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## NO MAN'S LAND: THE ODER-NEISSE LINE

FEW PEOPLE IN THE WEST realize that the "German Problem" is in reality three distinct problems. Two of these come readily to mind as Berlin and the division of Germany into East and West, but the third has been almost totally ignored. It is the unresolved question of the borderland between Germany and Poland, the line between the Teutonic and Slavic peoples which has been in dispute for centuries and is now referred to as the "Lost Provinces of Germany" or the "Western Provinces of Poland," depending on which side of the Iron Curtain one stands.

The differences between the Germans and the Slavs in this area is nothing new. The Vistula basin was settled originally by Germanic peoples who had come from southern Scandinavia. In the fifth and sixth centuries for reasons which are still unknown they migrated westward and southward into richer lands and more hospitable climates. The territory which they abandoned was gradually populated by Slavs who had moved just as mysteriously out of the East; but within a few hundred years the Germans began to move back. This reverse migration was for the most part gradual and undramatic, but it frequently assumed the proportions of a large scale invasion. The "Drive to the East" (*Drang nach Osten*) was inspired at times by religious fervour, commercial interest, and desire for military conquest, or by a combination of all three. In the twelfth century the most famous of the German Emperors, Frederick Barbarossa, reached Posen with an army,<sup>1</sup> but the thirteenth century witnessed the most powerful incursion of Germans into the Slavic world when the Teutonic Knights, at the invitation of the Polish King, undertook a fifty-year campaign against the Prussians, a militant people who had long threatened the Polish monarchy. By 1283 this military-religious order had conquered the Prussians and were granted the territory of East Prussia in fief by the Polish King. The Teutonic Knights, these "new" Prussians, in turn became a threat to the Polish kingdom but their expansion was contained principally by the defeat they suffered at Tannenberg in 1410.<sup>2</sup> East Prussia, which became Protestant during the Reforma-

tion, was later passed through its Hohenzollern Grand Master to the Electorate of Brandenburg, and in 1660 the Polish king relinquished his feudal claim to it. Lacking definite geographical boundaries and cursed by an unstable monarchy, Poland was ill-prepared to withstand persistent pressure from Germany. This "Germanization" of Poland led in the eighteenth century to the partitions of the unfortunate country, which fell under the domination of Prussia, Russia and Austria. After a brief revival under Napoleon, the country was once again submerged within three powerful empires and for one hundred years disappeared from the maps of Europe.

Contrary to the common assumption, Polish nationalism during the long period of foreign domination was a feeble growth. Only two major powers were critical of the partitions: Britain, because she had not been consulted and was concerned for her trade interest in the Baltic, and the United States, where there was great personal sympathy for Kosciuszko, the Polish national hero who had served in the American Revolutionary army. Far from considering it, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "a crime and an atrocity", the Polish lower classes appear to have been relieved to have exchanged Prussian and Austrian masters for their Polish lords, and they welcomed the more efficient administration which the Germans introduced. Such nationalist movement as there was, was centered on the conservative aristocracy and the small class of intelligentsia. The abortive rebellions of the nineteenth century demonstrated that nationalism lacked wide popular support and required sympathetic foreign intervention for fulfilment. Polish nationalists could only hope for a general war which would result in a complete revision of existing political boundaries. When such a war broke out in 1914, they could hardly have imagined that it would end in the defeat of not just one but all of their oppressors. This is exactly what happened: Germany was defeated in the west, Austria collapsed in the southeast and Russia defeated herself in revolution and civil war in the east.

