



1050 YEARS

A GUIDE  
TO THE HISTORY OF  
**POLAND**

966–2016





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**POLAND**  
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President  
of the Republic of Poland

Warsaw, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Introduction to the booklet on the history of Poland  
and the role of the Polish church in the world,  
addressed to participants of World Youth Day in Cracow

Dear Guests – Participants of World Youth Day in Cracow!

I welcome you warmly to my home country and my home city, Cracow – once the capital of Poland and the bishopric of St John Paul II. I trust that during your stay you will come to know Poland and the Polish people. As you visit the Royal Castle, Wawel Cathedral and the National Pantheon at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, you will hear about our monarchs, statesmen and renowned scientists and artists. Their unusual life stories and remarkable achievements make up the story of how Poland changed, developed and how it influenced the course of European and world history. The National Museum in Cracow, the galleries, the beautiful churches, convents, shrines and other historic sites testify to how much we Poles value spiritual wealth and cultural heritage – all of which enhance human emotion and understanding. There are over a dozen prestigious colleges located here as well as facilities at Cracow Technology Park, the site of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, and the research laboratory of the Max Planck Society – these are places where one can catch a glimpse of how Poland and the world of tomorrow will look.

While Cracow itself is a city full of attractions for visitors from abroad, I would like you to think of it as a gateway to our country, to its fascinating past and present. May your visit here encourage you to return to Poland to explore other, equally interesting towns and regions full of unique natural landmarks and landscapes. We invite anyone who wants to study here, who is seeking new experiences, and who wants to make new friends. For centuries Poland has taken pride

in its tradition of hospitality, openness and tolerance. This year we are celebrating the 1050<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the baptism of Mieszko I which was followed by Poland joining the then European community of Christian countries. This jubilee is an opportunity to remind ourselves that, on numerous occasions as a nation, we have defended the values that form the foundations of Christian civilisation, and in particular, the freedom, rights and dignity of individuals.

May your meeting with Pope Francis be a fruitful and deeply spiritual experience, and may you experience the spirituality of Polish saints, get to know Poland's past and present and meet friends from around the world – who, just like you, are full of hope and the determination to change the world.

Warm greetings to you all!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of two distinct parts. The first part is a stylized, cursive 'M' with a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the left. The second part is a more complex, cursive signature that appears to be 'John' or similar, with several loops and a final flourish.



Dear Guest and participant of World Youth Day in Cracow!

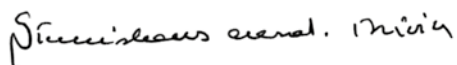
You are in Poland, a special place on the map of Europe. It is a land that throughout the last 1050 years has given the world and the Church saints, distinguished leaders, great scientists, excellent artists, and from which emerged the unifying "renewal of the face of the earth" which Pope John Paul II invoked from the Holy Spirit. You are in Cracow from where, thanks to St Sister Faustyna and St John Paul II, the message of Divine Mercy emanates into the world.

Poland's history as a nation and a country commenced in 966 when she became Christianised. Her history is extraordinary and difficult, yet it proves that the Master of History is guiding her in the right direction.

Since the time of her baptism, Poland has been faithful to the Gospel, helping to build a Christian Europe and defending it against threats. At the same time Poland has been a bedrock of freedom, tolerance and democracy. Even in periods of great difficulty during the country's partitions, wars and occupation, Poland provided universal inspiration to all those who love freedom.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries heroic battles for freedom and human dignity were waged on Polish soil. It is also where the most horrific crime in the history of humanity was committed by German Nazis: the Holocaust. The heaviest and cruellest of conflicts passed across the land, and Soviet communism ran amok here. But, thanks to Divine Providence, this land has triumphed over oppression.

You have come to Cracow in order to meet Christ in communion with young people from all over the world and with Pope Francis. You will also meet kind and hospitable local people. To give you a better understanding of the place in which you find yourself, the Institute of National Remembrance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have prepared a brief outline of the history of Poland, which you are holding in your hand. Although you are here for a spiritual experience and the joy of gathering, we invite you to take some time to read about our history and then to tell others about it on your return home.



Stanisław Cardinal Dziwisz  
Archbishop of Cracow



# POLAND – BIRTH OF A NATION



ur identity as individuals and as a community is based on memory. The past allows us to understand who we are. Poland's past and contemporary history began 1050 years ago when the nation became Christianised.

In the period of Poland's greatest prosperity, a beautiful myth was created claiming that Poles were descendants of the Sarmatians who were courageous warriors as described in ancient texts. Even today we sometimes refer to ourselves as the Sarmatians. In reality, however, the Polish people are descendants of the Slavs who have inhabited Eastern and Central Europe since the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Over time they began to establish their own countries. One such country was ruled by Mieszko in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century. In 966, he chose to be baptised and this was followed by the Christianisation of the whole country. Irrespective of whether this decision was driven by political expedience or by his wife's persuasion (he married the Bohemian princess Dobrawa) or by his personal conversion, this step had enormous consequences. Adopting Christianity strengthened the young country both internally and internationally. Poland became a part of the Latin civilised world, with Mieszko as an equal partner among European rulers. This position was maintained by his descendants who were called Piasts, after



Fields by Lednica lake, regarded as a possible site of Mieszko's baptism; the place has become a site of young Christians gatherings since 1997. (Piotr Tracz/REPORTER)

Piast the Wheelwright (Polish: Piast Kołodziej), the legendary founder of the Piast dynasty. This was reflected in, among other things, the numerous marriages with members of other ruling families.

Mieszko's work was continued by his son Boleslaus the Brave (Polish: Bolesław Chrobry), who in 1000 AD organised a meeting with the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III. The meeting was a great success. It took place in Gniezno, by the tomb of the first saint patron of Poland, St Adalbert (Polish: Wojciech). The Congress of Gniezno not only reinforced Boleslaus's position, but it also led to the development of church organisational structures. Apart from the existing diocese of Poznań, the see of Gniezno was created with subordinate dioceses in Cracow (Kraków), Kołobrzeg and Wrocław.

Following Otto's death, Boleslaus spent the next 15 years engaged in wars with his successor, Henry II, with various degrees of success. Eventually the Polish ruler defended his sovereignty and held on to some of the lands he had



St Adalbert (c. 956–997) – Bishop of Prague, opposed the slave trade and was forced to leave his diocese. He died as a missionary, at the hands of the Prussians. Boleslaus the Brave bought back his body for its weight in gold. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Denar coin of Boleslaus the Brave, called “Princes Polonie”. This was the first time the name of Poland had been written down. (Warszawskie Centrum Numizmatyczne)

conquered. In 1018, he defeated the Ruthenian Prince Yaroslav and conquered Kiev (Kijów), although these conquests proved to be unsustainable. Just before his death in 1025, he was crowned the first king of Poland.

Soon after Boleslaus's death, the crown was passed to his son, Mieszko II. A few years into his reign, a lengthy crisis began. Neighbours invaded from the West, the East and the South; there was a rebellion by those who still followed pagan practises, and rulers changed. Following the Bohemian invasion of 1038, Poland ceased to exist.

Poland was then rebuilt by Mieszko's son, Casimir, who was given the sobriquet Restorer (Polish: Kazimierz Odnowiciel). Thanks to his diplomatic efforts, alliances with recent enemies and also wars, he recovered most of the land that had been lost. Not only did he restore state structures, but also the church administration. On his succession in 1058, Boleslaus II the Generous (Polish: Bolesław Szczodry) continued his father's achievements.

Thanks to his diplomatic and military achievements, Boleslaus II is remembered as one of the greatest rulers of Poland. Several times he determined who would rule Ruthenia and Hungary. He supported Pope Gregory VII in his dispute with the German empire, which secured the crown for him in 1076. Three



Still fully functional, the Benedictine Abbey in Tyniec was funded by Casimir the Restorer. (Przemysław Antosik, Wikimedia Commons)

## Poland under Mieszko I and Boleslaus the Brave



years later, however, he ordered the murder of Stanislaus (Polish: Stanisław), the Bishop of Cracow, which led to a rebellion and to the king's exile.

Boleslaus's brother, Ladislas Herman (Polish: Władysław Herman), took over the throne. His position, however, was significantly weaker, both in international relations and at the national level. A sign of this was the fact that he was not crowned king. The role of magnates increased and the Prince sought their advice when making important decisions.



St Stanislaus (c. 1030–1079) – Bishop of Cracow, martyr, patron saint of Poland, sentenced to death for opposing Boleslaus II and for supporting the king's oppressed subjects.

Before his death in 1102, Ladislas divided the country between his sons – Zbigniew, who was the elder, and his younger brother, Boleslaus. However, this did not prevent the brothers from engaging in a long-standing rivalry, in which neighbouring rulers were also involved. The final showdown was the war of 1109 between the German ruler Henry V and a victorious Boleslaus, who called it a fight "in defence of freedom". Soon after this, the Polish Prince broke his undertaking and blinded his imprisoned brother thus earning the sobriquet "Wry-mouthed" (Polish: Bolesław Krzywousty).

A lasting achievement of the long reign of Boleslaus III in Poland was the annexation of Pomerania, including Gdańsk.

To prevent bloody power struggles among his sons, the Prince divided the country among them, making the eldest son a principal ruler with his seat of sovereignty in the capital, Cracow. This division came into force on the Prince's death in 1138 and was followed by nearly two hundred years of the country's fragmentation.

In the following years Boleslaus's descendants and their successors ruled various regions of Poland, some of which were divided still further. Piast princes made fleeting alliances, competed with one another for dominance, and even engaged in fratricidal wars. At the same time, this period saw the strengthening of administration, codification of laws and economic development. Rulers established towns and villages, frequently bringing settlers from Western Europe.





The legendary Battle of Głogów of 1109 which continued even after the sons of the defenders of Głogów, who had been previously captured and kept hostage, were tied to the siege engines. (Fotopolska.eu)

Monasteries, funded by princes and magnates, grew in number and played an increasingly important role. Apart from the Benedictines, who were present as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there were also Cistercians, Canons Regular, and with time, the Dominicans and Franciscans, too. There were military orders as well – the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and the Teutonic Knights – who would soon cause serious trouble for the Poles. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there already existed a relatively well-developed network of parishes, and this meant there was a network of schools too.

The second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century saw increased attempts to reunite the country. The Church, whose organisational structures were nationwide, played an important role in this. The cult of St Stanislaus, canonised in 1253, was a significant factor too. It was said that just as the parts of the dismembered body of the murdered bishop grew back together, so Poland would grow back together again. People also prayed to St Adalbert and St Hedwig, who was canonised in 1267, asking for their intercession.

The race for the Polish crown, between the Bohemian prince Wenceslaus and the ruler of the Polish province of Wielkopolska Przemysław II, was won by the



In 1241 Poland, like the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, suffered defeat following a devastating Tatar invasion. The greatest of the Piast dynasty, Henry the Pious (Polish: Henryk Pobożny), son of St Hedwig of Silesia (Polish: Jadwiga Śląska), died in the Battle of Legnica. (Getty Museum)

latter. In 1295, he became the first king of Poland for over two hundred years, although in reality he only ruled over a fraction of the country, and was murdered before he could strengthen his position. In 1300, the crown passed to Wenceslaus, who in the meantime had also become the king of Bohemia.

The ultimate rebuilding of Poland was undertaken by the most persistent of all of the claimants, Ladislas the Elbow-high (Polish: Władysław Łokietek). His over 30-year quest was rewarded and in 1320 he was crowned, with the celebration taking place in Cracow for the first time. He did not manage to unite all of the Polish territories. Silesia, divided into numerous duchies, remained outside the borders of the Kingdom. Most of its Piast rulers paid feudal homage to the Bohemian king. Pomerania was occupied by the Teutonic Knights and Mazovia maintained its sovereignty. The last years of the old king's reign were spent



St Hedwig – wife of Henry the Bearded (Polish: Henryk Brodaty) (the spouses were bound by a vow of chastity for most of their lives), funded many charitable and religious projects, including the Convent of Cistercian Nuns in Trzebnica. (Getty Museum)

defending the borders against the joined forces of the Teutonic Knights and the King of Bohemia, John of Luxembourg.

