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## The Prussians on the Thames? Reasons for British Resistance to Polish Claims to Gdańsk after the Great War

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**Abstract:**

In the settlement of the question of Gdańsk after the Great War, Britain came out as the power that was the most critical to Polish geopolitical aspirations among the Allies. This led some in Poland to call the British “Prussians on the Thames.” This paper discusses the reasons behind such British “Polono-skepticism.” After reviewing the common explanations given in the literature, the paper suggests that Britain’s Polish policy at the time was guided by civilisational assumptions and historical considerations which had their roots in the demise of the Lithuanian-Polish commonwealth in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



The first part of the title of this article – a quote from one Polish right wing daily – illustrates the annoyance of the Poles at the British foreign policy in 1919.<sup>1</sup> The British turned out to be the greatest opponents of Polish geopolitical ambitions among the Allies, opposing Polish territorial claims almost every step of the way. They had contested Polish claims in Prussia and Upper Silesia, and they had pressed Poland to accept extremely unfavourable Soviet peace terms in the summer of 1920. They had also favoured the Lithuanians in the Lithuanian-Polish dispute over Vilnius. Danzig, today’s Gdańsk, a port city that was meant to give Poland access to the sea, was no exception.

Gdańsk had huge geostrategic importance for the reborn Poland. During his presentation of the Polish case for the city at the Paris Peace Conference, the Polish foreign minister Ignacy Paderewski wept. The Polish people, explained Paderewski,

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<sup>1</sup> Miklós Lojkó, *Meddling in Middle Europe. Britain and the “Lands Between” 1919–1925* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2006), 290, note 40.

demanded Danzig as a *conditio sine qua non*.<sup>2</sup> On this issue, the Poles were supported by the French. Cambon, the French head of the Polish Commission, argued that historical troubles of Poland were largely due to its lack of communication with the sea. Hence, if Poland died when it lost Gdańsk, it was also vital for its resurrection.<sup>3</sup> The British, however, were immovable. They vetoed proposals on Poland's sovereignty over Gdańsk, and ultimately a compromise was reached according to which it became a free city under the League regime. What motivated the British, with the premier David Lloyd George at the helm, to be so hard on Polish geopolitical aspirations?

Roman Dmowski, one of the key political figures of the reborn Poland, thought that British thinking had been poisoned by the powerful Jewish lobby in London and Paris. It is true that the influence of various Jewish lobby groups was considerable at the time of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and that often these organisations acted against Polish territorial claims. The anti-Polishness of Lewis Namier, the influential Jewish member of the British delegation in Paris, was well known and stemmed from his personal grievances against Polish nationalists in Galicia. Namier, however, did not care much about Gdańsk, and treated Germans incorporated in Poland as future *Leidensgenossen* – “the more there will be of them, the easier it will be to stand up against (Polish) oppression.”<sup>4</sup> Dmowski himself, after all, was a notorious anti-Semite who greatly overestimated the influence of Jewish interest groups on British thinking.

Considerations of the balance of power could be another blanket explanation of British Polish policy. As Eyre Crowe wrote in his much-quoted memorandum of 1907, “it has become almost an historical truism to identify England's secular policy with the maintenance of this balance by throwing her weight now in this scale and now in that, but ever on the side opposed to the political dictatorship of the strongest single State or group at a given time.”<sup>5</sup> While in 1907 this balance meant combining with France to contain Germany, in 1919, it could be argued, with Germany defeated and Russia in turmoil, Britain did not want France to become too powerful on the continent and thus had no desire to strengthen what it thought to be a French satellite at the expense of Germany. There is, however, not much evidence that Britain's Polono-skepticism stemmed from its balancing against

<sup>2</sup> *The Deliberations of the Council of Four (March 24–June 28, 1919): Notes of the Official Interpreter, Paul Mantoux*, vol. 2, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 200–203.

<sup>3</sup> *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London: Harper and Row, 1971), 176; John Mason, *The Danzig Dilemma; A Study in Peacemaking by Compromise*, ed. A.J.P. Taylor (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1946), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Namier to Headlam-Morley, 18 I 1919, Churchill Archives, Cambridge, HDLM ACC727/12.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Brian McKercher, *Old Diplomacy and New: the Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, in: Michael Dockrill and Brian McKercher, *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85.

France. While it is true that the British were often annoyed with French support of the Poles, they might have as well put Poland under their own tutelage, which was preferred to that of France by many in the Polish political elite. In the end of 1919, Aleksander Skrzyński, the acting Polish Foreign Minister, pitched to the British the idea of harmonisation of British and Polish foreign policy, and argued that Poland could be Britain's main ally on the continent in reorganising Russia.<sup>6</sup> And yet, such proposals fell on deaf ears.

