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## Poland's Multicultural Heritage\*

Norman Davies

Nowadays, Poland possesses perhaps the most culturally homogenous society in the whole of Europe population of 36 million people who are overwhelmingly Polish-speaking by language, and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic by religion, and overwhelmingly patriotic in their political views. The percentage of ethnic minorities (1.3%), made up of half a million Ukrainians, perhaps, 150,000 or so Belorussians and Germans, and some 8,000 to 9,000 Jews — is marginal. The percentage of religious minorities — Orthodox, Uniate, Protestants, Mariavites, Baptists, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, atheists and even communists, — i. e. the whole non-Catholic population — does not exceed 11 or 12%. Although there are over 10 million Poles living abroad in distant parts like Chicago, Karaganda or Ealing, there are very few Poles living in the immediate border areas of neighbouring countries. Whatever one may wish to say about the political predicament of People's Poland, it is the first truly Polish national state in Polish History.

This present state of affairs — of an exclusively Polish Poland — differs radically from the picture of Poland as it existed for more than a thousand years up to the Second World War. Historic Poland as distinct from the Poland of today, was a multinational state of vast proportions. At one time between the 15th and 17th centuries, it was absolutely larger than Russia and was not only the homeland of most of the Poles in Europe, but also the homeland of almost all the Ukrainians, Belorussians and Lithuanians, of several million Germans, and of the principal Jewish community in the world. It came to an abrupt and brutal end during the Second World War, amidst the mass murders of the Nazi Occupation and the mass deportations of the Soviets. During the War, over 6 million Polish citizens were killed, almost half of them Jewish victims of the Holocaust; and in the two decades 1936-1956 over 20 million people inhabiting the Polish lands were subject to forced deportations. The mononational country which emerged from the chaos and the ruins of war had new frontiers, a new territory, and a new social composition, as well as a new political regime.

The creation of a Polish Poland—where to be a Pole was to speak Polish and be devout Roman Catholic — had been the long-standing dream of the radical right-wing of pre-war politics. It was the Promised Land of the old National Democratic movement of Roman Dmowski — a politician who had first made his mark in the Tsarist Duma. This nationalist's vision, which can be summed up in the slogans of JEDEN NARŌD, JEDNA WIARA, JEDNA RZECZPOSPOLITA, JEDNA KULTURA (One Nation, One Faith, One Republic, One Culture) was conceived at the end of the nineteenth century, when conditions in Poland were very different from today. It was conceived at a time when the Polish provinces of Russia, Germany and Austria contained a veritable Noah's Ark of nationalities, a Tower of Babel of languages, a riot of religions. None of the major cities — Poznań, Danzig, Warsaw, Wilno or Lwów — were much more than half Polish in the

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sense that the nationalists would have wished. Indeed, it was the very insecurity of life in this multinational jungle of Eastern Europe which inspired similarly militant nationalist movements, from the Ostmarkverein of the Germans to the Zionism of the Jews, among each and every one of the pullulating peoples of the region. Their mystical visions were projected both back into the past, to the time when the ancestors of the modern nation were supposed to have enjoyed their own exclusive Garden of Eden in sole possession and in perfect harmony, and also forwards into the future, to the time when the vision was somehow going to be realized. Like all their rivals and imitators, the Polish nationalists elaborated their own national myth, more or less inspired by the Biblical parables, the Paradise Lost of the ancient homeland, the fall from grace and the sentence of banishment: the endless yearning Jerusalem/Warsaw; the generations of exile in the Desert; the interminable wars against godless tribes — for Hittites, Philistines, Canaanites and Midianites read Teutonic Knights, Prussians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians; the years of captivity in the lands of Egypt and Babylon — for which read Russia and Germany; and finally the recrossing of Jordan-cum-Vistula, and the return to the Polish Sion. It is an inspiring legend for people who suffer humiliation in their own land and it is not at all surprising that the Poles, of all people, should have been beguiled by it.