After Ladislav's death, his son, who has gone down in history as Casimir the Great (Polish: Kazimierz Wielki), was crowned. This extraordinary king achieved

his first success through diplomatic channels, putting an end to a dispute with the Bohemian ruler and obtaining acknowledgement of his rights to the territories seized by the Teutonic Knights. However, he only recovered some of these lands, while an attempt to recover Silesia failed. Then again, Casimir did expand the eastern borders, annexing the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia to Poland.

Casimir the Great codified laws and made sure they were respected. The rights of the Jews, who had settled in Poland from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century,



The first records of Polish history were made in Latin. The photo shows a part of the Chronicle of Wincenty aka Kadłubek from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. (Polona.pl)

A seal of Casimir the Great with an image of a white eagle, the dynastic coat of the Piasts, used as the national coat of arms in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. (Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie)



were extended. The King reformed administration, built numerous castles, supported the erection of defence walls around towns, funded church building. During his reign, there was significant economic growth. Casimir did not, however, have male offspring and so, after his death in 1370, in accordance with an earlier agreement, the Polish crown was passed to a grandson of Ladislas the Elbow-high, Louis of Hungary (Polish: Ludwik Węgierski).

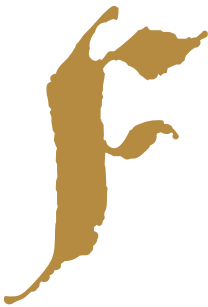
### In a nutshell:

**B**aptism of Mieszko I in 966 marked the beginning of the history of Poland. It also became a source of Polish culture and identity emerging gradually over the following centuries. During the reign of the Piasts dynasty, the concept of Polish freedom was born, which meant respect for the country's sovereignty and the rights of individuals, as well as the right to oppose unjust authority. In this period Poland faced numerous internal crises and external attacks.





# THE FIRST REAL UNION IN EUROPE



Following King Louis's death, the Polish nobles decided to entrust the crown to his younger daughter. The coronation of 11-year-old Hedwig (Polish: Jadwiga) took place in 1384. The young queen was persuaded to withdraw from a prearranged marriage in the country's interest. In 1386, she married Lithuanian Prince Jagiello, whose own baptism preceded the Christianisation of his country. Jagiello adopted the name Ladislas (Polish: Władysław), while his Lithuanian name came to stand for a new dynasty – the Jagiellonian dynasty.

A union pact between Poland and Lithuania set the stage for the royal marriage. Over the years both countries were involved in wars; gradually, however, a common threat from the Teutonic Order became apparent. Lithuanian lords wanted to achieve the same position as that enjoyed by the Polish nobles at that time. This peaceful Christianisation was a great success on the part of the Church. Many other political and economic factors also tipped the balance in favour of the union. Over the next century the union was renewed on several occasions. At the time, a voluntary union of countries in which each preserved its separate national character, while drawing benefits from the union, was an exceptional phenomenon.



Another Polish-Lithuanian union, concluded in Horodło in 1413. It transferred the rights of Polish nobles to Lithuanian lords. Forty-seven Lithuanian dynasties were “adopted” into Polish heraldic families. (AGAD)

All resources left in her will by Hedwig, were used by Ladislas Jagiello for the restoration of the Jagiellonian University, established by Casimir the Great. It quickly became an important scientific centre and the place of education of Central European elites. Its significance is reflected in the fact that its rector Paweł Włodkowic was an active participant of the Council of Constance, where he called for respecting nations' and individuals' rights.

At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Poland and Lithuania, along with their fiefdoms covered an area of over a million square kilometres. In just one generation the Jagiellons became one of the greatest dynasties in Europe. This was reflected in the coronation of Ladislas III (Polish: Władysław Warneńczyk) as King of Hungary





### Królowa Jadwiga

1384–1399.

Wielką i dobrą królową. Szlachetną swą ofiarą umożliwiła stworzenie wielkiego i potężnego państwa polskiego. Odnowicielka krakowskiego uniwersytetu.

St Hedwig (1374–1399) – the queen of Poland, patron of arts, initiator of a translation of the Book of Psalms into Polish, sponsor of many religious and charitable enterprises, restorer of the Jagiellonian University, to which she bequeathed all her assets. Renown for her sensitivity to human misfortune, the Queen was canonised by John Paul II.

(Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)



The Battle of Grunwald was one of the largest military clashes of the Middle Ages. Jan Matejko's painting comes from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

(from 1434 the King of Poland). The young ruler began a war with Turkey, which came to an end with the Battle of Varna in 1444. The Polish throne was taken over by his younger brother, Casimir IV Jagiellon (Polish: Kazimierz Jagiellończyk). He ruled for nearly half a century (1447–1492), and from 1440 he was also the Grand Duke of Lithuania. Casimir strengthened the position of both countries, so much so that his son Ladislas took over the crown in Bohemia and then Hungary.

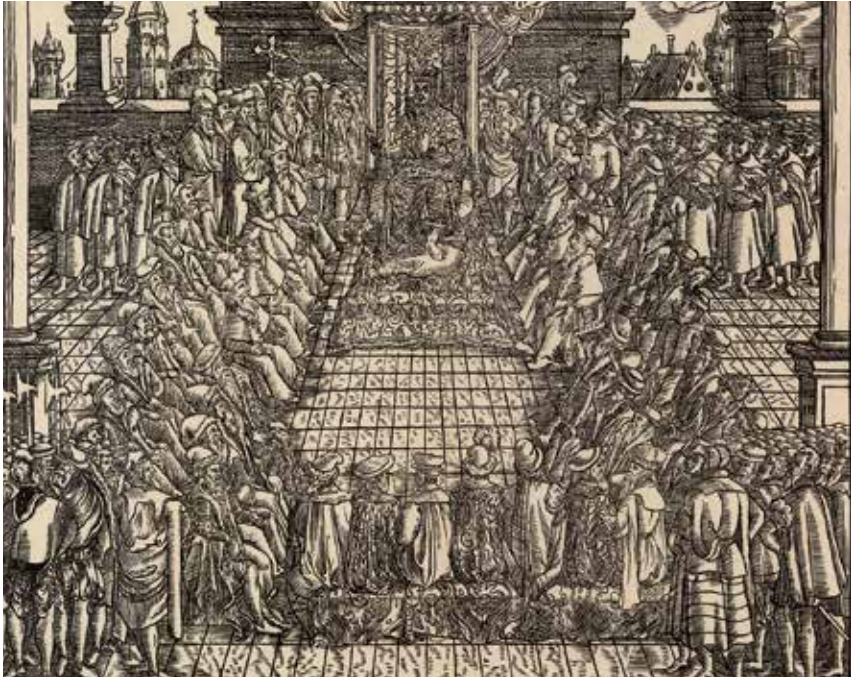
The main challenge for Poland and Lithuania was the aggressive strategy of the Teutonic Order. Despite a great victory in the battle of Grunwald (1410),



(Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie)

the conflict would flare up several more times. The matter was finally resolved after the Thirteen Years' War (1454–1466) waged by Casimir IV Jagiellon. On winning the war, Poland recovered the province of Gdańsk Pomerania and part of Prussia. The rest of the State of the Teutonic Order became a Polish fiefdom.

To ensure that the Polish crown would go to his descendants, Ladislas Jagiello and his successors systematically extended privileges of the noblemen, who had been knights of the realm. With time, this led to a unique political system in Europe as it was then, which was known as the nobles' democracy. During the

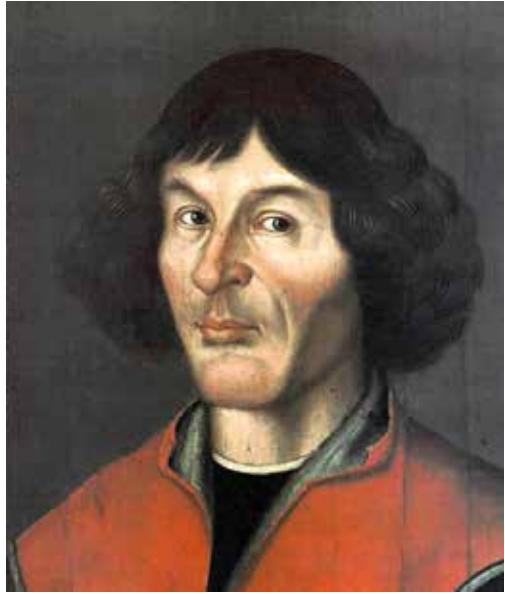


16<sup>th</sup>-century engraving of Sejm in session. (Polona.pl)

reign of John I Albert (Polish: Jan I Olbracht, 1492–1501), the King's Council was transformed into *Senat*, the upper house of the parliament, while representatives of noblemen selected during local noblemen's meetings established *Sejm*, the lower house of the parliament. In turn, the reign of Alexander Jagiellon (Polish: Aleksander Jagiellończyk, 1501–1506) brought *Nihil novi* Constitution, which bound the king to seek the parliament's consent in decision-making. Considering the high number of noblemen in Poland, an exceptionally large proportion of society – up to 8–10% – participated in governing the state. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the right to vote was enjoyed by around 1.5% of the population in France, and in Great Britain – just over 3% of society.

The last son of Casimir IV to be crowned was Sigismund I the Old (1506–1548) (Polish: Zygmunt Stary). Initially Sigismund's position was strengthened by the fact that Bohemia and Hungary were ruled by his brother Ladislas, fol-

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) – an astronomer and a medical doctor, studied in Cracow, Bologna and Padua, came up with the heliocentric model of the universe. He held various positions in the Diocese of Warmia; in 1520 he was in charge of the defence of Olsztyn Castle against a Teutonic invasion. (Wikimedia Commons)



King Sigismund the Old and his Italian wife Bona refurbished Wawel in the Renaissance style. (Zygmunt Put, Wikimedia Commons)



*Stanislaw beatorum  
Panis fertur Angelorum  
Comitante Barbara.*

*O rem miram! admirandam!  
Escaam terris fabricandam  
Caeli fundunt atria.*

*Anton. Wierx fecit et excud.*

St Stanislaw Kostka (1550–1568) – as a young man he stood out as particularly religious. Against his parents' wishes, he joined the Jesuit order and died soon after taking vows. Patron saint of Poland, students and Polish youth. (Polona.pl)

lowed by his nephew Louis (the latter until his death in the Battle of Mohacs in 1526). Sigismund waged the last victorious war with the Teutonic Order and, after its secularisation, he accepted a feudal homage from the first ruler of Prussia. His wars with the Grand Duchy of Moscow were not always successful.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century is sometimes called "the golden age". It reflects not just the great political and economic status of Poland and Lithuania, but also the flourishing of its culture. To this day there are many examples of Renaissance architecture in Poland, including the town of Zamość, which was built from the ground up. In this period one of the greatest Polish poets, Jan Kochanowski, produced his works. Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, a political writer renowned across Europe, argued for the equality of people of different states under law. The most outstanding scientist of these days was Nicolaus Copernicus. Book printing picked up fast and sons of noblemen were studying throughout Europe.

Sigismund the Old made attempts to stop the spread of the Reformation in Poland. The King's restrictions were not successful and various Protestant groups gained supporters among representatives of the nobility. In fact this led to an atmosphere of religious tolerance which was unique in Europe at that time.

The last king of the Jagiellons was Sigismund II Augustus (Polish: Zygmunt II August, 1548–1572). His biggest success was the conclusion of the Union of Lublin (1569), which meant the ultimate union of Poland and Lithuania. The country thus created was called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Both its constituent parts had the same ruler, parliament, currency and foreign policy. Other authorities, courts, finances and the army were kept separate. Lithuanian noblemen enjoyed the same rights as the Polish noblemen. It was the first union of countries in the history of Europe to be concluded not through the use of violence or on rulers' orders, but arising out of the will of the people.

### In a nutshell:

**T**he taking over of the Polish throne by the Jagiellonian dynasty led to the Christianisation of Lithuania and a union between the two countries. It was a voluntary and unique union of two countries which then became one – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.





# PERIOD OF ELECTIVE MONARCHY



he thing that most distinguished Poland from other European countries in the modern period was its democratic system, which was finally established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. All of the nobility, i.e. nearly 10% of society at that time, was able to participate in the governing of the country. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century parliament became the main state authority. The king was elected by noblemen at election sessions.

