

## Poland

### *A History*

*A.Zamoyski*

December 1-5, 2016

The beginnings of Polish history are as most other national histories hidden in pre-historic mist, but if one should take the tenth century or so at the starting point, which may be a convenient one, both because at the time much of Poland was already Christianized and one could start talk about kings and an emerging dynasty referred to as the Piast. Kings with name like Mieszko, Bolesław, Kazimierz started to be born, appear, rule and die, buried in cathedrals. At the time Slavic speaking people were spread all over Central Europe reaching west of the Elbe<sup>1</sup>, bordered by German speaking tribes, loosely united by the Holy Roman Empire, then reaching south to the Mediterranean and the Balkans, with Hungarians in the middle, and in the east fusing with the Russians, and in the North East with Baltic people such as the Prussians and Lithuanians. Then there was an inexorable 'Drang nach Osten' by German speakers. One should think of those not necessarily as movements of people as movements of languages which can spread, and often do so, without their individual speakers move at all. Pomerania is a case in point with a strong German element already a thousand years ago, and which changed hands repeatedly in the centuries to come, at some time under Danish suzerainty, but which would soon become predominantly German, without as noted above, cleansing the Slavic population, which instead would find it convenient to change language. The heartland of Poland was further south and east and contained many other ethnic groups. It is anachronistic to think of states as nations, there were very little national awareness among people at large in Europe until the passing of the Middle Ages which occurred later in Central and Eastern Europe than it did in the West. If there was any national feeling it was restricted to a narrow elite, which in the case of Poland consisted of a warrior class, a classical feudal phenomenon, in fact the author somewhat romantically recalls the samurajs of Japan. They are referred to as the *szlachta* and were responsible for choosing the King. It was a hereditary class, meaning that inclusion was not tied to their economic success, and hence as time passed the majority of them would be rather impoverished, but that did not exclude some political power. Soon there was a major Western intrusion in terms of the Teutonic Knights formed during the early crusades to the Holy Land but when those turned out to be unfeasible, their missionary passions were directed east towards the still pagan regions populated by Baltic people, predominantly the Lithuanians. They presented a formidable military presence as well as a pervasive economic one, as manifested by the many castles they erected<sup>2</sup> and would in practice constitute a state in the state. Of course

---

<sup>1</sup> As testified by many Slavic place names, such as Torgau on the Elbe where the American and Soviet forces met in 1945.

<sup>2</sup> the largest of which was Marienburg, in present day Malbork

their presence was not confined to within Polish borders but extended across the Baltic lands. And one cannot repeat too often that the Polish state was a multi-cultural one with an additional strong German influence in the towns, with a Slavic peasantry finding no wider identification than by its immediate region and church. This had its advantages making for permeable borders, in particular Jews would find a sanctuary in Polish lands and make up a sizable minority, mostly concentrated in towns, in many of which, by virtue of their insignificant populations, they often made up majorities. The demographic disasters caused by the Black Death that ravaged most of Western and Northern Europe to a large extent bypassed the Polish lands, which hence became relatively more populous than their Western neighbors. Add to that the devastation which the Mongol hordes imposed on much of Russia, a power vacuum was created in the East of Central Europe, which in particular the Duchy of Lithuania had taken advantage of and in the process created a huge state, including mostly Russians, both large and small, and Ukrainians, in which the Lithuanians, who like the Prussians, did not speak a Slavic language, was just a minor ethnic minority as to mere numbers. In the 14th century there was a discovery of mutual interest and the two made common cause, one result of which was that they routed the Teutonic Knights (the battle of Grünwald 1410) but failed to press their advantage territorially. The German knights would later ensconce themselves in what later would become East Prussia. The Commonwealth as the union would be known as would provide a new dynasty, the Jagiellons of Lithuania. However, no dynasty in Europe was ethnically pure, on the contrary, one of the interesting phenomena of European history has been the eagerness for royal intermarriage. Part of it can be explained by political expediency, but concomitant with this developed the mystique of Royal blood that would deeply influence the psyches of the ruled as well as the rulers themselves. Basically it was a matter of the prerogative of power. Those of the ruling class felt entitled to the right to rule, which when not felt makes the prospect of ruling something daunting from which you normally tend to shy away<sup>3</sup>, a dilemma that would be often manifested in modern history. And the ruled likewise felt a deep acceptance of the necessity of their submission. In its purest form we talk about hereditary succession which bestows on the process the crucial formality of legality. Now it is important to keep in mind that the Polish tradition was a bit more flexible, kings were elected as noted above, which actually conformed to an older tradition<sup>4</sup>, yet it did not necessarily make it more democratic in the egalitarian sense, as the candidates were by necessity restricted to royalty. And even as far as it had some democratic virtues it would in the end prove a fatal weakness as far as the political viability of the country.

