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THE CURZON LINE

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Adam Pragier, a Polish Socialist and Professor of Economics at the „Wolna Wszechnica Polska” („Free Polish University”), Warsaw, is one of Poland’s most prominent political writers. His criticism of the political works of H. G. Wells, attracted last year general attention and publicity.

In the Press and even in certain British political circles the „Curzon Line” is frequently mentioned of late in connection with the problem of Poland’s eastern frontier. The Line is commonly spoken of as a border line proposed by the Allied and associated Powers after the close of the first World War which was to separate Poland equitably from Russia on the basis of ethnic factors. To those who hold such a view the occupation by Soviet Russia of a slice of Polish territory in September 1939 appears almost as the final phase of that partition which Poland categorically rejected and which Russia itself later gave up in the Treaty of Riga signed on the 18th March 1921. These views indicated the existence of not a little confusion in the minds of many people regarding the exact nature of the Line. It would, therefore, serve a useful purpose were we to recall

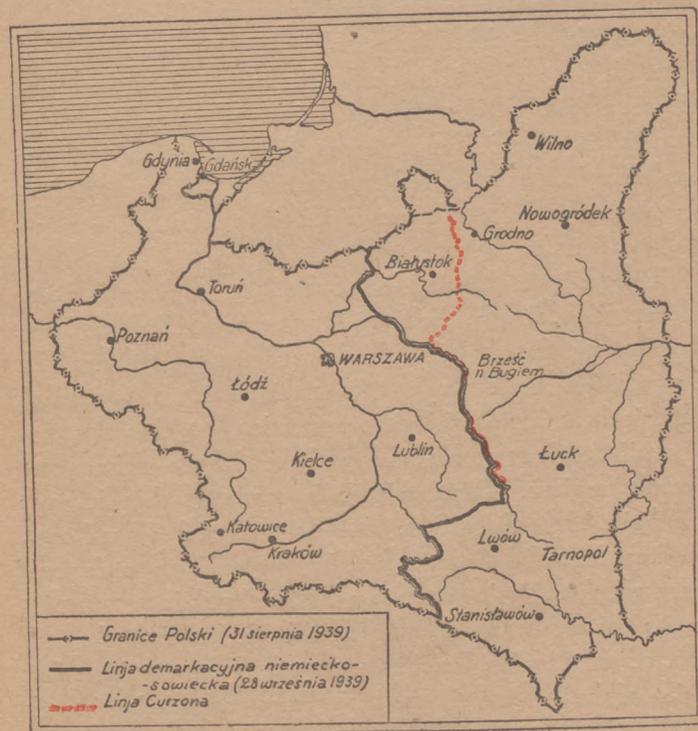


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where this Curzon Line actually ran and what was its precise significance.

The Treaty of Versailles did not determine the Polish-Russian frontier. At the time the Treaty was signed the Allied and associated Powers did not recognise Soviet Russia. In both Great Britain and France the possibility was seriously considered of a restoration of Tsarist rule in Russia; consequently there was no desire to put difficulties in Russia's way by unfavourably shaping her western frontier. Only a few days before the outbreak of the first Russian Revolution (in March 1917), France gave Russia an undertaking that she would treat the Polish question as a purely internal affair of the Russians. After the victorious close of the Revolution that agreement was denounced by Kerensky, who tore up all the secret treaties between Imperial Russia and other Powers, and recognised Poland's independence unreservedly.

In 1920 the French encouraged the Poles to declare war on Soviet Russia. But nobody had any doubt that had Soviet Russia collapsed and the Tsardom been restored Poland's eastern frontier would have been re-drawn in a manner more favourable to Russia. And who knows whether Poland would have been able to continue as an independent state? For this reason Pilsudski did not listen to French advice and did not declare war on Russia, a course which would probably have strengthened the hands of the interventionists. The Polish policy of the French at that time was firmly, though not so openly, supported by Great Britain.



Article 87 of the Treaty of Versailles left to the main Allied and associated Powers the task of determining those Polish frontiers that were not determined by the Treaty. In accordance with this ruling the frontier between Poland and the former Russian Empire was left unsettled. However, in order to mitigate the unfavourable consequences of such an uncertain state of affairs, the Supreme Council of the main Allied and associated Powers authorised Poland in December 1919 to establish normal state administration in such of the border regions as remained temporarily under its authority — within the limits of a provisional demarcation line especially drawn for the purpose.

