

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

19 – *Lord Salisbury's Essays*

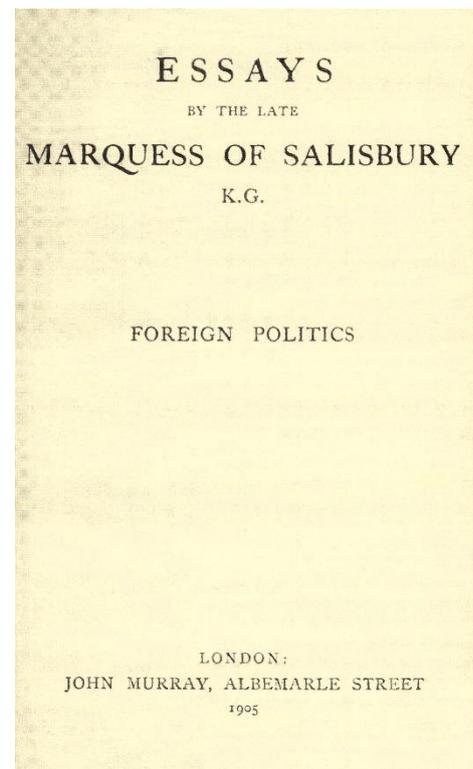
ESSAYS BY THE LATE MARQUESS OF SALISBURY K.G. – Foreign Politics

Author: Robert Gascoigne-Cecil

Publication info: John Murray, 1905
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

Keywords: Poland, Russia, partition, Liberals

Reviewer: Ian Mitchell, 3 October 2018



Reason to read: A.J.P. Taylor called the essay on Poland in this collection (one of three) “the most sensible thing ever written on Poland and Russia”. Anthony Eden quoted it in the House of Commons when debating the Yalta agreement in 1945. It stands today as a pellucid exposition of the *Russian* view of the Polish problem, one which is very unfashionable in the West in late Putin, post-Krymnash times. The essay was published in 1863, at the time of the last major revolt against Russian rule. While he does not attempt to excuse the barbarities perpetrated by Count Muraviev in suppressing the uprising, Lord Salisbury argued that the ancient animosity between the two counties was more the result of hundreds of years of *Polish* imperialism, and that the main culprit for the partitions of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century was really Prussia, not Russia as fashionable opinion in Liberal circles then believed.

Salisbury was British Foreign Secretary for four different periods, from 1878 onwards, and Prime Minister for three periods between 1885 and 1902. He is considered to have been one of the most competent British leaders of the post-Napoleonic period in terms of foreign policy, though his reputation suffered due to his being in charge when Britain provoked the Boer War in South Africa in 1899. Salisbury was a Conservative, a Unionist, an isolationist, a pessimist and a realist. He intensely disliked Liberal idealists like William Gladstone, who thought Britain should intervene in other countries' affairs all over the world on moral grounds.

This essay, which is available for free download as it is now out of copyright, is worth reading not only for its unfashionable arguments, but also for its elegant style and clarity of exposition. I doubt many modern politicians could write so readably unaided.

Main talking points: Salisbury's argument can be summarised like this:

1. “From the very first that is known, the Poles and Russians appear to have been animated by all the mutual hatred which is natural to races that are akin, but not identical.” (p. 11) The Mongols destroyed Russia but did not destroy Poland, which then took advantage of Russian disarray to advance into the western areas of Russian settlement. Moreover, “the Tatar occupation [of Russia] was prolonged mainly by the aid which Poland gave to the barbarians.” (p. 13)
2. During the century when Ivan the Great, Vasily III and Ivan the Terrible ruled Russia, much of the Polish conquest of the previous two hundred years was recovered. Soon after Ivan died, Boris Godunov got himself elected Tsar. “But he could not make himself heir to the spell which the lineage of Rurik had exercised over the Russian mind. The people who had patiently endured the cruelties of a madman at the hands of the last Ivan, resented the far milder caprices of the upstart Boris.” (p. 16) In 1605 the boyar Tsar died and his son and heir was murdered. Thereafter Russia fell into the anarchy of the Time of Troubles. Once again, Poland took full advantage, and many of the recently recovered lands were lost. “The Partition of Russian territory by Sweden and Poland does not figure in the declamations of the Liberal writers. It took place in the century previous to the partition of Poland, and was parallel to it from many points of view.... They only differed on one point. Catherine united to her empire populations who already belonged to its race and religion; Sigismund annexed to his kingdom populations which were alien to it in both. Yet the heinousness of Catherine’s proceedings has almost passed into a political axiom, while the world has heard very little of Sigismund’s misdeeds.” (p. 20)
3. After Poland (by then including Lithuania) became an elective monarchy, in 1572, it was open to the influence of outside powers’ bribery of noble electors. They could even indirectly put up candidates for election. King Sigismund’s Swedish relatives joined in the Polish attacks on Russia during the Time of Troubles, occupying Novgorod and the Baltic coast for a century.
4. By the late eighteenth century, outside influence had killed Polish independence. “The last King of Poland, Stalinlas Poniatowski, was nominated by Czarina Catherine in 1764, without any serious opposition of the other Powers of Europe. It was found necessary to spend upwards of 100,000 roubles in the purchase of patriots—in fact the Primate alone is recorded to have cost 12,000 ducats... Without, apparently, being disagreeable to the Poles, it secured to Russia as complete a mastery over the Government of Poland as England possesses over the Government of the Deccan [southern India].” (p. 27)
5. All that was left was a formal, territorial, carve-up. This has traditionally been thought to have been Catherine’s idea, but Lord Salisbury has a very different explanation. “To Frederick the Great belongs the credit of having initiated the scheme which was actually carried into execution.... Frederick had never been troubled with scruples upon the subject of territorial acquisition, and he was not likely to commence them in the case of Poland. Spoliation was the hereditary tradition of his race. The whole history of the kingdom over which he ruled was a history of lawless annexation. It was formed of territory filched from other races and other Powers, and from no Power so liberally as Poland... He had freely used Poland, without the slightest permission from her Government, as a recruiting ground for his army, and foraging ground for his Commissariat.” (p. 28)
6. Catherine acquiesced. Though questionable, “the course she took was one which the Poles, who for centuries had been a conquering race and who generally had conquered at the expense of Russia, had no right whatever to complain... She did not seize a single acre of genuinely Polish

ground.” (pp. 30, 31) This was undoubtedly a violation of the Russian commitment to uphold the integrity of what remained of Poland by the 1790s, but “it involved no breach of treaty so flagrant as the [Prussian] seizure of Silesia; it was accompanied by no deception so shameless as the red treaty by which Clive made England the mistress of Bengal.” (p. 32)

Thought(s) provoked: There are parallels with Russia today in this observation about relations between the Polish king and his most powerful noble subjects: “The Crown domains were exceedingly large, and it was the practice of the King, when elected, to farm these out at very low rents among his foremost partisans. It was the making of a man’s fortune to have been prominent among those who had supported the successful candidate.” (p. 25) Salisbury adds: “The system was not unlike that which we have seen working in America in our own day, and it bore precisely the same results.”

Incidental interest: The history of the Cossacks in today’s Ukraine, and how Polish arrogance drove them to abandon their liberty for subordination to Moscow in the 1650s. (pp. 36-8)

Style: Graceful, clear and, in places, quite witty.

Smile(s): Lord Salisbury was very much a creature of his time. When talking of serfdom, he says, “To estimate fully the depth of degradation to which the Polish nobles had reduced their slaves [i.e. serfs], it must be remembered that these were no negroes, men of an inferior race imported from a barbarous land and incapable of the acute and sensitive feelings of the white man”!!! (p. 54) Yet he appointed the first Indian to an important imperial position in London, and was happy to fight the Boer War because he so disliked the racism of the Afrikaners.

Author: Robert Gascoigne-Cecil was the third Marquess of Salisbury, and a direct descendent of Sir Robert Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s famous state counsellor. He left Eton early due to bullying, and got the lowest class of degree possible at Oxford. He then disobeyed his father and married for love, rather than for family money. He therefore had to work for a living, becoming a journalist and, in time, the most highly esteemed thinker on the British political “right”. This essay is one of hundreds which he wrote for the *Saturday* and *Quarterly Reviews*. He was immensely wealthy and, as a result, unconcerned with his public image. In Hatfield House, his seat in Hertfordshire, he installed the first electric light system in such a property, and also an internal telephone network. Because nobody could find a use for telephones when they had plenty of servants to convey messages, Salisbury would call up guests in different rooms and recite nursery rhymes to them. He did not like living in England, and much preferred the modest house he owned at Deauville in France. Though immensely tall, he died of the consequences of obesity.

Overall recommendation level: EXTREMELY HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>