

THE BATTLE OF OSTROLENKA¹

(9 June 1831)

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Nothing can move governments. That much we know. They have become like bronze statues that people sprinkle with blood to soften them, but which have no heart and do not pronounce oracles in favor of victory. Of what use is it to tell them we were defeated? Of what use is it to tell them the number of the dead, to speak of generals fallen with the soldiers, to report that the field of battle was large, the graves were deep, the glory boundless, the pain full of courage and of religion? Of what use is it to tell them all this? They know it already; they have ambassadors, couriers; they overlook no drop of blood; they know that there is so much more to spill, after which there will be no more. Then they will come forth; within their studies, they have plans already prepared, treaties *fearless and blameless*.² They will throw their cloaks down on the battleground so as to sit more comfortably and speak there of the major interests of nations: what more could you ask of them?

We ask nothing of them. But we wish to distinguish our cause from theirs, and to protest, like Daniel, that *we are innocent of the bloodshed*. That blood flows for France, it flows for Christ and for freedom; how could we not protest that it is sacred? How could we remain silent about it given the silence of kings? Kings and people no longer speak the same language; let everyone look to his honor.

The very day after Poland's revolution, Catholics encouraged it, and every time it becomes wretched, they will give it signs of hope and of love. It should not give way to fear, even if in Warsaw it retained only its flag on a mound of corpses! God, Whose secrets are impenetrable, nonetheless, in the darkness wherein men live, makes some of His profound thoughts shine brightly when they are about to be fulfilled. There is one of these that He has revealed to this century by signs that do not deceive. Kings hasten to ruin. Having become the scourges of religion, whether by schism or heresy, whether by hatred

of the Catholic establishment which has left them only a semblance and the name *Christian*, God has abandoned them. It is enough to glance at the thrones of Europe to see that what is sitting on them is but a ghost of the past, I do not know what kind of powerless shadow lacking thought and life. God wishes to preserve religion by means of freedom. Again, it is enough to look at Europe to see that, in fact, freedom is hallowed, and that its head is the only one that wears a crown. Whoever follows these decrees from eternal sovereignty needs to walk without fear, assured that a million Tartars cannot lift up what God has brought low. The kings have abandoned Poland: this is proof that their final hour has arrived. Indeed, if they had any spark left of the spirit of God, they would have understood that only justice could recall the glory gained under their scepter; instead of waiting like slaves for power to decide their fate, they would again have strengthened the virtue of royalty. But the thought never came to them, and so, they assembled countless soldiers, not to wage war, but to keep them from becoming afraid within their palaces — which, in fact, they did not succeed in doing. Poland alone stood up in the midst of those terrified thrones; it fought all by itself. God had clearly proved, against all hope, that it had received a mission from Him. What was there to fear? It is not only the advanced sentinel of freedom, but also the sentinel of God.

“Always,” Mr. de Maistre³ has said, “there is a certain equilibrium in the political sphere, but it does not hinge on man to break it, if we except certain rare, precise, and limited cases; that is why leagues are so difficult. If they were not difficult — with politics so little governed by justice — every day groups of men would assemble together to destroy a government. But such projects rarely succeed; even the weak eludes them with an ease that astonishes in history. When a predominant power frightens the entire universe, anger grows at being unable to find a way to stop it. Bitter reproaches are directed against egoism and the immorality of the cabinets that prevent people from assembling together to ward off the common danger. That was the cry heard during the good days of Louis XIV; basically, however, those complaints were baseless. One coalition between several sovereigns, built on the principles of untainted and disinterested ethics would be a miracle. God does not owe miracles to anyone. He who does not establish useless coalitions uses two much simpler means to restore equilibrium: sometimes the giant slits his own throat, *sometimes a very inferior power casts into his path an imperceptible obstacle, but one that subsequently grows, no one knows how, and becomes insurmountable*. Like a weak reed caught in the current of a river that ends up creating an accumulation that diverts it.”

Such is the mission of Poland, even greater because it is a case not of preserving the political equilibrium of Europe, but its religion and its freedom. Indeed, who can imagine without trembling what either one will become if Poland is destroyed? What king would defend them? Ha! We are aware of their love for freedom, and Rome is aware of their love for religion! Is there one of them who has shown for the Poles some feeling of compassion, who admired their bravery, bemoaned the disproportion of their weapons, dared to express a moan in public? Certainly not: the closest ones surrounded this unfortunate country with a belt of bronze and rained bullets on the few soldiers who went to their death for them. They allowed enemy columns to enter their territory to turn away the Poles; moreover, they took as prisoners the Poles who had the misfortune of entrusting themselves to their generosity. They did not even have the modesty of maintaining an impartial neutrality. Surrounded on all sides by heartless neighbors, Poland stretched out its arms further, believing that France had pity for some old soldiers who had served it. But it was written that the rostrum of France would not speak one word which could encourage the children of its companions in arms. Europe was immobile, mute, frozen; it mobilized a million men to watch Poland die, and it did not even tell Poland: Well done! Mr. de Maistre believed that coalitions are difficult; that is also what I believe. What is astonishing is that Europe had been capable of so merciless and universal a coalition against a country loved by all of Europe.

If governments were capable of providing the world — before the victory of the Russians — with a spectacle so dismal and so novel, what will happen next? Voltaire used to say: I would not like to deal with an atheist prince, because if he had any reason to crush me in a mortar, I would assuredly be crushed. As for me, I would rather deal with atheist princes than with princes who call themselves Christian and who treated Poland with remorseless cowardice. Still, please God that it was indeed cowardice! And yet, on the day of judgment when there will be no more palaces, no more chamberlains, no more velvet, silk, and ribbons on the chest, when one will be able to read hearts, perhaps we will see then and there that hell never did instigate against the Catholic religion and against freedom more horrible plots than those of our time. Those atheist princes will fail, thank God! If they do not fail, the Poles will be grateful to be dead, the first to die in their country, in the shadow of their religion, with such noble glory. As for us, we will be drinking the dregs of the chalice, and this is what they will be: mud mixed in blood.

ENDNOTES [Trans.]

1. Uprising of Poland against Russia, 26 May 1831.
2. Originally said of Pierre du Terrail (1426-1524), Chevalier de Bayard.
3. Joseph-Marie, Count de Maistre (1751-1821); French writer and philosopher.

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Excerpt from *Lacordaire Journaliste*, 1830-1848. Delhomme et Briquet. Paris, 1897. [Compiled by Paul Fesch]