Kurski: We Have Already Once Sold the Ukrainians to Soviet Russia. Let Us Not Do It Again

There were such people, there are such people, and there will continue to be such people — though somehow always too few, always not enough. One would wish for more Prometheans among us Poles.

Once, at the summer house of a close friend in Masuria — a house that had still belonged to his parents — I came across a small bookcase where, like a white raven perched on an old branch, there sat a rarity: *Memoirs* by Stanisław Stempowski, published by Ossolineum in the darkest depths of the Stalinist night, in 1953. Intriguingly, the volume was preceded by an extensive introduction by Maria Dąbrowska.

The memoirs were written in the language of a free man, describing his youthful years spent on the family estate in Podolia, school rebellions in Kamianets-Podilskyi, studies in revolutionary Dorpat, intoxication with ideas of social justice and independence, and finally political engagement — the revolution of 1905, socialism, Freemasonry, persecution, arrests, and exile. Particularly striking, and deeply illuminating, were Stempowski's observations concerning relations with the Ukrainian peasantry from the time when he managed the Winikowce estate.

In short, a multitude of themes already explored by critics and literary scholars. For the purposes of this review of the *Memoirs*, I will select one theme — today the most important and most topical: a Free Ukraine.

There could be no better or more symbolic moment to invoke Prometheus. The remarkable figure of Stanisław Stempowski — a socialist (paradoxically!), a landowner, a friend of Ukrainians (he said he carried within himself a dual identity, Polish and Ukrainian), by the will of Józef Piłsudski a minister in the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic, an antagonist of National Democratic Poland, an erudite, and a Freemason.

All three volumes of his *Memoirs* — I stress: all of them — have just been published. They are the result of a multi-year research project conducted by the Institute of Documentation and Studies on Polish Literature, involving work to merge the entirety of the *Memoirs* preserved in the archives of the University of Warsaw Library, Maisons-Laffitte, Bern, and Rapperswil. Editorial work has saved the complete text. Cooperation with Więź Publishing House and the support of the Lanckoroński Foundation made this impressive edition possible.

On the basis of this consolidated whole, a Ukrainian edition of the *Memoirs* has been prepared by the young Ukrainian historian Maksym Potapenko. Publication is planned for June 2026. The book will be published by the Kyiv-based press *Dukh i Litera* with the support of the Polonika Institute. At present, everything depends on electricity supplies to the printing house.

Stempowski wrote his memoirs at the twilight of his life, in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation. It was undoubtedly an attempt to escape the horror of everyday reality — a kind of intellectual teleportation by an old, sensitive man who could no longer actively

engage in the struggle, but did not wish to leave the world without a warning forged by history upon his own skin.

During the Bolshevik Revolution, the family estate in Winikowce, in the Lityn district near Vinnytsia — that is, beyond the Zbruch River — was lost forever. Stempowski describes the process of destruction in detail, much like Gustave Le Bon in his *Psychology of the Crowd*.

First, law and authority must disappear, replaced by chaos disguised as social — in this case Bolshevik — justice. Then various marauders, riffraff, and deserters from the front appear.

Increasingly frequent reports arrive of rapes, murders, and arson attacks on neighboring estates. At night, the glow of fires illuminates the horizon.

Finally, the marauders arrive. They are hungry and initially “only want food,” so they are fed. They drink. They slaughter livestock and plunder supplies. Eventually, one of them crosses the symbolic threshold and enters the house. Others follow. An avalanche begins.

They take whatever can be carried away. Then comes the next phase — the destruction and defilement of everything that cannot be removed: smashing mirrors, pounding the piano with fists, hacking wardrobes and drawers open with axes. Finally, the pursuit and inventive murder of the owners, if they have not managed to flee in time. The closing act is the destructive fire that consumes whatever remains.

Stempowski called this a “pogrom.” And rightly so, because the mechanism of this criminal frenzy is the same as that directed against Jews — the victim is a defenseless, stigmatized minority. A friendly Ukrainian peasant from Winikowce confessed to Stempowski, who had taken refuge in the city with his family at the last moment:
“Sir, have you heard the parable of Job? You are Job now.”

