

God's Playground

A History of Poland I - The Origins to 1795

N.Davies

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One common failure of books on history is being both too detailed and not detailed enough. The latter is unavoidable, although the former can be addressed. The work of a historian is often tedious, comparable to the gatherer who enters the forest to pick up useful and maybe not so useful things, and is thus reluctant to jettison when he returns from his forays what he has so painfully collected. The result is often an embarrassment of riches, which on one hand may not be such a bad thing, but on the other hand if it to a large extent consist of undigested material, it makes no reader really happy. There are much of that in Davies. Some the result of serious forays into archives may be forgiven, others the mere residue of secondary reading merely embarrassing. Then there are small mistakes, just above the level of typos, which one thinks could have been dealt with by competent editors, a vanishing breed, and which create a sense of sloppiness. More serious though are major mistakes committed just beyond the historian's area of expertise. One such is the howler, comparing Polen-Lithuania to Sweden-Finland, claiming that it both started out as a personal union then developing into a constitutional one. The fact is that Finland never existed as an independent entity, before it was excised from Sweden by the Russians, during the war of 1808-09 (which could have been the start of a partition of Sweden comparable to the one of Poland completed not even fifteen years earlier). Then a distinct Finnish identity developed, initiated by mostly Swedish speakers, when it for the first time was made into some kind of nation, be it embedded in Russia, enabling it to achieve for the first time ever the status of an independent nation as late as 1917. Before that Finland was just another part of Sweden not any more separate than say Norrland (the northern two thirds of the country) is and was. This might be a quibble (after all it is entirely marginal to the theme of the book), but it provokes some doubt as to the competence and trustworthiness of the author, although when you nevertheless read about things you do not know about, you tend to take them on trust anyway, what else could you do, short of putting the book aside?

Now how can we summarize the history of Poland, at least up to its extinction in 1795 (the temporal limit set by the author for the first volume)? First one thing what is Poland? The land of the Poles, but if so who are the Poles? Among European Indoeuropean speakers, three main and relatively isolated from each other families can be discerned, the Germanic, Roman and Slavic. Of those the Slavic are the most internally homogeneous. It is known that the Slavic language went much further west in pre-historic times than it did now, but that it subsequently has been pressed eastwards. This does not necessarily mean that Slavic people were pushed back, only the language. Populations can change language without any corresponding biological change. To equate language with race is at best a very tricky business, and race itself is a very hazy concepts, much more hazy

than language. It is speculated that Bulgarians are a Turkish people who acquired Slavic for some reason, and as a consequences much later become Greek Orthodox Christians. So when we speak about Poles we speak about Slavic speaking people talking a Western Slavic dialect. They would be notoriously difficult to pin down. The geographical position of Poland has shifted during history, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting, at one time disappearing altogether. Such an unstable position is due to there being no natural borders, and it also noteworthy that Poland has most for his history been essentially landlocked, with only a tenuous connection to the Baltic.

Now Poland was reconstituted twice during the 20th century, first after the First World War, then after the Second. Its borders were supposed to roughly correspond to its historical roots, at least as far as that was compatible with real conditions on the grounds. The first attempt was more accurate than the second, including swipes of the Ukraine and White Russia, the second involved a substantial loss of the east and the south and a compensating move to the west, including territories which had never traditionally been part of Poland, or, such as (western) Pomerania, only as feudal holdings in a distant past, and hence with no significant Polish speaking population, the rationale for any national borders. However, such issues are contentious, as any national history whose object is to justify contemporary claims.