At the same time, freedom of religion was guaranteed by law throughout the country, and this, too, was unique in Europe. At a time when, in the east, Orthodox monarchy was based on the despotism of the Tsar, and in the west after bloody wars, rulers could impose their religion on their subjects (the Augsburg Settlement of 1555 introduced the rule *whose realm, his religion*), there was a completely different system in place in Poland. In 1573, the statute of the Warsaw Confederation was accepted to ensure religious tolerance and equal access to public offices – regardless of one's religion. By comparison, in France such solutions emerged only two centuries later – after the revolution of 1789. Each newly elected king had to take an oath saying he would respect those rules. Even in the following century, despite influences of the Counter-Reformation, Poland was the country that attracted many Europeans seeking freedom of religion.



Free election in the fields near Warsaw. Painting by Marcin Altomonti.  
(Zamek Królewski w Warszawie)

The system of nobles' democracy established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century functioned efficiently for over a hundred years. Excellent economic growth was certainly helpful. A large part of Western Europe traded with Poland buying mainly agricultural produce. It increased the wealth not just of the nobility and magnates, but also townspeople and peasants. It is, therefore, quite right to regard the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the golden age of Poland.

The Commonwealth was one of the largest countries in Europe. In the 1630s, it covered 990,000 square km. Naturally Poland participated in major disputes among the largest powers of this part of the continent: it prevented Sweden from dominating the Baltic region, it was involved in several wars with Moscow, and it halted the expansion of the Islamic Turkish Empire. It was then that Poland began to be called the Bulwark of Christianity in Europe. In terms of military skills, Poland successfully used its experience gained in various theatres of war. As a result, one of the strongest cavalries in Europe, the hussars, emerged – they were used to break enemies' lines of battle.

## Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth



— Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1582

■ Crown of the Kingdom of Poland

■ Grand Duchy of Lithuania

■ Commonwealth dependencies

— Current Polish borders

When the Jagiellonian dynasty ended, the first elected king was Henry Valois of France (Polish: Henryk Walezy). He was followed by the Prince of Transilvania, Stephen Báthory (Polish: Stefan Batory) who ruled between 1576–1586 and proved to be an excellent military leader and victor in three spectacular campaigns against the Grand Duchy of Moscow, expanding the country's territories in the east and strengthening its position in Livonia.



Victory of Polish hussars over the overwhelming Swedish forces in the battle of Kirchholm in 1605. Painting by Wojciech Kossak.  
(Muzeum Wojska Polskiego)

The next elected king was a young prince of Sweden Sigismund III Vasa (Polish: Zygmunt III Waza), who ruled Poland for nearly half a century (1587–1632). When, on his father's death, Sigismund inherited the throne of Sweden, he wanted to unite both kingdoms under his reign, but this, as well as the fighting over what is present-day Estonia, gave rise to long-lasting wars with Sweden.

At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Poland became involved in the struggle for the throne of Moscow. In 1610, the Polish army conquered the joint Russian-Swedish forces in the Battle of Klushino and captured Moscow. But Poland could not sustain her victory and in 1612 the Polish forces capitulated at the Kremlin. The war with Russia continued over the next years (until the truce of 1619).

Between 1620 and 1621 there was the first war with Turkey with whom Poland shared her southern border. This marked the first of several conflicts which continued until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

After the death of Sigismund III, the crown passed to his sons, in turn: Ladislas IV (Polish: Władysław IV, 1632–1648) and then John Casimir (Polish: Jan Kazimierz, 1648–1668). The former's victories over Russia between 1632–1634



Column of Sigismund III was erected in Warsaw, which had become the capital of Poland during his reign. (Sempoo, Wikimedia Commons)



Wilanów is an example of the Baroque style in Poland.  
(Michał Jankowski, Wikimedia Commons)

seemed to confirm Poland's powerful position in this part of the continent. However, a few years later, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the beginning of the decline of the Commonwealth's power became obvious.

In 1648, the Cossack Uprising broke out in what is present-day Ukraine, proving catastrophic for Poland. Soon, another war with Russia began followed by a Swedish invasion. The east of the country was occupied by the Russians, while almost all the remaining area was seized by the Swedes. King John II Casimir had to seek refuge in Silesia. The neighbours' plans to partition Poland temporarily put a question mark over the very existence of the country. The heroic defence of the Jasna Góra monastery marked the beginning of a successful retaliation against the Swedish invasion, as the enemy was pushed back from occupied territories. In 1656, John Casimir made solemn vows before the picture of the Mother of God in Lvov (Polish: Lwów) Cathedral and proclaimed her to be the Queen of the Polish Crown.

This period of wars with Russia came to an end with the treaty of 1667, later reinforced by the peace treaty of 1686. The victories of hetman (chief of the armed forces) John Sobieski hindered the Turks' advance and opened for him the way to the royal throne. After he became king, John III Sobieski (Polish: Jan III Sobieski) led joint Polish-Austrian-German forces to a great victory in the Battle



John III Sobieski in the Battle of Vienna put a definite stop to the Turkish expansion in Europe. Painting by Marcin Altomonte. (Lwowska Galeria Sztuki)

of Vienna (1683), which was the final blow to the Turkish invasion into mainland Europe (the peace treaty was finally concluded in 1699).

Exhausting wars and the epidemics that accompanied them sapped Poland's strength in the last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. With Western European markets being saturated with commodities imported from colonies, the demand for Polish agricultural produce drastically shrank. At the same time, Poland's former fief by the Baltic Sea, the state of Prussia, became independent and over several decades came to have aggressive designs on Polish land.



St Andrzej Bobola – a Polish Jesuit and martyr murdered by Cossacks in 1657.  
Author of the Lvov vows of John Casimir.

With its guarantees of political rights for the whole of the nobility, the country's political system worked efficiently over a few generations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to a well-developed political culture. Unfortunately, the second half of that century saw an accelerating trend away from the nobles' democracy and towards the magnates' oligarchy. Mid-level noblemen grew dependent on influential families, becoming their tool in political feuds. Regional councils were turning into sparring grounds for competing oligarchs, while the state increasingly resembled a federation of loosely connected magnates' estates.

A gradual decline of political culture caused the centre of power, which in the nobles' democracy was the *Sejm*, to become more and more incapacitated. The *liberum veto* rule, previously protecting the nobility against breaches of democracy, was used in 1652 for the first time as an excuse to stall a session of the *Sejm* by a single MP. After that the disintegration of political structures progressed. As many as 17 out of 44 *Sejm* sessions were stalled in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, central authorities were completely paralysed. Almost all sessions of the *Sejm* were stalled. It was during that period that Poland's most powerful neighbours began to objectify her. This led directly to the challenging of Polish sovereignty. The adjacent powers, strengthening



their absolutist systems, were happy to see the inertia and weakness of government in Poland.

The coronation of August II (1697–1733) took place under pressure from Peter I, the Russian Tsar. The king and elector of Saxony, dragged Poland into the destructive Great Northern War (1700–1721). Although formally Poland was not taking part in it, battles between Russia, Denmark and Saxony would take place here. The destruction of war brought a wave of famine and further decline of the economy. The export of grain was only one-third of what it had been a hundred years before.

The presence of Russian military on Polish territories became a permanent feature. They began interfering in internal matters, including the election of the next ruler. Russia ensured that August III (1733–1763) was crowned monarch. Also the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–1795), was elected thanks to Russian influence. Russia wanted to maintain the state of quasi-protectorate over the whole of Polish territory. Prussia, in turn, which grew in power after the Seven Years' War, was considering annexation of, in the first instance, Pomerania with Gdańsk.

Inertia of state institutions, lack of efficient central authorities and a weak army pushed Poland over the edge of anarchy. Russia, Austria and Prussia were keen on preserving the state of political degeneration in Poland, treating the country as a kind of buffer zone. Any attempts to reform and modernise the country were regarded by them as a breach of their interests. This is why the dispute over how to repair, modernize and strengthen the Commonwealth, taking place in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, automatically concerned relations with neighbouring powers.

### In a nutshell:

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth preserved its power, however, it was weakened by numerous wars. In the next century there was a crisis of the nobles' democracy. Even as they grew in power, the neighbouring states, with Russia playing a predominant role, blocked attempts to repair the governing system of the country.





# COLLAPSE AND SLAVERY

# K

King Stanisław August Poniatowski attempted to reform the country, which was going through a crisis. Unfortunately he relied on support from Russia, which was intervening in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with increasing frequency and was blocking necessary changes. In response to this, the Bar Confederation was formed in 1786. Its supporters called for the preservation of traditional rights of the nobility, the

primacy of Catholicism and independence from Russia. This first Polish uprising was suppressed by the Russian army after four years of fighting.

In 1772, the first partition of Poland took place. Russia, Prussia and Austria divided among them over 200,000 square kilometres of land inhabited by 4.5 million people.



Kazimierz Pułaski (1745–1779) – one of the commanders of the Bar Confederation, called “father of the American cavalry”, one of very few foreigners distinguished (posthumously) with honorary USA citizenship. (Polona.pl)



A French drawing representing the first partition of Poland.  
(Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie)

The partition made many social groups realise that Poland was standing on the edge of the abyss. Over the next years, thanks to the first Ministry of Education in the world – the Commission of National Education – a new generation grew up, ready to fight for independence and for their country's freedom. There were also other attempts to reform the system.

In 1788, the Great Sejm began its session with a view to repairing the state. In 1791, it introduced the Constitution of 3<sup>rd</sup> May, which was an original attempt to implement a modern system of government, combining the nobles' democ-



Painting by Jan Matejko captures the moment of elation on enactment of the Constitution of 3<sup>rd</sup> May. Today 3 May is one of the most important Polish national holidays. (Muzeum Zamku Królewskiego w Warszawie)

racy with a strong central authority and hereditary monarchy. The Constitution also ensured certain rights of townspeople and it gave peasants the protection of the state. It was the first constitution in Europe (second in the world after the constitution of the USA). Unfortunately the Constitution and the whole enterprise of the Great Sejm were thwarted by a Russian military intervention.

In 1793, the second partition took place – Prussia and Russia occupied over 300,000 square kilometres of Polish territories. The fight for independence commenced in the rump state. The national uprising of 1794 was led by Tadeusz Kościuszko – by then already a hero of the War of Independence in the USA. For the first time peasants were also involved in the fighting. After its initial successes, the Kościuszko Uprising had to retreat in the face of the superior force of the Russian and Prussian armies. Following this defeat, the third partition of Poland took place, erasing the country from the map of Europe for 123 years.




Part of *The Ractawice Panorama* by Wojciech Kossak and Jan Styka. It depicts the Battle of Ractawice, in which scythe-bearing peasants played a leading role.



(Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu)


## Poland divided by partitioning powers (1795)



 Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772

### Partitions (1795)

 Russian    Prussian    Austrian

 Current Polish borders





Napoleon grants a constitution to the Duchy of Warsaw. Painting by Marcello Bacciarelli. (Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie)

The Poles did not abandon the idea of regaining independence. Hopes were especially pinned on France and Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1797, the Polish Legions were formed in France under the command of General Jan Henryk Dąbrowski. Their song *Dąbrowski's Mazurka* is now the national anthem of Poland. After Napoleon's victories over Prussia and Austria and then Russia, there appeared to be a realistic chance of regaining independence. The Duchy of Warsaw, a rump state subordinate to France which existed from 1807–1815, was intended to be the foundation of a reconstituted Poland. Despite the Poles' great military and financial effort, the defeat of the Emperor of the French in the war with Russia thwarted those plans.



During the November Uprising, the slogan “For our and for your liberty” was coined. It accompanied the Poles in their struggle for freedom for more than 150 years to come. The photo shows a flag with this slogan written in Polish on one side and in Russian on the other side; it also includes the invocation “In the name of God”. (Muzeum Wojska Polskiego)

Europe's fate was decided by the victors. The Congress of Vienna (1815) stipulated a new division of Polish territories. The Russian-occupied area became larger and the Kingdom of Poland was created within it. It had limited autonomy, including its own army. Autonomy allowed the development of the economy, education and science. Gradually, however, censorship and repressions increased and constitutional rights were breached. In response to this, clandestine patriotic organisations appeared in the Kingdom of Poland, as well as other parts of the Russian-occupied areas. Members of such groups were brutally persecuted.



After the failure of the November Uprising, Polish refugees were enthusiastically welcomed in many European countries. (Polona.pl)

In 1830, a group of young sub-officers initiated the November Uprising. Although the political and military elites hesitated at first, they later joined in. There was also an uprising in Lithuania. Unfortunately, the Polish forces were not able to resist the Russian army which far outnumbered them. Hopes for British and French support proved vain. The Russians finally quelled the uprising in the autumn of 1831.