The Bolshevik Revolution cut off the foundations of existence for a prosperous landed family. From then on, Stempowski would live in Warsaw and work as a librarian at the Ministry of Agriculture. Before that, however, he would become an envoy of Józef Piłsudski, who wanted a free, Poland-friendly Ukraine to serve as a buffer between Poland and Russia. Stempowski became a minister in the government of the Ukrainian People’s Republic and one of the promoters of the Piłsudski–Petliura alliance. The turmoil and chaos of those times are vividly captured in his memoirs.

In 1920, another tragedy struck him. He lost his youngest and, one may assume, most beloved son, Paweł — a blow from which he would never fully recover. Eventually, he separated from his wife. He did, however, form a bond with the recently widowed and much younger writer Maria Dąbrowska.

There are outstanding individuals whose greatness is attested by their works. But there are also those whose greatness was known only to their contemporaries — personalities who left no monumental works behind, yet were exceptional because they radiated influence, shaped milieus, formed ideas, and affected public opinion. Such was Stempowski.

And although he was a sage, an erudite, and the first reader and critical reviewer of Maria Dąbrowska's texts, he himself — apart from the now-published *Memoirs* and his correspondence — left no literary works or essays, unlike his son Jerzy Stempowski.

Maria Dąbrowska understood this. With determination, she sought the publication of Stempowski's *Memoirs* in communist Poland, preferably during his lifetime — something the author himself also desired.

Stalinist censorship and the class-origin "incorrectness" of the author were relatively minor obstacles compared to others that might have consigned the work to oblivion. For the fate of the manuscript itself was dramatic, inscribed into the tragedy of insurgent Warsaw — a city poised atop the volcano of history.

Stempowski wrote by hand, producing only one copy. As a precaution, however, the text was typed in two copies. Each typescript was deposited with a different friendly Warsaw family. Both were independently burned during the Warsaw Uprising — as Dąbrowska writes — together with their inhabitants.

And the manuscript? It had been placed in safe-deposit box no. 186 in the PKO bank vault in Warsaw and was recovered two years later from the ruins in a partially destroyed state by Stanisław Lorentz. Fortunately, the author survived and painstakingly reconstructed the missing pages.

Dąbrowska's efforts to secure publication of the *Memoirs* lasted a long time, and the eventual consent of the authorities should be understood as a kind of magnanimous gesture by the communists toward a respected writer. The book was published in 1953 by Ossolineum in Wrocław, in a truncated form, of course — without the years 1914–1920, which are crucial for understanding the background of Polish–Ukrainian relations. Sadly, Stanisław Stempowski did not live to see this.

Jerzy Giedroyc later published fragments of the *Memoirs* in the *Historical Notebooks* of the Paris-based *Kultura*, relying on manuscripts provided by Jerzy Stempowski, the author's son.

And today, we have a celebration: the publication of the complete work, in three volumes — graphically refined, superbly edited, furnished with annotations and an introduction to each volume by Dr. Łukasz Mikołajewski. This is a book that should not be missing from the shelf of any Polish intellectual.

Stempowski, raised by Ukrainian nannies, spoke Ukrainian better than Polish in his childhood; Polish he learned later, eventually mastering it to perfection. He was a Ukrainophile.

I was impressed by his ability to call things by their proper names and by his courage in breaking with the falsely understood solidarity of the Polish landed gentry in the so-called Eastern Borderlands. For this, he was constantly attacked in the National Democratic and conservative press.

It is no coincidence that I quote Gałczyński's poem at the outset. For the nationalist right, Stempowski embodied the most detestable traits imaginable: intellectualism, elitism, liberalism, philosemitism, Ukrainophilia, Freemasonry, socialism, and affiliation with Józef Piłsudski's camp. And on top of that, as a landowner he believed that the Polish nobility

treated Ukraine as a colony, and their estates in Podolia the way the French or British treated their latifundia in Africa. There, white farms were surrounded by seas of Arab or Black populations. How, then, did Polish landowners differ, those who referred to Ukrainians working on their estates as “my Ruthenians”?

Let us, however, give the floor to Stempowski himself:

“I decided in my heart that Poles constituted only a negligible fraction of the population in Podolia; that as the people are, so the country is and will be; and that Poles could exist there only as parasitic colonists unless they integrated their economic, cultural, social, and political activity with the interests and future of that people — while remaining Poles nonetheless, even accentuating that Polishness, which history might one day make use of for the purpose of fraternal coexistence between two nations and for bridging the chasm dug between us by the colonizing, blind, and arrogant policies of the gentry and magnates.

