

HISTORY OF POLAND

The Legend of Lech, Czech and Rus

Over a thousand years ago, there were three Slav brothers wandering with their tribes through the lands of forests and fields stretching between two large rivers, Oder in the west and Dnieper in the east, in search of the best place to settle. One day, after months of weary travel, a beautiful sight appeared before their eyes: on a hill there stood a huge oak tree with a nest between its branches. From the nest a mighty white eagle soared into the sky. Lech was amazed by the view and considered it as a sign from the gods for him and his people. He decided to settle there and chose the white eagle with its wings spread wide against the sunset sky for their emblem. Soon they built a town which they called Gniezno (a “nest” in the Slavic language). The town became the capital of their nation and the first capital of Poland. And so the three brothers separated: Czech decided to go south and Rus chose the east where they started their own countries.

History of Poland in brief

966 – Christianisation
1025 – Kingdom of Poland
1569 – Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
1795 – Partition of Poland
1807 – Duchy of Warsaw
1815 – Congress Poland
1918 – Reconstitution of Poland
1939 – Invasion of Poland, World War II
1945 – Communist Poland
1989 – Republic of Poland

History of Poland in detail

Poland has had a long and rich history. Over the past thousand years the country has defended its freedom and sovereignty from foreign aggressions on numerous occasions. Due to country's geo-political location between the East and the West, Polish history is marked with wars and uprisings. There was a time when Poland was the largest country in Europe but there was also a stage when it was totally erased from the world map for over a hundred years. Thanks to the resilience and pride of the people who value freedom above all, Poland has not only managed to overcome troubles but also has been offering its own contribution to European history and culture.

Poland's history dates back to prehistory times when Slavic tribes arrived on this territory and settled down. The first documented ruler was Mieszko I (from Piast dynasty) in the 10th century. In 966 duke Mieszko I converted to Christianity and by baptism brought Poland to the community of Western nations. The first coronation took place at Wawel Cathedral in Krakow in 1025 and the Kingdom of Poland began to take shape.

The Jagiellonian dynasty phase brought close ties with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1385 Lithuania accepted Christianity from Polish hands and Polish-Lithuanian union was formed, which lasted for more than 400 years.

Over time a new threat emerged. The Teutonic Order directed their campaigns against Lithuania and Poland. In 1410 at the Battle of Tannenberg (Grunwald) the united forces of Poland and Lithuania completely destroyed the Teutonic Knights. It was one of the biggest and most important battles of medieval times.

The 16th century was Poland's "Golden Age". The Renaissance currents brought about country's flourishing, Poland advanced culturally, arts and science developed. Polish astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), formulated the first modern heliocentric theory of the solar system and gave a start to modern astronomy. While Europe was absorbed with religious turmoil, Poland proclaimed a policy of religious tolerance which attracted many refugees from religious persecution (Christians, Jews, Muslims). The country also expanded territorially. In 1569 the Union of Lublin was signed forming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. From this time on Poland and Lithuania were known as the Republic of Both Nations and prospered together on the territory of almost 1,000,000 square kilometers of central and eastern Europe. The Union was largely run by the nobility but led by elected kings. This early democratic system ("a sophisticated noble democracy") was untypical and in contrast to the absolute monarchies prevailing at the time in the rest of Europe.

In 1596 king Zygmunt III Waza moved the capital from Krakow to Warsaw as the city was more centrally located.

From the mid-17th century the Commonwealth entered a period of decline caused by internal disorder and anarchy, and devastating wars. The state was invaded by Swedes; the so called "Swedish Deluge" left the country in ruins. The last great victory was taken in 1683 when the allied armies of Europe led by the Polish king John III Sobieski save Europe from invasion of Islam in the huge battle of Vienna.

In the 18th century the Republic was in crisis. The state required reorganization. King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski (the last king of Poland) introduced numerous reforms. On 3rd May 1791 Europe's first and the world's second constitution was signed. However, the reform process was not enough to turn the tide of failing fortune. Poland gradually fell under foreign influence. The rulers of Russia, Prussia and Austria invaded Poland and partitioned its territory. In 1794 the Kosciuszko Uprising began but soon it was crushed. The three occupying powers through partitions terminated the Commonwealth's independent existence in 1795. The country disappeared from the map of Europe and until 1918 there was no independent Polish state.

Despite the oppression, the idea of Polish independence was still alive in the nation and Poland continued to exist as a spiritual and cultural community. Poles engaged in armed resistance. They fought with Napoleon Bonaparte, organized November Uprising (1830-1831) and January Uprising (1863-1864), all of which failed. But yet some great achievements in science and art were obtained at that time: Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), the famous pianist and composer, who was born and raised in Poland preserved the national heritage in music; in 1853 Ignacy

Lukasiewicz made a kerosene lamp, invented a way to refine kerosene from crude oil and built the first oil refinery in 1856; Maria Sklodowska-Curie (1867-1934), the famous physicist and chemist, discovered radioactive elements and won two Nobel Prizes, the only one ever in two different sciences.

The outbreak of World War I gave Poland chance to regain freedom. On 11th November 1918 Poland reappeared on the map of Europe after 123 years. The Second Polish Republic was established. In 1920 the young state stopped the massive Soviet invasion aimed at Western Europe in the battle of Warsaw.

On 1st September 1939 Poland was invaded by the Nazi Germany and World War II began. On September 17th the Soviet Union launched the unexpected attack and the country was again divided between eastern and western powers. The Poles formed the strongest underground resistance movement in the occupied territories (known as Home Army). Many Polish soldiers joined military formations on the western and eastern fronts and fought together with the Allies against the German aggressor. In 1944 the Warsaw Uprising broke out being the largest single military effort taken by any European resistance movement of World War II. Six million of Polish citizens perished during the war, including three million of Polish Jews; the country lay in ruins.

After World War II ended, Poland fell under Soviet control and the communist People's Republic of Poland was created as a Soviet satellite state. The country's boundaries were radically changed and shifted to the west, followed by mass movements of people of various nations. In consequence, Poland lost its traditional multi-ethnic character and became a country with homogeneous Polish population.

In the difficult years of communism, a new hope for Poles arose when Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) was chosen Pope in 1978. Two years later, in 1980, the "Solidarity" was founded, being the first mass independent trade union in communist states. This reform movement, led by Lech Walesa, eventually broke Soviet control in Eastern Europe. The first elections of the Third Polish Republic were held in 1989 and the country entered a period of transition from a communist state to the capitalist economic system and liberal parliamentary democracy. A modern Polish state arose.

Poland now has a new constitution which was signed in 1997. The country is a member of the NATO since 1999 and joined the European Union in 2004. After years of turbulent history, the country has finally found some stability and chance for growth in peace.