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Four Polands, One International System: Multicultural Polonia Restituta and the Peace Negotiations of 1918-1921

Abstract

In the eyes of the French and Anglo-Saxon peacemakers at the end of World War I, the Polish case presented specific challenges. The three parts of the restored state, to whom we will adjoin the French *Polonia*, make it difficult to find homogeneity between the country and the people. In these conditions, the following question arises: How does one build an organised governmental machine and, most urgently, a united army that would be able to respond to the Soviet threat? The Allied and Associated Powers had different answers, but one single statement when it came to Poland: it was “a nation struggling to become a state, with perhaps a greater number of more difficult problems than have ever faced up any other nation at any one time.” (Hoover Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers)

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Amidst all the arduous tasks facing the peacemakers at the end of World War I, the Polish case presented specific issues resulting from the phenomenon of multiculturalism, one of Poland's distinctive features since the Middle Ages. The situation, which emerged from 123 years of partitioning, has been precisely depicted by historians: “The three sections of Poland operated initially with different systems of education and, during 1918–1919, there were as many as six currencies in circulation in Poland: German marks, Austrian crowns, Russian rubles, Polish marks, ‘occupation marks’ issued by the German High Command in the east, and varieties of Russian currency. Until 1920, a tariff barrier remained in place between former Prussian Poland and the rest of Poland, and one even needed a passport to travel from Warsaw to Poznań.

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Four legal systems functioned in the emergent Polish state (in the Russian sector, the region of the Congress Kingdom retained a modified version of the Napoleonic code, while elsewhere in the former Russian sector the same legal system had obtained as in the rest of the Russian Empire).¹

From a domestic point of view, this multiculturalism was a treasure, and moreover, a part of the Polish nation's very DNA. Roman Dmowski, when favouring a so-called "ethnic Poland," had to struggle against the legacy of the *Res Publica*. However, put in an international perspective, this multiculturalism presented itself to the peacemakers as a problem at three levels:²

- The frontiers were supposed to be drawn according to the principle of national self-determination, which promotes the individualisation of nationalities. In that sense, multiculturalism seems out-of-date, even regressive with regard to the course of history;
- Any mention of Polish multiculturalism was suspected to be an attempt to force the hand of the Great Powers to serve Poland's expansion towards Eastern Europe;
- There needed to be a functioning Polish modern government and multiculturalism added extra challenges to this general task. The three parts of the restored state made it difficult to find homogeneity within the country and among the people. In these conditions, the question arose: How does one build an organised governmental machine and, most urgently, a united army which would be able to respond to the Bolshevik threat? The Allied and Associated Powers had different answers but one single statement when it came to Poland: Poland was "a nation struggling to become a state, with perhaps a greater number of more difficult problems than have ever faced up any other nation at any one time."³

However, the Allies' point of view was not one-dimensional. Multiculturalism could be an asset in the hands of the peacemakers:

- The principle of nationalities, as it appears, could only be enforced so far. A multicultural Poland justified its requisite flexibility limits when it came to self-determination;
- The Great Powers needed to count on a strong Poland as a borderland facing Red Russia, especially along its eastern frontiers;
- The process of building a homogenised state with a unified territory and a national army required proactive policies which allowed the Great Powers, and France especially, to be present in a country. This situation naturally meant becoming a close ally.

¹ S.P. Ramet, *The Failure of Democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities – an Introduction*, [in:] *Interwar East Central Europe, 1918–1941. The Failure of Democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities*, ed. S.P. Ramet, London–New York 2020, p. 6.

² *Les traités de paix (1918–1923). La Paix les uns contre les autres*, eds. I. Davion, S. Jeanneson, Paris 2023.

³ Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 93, Annual Report of Trade commissioner, report n°59, June 30, 1921.

Thus, the Allies' position was to welcome multiculturalism whenever it strengthened Poland.

