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A HISTORY OF POLAND

ANITA J. PRAŻMOWSKA

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Second Edition

Anita J. Prażmowska

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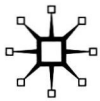

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In this wide-ranging survey, Anita J. Prażmowska explores the story of Poland from the early settlements through to the emergence of the Polish state. She goes on to examine the country's loss of independence, its eventual reacquisition after the First World War, and, finally, Poland's place in the modern world.

Thoroughly revised and expanded in the light of recent research and events, this second edition of an established text includes:

- an up-to-date analysis of Polish historical debate
- additional information on Poland's multinational history
- more detailed discussion of the relationship between the Crown, nobility and town dwellers
- a chronological list of recommendations for further reading.

Placing the complex history of Poland in a European context, this essential guide fully explains the country's place in European consciousness, and the political and cultural roots of a deeply patriotic nation.

Anita J. Prażmowska is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and is the author of several books on modern Polish history.

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Preface

If we view history as a discipline the role of which is to explain the present, we run the risk of being selective in what we consider relevant historical information. We might well miss or leave out what was important at the time, but which has no relevance to today's developments. We are likely to overlook trends, developments, movements and facts that were not part of the determinist progression through centuries. But, most importantly, we are likely to end up neither studying, nor explaining, history.

The twentieth century's preoccupation with nation states makes it difficult to conceive that the right of nations to rule themselves was not the driving force in developments of the past. Even less are we willing to accept, without some hesitation, that this is not the ultimate right of each nation. Where a national group experienced persecution, mistreatment or oppression in recent history, the desire for independence and the right to self-determination was strengthened. A present-day historian and his audience might only too easily slip into an analysis of only those factors which led to that manifold destiny of national independence.

During the nineteenth century the 'Polish question' dominated debates on the rights of national groups to independence in Europe. Until recently, when asked to make any comment on Poland and Poles, outsiders would refer to the nation's suffering and pain, betrayal and denial of rights. More recently, and in the United States, the popular perception of Poland is of a country in which a high proportion of Jews lived and which was characterised by anti-Semitism. This is not always a correct historical view. That is because they usually refer either to the fate of the Polish kingdom during the partitions and the long fight for independence or to the modern period. Poles themselves have been responsible for fostering this very narrow understanding of their history. Too often they put stress on moments in the past when the Polish kingdom or the Polish state made a dramatic contribution to the defence of Europe. This presentation is usually followed by a demand that the world recognise that it has a debt of gratitude to discharge. King Sobieski lifting the siege of Vienna, the defeat of the

Red Army near Warsaw and activities of Polish servicemen during the Second World War are usually cited in support of these arguments. This attitude has been fostered by the nationalist agenda of the present centre-right parties. As always, nationalism is a very powerful tool in the hands of politicians trying to outbid each other in defending the Polish heritage. It remains to be seen whether the younger generation of Poles, who are better travelled then their parents were, will move away from this narrow and self-serving approach to history. There are many indications that they will, since they have a broader view of Poland's place in the world, one that has been moulded during the time that Poland became a full and active member of the European Community.

Poles have since the fall of communism tried to come to terms with their own history. Freedom from censorship and availability of archives should have generated historical works that are not driven by political agendas. This has happened, but only to a certain extent. Initially there was a great rush to address previously forbidden subjects: Poland's Jewish heritage, Soviet occupation of Polish territories during the Second World War, the Warsaw Uprising and Soviet intervention in Polish internal affairs during the communist period. Thus there was a proliferation of books, frequently very slight in their content, which dealt with crimes committed against Poles. At the same time publishers, focusing more on profit, churned out biographies of various great Poles. With time this imbalance will be corrected since the younger generation, born and brought up after the fall of communism, will not share the previous generation's hunger to fill in the blank pages in Polish history. One therefore hopes that in spite of the nationalist agenda of various political parties, Polish history will become a study of the subject for its own sake. Polish history consists of more than just suffering. Nor is the history of Polish people that of victims. This book has been my modest attempt to move beyond issues that contributed directly to Poland's place in present-day Europe, instead suggesting that Poland has a rich and varied history.

I was not inclined to view Poles as passive in the face of events unfolding around them. The aim of *A History of Poland* is to probe the history of Poland, beyond the facts which determined the character of present-day Poland. Indeed, the history of Poland would be so much poorer were its parameters to be defined by what we know to be present-day Poland. This volume attempts to look at the history of people who inhabited the territories which became Poland, at its

rulers and their objectives and finally at the factors which moulded and buffeted the region.