Among the landed class in Podolia, however, I saw either gamblers, greyhound racers, and fairground types, or puffed-up gentlemen and ladies, or people thoughtless and dissolute — or, at best, *bon vivants* and social deadweight.

All these categories of so-called Borderland Poles were easy prey for the murky and mendacious ideology of the National Democrats, brandishing God and Fatherland — except that these ‘Borderlanders’ cunningly identified the fatherland with their estates and coined the bizarre term ‘Polish state of possession,’ by which they meant Polish landowners.”

In our own times, Polish colonialism in the East has been extensively written about by Daniel Beauvois, who, unlike any Polish historian, spent decades studying archives and social relations in the Kyiv region, Volhynia, and Russian Podolia. Yet Polish historiography treats him with hostility, because his conclusions concerning the relationship between the Polish, Catholic manor and the Ukrainian, Orthodox village do not fit — to put it mildly — into National Democratic narratives or the Sienkiewicz-style tableaux with which Polish youth are fed from their school desks.

This was no idyll; it more closely resembled slavery on the cotton plantations of Louisiana. And so — charge at Daniel Beauvois! For not only is he French, but he is “not even a historian,” merely a Polish studies scholar, and “we will not allow foreigners writing in foreign languages” to write about our history…

Reluctantly (*nolens volens*), I must therefore support my argument with Polish conservative authorities, such as Zofia Kossak-Szczucka — a landowner and the author of *Pożoga* (*The Blaze*). She represented a complete negation of Stempowski’s views. Like the National Democrats, she denied Ukrainians the right to self-determination and, in her writing, created a nostalgic image of the lost Borderlands. She regarded the dominance of the Polish lord over the Ukrainian peasant as a manifestation of Poland’s great-power status in the East. She wrote in the conclusion of *Pożoga*:

“Throughout the world, borderlands or colonies — vast, expansive lands, distant or near, constituting a free field for expansion — are the greatest wealth and treasure of a state. From there comes to the Motherland a new human element, full of energy and health. There are born bold and stubborn types, capable of wanting and acting. From there come raw materials and a wide, youthful breath…”

Regarding retaliatory actions by Polish punitive units, which brutally repaid the Ukrainian peasantry for lawlessness — whether incited by the Bolsheviks or undertaken independently in the looting of Polish manors — Kossak-Szczucka offered the following reflections:

“There was a time when, in America, the recognition of lynch law became a social necessity. Similarly, there was a time when recognition of punitive units became a necessity in Hetmanate Rus’. These formations were neither a caprice of gentry lawlessness ‘destroying the future,’ nor a ‘rampage of reaction.’ They deserved neither praise nor condemnation; they were neither good nor evil. (…) There was no other means.”

Thus, if one has colonies like those in Africa, it is only normal that — as in Africa — whites send punitive expeditions to defend the planters, that is, the “Polish state of possession.”

It is difficult to imagine a more falsified history than that of Polish–Ukrainian relations. There is much here that we must confront and rethink, and Stanisław Stempowski has much to teach us.

As Łukasz Mikołajewski writes in the introduction to the third volume of the *Memoirs*, Stempowski already in 1919 warned Poles that:

“War against the Ukrainian independence movement, along with a plundering and colonial approach, would lead in Podolia, Volhynia, and the Kyiv region to an inevitable escalation of conflict — and, as a consequence, to the PERMANENT expulsion [emphasis — J.K.] of the Polish population from these lands. A multinational Ukraine could survive through cooperation between democratic politicians of independent Ukraine and Poland, through the creation of a common front in the fight against the Bolsheviks.”

Stempowski’s warnings were voiced twenty-five years before the Volhynian paroxysm of Ukrainian nationalist violence. Just as then, they remain relevant today — and sound disturbingly familiar.

The opportunity of 1918–1921 has already been squandered. Of course, the idea of a free Ukraine was at that time unrealistic — but did we truly do everything we could to help bring it about?

After the absurd, fratricidal Polish–Ukrainian war, the only leader willing to cooperate with the Poles was Symon Petliura, head of the Ukrainian People’s Republic. Piłsudski sought to secure Poland’s eastern borders through a Ukraine federated with Poland. The Piłsudski–Petliura agreement was signed in April 1920, and soon thereafter both armies launched an offensive against the Bolsheviks.

