

## The Hope and Help of the Half-Defeated:

### G.K.C.'s Visit to Poland in the Late 1920s and H. Belloc's Ballade to Our Lady

(This article by Dr Robert Hickson has been posted on the Apropos website: [www.apropos.org.uk](http://www.apropos.org.uk) )

#### Epigraph:

*“Between them, they have nearly killed the thing [Christendom] by which we live.” (G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, 1936, p. 60)*

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**“Not only has Asia borrowed all the wrong things from Europe, but Europe has borrowed all the wrong things from Asia....The very ugliest thing that our civilization ever produced, the costume and habit of the industrial nineteenth century in the big towns, THAT has really spread over the whole world [hence Asia], as Christianity has never spread, as chivalry has never spread, as monogamy has never spread, as democracy and the civic ideal have never spread. We have not succeeded [as of 1928-1929] in making the remote Asiatic feel like a Christian; but we have succeeded in making him look like a cad. This seems to me one of the strangest and most sinister of all historical contradictions; when we consider what Christendom has had to give, and what it has given [to us!]. But while this blight of vulgarity was spreading from Europe to Asia, something was also spreading from Asia to Europe. And the strange thing is that this was also a blight. Its influence was not so immediately apparent....But it has been considerable; and, I think, very deplorable. What has come to us out of Asia, whatever else there may be in Asia, has been despair. It has been all those negative and anarchical ideals of disdain for the individual, of indifference to the romance of real life, of pessimism and the paralysis of the fighting spirit. It is ideas that have come out of the depths of Asia; and especially all the wrong ideas.” (G.K. Chesterton, “On Europe and Asia,” in *Generally Speaking*, 1928, 1929, pp. 24, 25, 26—my emphasis added)**

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*“I confess that I had never heard of it [the Battle of Muret, 11-12 September 1213] in my life, though I knew the rough outline of the Albigensian story [and of the Gnostic-Cathar Heresy]. The Battle of Muret [as Hoffman Nickerson's book on The Inquisition: A Political and Military History of Its Establishment, 1923, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1932—with a new Preface by H. Belloc—was subsequently soon to convince Chesterton] was one of the most extraordinary things that ever happened in the world....The Battle of Muret is more and not less romantic when we realize that it was a war of philosophies—a fight between the mystical materialism of the sacramentalist and the disembodied idealism of the pessimist.” (G.K. Chesterton, “On the Writing of History,” in *Generally Speaking*, 1928-1929, pp. 186-187—my emphasis added)*

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“Good evening, sir [said Flambeau “with placid impudence” to the mysterious “Hindoo humbug” in the garden]. Do you want anything?”

Quite slowly, like a great ship turning into a harbour, the great yellow face [of “the tall man”] turned, and looked at last over its white shoulder. They [i.e., Father Brown and Flambeau] were startled to see that **its** [impersonal] yellow eyelids were quite sealed, as in sleep. “Thank you.... **I want nothing.**” Then, half opening the lids, so as to show a slit of opalescent eyeball, he repeated, “**I want nothing.**” Then he opened his eyes wide with a startling stare, said, “**I want nothing,**” and went rustling away into the rapidly darkening garden.

“The Christian is more modest,” muttered Father Brown; he [i.e., the Christian] wants something.”  
“What on earth was he doing?” asked Flambeau....

“I should like to talk to you [Flambeau] later,” said Father Brown....

As they [soon later] turned into it [the “front doorway”] they saw the [“omnipresent Asiatic”] man in the white robe for the third time.... Father Brown and Flambeau, however, kept this weird contradiction to themselves....

“My father,” said Flambeau in French, “what is the matter with you?”

Father Brown was silent and motionless for half a minute, then he said: “**Superstition is irreligious, but there is something in the air of this place. I think it's that Indian—at least partly.**” He sank into silence, and watched the distant outline of the Indian, who still sat rigid as if in prayer. At first sight he seemed motionless, but as Father Brown watched him he saw that the man swayed ever so slightly with a rhythmic movement, just as the dark tree-tops swayed ever so slightly in the wind that was creeping up the dim garden paths and shuffling the fallen leaves a little.