This work is based on documents from the Hoover Archives at Stanford University, California, where a significant number of records related to these matters are kept. Among them, the Hugh Gibson collection is particularly rich with regard to the American perception of Poland since this diplomat was the United States Representative in Warsaw. Thus, we will start with a focus on the United States' approach to multiculturalism in Poland, that is, the approach of a relatively new country – it is important to highlight this fact – which was still struggling to forge its own “melting pot.” Let us not forget that one of the reasons why the White House was reluctant to enter the war in the first place was the diversity of the American population: how could it be possible – and not dangerous – to choose sides in the Great War, given a country whose population was constituted not only by Irish-Americans and English-Americans, but also German-Americans and Russian-Americans? If there should be one state that would understand the diversity of *Polonia Restituta*, then it would be America. In fact, annual reports from Americans in Poland, especially from trade commissions, show that they indeed reconnected with their pioneer's soul while in Poland.

This was the case with Louis Van Herman, an American trade commissioner who arrived in Warsaw in December 1919. He discussed the details related to his mission in the following way: “Instead of finding ready at hand a fairly homogenous country and people with fixed national habits and mental methods, with more or less defined national problems, contacts and backgrounds, as well as accurate sources of information and an organised governmental machine, [I] found a country [in struggle] It was a task for a pioneer!”⁴ He was under the impression that he had to build a whole economic system from scratch, or, what was worse, from local and archaic conditions: five currencies, three railway systems, two gauges (the distance between two rails), six law codes... But the most upsetting fact seemed to be that everyone was looking at everyone else with suspicion, from the perspective of their own territory. Herman himself remained dependent on German, Austrian or even Russian information because, as he said, “there [were] few – practically no-officials or economic Polish leaders sufficiently experienced in understanding, collecting or classifying economic data to whom to appeal.” His own observations led him to state that Polish political spheres were patriotic but could not really help the trade commission since they were “without training in economic procedure and with practically no experience in modern business methods.” Herman was, therefore, confronted with the “Polish patchwork” while being required to forge a modern economic system, understood as a system that can welcome investments of American capital as well as the sale of American goods. This project met with the Polish government's approval but from the start, Her-

⁴ Ibidem.

man's task was to build a unified economic system which would "reflect the spirit of American enterprise, progress and fairness in business methods."

His close contact with the United States Representative in Warsaw, Hugh Gibson,⁵ as well as the consul general, was very helpful in that matter. Herman and Gibson had a meeting every day at 11 a.m. They, therefore, "[work] in the closest possible way."⁶ As we may extrapolate, their exchanges were not of a purely commercial interest. Much broader than that, their conversation embraced quite strategic questions. The archives show that Gibson counted on the Trade Commissioner "for aid in securing information concerning the progress of the Franco-Polish treaty, the negotiations between the Polish Government on one side and French and American oil interests on the other, and in beginning to survey the ground for the conclusion of a commercial treaty between Poland and the United States." We conclude from this excerpt that Herman carried out the role of a commercial attaché even if he had not officially been given the title. Indeed, technical questions bore a strong strategic quality. This was the case, for example, in the establishment of a high powered wireless telegraph station in Warsaw, capable of direct and quick communication with the United States, and still pending in 1921: "[H]ad the American newspapers been in direct communication with Poland during the summer of 1920," Herman noted, "it would not have been possible for hostile news bureaux (Wolf's and others) to spread false reports of imperialism. Had Warsaw been quoted on the New York Exchange there would have been little or no chance for speculators of Central Europe and Poland itself to manipulate against the Polish mark." The contract for the opening of a branch of the Radio Corporation of America was finally signed in January 1921, with a great improvement to the financial as well as strategic situation of Poland. "[W]hen this station is in operation, American government and business circles will be able to tap all the news counters of Central and Eastern Europe and of Western Asia, and Warsaw will be put on the financial map of the world."⁷ We have here a perfect illustration of American messianism!

Thus, Herman acted as the mediator between Polish and American authorities, a position which made him the first observer of the diversity in the country. On an almost everyday basis, he had to assist American businessmen and to put them in contact with Polish industrial and financial circles, while everybody was facing "complicated questions involving particularities in the local situation and [...] more deliberate national psychology than Americans who do not know Eastern Europe can understand." Successful solutions appeared difficult to find, but the American delegates from the trade commission kept up because they knew that the Polish market was very promising.