Two points in that decision of the Supreme Council claim our attention. Firstly, the line did not separate Poland from Russia along the whole length of the border regions, but left the partition of Galicia from Russia in suspense. Secondly, when it drew that provisional demarcation line, the Supreme Council clearly reserved to Poland the right to claim more easterly regions. From this it is apparent that it was the desire of the Supreme Council to retain a free hand concerning the Polish-Russian frontier, the decision to depend upon whether Russia remained a Soviet Republic or reverted to its former status. *Eastern* Galicia at no time formed part of the Russian Empire; consequently, no partition decision of the Supreme Council could mean any diminution of Russian territory. The Supreme Council, therefore, took the line of least resistance: it left the problem unsolved. In such circumstances it cannot be assumed that the Supreme Council considered that demarcation line—incomplete and indefinite

as it was owing to Poland being granted the right to claim territories eastward of the line—as a definite future Polish-Russian frontier. The demarcation line drawn by the Supreme Council runs from a point where the former Russian-Austrian frontier meets the River Bug to a point where it is cut by an administrative boundary between the districts of Bielsk and Brest Litovsk. It then continues along the line of the Bug southwards up to a point situated to the south of the bulge of the northern administration boundary of the Suwalki district. From there, it follows the border of that district to a point where it meets the former Russo-German frontier. The map reproduced here shows clearly the course of the line.

The above-described line received later on, in circumstances fundamentally different, the name of the „Curzon Line”. The circumstances were the following. At the time of the Polish-Soviet conflict the then British Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, in the course of mediation proceedings undertaken by the British Government, addressed an appeal to the Soviet and Polish Government on the 11th of July 1920 to the effect that when the armistice was signed the Polish forces should withdraw to that line — commencing however from Grodno, while the Soviet forces were asked to stop at a distance of fifty kilometres to the east of the line. Of special significance was Lord Curzon's proposal regarding the position of the line of truce in Eastern Galicia. In view of the fact that no previous project of a demarcation line existed for that region, the British proposal was that each

army should stop on the line held by it on the day the armistice was signed.

The various phases of the mediation measures and the different forms of the "Curzon Line" are curious. The Soviet Government had not forgotten that the Allied Powers and those associated with them had not long before supported the activities of the intervention forces in their country and had not allowed the Polish-Russian frontier to be definitely determined because they counted on the restoration of the old regime. Hence the provisional demarcation line which Lord Curzon wished to make use of in his mediation efforts was looked upon by the Soviets as a political demarche directed against them and also as what we may term *post-mortem* political intervention in favour of the Imperial regime. Consequently immediately after the announcement of the Supreme Council's decision, the Council of Commissars proclaimed in a declaration addressed to the "the Polish Government and People" dated 28th January 1920 their "unconditional and unreserved" recognition "of the independence and sovereignty of the Polish Republic" and at the same time expressed the readiness of the Soviet Government to withdraw its forces to a line running much further to the East than that later became known as the Curzon Line, namely to a line following the course of the River Dryssa and passing through the towns of Polotsk, Borisov, Cudnov and Bar. The Soviets thus put forward a counter-proposal, a "Chicherin—Lenin—Trotzky Line" as opposed to the "Curzon Line". And when at a later date Lord Curzon's mediation proposal was published the Soviet Govern-

ment hastened to give its reply the very same day. In it they intimated their refusal to recognise the right of Great Britain to mediate in the dispute, citing as grounds Britain's previous armed intervention in Russia, and declared their readiness to grant to Poland a frontier more favourable than the line proposed by Curzon, which was based on the decision of the Supreme Council of 8th December 1919. The Soviets suspected in Lord Curzon's adherence to that decision the effect of Russian counter-revolutionary influences on the British Foreign Office. Shortly afterwards, — on August 5th — the People's Commissar Kameneff cabled to Lloyd George that the Soviet Government "emphasises its recognition of Poland's freedom and independence, and its preparedness to grant to the Polish State wider frontiers" than could be judged from those delimited by the supreme Council that were in force at that time.

It is worth while mentioning that the attitude of the Soviet Government in this matter was then quite uninfluenced by the military situation at the time, for this cable was sent when the Soviet forces were meeting with success and a second cable in identical terms was despatched when the Russians were not winning, but the Poles.

Again, during the direct negotiations conducted at Minsk for an armistice and peace, Danishevsky, the Chairman of the Soviet Delegation, did not take the Curzon Line into account as a basis for negotiations but submitted to the Polish Delegation a project for a new frontier extending far to the East and embracing the important regions of

Bialystok and Chelm. This proposal was made at a time when the Soviet Delegation had not yet heard of the sudden change in the fortunes of the war, as a result of which the triumphal march of the Soviet forces had been transformed into a panicky retreat. It was made, therefore, in circumstances which the Soviets considered as favorable for themselves. Subsequently, of course, after their defeat, the Soviets had all the less reason to make excessive demands. It is significant, however, that, on the resumption of the negotiations at Riga, Joffe, the Chairman of the Soviet Delegation there, in declaring his readiness to subscribe to the armistice conditions and to sign the peace treaty, reiterated the Soviet declaration made on several previous occasions which rejected the Curzon Line, and stated that the Polish-Soviet frontier should lie more to the East. In fact the frontier laid down by the Treaty of Riga runs to the east of that line, but at no point does it reach the demarcation line proposed in the declaration of Chicherin, Lenin and Trotsky. This restraint in arriving at the definitive frontier between the widely different temporary demarcation lines, serves as sufficient proof that the Treaty of Riga was not signed as the result of pressure but was in fact in the nature of a compromise with a powerful neighbour. The treaty was, in fact, understood by the Great Powers in that sense. Poland's eastern frontier which had not been fixed by the Treaty of Versailles and which the Supreme Council had also not wished to determine, had at last been settled when the situation in the East had become stabilized without the participation of the Powers. When the Soviet Union