Polish history starts at the end of the 10th century with the advent of Christianity. This is roughly contemporary with Scandinavian history, which likewise became part of that of Western European Civilization, at the time. Conversion was, as was the custom at the time, top down. First the king converted, then his underlings, and then it slowly trickled down to the masses, a process, one surmises, which was not immediate. Also, in the absence of fortified frontiers, boundaries of realms tended to be fluid, and actual suzerainty tended to be distinct from ostensible. Then, unlike Scandinavia, there were many competing powers. To the west there was the powerful Holy Roman Empire, admittedly more of a vision than a political cohesive entity, but with powerful substates, such as Saxon and the emerging Brandenburg, as well as Bohemia, with a definite Slavic component. To the south were the still heathen Magyars, and to the north east, the pagans of the Baltic states. The east was in disarray, Slavic lands, which had been brought to Christianity, not from the West but from the South, and become Greek Orthodox slowly to develop into Russian Orthodox. The East and the South East were occupied by various Slavic tribes, with no political cohesion, and thus creating a vacuum, into which the Lithuanians moved and created a huge realm stretching far down into present day Ukraine. Most of those neighboring states would play a crucial role in the history of Poland, most of all Lithuania, to which we will return.

Now early kings tend to be more mythological than historical, and the line of kings confusing consisting of many non-entities. It may nevertheless be of some interest to list them. The first dynasty is referred to as Piast, of peasant origins, as so much else. We have prince Mieszko I (c.922-992) the first to introduce Christianity, the first Crowned king Bolesław I (the Brave), (967-1025), Bolesław II (the Bold), (1039-1081), Bolesław III (the Wry-mouthed), (1085-1139), Conrad of Mazovi (1191-1247), Władisław Łokietik (1260-1333) and Kazimierz III (the Great) (1310-1370) who greatly expanded the Polish realm. In fact the period during which those kings ruled, can conveniently be divided into three

periods. The first involving traditional dynastic descent until the death of Boleslaw III in 1138, to be followed by a period of fragmentation, during which the dynasty branched like a tree, with a lot of internal strife, lasting to 1320 with the coronation of Lokietik in Cracow, when a period of reunification and state-building commenced. Basically the period was one of confusion, and hardly one to commit to memory.

The Polish lands had no natural borders as already noted, thus its location was fluid, and it was vulnerable to invasions. One such was the Mongol invasion (actually several) of the 13th century, the one that quenched the burgeoning power of Russia for a couple of centuries, another more lasting one was the invitation extended to the Teutonic Order in 1226, a Christian military order, which had been formed during the days of the Crusades, and when the conquest of the Holy Lands had been stymied turned its attention to Pagan lands of the East. This actually predated the Mongols, and turned out to be of a much more lasting influence. The occasion having been the hostilities of the Prussians, and the invitation had been on the private initiative of Conrad of Mazovia, who briefly served as King. The knights (known as the *Deutschritter* by the Germans) were able and totally unscrupulous, and became a state within the state, subjugated the Prussians during a period of more than fifty years, as well as usurping Pomerania and conquering what later would become the Baltic States, for some years at the end of the 14th century they even held the Baltic island of Gotland. In particular they conquered Gdansk and made it into the German town of Danzig. In effect they made Poland into a landlocked country, diverting its influence and conquests to the south and to the east.

The emerging Polish state was feudal, the king or strongman, having fiefs on which his power rested. There emerged a governing, or fighting class, which may more appropriately be seen as a superior caste almost on the Hindu model. In fact the aristocracy of Poland would encompass a large part of the population, and be known as the *szlachta*, much of whose members would be financially impoverished, yet have the pride of noble descent. Then there were a class of slaves, but the Christian church did not look favorably on the practice, especially if they were baptized, which of course constituted a powerful incentive to become so. The land being sparsely populated colonists were welcome, mostly of German stock. Thus there was a great influx of burghers to the incipient towns, which became Germanized (as Gdansk had been made Danzig), notably Wroclaw and Krakow, which turned into Breslau and Krakau. Jews had always enjoyed liberal rights in Poland, and with the influx of German Jewish emigrants, their rights were further codified and made Poland the most densely populated Jewish country of Europe.

The son of Lokietik became Kazimierz III, known as the Great, who can be said to have consolidated the Polish lands. Under his reign, Cracow having been a town of wood, became a city of stone, and the capital of the country, which experienced prosperity during the 14th century, and was spared the ravages of the Black Plague, which is a testimony to the sparsity of the Polish population and its relative isolation, although it was becoming internationally better known. A university was founded in the capital, which required the consent of the Pope. Casimir reigned until 1370, but in spite of many marriages and liaisons, did not leave any lawful issue, and thus with his death the dynasty of Piast came to an end.