In early May 1920, Kyiv was captured. It was perhaps the fifteenth march of foreign troops through the city, and it made little impression on residents exhausted by the chaos of war. Quickly — already in June — the Bolshevik counteroffensive began, halting only at Warsaw. We know this history.

However, Poland’s condition for the alliance in exchange for assistance was Ukraine’s renunciation of claims to Eastern Galicia and Volhynia. Petliura thus found himself accused of treason, particularly by Ukrainians from Eastern Galicia. Despite this, his units loyally covered the Polish retreat and played a role in the defense of Warsaw. All the more

painful for him was the betrayal at Riga. Poland defended its independence — but Ukraine did not, being divided between Poland and Soviet Russia.

Blind to Ukrainian independence aspirations, the National Democratic delegation not only renounced the alliance with Ukraine, but also recognized Soviet Ukraine and accepted a clause stipulating that subversive activity directed against the other party would not be tolerated.

The agreement was confirmed by an additional protocol signed on 7 October 1921 between Jan Dąbski and Lev Karakhan. Under its terms, Poland was to — note this carefully — expel anti-Soviet activists from its territory…

**Russians and members of the Ukrainian government-in-exile, especially Petliura, were involved. Both the Soviet and National Democratic delegations equally regarded Ukrainians as an “unhistorical nation”. Both Poles and Soviets intended to assimilate Ukrainians: Poles through Polonisation and Soviets through Russification.

Józef Piłsudski had no influence over the composition of the delegation that destroyed his federalist concept, as its members were appointed by the Sejm. The Marshal could only apologise to the Ukrainian soldiers interned in Szczypiorno near Kalisz: “I apologise to you, gentlemen. I am very sorry. It was not supposed to be this way.”

We rightly express outrage at the Soviet-German partition of Poland under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, but we fail to see that the Treaty of Riga

was essentially the same—a Polish- Soviet partition of Ukraine.

The Soviets, and later Putin’s Russia, which considers Kyiv the cradle of its statehood, have retained this imperial hatred to this day, now manifesting itself in a new war of conquest. History has come full circle.

At least we have no territorial claims, although extremist parties—as I fear— have not had their final say. It is enough that they are chauvinistically anti- Ukrainian and pro-Russian in the spirit of Roman Dmowski.

An anonymous columnist in the Piłsudski-affiliated journal Government and Army predicted in 1919: “If Petliura falls, in fifteen years or sooner we will have to give Eastern Galicia to Russia, which would be a disaster for us, because if Ukrainians may have

legitimate claims to Eastern Galicia, Russia has none.” He was not wrong.

The National Democrats, under the infamous Dąbski–Karachan protocol, committed—shamefully!—to expelling Ataman Petliura from Poland. And so, in free Poland, two Piłsudski conspirators —Stanisław Stempowski and his friend Henryk Józewski, later Voivode of Volhynia—just like in Tsarist times, hid and smuggled Petliura from Tarnów, where the Ukrainian People’s Republic government-in-exile resided, to a new secret location. Unfortunately, this episode is absent from the memoir, which ends in 1920. Petliura remained in hiding under false papers until late 1923, when, after the centre-right won the elections, he left Poland for Paris. On 26 May 1926, on orders from the Soviet GPU, he was assassinated by Sholom Schwartzbard.

The date was no coincidence. Piłsudski had just returned to power after the May Coup. The Soviets feared a renewal of the Polish-Ukrainian alliance. The assassin was captured

and claimed his act was revenge for pogroms committed by Petliura's troops against Jewish civilians—though such atrocities had been committed since 1914 by all armies moving across the front: Russians, Austrians, Ukrainians, and Poles alike. Szymon An-ski described this bluntly in The Tragedy of Galician Jews.... Historians sometimes call it the first Holocaust. It was certainly the largest massacre since Bohdan Khmelnytsky's uprisings: between 50,000 and 100,000 victims and about half a million Jews driven from their homes. Under public pressure, the French court acquitted the killer. Petliura was not an anti-Semite, but his response to the excesses and lawlessness of his subordinates who carried out pogroms was woefully inadequate. This gave Soviet Russia an opportunity to discredit the young Ukrainian state and dress up a crude political murder as righteous vengeance.

