

THE RETURN OF COLONEL BECK



by Ralph Berry

POLAND IS NOW THE NEW GREAT POWER OF EUROPE. This startling headline appeared in the *TELEGRAPH* (30 March), and was composed by Con Coughlin, the regular cheerleader for the company position which is unwavering support for Zelensky and total rejection of whatever chances Russia might have. I am tempted to recline on the ancient folk wisdom of International affairs, that Russia is never so strong or so weak as it may appear. But Coughlin's claim is phrased so provocatively that it calls for a sharper response.

In the late 1930s Poland was the epicentre of European diplomacy. It was governed by Colonel Beck, appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Pilsudski government of 1932 who thereafter ran Polish policy on a tight rein till the catastrophe of war in April 1939. Nothing in the intricate

maneuvering of the European players could be done without his taking part. For years Beck played a game of courtship with Hitler, and in 1934 he signed a ten-year non-aggression pact with Hitler. That went, and in the run-up to war, Beck accepted Chamberlain's insane offer of a guarantee to Poland. A.J.P. Taylor described how Beck received word that Britain would back Poland all the way:

The [British] ambassador read out Chamberlain's assurance. Beck accepted it "between two flicks of the ash off his cigarette." Two flicks; and British grenadiers would fight for Danzig. Two flicks; and the illusory great Poland, created in 1919 signed her death warrant.

Two flicks of the ash off the colonel's cigarette and the fate of the British Empire and fifty million people was sealed. That was Taylor's mordant verdict.

Beck's judgment was that the British guarantee had substance behind it. He had no idea that there was none; Chamberlain's guarantee was an empty bluff. It did not fool Hitler, but it did fool Chamberlain. Beck took Poland into a war which was lost in three weeks (a late success for the short-war believers), Britain having no serious military aid to give. The Polish Government with Beck fled to Rumania, where Beck died in 1944.

Colonel Beck embodied the great power illusion of Poland, and its mortal overconfidence. The psychology of the man comes out in a revealing memoir by Lady Diana Cooper, THE RAINBOW COMES AND GOES.

She was a great beauty and also a witty and perceptive writer. Married to Duff Cooper, she accompanied him on a visit to Poland in 1938 when he was First Lord of the Admiralty (this was before Munich).

They had many opportunities of seeing and judging Beck, and a photograph in Lady Diana's book says a great deal. It is of

the two men, Beck and Duff Cooper. Beck is making a sales pitch in his expansive way, and Duff Cooper, evidently bored stiff, is having none of it. Lady Diana saw a deal of Beck on a variety of social occasions and found nothing to impress her. His defining trait was to repeat at frequent intervals in a room-echoing performance his signature line, THERE IS ONLY ONE BECK. This alone might raise doubts as to his capacities. History has not endorsed Beck's celebration of self.

I think we should wait to see how the *Telegraph's* vision of a new rising star plays out. There are growing signs that the Poles' readiness to take on Russia is not shared by other EU members, including France. In particular, the Polish call for jet fighters, so that their pilots can renew their feats of the Battle of Britain while practising on Russian drones, does not strike non-Poles as plausible or desirable.

The situation has echoes of the past. The strange complicity between Poland/Ukraine and Britain is of two overconfident powers straining at the natural limits on their capacities. Rising stars are welcomed in the world of entertainment, less so in high politics.