In the Polish case, the particular historical fable preferred by the nationalist movement was the one which has become known as the Piast Idea (*koncepcja piastowska*). The chief propagator of the idea was the National Democrat publicist and literary critic Jan Ludwik Popławski (1854–1908), who had been converted to “Nationalism” as distinct from the older trend of “National Insurrectionism” after a spell of political exile in Russia. Of course, at the time when Popławski was writing in the 1880s and 1900s, Poland did not exist as a state, having been partitioned over a hundred years earlier by the three great empires of Eastern Europe, Russia, Prussia and Austria; and in imagining where the true Poland ought to be in future, or might have been in the past, Popławski and his associates seized on the ancient kingdom of the Piast dynasty of the ninth and tenth centuries, whose territorial limits lay somewhat to the north and west of most later Polish states, and whose main provinces — Wielkopolska or Posnania, Małopolska or Galicia, Pomerania, Kujavia, Silesia, and Mazovia — had subsequently fallen largely under German or German/Austrian control. According to the theory, the Piast homeland was supposed to have been inhabited by so-called “native” aboriginal Slavs and Slavonic Poles since time immemorial and only to have been “invaded” and “occupied” and “infiltrated” by so-called “alien” Germans, Balts, Celts, Ruthenians, Huns, Avars, Jews and Mongols in subsequent times. The Poles were supposedly indigenous; all the others, to a greater extent, foreign intruders. In the eyes of the nationalists, the evil of history, lay less in the presence of the Empires, which as ephemeral political organisms were sure to pass away, as in the intermixing of peoples and cultures caused by the German *Drang nach Osten* and, to them, by the equally regrettable Polish *Drang na wschód* (Drive to the East) into Belorussia, Lithuania and Ukraine. Throughout the first part of the twentieth century up to 1939, it was the policy, more or less explicit, of the nationalist movement to recover and to reconstruct not only the Piast lands themselves but also their supposedly mononational, monocultural, monoethnic character. Here was a policy and a theory, at once deceptively simple and highly emotional, and possessing a high degree of racism and

impracticality.

Needless to say, the Piast Idea, which was directed principally at German expansionism, evoked considerable sympathy in Tsarist Russia where similar visions of primitive Slavonic purity were afoot. It is worthwhile noting, for instance, that the map of a future Europe published in 1914 by an overoptimistic Russian General Staff at the outbreak of the First World War, envisaged an autonomous Poland under Russian suzerainty stretching from the Oder to the Bug.<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say also, the Piast Idea was diametrically opposed to the rival Jagiellonian Idea favored by the left-wing of Polish politics of the day, by Piłsudski's socialists and others, which looked back to the great federation of people living under the Jagiellonian Dynasty in a united Poland-Lithuania in the four centuries from 1386–1795, and which envisaged the revival of a multinational Poland on a much more easterly territorial base.

Of the two rival visions of the future Poland current seventy and eighty years ago, the mononational one and the multinational one, it is a simple matter of fact that it is the former which was put into effect after the Second World War. What is really ironical, however, is that this simplistic, right-wing, nationalist fantasy was put into effect not by the National Democrats, who by 1945 had passed into the museum of Polish History, but by the Soviet Union and by Stalin's Polish communist clients. The Piast Idea — the myth of the once and forever Polish Reservation between the Oder and the Bug has become a key element of the ideology of People's Poland, a fiction enforced wherever possible by the communist censorship. One would suspect that it is the only element of the official ideology which enjoys any measure of popular support. It is this view of Poland's past if it were worth the trouble, that will be contested in the next few pages, in the hope of explaining that the Polish heritage something rather richer and more complex than the official communist censors, or the pre-war nationalists allow.

### 1. *Prehistory*

Despite the common view of prehistory and archaeology as a esoteric, antiquarian subject entirely free of political bias, it is in fact highly politicized. The postwar authorities in Poland are at great pains to impress on the world the ancient Slavonic character of the lands acquired in 1945, and thus to give the Potsdam decision an aura of scientific respectability. In this aim, they agree in large measure with the postulates of pre-war nationalists, who traditionally opposed Prussian claims to the ancient Germanic character of the borderlands with similarly exclusive Slavonic theories of their own. As a result, the so-called "autochthonous" or "aboriginal" School of Polish Prehistory receives both official backing from the censorship and a considerable degree of popular support. According to this view, the present territory of People's Poland has been inhabited by Poles and the Poles. Slavonic ancestors since time immemorial; the key Lusatian Culture, which archaeologists have identified between the Oder and the Vistula in the early Iron Age, is said to be Slavonic; all other non-Slavonic tribes and peoples recorded in the area at various points in ancient times dismissed as "migrants", "nomads", "birds of passage" or "visitors." The idea that any non-Polish population had the same standing as the Poles is unacceptable. In contrast, prehistorians who do not subscribe to the aboriginal School regard their rivals' conclusions as unproved hypotheses colored by a vivid sense of