It remained for the Poles (divided within themselves, they had fought both for and against the Allies during the war) to succeed in having their national claims recognized by the victors at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. That these claims would be accepted without question was not at all assured since some of the major participants in the conference remained unconvinced. To some of them, the Polish demands on German territory were absurd. Few disputed the award of the Poznan area to the new Poland since this would be merely a restoration of the border of 1772, but the questions of Danzig city, the "Polish Corridor", and Silesia were far more controversial. These constituted the homelands of a majority or sizeable minority of Germans whose forefathers had been settled there for generations. For

this reason, Lloyd George, who was sceptical of Polish intentions, expressed grave doubts about a whole-hearted support of the Polish delegation: "The proposal . . . that we should place 2,100,000 Germans under the control of a people which is of a different religion and which has never proved its capacity for stable self-government throughout its history must, in my judgment, lead sooner or later to a new war in the East of Europe."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Polish cause had found a strong adherent in Woodrow Wilson, who besides being a champion of national self-determination, had compromised himself when he had felt constrained to woo the Polish American vote in the United States. Ironically enough, before going into politics Wilson had insulted the Poles in the United States by describing them in his *History of the American People* as having "neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence".<sup>4</sup> Polish immigrants were, he had written, "a coarse crew". Later in 1916, as President of the United States and anxious about the Polish American vote in several key mid-western states, he felt obliged to revise his earlier opinion which had been widely publicized by his Republican opponents.<sup>5</sup> In the election of 1916 Paderewski, who was to be the chief Polish representative in Paris and who had a great prestige among Poles in the United States, urged them to support the Democratic Party. The result of this intervention appears to have been significant and Wilson subsequently included among his Fourteen Points one which declared that an independent Poland with access to the sea was one of the major war aims of the United States. Wilson was a powerful advocate at the conference and the Poles received a very generous settlement in spite of reluctance on the part of Lloyd George. Danzig, predominantly German in population but occupying a strategic position at the mouth of Poland's main waterway, the Vistula, was made a free city under the supervision of the League of Nations. In addition, Poland was granted a corridor across German territory, thus giving her access to the sea, but cutting East Prussia off from Germany. A controversial plebiscite held in 1920 transferred part of rich Upper Silesia to Poland. The Paris Peace Conference concerned itself with the settlement of the western Polish border, but the Poles meanwhile took matters into their own hands in the East, eventually forcibly wresting from the Bolsheviks who were fighting desperately for survival in Russia a great expanse of territory which lay well beyond a point, the Curzon Line, considered by many to be a realistic eastern boundary between Poland and Russia.

The territorial provisions of the Versailles Treaty were not generally acceptable in Germany, either by the moderate politicians of the Weimar Republic or by the extreme elements of which the Nazi party was one. The Bolsheviks for their part were no happier at having lost to Poland territory which was largely inhabited

by non-Poles. To the extent that they had both lost territory to the Poles, the German and Soviet governments shared mutual interests. The way to a revision of the Polish frontier was open after Hitler's success at Munich. Under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement of 1939, in case of an alteration of the Polish frontier (that is to say, in the event of a German attack on Poland), the Nazis not only recognized Russia's right to a sphere of influence among the Baltic States but also agreed to a Russian occupation of Poland up to the Vistula River. Stalin later changed his mind as to the extent of Poland to be occupied and when a Polish collapse was obviously inevitable the Red Army moved into Poland only as far as the old Curzon Line. Ethnic Poland was left to German occupation. The Russians rapidly abandoned this buffer territory when Hitler launched his attack in 1941 but not before they had undertaken to deport "undesirables" to Poland or Siberia.

The Polish frontiers constituted a central and increasingly critical point of difference between the western allies and the U.S.S.R. during the Second World War. As the Red Army advanced westward the western powers were forced into an almost hopeless dilemma. On the one side Stalin insisted that Britain and the United States in allying themselves with the Russians were bound to accept the frontiers of the U.S.S.R. as they stood after the defeat of Poland in 1939. On the other side, the Polish government in exile in London just as vehemently pointed out that Poland had a prior alliance and that Churchill and Roosevelt had no choice but to uphold the border as it had been before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement. At the Teheran Conference Churchill cut the Gordian knot and proposed that the Poles give up to the U.S.S.R. the land east of the Curzon Line in return for which they should receive territory from Germany east of the Oder and including East Prussia and part of Silesia (which he described as "Oppeln" without specifying whether he meant the town or district of Oppeln).<sup>6</sup> He admitted that such a solution would entail the "disentanglement of population at some points".<sup>7</sup> Churchill's strategy was clear: he hoped to stop Communism at the Curzon Line and keep Poland out of the Soviet orbit. The German territory which the Poles would gain was smaller than what they would lose but it was incomparably richer and quite capable of absorbing the three or four million Poles who would otherwise find themselves in the U.S.S.R. Although the proposal made logical and political sense, the Poles in London when informed of it proved adamant as Stalin had expected they would.<sup>8</sup> No firm decisions aside from the provisional adoption of the Curzon Line were taken at Teheran. Nevertheless, the Oder-Neisse Line had been born.