Who were the Prometheans? Few remember them today. They were a transnational, anti-Soviet movement of people linked to Józef Piłsudski, who in the interwar years fought for the independence of nations absorbed by the USSR. They did so using the soft power of the time: publications, propaganda, political influence, support for Ukrainian independence activists, international relations, and even

intelligence operations within Soviet Ukraine.

Polish Prometheans—mostly socialists, often Freemasons—opposed the pro- Russian and, after the Treaty of Riga, pro-Soviet policy of the National Democrats. They reasoned that Poland could not defend its independence without an eastern buffer: an independent Ukraine free from Russia.

In this milieu, Stanisław Stempowski was an authority. Among his most devoted listeners in the quiet halls of the Ministry of Agriculture library was a young editor of Imperial Thought, Jerzy Giedroyc, as Timothy Snyder noted in his brilliant account of Henryk Józewski, The Secret War. It is neither speculation nor exaggeration to say that the programme line of the Paris-based Kultura was forged there. There, the unwavering conviction took root that

without independent Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus, there could be no independent Poland—and that under post-Yalta conditions, Poland's eastern border was immutable, meaning Vilnius was definitively Lithuanian and Lviv Ukrainian.

Today this seems obvious, but proclaiming it to the Polish post-war émigrés steeped in nostalgic longing for the lost Kresy was something else entirely. Readers cancelled subscriptions, accusing Kultura of treason. But all that was yet to come— after the war.

In the Second Polish Republic, the Prometheans lost. The rule of obtuse colonels dreaming of an imperial Poland "from sea to sea", allied with the far right, launched a state campaign of Polonisation of Ukrainians in the east. Alongside earlier military colonisation of

Volhynia and pacification of villages in so-called Eastern Lesser Poland, on the eve of the September disaster—as if that was what Poland needed—came forced conversion of Ukrainian citizens of the Second Republic to Catholicism, destruction of Orthodox churches in Chełm Land, banning of Ukrainian social organisations, pacification of Ukrainian villages, and so on.

We know the pitiful end of the Second Republic. The rule was confirmed: there is no independent Poland without an independent Ukraine. Instead, there were Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. And though the USSR outlived the Second Republic, it did not

survive its own crisis, Gorbachev's reforms, and the wave of independence aspirations of former Soviet republics.

The Promethean ULB utopia cherished by the Paris Kultura circle revived—and

materialised at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, when the autumn of nations erupted and some former Soviet republics gained independence. The Promethean dream became reality. The tree bore fruit. Poland was the first country to recognise the statehood of independent Ukraine on 2 December 1991. This gesture—alongside Polish support for the Orange Revolution, for Maidan, for Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations to join the EU and NATO, and finally assistance after Moscow's criminal assault on Kyiv—marks the most beautiful chapter in Warsaw-Kyiv relations.

Let us not allow this to be ruined by ignoramuses with hussar wings, online hooligans, true national chauvinists, agents, and ordinary traitors. This is what Stanisław Stempowski would want from us.

Stanisław Stempowski, Memoirs 1870– 1920. Edited, with introduction and notes by Łukasz Mikołajewski. Published by Więź and the Institute of Documentation and Studies on Polish Literature, Warsaw 2025.

Invitation

On 20 January 2026 at 6 p.m. in the BUW building at Dobra Street in Warsaw, Linde Hall (Room 316, 3rd floor), there will be a meeting related to the publication of the three-volume edition of Memoirs 1870–1920 by Stanisław Stempowski, published by Więź and IDiSnLP.

Organisers: University Library in Warsaw, Institute of Documentation and Studies on Polish Literature, a branch of the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw, and the Więź Society request confirmation of attendance by 13 January at konferencje.buw@uw.edu.pl.

The discussion will feature:

• Dr Agnieszka Fabiańska – Head of the Manuscripts Cabinet, University Library in Warsaw

• Prof. Dr Hab. Ola Hnatiuk – Department of History, National University "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy"

• Prof. Dr Hab. Andrzej St. Kowalczyk – Head of Manuscripts Department, Museum of Literature, Professor at the Institute of Polish Literature, Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw

• Prof. Em. Dr Hab. Andrzej Mencwel – Department of Cultural History, Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

• Dr Łukasz Mikołajewski – Department of History of Ideas and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw

• Prof. Władysław Werstiuk – Head of the Department of History of the Ukrainian Revolution, Institute of History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv

Moderator: Jarosław Kurski