imagination. For them, the date and origin of the westward migration of the Slavs is largely uncharted; the Slavonic connections of the Lusatian Culture are entirely imaginary; and the presence on the North European Plain of an ethnically mixed and constantly changing collection of peoples is regarded as perfectly normal. The gulf which separates the two schools — the Aboriginal and the anti-Aboriginal — is clearly illustrated by two volumes published in the much respected London-based series of *Ancient Places and Peoples*. One of the volumes, written by Konrad Jażdżewski and entitled *Poland*, is a clear manifesto of the aboriginal theory. The other, written by Maria Gimbutas, a distinguished American archaeologist of Lithuanian origin, and entitled *The Slavs*, covers the same ground in a wider context.<sup>2</sup> The point is, on all the crucial issues of Polish prehistory, the two experts diametrically disagree. In such a situation, the uncommitted observer is not competent to arbitrate between the experts. But common sense prompts one to suspect the exclusive claims of the Aboriginal School which present the Poles as the only nation in Europe to be planted at a stroke in their eventual homeland and which relegate the Germanic, Baltic, Celtic and other ancient inhabitants of the area to the role of auxiliary actors. Such a picture looks artificially simple and improbable. Everyone knows that there was a long prehistory in England before the English, of France before the French, of Russia before the Russians and Bohemia before the Czechs; but on no account are we supposed to explore the richness and variety of the prehistory of Poland before the supremacy of the Poles.

## 2. Religious History

Recorded history began in Poland with the establishment in 966 A. D. of western Catholic Christianity; and no one could fairly deny that the Roman Catholic Church has been the single most prominent institution of Polish national life over the last thousand years. However, if Polish prehistory is encumbered by the dogmatic theories of the Aboriginal Slavonic School, Polish religious history is overshadowed by the exaggerated claims of Catholic apologists. Two concepts are constantly encountered. The first, encapsulated in the old tag of "*Polonia semper fidelis*," suggests that the loyalty of Poles to the Polish Church was always as close as it is in modern times, and that Polishness and Catholicity are virtually synonymous. The second, well expressed in the label of "the Land without Stakes," is concerned with Poland's longstanding reputation as a country of religious toleration. Few scholars care to point out that the two concepts are logically incompatible. If Poland had been an exclusively Catholic society, then there could not have been any religious minorities to tolerate. If, on the other hand, Poland was indeed a Haven of Toleration (as I accept it was), then it is impossible to deny that a considerable proportion of the Polish population were not Catholics. Faced with these elementary propositions, the objective historian is bound to shift his emphasis. On the one hand, he must stress that Roman Catholicism was but the largest and strongest of many religious denominations in Poland. At any point up to 1945, the history of the Roman Catholic Church must be seen in conjunction with the history of numerous Polish Protestant churches and sects, of the Orthodox, Armenian and Uniate churches, of Polish Judaism and its various offshoots, and even of Islam. On the other hand, he must stress that the Catholic supremacy among the population at large is a relatively recent phenomenon, and

