

The portrait of a nation: Poland through the eyes of the British press September 1938 - August 1939

Donald Trinder

Summary

During the Crisis of September 1938, a mere 23% of British people favoured an armed intervention in defence of Czechoslovakia. It is possibly this lack of enthusiasm for war which prompted Chamberlain to tell the BBC ‘How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.’ It is quite possible that Chamberlain was speaking for himself when he used ignorance as an excuse for not going to war (Churchill once famously stated that for the PM ‘Europe [...] was only a greater Birmingham’). Interestingly, less than one year later, the same polling organisation reported that 83% of those polled were in favour of war in defence of Poland. This change of heart took place in spite of the fact that 12 months was hardly sufficient time for a nation to become educated in European geography. Of course, some of this martial sentiment would have been provoked by an understanding of the need to face down the growing Nazi threat to British security, but, as was reported by Mass-Observation, there was a great anger at the way in which Poland had been victimised, and a true belief that Britain had a moral obligation to stand in defence of Poland in honour of their commitments of March 1939.

What makes this sentiment even more fascinating is that during the inter-war period, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a relatively positive press image as a liberal democracy in the heart of Europe, an image that was only enhanced by the spread of fascism in the 1930s. Conversely, the narrative pertaining to Poland was formed in the immediate aftermath of WWI by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who found the attitude of the Polish delegation to the Paris Peace Conference to be obstructionist and petty in their attempts to form a viable independent state that ran counter to British policies for the region. Over the period of the Polish-Bolshevik War, Polish policy ran counter to British wishes: whether it be in the provision of arms for the Polish military, which Lloyd George vehemently opposed; or the demarcation of Polish borders, with Polish sentiment being for the recreation of a state closely resembling the pre-Partition Kingdom while the British sought to limit Polish dreams to a relatively homogenous population. This gave rise to the right wing view of Poland as a “petty imperialist” power, which was one of two of the dominant narratives concerning Poland in the inter-war period in the British press. The second

pertained to the perceived discrimination shown by Polish authorities towards minorities, especially the Jewish community. Despite the findings of the Morgenthau Report presenting a complete vindication of Polish behaviour, the belief remained, especially among left-leaning publications, that Poland was strongly anti-Semitic, and was also later to be accused of extremely repressive measures against other ethnic minorities – especially the Ukrainians. These two narratives provided the basic framework of the image of Poland for the typical British reader up until Poland became one of the major players on the European political stage around the time of the Nazi partition of Czechoslovakia. So the superficial view is that the British went to war, if not eagerly then at least with conviction, in defence of a country which held values that were completely abhorrent to the establishment of the United Kingdom.

This leads us to the main research question of this thesis, namely; what was the image of Poland portrayed in the British press in the Period from September 1938 to the signing of the Military Alliance on August 25th 1939? This timeframe has been chosen because prior to September 1938, Poland remained a peripheral figure in European politics, and the vast majority of material including Poland was of a purely descriptive function. However, as Jozef Beck and the Polish Government began to agitate and press for the annexation of the Teschen region, Poland became a player of much greater significance, and consequently attracted far greater levels of comment on the pages of the main British daily newspapers. The cut-off point of the 25th August is significant because it marks the crossing of a symbolic Rubicon: as Britain finally made a firm military commitment the press focus turned more to the question of whether or not Britain should become embroiled in a general European conflagration.

Next, it is important to explain why the focus of the work is on the printed press. Yes, it is true that the British public in the 1930s had access to three basic media outlets: the printed press, radio and cinema newsreels. However, because of the zealous defence of its privileged position as the fourth estate, both radio and newsreel were limited in their scope to providing factual information only, without the possibility of adding a layer of analysis or comment. It may be true that a picture tells a thousand words, but in the case of the broadcast media, the pictures painted were bland and purely informative or educational. The traditional press, however, had free rein to analyse, criticise and embellish, with the result that print journalists had a huge influence over the way in which the issues of the day were presented to the public. Which leads us to the next point: that the British were an incredibly well-read nation. The average sales of national newspapers in the second half of the 1930s exceeded 15 million copies per day, an astonishing one newspaper per 3