The Western position on the western Polish boundary became firmer as it became evident with the formation of the Communist Lublin Committee and the

tragic Warsaw uprising that Poland might become not a bulwark against Communism but a Russian satellite. At the Yalta Conference Churchill and Roosevelt refused to accept the western Neisse as the extension of the Oder line and would agree only to an official statement of the principle that "Britain, Russia and the United States recognize that Poland must receive substantial accessions of territory in the north and west . . . and that the final delimitation of the western frontier of Poland should . . . await the Peace Conference."<sup>9</sup> They also agreed that Germans beyond the Oder who were estimated to number about six million should be transferred to Germany (they did not include in their estimate the three million Germans in Silesia). At the same time the Polish Communist authorities, after consulting only the Russians, announced that they had taken over the administration of the country up to the Oder and the Western Neisse. Presented with this *fait accompli* at Potsdam, the western powers could only register a feeble protest against Russian bad faith and reiterate the view that a final settlement of the border must await a peace conference.<sup>10</sup>

Many Germans had already fled from the territory as the Red Army moved westward but the Polish administration, in co-operation chiefly with the British, undertook immediately to remove those who had remained behind. The removal, considering the chaotic conditions which prevailed in Eastern Europe at the time, appears to have been accomplished with a minimum of suffering. The figures for those who left of their own accord earlier or were evacuated by the Poles later vary considerably but there were probably about seven and a half million persons involved in East Oderland, Silesia and Danzig, with another two and a half million from East Prussia.<sup>11</sup> Of this number the Poles reckon that about five million had gone before the Polish administration assumed control. This uprooting of the Germans beyond the Oder, crude as it may have been, enormously simplified the line of demarcation between Germans and Slavs: the wheel had come full circle so that the border was roughly as it had been in the early thirteenth century. Most of the German refugees eventually made their way into the British and American Occupation Zones where they formed a vocal and potent political force which has continued to make recognition of the Oder-Neisse line a hazardous policy for any political party in the Federal Republic. Consequently, although the East German regime has recognized the *status quo* as permanent, the government of West Germany has steadfastly refused to accept it. In 1955, when diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and the U.S.S.R. were established, Chancellor Adenauer explicitly denied that this in any way indicated a change of policy on the Oder-Neisse frontier: "The establishment of diplomatic relations between the German

Federal Republic and the Government of the U.S.S.R. does not constitute a recognition of the present state of territorial possession of the two countries. The final establishment of Germany's frontiers is reserved until the conclusion of a peace treaty."