During the next fifteen years or so the destiny of Poland would be joined to that

of Hungary, and as the author points out, the two countries have had parallel destinies up to this day. The Hungarians, or more appropriately the Magyars, were a Nomadic tribe of people coming from Central Asia in the 10th century and penetrating deeply into Europe before settling down in their present location, although at the time their territories were more widespread than now, and effectively inserted a wedge between the West Slavs and the South Slaves. Both nationalities, if that is the appropriate terminology, came to Christianity at the same time, and thus became part of Roman Catholicism, constituting its easternmost region. The ruler of Hungary, which at the time extended down to the Adriatic coast in the west and down to the Carpathian mountains in the south and the Ukrainian steppes in the east, was not Hungarian. In fact, as the author reminds us, the great dynasties, such as the Habsburgs, Hohenzollern, Anjous, emerging in Medieval times, should be thought of as international corporations, extending their rules over lands irrespective of ethnic groups and present political divisions. Extensions brought about by a skillful mixture of war and diplomacy including that of advantageous marriage. In the case of Hungary it was ruled by the Anjou family, which had supplied the kings of England for a few centuries, and been active in France and Italy. Ludwik, the king of Hungary, was elected as King of Poland, and ruled for a decade and a half, putting his stamp on Polish traditions, as to the relationship between the king and the aristocracy.

The Anjou line came to an end with the young Jadwiga, and the question of succession remained open. Meanwhile the Lithuanian dynasty had greatly expanded, ruling over a mostly Slavic population, still remaining Pagan. They encountered opposition from the North by the Teutonic Knights, to the East by Muscovy, albeit at the time still very feeble so, and to the West by Poland. The Poles on the other hand, were pressed by the Teutonic Knights in the North, and the states of the German empire to the west, Bohemia and Silesia, intermittently being part of the Kingdom. Between the other West Slavic population - the Czechs - there were hostilities. It was decided that a union of the two dynasties would be to the advantage of both, and the young still a child Anjou Queen and Monarch Jadwiga was separated from the German prince to which she had been betrothed since her birth, to marry the Lithuanian Duke Jogaila, who consented to baptism (and would later forcefully convert his Pagan underlings) and changed his name to the Polish Vladislav, and would rule as King Vladislav II the first king of the Jagellonian dynasty. Jadwiga, who in Polish historical mythology has taken on the characteristics of a saint (in fact she was canonized in 1997), died young, and were replaced by other queens, Vladislav being blessed with an unusually long life, but cursed along with so many ambitious rulers of failing to produce a male heir. The crucial event of his reign was the battle at Grunewald in 1410. This was an epic battle, in which Slavs were pitted against Germans, and thus have played a major role in the national epos of both camps. From the German point of view, the defeat was not revenged until the battle of nearby Tannenberg in 1914, and the Russians think of it as a precursor of Stalingrad. The forces of the knights were surprised but in spite of a valiant fight against a powerful coalition, had half their manpower annihilated on the battle, including that of their Grand Master, and had to retreat to their headquarters Marienburg, which was put under siege. The treaty that followed imposed on them marginal territorial losses and some other concessions concerning free trade on the Vistula. A rather anti-climactic result of such an epic and hyped-up battle.

The head-quarters of the Teutonic order was moved to Königsberg and they ruled over the Baltic coast, including the northern province of Livonia. Hostilities would resume in the middle of the century, starting with the rebellion of the Prussian cities of Elbing and Thorn, and lead to the so called Thirteen Years War (1454-1466) the final outcome of which broke the power of the Order. Prussia was split into a western part, called Royal Prussia, which became part of Poland, including Marienburg, which had resisted the siege, and Elbing, while Eastern Prussia became a vassal of Poland. Furthermore Pomerelia with Dantzig, became part of Poland again.