proved itself to be a permanent political creation and the dream of a Tsarist restoration had ceased to trouble the minds of the politicians in London and Paris, the Powers on the 15th March 1923 unreservedly recognised that Eastern frontier. The initiative in this move was taken by Britain. From that moment the Curzon Line disappeared from the political horizon. Independently of this the Polish-Soviet frontier was once again ratified, voluntarily and internationally — by Soviet Russia itself. This confirmation was given in the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact concluded on 25th July 1932 and renewed on 5th June 1934. This Pact was to remain effective until the end of 1945; it was broken by Russia on the 17th September 1939 not verbally but by an act of aggression. It may be assumed that the Polish-Soviet treaty concluded in London on 30th July 1941 which terminated the state of war that had existed between the two states reinstated the binding power of that Pact. From the above record of the events between 1917 and 1939 the following facts stand out:

1) The so-called "Curzon Line" was never intended as a frontier between Poland and Soviet Russia. It served in its first phase as a temporary line up to the limits of which the Powers authorised Poland to establish normal administrative institutions pending actual delimitation of the frontier. 2) In its second phase, i. e. at the time of the mediation proposal of Lord Curzon, it was likewise not intended as a frontier line but as a line on which the Polish forces were to stop. The partition effected by the Supreme

Council reserved for Poland a clear right to territorial claims eastward of that line.

3) Soviet Russia not only refused to recognise that line but openly opposed it and in official documents condemned it, seeing in it the result of counter-revolutionary intrigues at the Foreign Office.

4) Throughout the peace negotiations neither from the Polish nor from the Russian side was any reference made to the Line, and it was never the subject of even indirect negotiations. The demarcation line both at the time of its determination by the Supreme Council and during the mediation by Lord Curzon was born of practical considerations: firstly, the possibility in the minds of the Powers of a Tsarist restoration; secondly, the turn of military events. For these obvious reasons it has no connection whatsoever with national relations on the adjoining territories.

However, it frequently occurs that the point of view is expressed in the British Press that the Curzon Line constitutes an equitable boundary drawn in accordance with the preponderance of Polish and Russian (or Ukrainian) inhabitants. So, we shall very briefly dispose of that fallacy too.

It is true that on both sides of the line the Polish population is mixed with Ukrainian and Byeloruthenian (White Russian) elements. The percentage of Russian inhabitants is, however, quite negligible. In the region between the Curzon Line and the pre-1939 Polish-Russian frontier which

has an area (excluding Eastern Galicia) of some 134,000 square kilometres, there are some six million inhabitants. Of this number the Poles are in the majority with two million. The Ukrainians come next with one and a half millions, while the Byeloruthenians number 900,000, the Jews 550,000, and the Russians less than 100,000. The balance is made up by various small groups. There is therefore not the slightest ground for speaking of this territory as predominantly Russian. If any race is to be considered as predominating, it is definitively the Poles both by reason of their numbers and the economic importance.

One final remark. I often come across in the British Press the view that the occupation of Polish soil by Russia in September 1939 stopped at the Curzon Line, by reason of its character as an ethnic boundary. This view also is incorrect. The Soviet occupation of Polish territory was not directed by racial considerations but by strategical motives. Its aim was the creation of a springboard for offensive action or a defensive base — depending upon the nature of Soviet relations with their then German ally. For this reason the border of the occupied territory coincided with the Curzon Line only along the middle course of the River Bug, as is apparent from the map given here, whereas to the north and south of that sector it extended far westward. In the Polish territory occupied by the Soviets there were twelve million inhabitants, of which 4,800,000 were Poles; 4,135,000 Ukrainians; 1,700,000 Byeloruthenians; 1,050,000 Jews and only 120,000 Russians. There too therefore Poles formed the strongest group, and the Russians were an insignificant

minority. The groups next in importance to the Poles, the Ukrainians and the Byeloruthenians, were individually weaker than the Polish group, both numerically and economically. This territory, it should be added, had belonged to Poland either from the very commencement of her existence as a state (the northern part of Mazowsze with Lomza and Ostroleka) or for at least four centuries (Eastern Galicia and Lvov). At no time did they belong to Russia, unless we count a brief period during the partitions.



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