the final stage in a long process of change and development. In 1772, on the eve of the First Partition, the Roman Catholic population of the "old Republic" of Poland-Lithuania represented barely half of the whole ; in 1931, in the "second Republic" of the inter-war period, it had risen to about two-thirds ; only in 1947, as a result of the wartime and post-war upheaval, did it rise to the present 96%. It is a paradox that the population of the Polish People's Republic, ruled by a communist regime officially wedded to atheism, is far more Catholic in its composition and allegiance than that of any other previous state in Polish History. That in 1978 the Roman Catholic Church should have been given a Polish Pope in the person of John Paul II is entirely appropriate, for he is a product of the most Catholic nation in Europe, perhaps in the world. As for religious toleration as a characteristic Polish tradition, one has to be careful about time and place. It is perfectly true that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the rest of Europe was torn by religious wars, Poland-Lithuania was remarkable for the relative peace and harmony of its many religious communities. Whether the absence of serious persecution must be attributed to a true tolerance of spirit or perhaps to a decentralized political system incapable of enforcing conformity is another question ; but at all events the prevalence of religious peace in that period must be noted and welcomed. At a later date, when the Polish Catholic Church itself felt threatened by Swedish and Prussian Protestants or by Russian Orthodox, religious animosity undoubtedly increased. Savage incidents such as the "Bloodbath of Thorn"(1724) or the Massacre of Human (1768) cannot be ignored. In the nineteenth century, too, when Poland was subjected to foreign and frequently hostile rule, it was inevitable that the various religious communities grew more truculent and intolerant of each other. Even so, if religion played its part in the rising tide of nationalism throughout Eastern Europe, the old traditions of toleration and co-operation did not disappear. Although anti-semitism, for example, did rear its ugly head in one wing of Polish political life, Polish philo-Semitism, which had a much longer history, prevailed in other circles. Similarly, if many Polish Jews were encouraged under the influence of Zionism to point accusing fingers at the land of their birth, there were many others, especially in the intelligentsia, who sought to foster the traditional *modus vivendum* with their Catholic or non-Jewish neighbours. Even in the twentieth century, Polish society has been rather more tolerant and accommodating than many outside and interested parties have been prepared to allow.

### 3. *The Multinational Community : Poland-Lithuania, 1386-1795*

Taking the Millennium of Polish History as a whole, there can be little doubt that the four hundred years of Poland's union with Lithuania formed the framework for most of the country's lasting traditions. If the earlier Piast era gave rise to Poland's vital link with western Catholicism, it was the long era of the Lithuanian union which provided the formative influences in Polish secular culture, in Polish social development, and in Polish political culture. Just as "little England" grew into Great Britain through the union with Scotland, so "little Poland", united with Lithuania first through the person of their common Jagiellonian rulers and then through the constitutional union of Lublin (1569), grew into the great multinational *Rzeczpospolita* or Commonwealth, at one time absolutely the largest state in Europe. As long as the *Rzeczpospolita* survived, the multinational,

multireligious, multicultural aspects of its affairs were not just curious minority concerns ; they were central to the health and character of the Polish community as a whole.

The richness and variety can be illustrated from the list of languages in currency. There were four main official languages in use — Latin and Polish in the Kingdom of Poland, *Ruski* or “Old Belorussian” in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to 1700, and German in several of the great royal cities. German was the language of the city courts in Cracow to 1600, and, together with Latin was the official language of Danzig until its incorporation into Prussia in 1793. There were four main liturgical languages — Latin in the Catholic Church, Old Church Slavonic for the Uniate and Orthodox rites, Hebrew in the Jewish synagogues, and Arabic in the Moslem mosques. And there were a dozen colloquial languages, ranging from Slavonic Polish, Ruthenian (Belorussian and Ukrainian), and Russian ; to Baltic Lithuanian, Latvian, and ancient Prussian to 1600 : German, Yiddish, Tartar, Armenian, and, on the Carpathian borders, Romanian, and Slovak. Most of these languages required formal educational support in both secular and religious schools, and produced literatures of a secular or a religious character. All these languages and literatures interacted with each other in different degrees, and most of them entered the modern era of the printed word in the hands of printers in Cracow, Danzig, or Wilno. Such was the variety of languages spoken that most educated people were bi- or tri-lingual, and gained a sense of their common “Polishness” not from thier mother tongue but rather from the awareness of shared experiences and shared ideas.

