Tsars led to his arrest, banishment to Siberia, condemnation to death, adventurous flight, and exile. In miserable underground quarters in Lodz he published illegal newspapers. In 1905, the year of the first Russian revolution, he led armed groups and held up trains to rob money transports of the Russian Government in order to help finance his movement. So as to leave nothing undone, he even turned up in Tokyo in 1903 in the hope of being able to negotiate an alliance against the Russian Empire with the Japanese Government.

**POLES AGAINST POLES**

In the years immediately preceding the Great War, Pilsudski lived as a fugitive in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia where, with the support of the Austrian Government and in disregard of Russian protests, he organized Polish rifle clubs. After the outbreak of war in 1914, these clubs were formed into a Polish legion under his command. This legion participated actively in the war against Russia. Although its activities were not very important from a military point of view, they did much to fire the enthusiasm of the population of central Poland: for the first time there was again a Polish corps under Polish flags and allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary.

As a counterblow against this cooperation of part of the Poles with the Central Powers, the Tsarist Government issued an appeal in which the Poles of Russia were given vague promises of obtaining the autonomy which had so long been denied them. The Dmowski group unconditionally supported this policy and sought to outdo official Russia in its anti-German attitude.

Thus the leading groups among the Poles were divided from the outset of the Great War into two opposing camps. In 1917, when the Tsarist Empire collapsed, Dmowski hastened to Paris in
order to continue his fight against the Central Powers from there. In the further course of the war, Polish volunteer units were organized in France and Italy also; however, they never grew to a size of any importance.

In 1915 the armies of the Central Powers had occupied all of what had once been Poland. In November 1916, they solemnly announced the restitution of a Polish kingdom. A temporary Regency Council was set up in Warsaw which functioned as a kind of provisional government. Not long after, the military authorities of the Central Powers made preparations for conscripting a strong Polish army. This is where Pilsudski's opposition set in, which later led to his legion being dissolved. Pilsudski himself, together with some of the other leaders, was imprisoned in the fortress of Magdeburg in Germany for the duration of the war.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE NEIGHBORS

The chief difference between this second Polish legion and that of the Napoleonic days was to be found in the fact that Pilsudski's legion had been in its own country, in contact with the Polish population. The demobilized legionaries, many of whom were used to working under cover and against the law, immediately resumed their revolutionary activities in a secret organization known as the POW (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa). The man who headed this secret organization in the Ukraine was Josef Beck, later Polish Foreign Minister.

When November 1918 brought the unprecedented situation that all three partitioning powers were defeated and convulsed by revolutions, the Pilsudskiists were able immediately to take over the actual leadership of the country. The Berlin Government, which realized the helplessness of the Warsaw Regency Council that it had been supporting and feared a revolutionary chaos in Poland, hastily sent Pilsudski from Magdeburg to the Polish capital. After a short dispute with a leftist radical government, which had been formed meanwhile, Pilsudski was appointed "head of the State" by the Regency Council. The fact that he succeeded in getting his way in that time of upheaval was due mainly to the unconditional obedience of the socialist organizations, who followed their old leader although he had long moved far away from the socialist dogma.

BETWEEN GERMANY AND THE USSR

Now the most burning question was: how were the borders of the new Polish state to run? And here Pilsudski's opponent Dmowski held all the cards in his hand. As the head of a Polish national committee in Paris, Dmowski was admitted by the Entente to the peace negotiations as the sole authorized representative of Poland. Within Poland, too, especially in the upper middle classes, his influence was considerable. Dmowski and his friends succeeded in blackening the new Pilsudski regime in the eyes of the victorious powers, now as Bolshevik-ridden, now as "lackeys of the Germans." The first representative sent to Paris by Pilsudski was not even received by the French Government. Not until the famous Polish pianist Paderewski arrived from America did some sort of an understanding come about. Paderewski himself became Prime Minister and went to Paris, where he played a not very successful role between the two hostile Polish groups.

Wherein, then, lay this deep-rooted contrast? In rough outline, Dmowski, the liberal intellectual, desired the creation of as large a Polish national state as possible, mainly at the cost of Germany. This state was to include all territories which, at one time or another during early history, had been inhabited by Slavic tribes related to the Poles. His goal was a Polish state facing westward which, together with its great democratic allies, was to keep beaten Germany on her knees for all time.

