

**Polska**



History

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Poland, a country in the very heart of Europe, with 38.5 million inhabitants, is mainly known to the world for Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła, 1920-2005), elected in 1978 as the first non-Italian pope in 455 years, and Lech Wałęsa (b. 1943), the famous “moustached electrician”, the leader of the 1980 shipyard strike and the “Solidarity” anti-communist trade union who went on to become President of Poland (1990-1995).

Others associate Poland with the great composer Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) or the national hero of Polish and American independence wars Thaddeus Kościuszko (1746-1817). Many people around the world who had taken some interest in Polish history, identify our country with the insurgencies of the 18th, 19th and early 20th century, followed by a victorious war against the Bolsheviks (the Battle of Warsaw, 1920), the heroic yet lost Defensive War following the German and Soviet invasion of 1939, the years of German occupation, the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943) and the Warsaw Uprising (1944).

Although Poland suffered the heaviest losses of all countries engaged in World War Two (in the years 1939-1945, the total death toll among Poles under German occupation reached over 2.7 million, with a further 2.7-2.9 million Polish Jews murdered by Germans in death camps), it should be noted that her history is not made up solely of insurrections, heroic though often suicidal uprisings or horrifying war losses and suffering. Poland is also a country that has witnessed several centuries of religious freedom at a time when it was unheard-of in the rest of Europe; it was a state of law – based on the so-called “Golden Liberty of Nobles”; finally, it was the first country to adopt a modern European constitution (1791).

In 966, Poland emerged on the map of Europe for good along with the baptism of Duke Mieszko from the Piast dynasty. Having united neighbouring tribes around his Polans, he laid the foundations for a powerful state. However, it was his son Bolesław the Brave who became the first Polish king (1025), waging successful wars with his neighbours – Germans, Czechs and pagan Prussian and Lithuanian tribes to establish firm borders as, at the time, they were constantly shifting.

In 1138, Poland, like many other countries of the period, was affected by feudal fragmentation. The country was only reunited in 1320, when Władysław the Short had himself crowned King in Cracow and managed to unite two major regions - Lesser Poland and Greater Poland.

Under the reign of the last king from the Piast dynasty, Casimir the Great (d. 1370), the realm grew rich and powerful. The country’s overall development, including economic growth, was so extraordinary that even today Casimir the Great is still said to have “found a Poland made of wood, and left her made of brick”.

A further territorial, state and economic expansion was brought by the rule of the Jagiellonian dynasty (1386-1572). Poland formed a union with Lithuania known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, becoming a European power stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The economy flourished and our country became an important supplier of crops and wood for Western Europe, experiencing raw material and food shortages. This period, frequently referred to as the Polish “Golden Age”, also witnessed a great development in culture, arts

and architecture.

After 1572, when King Sigismund Augustus, the last of the Jagiellonian dynasty, died without an heir, subsequent monarchs were appointed to the throne by vote, in the so-called free election. This lack of dynastic continuity, as well as internal upheavals and growing hostility at the borders, thrust the country into a difficult phase of wars against Sweden, Turkey and Russia, deterioration of the economy and State Treasury debt.

As Poland descended into a string of destructing wars, her strong neighbours took advantage. In 1772, Russia, Prussia and Austria divided up a part of the defenceless country among themselves in an event known as the first partition of Poland. Despite internally-driven attempts to reform the state, including the adoption of a modern constitution (1791), Poland's power-hungry neighbours did not let her recover from the fall and abolished the Polish statehood altogether in the course of two consecutive partitions (1793 and 1795).

One hundred and twenty three years had to go by, a period filled with dramatic insurrections against the country's occupiers, before Poland regained its independence. First came many years of the Polish Legions' participation in the Napoleonic wars, followed by insurgencies that took place in 1830 (the November Uprising), 1846, 1848 and 1863 (the January Uprising). While all those rebellions ended in military defeat, severe casualties and repressions against Polish patriots, they reinforced the Polish national identity, which the partitioners failed to erase from the citizens' consciousness, no matter how hard they tried.

The Poles were able to regain their independence in the aftermath of World War One (1914-1918), during which Russia, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire fought against each other. Each of the three countries conscripted hundreds of thousands of Poles into their armies. Polish troops serving in the Austrian-Hungarian army were given an opportunity to form a separate unit, named Piłsudski's Legions after their leader. Indeed, it was Józef Piłsudski who led his forces into Polish lands occupied by Russia and Germany, infusing his compatriots with hope of independence. As the war between the superpowers drew to an end and Russia was being shaken by the October Revolution, which brought down the tsarist regime, Poles seized the opportunity and proclaimed their independence in November of 1918. For the Second Polish Republic to establish itself for good, her citizens had to fight for the country's frontiers against Germany, a struggle which included the Silesian Uprisings (1919-1921), as well as face the threat from Bolshevik Russia (1920, including the victorious Battle of Warsaw, which many historians believe put a stop to the Communist advance on Europe).

The interwar period (until 1939) was difficult for Poland, as the newborn state had to practically build up its infrastructure from scratch. Nevertheless, the country managed to sort out its finances and contain rampant inflation (by introducing the Polish zloty in 1924), as well as implement a major investment programme, including the development of the Gdynia seaport (starting in 1922), establishing of the Central Industrial Region (heavy industry and munitions factories, 1936-39). Unfortunately, the resurrected Poland was painfully struck by the global Great Depression (1929-35), which brought on a decline in production, high unemployment and poverty, particularly acute in rural areas and among the working class.