members of the population – every day. More importantly, these publications did not remain the exclusive purview of the middle and upper classes. Many of the papers were written for and distributed among the working classes, including the Daily Express, Mirror, Mail, Star, News Chronicle and Daily Herald. As well as including all of the national dailies, two highly influential regional papers have been included: the Manchester Guardian and the Yorkshire Post. The Manchester Guardian, despite being published in Manchester, was read throughout the United Kingdom and enjoyed an unrivalled reputation for its coverage of foreign affairs under the guidance of the highly talented Diplomatic Editor, Frederick Voigt. The Yorkshire Post was edited by one of the most influential men in the press at the time, Chairman of the Press Association, Arthur Mann. The Yorkshire Post had moved into the mainstream in 1936 as it was Mann's decision to break the news of the opposition of the Church to the relationship between Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, thus fomenting the Abdication Crisis. Mann remained the one and only newspaper editor who opposed the policy of Appeasement from its very beginning, urging the government to take a strong stance against Nazi attempts to rewrite the terms of the Versailles Treaty. As well as the daily press, a number of influential periodicals have also been included because they all helped to shape the national discourse. These include a number of well-established titles such as the Economist, the New Statesman, Punch and Spectator, as well as certain publications that had been set up to 'enlighten' the public as to the real events unfolding on continental Europe, such as Truth, The Arrow and the Whitehall News.

The reason that the research question is important is that if the description of Poland can be properly established based upon the way in which the press portrayed Poland, then using the linguistic tools of Intertextuality and Discourse Analysis it is possible to extrapolate this imagery onto the mind of the reader, thus in a pseudo-anthropological way, it is possible to see the image which the reader had of Poland at the outbreak of World War Two. The actual opinions they held, or the discussions they had, are of less importance and would, in fact, be impossible to recreate. The polls of BIPO were conducted on populations of about 1,300-1,500, and can hardly be described as a true window into the soul of the residents of Britain in the late 1930s. Equally, Charles Madge, the founder of Mass-Observation, was quite clear in stating that public opinion was a rather spurious concept, which newspaper editors and journalists bandied around as they pleased generally to justify their own opinions. In fact, according to Madge, public opinion was generally 'nothing more than the opinions of those who surrounded the newspaper editors or politicians on any given day.' Indeed, not one single newspaper

had an affiliated polling apparatus – as is common today – and the Government made no recourse to the opinions of focus groups. With this in mind it would be a very dangerous step to start to talk about public opinion. Indeed it seems somewhat foolhardy for Daniel Hücker to retrospectively apply certain understandings of the manifestation of public opinion in order to correlate the ending of Chamberlain's policy of Appeasement with what the public actually felt. One thing that a study of the early BIPO results demonstrates clearly is an unfailing loyalty amongst the British public towards their political masters. At the beginning of May, in the run up to the invasion of France and facing utter humiliation in Norway, Chamberlain enjoyed the support of over 70% of respondents to the Polls, while the overwhelming majority believed him to be the best man to conduct the British war effort. Just one month later, during Churchill's darkest hour, as France faced utter annihilation and the BEF were being extracted from the beaches of Dunkirk, he enjoyed similar poll ratings.

Given such apparent levels of almost blind loyalty to the ruling class, I believe it would be appropriate to ignore the Agenda Setting Theory, which states that the mass media decides what topics the general public thinks about, but does not form their opinions. Given the paucity of informational input available to the press-reading population of the United Kingdom in the 1930s, it is quite valid to suggest that that which the reader read formed the basis of the opinions which they expressed. As previously mentioned, the BBC Wireless services maintained a strict impartiality which prevented them from providing any form of comment or analysis, and the Newsreels played a similar role to the cinema-going audience. Using the theory of Intertextuality, it is possible to discern the basic factual information contained within a news report from the opinions which the journalist wishes to convey: the choice of language helps to build a picture in the mind of the reader, and it is defining this picture which is the main aim of this thesis.

In addition to this, an effort will be made to establish the editorial politics of each of the newspapers and periodicals under consideration. In some cases, such as with The Times and The Manchester Guardian, this is a relatively easy task as the archives of the papers are open and the private papers of the individuals involved are easily accessible. Also, being such prominent and influential titles, the history of the two is well documented. Other newspapers, however, have proven to be more troublesome; either through a lack of accessibility or unwillingness to cooperate. Thus the stories about how and why the various newspapers changed their narratives remains only partially complete, and it remains

the hope that persistence and further investigation will provide further substance to this narrative.

Given the incredible variety of structure and influence which existed within the British Press, the first chapter provides an overview of each of the titles which have been included in this study. This will include a potted history of the newspaper, plus an identification of the key figures in the establishment of the paper's copy and editorial standpoint, and a broad insight into the title's political inclination. This, it is hoped, provides a clear context for what follows, and also helps to understand the starting point of each newspaper in terms of its level of coverage of foreign affairs, and the attitudes of the relevant individuals to Germany and Poland.