Artur Grottger created emotive drawings showing scenes from the January Uprising. This is *The Battle* in *The Polonia* collection. (Polonia.pl)

The failure of the uprising brought about mass persecutions and elimination of the autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland while more than 10,000 soldiers and political activists had to flee the country. They went down in Polish history as the Great Emigration. Émigrés were involved in numerous political initiatives and sought allies for the Polish cause. They supported all opponents of the partitioning powers. During the revolution of 1848–1849, General Józef Bem was one of the commanders of the Hungarian forces fighting with Austria and its allies, the Russian forces. In total there were around 3,000 Poles fight-

ing on the side of the Hungarian army. For many, Poles became a symbol of the fight for freedom.

The Great Emigration comprised not just soldiers, but also people associated with the world of culture. Distinguished poets like Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Cyprian Norwid sought refuge in France. Also Fryderyk Chopin was creating his works as an emigrant. After the composer's death, his heart was secretly brought to Poland and kept in the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.

Apart from military conflicts, there were also attempts to encourage economic growth and access to education. The Church played an important role being the only institution that united Poles regardless of the borders of occupied areas. The occupiers closed down many convents, confiscated assets belonging to the Church, hindered contact of bishops with Rome. In this way, once again, the history of the Polish nation was closely entwined with the history of the Church.



St Brother Albert  
(Adam Chmielowski,  
1846–1916) – artist,  
participant of the January  
Uprising, Third Order  
Franciscan; renown for  
taking care of the poor  
and homeless; established  
congregations of Albertine  
Brothers and Sisters.  
(Public domain)

In 1863, the January Uprising broke out. It was run as a guerrilla war. The rebels fought over a thousand battles and clashes with Russian forces. An underground state was formed with a government and complex clandestine administration. Weapons were brought over from abroad. Italian, Hungarian and French volunteer soldiers participated in the fights. Many clergymen were involved in the uprising: Father Stanisław Brzóska was in charge of the last troops fighting until December 1864. Among those involved in the uprising there were three people who were later pronounced saints: Archbishop of Warsaw Zygmunt Szczęsny Feliński, forced out of the country for writing a letter in defence of his fellow nationals, Carmelite Rafał Kalinowski and Adam Chmielowski. Leaders of the uprising, with Romuald Traugutt being the main figure, were murdered by Russians on an embankment of the Warsaw Citadel.



So-called Execution Gate at the Warsaw Citadel. From the 1860s the site of numerous executions of Polish patriots. (Maciej Szczepańczyk, Wikimedia Commons)



St Józef Sebastian Pelczar (1842–1924) – theologian, professor and rector of the Jagiellonian University, Bishop of Przemyśl; social activist, sponsor of numerous charitable acts, author of many religious works, founder of the Sacred Heart Sisters.

(Archiwum Sióstr Sercanek)

The fall of the uprising brought another wave of repressions. Thousands were executed. Tens of thousands were forcibly sent to Siberia while their possessions were confiscated. Russification of Polish society increased in the Russian-occupied territories. In the Prussian-occupied provinces there was so-called *Kulturkampf* which involved Germanisation and fighting Catholicism. Additionally, there was an initiative to buy out Polish lands from the Polish people. In both

occupied territories, the Polish language was banished from schools. There was a well-known strike of Polish school children in Września in 1901 – they refused to pray in German. In the Russian-controlled districts, clandestine classes proliferated. In this respect the Austrian-controlled territory was in a more privileged position as it gained substantial autonomy, which allowed the development of Polish culture and education.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some modern political movements appeared – people's movement, socialists, national-democratic movements and later also Christian democracy. They developed different strategies to deal with the occupiers, mostly trying to take advantage of possibilities to participate in elections. Socialists were undertaking secret activities in the Russian-occupied territories and were, for instance, involved in the revolution of 1905. One of the leaders of this movement was Józef Piłsudski, who was trying to combine ideas of social equality and independence. Later he moved to the Austrian-controlled territories, where he established both open and clandestine organisations which were to actively engage in the fight for independence when the right time came.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was another outstanding period in Polish culture. Distinguished poets and writers were creating their works; in 1905 Henryk Sienkiewicz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. It was also an era of great painters: artists Jan Matejko, Jan Styka and Jacek Malczewski often took up historic and patriotic themes in their works. Scientists would mostly develop their talents abroad, as, for instance, Maria Skłodowska-Curie.

### In a nutshell:

**A**ttempts to reform the country failed due to Russian aggression. Poland was divided between three occupying powers. Over the years, Poles undertook the fight for independence several times.





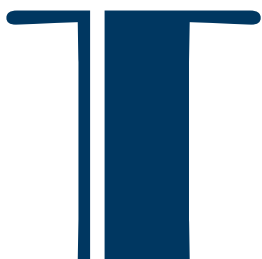


Maria Skłodowska-Curie (1867–1934) – chemist and physicist, pioneer of radiochemistry, the only woman awarded the Noble Prize twice, and the only woman granted this award in two different domains. Participant in clandestine lectures in Warsaw, she completed her studies in Paris where she continued her scientific work.

(Tekniska Museet)



# POLAND REBORN



The outbreak of World War I in 1914 divided the occupying powers into two opposing camps. Russia supported France and Great Britain. Germany and Austria-Hungary formed a central powers alliance.

Polish subjects were drafted into all armies of the occupying powers: Russian, German and Austrian. During the war some Polish soldiers were forced to fight against one another. Thanks to several decades of autonomy in Galicia, which gave the Poles some national and individual freedom, Polish paramilitary organisations had developed over the years in the Austrian-controlled province. They became a foundation of the Polish Legions formed as part of the Austrian army. It was stipulated that the Legions were only to fight against Russia. Later these troops formed the beginnings of the Polish Army.

Józef Piłsudski was a commander of one of the Legions' brigades. Independently from the central powers, he developed a clandestine Polish Military Organisation. He consistently argued for independence. After initial successes of the Russian offensive in Galicia in 1915, the tsar's army was forced out not just from this province, but also from the area of the Congress Kingdom and substantial parts of the former Great Duchy of Lithuania. At the end of 1916, the



The Polish Legions' soldiers during exercises, 1915. (Polona.pl)

central powers, which needed Polish recruits, brought up the Polish issue at the international level.

In 1917 the tsar's reign ended in Russia. The new authorities of this country declared that Poland should be recreated and would be in alliance with Russia. In the West, the Polish National Committee (its leader was Roman Dmowski) was recognised as the official representation of the Polish people. Additionally Polish military units began to form in Russia and France ("Blue Army"). Along with other formations created by the central powers at different times, they became the backbone of the Polish army at the time that Poland regained independence in November 1918. Józef Piłsudski returned to Warsaw – having established a reputation as a key figure fighting for independence against Russia, and in the last year of the war, also a prisoner of Germans.

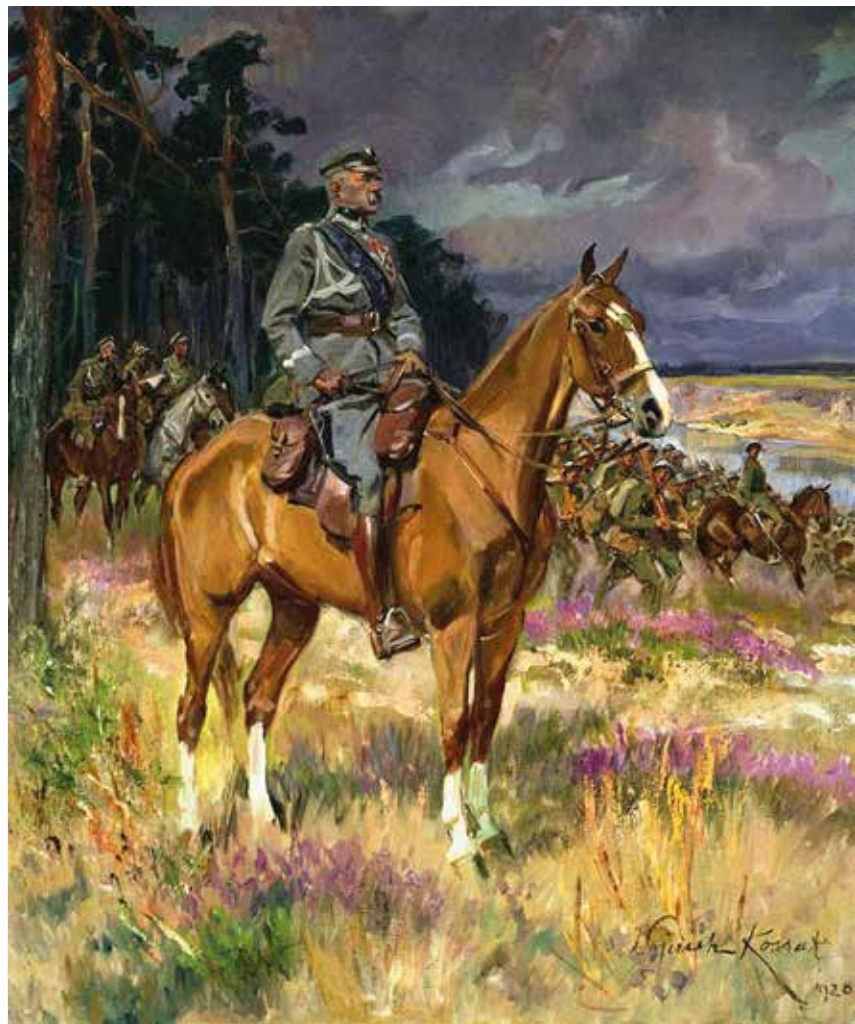
Piłsudski proclaimed the creation of the Republic of Poland and took up the position of Interim Chief of State. One of the first decisions he made was to call a free, independent election, scheduled for January 1919. These actions were taken despite the fact that the Polish administration only covered a part of Polish territories: most of the Congress Kingdom and western Galicia. An agreement



*Disarmament of the Germans in Warsaw* – painting by Stanisław Bagiński representing events of 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918. (Muzeum Wojska Polskiego)

was made with the Polish National Committee and the new country was recognised by the victorious powers.

It was clear that the issue of the western border would depend most of all on the diplomatic endeavours of the Polish delegation to protect Polish interests at the Peace Conference in Paris. Thanks to an uprising that broke out in Wielkopolska in 1918, this region was annexed to Poland. Similarly, three uprisings in Silesia between 1919 and 1921 led to the eastern part of industrialised Upper Silesia being granted to Poland. In the Versailles Treaty, Pomerania with Gdańsk was finally recognised as Polish territory, thanks to which Poland could benefit from access to the Baltic Sea. As a result of a difference of opinions between the English and the French, Gdańsk was made a free city under a protectorate of the League of Nations, but Poland was given special rights to it.



*Józef Piłsudski astride Kasztanka – painting by Wojciech Kossak.  
(Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie)*

As far as the eastern border was concerned, only military efforts could bring a solution. Clashes in this campaign began with battles for Lvov in 1918. They came to an end in summer 1919 after Ukrainian troops were forced out beyond the border of eastern Galicia. The Red Army followed the German forces that were withdrawing to the West right from the end of 1918. It aimed to conquer the regions that in the past had belonged to the Russian empire and to reach Germany, which at this stage was seething with revolutionary ideology. According to Lenin, the occupation of Germany was key to the Bolshevik revolution on the entire European continent and then the whole world. Poland was the last obstacle standing between Russian Bolshevism and the rest of Europe. The first military clash between the Red Army which was heading west and Polish units took place in January 1919. These battles marked the start of a two-year war. What was at stake was not just the issue of Poland's eastern borders, but also the very existence of an independent Polish state, free from totalitarian enslavement.

After the spring offensive of 1919, the Polish army liberated the Vilna region, where 90% of inhabitants were Polish. This pushed the Bolsheviks east. Piłsudski believed that the Ukrainian People's Republic, built on the remnants of Russia, should be supported. By that time Ukraine had been almost entirely occupied by the Bolsheviks. The Soviets prepared an offensive against Poland in the spring of 1920, but Poles in alliance with Ukrainians pre-empted the Soviet attack and marched on Kiev. The Bolsheviks had to back out, but their forces were not broken up. A new Bolshevik offensive forced the Poles to withdraw as far as the Vistula river. That is where a major battle took place. Thanks to an audacious manoeuvre in August 1920, the Poles broke up the Bolshevik forces in the battle of Warsaw. It was a turning point in the war and the end of the Bolshevik military campaign against Europe. Another great battle took place by the Niemen River in 1920 and it tipped the balance in favour of a Polish victory. The conflict was finally brought to a close with the signing of the peace treaty at Riga, and so the Polish-Soviet border was established.