⁵ The diplomat Hugh Gibson was Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States in Warsaw from May 1919 to May 1924, when he moved to Switzerland (Berne legation).

⁶ Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 100, Memorandum for the Secretary of State, June 24, 1919.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

France had its own analysis of the situation, slightly differing from the American approach. The French approach was depicted in a report written for the Interallied Commission for Poland by the French delegates at the beginning of 1919.⁸ This text offers a statement of the difficulties sparked by the need for the integration of different parts of the Polish territories. From a typically French point of view – that is, a jacobine, centralist one – the weak centralisation of the Polish state was the most urgent question. The different layers of administrative rules inherited from different empires prevented Warsaw from fully functioning as a capital and from controlling the entire territory. This deficiency appeared in the financial area, for example, given that currency is one of the most important attributes of sovereignty. “Money circulation in Poland is hampered by the use of paper notes with no value and different guarantees. The Russian rouble, the German mark, the Austrian koruna, being used in transactions in conjunction with the Polish mark.”⁹ Different measures were contemplated to clean the fiduciary situation up, including the creation of a currency which would be Franc-indexed.

Another attribute of sovereignty which was at stake was the recovery of taxes. Each part of the territory had its own fiscal institutions. The coordinating administrations were absent since the imperial agents had left the country. “Nobody is here to make these institutions work, and as we can imagine, the tax payers are less than in a hurry to offer their services... A fact, I must add, which is genuinely understood by the Allied commission, whose delegates are perfectly aware of the misery resulting of 5 years of war and occupation.” Given that the building of an entire new fiscal system would take time, provisory actions were contemplated. The Polish Assembly recommended state monopolies on coal, alcohol, oil, and insurance. In response, the pragmatic French delegates of the Interallied Commission called for prudence. They noted, “two pitfalls are to be feared in Poland more than in any other country [...] the risk of impeding the industrial production on which the economic recovery of this country depends, [...] [and] foreign capitalists who, scared by some statist measures could renounce financial assistance.”

In France, political questions dictated an economic strategy.¹⁰ In the United States and Great Britain, the relationship was the opposite. The British side, like the American one, was also very interested in the opportunities for business in Poland, more than France, which – whilst hoping to benefit from commercial

⁸ Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 91, Rapport de la Commission Interalliée pour les affaires polonaises, (end of March?), 1919.

⁹ The excerpt refers to the Polish mark established by the German Army during the occupation.

¹⁰ I. Davion, *Mon voisin, cet ennemi. La politique de sécurité française face aux relations polono-tchécoslovaques entre 1919 et 1939*, Bruxelles–New York–Francfort–Londres–Paris 2009; I. Davion, *L'Europe centre-orientale, laboratoire de la Sécurité Collective à la sortie de la Grande Guerre (1917–1921)*, habilitation manuscript, 2023.

treaties – had fewer means to achieve its aspirations.¹¹ Their ambitions in the oil business led the British to take interest in the Eastern Galicia question. They were more than worried by the eventuality of a Ukrainian rule in this area. “Is the so-called Ukrainian movement a National movement sufficiently mature and well founded to be recognised as such at the present moment? [...] The Rutheno-Ukrainian movement in Eastern Galicia was created by Austria in 1890 as weapon against Russia and [...] the Ukrainian uprising in November 1918 was organised by Austria and has been consistently supported by Austria and Germany in order to create discord and weakness in these districts.”¹² The British delegate of the “Comité International pour la Protection de l’Industrie du Pétrole Britannique, Française, Belge et Alliée” [the “International Committee for Protection of British, French, Belgian and Allied Petroleum”] sent a note to the American commission at the Hôtel Crillon in Paris, to highlight the fact that the attribution of Eastern Galicia to Poland was vital to the English economy. “After many years of uncertainty regarding the future of British oil interests in Galicia, our Companies are now enabled to restart their business owing to protection afforded them by an orderly Polish Government and its disciplined troops.”¹³ Any provisional solution, such as a plebiscite or evolving autonomy, would ruin business because it would “[make] it impossible for us to execute our important schemes and invest fresh capital [...] as also to develop our oil properties.” The English representatives of the “Comité International” --more British than international in that matter-- pled for an interview with the Americans prior to any decision. “Any attempt to diminish Polish sovereignty in Eastern Galicia will jeopardise interests of seventy five thousands British shareholders. [...] The Principal Allied and Associated Powers are of the opinion that Poland is now the State the best able to re-establish a free and well-ordered Government in Eastern Galicia.” This opinion stating that Poland was a reliable and industrious country was very rare among the British and must be ascribed to the oil stakes in Ruthenian areas, as we will see.