Interwar Poland's political system underwent a striking metamorphosis in 1926, after the so-called May Coup d'État, when the state was transformed from a democratic republic, based on a multi-party parliamentary

system, into a presidential autocracy under the rule of the so-called Sanation (Polish: *sanacja*).

On 1 September 1939, Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany. The chances to defend the country in anticipation of succour from its allies, Britain and France, were blighted by another act of aggression; on 17 September, Soviet troops attacked Poland from the east. The aggressors divided the lands they captured between themselves, introducing a policy of terror, forced labour, repression and persecution in both occupation zones.

Despite the unprecedented scale of oppression, the Underground State was founded in Nazi-occupied Poland, becoming the largest resistance organisation in Europe, with secret administration, education and armed forces. As early as 1939, the Polish government in exile was formed in France and, following the French capitulation in 1940, fled in Great Britain. Polish troops fought both in the French and, later, the British army. Particularly famous were the Polish pilots who proved the most effective among all Allied fighter pilots (No. 303 Squadron) that fought the German Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain (July-October 1940).

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union (1941) and the Red Army regaining initiative with support provided by the Allies (1943), the outlook for defeating the Nazis improved. For Poland, however, a dreadful prospect started to loom on the horizon: the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin intended Poland to become, much like other Central and Eastern European countries, a faux state entirely dependent on his will. His plans came to fruition once Germany capitulated in May of 1945.

The country, ravaged by war, ruined and, as mentioned above, stricken by severe human casualties, fell into the hands of a puppet Communist government controlled by the Soviet regime. The referendum of 1946 and the parliamentary election of 1947 were both rigged. Political opponents were persecuted, murdered or imprisoned; some of the so-called “cursed soldiers” went underground and pursued guerrilla warfare against the Communists well into the 1960s. Over that period, the Stalinist secret police executed at least 7 thousand members of the Polish underground resistance.

Since 1948, post-war Poland was effectively ruled by the Polish United Workers’ Party, while the country, although called “the People’s Republic”, was in fact reliant on the Soviet, Stalinist concept of constructing a socialist and Communist society. In spite of a few reasonable moves, such as the agricultural reform (even though it meant stigmatising existing landowners and depriving them of their rights), electrification of the country and introduction of public education, the new government also introduced all “flagship” mechanisms of the Soviet totalitarian regime: personality cult, the omnipotent rule of the Security Service, total nationalisation of private property, collectivisation of agriculture (which, incidentally, met with fierce resistance), persecution of the Catholic Church, impairment of private trade, propaganda and curtailment of human rights. The industry, though thriving, was primarily focused on heavy engineering and armaments, the technologies used were obsolete, and numerous products were sent to the USSR under the pretence of ‘brotherly aid’, while the domestic market struggled with a chronic shortage of goods.

The Poles did not accept Russian occupation, with Russian troops garrisoned in Poland, formally under the alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. The first anti-government rallies were brutally quelled as early as 1956, with more to follow in 1968 and 1970. In the 1970s, opposition began to rise, growing particularly strong after a Pole,

Karol Wojtyła, was elected Pope in 1978 and subsequently visited Poland a year later.

In Summer 1980, a wave of strikes swept the country in response to the increase of prices for meat introduced by the government headed by Edward Gierek. For the first time, the protesters called for a new election to the official trade unions. In August, strikes began on the Polish coast, where the memory of a bloody crackdown on protesters that took place in December of 1970 was still alive. The Gdańsk Shipyard strike was organised by activists from the Free Trade Unions of the Coast (Polish: Wolne Związki Zawodowe Wybrzeża, WZZW), an outlawed opposition organisation founded in 1978. One of the WZZ co-founders was Lech Wałęsa.

The first agreement between the government and the striking workers was signed on 30 August in Szczecin. By that time, around 700 plants were engaged in the industrial action, with some 750 thousand people involved. The government agreed to the protesters' demands, including those concerning new labour unions, thus paving the way for the rise of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (Polish: Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy "Solidarność"); it was officially registered on 10 November, soon becoming an organisation uniting 10 million individuals.

The democratisation of the country was suppressed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, leader of the Communist party, who declared martial law on 13 December 1981. "Solidarity" was first suspended, and then banned in October of 1982. It was a time of political persecution of all opposition which forced it to go underground.

On 5 December 1983, the Nobel Committee announced that the Nobel Peace Prize was to be awarded to Lech Wałęsa "to honour his activity for freedom and democracy in Poland".

In 1989, the Iron Curtain began to crumble once again. In February of that year, representatives of the Polish Communist government, Solidarity opposition and the Catholic Church entered negotiations, agreeing on the first partially free election to the Sejm and entirely free election to the Senate to be held in June. The Communists were giving up their power.

On 4 June 1989, on election day, the Solidarity Citizen's Committee candidates won all seats available in the Sejm and triumphed in the election to the Senate as well. The election led to the fall of Communism and political transition, not only in Poland, but also in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe.

In 1990, Poland saw the first free general presidential election, won by Lech Wałęsa.

In 1999, Poland joined NATO along with the Czech Republic and Hungary. Russian troops left the country a few years earlier.

In 2004, our country became a member of the European Union.

In 10 April 2010, President of Poland Lech Kaczyński and his wife Maria were killed in a plane crash near Smolensk.

In 2014, a long-time Donald Tusk, Prime Minister of Poland and the leader of the Civic Platform, a post-Solidarity political party, was appointed the President of the European Council.

In the same year, Poland moved up to No. 31 in the international Prosperity Index of the Legatum Institute think tank, taking into account economic and social development, personal freedom as well as safety and security. In the third quarter of 2014, Poland had the highest GDP growth in the European Union.

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