The landscape was growing rapidly dark, as if for a storm, but they could see all the figures in their various places. Atkinson was leaning against a tree with a listless face.... and the fakir still sat rigid and yet rocking, while the trees above him began to rock almost to a roar. Storm was certainly coming. “**When that Indian spoke to us,**” went on [Father] Brown in a conversational undertone, “**I had a sort of vision, a vision of him and all his universe. Yet he only said the same thing three times.** When he first said 'I want nothing,' it meant only that he was impenetrable, that Asia does not give itself away. Then he said again 'I want nothing,' and I knew that he meant that he was sufficient to himself, like a cosmos, that he needed no God, neither admitted any sins. **And when he said the third time, 'I want nothing,' he said it with blazing eyes. And I knew that he meant literally what he said; that nothing was his desire and his home; that he was weary for nothing as for wine; that annihilation, the mere destruction of everything or anything—**” (G.K. Chesterton, “The Wrong Shape,” from his Complete Father Brown Stories—my emphasis added)

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“But I am talking, **not** of the ideas that are deepest in Asia, of which I necessarily know little; but **of the Asian ideals that have bitten deepest into Europe, of which I know only too much.**”

And it strikes me as **an astonishing antithesis and reversal** that neither of the two great civilizations [Europe and Asia] should have given its best to the other. **We have given them a disfigurement; and they have given us a disease.** Now it is really in the matter of ideas that our own civilization is superior. There are some who do not believe this; because **they always assume that deep ideas must be depressing ideas. They cannot bring themselves to believe, what is the truth, that the deepest of all ideas are inspiring ideas. Of those courageous and invigorating conceptions, the conceptions that make it possible to live, Christendom has had infinitely more than any other culture; more of the idea of free-will; more of the idea of personal chivalry and charity; more of the clean wind of hope.** The metaphysics and morals of these things have been worked out by our fathers fully as deeply and delicately as any of the dark and disenchanting metaphysics of Asia. But the European travelling in Asia [often as a commercial “missionary” merchant] does not seem to know that he represents these things [of the historic, spiritual and sacramental culture of Christendom]....**Having never learnt his own religion** [such as the completeness and culture of the Catholic Faith], **he is very likely to learn somebody else's; and that one which is really inferior to his own.**” (G.K. Chesterton, “On Europe and Asia,” from his anthology, *Generally Speaking*, 1928-1929, pp. 26-27—my emphasis added)

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### **Astride an elephant**

Especially after witnessing my German wife's unlooked-for response very late the other night while (and more so after) I read aloud to her for the first time G.K. Chesterton's short essay, “Two Words from Poland,”<sup>1</sup> I am now even more confident in my judgment to recommend these seven pages to the close attentiveness of the reader. For, interwoven in these variegated pages is so much of the affirming heart and admiring character of Chesterton—to include his understated humor and deft self-irony. May we not, for example, even now imagine him in Warsaw “at the jumping competition in the *Concours Hippique*,” (54) riding an elephant in a military steeplechase with the Polish cavalry? After the Polish cavalry's gracious invitation to him to ride with them, Chesterton more modestly thought, however, that he “should be more useful as an obstacle than a surmounter of obstacles”! (54)

### **Our Lady of the Half-Defeated**

Moreover, Chesterton gives a generous tribute to his dear friend, Hilaire Belloc, but without explicitly mentioning the title of Belloc's Marian verse, yet twice adding a nuance of meaning to Belloc's original phrase: “**Help** of the Half-Defeated.” For, Chesterton also calls Our Lady: “**Hope** of the Half-Defeated.” (53, 55) Belloc's “Ballade to Our Lady of Czestochowa” was resonantly in his heart!

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1 G.K. Chesterton, “Two Words from Poland,” from his Anthology of essays entitled *Generally Speaking* (New York: Dodd, Meade & Company, 1929), pp. 49-55. This anthology was first published in London the year earlier, in 1928; and first published in New York in February of 1929. Further page references will be to the American Edition, and placed in parentheses in the main body of the text above. All emphases—bold and italics—will have been added by the present writer to the original text, unless otherwise specifically indicated.

## The Miracle on the Vistula

Less than eight years after the Polish military had unexpectedly defeated the Russian-Bolshevist army near Warsaw upon the Vistula in August of 1920, G.K. Chesterton made a grateful visit to Poland. He knew that that “Miracle on the Vistula” had also spared all of Europe, not only Poland and even Germany herself, from the intended strategic initiative of the Communist westward onslaught of Lenin and Trotsky and Marshal Mikhail Tukachevsky, thereby strategically moving the Revolution into the ravaged moral vacuum of an already exhausted continent so soon after the November 1918 Armistice which only temporarily held back the rest of a New “Thirty Years' War” in Europe (1914-1945). Only nineteen years after the Battle of Warsaw in the summer of 1920 (12-25 August), Germany attacked Poland (on 1 September 1939) and the Bolsheviks again attacked Poland, this time successfully (on 17 September 1939). And then Poland was to be further betrayed—even by her own purported allies in World War II—but Chesterton, though he knew of the earlier three Partitions of Poland (1772-1795), was no longer alive to see that latest humiliation and perfidy.