The British delegates also had their own point of view regarding the administrative and economic diversity of Poland. Colonel H Wade, the British commissioner to Poland in Warsaw, writes a report at the beginning of January 1919. What he describes is no less than a catastrophe, if not an apocalypse, even apart from the context of the Bolsheviks preparing to launch a new attack.¹⁴ He points out that there is no such thing, from his point of view, as a Polish nation: “The Poles have been divided for 150 years, not only under different systems of government, but under different standards of culture.” He pushed

¹¹ G.-H. Soutou, *L'impérialisme du pauvre: la politique économique du gouvernement français en Europe centrale et orientale de 1918 à 1929*, “Relations Internationales” 1976, no. 7, p. 219–239.

¹² Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 86, “Argument”.

¹³ Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 86, letter to Lieutenant Foster, August 29, 1919.

¹⁴ Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Gibson (Hugh S.) papers, box 91, Report from the British Mission in Warsaw, January 12, 1919.

forward his assertion by highlighting the benefits of German civilisation on a slave population. “The German-Poles under the tyrannical, but efficient, Prussian bureaucracy have been welded into a disciplined body, well educated, and patriotic.” He seemed to advocate that the criterion of republican values, although one of the pillars of the new international system under construction in East-Central Europe, was not as important as the efficiency of the state. In post-war Poland, Wade diagnosed, one must choose between discipline and chaos, and this was particularly true in the former Russian part of the Polish territory, where a real political life had not been developed because, under the czarist rule, intrigues had replaced organised political struggles. Also, Wade added, there was a large Jewish population in these areas, which was “not without reason, anxious as to their security under a Polish Government, and would probably prefer German citizenship to any other.” Regarding Galicia, where Austrian policy spread discord as well, a pro-Austria sympathy may have had subsisted. We may synthesise Wade’s description by picturing a Polish society which presents itself as shattered, because the dominance of different heritages does not result in unity and even generates a lack of motivation to forge this unity in the first place. The reconstruction of a state from such elements, at a moment when the whole social structure had been shaken from within and without, was a task requiring goodwill and a spirit of compromise. Unfortunately, these qualities had not, in the past, been typical of Polish politics.¹⁵ Wade placed all his hopes in Paderewski because he appeared above the fray. “With a race as patriotic and temperamental as the Poles, there is still the possibility that [his] appeals [to unity] may succeed.

As far as the military situation was concerned, Wade thought there was one solution: to send munitions to make the Allies’ support tangible and concrete. He had the plain-spokenness to admit that a mere advertising of promised munitions can have effects –as it had on the 10th of January 1919¹⁶--but he himself believed the announcement effect would not suffice and that the Allies must secure the passing of the Polish troops through German zones. This was not a common point of view among British circles, but Wade thought that there was a real risk of a coup d’état by socialists in Poland, a threat that “can only be adverted by a public pledge of assistance in the form of food and war material, on the part of the Allies, followed by the prompt and continued arrival of these necessities.”

As we have shown, the Associate and Allied Powers were disconcerted when they discovered the diversity of the *Polonia Restituta*. This does not coincide with the picture they had based on the incomplete information which had been spread during the 19th century, and which had focused on the national sentiment. When the time came to analyse this aspect of Poland for immediate pragmatic purposes, each country reacted in a frame shaped by its own particularities: the American Pioneer, the Jacobin French, the Germanophile

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

British. But at the end of the day, their experience in Poland delivered to them the accurate and rich particularity of multicultural Poland.

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