While the war with the Bolsheviks was continuing, there was also a Polish-Lithuanian dispute about Vilna and its environs. When, under pressure from the Polish army, the Bolsheviks were withdrawing to the east, they handed over this area to the Lithuanians. Finally, it was taken over in October 1920 by a Polish division set up by the inhabitants of the Vilna region. A free election to the

## Second Polish Republic in the inter-war period



— Voivodships' borders



Sejm of Vilna was held, which determined that this region be annexed to Poland.

Another flashpoint was the conflict with Czechoslovakia. Taking advantage of the fact that Poland was busy with the Bolshevik war, the Czech army entered Cieszyn Silesia, which was previously amicably divided according to ethnicity by local national councils representing the Polish and Czech inhabitants of the Cieszyn area. Finally, the conflict was resolved by western powers which drew a line of division excluding from Poland a solid chunk of land in so-called Zaolzie, inhabited by Poles. It gave rise to further Polish-Czechoslovakian disputes throughout the whole interwar



Władysław Stanisław Reymont – the 1924 Nobel Prize winner in literature.  
(Library of Congress)

period. Some years later, when Czechoslovakia was facing a crisis in 1938, Poland gave it an ultimatum forcing Prague to return Zaolzie to Poland.

Poland was recreated as a territory of 388,000 square km. In the interwar period the population grew from 27 million in 1921 to 35 million in 1939. It was the largest country of those re-created after World War I or appearing on the map of Europe for the first time following the Treaty of Versailles.

Poles made up 69% of the population. Numerous ethnic minorities were one of the most significant problems of the Republic. Among the biggest minority were Ukrainians, inhabiting the south-eastern districts, and Jews, scattered around towns all over Poland. Belarusians and Germans made up a small percentage of the entire population. Throughout the interwar period no sensible and consistent policy was worked out regarding these minorities.



Marshal Piłsudski surrounded by his officers celebrating the day of his patron saint in Sulejówek in 1925. (NAC)

Poland was rebuilt as a democratic country. The Constitution of 1921 created the parliamentary cabinet governing system. Poland belonged to a small group of European countries which as early as 1918 granted women full voting rights (Great Britain granted women equality and full voting rights 10 years later, France only gave women the vote in the 1940s, while female suffrage in Switzerland came as late as the 1970s).

The biggest challenge for the new Polish state was unifying three different territories, which for over a hundred years were incorporated in the administration of three different countries. Each of those three regions functioned within a single market of the occupying country: trading was based mostly on the internal market of each of those countries. The Bolshevik revolution eliminated the possibility of trading with Russia. In order to create an economic crisis in Poland, Germany waged a tariff war with its neighbour right until 1925.

Despite difficulties, post-war reconstruction of the country was making fast progress and after a period of hyperinflation, Polish currency became strong.

In the 1920s, an unstable majority in the Sejm and frequent changes of government led to the conviction that it was necessary to strengthen the executive power. Almost all political groups spoke of the need to introduce changes. Hence, despite the fact that in 1926 an intervention led by Piłsudski was in effect a military coup d'état, he had the support of the parliament which had been formed a few years before, following free elections.

Although the principles of democracy were curtailed and the country was governed by the autocratic Marshal Piłsudski, unlike other countries in this region, opposition parties and the press opposing the governing camp were not abolished. Despite certain disputes and abuses of power, opposition parties representing the left, right and centre of the political scene operated in an unrestricted manner. In terms of the political system, Poland still functioned more like Western democracies rather than dictatorships elsewhere on the



Jan Czochralski (1885–1953) – chemist, inventor of a method of crystallisation of silicone which is the basis for the manufacture of microprocessors.

(NAC)

continent. In 1935 a new constitution was passed which made the president of the Republic of Poland the most important national authority.

In its foreign policy, Poland had to reckon with two large neighbours: the totalitarian Soviet Union ruled by Lenin and then Stalin, and Germany, which from 1933 created its own model of totalitarian rule under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Both of those countries with their extreme centralisation of power were hostile towards the order introduced by the Treaty of Versailles. They both regarded Poland as an obstacle in implementing their far-reaching ideological plans. For Stalin, Poland was stopping the spread of the revolution into Germany and the rest of the continent. For Hitler, Poland restricted German settlements in the East and was an obstacle

for the nationalist-socialist plans for the expansion of German settlement territories (*Lebensraum*).

In these circumstances, Poland decided to keep both aggressive powers at bay. It understood that due to differences in population numbers, economic weight, and in the late 1930s also military potential, a closer relationship with either of them would inevitably mean a loss of sovereignty. Poland formed non-aggression pacts with both those countries.

There were initiatives aimed at building a foundation for economic development in Poland. Because Gdańsk became a free city, it was necessary to build a new port on a small strip of the coast belonging to Poland. Within a short period the small fishing village of Gdynia grew into one of the biggest Polish cities. The port built there from scratch in the 1930s was the most modern transshipment port in the whole of the Baltic coast.



Slogan on the banner “Heinie, keep off Polish land”. An anti-German demonstration in 1939. (H. Zieliński, *Historia Polski 1914–1939*, Wrocław 1982, s. 278)



St Faustyna (1905–1938) – a nun and mystic. After having visions, she initiated the devotion to Divine Mercy. (Public domain)

In the central part of the country the Central Industrial Area was being developed, where over 100,000 people were later employed. It was supposed to become the foundation of Poland's economic growth, and, at the same time, a site of modern arms industry. This enterprise (like many others) was meant to transform the agricultural country into a modern industrialized economy.

There was versatile scientific development – Polish universities like the Jagiellonian University, Warsaw University, Jan Kazimierz University, and Lvov Polytechnic, in many respects, belonged to the European elite of scientific centres.

Poland maintained one of the strongest armies in Europe. Despite changes, its economy and financial resources were far inferior to those of Germany. Although in the second half of 1930s there was a large-scale modernisation of the army, Poland could not reach the same level of armament as Germany. That is why Poland wanted to resolve its security problems seeking allies among the largest powers of Western Europe – France and Great Britain.

### In a nutshell:

**P**oland regained its independence in 1918 due to the collapse of all the occupying powers and efforts made by the Polish people. The victory of Poles over the Bolsheviks in 1920 saved Poland from losing its independence, but it also prevented the Red Army from spreading communism throughout Europe.



**POLAND**



**FIRST TO FIGHT**

# POLAND FIGHTING



Poland was the first country to put up armed resistance against Hitler. Her struggle brought to an end Germany's unobtrusive expansion; it transformed the act of aggression into an international conflict and ultimately led to the obliteration of the Third Reich.

In May 1939 in no uncertain terms Poland rejected German territorial demands. Poland was not certain to be defeated. She had allies – France and Great Britain. Mutual agreements guaranteed that Hitler's state would be squeezed tight. After the German invasion of Poland, French military forces were to immediately activate their air force, and after three days launch "an offensive against limited targets", and within 15 days "in case of German invasion, launch an offensive against the Germans using [their] main military forces". The Polish-British military alliance clearly stated that should the Germans attack, "all support and assistance" would be offered immediately.

In the meantime, Poland's powerful and totalitarian neighbours joined forces. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed. It included a secret protocol that set out the plan of dividing Poland between the USSR and Germany.

Germany attacked Poland on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 invading from the West, North and – along with Slovakia – from the South. Poland's determined resist-

## Invasions of Poland in September 1939



ance made France and Great Britain declare war on the Third Reich on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939. That should have been the start of a military offensive.

The joint military potential of the three allies was larger than that of the Germans. Almost all German forces were directed to Poland. In the West, near the French border, German military units were relatively few in number and not well armed. A French offensive with British air force support would have forced



the Germans to split their army to fight on two fronts. However these countries did not respect their undertakings to provide support. German general Alfred Jodl later commented: "We did not suffer defeat as early as 1939, which can only be put down to the fact that during the Polish campaign, around 110 French and British divisions remained completely passive in the face of 23 German divisions." French and British inertia thwarted the chances of a swift defeat of Germany, and, at the same time, it caused the allies to lose a nearly million-strong Polish army.

In those circumstances, while Poland was fighting the Germans, she was attacked by the USSR from the east. On 17<sup>th</sup> September the Red Army began an assault on Poland along the whole of its eastern border. No country would have been able to withstand such blows. For over five weeks Poland was fighting on her own and with sheer determination. The Germans lost so much military equipment in Poland that they were not able to run operations in Western Europe immediately after the September campaign.

The extent of Polish resistance was only understood a few months later following the defeat of France, which, despite having a much more favourable



Warsaw would resist German onslaughts until 28<sup>th</sup> September 1939. The photo shows the Royal Castle in Warsaw in flames after a German raid. (NAC)



Pilots from the Polish 303 Squadron in Great Britain.  
(Imperial War Museums)

location, many times stronger army and cooperating with British, Belgian and Dutch forces, resisted for only six and a half weeks.

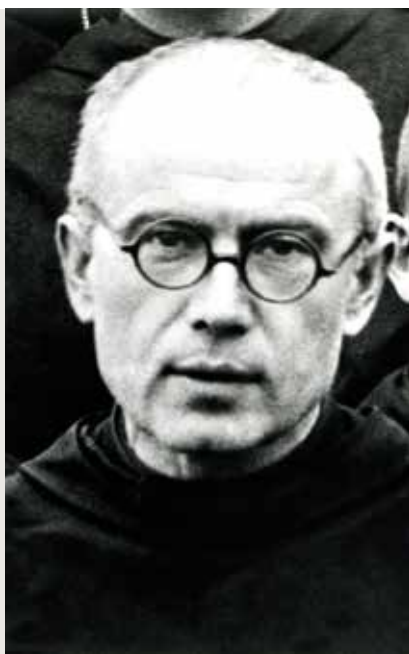
The Republic of Poland did not capitulate. It continued to fight and was a member of the anti-German alliance from the very beginning to the very end of the war. Never in the history of the war did she humiliate herself by collaborating with the Germans. She paid a great price for this.

Polish authorities moved temporarily to their ally, France, and after her defeat in 1940, they moved to Great Britain. The legal continuity of the Republic of Poland was preserved and at the international forum it was the only legitimate administrator of the Polish territory and representative of its citizens.

In France, Poland managed to rebuild some of her military forces. In the spring of 1940 Polish units and ships participated in the fight for the freedom of Norway (including the Battles of Narvik). In the same year, Polish soldiers were fighting in defence of France, including in the Saar Offensive, battles of the Marne-Rhine canal, Lagarde, Somme, Champagne, as well as other regions. Polish pilots

St. Maksymilian Maria Kolbe (1894–1941) – a Franciscan, missionary and martyr, prisoner of the German concentration camp in Auschwitz, died in a hunger bunker after volunteering to take the place of another prisoner.

(Public domain)



took part in the defence of Belgium and northern France, protecting Paris, among other places. As France was capitulating, it was possible to evacuate only a part of the Polish army and Polish authorities to Great Britain.

In the British Isles Polish forces were once again being regrouped. Apart from land forces, Polish fighter squadrons and bomber squadrons were formed. They participated in the defence of Britain, and, in the years to follow, in fights and airstrikes in various parts of the continent. A real achievement of Polish pilots was the fact that they accounted for 12% of the total number of German airplanes that were shot down in the Battle of Britain.

From 1941 to 1942 Polish soldiers also fought in Africa, for example, in the Siege of Tobruk.

In the meantime, the Germans and the Soviets divided Polish territory between them. Western and northern areas were incorporated directly into Germany. In central Poland Hitler created the so-called General Government. Part of the southern border was under Slovak occupation for five years. The Soviet

Union took over more than half of the Polish lands and annexed them to the USSR. The Vilna district was initially transferred to Lithuania, where Moscow deployed Soviet military units, only to see the whole country being annexed to the USSR just a few months later.