The Second Chapter covers the period from September 1938 to the end of February 1939. During this period, the coverage of Poland focused on a number of issues including (but not only) Polish claims and efforts to acquire the Teschen region, the growing influence of Poland in central Europe, the conflict between Poland and Germany over the Nazi expulsion of Polish Jews, Polish treatment of its minorities and German-Polish relations. It shows the generally hostile attitude which most newspapers adopted to what was broadly viewed as a clumsy act of opportune imperialism, and how this then diversified over the ensuing five-month period. The most anti-Polish picture was consistently painted by the Daily Express, which was effectively a mouthpiece for its owner, Lord Beaverbrook, a man with political ambitions and an eye on government. Their view was that Poland was a backward militaristic state, very much in the pocket of the Germans, and every single article has a pejorative undertone, which, given the incredible attention to detail displayed by Editor Arthur Christiansen, can only lead to the conclusion that the portrait painted for the readers of the Express was entirely deliberate. On an interesting note, and to highlight the unique circumstances that existed within each of the papers, it is curious that another Beaverbrook-owned title – The London Evening Standard – chose immediately upon his resignation from the Government to employ Duff Cooper as a regular foreign affairs columnist. As it becomes clear that Danzig and the question of Ukrainian independence are bound to become pressing issues in the coming year (1939), some publications seek to take a more emollient tone, with papers such as the Daily Telegraph and the previously critical Economist indicating quite clearly that Polish existence was inextricably linked to the free city maintaining its independence.

The third Chapter looks closely at the month of March 1939 and the immediate aftermath of the British guarantee, especially the two-week period between the German establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia

and Moravia and the unilateral announcement by Chamberlain the guarantee of Polish independence. Once again it examines the range of opinions held, both on and off the pages of the press, and also looks at the unity which developed in opposition to The Times leader which undermined the validity of the guarantee, effectively suggesting that the road to a Nazi annexation of Danzig was well and truly open. In what initially appears to be a carbon copy of the infamous leader column of September 7th, 1938, in which Geoffrey Dawson became the first person to suggest openly the idea of ceding the Sudetenland to the Germans, The Times seemed to suggest that negotiating over the future of Danzig was not connected with a promise to uphold and defend Polish territorial integrity, and that any territorial correction was still on the negotiating table. Part of the interest in this chapter is the role of the correspondents, and how influential they feel they are in the development of events. There is a persistent conjecture that there is a very close relationship between the foreign press corps in any given city and the intelligence services. Indeed, one might argue that the role of a foreign correspondent and an intelligence officer is very similar – to cultivate sources to gain information that goes beyond that which is already in the public domain. Ian Colvin, of the Daily Herald, was a perfect example, as can be seen by his well-documented direct intervention with Halifax and Chamberlain in the days prior to the issuing of the guarantee. Despite the lingering beliefs, there is very little evidence to link the foreign press corps in Berlin and other European cities with MI6. However, there were a number of private initiatives in this field, such as the private network of agents which directly reported to Frederick Voigt of The Manchester Guardian, or the almost mythological ‘Z Network’ of Robert Vansittart, the former Chief Secretary of the Foreign Office. What remains unquestionable is that the people who scooped the stories had a certain feeling of their own greatness, as can be seen by the correspondence between Marcel Fodor and Manchester Guardian editor William Crozier. From this it emerges that Fodor has the freedom to take himself where he pleases, and writes extensively about how the European situation will unfold. His letters are strewn with sources, although no concrete information is provided as to the precise nature of those feeding him his information. To be perfectly honest it is just as likely that most journalistic sources were nothing more than the result of late-night gossip in the bars of Berlin and Warsaw between members of the foreign press pack.

The fourth and final part of the work deals with the period between the official state visit of Colonel Beck at the beginning of April 1939 and the conclusion of the Military Agreement on August 25th. The main focus of this chapter is to determine the general level of support for Poland as a

'victim' of Nazi aggression of each of the papers, and also the extent to which the papers supported the idea of war in defence of Danzig. An interesting aside is provided by the sudden glut of Polish journalists who became contracted to specific titles in order to provide a 'view from Poland', and thus an attempt has been made to find out who these journalists are, and how they brought influence to bear.