The Polish government in defence of its right to this territory presents a cogent argument based on law, history, and political realities. They argue that legally the Yalta and Potsdam agreements on the accession of territory in north and west, the acceptance of Polish administration in the area, and the collaboration of Britain and the United States in the expulsion of the Germans, constitute an implicit if not explicit recognition of Poland's legal right to their western provinces.<sup>12</sup> Any future peace conference according to this argument will concern itself with the details and not the general location of the frontier. An important factor in this whole problem is the deep sense of a national destiny which pervades Poles of all classes. To them the occupation of East Oderland, Silesia and East Prussia in 1945 was purely and simply the "liberation" of territory which had been theirs in the past.<sup>13</sup> This sense of history was typically demonstrated when Polish army units reached the Baltic Sea at Kolburg. The commanding officer assembled the troops on the shore and reminded them that they were the first Polish soldiers in eight hundred years to stand on that spot. "Remember this day," he told them, "it is history." Emotionally important as their history is to them, the Poles suspect that it carries little weight outside the country. Far more important in political terms has been the doctrine of punishment: the Germans have been guilty as a people for crimes without number against the Poles, and justice demands that they as a nation pay for their atrocities through the loss of their eastern provinces. In order to propagate this proposition, an efficient publicity organization in Poland has continued to give maximum publicity to the record of Nazi crimes and to foster fear of a neo-fascist revival in Western Germany. For the Poles the retention of former German territory has become a matter of economic life or death since the socialist reconstruction of Poland has become very largely dependent upon the western industrial complex, especially that of Silesia.<sup>14</sup>

West German advocates have countered the Polish legal argument by pointing out that the wartime agreements at Yalta and Potsdam do not hold in international law because a third party cannot be bound by decisions arrived at in conferences at which it was not present.<sup>15</sup> The Polish frontier settlement, they say, will not have legal validity until there is a general peace conference which will include all parties affected. The Polish reference to history the Germans reject as exaggerated and essentially insignificant. Medieval history bears no relevance

to the issue which the Germans maintain should be restricted to events within the same historical period, that is to say to the period since 1919. Accordingly they concede Poland's right to territory awarded to her by the Versailles Treaty but dispute their claim to territory which lay beyond Poland's border in 1939. The doctrine of punishment the Germans find an embarrassment but reject on the ground that only individuals and not nations may be punished for atrocities between 1939 and 1945. These crimes they attribute to the Nazis and not the German nation as a whole. The Nazis having been punished not only by the Allies but also by German courts, they argue that further retribution in the form of territorial concessions is unreasonable and unjust.

The present state of affairs, while admittedly precarious and of dubious legality, is entirely to the liking of the Poles. The longer the *status quo* is maintained the more permanently the "Lost Provinces" of Germany become an integral part of Poland. However, Poles who have an appreciation of the record of power politics in the twentieth century express a private concern that the Russians and Germans, if circumstances should dictate, may sometime in the future reconcile their present differences and join in a settlement of the border dispute to the detriment of their country. Such a *rapprochement* is entirely within the realm of possibility. The Germans and Russians who throughout history have had to choose between friendship and enmity, co-operation and hostility, share a startlingly consistent tradition of collusion with regard to Poland.<sup>16</sup> Prussia and Russia, having partitioned Poland in the eighteenth century, presented a united front against Napoleon in defence of their interests. They joined forces again at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to preserve the partition and actively supported one another through the nineteenth century as they mutually repressed Polish nationalism. Under Bismarck's direction a keystone of German foreign policy was a carefully nurtured alliance with Russia. Even in a period when fear of Bolshevism was rampant in Germany, relations between the two countries were surprisingly friendly: after the First World War renewed trade activity and military agreements (which resulted in the setting up of munition plants, as well as aircraft and tank testing facilities in the U.S.S.R.) culminated in the Rapallo Treaty in 1922. Even such an anti-Russian fanatic as Hitler was able to repress his feeling of revulsion for the Communist Slavs and conclude the non-aggression pact of 1939 with the Soviet. A forcible case can be made for the thesis that when Germany and Russia have had a friendly understanding they have prospered and that when they have fallen out as they did in 1914 and 1941 the results have been disastrous.

