

THE LAST STRAW: THE IMPACT OF YALTA ON POLISH POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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When one comes to think of it, the surprising thing about the Poles' reaction to Yalta is that it surprised them at all. The last 200 years of Polish history, as well as the elementary common sense of geopolitics should have taught the Poles that their country's future would be decided by the superpowers on the basis of their own interests, and not on that of the rights and strivings of the Polish people. This was not the case, however, at the time of the Crimean Conference. All the expectations of the Poles were based on the firm belief that the Western powers would defend the cause of Poland's independence against the liberating/invasive Red Army. After all, hadn't they gone to war in defence of that cause?

The issue was not new. Most of modern Polish history can be considered as but a series of variations on the central theme of resistance to Russian domination and of hopes for Western intervention in Poland's favour. Ever since the partitions of the First Polish Republic at the end of the eighteenth century, the Poles have looked towards the West for help. This help they considered not only the West's moral duty, but also an expression of practical political interest. Russia, according to the Poles, was an ever-present threat to the West — and growing stronger. A strong Poland was the West's best bulwark against this menace. This view, however, was not overly popular in the West. Seen from a distance, Russia appeared not only as a threat, but also as an element in the European balance of power. It was not obvious that containment was to be a more profitable policy, from that viewpoint, than appeasement. On the whole, good relations with Russia seemed a better investment than banking on a future independent Poland. This did not mean, however, that the instrumental use of the Polish question was to be dropped.

And so, Polish participation in the Napoleonic wars, and then the two nation-wide uprisings, did bring about Western reactions. A modicum of support was given, sufficient to influence to a degree Russian policy in the Polish provinces. This was sensible big power politics — showing Russia that it must, in policy planning, take Western reactions into consideration. At no moment, however, was any Western nation prepared to break with Russia over the Polish issue — even if it was at war with Russia at the time. This taught the Poles a lesson as to the extent of Western commitment to their cause, and strengthened the "realistic", i.e., pro-Russian orientation in Polish politics. As Margrave Wielopolski, the Polish aristocrat whom the Tsar had nominated head of the civil government of the Kingdom of Poland in the mid-nineteenth century, used to ask when someone assured him of Western support for

Polish independence: "Has the Anglo-French navy been sighted near Cześćochowa?" Cześćochowa, in South-Eastern Poland, is not only several hundred miles away from the sea: it is also the sanctuary of the miraculous icon of the Black Madonna. For Wielopolski, and many others, hoping for Western help was hoping for a miracle.

By the turn of the century, this viewpoint was considered obvious by the immense majority of the Poles. Cultural ties and political sympathies notwithstanding, the West was not considered an active agent in Polish politics, which at the time was confined to plans of playing one occupying power against the other. And even in these plans, an independent Poland was a distant, if not impossible goal. This seemingly impossible goal was reached, however, in the aftermath of World War I. Two years later, in the Battle of Warsaw of 1920, Poland did indeed prove to be the bulwark of the West against a Russia which had become, in the meantime, Red Russia. Poland then enjoyed almost twenty years of independence until it was partitioned once again as stipulated by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and implemented in September 1939.

This time, however, France and England went to war against one of the aggressors — Nazi Germany — and declared the defence of Poland's independence one of their war goals. The Poles had therefore good reason to expect that this commitment would be a lasting one, and it was taken for granted by Polish soldiers in the country and abroad that their fight was for the independent Poland which was defeated in 1939. The country's legal government was in exile in London, enjoying international support and recognition and no Quisling established himself in Warsaw. Politically, legally and morally, Poland was entitled — at least as much as, say, France — to the recovery of independent statehood within pre-war boundaries with possible territorial gains at the expense of the defeated enemy. What is more, the Western allies had signed the Atlantic Charter, thereby giving an additional legal sanction to the inviolability of Polish statehood.

The West's alliance with Russia was considered one of necessity, arising from the fact of having a common enemy. The Poles had not forgotten that the Soviets had deported, imprisoned and murdered at least one and a half million Polish citizens during their two-year occupation of Eastern Poland, nor the fact that they had considered the Polish State in Molotov's own words "a bastard of the Versailles Treaty", done with once and for all. To be sure, winning the war was the most important thing; hence the Polish government tried to maintain as good relations with Moscow as was possible. Diplomatic relations had been resumed after Moscow had declared the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact null and void; they were broken off by the Soviets after the Polish government demanded a neutral inquiry into the Katyn affair. Even after this there was important British and American pressure on the Poles to maintain a "positive attitude" towards Moscow. However, neither the Polish authorities nor the Polish people expected betrayal from their allies.

Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed to Soviet territorial demands on Poland as early as 1943 in Teheran. This meant handing over 48% of Polish territory to the Soviet Union, in a repeat of the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement. The Polish government was informed of this a year later, in the form of an ultimatum. The country learned the truth only after Yalta.