German persecutions hit all levels of Polish society hard. As soon as the autumn campaign of 1939 started, the occupying forces engaged in mass executions of the population. Jews were treated with particular cruelty. The Jewish population was gradually rounded up in ghettos created by the Germans in many cities, including Warsaw. It was just the beginning of the extermination that followed later. The occupying forces were determined to suppress Polish intelligentsia – intending to stamp out the Polish establishment. To this end they suppressed Polish education – allowing only primary education and vocational training.

Areas incorporated into Germany were supposed to have a purely German character. As a part of this process, in the first months of occupation, the Germans forced out almost half a million Polish people from those areas.

Every year the level of German persecution of Polish citizens increased. In various pacification actions, the Germans burnt down hundreds of Polish villages and carried out mass murders of the civilian population.



Exhumation of Polish officers murdered by the Soviets in Katyn in 1940.  
(Muzeum Katyńskie – Oddział Muzeum Wojska Polskiego)

Also those living in Soviet-occupied areas experienced ruthless terror. As early as in the autumn of 1939, Soviets deported tens of thousands of Polish nationals into the depths of the USSR as part of the cleansing of "the border zone". Between 1940 and 1941 there were four waves of mass deportations of Poles to labour camps and very distant areas of the USSR. Apart from that, arrests and deportations of individuals, families or bigger groups were a daily occurrence. At least 400,000 people experienced repressions, and in the first instance the Soviets targeted social elites: intelligentsia, civil servants, public officials and their families. They forced them to live in dreadful conditions and do slave labour, both of which led to incredibly high mortality rates.

In March of 1940 the Soviet authorities made an unprecedented decision in the history of the world to murder over 20,000 Polish senior army and police officers and public officials who until then were imprisoned in camps and prisons run by the NKVD. This carnage is known in history as the Katyn massacre.

Despite these blows, the Poles did not lose hope of gaining the final victory. On the initiative of the authorities of the Republic of Poland, an underground system of national institutions developed – the Polish Underground State. Underground activities were taking place on an incredible scale, unmatched by any other occupied country. Underground local authorities operated under the supervision of the Government-in-Exile's Home Delegation, which was clandestine civilian administration. In the



Poster "Poland – first to fight" by Marek Żuławski, 1942.




A guerrilla division of Home Army (AK).




(Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna w Lublinie)


## Occupied Poland in 1939–1941





 Polish borders on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939

### German-occupied lands

 Areas incorporated directly into the Reich


 General Government

 Soviet-occupied lands

 Vilna District was transferred to Lithuania by the Soviet Union, and then incorporated into the USSR with the entire country in 1940

 Slovak-occupied lands

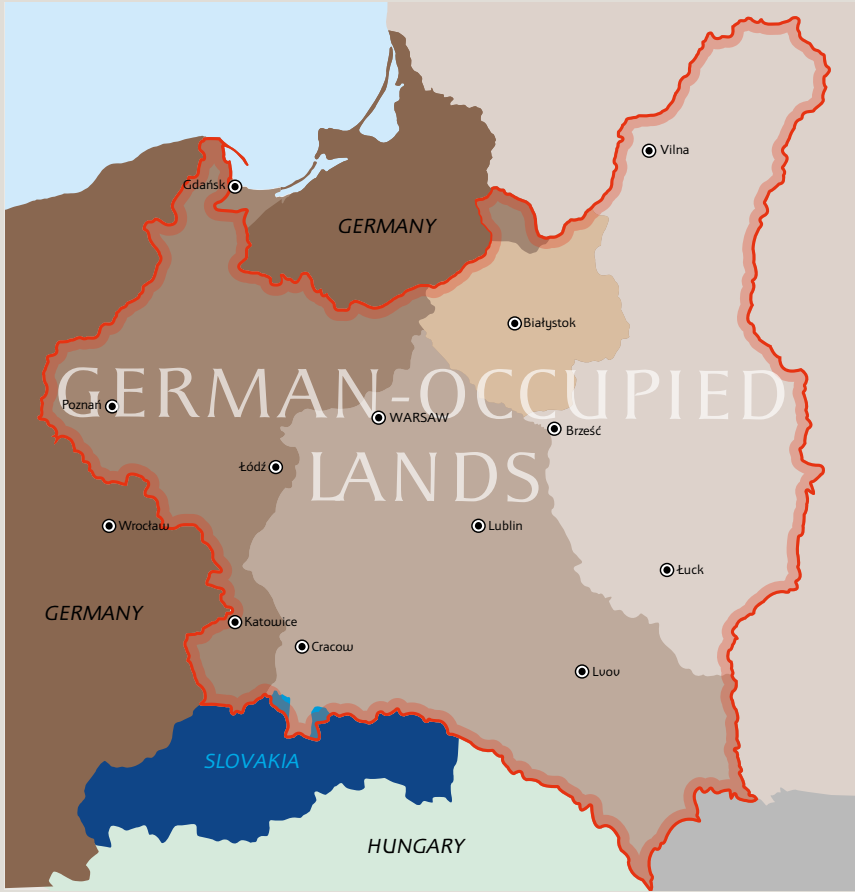
### Border between Soviet- and German-occupied parts of Poland


 as agreed under the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact of 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1939

 Demarcation line as agreed on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1939








## Occupied Poland in 1941–1944



 Polish borders on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939

### German-occupied lands

-  Areas incorporated directly into the Reich
-  General Government
-  Białystok District
-  Areas incorporated into Reichskommissariat Ukraine and Reichskommissariat Ostland

-  Germany before 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939
-  Slovak-occupied lands

underground state there was also a quasi-parliament (the Council of National Unity) which was formed by the main underground political parties. The Delegate of the Government-in-Exile was also acting as the Deputy Prime Minister.

Military forces regrouped in secret and were finally called the Home Army (Polish: Armia Krajowa or AK). In total over 350,000 people served in it. The local networks of the Home Army were developed in all Polish districts, provinces and boroughs of the occupied state.

The Poles also developed a network of underground education. Despite the German ban and the threat of draconian punishment, a large number of Polish pupils and students participated in this form of education. Underground universities were also in operation. There were ongoing underground scientific and cultural activities. Underground publications – monthly and weekly magazines and even dailies had a large distribution network.

In the Polish underground state there were also judicial authorities. Special military and civil courts were convicting traitors and informers. Even common criminals were sentenced to death along with people who, for personal gains, turned in those in hiding.

There was intelligence and counterintelligence in operation. Updates were sent to western allies systematically regarding movements of the German army behind the eastern front. It was discovered that the Germans were preparing for the manufacture of the V-2 rocket, which was supposed to change the course of the war. In 1944, the Home Army got hold of a rocket which was then dismantled; a detailed documentation of each of many thousand elements was prepared. This data was all then passed on to the western allies.

Appointed units of the underground army were undertaking sabotage and military operations. Death sentences were carried out, including those on German oppressors. One of the best-known operations was a 1944 execution of the Head of SS and police in the Warsaw district, notoriously brutal and cruel Franz Kutschera.

The year 1941 brought war between the two totalitarian occupiers. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1941 Hitler's army invaded the USSR. Within a few weeks, the Germans pushed the Soviets completely out of Polish territory.

Great Britain immediately recognised the USSR as her ally. Poland had to take a stance in the new situation too. When the Red Army was being defeated, the Soviet totalitarian system did not pose a direct threat to Poland. In 1941 the

opportunity arose to release the hundreds of thousands of Poles who were still alive in the Soviet labour camps.

Under those circumstances, of the authorities of the Republic of Poland decided to attempt to stabilise the relationship with the USSR. A treaty and a military agreement were concluded reinstating relations between the two states. Moscow formally cancelled the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and undertook to release Poles imprisoned in the USSR. It was agreed that Polish military units would be created on Soviet territories, but they would be controlled by Polish authorities. In 1942 they were evacuated to the British-controlled Middle East.

Unfortunately the criminal nature of Soviet totalitarianism did not change. The tragic events of 1939 and 1941 made Poles cautious about the prospect of a total victory of the Soviets in the East. For many it was clear that victory of either totalitarian Germany or totalitarian USSR would thwart the prospect of an independent Poland. The most favourable scenario for Poland would be for both flagitious powers to continue fighting far away from the Polish eastern border, leading to their mutual annihilation. The point was to get western allies to overcome the Germans before the Red Army drew near to Poland. Because of this, Poland supported the idea of the allies' invasion of the continent from the Balkan Peninsula rather than from France, which was further away.

Polish concerns about Russia were well-founded. Stalin sabotaged Polish-Soviet agreements even in the first months. For instance, the Kremlin was hindering the process of releasing Polish nationals from labour camps and places of exile and developed a secret police service on Polish territory.

In 1942, the Germans made a decision to implement their plan to exterminate European Jews. Among them were 3 million Polish Jews. For this reason Hitler made Polish occupied territory the centre of the Holocaust. The plan to annihilate the Jewish population was an enormous enterprise organised and carried out by the whole German state. Prior to this the Germans deprived the Jewish population of their every legal right. In the occupied Polish territories – unlike in other occupied countries – any form of assistance to the Jews carried a death sentence, often applied to whole families. Despite this, in 1942 *Żegota* Committee was formed within the underground Polish state to aid Jews. Convents played an important role in hiding Jewish children. Almost 1000 Poles were murdered, including several dozen priests, for assisting Jews.



In KL Auschwitz-Birkenau Germans murdered Jews from all European countries.  
On picture: Hungarian Jews deported to Auschwitz, May 1944.  
(Yad Vashem)

There was a network of German concentration camps in occupied Polish territories. To this day the German extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau remains the key symbol of genocide on Polish territory. Created in 1940 for Polish political prisoners, from 1942 it became the main site of the extermination of the Jewish population. Up to 1945, the Germans murdered there over a million Jews from all over Europe, over 70,000 Poles, 20,000 Roma and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war. To make the extermination system more efficient, the Germans started to use poisonous gas in custom-made chambers in order to kill people. The whole network of the German death camps played a similar role. Jewish attempts at military resistance were curbed with vengeance. The largest such operation was an uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, which broke out in April of 1943.

Poland was trying to alert the world to the German atrocities and the extermination of the Jewish population. The international community's reaction was one of disbelief and passivity.



Servants of God Wiktoria and Józef Ulma from Markowa village. In 1944 the Germans killed them along with their 7 children for hiding two Jewish families.  
(From the collection of Mateusz Szpytma)



# Major German occupation camps and German death camps within the so-called Greater Germany in 1941–1944



"Greater Germany" 1941–1944 with current borders





-  German concentration camps  
Established – year
-  German death camps  
Established – year

The scale of the German atrocities proved how valuable Poland's decision was to fight against Hitler's state. Despite enormous casualties, the Republic of Poland did not tarnish her reputation by any form of collaboration with the Germans. If an individual collaborated with them to the detriment of the civil population or the underground system, he was treated as a traitor. He was risking being executed by soldiers of the underground state.

From 1943–1944, noticing the efficiency of extermination practices used by the Germans, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army launched a systematic destruction of the Polish inhabitants of German-occupied Volhynia (Polish: Wołyń) and Eastern Galicia. This bout of extermination resulted in the killing of over 100,000 Poles. Its purpose was to completely eliminate the Polish population in those areas within a short period of time.

The end of the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943 marked a breakthrough on the eastern front. The Red Army had a victorious march west ahead of it. Unfortunately that opened up a chance for Stalin to implement his imperialist plans in Europe. A free and independent Poland did not feature in them.

At this stage the Kremlin launched an aggressive strategy against the Republic of Poland, which was implemented in a few stages. Stalin aimed to reduce Poland's role to being no more than the object of the politics of other powers; later eastern territories were meant to be annexed to the USSR and the rest of the country would be subordinate to it.

These plans were in contrast with the Atlantic Charter's noble slogans of the anti-German coalition. Poland counted on the support of London and Washington in defending her rights. Unfortunately, starting in 1943 both the USA and Great Britain, without disclosing it to the Poles, would send signals to Moscow confirming their readiness to accept the annexation of eastern Poland to the USSR. This encouraged Stalin to escalate his anti-Polish demands.

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1943 Moscow terminated interstate relations with Poland. This was in fact the beginning of a new Soviet aggression against the Republic of Poland.

In this way Poland became the only country in the anti-German coalition which, while still fighting with the Germans, became targeted by another allied power. The Americans and the British gradually accepted further Soviet demands. Thanks to this, Stalin intensified his preparations for the complete subordination





Home Army soldiers in Vilna region in 1944. (KARTA)

of Poland. Part of this strategy was the formation of Polish military units fully controlled by the Soviets.

