

# A Brief History of Poland

- **850** — Founding of the Piast dynasty in the Polish realm.
- **966** — Piast ruler, Miesko is baptized. Poland adopts Christianity and becomes an acknowledged partner of European christian states
- **1370-1386** — End of Piast dynasty. A French -Hungarian dynasty rules Poland. Jadwiga, daughter of the king of Poland and Hungary, marries Jogaila, grand duke of Lithuania, establishing the beginning of the Jagiellonian dynasty. Poland's union with Lithuania enables it to become the dominant power in east central Europe during the 15th and early 16th centuries
- **1572** — End of Jagiellon dynasty. Polish nobility begin to elect their kings from various royal houses of Europe and from native Polish aristocratic families. These weak rulers allow the strength of the Polish Lithuanian state to be sapped by powerful neighbours.
- **1648** — Chmielnicki revolt in the Ukraine - an attempt to destroy the Polish state. Cossacks kill tens of thousands of Jews. This uprising causes the greatest loss of Jewish life until the Shoah. About half the Jewish population is destroyed. There is a very high loss of life among the Poles
- **1655** - Sweden invades Poland and forces the cession of considerable territory in 1660. Poland becomes embroiled in conflicts with Russia and Sweden. Internally the Polish state succumbs to economic backwardness and social conflicts between Roman Catholics and Orthodox Poles,
- **1795** — Third and final partition of Poland as its territory is seized by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Poland is eradicated from the political geography of Europe.
- **1815** — Kingdom of Poland is established within the Russian empire. Unsuccessful Polish revolts in
- **1830, 1846 and 1863** leads to Russification and Germanization in the educational systems of Russian and Prussian sectors.
- **1917** — The Russian Revolution. Poland is occupied by the Germans.
- **1918** — Independent Polish state is reestablished after the fall of Russian, Austrian and German Empires.
- **1926-1935** — Poland's political life is dominated by Marshal Josef Pilsudski who ruled dictatonally.



- **1939** — Germany invades and occupies the western two thirds of Poland, and the Soviet Union occupies the remainder.
- **1941** — Germany invades Soviet Union. All of Poland comes under Nazi rule, German policy is designed to eradicate Polish culture through mass executions and to exterminate the large Jewish minority.
- **1944-1945** — Soviet Red Army drives the Germans from Polish soil, and Poland's boundaries are redrawn. Communists curtail free elections, collectivize Polish farms and nationalize industries.
- **1944-1956** — Poland is firmly in the grip of Stalinist totalitarianism.
- **1980-81** — Solidarity, under Lech Walesa's leadership wins legal status after a series of strikes. In response to continuing pressure by Solidarity, defense minister Wojciech Jaruzelski declares martial law and terminates Solidarity's legal status.
- **1988** — After years of a flailing economy and renewed labour unrest, Jaruzelski approves negotiations with the outlawed Solidarity movement.
- **1989** — Negotiations result in far-reaching reforms of Poland's political system, allowing Solidarity to participate in free elections. Solidarity enjoys an overwhelming victory in the June elections. In subsequent months the new government enacts radical plans to transform Poland's centrally planned economy into a free enterprise economy. 1989 represents the end of communism in Poland.

# Timeline of Polish History

## ORIGINS TO 10TH CENTURY

In the area that is today called Poland, in the early centuries AD there lived many groups or tribes, including the Celts, Balts, Scythians, Huns, Goths, and Germanic peoples. It is believed that the Slavs arrived in the 6th or 7th century when several different Slavic tribes settled in the area. By the mid-10th century, the Polania tribe became dominant. Legends say that the chief, Piast, united the groups into one cohesive unit, naming it Polska (Poland). This region became Wielkopolska, or Greater Poland.

- 966: Duke Mieszko I, Poland's first recorded leader, converted to Christianity after marrying Dabrowka of Bohemia. This is formally recognized as the birth of the Polish nation. By accepting Christianity, Poland became an influential participant in the sphere of Western culture. Poznan became the Episcopal see, or capital city. Mieszko allied himself with the German Emperor Otto I and placed his land under the protection of the Pope.