The political culture of Poland-Lithuania, with its emphasis on Individualism and Pluralism, has received more adverse publicity than it deserved, especially from supposedly democratic critics. The “Noble Democracy” of the Polish *szlachta*, based on the principles of consent, unanimity, and the citizen’s right of resistance, was diametrically opposed to the autocratic traditions of neighboring Russia and Prussia ; but it developed in parallel to the constitutionalism which triumphed in Britain and the USA, and it would merit the attention of Anglo-Saxon scholars, above all in the earlier stages before the collapse and deformations of the eighteenth century “anarchy.” However, there was much more the policy of the *Rzeczpospolita* than is revealed in the laws and practice of the central institutions. Poland-Lithuania was decentralized to a unique degree ; and the virtually independent activities of the regional dietines, of the great magnates, of the incorporated cities like Danzig, and of the autonomous Jewish community, whose parliament survived until 1764 on the eve of the Partitions, all await examination and wider public in western countries. It is a matter of historical fact that Poland-Lithuania was destroyed ; but in relation to a part of the world where totalitarianism and gangsterism has prevailed, it is curious that western historians show so little interest or sympathy for the fate and values of the victims.

#### 4. *The Nineteenth Century*

In the wake of the French Revolution, when most of Europe was swept by Nationalism, Poland produced one of the most precocious and sophisticated national movements of all. It was a natural consequence not just of the Napoleonic experience but also of the humiliating Partitions which preceded it. Not surprisingly, most Polish histories underline the purely national element in their accounts of that long era of

oppression, giving special emphasis to moments of national assertion such as Dabrowski's Legions or the three great Risings of 1830, 1863 and 1905.

Yet it is arguable that the principal experience of the Partitions was not one of Poles rising in revolt against their political masters but rather of Poles living in daily contact and rivalry with all the other peoples and cultures of the three great East European empires. After all, if the scene of Poles fighting on the barricades were true enough for short periods once every thirty or forty years, the scenes of Poles attending German universities, of Poles serving in the Russian Army, or of Polish aristocrats paying their respects at the imperial court in Vienna, were commonplace events for nearly two centuries. The multinational theme was no less significant than the national one.

For one thing, Polish society was largely multinational and multicultural in character. There were very few regions or cities where all classes of society were dominated by Polish-speaking, Roman Catholic Poles. In the easterly areas where Poles made up the majority in the cities as in Wilno or Lwów the countryside was largely populated by non-Polish Lithuanian or Ruthenian peasants. Many smaller towns were dominated by Yiddish-speaking Jews. In the westerly regions, where Poles made up the majority in the countryside, the cities were largely populated as in Danzig or Poznań by Germans. In the city or Łódź, for example, "the Polish Manchester" and a creation of nineteenth century industrialization, the population was roughly one third Polish, one third German, and one third Jewish. The experience is vividly portrayed in Reymont's novel *Ziemia obiecana* (The Promised Land, 1899), recently made into a memorable film by Andrzej Wajda. The story of three young men cast into the maelstrom of the rags and riches of the textile revolution is given its edge by the fact that one is a Pole, one a German, and one a Jew. Łódź was no more "Polish" in the narrow ethnic sense than Strasbourg was French or Kiev was Russian.

In the world of literature, one naturally thinks of Poland as the home of Polish literature, and, seeing the woeful ignorance of most western scholars on the subject, one can only hope that they would think *more* about it. Whole volumes have been written on European Romanticism, for instance, without so much as a mention for the country where Romanticism had its most profound impact. Having said that, one has also to say that Polish scholars themselves rarely draw attention to the non-Polish languages and literature which flourished in Poland in nineteenth century. Everyone, it seems, has their own particular brand of parochialism. If one were to call, for example, for the names of the three best-known Warsaw authors, not many people would come up with the names of E. T. A. Hoffman, Alexander Blok, and I. B. Singer — the first a German writer, the second a Russian poet, and the third a Yiddish novelist. Yet there are no Polish authors connected with Warsaw who might claim the same stature as Hoffmann, the Prussian bureaucrat who wrote his fanciful "Tales" during the intervals of his official business: as Blok, the son of a professor at the Russian University of Warsaw, who harbored rather hostile feelings about the Polish capital; and as Singer, the Jewish emigrant, whose historical stories about old Poland gave him a Nobel Prize in his New York exile.

This interpenetration of cultures can also be observed in the way that the great masters of Polish Romanticism inspired the literary revivals (or rather, the literary vivals)



of the Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Jewish national movements.

It was equally visible in the multilingualism of many leading Polish authors. Alexander Brückner, the historian and linguist, and August Cieszkowski, the philosopher, chose to publish in German, just as Władysław Spasowicz, the literary critic, chose to write in Russian. The cosmopolitan Polish intelligentsia, to which they belonged, was an integral part of the European culture of their day.