Initially Stalin implemented his aggressive policy using diplomacy and propaganda. When the Red Army crossed the eastern borders of Poland in January 1944, the Soviets also used their military and police forces against the Poles.

The Home Army engaged in intensive anti-German uprisings which were meant to alert the world to the Polish rights to freedom, sovereignty, and its territorial integrity (Operation *Tempest*). Poland expected her military efforts and support of the Anglo-Saxon allies to make the USSR respect her sovereignty. Poland had no other means of exerting pressure.

Military actions of the Home Army were activated in specific regions the closer they were to the front. In the hinterland of German-occupied areas, there were local uprisings with Polish units liberating hundreds of towns. The Home Army participated in battles with the Germans including in those for Vilna and Luov. By making the Red Army aware of the existence of Polish military forces, the Poles, as masters of this land, declared their readiness to cooperate within the anti-German coalition.



Participants of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.  
(Wikimedia Commons)

In many places local Soviet commanders pretended to be ready to cooperate. However, after joint struggle against the Germans, they would arrest Home Army leaders. Home Army soldiers were incorporated into units controlled by Moscow. Those who resisted were murdered or arrested and sent to labour camps or sent into exile to distant areas of the USSR. Yet again the civilian Polish population suffered repression at the hands of the Soviets.

The Soviet occupation of Poland became a fact. Eastern areas were incorporated directly into the USSR. For the territory west of the new border established



by the Kremlin, Stalin appointed new communist central authorities, which were fully controlled by Moscow and protected by Soviet armed forces.

The last act in this time in the struggle for Poland's independence was the Warsaw Uprising, which broke out on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1944. In the capital's districts freed by the Home Army, Polish authorities operated overtly. Participants of the uprising were fighting on their own, despite the fact that the Soviet front was nearby. The authorities in Moscow did all they could to make the uprising fail. Stalin paused the offensive of the Red Army before it reached Warsaw and put



Soldiers of the Home Army killed by the Soviets in Turza near Rzeszów in the autumn of 1944. Photo taken in the time of exhumation in 1990s. (Maciej Korcuć)

on hold his plan to attack the capital. He gave Hitler time to eliminate the Polish forces. When insurgents achieved greatest successes, the USSR prevented the Allies from sending more air support to assist the Home Army which continued to fight. The Soviets brutally eliminated the Home Army units coming to the aid of the uprising. The Germans did the same on the other side of the front line.

In such circumstances for 2 months the Home Army soldiers continued their heroic fight against the Germans, who far outnumbered the participants of the uprising. In the areas controlled by the Germans mass murders were carried out: well over 140,000 city residents were killed. Taking advantage of the Soviet passivity in the following months, following Hitler's orders, the Germans were free to demolish entire districts of Warsaw.

From 1944 to 1945 the Polish Army participated in the liberation of Italy, France, Belgium and Holland. Victories included the Battle of Monte Cassino, opening up the way for the Allies to head for Rome. Then they liberated dozens of Italian towns – including Ancona and Bologna. In northern France they took part in the Battle of Falaise Pocket. They liberated Ypres and Ghent in Belgium

and Breda in Holland. They fought in Arnhem and by the Meuse. They took control of northern areas of Germany. The Polish navy took part in the Battle of the Atlantic organising convoys to Murmansk and military operations in the Mediterranean and the Aegean seas.

Poland also contributed to the victory over Germany in another way. Polish cryptologists broke codes of the Enigma, a German encoding machine, and they passed them onto the British. This became instrumental in numerous allied victories during the war.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the USA and Great Britain, despite officially following the stipulations of the Atlantic Charter, finally put a seal of approval on the annexation of a half of Polish territories, including Vilna and Lvov to the USSR. The Potsdam Conference confirmed that Poland would be granted southern part of East Prussia and the areas to the Oder–Neisse line, which before the war belonged to the Third Reich. This did not make up for Poland's territorial losses. The area of the newly formed Poland was 20% smaller in comparison with the pre-war country.

As a result of German and Soviet actions, Poland suffered enormous losses, which have been difficult to make up in the course of history. Nearly 6 million Polish citizens died (a half of whom were Jews murdered by the Germans). Scores of people could not return to their home country which was enslaved by the Soviets. Through extermination, deportation and imprisonment Poland lost a significant part of her population. In 1945 in the country of the newly defined borders there were 11 million fewer citizens; the number dropped from 35 million in 1939 to only 23.9 million in 1945. The losses were especially marked in the Polish elite. For instance, 39% of medical doctors died, along with 30% scientists and 28% of priests.

Destruction was colossal. It was estimated that national wealth was reduced by 38%. The country that had suffered the devastation of war, was now being systematically robbed by the Soviets who were removing industrial machinery and energy and communication equipment to the USSR.

Stalin constructed an alternative state: the communist authorities fully controlled by him were moved to Warsaw. From 1944 onwards Soviet armed forces and NKVD participated in the elimination of resistance movement fighting for independence and the underground network loyal to the constitutional government-in-exile. Atrociously repressive measures were applied: murders, arrests, labour camps

in very distant areas of the USSR. In March 1945, the Soviet authorities tricked and arrested the leaders of the Polish underground state. Three of them – including the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chief Commander of the Home Army – did not survive incarceration in the Soviet prisons they were sent to.

In June of 1945, due to decisions made by the "Big Three" of Allied leaders, a new government was formed under the control of Moscow. It was supposed to organise parliamentary elections in the country stripped of some of its territories. On the basis of this, the governments of the USA and Great Britain established diplomatic relations with this new government, terminating recognition of the legitimate government-in-exile. It was another act of disloyalty of the western allies towards their Polish ally, especially as there was no reassurance that the elections would be genuine and Soviet forces were not removed from Poland. The communists who only had a marginal social support could stay in power only thanks to the Soviets.

The parliamentary elections took place in 1947. Under the control of Moscow, their results were completely rigged and the communists were announced as the winners.

Up until 1947 military resistance against captivity was undertaken by strong guerrilla groups; political opposition included the Polish Peasants' Party (Polish: *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*) and the underground Freedom and Independence Association (Polish: *Zrzeszenie "Wolność i Niezawisłość"*). Deprived of hope that the geo-political situation would change, the military underground resistance faded away with time. At the end of the 1940s there were single guerrilla units still in the forests and they turned into survival groups.

### In a nutshell:

World War II started with the German and Soviet invasions of Poland. The Poles were not assisted and were therefore defeated, but they did not give up. The country's authorities and the army were re-constructed in exile. On the Polish territories the underground state operated. Despite enormous war-time efforts and massive losses, Poland could not enjoy victory. In the final years of the war, she fell victim to yet more Soviet aggression. Almost half of her territories were annexed to the USSR, while the rest was totally controlled by the Soviet communist dictatorship.

## Borders of Poland prior to and after World War II



Borders of Poland in 1939



Borders of Poland defined after World War II





# IN COMMUNIST CAPTIVITY



post-war Poland, after the Soviets gained control over the country, the communist party took charge. They exercised control over administration, the economy, the media, education and all other domains of social life. They used terror and propaganda. It is estimated that in the period of their coming to power (1944–1956) some 50,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands were imprisoned and sent to forced labour camps. Both internal and foreign policies of the Polish People's Republic (the official name of the country from 1952) were entirely dependent on the Soviet Union.

After 1947 military resistance was fast diminishing. At the beginning of the 1950s there were still small guerrilla groups operating. The last fighter was killed in 1963. After the scout movement was abolished, underground youth groups began to emerge on a mass scale.

Following nationalisation of the economy, farmers were the last remaining large group of private asset owners. In 1948 the communists launched collectivisation forcing them to give up their land, which caused a great uproar.

Gradually anti-church propaganda and repressions intensified. The authorities aimed to eliminate religion completely. Many priests, nuns, monks and even



Colonel Łukasz Ciepliński (1913–1951) – the last leader of the largest underground organisation Freedom and Independence (Polish: Wolność i Niezawisłość), executed by the communists. While on death row, he wrote: “They can only take my life away. But that is not what matters most. I am happy to be murdered as a Catholic for my faith, as a Pole for Poland’s independence and happiness, and as a human being – for truth and justice. Today more than ever I believe that Christ’s idea will prevail, Poland will regain its independence, and disgraced dignity will be recovered. This is my faith and my great happiness.” (AIPN)



Cavalry Captain Witold Pilecki (1901–1948) – an officer of the Polish Army officer, “The Auschwitz volunteer”. He participated in military operations of 1919–1920 i 1939; under the German occupation, he was a co-founder of the Secret Polish Army. He deliberately got himself arrested by the Germans and was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp where he was planning to set up a resistance movement and gather intelligence. He escaped from the camp after over two years and took part in the Warsaw Uprising. After the war he set up a network gathering intelligence for the Polish government-in-exile. He was executed at the hands of communists; his remains have never been found. (AIPN)

bishops were imprisoned. Anti-religious policies escalated dramatically in 1953 when the Polish primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was arrested. Intimidated priests were forced to take an oath of allegiance to the country. The imprisoned primate created a programme for the Poles' spiritual preparation for the jubilee celebrating the baptism of Poland.

Increasing resistance of the Poles came to a head in Poznań in June of 1956. Some 100,000 people took to the streets demanding an improvement of living standards and political and religious freedom. The protest was brutally put down. 58 people died as a result, including the youngest casualty, 13-year-old Romek Strzałkowski.



Poznań, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1956. (AIPN)



On 26<sup>th</sup> August 1956 following a call from the imprisoned Cardinal Wyszyński, a million Poles gathered at the shrine of Jasna Góra. They renewed the national vows, first taken by King John Casimir in 1656.  
(Archiwum Kurii Metropolitalnej w Katowicach)

In the autumn of 1956, to appease the social tension, the communists changed authorities of the party. During marches and manifestations, Poles called for a withdrawal of Soviet forces stationed in Poland, gaining independence from Moscow, freedom and the release of Cardinal Wyszyński. The last demand was soon to be met. In an attempt to quieten society, the communist authorities decided to make certain concessions. Collective farms were allowed to be dissolved (only a few continued to operate), censorship eased off temporarily, Soviet officers in charge of the army returned to the Soviet Union, omnipotent power of the repressive state apparatus was restricted.

The Catholic Church also felt the change. Priests were among political prisoners released from prisons; bishops, previously forced to leave, were now



Autumn 1956. Poles manifested their solidarity with Hungarians fighting with the Soviet army. Despite a difficult economic situation, Poland offered Hungarians financial support which was outdone only by support from the USA.

(AIPN)

allowed to return to their dioceses, religion was reintroduced at schools, permission was given for the construction of new churches. Soon a new wave of repressions started, though not as tough as before. Removal of crosses from schools and the abolishing of religious education, suspension of the construction of churches, confiscations of church assets triggered strong social opposition.

In the conflict between the authorities and the Church, the millennium of the baptism of Poland became a real bone of contention. The Poles were making preparations for it according to the programme of spiritual rebirth of the nation – the Great Novena, initiated by Primate Wyszyński. The communists announced their own programme of celebrating the country's millennium.



Nowa Huta was supposed to be a “city of socialism”, without any churches. In 1957 permission was given for the construction of a church, but it was soon withdrawn. When in 1960 authorities removed a cross from the site of the planned construction, thousands of people protested. (AIPN)

In 1965 Polish bishops sent the famous letter to German bishops in which they said: “we forgive and ask for forgiveness”. This letter marked the beginning of Polish-German reconciliation. At the same time it also triggered another anti-church propaganda campaign. In spite of this, mass participation of Poles in the millennium celebrations clearly showed which side society supported.

In the 1960s changes introduced in 1956 were slowly withdrawn. There was an increasing dissatisfaction of intelligentsia, which culminated in March 1968 when university students began to protest. They demanded freedom of speech, study and culture and the abolition of censorship. In reaction the authorities applied mass repressions; they also started an anti-Semitic propaganda campaign forcing 13,000 people of Jewish descent to leave Poland.

The economic situation was also worsening. In December of 1970, authorities decided to increase prices (which were regulated by the state). This sparked



As part of preparations for the millennium, a copy of the painting of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa was taken from parish to parish visiting the whole country. The communists wanted to put a stop to this peregrination and “arrested” the painting in 1966.