So let us pause momentarily. The combined countries of Poland and Lithuania constituted a vast and populous and relatively prosperous empire, at least as far as agricultural produce was concerned, and at the time, this was the main one, and would in the 16th century reach its zenith as to power and influence. It is interesting to note, as far as we are

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a point made by A.J.P.Taylor in his book on the Habsburg Empire, reviewed elsewhere in this collection

<sup>4</sup> Swedish kings were traditionally elected, it was the determined effort of Gustavus I Vasa to create a dynasty based on rigid succession to avoid civil unrest, it did not work initially, three of his sons managed to rule in succession being at loggerheads with each other, prime material for a Shakespearian drama, which unfortunately was never exploited by the bard.

to believe the author, that just as with the case of the Black Death, the upheavals of the Reformation to a large extent passed Poland by. Why was that? The author attributes it to the eminently tolerant attitude of Polish society, as indicated by the wide spread acceptance of Jews. The author, is of course partial, as any historian is bound to be, but furthermore being born and bred in England by parents in exile, stemming from Polish aristocracy (members of which are repeatedly referred to in elevated positions throughout the latter part of the book) he is particularly vulnerable to viewing the old land in an overly romantic vein. The whole issue turns on the crucial distinction which has to be made between society as a conglomeration of individuals and social traditions, and its more formal aspect as a ruled entity with laws and formal traditions. The bottom-up approach versus the top-down. In principle a society could be intolerant while the ruling attitude is one of tolerance and enlightenment. In fact enlightenment has traditionally been imposed from above. In modern society there is much more of a connection, than in a more primitive one. Historical documentation will invariably emphasize the latter of which we will have more detailed knowledge, while to the former we are reduced to speculation. Anyway during its heydays, there was a lot of contact between Poland and Western Europe, especially Italy, from which Renaissance culture was brought up north. Universities were founded and were competitive with what you could find further West. The author can hardly ignore Copernicus in this context, a source of pride for Polish nationalists. But to write that he demonstrated that the Earth moved around the Sun shows a basic ignorance, but maybe one should not expect a general historian to be knowledgeable about the science. As to Copernicus, he wrote in Latin and it could very well be that he was much more fluent in German than in Polish, Anyway when the Swedish prince Johan married the sister of the Polish king he made quite a match, Poland very much being the senior partner.

