



Poland, Russia and Europe: Lessons from History

"Without Christ, man cannot be fully understood...Without Christ, man is incapable of fully understanding himself. He cannot understand who he is, what his true dignity is, what his vocation is, or what his ultimate goal is.... The exclusion of Christ from human history is an act against man. Without Christ, it is impossible to understand the history of Poland."

Sermon by Pope John Paul II, Victory Square, Warsaw, 2 June 1979

In June 1979, Pope John Paul II began his first pilgrimage to his native Poland, which was then under communist dictatorship. The visit not only had an enormous impact on the spiritual renewal of the Polish nation and paved the way for democratic change. The trip also inspired freedom activists in other parts of the Soviet empire. In Warsaw, he delivered a sermon at Victory Square in which he asked the Holy Spirit to 'renew the face of the earth.' John Lewis Gaddis, the 'dean of Cold War historians' (The New York Times), wrote in retrospect: 'When John Paul II kissed the ground at Warsaw airport on 2 June 1979, he initiated the process that would lead to the end of communism in Poland – and ultimately everywhere.' (John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War*. 2005)

A year later, the economic crisis in Poland led workers at the Gdańsk shipyard to go on strike. In September 1980, an independent trade union (Solidarność; Polish: Solidarity) was founded for the first time within the socialist bloc. Solidarność did not seek to overthrow the socialist system, but rather to bring about reforms that would allow it to function independently. Pope John Paul II supported Solidarność's demands. After years of conflict, parliamentary elections were held in June 1989, resulting in a landslide victory for Solidarność, the first non-communist government and a complete change of regime. The leader of Solidarność Lech Wałęsa became president of the new Republic of Poland in 1990. Poland and the Solidarność movement played a decisive role in the dissolution of communism in Eastern Europe. British historian Timothy Garton Ash wrote that the end of communism in Eastern Europe 'took ten years in Poland, ten months in Hungary, ten weeks in East Germany, ten days in Czechoslovakia and ten hours in Romania'.

Poland and the European powers

Geographically, Poland lies in the middle of the North European Plain. Due to this location, it has been the victim of other powers in Europe several times throughout history and has disappeared from the map twice. Its powerful neighbours Russia, Prussia and Austria did not agree with Poland's sovereignty and divided the country among themselves in 1795. It was only after a century of oppression and failed revolts, and after the fall of these empires, that Poland regained its sovereignty as a newly founded republic in 1918. France and Great Britain saw Poland as a bulwark against Russian Bolshevism. In fact, Lenin attempted to destroy the entire order in Europe with a military strike against Poland in 1920. He hoped to unleash a revolution in Germany after conquering Poland. However, the Bolsheviks underestimated the military strength of the Poles. The Polish armed forces pushed between the Soviet Northern Army, which was advancing towards Warsaw, and the Southern Army, which was besieging Lviv, and forced them to retreat. In Poland, the victory in August 1920 is celebrated as the 'Miracle on the Vistula'. Poland had thwarted Lenin's plan to 'carry the world revolution into the heart of Europe on the bayonets of the Red Army'.

The second fall of Poland

After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Red Army occupied the eastern part of Poland. The Nazis and the Soviet Union proceeded to divide Poland between themselves. Their brutal occupation and the lack of intervention by France and Great Britain are still part of the collective memory in Poland today. In 1941, the Germans conquered all of Poland and murdered 3 million (90%) of the Jewish population during the Holocaust. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Allies agreed in 1945 on the future of Europe in Yalta on the Crimean Peninsula. These included the westward shift of Poland's borders, accompanied by massive population movements as millions of Germans were expelled from their homes (now newly western Poland) and millions of Poles forcibly moved to there from their homes in what had become Soviet territory. 'From Stettin on the Baltic Sea to Trieste on the Adriatic, an Iron Curtain has descended across Europe,' said Winston Churchill on 5 March 1946. Poland and its neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe were trapped. Yalta paved the way for decades of Soviet rule, with the nationalisation of industry, the creation of large collective farms and a close military alliance.

Poland's orientation towards the West

Close on two centuries of Russian or Soviet oppression meant that Polish mistrust of its Russian neighbour runs deep. Joining NATO in 1999 with the establishment of an American missile defence shield in Poland contributed to security. In 2004, Poland joined the EU, which led to an improved economic situation. Western Poland is generally better off economically than the east. This is also reflected at the political level ('liberal' west vs. 'conservative' east).

The war in Ukraine ultimately made Poland an important partner for the EU and the US in terms of aid deliveries. Regardless of the government in power, Poland's geography puts it on the frontline of defence of Europe's borders against Russian expansion. Its 19th and 20th century history have also given it a strong empathy for other nations fighting for freedom, in particular, from Russia.

Prayer for Poland

Alongside growing prosperity, 21st century Poland is seeing developments familiar in other European countries where the church once occupied a dominant position. For example, some resentment at its status, media reports over sexual abuse cases linked to the church are crowding out the Good News, and a turning away of many younger people from institutional religion.

- Pray that anti-church sentiment in Poland will not hinder the way of the Gospel. Please pray that people recognize the truth that comes from the Bible.
- Pray for the younger generation caught up in materialism in Poland, that many are responsive to the Gospel.
- Pray for Poland's role in relations between Russia and the rest of Europe: for wisdom for leaders in making a stand for justice on the one hand, and building trust on the other; and for forgiving hearts for everyone in areas with much collective memory of suffering.

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