## THE PIAST DYNASTY 966–1370

- 992: Duke Mieszko I dies. By the time of his death, Poland's borders extended to an area similar to today's boundaries. The city of Gniezno was the capital, and the towns of Gdansk, Szczecin, Poznan, Wroclaw, and Krakow already exist.
- 1100s: Boleslaw Krzywousty (Boleslaus the Wry-Mouthed) divides Poland among his sons in an apparent attempt to reinforce unity. The division instead caused rivalry, leaving Poland prey to various foreign invaders.
- 1320: Polish state is reunified.
- 1333–1370: Poland achieves political and cultural unity under the rule of Kazimierz III Wielki (Casimir the Great). The city of Krakow flourishes as capital.



Portrait of Jadwiga of Anjou, Queen of Poland.

- 1364: The university is founded at Krakow, one of Europe's first universities.

## The Jagiellonian Dynasty 1382–1572

- 1382: The Polish crown is passed on to 10-year-old Jadwiga. Poland forms an alliance with the pagan Lithuania when young Jadwiga marries Duke Jagiello of Lithuania. Jagiello converts to Christianity and becomes Wladyslaw II Jagiello, ruling from 1386-1434. The union increases Poland's boundaries dramatically and creates an alliance with Lithuania that lasts for 400 years.

During this time there are many wars against various enemies (Teutonic Knights,

Tatars, Russia, the Ottoman Empire). However, the country prospers economically, culturally, and spiritually.

- 1500s: The Renaissance comes to Poland. Polish becomes the language in lieu of Latin. Literature, learning, culture, and architecture flourish.
- 1543: Nicolaus Copernicus (Mikolaj Kopernik) publishes “On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres,” proposing that the earth revolves around the sun.
- 1569: The Polish Parliament, or Sejm, unifies Poland and Lithuania into one state. Royal succession is now based on election by the Sejm, including allowing foreign candidates for consideration. The decision was disastrous for Poland, and during the period of the Royal Republic, only four out of eleven kings were native Poles.

#### THE ROYAL REPUBLIC 1572–1795

- 1573: The Sejm guarantees religious equality. Roman Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims all live together in Poland in peace.
- 1596–1609: Poland’s capital city is moved from Krakow to Warsaw.
- 1655–60: Known as the Deluge, Sweden invades Poland with the help of the Tartars and Cossacks from the East. Poland is virtually destroyed as cities are burned and plundered.
- A population of 10 million is reduced to 6 million due to the wars, famine, and the bubonic plague.
- 1674–96: This period is the reign of Jan III Sobieski, an expert military commander.
- Sobieski’s forces have many victories over the Turks.
- 1700s: Poland’s three powerful neighbors, Russia, Prussia and Austria, each want to own Poland. This was all but impossible without risking war with each other. They finally settled their dispute by dividing Poland among themselves in a series of agreements called the Three Partitions of Poland.
- 1791: After the First Partition leads to some reforms, a constitution is passed, called the Constitution of the Third of May. It is the second written document that outlines the responsibilities of the Government (the U.S. Constitution is the first). Catherine the Great of Russia invades Poland to break up the newfound democracy.
- 1793: During the Second Partition, Russia and Prussia take over half of what was left of Poland.
- 1794: Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the famous general who helped win the American Revolution, starts a rebellion for Polish independence, but it is not strong

enough to defeat the Russians.

- 1795: The Third Partition divides the rest of Poland. Poland is “officially” non-existent for the next 123 years.
- 1870s: Russia attempts to eradicate Polish culture, making Russian the official language of the Russian partition. Prussia does the same in their portion of Poland, attempting to
- Germanicize Poles. Under the Austrian partition, Galician Poles are allowed to retain some autonomy.
- 1890s: Poland experiences mass emigration due to poverty. Approximately 4 million out of 22 million Poles emigrate to the United States prior to World War I.
- World War I 1914–18: With Poland’s three occupying powers at war with each other, Poland becomes the main fighting ground. Because there was no official Polish state, there was no Polish army. Poles were forced into the Russian, German, and Austrian armies and forced to fight against one another. Native Poles now in America join Haller’s Army in France to fight for their country.