Pilsudski, on the other hand, had on various occasions spoken against the unwise acquisition of territories and warned his countrymen not to accept such "gifts" from the Entente. His Paris representative
objected, for instance, to the inclusion of the German-inhabited western part of Posen into the new state; and later Pilsudski himself remarked that eastern Upper Silesia did not belong to Poland. His eyes were turned eastward. We do not wish to imply that in this he was guided by any sort of idea of a European solidarity. No, for him the enemy whom it was necessary to weaken, no matter in which form he appeared, was Russia. Pilsudski’s idea was a great eastern European federation led by Poland and including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and, in the south, the Ukraine as independent members. He was convinced that in a bloc of that kind the Polish influence would prove so dominating that Poland would *de facto* regain its old position as a great power, though in a changed form adjusted to modern requirements. In order to realize these plans he needed at his rear a Germany who was, if not friendly, at least pacified.

Let us point out here that Pilsudski never abandoned this idea. The combination formed under the pressure of Versailles, which made Poland a tool of the western powers and, in the twenties, temporarily brought Germany in her struggle for existence to the side of the Soviet Union, was always diametrically opposed to his own political dream. This explains the eagerness with which he seized the hand held out to him in 1934 by Germany, who had made the struggle against Bolshevism her watchword.

**WAR WITH THE SOVIETS**

From the very beginning the relations between the new Poland and the Soviet Union had been extremely tense. In 1919 hostilities began without any formal declaration of war. The Polish troops rapidly advanced towards the east, into territory that had just been evacuated by German and Austrian troops. In the Ukraine the Poles met with the Ukrainian army of Hetman Petljura who, hard pressed by the Red Army, allied himself with Poland. In the summer of 1919 a new Polish army under General Haller, consisting mainly of former prisoners of war of Polish origin, arrived in Poland from France. We might mention here that one of the most vehemently contested points of dispute between the Pilsudski government and the western powers had been the liberation of Polish soldiers in French prison camps, as the Entente had sought to retain these prisoners as a means of political pressure.

Meanwhile, the entire military situation of the Soviet Government had deteriorated badly. It was forced to seek peace with Poland so as to have its hands free against the White armies of the Tsarist leaders Kolotchak and Denikin. Twice Soviet delegations came to offer the Polish Government borders which would have almost fulfilled the old dream of a restitution of the Poland of 1772. Pilsudski rejected these offers; he had no desire for any such commitments and wished to defeat the Soviets by force of arms. The Polish Army occupied Vilna and almost all of Lithuania and allied itself with Latvia. But then a stagnation began which lasted from the summer of 1919 till April 1920.

**PILSUDSKI’S HISTORIC MISTAKE**

It was during this time that Pilsudski made his historic mistake, the avoidance of which might have changed the face of the world. He was faced by the choice, either to come to terms with General Denikin and, together with him, to destroy the Red Army, or to enable the Red Army by his passive attitude to neutralize the Denikin forces. In September 1919 Pilsudski sent a military mission to Denikin’s headquarters at Taganrog. But the negotiations came to nothing, since Denikin would not give up Kiev or even consider the idea of granting autonomy to the Ukraine in a future Russia, an autonomy which he was prepared to grant the Baltic States, Finland, and even the Caucasus territories.

The collapse of these negotiations was the death sentence for the Denikin army. However, as it made possible the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia, it also prepared
the future catastrophe of Poland. During the final struggle between the Red Army and Denikin, the Polish troops looked on passively. Not long after, Denikin's army was destroyed, and the road into European Russia stood open to the Soviets.

THE MIRACLE ON THE VISTULA

Pilsudski's underestimation of the Soviets' strength and duration of life at that time was an error which he shared with most of his contemporaries. He believed the resurrection of a Tsarist Russia with imperialistic ideas to be a greater danger than a Bolshevist Russia. Moreover, he was convinced that he could carry out his plans in the Ukraine and White Russia without outside aid, thus making Poland the undisputed leader in Eastern Europe. New attempts at negotiation made at the beginning of 1920 on the part of the exhausted Bolsheviks, who offered a definite border running far to the east of Minsk, were rejected by Pilsudski. Notwithstanding the warnings of Polish politicians, and in the face of the open opposition of the Entente governments to this adventure, the Polish troops advanced on April 25, 1920, into the Ukraine.

The advance units of the Poles actually got as far as Kiev, but the reversal was not long in coming. The Ukrainian population rose against the Poles, in whom they saw the representatives of the large landowners. Budjonny's cavalry army forced the Poles to retreat from Kiev. Under General Tukhachevsky, who was later liquidated by Stalin, the Russian troops rapidly advanced as far as the gates of Warsaw. A Soviet Polish government was proclaimed in Bialystok.

