

PART I
POLAND, TO 1795



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Jerzy Lukowski , Hubert Zawadzki
Excerpt
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I

Piast Poland, ?–1385



The Romans never conquered Poland: a source of pride to its first native chronicler, bishop Vincent of Kraków, writing around 1200, but a nuisance to the modern historian. Since Rome neither subjugated nor abandoned Poland, there is no widely recognisable Year One from which to launch a historical survey. The year AD 966 has to serve, for in that year the ruler of what has come to be known as ‘Poland’ accepted (and imposed) Latin Christianity. We know as little about this event as we do about anything else that happened during the next hundred years or so. The written record begins to assume substantial proportions only in the fourteenth century. Some eighty years before bishop Vincent, an unknown clergyman, possibly of French origin (he has come to be called Gall-Anonim, ‘the anonymous Gaul’) produced the earliest chronicle emanating directly from the Polish lands. Archaeological and toponymic evidence, the accounts of foreign observers and travellers, inform the historian little better than the folk memory on which Gall relied to locate the founder of the ruling house in a successful peasant adventurer called ‘Piast’,¹ who had overthrown a tyrannical predecessor, Popiel (supposedly gnawed to death by

¹ The label ‘Piast’ was attributed to the ruling dynasty only in the late seventeenth century by Silesian antiquarians. Medieval sources used formulae such as ‘the dukes and princes of Poland’ (‘duces et principes Poloniae’).

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some very hungry mice) at some point in the ninth century AD. Historians are more inclined nowadays to accept that Mieszko's immediate forbears, Siemowit, Lestek and Siemomysł, were real persons, not just figments of Gall's imagination; and that it was under them that the early foundations of the future *Regnum Poloniae* were laid, with commercial and administrative centres in Gniezno and Poznań. Echoes of Lestek's realm are to be found in contemporary Byzantine and Germanic chronicles.

In the forty or so years after the Second World War, Polish historiography was wont to depict a 'Piaśt Poland' whose boundaries were curiously congruent with those of the post-1945 state. This reflected more than an attempt by a deeply unpopular communist regime to legitimize itself by appeal to an original past. It was also symptomatic of a genuine need for stability after a thousand years of a history when borders were rarely fixed, but could contract and expand, twist and disappear within the span of a lifetime, taking in or discarding groups of people some of whom even to-day cannot wholly decide on their own identity: 'Poles'? 'Germans'? 'Ukrainians'? 'Jews'? 'Byelorussians'? 'Lithuanians'?

'Polak' (*polonus*, *polanus*, *polenus* were the commonly used medieval Latin forms) derives from *pole*, plain or clearing – the land of the *Polanie*, living in the basin of the middle Warta river, in the western part of modern-day Poland. Remote though these territories may have been, they were not isolated. In Roman times, a well-established trade route joined the southern shores of the Baltic and its much-prized amber resources to the Europe of the Mediterranean. By the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, in the shadow of the fortified strongholds, the *grody*,

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which housed garrisons and princely officials, small commercial communities, even a scattering of Jewish trading centres, grew to service the arduous overland routes connecting the Rhineland, Germany and Bohemia with Kiev, Byzantium and the Orient. The primacy of these western lands came to be acknowledged in the thirteenth century with their designation as ‘Old’ or ‘Great’ Poland (Wielkopolska, *Polonia Maior*) – as opposed to ‘Little’ Poland (Małopolska, *Polonia Minor*) to the south and south-east. What linked the *Polanie* to their neighbours and to so many peoples of the great Eurasian plain was language – *słowo* – the word: those who spoke intelligibly to one another were *Słowianie*, *Sclavinii*, Slavs – as opposed to the ‘Dumb Ones’ (*Niemcy*) who spoke no tongue intelligible to ‘Poles’ or ‘Czechs’ or ‘Russians’. The ‘Dumb Ones’ were mainly from the Germanic world – Saxons, Franks, Bavarians, Lotharingians. The ‘Dumb Ones’ were little bothered by such linguistic insults. The pagan Slavs, whether living east of the Elbe or north of the Danube, were fair game as slaves. It was in Venice, one of the great entrepôts of the early medieval world, that the word *Sclavus* first came to be synonymous with both ‘Slav’ and ‘slave’ – so great were the numbers of southern, Balkan Slavs sold on by its merchants.