The period that followed saw an economic flowering of the Polish-Lithuanian union, which also expanded southwards and eastwards, down to the Black Sea, due to the Fiefdom of Moldavia. As far as territory was concerned Lithuania was by far the most extensive, and together they formed the largest state in Europe, and not threatened by anyone. Economically Poland was an agricultural country and its main produce was grain accounting for almost three quarters of their exports. It was mainly cultivated in the drainage area of the Vistula and brought to the sea close to Danzig, which became an important city and part of the Hanse and thus harboring a sizable foreign population, mostly German and Dutch. However, the cities would with time decline. The monetary situation was improved by currency reforms, and for the first time the zloty was introduced, coming in a gold and silver variety. In fact the currency was divided into zloty, szostaki, trojaki, groszy, szelagi, ternariim, denarii at the ratios of 1:5:2:3:3:2:3, so there were 540 denarii to a zloty.

Society ossified into five estates, not four as usual. In addition to the classical ones, nobility (szlachta), the clergy, the burghers and the peasants, the Jews formed a fifth estate. They were all defined by privileges and obligations, although for some the former dominated for others the latter. The most numerous were the peasants, constituting about three quarters of the population, of which all but a small minority served as serfs mainly to the nobility. The latter was by European standards rather numerous, making up one fifteenth of the population. Consequently a large part of it was poor, lacking both land and serfs, this did not prevent them from pride of their 'blue blood', and signs of their superiority were marked in clothing and style of housing, even when means were modest indeed. Anyway they had political clout, and could always cast their votes when a new king was to be elected. Their political privileges would eventually spell the collapse of the country. One could or maybe even should think of the stratification as a caste system because mobility between estates was severely restrained, the higher offices of the clergy were barred to the lower castes, although in academe the options of medicine and law were open to anyone of ability. The situation of the Jews with their rights and protection was particularly good, and as a result there were a further influx of Jews. In short one can describe the social system in Poland to be a Paradise for the Nobility, Purgatory for the Burghers, who could decline in importance, and sheer Hell for the peasants.

By the 16th century, under the reigns of the two Sigismunds (Zygmunts), the foreign situation would worsen considerably. The Teutonic Order, with its large holdings and strong military, still presented a threat in the North, exacerbated by the growing strength of Muscovy. Thus they sought an alliance with the Habsburgs through marital ties to have their back free in the West. The situation in the South also became very serious due to the northwards expansion of the Ottoman empire. Hungary fell, and the Ottoman army

besieged Vienna. The German reformation, however, made the Order implode as so many of its members converted to Lutheranism, and it ceased to function as a political entity and military player (although it still remains to this day, although at different geographical locations, mostly involved in charitable works), and in the vacuum it created, Livonia was up for grabs, desired not only by the Poles, but also by the Swedes and the Danes (if for no other reasons than obstruction) and of course the growing Muscovy. But the union was being able to hold its own, but its existence became more precarious. It was becoming clear that the union had to be replaced by a closer fusion, the details of which were hammered out in the late 1560's. Thus a new chapter of Polish history would begin in 1569. But before that it could be the time to take stock. By the 16th century the world had expanded and become better known, that was also true of Poland, at the periphery of the Roman Catholic world. The Renaissance also reached Poland. The author picks out three names, namely those of Copernicus (1473-43), who needs no closer introduction and the poet Jan Kochanowsky (1530-84) the first vernacular poet of the Polish language, and the politician and political scientist Jan Zamoyski (1542-05). Somewhat misleadingly he describes Copernicus who discovered that the Earth moved around the Sun, the real story is more complicated and subtle, but he is correct stressing the polymath character of the astronomer, who in addition to astronomy was an authority on law, medicine and the emerging discipline of economics, most of his life active at Frauenburg (Frombork), while he was born in Torun, where his father was a wealthy merchant, siding with the Polish kingdom against the Teutonic Knights. The mother was of mixed Polish and German stock, and related to Polish nobility. However, there are speculations to the effect that his native tongue was German. He definitely spoke it, and a few German documents by his hand have been found, but he mostly wrote in Latin, and was anyway fluent in both Polish and Italian. The issue may seem trivial, if sensitive, but it does point to question of ethnicity in Medieval Poland, especially as the towns were dominated by German merchants (as was the case with some towns in Sweden).