This long introduction was necessary to highlight the immensity of the Poles' astonishment and anger. When one adds to the territorial decisions made at Yalta concerning Poland those which concerned her political future, then one obtains an image of utter betrayal of the country by its allies: the abandonment of the legal government in exile (then still recognized by the Allies!), its substitution by a puppet government installed by the Communists with Soviet support (with the provision that it be enlarged to include representatives of Polish democratic and anti-Nazi forces thus implying that organized political forces existed in Poland which were not an-

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ti-Nazi). The provisions for free elections contained in Yalta documents should be considered meaningless in that they did not include a clause for international supervision of the elections – for, as Stalin had said, “this would be insulting for the Poles.” The Poles themselves were not asked their opinion on this, or any other point of relevance to them. As during the nineteenth century, counting on Western commitment proved futile.

The aim of this essay is to present the consequences of this event for Polish political consciousness.

It should first be pointed out that the Yalta decisions concerning Poland were considered by the Poles to be deeply unjust and unjustified. This is no mere truism – after the experience of five years of war, the Poles had to rely on the belief that not all moral values were lost, and that not all political action was motivated solely by the ruthless use of force. The incredible phenomenon of the mass civilian underground (not to mention the military one), the effective existence of the Polish underground State was, in many respects, the effect of a moral reaction to the everyday situation of rule by terror. It was considered obvious that this rule was but an aberration, and that “the great democracies of the West” were fighting the war not only against the German Nazi state, but also against all that state stood for – that is, the crushing of all moral values. It was also considered obvious that this moral stance contained an implicit condemnation of the analogous policies of the Soviet Union, and that this condemnation would become explicit after the final victory when politically-motivated hypocrisy would no longer be necessary. The propaganda the occupying powers – German and Soviet – directed towards the defeated Poles contained a different message:

“The Poles were manipulated by the Jewish plutocrats [capitalist imperialist – in the Soviet version] to oppose their powerful neighbour [Germany or the Soviet Union] instead of submitting to its will. History cares not for moral values, but grants victory to the strong; the weak should submit. Above all, no victor shall ever be prosecuted for his crimes.”

These were the main lines of propaganda of the totalitarian powers. Yalta seemed to confirm their validity. The crimes of the strong were rewarded, the righteousness of the weak ridiculed. This factor was to contribute later, to no small extent, to the at least passive acceptance of Communism by important sections of Polish society.

Not only unjust, Yalta also seemed unjustified. The imminence of an imminent break in the unholy alliance between democracy and totalitarianism seemed so obvious that the agreement to hand over half of the continent to tomorrow's adversary had to be considered a monstrosity. Even if the West cannot liberate us – ran the Polish argument – it should at least protest, make Stalin feel insecure, force him to negotiate. It was considered impossible for the West to ignore the totalitarian character of the Soviet system, and therefore to ignore the fate to which it had doomed East European nations. Communist propaganda, on the other hand, made no secret of the purely tactical nature of the Soviet alliance with the West, one in which today's allies could become tomorrow's losers. What is more, proclaimed the propaganda, the future downfall of the West was to be self-inflicted. Any Polish observer of international events had to conclude that the future was shaping itself according to Communist predictions – and this perception greatly increased the attractiveness of Marxism as an ideology.

The general view of the position taken by Roosevelt and Churchill at Yalta was, of course, extremely negative. However, depending on whether the unjust nature of the Yalta decisions or their lack of justification was stressed, different rationalisations of the attitudes of Western leaders were advanced. The most optimistic – that this was but a deceptive move to fool Stalin and catch him unawares – disappeared rather

quickly once the West showed no inclination to go further than mere verbal protests against Soviet activities in Eastern Europe. The remaining rationalisations could be classified as the “naive” vs the “cynical” hypothesis, respectively. The first assumes that Western leaders acted in good faith, not understanding the true nature of the Soviet system, the intricacies of Russian-Polish relations, or the Soviet understanding of the term “free elections”. Recognising that they had been duped – the argument ran – Western powers would at least repeal their signatures and use all the means at their disposal to force Stalin to mend his ways. The advocates of this hypothesis then drew the practical conclusion that resistance to Soviet domination must continue in order to strengthen the West's hand in the eventual political – or hopefully military – confrontation.

The cynical hypothesis held that the West knew perfectly well what it was doing but, unwilling to spill blood and expend effort on the defence of other people's freedom when its own was not threatened, it had decided to abandon its allies. However – still according to this line of reasoning – the West would, of course, use every available opportunity to alter the balance of power in its favour, without restraining itself from using force, blackmail etc. In this case, Polish resistance would also be considered an important factor in the course of the eventual confrontation.

It is interesting to note that the cynical interpretation is usually associated with Churchill, and the naive interpretation with Roosevelt. Other considerations aside, this attribution of motives served an important political purpose. As America was on the ascendancy in the Western camp, the thesis that its leader was merely naive and not cynical helped to sustain the opinion that moral values and commitments did have meaning in international politics.

The above presentation offers an overview of the attitudes of the overwhelming majority of the Polish people in the period immediately after Yalta. With time, however, these rationalisations proved to be less and less sufficient as a means of coping with the political reality of increasing Soviet domination. Public opinion became polarised, and the main issue was no longer the question of Western motives at Yalta, but that of the durability of the post-Yalta political situation. And, as that situation was created by armed force, and only by armed force could it be changed, the question arose: will there be war?