The supremacy of Poland would not last, Sweden was rising to a position of eminence as a Baltic power during the 16th century challenging the Polish ambitions. Briefly the two countries were joined under a common king, as the son Sigismund of King John of Sweden also was elected as the first Wasa king in Poland. This situation was untenable, Civil War ensued, and Zygmunt was toppled by his uncle, although he would never fully renounce claims on the Swedish throne on which he had legal aspirations (the disposed King Eric had no male issue). Zygmunt III as he is known in Poland, moved the capital to Warsaw from Krakow, and engaged actively in the counter-reformation, making Poland religiously a less tolerant society and the Catholic church more powerful. In the early 17th century there was open conflict and Zygmunt's cousin Gustavus Adolphus honed in his military skills as a commander on the Polish theatre prior to entering the fray of the Thirty Years War. His policies were continued by his successors, the ultimate ambition being to turn the Baltic into a Swedish dominion controlling the entire coast. The repeated devastations of the Swedish armies, sometimes in cohort with the growing power of Brandenburg, bled the Polish nation. The final campaign, being part of the Great Nordic War, took place in the early 18th century when the Swedish King Charles XII disposed of his enemy (and cousin) the Saxon August as a ruler of Poland in preparation for a final show-down with Peter the Great. A campaign that tied him down for too many years and allowed his Russian opponent to resume the initiative (and build a new capital on Swedish territory set among the marshes at the outlet of Neva). Charles came to grief in Poltava in 1709

and by that debacle the period of Swedish power came to a rather abrupt end. August once again seized power in Poland, Peter consolidated his position on the Baltic coast, and the Swedish overtures to the Ottoman Sultan came to nothing. By that time Brandenburg had asserted itself, in fact by the acquisition of Old Prussia restyled itself as Prussia, a new actor on the scene. The Polish political scene was in total disarray, the so called democratic system of the Sejm where everybody had the right of veto was not a viable system with powerful states and autocratic rulers. The fate of Poland was sealed. It took, however, the major part of the century before the partitions started. First in 1772 when Prussia and Russia appropriated large swaths of the empire. The Prussians were eager to secure the Baltic coast and connect with East Prussia, and the Russian felt that large chunks of Poland were rightfully theirs being populated by their own Natives. Catherine the Great who was the driving force was a German Princess closely related to the Prussian Royalty as well as to the Swedish King. She was no sissy and identified closely with Russia and put on the remaining stump of Poland one of her discarded lovers. Already by the first partition Poland for all intents and purposes had stopped being an independent country, despite valiant efforts to reform. In fact the new constitution which was drafted has earned the praise of posterity as the most liberal and advanced at the time<sup>5</sup>. But to what avail? By 1795 Poland as a political nature no longer existed even formally. To be honest, it was an empire that had outlived itself and become redundant. Some ten years later a similar attempt at a partition was directed against Sweden. Russia appropriated a large chunk, namely Finland, an integral part of the country, and had the Danes been more powerful they could easily have helped themselves of the Southern part of Sweden, regaining territory they had lost hundred and fifty years earlier. But Denmark too was a spent country, and Sweden escaped the Polish fate, mostly because of its more peripheral location.

The 19th century nourished the ideas of nationalism, and Poland continued to exist as a sentimental idea. But sentimental ideas should not be underestimated. During the Napoleonic Wars the country was temporarily revived, but of course only as a formality, only to fade away again. Its time came after the First World War. The Russian defeat by the Germans and the subsequent revolution opened up an opportunity as an aftermath of the Treaty of Brest-Livstock in 1917, when the Russians not only renounced former Polish territory but also the Baltic states and Finland. A Polish general saw to it that Polish territorial gains were secured during the confusion of the Civil War in Russia, and a reborn Poland was once again put on the map.

But times had changed since the late 18th century. Then a former defunct empire was dismantled, the new Poland was based on ethnic consideration, although the bloated extension, which once had made sense during its time as an empire, now undercut the entire project. Germany had suffered rather mild territorial losses, and in the East, only a narrow corridor around Gdansk had been excised to allow the otherwise landlocked Poles access to the sea, so the center of Poland was in the south east, containing swathes of Belarus and the Ukraine. Liberal Poland of sentimental memory turned out to be something else on the ground. It was hardly a Democratic show piece, but few continental countries were that at the time. Then came a disaster, even greater than that suffered during the