Linguistic community did not mean political solidarity. The Slav tribes of the lands between the Elbe and the Oder were as likely to be in conflict with their Polish/Silesian/Czech neighbours of the east as with incomers from the west. In 965, the *knez*, the prince of the *Polanie*, Mieszko I, thwarted a troublesome alliance between the Christian Czechs and his pagan, Slav neighbours to the west by his marriage to Dobrava, daughter of duke

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Boleslav I of Bohemia. Conversion in the following year allowed Mieszko to tap into the manpower, military technology and politics of the German Empire in a way that would have been inconceivable if he had remained a heathen. Most of the early clergy who came to Poland were German; Mieszko and his successors were as willing to conclude marriage alliances with the great families of the Empire as with the ruling dynasties of Scandinavia, Hungary and the Rus' lands. They were quite prepared to furnish the emperors with tribute and warriors in return for recognition of their lordship over the borderlands that they disputed with the German marcher lords. Mieszko's marriage to Dobrava was something of an aberration – the Piasts and the Bohemian Přemyslids had too many conflicting interests for family ties to take root.

Political contacts with German potentates must have existed for a long time before Mieszko's accession. It was probably Mieszko's father, Siemomysł, who first pushed across the river Oder around Lubiąż, and northwest into Pomerania. This westward drive was bound to lead to clashes with the rulers of the 'Northern Mark', a political unit of undefined borders established by the German emperor Otto I east of the middle Elbe. Its rulers had a free hand to convert the Slavs and annex their territories, which they did with genocidal gusto. Christian German and pagan Slav rulers could, as occasion demanded, form alliances. Mieszko was clearly well informed of the feuding and power struggles within the German Empire. Even before his conversion, he agreed in 964 to pay tribute to Otto I for at least some of his lands. For his part, the Emperor saw in rulers such as Mieszko a useful counterforce against the excessive ambitions of his own marcher

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lords. Conversion was also likely to strengthen the ruler's own position: among the *Polanie*, there was almost certainly no one central cult, but a variety of localized beliefs. Christianity could provide a central, unifying religious force, which of its very nature was bound to strengthen the ruler's authority.

Byzantium was too far away for its version of 'Orthodox' Christianity to be convenient, just as for Kiev, adopting Christianity in 988, 'Latin' Rome was distant and unimpressive. Mieszko preferred to receive his new faith from the Bohemians, perhaps to escape possible subordination to the planned new archdiocese for the North Mark, Magdeburg (established two years after Poland's conversion, in 968). The unstable German politics of the time required some deft footwork: Bohemia at this time fell within the jurisdiction of the Bavarian bishopric of Regensburg. It has even been speculated that Mieszko and his immediate entourage may have been christened in Regensburg, early in 966, before the missionaries came to Poland. There was a strong Bavarian connection, so much so that, in 979, Otto II launched a punitive expedition against Mieszko for the support he gave to his opponents in Bavaria. The experience seems to have convinced the Polish ruler not to go too far. He loyally supported the young Otto III in the troubles which shook his early reign, not least in the great East Elbian pagan Slav revolt of 983. Mieszko's second marriage, to a German princess, Oda, daughter of Dietrich of the Northern Mark, around 980, signified that his Christianity and connections with Germany were there to stay.