## Intensely loved or intensely hated

This compact portion of history may also help us to grasp Chesterton's own more elevated beginning to his essay, “Two Words from Poland.” For, he says:

*There are certain things in this world [perhaps even the traditionally militant Catholic Church?] that are **at once intensely loved and intensely hated**. They are naturally things of a strong character and either very good or very bad. They generally give a great deal of trouble to everybody; and a special sort of trouble to those who try to destroy them. **But they give most trouble of all to those who try to ignore them**. Some hate them so insanely as to deny their very existence; but **the void made by that negation** continues to exasperate those who have made it, till they are like men choked in a vacuum. They declare that it shall be nameless and then never cease to curse its name. This curious case is perhaps best illustrated by examples. One example of it is Ireland. Another example is Poland. (49)*

## God is the chief friend of Poland

After leading us first to reflect on these two historically Catholic cultures situated in vulnerable geographical locations near—or between—other non-Catholic “Great Powers” or Empires, Chesterton makes a transition to his own specific arrival in the historical cultural nation of Poland some time around 1927-1928; and he speaks at once of two profound and characteristic phrases that he soon heard uttered there:

*Within ten minutes of my stepping from the train on to Polish territory, I had heard two phrases: phrases which struck the precise note which thus inspires one half of the world and infuriates the other half. Most men have an immediate reaction to them, one way or the other; they think them spirited and generous or they would think them extravagant and futile. We were received by a sort of escort of Polish cavalry; and one of the officers made a speech in French; a very fine speech in very good French. In the course of it he used the first of these two typical expressions, “I will not say [that you are] the chief friend of Poland. God is the chief friend of Poland.” And he afterwards said, in a more playful and conversational moment, “After all there are only two trades for a man: a poet and a soldier of cavalry.” He said it humourously, and with the delicate implication, “You are a poet and I am a soldier of cavalry. So there we are!” (49-50)*

Feeling warmly comfortable to continue this repartee, Chesterton chivalrously replies, and with a sort of wink:

*I said that, **allowing for the difficulty of anybody having anything to eat**, if this were literally true, I entirely accepted the sentiment and heartily agreed with it. (50)*

### **A real working prejudice**

Aware that this view would not be seen in the same manner by certain kinds of people, Chesterton brings forth a contrast in order to reveal that other all-too-operative “prejudice”:

*But I know there are some people who **would not understand it even enough to disagree with it**. I know that some people **would** hotly and even furiously **refuse to see the joke in it**. There is something **in that particular sort of romance**, or (if you will) **in that particular sort of swagger**, which moves them quite genuinely to a violent irritation. It is an irritation common among rationalists, among the drier sort of dons, and among the duller sort of public servants. It is **one of the real working prejudices of the world**. (50)*

Chesterton then tries to understand why there is, still in 1928, so much more indulgence of, and sympathy with, the largely Lutheran-Prussian Military Culture than with the more Cavalier and Romantic Traditions of Catholic Europe, especially those of the Polish Military Culture. Chesterton observes there to be even more sympathy for the cruel Calvinist Cavalry of Oliver Cromwell (“Ironsides”) and his sternly disciplined Roundheads:

*Now if all those Polish officers [in his welcoming military escort] had been Prussian officers, if their swagger had consisted of **silently** pushing people off the kerbstone, if their ceremony had consisted not in making good speeches but in standing in a row quite **speechless**, if their faces had been like painted wood and their heads and bodies **puffed up with nothing but an east wind of pride**, they would not have irritated this sort of critic [rationalist, dry, and dull] in this sort of way. They would have **soothed** him, with a **vague** sense that that is what soldiers and men of action ought to be, or rather **must** be. I do not say he would approve of everything they did; but he would **accept** what they were. It would not anger him or even seem to him absurd; **as it does [seem absurd] to me, who belong to the other half of mankind**. (50-51)*

### **Persistent hatred of the Cavalier**

But, in contrast to Chesterton's “half of mankind,” the others also seem to have an entirely different, and more cramped, Ethos about the place of the Soldier in Civilization. Moreover,

*What does anger him, what does seem to him absurd, is **the idea of the soldier civilized**, the man who is no more ashamed of **the military art** than of any other art, but who is interested in other arts besides the military art; and interested in all of them like an artist. That the man in uniform should make a speech, and, worst of all, a good speech, seems comic, like a policeman composing a sonnet. That he should connect a horse soldier with a poet appears meaningless, like connecting a butcher with a Buddhist monk. In one historic word, **these people hate and have always hated the Cavalier**. (51)*