### 5. *The Inter-War Period*

In many ways, the internal politics of inter-war Poland can be seen as a prolonged duel between the Nationalists of Roman Dmowski and their opponents headed by Józef Piłsudski. Admittedly, the Nationalists formed the largest single camp, and their obsession with “a Poland for the Poles” and their hatred for the ethnic minorities undoubtedly set the antagonistic tone of political life. Yet it is important to realize that the Nationalists never gained power, and never, with the possible exception of 1935–9, reached a position where they could begin to put their intolerant ideas into practice. Piłsudski regularly came out on top in the tussle for power with Dmowski. If Nationalism was strong in Poland, the combined opposition to Nationalism was even stronger.

To illustrate the ethos of the anti-nationalist camp, no name could be more evocative than that of Jan Ignacy Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1926). Baudouin de Courtenay, the son of a Polish family of Belgian origin, is well known as one of the founding fathers of modern linguistics; but his political views, which grew from a lifetime of research into the cultures of Eastern Europe, are less familiar. It is true that he held positions in several of the leading universities — at Petersburg, Dorpat, Berlin, Kraków, among others, but reason why he changed those positions so frequently was because he fell foul of the political authorities with regular monotony. In Russia, he was punished for his interest in the Lithuanian movement; (the Lithuanian language providing one of the clearest links with proto-Indo-European); in Prussia, for his concern with the Kashubs, in Austrian Galicia — or rather by his Polish colleagues in Kraków, for his research into Ukrainian, and in Hungary for his support for the Slovaks. In 1918, when accepting an honorary award at Warsaw University, he outraged his audience by daring to pronounce that “Poland has not been created in order to swell the tally of imperialist hyena-states.” In 1922, this pacifist, feminist, educational progressivist, and universal freethinker became the candidate of the Block of Minorities in the Presidential Election. He did not win — perhaps fortunately, because the other non-Nationalist candidate, Gabriel Narutowicz, who *was* elected, was promptly assassinated by a nationalist fanatic; but he stands out as a champion for those ancient Polish virtues of unconformity, individualism, and multinationalism which had always formed such remarkable ingredients of Polish life.

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If stress has been laid on the non-Polish elements of the Polish heritage, it is not because in any way the Polish national achievement should be rejected or minimized. It is just that to harp exclusively on the narrower National ingredient is somehow to diminish and to undersell the richness and variety of the whole.

What I have been emphasizing, in fact, is the universal character of Polish culture, with its broad European connections. In contrast to the cultures of some European

nations, which are essentially parochial in nature — and I won't be so impolite as actually to *name* the Liliputians of our continent — the Polish heritage is shared by many different people with many different religious, linguistic, and ethnic connections. It belongs, in fact, not just to the Poles but to that great treasury of European Culture, where it can take its place alongside the French, the German, the English, the Russian and the Latin traditions. Poland is the heart of Europe in more senses than one.

Apart from that, there is a serious political point of immediate current importance. It seems to me that Nationalism in Eastern Europe has served its purpose, and is harmful to the nations of that troubled region. In the nineteenth century, it was probably inevitable, even necessary, that the Poles should have defended their separate identity and separate interests against their rivals and neighbors, just as it was necessary or inevitable that the Ukrainians and Lithuanians should have produced their own varieties of Nationalism or that the Jews should have produced Zionism. But nowadays, those conditions no longer apply. Nowadays, Nationalism is artificially preserved by the communist regions of the Soviet Empire to divide and to rule, to simply keep each of the subject peoples quiet in their appointed reservations and to preserve the Soviet hegemony. In contrast, to emphasize the common heritage of these peoples, to remind them of the shared achievements of the past, as well as the shared disasters and the fratricidal struggles, can only increase their self-respect, strengthen their sense of a common purpose, and hasten the day of their common liberation.

## Notes

- 1 See K. Rosen-Zawadzki, "Karta Buduszczej Jewropy," in *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej*, VIII, (Wrocław, Poland, 1972), pp. 141–144.
- 2 K. Jazdźewski, *Poland*, (London, 1965); M. Gimbutas, *The Slavs* (London, 1971).