An understanding of this point is crucial for our further deliberations. The West had won the war and at the time of the Yalta conference was already busy at rebuilding its postwar reality. And although this reality was preceded by many tragic experiences, basic political factors remained unchanged: Western states had defended, or recovered their independence and their freely-elected political systems, and the future seemed free of any significant menace. Even the Axis powers could consider that they were not only defeated, but also liberated. Therefore war represented for the West just another period of effort and suffering, which nothing warranted, especially if the enemy was to be that gallant wartime ally – Russia. There is no need to search here for Communist inspiration – although, to be sure, this was also widely present, for example, in the peace movement of the forties. Even without the Communists, this view would have gained mass adherence.

Poland, however, had lost the war. After five and a half years of fighting it emerged occupied, having lost 20% of her population and 38% of her national wealth, 48% of her prewar territory was incorporated into the territory of the occupying power, which was also imposing on Poland a political system the Polish people rejected. Tens of thousands of people were arrested or in hiding, thousands were being killed. The situation in Poland of 1945 was worse than the worst predictions one could have made, in August 1939, for the eventuality of a German victory over Poland. However then it was not alone, and its allies – England and

France — were ready to go to war to preserve Poland's independence. Six years later, the West accepted a Soviet-dominated Poland. This bitter awareness of being betrayed and abandoned was the last straw which provoked a deep reorientation in Polish political consciousness. Again the realists turned towards Russia.

For, in fact, no Anglo-French — or Anglo-American — navy had been sighted near Czestochowa. What is more — as we have pointed out earlier — the Communist approach to morality and the Marxist vision of history seemed to be borne out by the facts. The pathetic defenders of an independent Poland had lost their footing. If any future was in store for the country, it lay with the victors.

This was not the only reason for joining the Communist camp. After all, a Poland did exist — truncated and enslaved, it is true, but with at least the appearance of statehood. Its underground soldiers were called "slaving reactionary dwarfs" by the new rulers, but that was still better than being a "bastard of the Versailles treaty". And then there were the Recovered Territories — the final trap of Yalta.

It was decided in Teheran — and confirmed in Yalta — that Poland was to receive "important territorial gains in the North and West", to compensate for territories lost to the Soviet Union. Poland had ethnic and historical claims to part of them, and could claim still another part as war reparations. However, the demands made by the Polish Communists, with Stalin's support, meant a westward expansion without precedent in the country's history. Poles from territories annexed by the Soviets had to be resettled, however, and material resources were necessary to start the economy anew. The extension of the frontiers to the Baltic, Oder and Neisse was enthusiastically supported by the immense majority of the population. Millions of Germans living there were deported, often in conditions as bad as those suffered by Polish deportees from the East, while the Western powers objected to their immigration to Western occupation zones. What is more, the formal annexation of these territories by what was now Communist Poland was considered an unnecessary concession towards the Soviet Union by a West which was belatedly starting to open its eyes. The results were disastrous for Poland. As the Western powers refused to recognise the definite character of Poland's western frontier pending a final peace conference, the only real guarantee for the Recovered Territories remaining a part of Poland was Soviet recognition of the frontier and Soviet military presence. The Yalta trap closed.

Those who had decided to cast in their lot with the victors — and many of them were honest patriots who desperately looked for a way out of the trap which had closed over Poland — used Yalta to justify Soviet domination and Communist rule. "The fact that the West signed these agreements, their line ran, "indicates that nobody believes in morality in politics. Politics is power. And we have power — the secret police, the army — and the Red Army in reserve. Moreover, to challenge Yalta means to challenge the Polishness of the Recovered Territories, without a hope of recovering what was lost in the East. Both the political and the geographical shape of our country were determined at Yalta. No other Poland can exist. Therefore if you fight Yalta — you betray your country. This line was gradually believed, accepted or tolerated by a sufficient part of the population for the new system to find a modicum of popular support. It took forty years for this support to dwindle away.

Those who could not renege on themselves, or who could see through the slogans of the Marxist dialectic stayed out of the political game, and continued to remember the betrayal at Yalta. Without hope for the future of their own country, they watched the spirit of Yalta flourish in the West with growing despair. Seeing its recurrent tendency to withdraw under Soviet pressure, they coined a phrase which is very popular in Poland: "The West deserves what's in store for it."

And those who continued to hope for the Anglo-French navy to appear near Czestochowa, used to sing a song which everyone in Poland knew at the end of the

forties: "Truman, Truman, drop the bomb, for this simply can't go on." If I understand the horror these words may inspire in the hearts of today's peace activists, am I entitled to expect that these peace activists will understand the horror that inspired this song?

Yalta is forty years old. Today, as then, there is no method of removing the Red Army from Eastern Europe, other than military conflict. Today, even more than then, this is not acceptable. However, the millions of people who have been raised in post-Yalta Poland seem to believe that Yalta can be overcome. It is not clear on what they found their hopes, except for the fact that they act upon them. And perhaps it is not by chance that the children of those betrayed at Yalta have called their movement "Solidarity".