A more plausible variation on the balance of power argument is that Britain was used to dealing with great powers and was skeptical of the stability of an international system which accorded geopolitical significance to weak and conflicting countries<sup>7</sup>. While France was grasping at straws in trying to contain Germany and to compensate for the loss of her Russian ally, Britain could afford to have a much more relaxed attitude and saw Germany regaining its great power status as something not only inevitable, but also desirable. Britain's interests in Eastern Europe above all were unrestricted commerce and peace, and according Gdańsk to Poland could upset both. Simply put, Polish possession of Gdańsk would be short-lived, because Poland was too weak and Germany was too strong. During the First World War, Germany remained unoccupied by foreign troops, and showed remarkable resilience in its aftermath. The prospects of Poland, on the other hand, were much less certain. It was a poor agricultural country that had to deal with legacies of three empires, that was menaced by the Bolshevik onslaught from the east and that had its borders contested on all fronts.

British Polish policy in the immediate aftermath of the Great War had also been explained through appeasement of the Left both at home and abroad.<sup>8</sup> In Britain, this was the time of workers' strikes and riots that posed significant challenges for the government. In the summer of 1920, sympathising with the Bolsheviks, the leadership of the British Left set up a Council of Action that pledged to oppose Britain's involvement in the Polish-Soviet war, while London dockers refused to load supplies for Poland. In such circumstances, it was politically costly for British statesmen to openly advocate the Polish cause. But while domestic politics certainly helps to explain Britain's Polish policy in 1919–1920, it is not sufficient to account for the all-encompassing British Polono-skepticism, which could be felt even in matters of detail that could have remained hidden from the public eye. Moreover, while Lloyd George bore the brunt of attacks in the Polish press, he was not alone in his reserved attitude towards Poland and the Poles. Many important figures, including the foreign secretary Curzon, Lord Balfour, Lord Hardinge,

<sup>6</sup> Rumbold to Curzon, 20 X 1919, TNA FO 688/01, 457.

<sup>7</sup> Lutz Oberdörfer, "The Danzig Question in British Foreign Policy, 1918–1920," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15/3 (2004): 575.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Davies, "Lloyd George and Poland," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6/3 (1971): 132–154.

Lloyd George's private secretary Philip Kerr, education secretary H.A.L. Fisher, had surprisingly similar views on Poland.

Looking for deeper causes of British resistance to Polish claims to Gdańsk and elsewhere, it is useful to start with how Lloyd George explained it himself. In an official letter to Józef Piłsudski, justifying the compromise on Gdańsk achieved in Paris with the French and the Americans, Lloyd George wrote:

[...] it has appeared to us that it would be irreconcilable with the principles governing the Peace that the predominantly German population of this district should be placed unconditionally under Polish rule. On the other hand we have felt it essential that Poland should have that secure and free access to the sea which is necessary to its future and prosperity. [...] Even though some regret may be aroused among your fellow citizens by the disappointment of hopes prematurely created, I venture to hope that they will willingly and loyally accept an arrangement which while it secures to them the satisfaction of their vital needs will avoid the difficulty of throwing upon the Polish state the responsibility for the direct government of a considerable alien community.<sup>9</sup>

In his talks with other Peacemakers, Lloyd George unpacked his position further. First, he implied that the Poles were civilisationally inferior to the Germans. Second, he said that the Poles had a proven record of their inability to rule themselves. Third, the British PM warned that attempts to elbow Germany out of Gdańsk would not end well for Poland, once its western neighbour got back on its feet.<sup>10</sup> Lloyd George's reasoning thus appears to have two components. One has to do with Germany's comparative strength and Poland's weakness, which relates to the balance of power arguments discussed above. Another concerns a particular perception of Poland, the Poles and of their history. It is this second, subjective component that is often missed in explaining British Polish policy after the Great War. This subjective element is crucial in explaining why Britain in 1919 did not believe in Poland's geopolitical significance and why it contested Poland's territorial claims.

Civilisation was a concept that was central to (geo)political thought in imperial Britain. Civilisation not only as a binary racist black and white distinction, but as a continuum between civilised and uncivilized/barbarian. In British view, Germany, despite being Britain's geopolitical arch-rival since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was on the most civilized end of this continuum, on par with Britain. The abovementioned Crowe's pre-war note is a good illustration of this. While arguing in favour of containment of Germany, it is still embellished with platitudes for the German civilisation:

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd George to Piłsudski, 2 V 1919, TNA FO 688/01, 502.

<sup>10</sup> *The Deliberations of the Council of Four*, vol. 1, 37; vol. 2, 386–387.

[...] The mere existence and healthy activity of a powerful Germany is an undoubted blessing to the world. Germany represents in a pre-eminent degree those highest qualities and virtues of good citizenship, in the largest sense of the word, which constitute the glory and triumph of modern civilisation.