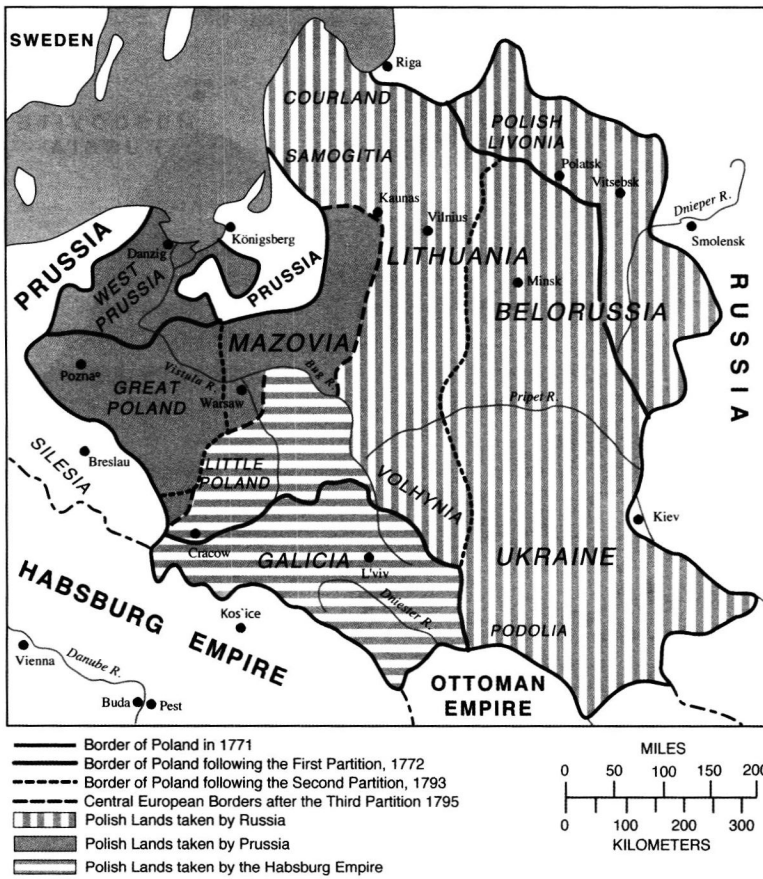
When I was asked by Palgrave to write this volume, I accepted the commission with excitement. I knew that in the process my understanding of past events would be extended. I also expected that many issues, which until now I took for granted, would never again seem either obvious or simple. Writing the second edition of *A History of Poland* was equally challenging, as one naturally moves on from initial ideas. At the same time, present-day Poland continues to change fast. Political and economic transformation has come about as a result of deliberate policies, but incidental factors continue to play an important role in moulding Polish thinking. For example, the Smolensk air accident of 2010 in which President Lech Kaczyński died has created a tragic chapter, the impact of which will haunt Poland for many years to come.

Many people have influenced me in my attempt to understand my past and that of Poland. Franciszka and Stefan Themerson always encouraged me to be sceptical of received wisdoms. Tamara Deuscher encouraged me to probe further and not to be constrained by reactions to my findings. I remain indebted to them for pushing me to be bolder in my conclusions. But my biggest debt of gratitude is to Jan Toporowski, without whose help and companionship my life would have been incomplete. To Miriam and her English Babcia I dedicate this book.

All effort has been made to simplify the issue of place names for the reader. Present-day place names are used in the final chapter. Otherwise names which have passed into common usage and would be recognisable to English-language readers are used, thus Warsaw and not Warszawa, Cracow and not Kraków. Although throughout the book I have used Danzig, in the final chapter I have referred to the Polish name of Gdańsk as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement, which has put the Gdańsk shipyard on the map. It has not always been possible to be consistent since areas presently incorporated in Polish borders have had a varied political history. In no case was the name usage meant as an endorsement of any border settlement.

Map 1 Poland, late 10th–13th centuries

Map 2 Poland, 14th–15th centuries



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The Lands That Became Poland

History has never been free from the politics of today. Only too frequently it has been a tool in the hands of those who use the past in order to justify present-day attitudes and actions. It has been suggested that Central Europeans are particularly adept at using remote historical events to justify the present. Thus, in their claim to justify Germany's right of expansion eastwards, some historians have suggested that the catalyst for the creation of the first Slav states did not emerge from within the local tribes, but was the result of German influence and organisation. By the same token, Polish historians have defined as 'Polish' prehistoric archaeological evidence which in reality could at best only be evidence of tribal or regional developments, since the Polish state did not exist at the time. Any claim that this evidence reflects some early 'Polish' national consciousness is pure invention. The nineteenth century, dominated by a preoccupation with the rise and fall of nation states, has become a particularly fertile ground for the proliferation of such spurious historical debates, aimed at suggesting that from their early days people wished to be ruled by 'their own people'. Since the creation of ethnically homogenous states is almost entirely confined to the twentieth century, we should be careful in ascribing to any earlier development significance that was not present at the time.

