
BACKGROUND BOOKS

POLAND

"The lands of the Slavs are the coldest of all When people breathe, icicles form on their beards, as if made of glass. . . ."

Thus, in 965 A.D., in the report of a Moorish Jew, Ibrahim-Ibn-Jakub, a diplomat from Cordoba, did the land now called Poland make its debut in recorded history. And thus do we learn of Mieszko I, self-styled King of the North and chief of the Polonians.

Mieszko was betrothed to a Bohemian princess, Dubravka, the same year Ibrahim paid his visit. And in 966, as part of the marriage agreement, he embraced Christianity. "Of all his feats," writes Norman Davies in his splendid, two-volume **God's Playground: A History of Poland** (Columbia, 1982), "none but his baptism was permanent. By this one act, he brought his people into the world of Western culture and Latin literacy." Mieszko's son, Bolesław I Chrobry ("the Brave") became in 1024, with papal approval, the first crowned King of Poland.

The new kingdom fared relatively well in its first century. But in 1138, Bolesław III Krzywousty ("the Wry-Mouthed") left a will dividing the realm among numerous sons. Fragmentation invited incursions by Czechs, Prussians, and Russians, usurpation of vast tracts by the Teutonic Knights, and ultimately, in 1241, invasion by the Mongols.

During such periods of distress, Václav L. Beneš and Norman J. G. Pounds note, the church in **Poland** (Westview, 1976) was "the chief instrument in perpetuating the concept of a single, united Polish state."

Not until the 14th century were Poland's pieces reassembled into a

single unit. The architect was Casimir III, the only Polish monarch ever to gain the epithet "the Great" from his people.

Casimir reformed Poland's currency, codified its laws, promoted commerce, transformed Kraków from a city of wood into a city of stone, and founded a university there in 1364.

Casimir's chief failing was that he did not perpetuate his line.

Succession passed briefly to Louis of Anjou, and then in 1384 to his daughter, Jadwiga. A year later, at age 11, she was forced to marry the Lithuanian Grand Duke Jagiełło, a pagan. Jagiełło converted to Christianity, defeated many foes, and made the federated state of Poland-Lithuania into a strong European power.

Under the Jagiellons, Poland entered its *Złoty Wiek*, its Golden Age. This was the era of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) and the great poet Jan Kochanowski (1530–84). The flavor of the period is well caught in **The History of Polish Literature** (New York: Macmillan, 1969) by Czesław Miłosz, who carries the story up through the late 1960s.

The last of the Jagiellons died in 1569. Poland became a *Rzeczpospolita* (Republic or Commonwealth) under an elected monarch and with a bicameral Sejm, or Parliament, composed of nobles. In practice, certain peculiarities of this system abetted the nation's gradual decline into anarchy. After 1717, Poland was little more than an appendage of tsarist Russia. By the end of the century, as Lord George John Eversley relates in **The Partitions of Poland** (Dodd, 1st ed., 1915; Fertig, 1973), the country

no longer existed.

That an independent Poland was reestablished at the end of World War I was a caprice of history. Nationalists such as Roman Dmowski and Józef Piłsudski realized that the war on the eastern front was a conflict among the partitioning powers—and hence represented an opportunity. Russia and her foes, Germany and Austria, competed with promises of future autonomy to secure the wartime loyalty of their Polish subjects, and two million Poles fought in three armies.

As it happened, Poland's renaissance resulted from the withdrawal of Russia from the war in the wake of the October Revolution in 1917 and the collapse of the Central Powers a year later.

Piłsudski arrived by train in Warsaw on November 10, 1918, and on the following day stepped into the vacuum, taking control of what would become, after Versailles, the Polish Republic.

The story is told in Titus Komarnicki's 776-page **Rebirth of the Polish Republic** (Heinemann, 1957) and in Hans Roos's concise **A History of Modern Poland** (Knopf, 1966).

Poland's experience between the wars was one of intellectual and cultural vitality, political turbulence, and, as the Depression set in, economic hardship—presided over by the dictatorial but somehow reassuring figure of Piłsudski (who seized power in a coup d'état in 1926). His death in 1935, Roos writes, "seemed a catastrophe, a forewarning of dark days to come."

The dark days arrived four years

later with Poland's dismemberment by Hitler and Stalin. The Poles' ordeal is described by the last chief of the Polish resistance, Stefan Korbonski, in **Fighting Warsaw** (Funk & Wagnalls, 1968).

Other worthwhile accounts of the war years include Jan Nowak's **Courier from Warsaw** (Wayne State Univ., 1982), Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski's **The Secret Army** (New York: Macmillan, 1951), George Bruce's **The Warsaw Uprising** (Hart-Davis, 1972), and Edward Rozek's **Allied Wartime Diplomacy** (Wiley, 1958).

There was no Poland when Władysław Gomułka, future party boss of the Polish People's Republic, was born in 1905. Nicholas Bethell traces his volatile career in **Gomułka: His Poland and His Communism** (Holt, 1969, cloth; Penguin, rev. ed., 1972), which does double duty as a survey of Poland's postwar evolution under communism.

Two other fine accounts of contemporary Poland are Peter Raina's **Political Opposition in Poland, 1954–1977** (Poets and Painters Press, 1978, cloth & paper), and Neal Ascherson's journalistic **The Polish August** (Viking, 1982), which focuses on the Solidarity era and culminates with the imposition of martial law "in the snowy darkness of Sunday, 13 December 1981."

What the future holds for Poland is the subject of a book not yet written, but whose epigraph could well be a quote from Rousseau: "If you cannot prevent your enemies from swallowing you whole, at least you must do what you can to prevent them from digesting you."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Books were suggested for this essay by Wilson Center Fellows Maria Turlejska and Artur A. Międzyrzeccki.*