Such views did not dissipate after the first world war, and sharply contrasted with descriptions of Poland. In British view, Poland was no match for Germany in terms of civilisation. The Poles, argued Lloyd George in Paris, would “govern badly and will take a long time to conduct business in the western manner.”<sup>11</sup> British experience in Gdańsk itself led to similar conclusions. In the words of Reginald Tower, temporary administrator and later high commissioner of the League of Nations in Gdańsk,

[...] The Poles would be no match for the Germans in any local negotiations. It would be difficult to find a greater contrast than between the character and temperament of Germans and Poles. The hard, calculating, industrious German, imbued with the principles of order and discipline, must find it hard to be patient with the idealistic and expansive Pole who has hitherto had no opportunity in his varying subordination to foreign rule to develop qualities necessary for progress in this twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The reference to Polish history made in the latter example is not coincidental. Historical references abound in the contemporary discourse of British statesmen on Poland, which unavoidably point to the demise of the old Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For this, the British tended to blame Poland itself. “If Poland had understood the elements of reasonably good government, the idea that she could be partitioned like an inert mass, as she was, is out of the question,” reasoned Balfour in his wartime speech on foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> The British thus saw the new Poland in the shadows of its historical vices. This is unsurprising, as there is a strong historiographical tradition both within and outside Poland to regard the demise of the late Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth as Poland’s own doing. Its roots date back to the writings of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, who blamed the Poles themselves for the partitions and pointed to the grave imperfections of Poland’s constitution as well as to the defects of the “Polish character.” Voltaire, for instance, praised the first partition of the Commonwealth as a “glorious event” and blessed it as the “unscrambling of the Polish chaos.”<sup>14</sup> Similar judgments could be found in the subsequent British historiography and commentary

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Reginald Tower, Notes of Journey to Danzig, 17–29 I 1919, TNA FO 608/66, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Balfour’s statement on foreign policy to the imperial war council, May 1917, in: Robert Lansing, *The Lansing Papers, 1914–1920*, vol. 2 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1939), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 24 (Kehl 1785), 93.

on Poland. In the words of renown (and Germanophile) Thomas Carlyle, Poland deserved to die, since “anarchies were not permitted in this world.”<sup>15</sup>

A similarly “pessimistic” strand of historiography can also be found among Polish writings. It is associated with the Cracow school of history that was prominent in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This group also called itself *Stańczycy* after a 16<sup>th</sup> century Polish court jester. *Stańczyks*, such as Józef Szujski and Stanisław Tarnowski, in their views towards Poland’s past and future did not hesitate to lampoon what they saw as Polish geopolitical romanticism. Just like the pessimists outside Poland, *Stańczyks* thought the death of the Commonwealth to be a suicide rather than a murder. They were skeptical about Poland’s prospects as an independent polity, and urged the Poles in Austria-Hungary to remain loyal to the empire.<sup>16</sup>

This pessimistic tradition of thinking about Poland’s past and future survived into the twentieth century and shaped the way in which the British saw Poland’s geopolitical role in general and its claim to Gdańsk in particular. It clashed with the optimism of the Poles, and of their supporters in France, on making Poland the bulwark against both German and Bolshevik expansion. All agreed that Poland’s geopolitical function in Europe should be such as to help it avoid the fourth partition. For optimists in Poland and France, this meant making Poland *forte, très forte* and stretching its borders as far as possible to give it enough resources to resist its neighbors. For Polono-skeptics in Britain, however, who saw the new Poland in the shadows of its past, the new Poland would have to be reduced to its narrowest ethnographic limits in order to increase its chances of survival. “It may be urged, indeed, that the larger the Poland, the greater the buffer between the Germans and the Russians and in the strictly geographical sense it is true,” wrote H.A.L. Fisher to Lloyd George, “per contra and with the greater reinforcement from the lessons of the past may it be urged that the larger the Poland, the stronger the chances of a Germano-Russian combination against it.”<sup>17</sup> In British view, therefore, Poland was not just a space that belonged to the grey zone of civilizational continuum, somewhere between “western” and “Asiatic.” As a historical polity, it also had a track record of a failed state, and the British feared that modern Polish geopolitical romanticism would lead to a fourth partition.

It is thus necessary to see British opposition to Polish claims to Gdańsk against the backdrop of this deeper layer of civilisational and historical arguments. While most of British statesmen had no direct experience of Poland before 1918, they shared the pessimistic reading of Polish history which was significant in delineating

<sup>15</sup> *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Henry Duff Traill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2005), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Fisher to Lloyd George, 17 I 1919, in: *The Coalition Diaries and Letters of H.A.L. Fisher, 1916–1922: The Historian in Lloyd George’s Cabinet Fisher Diary*, ed. Bryant F. Russell (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2006), 397.

the borders of the new Poland. For a British Polonoskeptic such as Lloyd George, who did not have much hope in the statesmanship capacity of the Poles as a nation, Poland's geopolitical role in Europe could only be peripheral and no territorial aggrandisement could change that. In this sense, the benefits of attributing Gdańsk to Poland would not outweigh the risks of turning Poland's old and more civilised enemy against it. Polish coups in Silesia or Vilnius, or Piłsudski's march on Kiev, coupled with Poland's internal political instability at the time, served as further proof for the British that Poland had not changed since its last disappearance, and that it was heading towards a new disaster. This clash between Polish geopolitical romanticism and British Polonoskeptic conservatism shaped the limits of the new Poland after the Great War and beyond.