During the inter-war period historians seeking to justify Poland's extended boundaries to the east suggested that the area which should be considered as the cradle of the Polish nation is that defined by the rivers Vistula, Dnieper, San and Dniester. After the Second World War, when Poland's frontiers were shifted westward, a new historical interpretation was put forward. Since Poland lost over one-third of its inter-war territories to the Soviet Union, but gained undeniably German areas of East and West Prussia together with a western border on the river Oder, the official presentation of facts changed accordingly.

During the communist period the cradle of Polish nationhood was redefined as being between the Vistula and the Oder rivers, which flow from the south to the Baltic Sea in the north. The political stability achieved at the end of the twentieth century and the acceptance by Poland's neighbours that the present borders are here to stay, have created preconditions for a less impassioned and more scholarly debate. The history of the present-day Polish state can now, perhaps, be freed from the duty it had of supporting the reasons of state and concentrate on presenting the historical developments that resulted in the creation of the present-day Polish state. In Poland's case, the past is sufficiently turbulent and interesting not to need further embellishment.

Geography has played an important role in defining the boundaries within which human settlements developed in northern Europe. In the areas where the first Polish kingdom was to emerge at the beginning of the tenth century, the geographical features were sufficiently prominent to have made a marked impact on the evolution of human settlements. These determined movement across the region, contact between people, trade, but also the exchange and spread of ideas. In the north the Baltic Sea encouraged coastal trade, which in turn facilitated coastal settlement, but also enabled invasions. South of the coast, the terrain is flat, but the predominance of great primeval forests and marshes in the east was always a constraint on movement. Not until these forests were depleted did contact between scattered tribes take place. Thus the river valleys, which in the future Polish territories invariably start in high terrain in the south and then meander to the Baltic, have acted as communication routes. In the south the generally impassable Tatra and Carpathian mountain ranges formed a natural barrier between tribes north of the mountains and those south of them. One mountain pass between the Sudeten and Tatra mountains, the Moravian Gate, allowed communication with areas south. It was also possible to skirt the Carpathians by travelling south-east and along the valley of the river Dniester. These geographical features explain population movements and trading patterns.

North and north-eastern Europe were directly affected by the Ice Ages. The glaciers, which covered territories of future Poland, changed its geography and influenced the pace of future human settlement. During the Palaeolithic period, approximately 40,000 years ago, mammoths were hunted in north-eastern Europe. There is some, though scant, evidence of human settlement, whose temporary nature points to a nomadic lifestyle. The glacial period which followed destroyed

most of the archaeological evidence. The ice cover tended to alter the terrain but most of northern Europe continued to be covered by glaciers. Between 12,000 and 8000 BC the glaciers receded first to the Baltic and then further north, freeing the seas. By then, tribes which led a migratory lifestyle, based on limited agriculture and on following reindeer herds, lived in the region. It is estimated that by that time the climate had stabilised and became like the climate we know in what would later become Poland. As the glaciers receded, mixed forest grew and covered most of the area. Because of the density of growth it inhibited population movement. Pockets of human settlements established themselves in clearings and in areas where the forest cover was not so dense, but it is assumed that the pattern of forest cover limited contacts between groups and facilitated the emergence of strong tribal consciousness. Limited archaeological evidence suggests that it also encouraged economic self-sufficiency.

Opinions differ on what caused a change in this pattern of life. The key question is what led tribes to break out of the isolation imposed by geography and the topography of the region. Historians of this early period seem to have put forward various interpretations. Some subscribe to the theory that what happened was no less than a revolutionary change, one which forced communities to change drastically the way in which they had hitherto obtained food and shelter. These are clearly theories influenced by the Marxist interpretation of historical evolution. This presupposes that the driving force behind all social change is economic, usually accompanied by violent breakdown of the old order, which is in turn replaced by one more appropriate to new forms of production. Since there is little evidence of such a trauma it might be wiser to assume that the population of north-eastern Europe was affected by a variety of influences, none necessarily violent or sudden. In the south, new agricultural methods absorbed from contacts with more advanced cultures might have encouraged further inter-tribal contacts. In the north, where trade in amber had always created preconditions for contact between the local population and traders from the outside, there is evidence of more exchange of commodities but also of use of hitherto unknown metals. In the interior, communities might have continued undisturbed, pursuing traditional methods of agriculture, which in most cases amounted to the slash-and-burn method, followed by a few years of cultivation and then a temporary abandonment of the cleared field until nutrients in the soil had been replenished. Whether one does or does not subscribe to the definition