### **A revulsion to the aesthetic, to beauty, to honor**

Despite Chesterton's multiple and repeated reservations about the **impersonal** spirit of Asia, its cruelty and despair, and the grave absence of the Pure Woman from its own knightly codes of honor and protection (as is, by contrast, the case with the Blessed Mother's vivid presence in so much of Western Christian Chivalry); he also knew of their admirable Asiatic traditions of the "Martial Aesthetic," as it were, which were to be seen, for example, not only in the Zen Buddhist's disciplined art of archery and in the requirements of the well-ordered tea ceremony for a cultured Japanese Samurai. But now he sees as a later development in the West, perhaps more discouragingly, that—**unlike** even that stern Samurai of Asia with their strict Moral Code of Bushido bereft of the Blessed Mother—such Judaeo-Protestantized Western people already mentioned above also seem to have a general revulsion to the aesthetic, perhaps even to certain forms of beauty, to include moral beauty and its well-proportioned protective sense honor:

*They [with their more stringent Protestantized ethos] hate the Cavalier especially when he writes Cavalier Songs [or Poems]. They hate the knight when he is also a troubadour; especially when he always swaggers about with both rapier and guitar. They can understand Ironsides [the Calvinist Commander, Oliver Cromwell] solemnly killing people in the fear of the Lord, as they can understand Prussian soldiers solemnly killing people in the fear of the War-Lord. But **they cannot tolerate the combination of wit and culture and courtesy with this business of killing**; it really seems to them provocative and preposterous. It seems especially preposterous when the Cavalier adds to all his other dazzling inconsistencies by being quite as religious as the Ironside [but a sacramental Roman Catholic, instead of a Calvinist like Cromwell]. The last touch is put to **their angry bewilderment**, when the man who has talked gaily **as if** nobody mattered except lancers and lyric poets, says **with the same simplicity and gaiety**, "The one friend of our country is God." (52)*

### **Not entirely forlorn**

Furthermore, in opposition to the ethos of older chivalry and of the Cavalier,

*These same critics commonly say that they are irritated with this romantic type **because it always fails**; so they are naturally even more irritated **when it very frequently succeeds**. People who are ready to shed tears of sympathy, when the windmills overthrow Don Quixote, are very angry indeed when Don Quixote really overthrows the windmills. People who are **prepared to give a vain blessing to a forlorn hope** are not unnaturally **annoyed to find that the forlorn hope is comparatively hopeful, and not entirely forlorn**.....[they seem reluctant to] *admit that the Arms counted for a little less and the Man for a little more.* (52)*

### **The Battle of Warsaw 1920**

Then Chesterton gives an example of how "that is almost exactly what has happened in modern Europe today," (53) and to the depreciative detriment of the Poles; and he thus makes specific reference to the decisive 1920 Battle of Warsaw<sup>2</sup> some seven years earlier: 12-25 August 1920.

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2 See Lord Edgar Vincent D'Abernon, *The Eighteenth Decisive Battle of the World: Warsaw 1920* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 178 pages. Lord D'Abernon was the British Ambassador to Berlin, but resident in Warsaw; and he was not only present there in 1920 during "the Miracle on the Vistula," but he learnedly knew much about military history himself, as a basis of comparison. His book's original 1931 edition was reprinted in the United States in 1977 by Hyperion Press of Westport, Connecticut.

Beginning on 16 August (after the Novena from 6 August to 15 August—Feast of Our Lady's Assumption), Polish Marshal Jozef Pilsudski launched the key surprise maneuver across the Vistula southeast of Warsaw and drove on his exhausted troops to cut off the main Soviet-Bolshevik Lines of Communication (LOCs) from the east, causing their panic and retreat, with great losses to themselves. The Poles, after some further victories, then soon forged, in Riga, an Armistice with the Bolsheviks of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, in October of 1920; a fuller peace treaty being signed in March of 1921, establishing the eastern borders of Poland for almost twenty years. This victory halted the Soviet attempt to take over already then large parts of Central and Eastern Europe. But, on 17 September 1939—not even three weeks after the 1 September 1939 German invasion of Poland from the west—the Soviet-Bolsheviks, in a vengeful spirit, invaded Poland from the east once again, and this time successfully, soon becoming (after June of 1941) even an “Ally” of the West in their maniacal War against Hitler. How many know of this history? And of this tragedy.