It is not inconceivable that at some future date the Germans and Russians

should decide to resolve their differences bilaterally. The Russians have not opposed reunification of Germany but they have demanded that a united Germany be neutral. Such an offer of unification in return for neutrality was actually made in 1953. At this critical juncture in European affairs, with a threat from the political and military potential of the Common Market in the West and disturbed by an ideological dispute with a restive Red China in the east, the Soviet leaders may find the idea of a renewed approach to the West Germans seductively attractive. The successors of Adenauer, for their part, upset by the events of 1962 in Berlin and suspicious of Western compromise with East Germany, may well feel inclined to turn a receptive ear to Moscow. The Germans may well conclude that they might be able to make more progress toward a united Germany outside the Western alliance than they have been able hitherto to achieve as a partner within NATO. Any such Russian-German collaboration would assuredly involve a new appraisal of the Oder-Neisse problem and the country which would stand to lose in any revision must be Poland. The Poles have become accustomed to their position as a buffer and a pawn between East and West, so that to be once again the victims of a bargain between their two great neighbours would not be for them an unfamiliar role.

#### NOTES

1. It was no accident that Hitler should have chosen "Operation Barbarossa" as the code name for the planned invasion of the U.S.S.R. in 1941.
2. General Ludendorff too had a long memory and was obsessively anti-Slav. Although the battle against the Russians in 1914 was not very near the 1410 site, he insisted that the telegram announcing the victory be sent from Tannenberg. Not to be outdone, the Poles have erected in the former Gestapo Headquarters in Warsaw a memorial which consists of a large sword, a reminder of another incident of the battle when the Teutonic Knights over-confidently and insultingly sent a sword to the Polish commander with the message that his poorly equipped army was no match for the Knights and would need it. The Polish leader personally carried the sword into battle and victory.
3. David Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, I, 268.
4. Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People* (New York, 1902), vol. 5, 212-13.
5. See Louis L. Gerson, *Woodrow Wilson and the Rebirth of Poland, 1914-1920* (New Haven, 1953), 55-66.
6. Churchill was vague as to the southern extension of the Oder Line and appears to have been ignorant of the fact that there are two Neisse rivers, the Western Neisse (Görlitzer) and the eastern Neisse (Glatzer). The two are approximately one hundred miles apart, the eastern Neisse flowing through Upper Silesia in a north-



easterly direction, and the western Neisse flowing north and enclosing practically the whole of Silesia in the west. Three million Germans lived in the area between the two.

7. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (Cambridge, 1951), vol. V, p. 403.
8. Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin, A Biography* (London, 1949), Paperback edition, pp. 509-510.
9. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. VI, p. 387.
10. Concurrently they weakened their position by agreeing that the Polish administration east of the Oder-Neisse should continue in the meantime. See Elizabeth Wiske-  
mann, *Germany's Eastern Neighbours* (New York, 1956), p. 109.
11. See *German East Territories*, edited by the Göttingen Research Committee, Wuerz-  
burg, 1957, p. 21; Wiskemann, p. 121; Bogermil Ziolk, "Basic Demographic Prob-  
lems in the Polish Western Territories," *Polish Western Affairs*, vol. II, No. 1, 1961,  
p. 75; Janusz Ziolkowski, "The Population of the Western Territories," *Polish West-  
ern Territories* (Poznan, 1959), pp. 130-134.
12. Alfons Klafkowski, "The Legal Foundations of the Odra-Nyssa Frontier," *Polish  
Western Territories*, pp. 70-114; B. Wiewisra, "West German Territorial Claims  
Against Poland and International Law," *Polish Western Affairs*, vol. II, No. 1,  
1961, pp. 3-30.
13. One Polish scholar put it succinctly: "The document of 1200 possesses the same  
legal value as a document dated 1951." (Alfons Klafkowski, "The Legal Founda-  
tions of the Odra-Nyssa Frontier," p. 96.)
14. *The Economic Development of Poland's Western and Northern Regions*, edited by  
the Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne (Warsaw, 1961), pp. 112-158.
15. See Eberhard Menzel, "The Rule Against Annexations in Modern International  
Law and the East German Territories," *Eastern Germany, A Handbook*, edited by  
the Göttingen Research Committee, (Wurzberg, 1961), pp. 3-51.
16. See E. H. Carr, *German-Soviet Relations Between the Wars, 1919-1939* (London,  
1952), p. 1; Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia* (London, 1957), pp. 4-7.