In 1569 Poland and Lithuania for all intents and purposes merged. Zygmunt II August a mild mannered king, served his last years in deep depression as the first common king. Then there followed a farcical interlude. The French prince Henry son of Henry II and Catherine de Medici was elected. He actually travelled to Poland to claim his throne, but could not hack it for long and ignobly escaped after only a couple of months, later to claim the French throne after the death of his brother Charles XI. It was a failed attempt to bring about a unions between the French and Polish crowns, and as such doomed. Instead the sister of the late Zygmunt II was elected jointly with her husband Stefan Barthory of Transylvania. Real power rested with the latter who reigned competently greatly enhancing the financial muscle of the royal treasure and waging a successful war against the aggression of Ivan the terrible. When he died in 1586 he was succeeded by Zygmunt III a nephew of Zygmunt II, son of the latter's sister Katarzyna married to the Swedish king Johan III. Thus the Wasa dynasty was introduced on the Polish lands. Zygmunt, although raised in Sweden, was not a Protestant unlike nominally his father, but very much a Catholic adhering to his Polish traditions as represented by the fervent Catholicism of his mother, whose ambition to reconquer Sweden for Catholicism he shared. He would after the death of his father in 1592 succeed to the Swedish throne, but his tenure would be short. He

would not take command until 1594 and by 1598 he was effectively ousted by his uncle Charles IX, although formally he was king of Sweden until 1604, and would never renounce his claims, nor would his sons. In Sweden he was thought of as a foreign intruder strongly opposed by the Protestant power elite, while in Poland he was thought of as a Swede, more concerned with his homeland than with Poland itself. In fact so disillusioned he was that he was at one time ready to sell his Polish crown. His power in Poland was hamstrung, as it had been in Sweden, yet he and his two sons proved to be competent if not innovative rulers, and during the reign of Zygmunt the Polish realm reached its greatest extent as well as its wealth. But that would soon change. One of his lasting contributions, as a result of among others his ambition of keeping the Swedish lands, was to move the capital north from Cracow to Warsaw. When the once Swedish Prince Johan married the sister of the Polish King this was obviously a very good match, Poland being more powerful and wealthier than the primitive country of Sweden, but that would change. Starting with Charles IX, Sweden built up a strong military force with the ambition of making the Baltic Sea into a Swedish internal sea. His son and (half) cousin of Zygmunt continued the project with spectacular success, starting with a Polish engagement on the theatre of Livonia, a predominantly Protestant land, resenting the Polish Catholic influence. This made the two countries, once started on a precarious personal union into major rivals. Muscovy at the time, rent by internal strife and confusion, were a weaker player. The end result was Swedish control over Livonia, as well as the coastal Prussian cities, enabling it to reap the customs duties on the Vistula trade to finance further military adventures further west. But this was fairly mild compared to what would come in the mid-17th century, as well as the early 18th century during the Great Northern War. Gustavus nephew Charles X entered on the scene in 1654 and ravaged Poland. It brought havoc and weakened the country and resulted in the end of the Wasa dynasty, without bringing the Swedes any corresponding advantages. The country that would ultimately benefit from it was Russia. There followed a sequence of kings, one of whom stood up to the Ottomans in the South, an empire that threatened Europe, and would in due time conquer Hungary and besiege Vienna. By the early 18th century Saxon kings had established themselves on the Polish throne, and August the strong, along with the Danish King and the Russian Czar Peter challenged the power of the Swedes. Most of the fighting took place on Polish soil, and the Swedes managed to put their favorite on the throne, but their control was always precarious, and by the defeat at Poltava in 1709, it collapsed altogether. The net effect of the Northern War was the supremacy of Russia, replacing Sweden, as well as the ascendancy of Brandenburg, turning into Prussia. The Habsburg domains had recovered from the Turkish onslaughts, and Poland was left in the middle in a more or less total disarray, the Sejm being the scene of tumultuous dissent incapable of co-ordinated action. The country was ripe for dismemberment at the end of the century, an unprecedented event in modern European history, and carved up during three partitions, the last an actual extinction during the years 1772, 1793 and 1795. And the history of Poland, did not cease, but went into hibernation. It is hard to find a better point of division in a two part history of Poland.

Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se