Jozef Pilsudski (1930).  
Wikipedia.org

- 11 November 1918: Poland becomes independent as WWI comes to an end. The country was devastated by the war. Approximately one million Poles died. All Polish institutions had to be rebuilt as the country once again formed a nation. The official boundaries are not set until 1923.
- 1919: The Treaty of Versailles gives Poland western Prussia, thus getting access to the Baltic Sea.
- 1919-20: During the Polish-Soviet War, Jozef Pilsudski’s army defeats the Russians. Poland gains western Ukraine and Belarus.
- 1926: Pilsudski makes himself dictator of Poland. Despite the dictatorship, the economy stabilized at this time and culture continued to prosper.
- 1930s: Poland signs non-aggression pacts with Germany and the Soviet Union. The pacts soon prove to be pointless.
- 23 August 1939: Germany and the Soviet Union sign a nonaggression pact, with Stalin and Hitler planning to divide Poland once again.

#### WORLD WAR II 1939–45

- September 1939: Hitler invades Poland on 1 September. On 17 September, the Soviet Union invades eastern Poland. Mass arrests, executions, and exiles begin.
- June 1941: Hitler attacks the Soviet Union, and Poland remains under the Nazi regime for the next three years. Many Poles are deported to labor camps. The

Polish intelligentsia are executed, and the Nazis plan to eliminate the Polish Jews entirely. Most of Poland's Jewish population, and many non-Jews as well, die in Nazi death camps set up throughout Poland in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. The Germans exterminated most of Poland's 3.3 million Jews, along with another approximately 3 million Jews from other occupied countries.

- April 1943: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, pitting hundreds of Jews in the besieged Warsaw Ghetto against the might of the German army, is quelled after over a month of battle. It is the single largest act of defiance until that point of the war.
- 1944–1945: In 1944, the Warsaw Uprising took place in the Polish, non-Jewish side of Warsaw which is crushed by the Germans as Russian troops looked on. Later that year, and in early 1945, Russia's Red Army is victorious over the Germans. Russia set up a Communist-dominated government for Poland in Lublin. In February 1945, Russia, United States, and Great Britain meet at the Yalta Conference and agree to leave Poland under Soviet control.

At the war's end, over 6 million Poles were dead, approximately 20% of Poland's pre-war population.

- 1956: Industrial strikes break out in Poznan in an attempt to gain "bread and freedom" from Soviet rule. In October a reformed government is elected without the stamp of Moscow approval. This unheard of defiance elicits a visit from Khrushchev and results in several armies massing at the Polish border.
- 1956–1970s: Poland experiences some internal independence under Soviet rule. Most importantly the Church survives and even flourishes as a counterpoint to Soviet repression. Poland manages to rebuild its war-devastated iron, steel, shipping, and mining industries, but fails to regain a decent standard of living.

- 1978: Karol Wojtyła, the Archbishop of Krakow, is elected to Pope. Taking the name John Paul II, he is the first non-Italian pope in nearly 500 years.

- 1980: Strikes and riots ensue as the economy crumbles. At the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, the government reaches an agreement with the workers. The workers



Strike in Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk (1980).  
Photo by T. Michalak / Wikipedia.org

are allowed to organize into an independent trade union, called Solidarnosc, or Solidarity. Strike leader Lech Walesa is elected as the head of Solidarity, and by November 60% of the Polish workforce is organized. Solidarity gradually grows into a strong, non-violent, sociopolitical movement.

- 1981: In December, Martial Law is declared. Solidarity is suspended.
- 1982: The government formally dissolves Solidarity. The cost of living rises over 100% during the year.
- 1983: Martial law is lifted.
- 1989: In April, Solidarity is re-established.
- 1990: Prices rise by 250%, with incomes dropping by 40%. In November, the first fully free election is won by Lech Walesa. His rule results in disillusionment as no economic miracles take place, and the political forces fail to stabilize.
- 1997: Poland's National Assembly adopts a new Constitution.

Today Poland is a flourishing Western-style democracy, a member of NATO, as it continues to gain international credibility