Authorities organised alternative events, but Poles attended religious celebrations en masse. In the photo: celebrations in Cracow. (NAC)



In 1968 the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia put an end to reforms of the Prague Spring. The most dramatic act in protest against this invasion was the self-immolation of a former soldier of the Home Army, Ryszard Siwiec. (AIPN)

a series of strikes in the whole country. The most dramatic events took place in the Baltic coastal cities, with demonstrations and street fights. In Gdańsk, Gdynia, Elbląg and Szczecin the army and militia used firearms against the workers killing 45 people; over a thousand people were injured.

As putting down the protest involved this terrible bloodshed, it became an excuse for another change of leadership in the communist party. Again society was offered certain concessions. Limited political liberalisation followed and living standards improved significantly. However, centrally planned economy was not reformed and the economic growth was financed from western loans.

Another crisis was just a matter of time. An attempt to increase prices in 1976 sparked another wave of strikes and demonstrations. The communists put on hold the price increases but at the same time punished protesters severely.





Street fights in Gdańsk, December 1970. (AIPN)

This spurred the creation of opposition organisations of which the most important ones were the Workers' Defense Committee (Polish: Komitet Obrony Robotników) and the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights (Polish: Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela). The opposition supported victims of repressions, published underground press and set up independent education.

On 16 October 1978, Metropolitan of Cracow, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected as Pope and took the name of John Paul II. This event was welcomed enthusiastically by the Poles and came as a shock to the communists. The authorities were not able to prevent John Paul II from making a pilgrimage to his homeland, which took place in June 1979. During the Mass in Warsaw attended by hundreds of thousands of people, the Pope spoke of Poland's history and finished his homily with the words: "And I cry—I who am a Son of the land of



Stanisław Pyjas (1953–1977), student of the Jagiellonian University, cooperated with the Workers' Defense Committee, murdered by the communist secret service. Following his death, the Students' Solidarity Committee was created. (AIPN)

Poland and who am also Pope John Paul II—I cry from all the depths of this Millennium, I cry on the vigil of Pentecost: Let your Spirit descend. Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth, the face of this land." It soon turned out that these were prophetic words. Hope was settling in the hearts of the Poles.

### In a nutshell:

**I**n post-war Poland, the communists exercised control over all levels of social life, using terror and propaganda as their tools. Poles objected to the dictatorship on numerous occasions. Great hope was raised in connection with the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II – as the head of the Holy See.





St John Paul II (1920–2005) – prior to becoming the Pope, the archbishop of Cracow, a poet, philosopher, sometimes called the Pilgrim Pope – during his pontificate, he visited 129 countries. Tirelessly promoted the message of Divine Mercy.

(Dennis Jarvis)

# SOLIDARNOŚĆ

## MAŁOPOLSKA

### UCHWAŁA

Krajowej Komisji Porozumiewawczej podjęta na nadzwyczajnym posiedzeniu w Bydgoszczy w dniu 24.03.1981 r. w sprawie akcji strajkowej

Przeobrażając w całości dotychczasowe zadania i zadając, zgodnie z zasadami, wyznaczone przez Krajową Komisję Porozumiewawczą, zadania do wykonania w strajku, Komisja Krajowa zadecydowała o ogłoszeniu strajku w całym kraju od rannej zmiany w dniu 27.03.1981 r. w sprawie akcji strajkowej

ogłosić w całym kraju na piątek 27.03.81 4-ro godzinny

### STRAJK OSTRZEGAWCZY

od godz. 8-12

w wypadku nie stwierdzenia zgłębni strajkowych przystąpić we WTOREK 31.03.1981 r. do

### STRAJKU WŁASNEGO • OKUPACYJNEGO

w całym kraju od rannej zmiany

ZADZIAŁ STRAJKOWY

NIK  
WBREW  
NOLI  
NARODU

STRAJK  
OSTRZEGAWCZY

SOLIDARNOŚĆ

STRAJK  
OSTRZEGAWCZY

SOLIDARNOŚĆ

NIE ODDAMY

KONKURS  
SIERPNI

28 do 11  
MARCA KWIECIA

ICJE '80

Warszawa • Kijów • Warszawa • Wolność • Uciecha

ul. Św. Krzysztofa 1, Warszawa

# FREEDOM AND SOLIDARITY



the summer of 1980 a wave of strikes swept across Poland. They were brought on by the worsening economic situation. An outbreak of strikes in the Gdańsk Shipyard proved to be ground-breaking. It was sparked by a dismissal of opposition activist Anna Walentynowicz. Other industrial sites joined in. A list of 21 demands was put forward and the most important one was the right to create independent trade unions. The strike spread to other cities – Szczecin, Wrocław and Jastrzębie.

The scale of the protests forced the authorities to make concessions. As a result, an agreement was signed, which eventually led to the creation of the Independent Self-governing Labour Union "Solidarity" (Polish: "Solidarność") under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, who was the key figure of the August strike in Gdańsk. Despite obstacles put up by the authorities, "Solidarity" began to operate across the whole country. In 1981 nearly 10 million Poles were members of it. It was by far the largest grass-root organisation in the history of the world that emerged so quickly. Following further protests, farmers and students also created their own independent unions.

What made "Solidarity" truly exceptional was not just its impressive membership numbers. Sixteen months of legitimate operation of this independent



Strikers put up pictures of John Paul II and the Black Madonna of Częstochowa on the Gdańsk Shipyard gate. During two weeks of protests, their daily prayers and the Sunday Mass kept them strong.

(Jan Palik/FOTONOVA)

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labour union was a period of great enthusiasm and hope. The Poles were engaging in matters of public life on a mass scale; there were plans to reform nearly all organisational levels of society. Thousands of uncensored magazines and books were circulated. Those publications told the truth about recent history. Previously forbidden literature was now published. There was also an undercurrent of reform amongst the authorities themselves.

The spirit of this period can be best described as the appreciation of values like truth, freedom, justice, solidarity, human dignity and the common good. "Solidarity" was a movement attracting people of a broad spectrum of views. What they had in common was patriotism and also religious conviction. After years of imposed atheism, religion began to re-emerge in public life.

The 1<sup>st</sup> National Congress of "Solidarity" was a key moment. Because in fact the delegates represented the majority of society, the congress was sometimes called the parliament of free Poland. The union's manifesto "Self-governing Republic" was adopted. Another important step was issuing an "Open Letter to the Working People of Eastern Europe". It instigated a further anti-Solidarity campaign in the whole Soviet Bloc. In reality, from August 1980 "Solidarity" was mellowing its most radical demands, in particular free elections.



On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of December 1970 events in Gdańsk, the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers was unveiled. (Tomasz Wierzejski/FOTONOVA)



In May 1981 the Poles first were shocked by an attempted assassination of John Paul II, and then by the death of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. Prayers for the recovery of the Holy Father were held across the whole country. (Włodzimierz Pniewski/REPORTER)



The 1<sup>st</sup> National Congress of "Solidarity" . (Wojtek Laski/EastNews)





Pacification of a strike in the coal mine "Wujek" in Katowice on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1981.  
(Marek Janicki/FOTONOVA)

The communist authorities were planning to abolish "Solidarity" from the very beginning. There was also pressure from the Soviet Union to disband it. On 13<sup>th</sup> December 1981 martial law was imposed. Tanks and armoured vehicles appeared in the streets, telephone lines were cut, people were not allowed to travel to other towns, and the operation of all organisations, except for the communist party, was suspended. On the first night of martial law, over 3,000 people were interned. In total nearly 10,000 members of "Solidarity" and other organisations passed through internment camps. Over 10,000 people received prison sentences. Tens of thousands lost their jobs.

Despite the atmosphere of fear fuelled by warnings that resistance would be punishable by death, hundreds of strikes broke out in the whole country. They were violently put down. The most tragic was the pacification of a protest in the coal mine "Wujek" in Katowice, during which nine miners were killed. The protests were broken up, but "Solidarity" was not destroyed. Structures of the labour union were being re-created clandestinely in factories as well as at regional and national levels. Clandestine youth and students' organisations and political parties were formed.



Symbol of "Fighting Solidarity", an underground organisation created in Wrocław in 1982. It alludes to the symbol of fighting Poland movement from World War II.

(AIPN)

A specific phenomenon of the Polish underground movement of the 1980s was its press. Each year hundreds of titles appeared on the underground market. After a few months of martial law, underground radio stations were also set up. Independent culture was flourishing. Thousands of books were published in the underground. Concerts and theatre performances were organised. Many of those activities were hosted by the Church.



Underground printers. (KARTA)



During a manifestation in Lubin on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1982, three demonstrators were shot dead. (Krzysztof Raczkowiak/FOTONOVA)

The whole world reacted to the imposition of martial law. The USA announced sanctions against the communist authorities of Poland and the Soviet Union. There were demonstrations all over the world in solidarity with the Poles. Humanitarian help was sent to Poland. Also underground "Solidarity" received support. There were protests even in the Soviet Bloc. The symbol of recognition of significance of "Solidarity" was the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Lech Wałęsa in 1983.

The opposition organised strikes and demonstrations. However, the communist authorities were not willing to give in. Although martial law came to an end in 1983, repressions continued. The Poles looked to the Pope for support; he visited his homeland in 1983 and 1987. It came as a great shock for society to learn of the death of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who was murdered in 1984 by the communist secret service agents.

The communists were unable to overcome the economic crisis. Despite rationing, buying even basic products involved many hours of queueing. Lack of prospects made thousands of Poles escape from the country.



Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko (1947–1984) – martyr, chaplain of “Solidarity” .  
He celebrated Masses for the country; in his teachings, following St Paul, he called for  
the “conquering of evil with good”. (KARTA)

In 1988 there were two waves of strikes. Another generation of young people became involved in opposition activities. In the light of these events, the communists made some concessions. Moderate opposition was offered to hold talks at a round table. The authorities only intended to reform the political system, but the system ultimately fell. In semi-free elections of June 1989 “Solidarity” won 99 out of 100 seats in the Upper House (Senate) and all possible seats (35%) in the Lower House of the Parliament (Sejm).

**Solidarność**



**W SAMO POŁUDNIE  
4 CZERWCA 1989**

An election poster of "Solidarity" entitled "High Noon" by Tomasz Sarnecki.



The presidential insignia of the Second Polish Republic were passed to the new president at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, which was completely rebuilt after being destroyed by the Germans. (Tomasz Wierzejski/FOTONOVA)

Events in Poland triggered the fall of the communist system in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. In the following months the dictatorship fell in Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. Finally in 1991 the Soviet Union fell apart.

In December 1990 Lech Wałęsa was voted president following free presidential elections. Official insignia were handed over to him by Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last president of Poland in exile. In this way the history of the Polish Government-in-Exile that started in 1939, finally came to an end.

The 1990s were dominated by economic and political reforms. Due to its inefficiency, the economy faced a complete breakdown. Introduction of free market allowed for a gradual improvement of the situation, but many social

groups were impoverished. A lot of political reforms were successful, including the creation of self-governing local authorities. Poland's membership of NATO (1999) and the European Union (2004) symbolically marked the return of Poland to the western world.

The greatest shock for the Poles in recent years was a crash of the presidential plane on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2010. Apart from President Lech Kaczyński, other casualties of the crash included representatives of Polish authorities, commanders of armed forces, clergymen and veterans, all of whom were on the way to Katyn to pay their respects to victims of the Soviet mass murder. In this way, once again in the history of Poland, the past became entwined with the present.

Today we look at the history of Poland which spans over a thousand years and began with the baptism of 966. We are proud of what our ancestors achieved and we try to learn a lesson from their failures. The past is the source of our identity and yet it is also a commitment. Words spoken by the Holy Father just before the end of his first visit to his homeland keep coming back to us. St John Paul II said then: "So, before going away, I beg you once again to accept the whole of the spiritual legacy which goes by the name of 'Poland', with the faith, hope and charity that Christ poured into us at our holy Baptism. I beg you never lose your trust, do not be defeated, do not be discouraged; do not on your own cut yourselves off from the roots from which we had our origins."

## In a nutshell:

**I**n 1980, following an unprecedented wave of protests, "Solidarity" was created. It was a unique social movement in the history of the world. Despite martial law being imposed on the country by the communists, opposition sustained its operation in the underground. Finally "Solidarity" won, which made it possible to bring democracy back to Poland. The fight of the Poles triggered the fall of the communist system across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.





Piotr Żyłciński



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