### Tradition defeating the modern

Though Chesterton did not live to see that later tragedy and betrayal—he died in June of 1936—he deftly recalls for us some of the implications of “The Miracle of the Vistula” in 1920, against all odds:

*When the Poles defeated the Bolsheviks in the field of battle, it was precisely **that** [namely, the unexpected success of the Religious Cavalier]. **It was the old chivalric tradition defeating everything that is modern, everything that is necessitarian, everything that is mechanical in method and materialistic in philosophy.** It was the Marxian notion that everything is inevitabl[e], defeated by the Christian notion that nothing is inevitable—no, not even what has already happened [i.e., “it could have been otherwise”!]. Mr. Belloc has put **the Polish ideal** into lines dedicated to a great Polish shrine [and Our Lady]:*

*“**Hope of the half-defeated**; house of gold,  
**Shrine of the sword** and tower of ivory [purity].” (53)*

### That’s just like the Poles

But, after this generous reference to his beloved friend's verse, “Ballade to Our Lady of Czestochowa,” Chesterton shows his additional modesty, once again:

***I am not dealing with such great matters** [like Polish King Jan Sobieski's earlier-decisive 1683 victory over the Turks then invading Vienna to the south], *but describing an aspect and an experience* [of my recent visit to Poland]; *and before I leave **these Polish cavaliers**, I may remark that I had another chance of seeing them at the jumping competition in the Concours Hippique; and I will only mention one incident and leave it; **for it is something of a parable** [as if to say, in an honorific way, “**That's just like the Poles.**” (55)]. (53)**

And Chesterton will now tell us of this Parable of the Chivalrous-Cavalier Spirit, in the case of a rider who did not fail at the final test—interspersing it with his own modesty and comic self-depreciation as one who blushinglly is, alas, not such a horseman!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, he says, as follows: “One of the lancers playfully asked me if I was going to compete; I made the **obvious** answer that, **mounted on my favorite elephant**, I would **undertake** to step over many of the fences, **though certainly not the last fence of all**, which I doubt if a giraffe could **bestride**. But **the general feeling seemed to**

The course [for the jumping competition] consisted of the usual **high obstacles**; but **there was one** which was apparently of a novel pattern and **practically insuperable**. Anyhow, one after another **in that long procession of admirable riders**, French, Polish, and Italian, **failed at this final test till failure came to be treated as a matter of course**.... There was some amusement and some pity for one young Pole, who was, I believe, a novice or **a relatively untried person**, whose mount in some fashion stumbled, so that the rider was shot over the horse's head. At least I thought he was shot over the horse's head; **and then discovered**, amid some amazing and jerky gyrations, that he was what can only be called **clinging to the horse's ears**. While the horse danced about the course in a *dégagé* manner, the rider seemed to crawl down the neck in some incredible way **and rolled back into the saddle**. He found one stirrup and tried **in vain** to find the other. **Then he gave it up**; the stirrup, **not the race**. He cleared the fairly low obstacle before him, and then, **seeming to gather a wild impetus from nowhere**, with one stirrup flying loose and swinging in the saddle, **he charged the impossible barrier, and, first of all that company, went over it like a bird**. (55)

Wondrously seeing this unexpected attainment against all the odds, one of Chesterton's unnamed companions seated or standing right beside him spontaneously emitted a "sharp exclamation, in English" (55) and said: "**That's just like the Poles.**" (55)

In reply, Chesterton's additionally evocative (but slightly misremembered) final words from his friend H. Belloc's verse were: "**Hope of the Half-Defeated**; house of gold..." (55)

### **That special pluck of spirit**

For Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, the recurring theme of hope, persevering and resilient, always also reflected their intimate personal **trust** in Our Lady, the Blessed Mother and Our Queen. And both men saw that same deep devotion still (in 1928) among the Polish people to Our Lady of Czestochowa, especially amidst the experienced and remembered tragedies of Poland's history. A few words from Belloc's "Ballade to Our Lady of Czestochowa"<sup>4</sup> will show us that special pluck of spirit fighting against great odds, trustful and tender:

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**be** that I should be **more useful as an obstacle than as a surmounter of obstacles**; and that **if** I lay down on the course, **it might be even worse than the worst obstacle** [i.e., that "last fence of all," "this final test," as it were!]." (54)

4 H. Belloc, *Sonnets and Verse* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), pp. 150-151. The Ballade contains three stanzas, each ending with the same forceful and faith-filled refrain, which are then followed by a somewhat jarring Envoi of four lines.