According to the Arab-Jewish merchant, Ibrahim ibn Yakub, Mieszko had 3,000 heavily armed cavalry and

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infantry at his call. Even if this is a very flattering assessment (the emperor Otto I, ruling over lands perhaps five times as populous, had an army of 5,000 mounted knights), Mieszko's retinue of warriors was an impressive instrument, which enabled him to annex Silesia from his former Bohemian in-laws. His son, Bolesław I Chrobry, 'the Valiant' (992–1026) deprived them of the burgeoning commercial centre of Kraków and its southern hinterland, extending the Piast realm to the Carpathian mountains. The two rulers brought under their sway the Pomeranian lands between the Vistula and Oder deltas. It was probably Mieszko who founded the port town of Gdańsk around 980 to consolidate his grip on lands at the mouth of the Vistula. Bolesław's western forays took him to the Elbe. In 1018, Emperor Henry II reluctantly acknowledged his rule over Miltitz and Lusatia, west of the Oder. In 1018, too, Bolesław intervened in Kiev, to secure his brother-in-law, Sviatopolk, on its throne. He was even fleetingly able to impose his rule over Bohemia, Moravia and much of modern-day Slovakia.

Almost annual expeditions for human and material plunder were essential to the 'economy' of the early medieval state. But Piast Poland, with a population of well below 1 million in lands densely tangled by forests, swamps and heaths, could not sustain such efforts indefinitely. The aggressive reigns of Mieszko II (1025–34), Bolesław II (1058–81) and Bolesław III (1102–38) were interwoven with periods of revolt, foreign invasion and recovery. Even Chrobry faced serious rebellions in 1022 and 1025. He had to pull out of Bohemia and his successors had to abandon Moravia and Slovakia. His protégé, Sviatopolk was driven out of Kiev by his brother, Yaroslav the Wise, as soon as

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Polish forces withdrew. Mieszko II had to abandon Miltz and Lusatia; he lost his kingdom and his life to domestic revolt. Between 1034 and 1039, Poland may have been without a ruler at all (some chroniclers tried to fill the gap with a Bolesław the Forgotten, but he is just as likely to have been a Bolesław the Non-Existent), as it threatened to disintegrate under the pressures of pagan reaction (itself stoked by the burdens of Chrobry's adventurism) and Bohemian invasion. Poland's Christianity seemed at risk of collapse barely a generation after its imposition. Mieszko II's son, Casimir (Kazimierz) 'the Restorer' (1039–58) needed at least fifteen years to stitch his lands back together with Imperial and Kievan help. It was during his reign that Kraków began to establish itself as Poland's capital: the political and metropolitan centre of Gniezno was so devastated by the disorders as to be temporarily uninhabitable.



1 One of the earliest surviving Polish churches: the collegiate church of the Blessed Virgin and St Alexis, c. 1150–61, at Tum, near Łęczycza, in western Poland.

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Few, if any, of the Slav tribes between the Elbe and the Oder accepted Christianity gracefully. It was only in the course of the twelfth century that their marcherlands were effectively brought under the authority of German rulers. Only in 1157 did Slav Brunabor become German Brandenburg. The *Polanie* and their associated tribes were no exception. Christianity was the price that had to be paid to escape the fate of their more obdurate fellow Slavs to the west, such as the Wends, who kept faith with the pagan ways and suffered one murderous Christian onslaught after another, until they lost their gods, their independence and their identity. Today, between the Elbe and the Oder, some 50,000 Sorbs survive with their two languages (Lower and Upper Sorbian), an ethnic and linguistic reminder that the peoples who lived in these lands were once not German but Slav.

To the bulk of the populace, Christianity brought burdens which only exacerbated those imposed by the ruler's war bands and garrisons. Bolesław I took his role as Christian (if opportunistic) ruler sufficiently seriously to be regarded by the young emperor Otto III as his partner in the conversion of Slavonic Europe. In the person of Vojtěch (Adalbert) of Prague, Bolesław furnished Poland with its first, albeit adopted, martyr – in 997 Vojtěch was slain by the heathens of Prussia whom the king had hoped he would convert. He was canonized two years later. Like Vojtěch, most of the early clergy came from abroad. They were supported with tributes and tithes exacted by a brutal ruling apparatus. A significant native clergy did not begin to emerge until at least three or four generations after Mieszko I's conversion. The deeper Christianization of Poland began only with the coming of the monasteries