But the Soviets, too, had overstrained their strength. Under Pilsudski's command and with the advice of the French General Weygand, the "miracle on the Vistula" saved Poland. The Russians, who had advanced too far and whose supply lines were completely disorganized, were thrown far back to the east. Here again it was the Warsaw labor organizations which participated actively in warding off the Russians and thereby proved that they had no sympathy whatever for Bolshevism.

On March 18, 1921, the peace of Riga was signed between Poland and the Soviet Union. Large territories in the east remained within the Polish borders, especially the centers of Western culture and traditions, the cities of Lemberg and Vilna. The latter, however, had first to be wrested from Lithuania by a coup de main in absolute disregard of treaty stipulations, without the Entente or the League of Nations doing anything about it. Nor did the western powers prevail upon the Poles to fulfill their promise of granting the Ukrainians of eastern Galicia their autonomy, although this formed one of the fundamental laws of the Polish constitution.

With the peace of Riga the outward shape of Poland was more or less fixed. It remained far behind the size Pilsudski had dreamed of. Nevertheless, he clung to his ideas to the end of his days, and his agreement with Germany as well as the constantly repeated efforts of Polish diplomacy to assemble all the eastern states from the Baltic to Rumania in a common system headed by Poland all, in the last analysis, served this one purpose.

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We do not wish to describe here in detail the developments in Poland from the peace of Riga up to the collapse of 1939. The events are generally known and constitute an inevitable continuation of the road on which Poland has marched through history. Dmowski had made the mistake of considering the defeat of Germany as something final and, consequently, had created impossible conditions on Poland's western border which had to result one day either in a Polish renunciation or in a catastrophe for Poland. And Pilsudski had made a similar mistake in wrongly estimating the ratio of power between his country and the Soviet Union. But while Dmowski and the other national-democratic leaders lived in the past ideas of a European system of states not joined by any deeper
bonds of unity, Pilsudski still somehow bore within him the old traditions of the frontier struggle against the East. He sensed the need for a new order and attempted to realize in his own state the idea of leadership as the prerequisite of social justice and of the greatest development of national strength. Moreover, he pursued constructive ideas regarding the shaping of Eastern Europe, ideas which may continue to have their influence in the future, although in a different form and not under Polish leadership.

The great error of all Polish patriots was that they believed themselves able to realize ancient claims with entirely inadequate forces under the new conditions of the twentieth century. The nineteenth century, which placed the great modern industrial states in the world's leading positions, knew no independent Poland; and the emancipation of the masses brought forces to light with which comparatively small, preponderantly agrarian Poland was not able to cope. In addition to this, there was the problem of nationalities which acted as a disruptive force. For, notwithstanding their own bitter experiences during their period of subjection, the Poles robbed their non-Polish minorities of all political and cultural rights by means of the most brutal measures of suppression. And these minorities made up more than one third of the total population of Poland. Among them were about 7.5 million Ukrainians and White Russians inhabiting eastern Poland in a compact bloc, to say nothing of the Germans in the western part of Poland.

Thus, instead of being a boon, the new Polish state proved to be a calamity to the Polish people which, emerging from national dependence, suddenly found itself between the millstones of world politics. It could not and did not pass this test. But it has proved that, as in former centuries, it is still determined to be an integral part of Europe and its culture. Even Sikorski's exile government in London has left no doubt about its feelings in this respect.

If Moscow says today that Poland wishes to return to the fold of the great family of Slavic peoples, this cloak which is supposed to hide Moscow's desire of creating a Soviet Polish state is so threadbare that it cannot possibly deceive anyone as to the reality. There is no group of Poles of any consequence which is willing to agree to such a solution, a solution which would mean the betrayal of Poland's entire history. The dead officers in the graves of Katyn, and the Polish socialist leaders recently executed by the Soviets, are just as much witnesses to this as the warriors and heroes of past centuries of Polish greatness, as the fallen soldiers of the first Polish legion, as the anti-Russian insurgents of the nineteenth century whose graves in the citadel of Warsaw are a national sanctuary, and as the comrades of Josef Pilsudski.

We do not know today what the Europe will look like that will emerge from the present conflict; but we know that the place of the Polish people is on this side of the abyss that separates European civilization from the Bolshevist world.

**Pilsudski's Counsel**

Marshal Pilsudski, on November 2, 1932, in a message to Josef Beck on occasion of the latter's appointment to the foreign ministry:

"You must bear in mind that a time will come in which the conventional structure of the international political system of the last decade will be shaken. The forms which the world has almost come to regard as perpetual will collapse. Ideas and States will once again be examined for their right to whatever significance they may have gained . . . . I must warn against the pursuit of ideas and plans that exceed the durability of the instrument which has to carry them out . . . ."