## I

**Lady and Queen and Mystery Manifold**

And very Regent of the untroubled sky,  
Whom in a dream St. Hilda<sup>5</sup> did behold  
And heard a woodland music passing by:

**You shall receive me when the clouds are high  
With evening and the sheep attain the fold.  
This is the faith that I have held and hold,  
And this is that in which I mean to die.**

## II

Steep are the seas and savaging and cold  
In broken waters terrible to try;  
And vast against the winter night the wold,  
**And harbourless for any sail to lie.**  
**But you shall lead me to the lights, and I  
Shall hymn you a harbour story told.**  
**This is the faith that I have held and hold,  
And this is that in which I mean to die.**

## III

**Help of the half-defeated, House of gold,  
Shrine of the Sword<sup>6</sup>, and Tower of Ivory<sup>7</sup>;**  
Splendour apart, supreme and aureoled,  
**The Battler's vision and the World's reply.**  
**You shall restore me, O my last Ally,**  
To vengeance and the glories of the bold.  
**This is the faith that I have held and hold,  
And this is that in which I mean to die.**

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<sup>5</sup> Of Whitby? (footnote added by RH)

<sup>6</sup> i.e. at Jasna Gora Monastery (footnote added by RH)

<sup>7</sup> i.e. Purity (footnote added by RH)

*Envoi*

**Prince of the degradations, bought and sold,  
 These verses, written in your crumbling sty,  
 Proclaim the faith that I have held and hold  
 And publish [that Faith] in which I mean to die.**

**Gegen die Türken**

On Our Lady's Feast Day of the Assumption—on 15 August 1683—Polish King Jan III Sobieski (1629-1696), after he had successfully dealt with the Swedish armies of invasion from the north, reverently stopped at the Jasna Gora (*Clarus Mons*) Benedictine Monastery to pray at the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa. For he was also then en route to the south—to Vienna—to combat the Turks who were already dangerously present at the Gates of Vienna. Sobieski arrived by night on 11-12 September 1683, almost a month later, but still in time with his Cavalry to lead the military-strategic defeat of the invading Turks. (Every year, on 12 September, there is still a special Mass offered, in gratitude for the deliverance from the Turkish forces—their decisive victory “*Gegen die Türken.*”) Sobieski's complementary victory soon thereafter, at the Battle of Parkany (7-9 October 1683) effectively ended the Turkish expansion into Europe.

However, less than a century later, in 1772, courageous Poland, after so often defending the Frontiers of Europe, was gravely humiliated and partitioned for the first of three times by the great powers of Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary. The anti-Catholic King of Prussia Frederick (1712-1786) was the initiator of the crime of the partition of Poland. (The last of the three dismembering partitions was in 1795.) This is part of the history we must also consider as we try to understand what the Poles defended us against in 1920.

**CODA**

On 9 September 1939—a little over a week after the German invasion of Poland at the beginning of the month, and still eight days before the hostile Soviet Union, as part of a pre-arranged plan, was also to invade Poland, but from the east—a Catholic priest and historical-theological scholar, Philip Hughes, wrote a compact and religiously revealing two-page article, entitled “The Miracle of the Vistula.” The article was published in England in *The Tablet: The International Catholic News Weekly*.<sup>8</sup>

Father (later Monsignor) Hughes likely did not expect such a Soviet incursion on 17 September 1939, for at the time the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement (also called “the Nazi-Soviet Pact”) was still a well-kept secret, although the Japanese knew of it and therefore, to protect their vulnerable flank, made their own Neutrality Pact with Stalin, one which was kept by the Soviets until just before the two nuclear bombs were dropped in early August 1945.

Father Hughes begins his reflections with the following words published on 9 September 1939, for already he had noticed the characteristic Polish response as an underdog, given factors of their

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<sup>8</sup> This helpful article—written by an historically informed, discerning “witness of the time” (a “*Zeitzeuge*”)—can still be retrieved, though with some difficulty, from *The Tablet's* Electronic Archive, on pages 336-337, or 12-13.

intrinsically vulnerable geographical location and the difficulty in establishing and protecting their frontiers:

*The stand of the Poles under the stress of the German assault; their immediate, characteristic counter-attack; **their very evident spirit to risk all and to perish rather than submit**; all these can hold no surprise for one who remembers the events of nineteen years ago, which have been called, by whom first I do not know, “the miracle of the Vistula.” Those events ought to be recalled, for in England they never, at any time, received the notice they deserved, **the notice due to a military masterpiece**, which a well-placed observer [the British ambassador to Germany then residing in Warsaw], Lord D’Albernon, described as “the eighteenth decisive battle in the world.” (12)*