One current which runs throughout is the influence which outside agents sought to exert on the content of daily newspapers. To start with, there is the obvious effort of Chamberlain and the Cabinet designed to swing the press behind the official Government line. Chamberlain adopted a multi-pronged approach to this task, including the use of influential Ministers and members of the peerage to intervene directly with owners, empowering the Conservative Research Department and the National Publicity Bureau to conduct a positive propaganda campaign to promote the cause of peace, and even buying their own title to run a subversive campaign against anybody who stood in their way. On the opposite side of the coin there are the anti-Appeasers, led by Churchill, Amery and Anthony Eden. Churchill was an especially active agent in this sense, penning a number of 'guest columns' on a monthly basis, and writing a regular feature for the Daily Mirror, which, amongst the Fleet Street dailies, had been the most vociferous critic of Chamberlain since the beginning of his term of office. Interestingly, Churchill's profuse output may have been a reflection of the depth of his feeling on the subject of the Nazi threat, but could also have been the result of his dire financial situation. An interesting addition to the wealth of material on Churchill was made by David Lough, who carefully investigated Churchill's parlous financial situation, and demonstrated how as Churchill's finances plummeted into the red in the second half of the 1930s, his agent was placed under increasing pressure to find more sources of income from the publication of articles. Naturally, as the threat of war grew, so too did demand for the Churchillian pen. Finally, there were foreign agents, of which the lead was unquestionably taken by Polish Ambassador Count Edward Raczyński. Following his appointment to the Court of St. James in 1934, one of the key elements of his terms of reference was to improve the nature of the relationship between the British press and Poland, and to try to positively influence the nature of reporting. On the whole, Raczyński was unsuccessful in his task, as can be seen by the episode in which he dined with Beaverbrook to try to bring the peer onside, and to get him to exert influence on both Christiansen and Frank Owen (the left-leaning Editor of the Evening Standard) to encourage them to be less critical of the Polish government, especially Foreign Minister Beck. During what Raczyński reported as having been a most sociable and amiable of

meetings, Beaverbrook agreed to tone things down a bit. The following day The Evening Standard led with an editorial containing a thinly veiled attack on those who sought to undermine the independence of the British press, an article which Raczyński felt was written by Beaverbrook personally as a direct admonishment to the ‘errant’ ambassador.

The most fascinating aspect of this thesis is the huge variety of influences that led to the painting of a complex and often contradictory portrait of Poland. It is unquestionable that in 1938, Poland did not enjoy the favour of Fleet Street, and the attitude towards the acquisition of Teschen was, to put it mildly, vitriolic. If the British had been asked to go to war in defence of Poland in September 1938 the result would undoubtedly have been the same as with Czechoslovakia. 12 months later the British view of Poland had altered radically. Of course, from a political perspective, the need to fight Germany had become paramount, and this should not be overlooked, except for Beaverbrook and the Daily Express. On the other hand, the newspaper reading public were fully aware of the existence of Poland, of the nature of the free city of Danzig and its importance in the maintenance of her independence. The discrepancy of opinions occurred with respect to how important this was to British sovereignty, and how deserving Poland was of British support. Thus it is possible to conclude that the British went to war in defence of a country, about which they were fully informed. The portrait was more of an Oliver Cromwell ‘warts and all’ than Holbein’s ‘Anne of Cleves’, tending to focus on the ugly side of the Polish state. By August 1939 some publications had been brought round to the desperate plight of Poland, with the most radical volte face being the Economist. In the period October 1938 to April 1939 not one single positive word on the subject of Poland can be found in its bi-weekly pages. Once, however, the nature of the threat to Polish existence became clear, it is as if an instant redemption took place and Poland’s claims on her own territory were suddenly justified, and the politics of Beck were unimpeachable. On the flip side of the coin, the obdurate Daily Express managed to remain obdurately hostile to Poland, and even in mid-August 1944 Christiansen felt confident enough to lead with the Headline ‘No War before ‘44’, and opined about the fact that Europe’s borders had been liable to alteration throughout history, and the traditional fluidity should not suddenly be brought to an end.

To conclude, the impression we are left with is of an imperfect nation that enjoyed little love in Britain until it became the subject of Nazi demands. At this point, we might hark back to the traditional proverb which states that ‘adversity makes the strangest bedfellows’, and part of the transformation in the reporting of Poland is undoubtedly the result of pragmatism. However, as an increasing number of special correspondents

descended on Poland, their understanding of the country became first hand, rather than anecdotal, and this certainly had a positive impact on the way in which she was portrayed. More importantly, however, the evolution of the sketch over the eleven months prior to the outbreak of the war provides a fascinating insight into the intricate workings of the British press, and the vast array of actors who were struggling to get their voices heard on the pages of Britain's daily newspapers.