---

<sup>5</sup> The author quotes Marx at some length as a corroboration

partition. After the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact Germany entered Poland. France and England declared war, but made no serious effort to engage in one. Poland was left to its own devices. It did put up a good fight against the superiority of the Wehrmacht, which at the time was more or less invincible, and in fact their performance was definitely more heroic than that put up by the French some six months later. Then the concomitant invasion by Soviet that followed shortly thereafter made the situation hopeless. The author claims that had France intervened from the start, the Soviets would not have invaded, claiming that this is proved by documents later disclosed. This is clearly a nonsense proposition. Anyway France was hardly in the position to come to the aid of Poland, how would that have come about, landing massive amounts of troops by Gdansk, or fighting its way through Germany? Poland along with the regions to the East and South suffered most during the Second World War, there is no comparison with the relatively benign occupation in the west. Cruel as the German occupation was, the Soviet one could not have been much better<sup>6</sup>, atrocities were legion, as the lands were crisscrossed several times by victorious armies. The eventual liberation of Poland was hardly a blissful affair, notorious is the decision by Stalin not to intervene during the Warsaw uprising at the very end, a cynical, however rational decision.

After the war the borders of Poland were substantially redrawn. At the end of the First World War a Curzon line (with minor variations) had been drawn and Stalin had decided that this would provide the eastern border of the liberated Poland, as a compensation large chunks of eastern Germany were ethnically cleansed and the population replaced by Poles and Ukrainians disposed from their own homelands. The question whether Germany deserved this is moot, it contributed to the chaos and resentment of everyone involved. To be forced from your own lands to foreign ones and become squatters in effect was not something conducive to peace. The Polish population had been deeply traumatized by the war, and the trauma would continue under Soviet de facto occupation. Still Poland early on got the distinction of being the least cowed of all the satellite states earning the admiration of the west, adding to the sentimental picture of the country.

The modern history of Poland starts with Solidarnosc in the late 70's. Before that there had been various uprisings and strikes and anti-government demonstrations, although of course nothing on the scale of Czechoslovakia in the late 60's to say nothing about Hungary in the mid 50's. The election of the Polish Pope greatly boosted morale, and his visits to his homeland were political manifestations attracting huge crowds, sometimes to be counted in excess of a million. Solidarnosc came to the fore in 1980, and so successful was the movement that another Soviet invasion was expected. It did not come to that, but a local strongman clamped down on the movement, which had to go underground. Still it survived and resurfaced and by the end of the 80's there were official talks and negotiations of modest power sharing. This might have gone on for quite some time, had it not been for Gorbachov. When it became clear in 1989 that he would not prop up falling regimes, they all collapsed like proverbial houses of cards more or less overnight and history took a quantum jump, supposedly then to stop for ever.

It did not. The liberation from communist rule did not turn out to be quite as smooth

---

<sup>6</sup> Still in Poland it is better to be taken for a German than a Russian. The reasons for that are of course more complex than just a memory from the war.

as had been envisioned. One thing to have a common enemy, and during the last months of the old regime the latter was repeatedly humiliated at the polls, quite another thing when the enemy voluntarily retires. Infighting started, and Wałęsa, who had been seen as a hero and a savior turned out to be a clown as a President. There were years of confusion, the economy had been mismanaged during the Soviet era and recovery was slow. The communists, in different garb, made a temporary come-back, not as Socialists but more as supposedly competent people who knew, or at least, had the habit and confidence of ruling. There was a turn to the right, and Poland which in the 60's had been a last resort for Swedish women to get abortions, now instead was on the verge of outlawing them altogether, testimony to the solid position of the church, the one institution that had survived war and mayhem and Soviet rule its legitimacy intact. A peculiar set of identical twins<sup>7</sup> suddenly seized the reins. The patriotic author thinks, however, that in the end everything worked out, and in particular lauds the wise and consistent foreign policy that had been enacted since the fall of the wall. Thus having no objections to the joining with NATO, nor getting to be members of the European Union. In other words Poland is now securely in the Western camp, taking its rightful place in Europe.

December 6-7, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

---

<sup>7</sup> one of whom were later killed in a plane crash, ripe for theories of conspiracy to get purchase