Although it is my intent to present and accent some little-known religious matters, to include the courageous spiritual presence and conduct as a sacramental priest (not as a diplomatist) of the future Pope Pius XI, a few other facts will help us to keep the proper sequence and proportion. For, by May of 1920, the Soviets, coming out of the east on the way to Warsaw, “had pushed...as far as Kiev [in the Ukraine], which fell to them [the Bolsheviks] in that very month. **Then the tide changed.**” (12) The Bolsheviks, however, says Father Hughes, had as a strategic aim “something far greater than the mere recovery of Kiev or even than the conquest of Poland”: (12-13)

*“Had the Soviet forces overcome Polish resistance and captured Warsaw,” wrote Lord D’Albernon, “Bolshevism would have spread throughout Central Europe, and might well have penetrated the whole continent.” That this is not the wild exaggeration of an anti-Communist partisan is evident from the language in which the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army himself described **his ultimate objective**. Lecturing on the campaign of 1920 to the students of the Military Academy at Moscow, **in 1923** [shortly before Lenin died in early 1924], Marshal Tukachevsky declared: “There is not the slightest doubt that, if we had succeeded in breaking the Polish Army of bourgeois and seigneurs, the revolution of the working class in Poland would have been an accomplished fact. **And the tempest would not have stopped at the Polish frontier. Like a furious torrent it would have swept over all of Eastern Europe.** The Red Army **will not forget** this attempt to carry the revolution outside our frontiers, and **if ever** the bourgeoisie braves us to new fights, the Red Army will **crush it, and spread the revolution throughout Europe.**” (13)*

“And now,” Father Hughes adds, “in something less than forty days, the Poles retreated [from the east] four hundred miles before the new [Bolshevik] advance.” (13) Moreover,

*Then, in July [of 1920] Minsk [only 300 miles distant from Warsaw] fell to the enemy.... The situation of Poland was now desperate, and it was generally regarded as hopeless.... To such an experienced observer as Lord D’Albernon, then actually on the spot, “Nothing could appear more certain than that the Soviet would capture Warsaw.” It is safe to say that **all Europe shared that expectation**. As the Anglo-French mission passed through Czecho-Slovakia [the recently created, un-historic political entity, the fruit of the Treaty of Trianon], President Masaryk [also perfidiously anti-Habsburg] actually did his best to persuade them to abandon the enterprise. “By **openly siding with the Poles in their hopeless position we would do them no good, and we should do ourselves much harm**. The population here was **more** friendly to the Bolsheviks than to the Poles, **and the whole atmosphere was secretly hostile to Poland**. Socialists and Communists, **everywhere**, watched the Russian advance **with the most eager sympathy**. In Germany the*

workers could **not be relied on** to handle the **supplies destined for the Poles**. At Paris the D'Albernon Commission was regarded as **no more than a last despairing gesture of futile sympathy**. English politicians had **one pre-occupation only: to keep clear of any entanglement**, whether Warsaw fell or not. Lord Curzon [in Britain] could speak of the executioner's axe as already within as an inch of Poland's neck. [We recall here the Katyn Forest massacre of the flower of Polish Officer Corps twenty years later, in 1940, and less than a year after their 17 September 1939 invasion of Poland, a deliberate atrocity which was for years blamed on the Germans, but was, in truth, vengefully perpetrated by Stalin and his "Tartarized" Bolshevists, part of their planned Pax Tartarica.] (13)

Thus, Father Hughes summarizes the situation in Eastern Poland in the summer of 1920, and thereby also prepares us to consider with gratitude the generous and noble priestly acts of the future Pope Pius XI:

*As the weeks of constant tragic loss went by, and the [paralyzed] realization grew that Poland was to be left to her fate—**though in defending herself she was defending all that Europe knows as civilization**—preparations were made to evacuate the capital [Warsaw]....and the diplomatic corps prepared to follow suit. Their doyen [the senior diplomatist of honor present in Warsaw] was **the Papal Nuncio, Msgr. Ratti [the future Pope Pius XI], titular Archbishop of Lepanto** ["in partibus infidelium"], [an] **appropriate and indeed prophetic title**. (13)*

In this situation, we may well wonder what Msgr. Ratti himself then considered rightly to be both **the source and specific content** of hope: "**the hope and the help of the half-defeated.**"

For, indeed, says Father Hughes respectfully:

*He presided daily at the meetings of the ambassadors and he knew to a hair what the prospects were. Diplomacy, for the moment, was at the end of its resources. **The hour had come when man has no hope but in God** [or, perhaps also, as at the Battle of Lepanto, in His Mother, Spes Christianorum?], Msgr. Ratti telegraphed Rome **for leave to remain in Warsaw whatever happened**. The Catholic bishop [a sacramental successor of the Apostles] could be of service even though the Nuncio had no longer any functions. "I am not, like yourselves, a diplomatist only. **As a priest I have the duty of helping to keep up this people's courage** [lest they despair and perish]," he told his colleagues [in Warsaw]. And, indeed, **in such a crisis as this, a Christian Capital beset by an infidel horde, where else could an Archbishop of Lepanto be if not with the defenders in the very breach**. (13)*

We are now at or near the beginning of August, 1920, says Father Hughes, and:

*For days now the menaced city had **given itself to prayer**, and on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Transfiguration, **a great novena began**, to end on the the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption [on 15 August], and as in some city of the Middle Ages, **processions singing litanies of intercession filed continuously through the streets**. **This spirit seems to have been universal**. When the Nuncio [Msgr. Ratti himself] asked the French military advisor of the allied [the above-mentioned D'Albernon] Commission, General Weygand, **what his expectations were** [thus what his hopes were], the soldier replied that all that was possible has been arranged. "**The rest remains with your good prayers.**" (13)*

As to the enemy side,

*The Bolsheviks had already nominated **the officers** who were **to govern the recaptured Poland**. [That is to say, the Cadre for the military government of the occupying forces.] In the west, **high political opinion was so unanimous in its expectation of the worst**—that the Bolsheviks would win [and often those slothful or wearied western leaders, if not in complicity or at least in sympathy, were even quite indifferent about that flagitious result, as was to be so also after World War II]....It was on August 14<sup>th</sup>. 1920, that the Bolshevik attack on Warsaw began. (13)*

Amidst the heavy fighting, Father Hughes writes, “the Poles were holding their own, **but hardly realized that they were not defeated**”! (13) Indeed,

*Discouragement reigned supreme [in Warsaw] and urgent messages were sent calling for the return of Pilsudski who, two days earlier [on 12 August], had left the capital to take over [personally] the command of **the desperate manoeuvre, on which against all advice, he had staked all**....to the please of the government [in Warsaw] he turned a deaf ear. **He refused to return, hoping against hope** that Warsaw would hold out **yet another day** [until 15 August, Our Lady's Feast Day] **while he made his great move, an attack on his enemy's flank** [and Lines of Communication] **from his position well to the south [and southeast] of the capital** [on the western side of the Vistula]. **His one concession to the situation** was to begin his advance a day earlier than he intended. At dawn on August 16<sup>th</sup> [the day after Our Lady's Assumption and the end of the Novena], he moved forward and, after two days of incredibly rapid marching, his ragged and bootless [sic] army **came up with [came upon] the rear of the besieging army**. He had succeeded beyond all human right of expectation. (13)*

**“That's just like the Poles!”** (55)

The further details of their pursuit of the rapidly withdrawing Bolsheviks, fearful and in great confusion, should be closely considered and many lessons, timeless and timely, learned therefrom, in addition to the ones that G.K. Chesterton would have us learn.

There is a passage from the historian and Greek statesman, Polybius (circa 200-118 B.C), which may also add to our reflectiveness in this context. It comes from *The Histories of Polybius*, Book I, the last words in section 35, and it was especially admired by Major General J.F. C. Fuller, himself a great strategic-minded military historian with a special attentiveness to the moral factors of warfare. In the words of the pre-Christian pagan historian, Polybius, we read: “For it is history, and history alone, which, without involving us in actual danger, will mature our judgment and prepare us to take right views, whatever may be the crisis or the posture of affairs.”<sup>9</sup> (151)

We may therefore now be henceforth more attentive in our studies and lives to the history of Our Lady's manifold and mysterious interventions into time, at very unexpected times, against great odds,

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<sup>9</sup> See Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, the Classics, 1979), p. 80. The above slightly different translation, with a clearer syntax, is to be found in Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789-1961: A Study of the Impact of the French, Industrial and Russian Revolutions on War and Its Conduct* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 151—the passage quoted by him comes near the beginning of his Chapter IX—“The Conduct of World War I.”

and in subtle and inspiring ways of mercy, in order to help and give hope to those who are loyal to her and to her Incarnate Divine Son. O Mary, Hope and Help of the Half-Defeated, pray for us—and mediate to us those indispensable Graces, illuminating and fortifying, especially *in hora mortis nostrae*. Lest we also, unprepared and unprovided for, have to face “the second death” (Saint Augustine), the death of the soul because of mortal sin.

--Finis--

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