A Whistle-stop tour of Poland

By Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Ph.D., San Francisco, 22 April 2001

Did you know that Magna Carta predated the Act of Cienia barely by thirteen years? However, Poland's Neminem Captivabimus preceded England's habeus corpus by over 150 years. Easily accessible nuggets of the Polish past come in handy if one teaches, as I do, Western Civilization at a small California college.

Standard textbooks I use are predictably mum on Poland. Their most salient feature is the glorification of the Anglo-Saxon (Germanic) tradition as a worthy successor of the Greek and Roman civilizations. After gliding through Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, a typical textbook anchors itself firmly in Western Europe. Germany figures prominently in the narrative but its past is depicted almost exclusively in conjunction with Western European developments: the wars of the Holy Roman Emperors in Italy and France, the feudal fragmentation of the Empire, and religious strife that followed the Protestant Revolution. Nothing on Drang nach Osten. England and France occupy the central part of the textbook with "Rome" moving in and out of the narrative usually to signal the utter corruption of the Papacy and the wickedness of the Catholic Church. "Italy" pops up suddenly for a brief spell during the Renaissance to disappear again until the 19th century. Spain surfaces for a fleeting moment during the Age of Discovery to retreat into obscurity soon after, save for the Inquisition, everyone's favorite whipping boy. Scandinavian countries are mentioned only to the extent that their denizens created havoc in Germany, France, and England – from the Vikings to Gustavus Adolphus.

The Balkans and its people exist as background for the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Bohemia and Moravia merit but a perfunctory nod thanks to Jan Hus. Slovakia is a part of Hungary which is Austria, unless it hosts Atilla the Hun. Russia's early history is covered in a superficial, Muscovite-centered way, reflexively stressing continuities and similarities between Moscow and Kiev and mechanically upholding the former's spurious claims to "all Russia," including the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which at any rate is hardly mentioned at all. Jewish history is largely limited to anti-Jewish violence. Monotheistic Yahveh, the Old Testament, and Moses Maimonides are given a rather short shrift. Poland is practically dismissed in a few pedestrian entries. Hence, along with many other European nations, Poland is one of the best kept secrets of history.

To put it plainly, standard textbooks on Western Civilization shortchange my students. I have taken steps to remedy the situation. After all, my class is usually their one and only scholarly encounter with the past Western Civ. requirement sucks, but you gotta take it, man, to graduate. And it's transferable, too"). Therefore, usually, I set aside two class periods to talk about Central, South-East, and Eastern Europe. I prepare my lectures using Michal Bobrzynski, Barbara Jelavich, Oskar Halecki, George Vernadsky, Meir Balaban, Norman Davies, and others. I find it disruptive to consult them, however, when I work on my "Western European history" lectures. Lately, instead of leafing through Davies et al., I have been able to pepper my lectures with data handily drawn from Professor Iwo Pogonowski's Poland: An Illustrated History. His whistle-stop tour of Poland is an indispensable teaching tool. It is also a treasure for quick self-defense and Polish pride. Is it inappropriate to juxtapose John Lackland's fleeting concessions to his lay and spiritual lords with Ladislas III's solemn promise to preserve "just and noble laws according to the council of bishops and barons"? Is it intolerant to state that, although the Inquisition was introduced into Poland in 1318, the institution remained mostly dormant for the duration of its existence, while anti-Catholic laws are still on the books in England (e.g. a British monarch may not marry one or become one)? Is it cultural chauvinism to recall that Pawel Wlodkowic expounded the basic principles of international law over two hundred years before Hugo Grotius? Is it politically incorrect to reveal that the Constitution Nihil Novi of 1505 extended the franchise to about 10 percent of the population, a feat unmatched

elsewhere in Europe until Britain's reforms of the early 19th century? After all, old Poland was well ahead of its times in democracy, tolerance, and justice. Should we not stress those achievements which are relevant to our liberal democratic society?

And so my lectures are peppered with occassional, "by the way, did you know that at the time in Poland ..." Und so weiter. Yes, yes. I know that I sound very self-congratulatory about Poland's past. It is quite fashionable to confess the sins of our forefathers and apologize for them. But Professor Pogonowski has none of that. And why not look up to him? And he is not the only one. For example, the Polonophile Professor Joseph Rothschild at Columbia University used to lecture on things Polish as if Poland were the center of Western Civilization. Horror of horrors, he was even rather fair to Poland's Nationalists, while positively gloating over the Pilsudskites. Professor Pogonowski is rather even handed on both.

Nonetheless, I'm afraid Norman Davies would frown upon Professor Pogonowski's insistence that the Slavs (presumably some of them proto-Poles) were already settled in the area in the 5th century BC. Why would they stay in one place when Europe witnessed at that time the great wandering of the peoples? Well, if one wants to be a true Sarmatian, one should seek one's origin with the Sarmatians and continue to live among the Sarmatians. Therefore, "in the 16th century [Poland], Sarmatism was visible primarily in manners and taste. The Sarmatian myth of the 'noble warriors' was much more familiar to Polish nobility than were western European traditions of chivalry ... Sarmatism eventually became a form of culture typically Polish."

Like historian Adam Zamoyski, Professor Pogonowski is a true-blue equestrian Sarmatian. He is also an impatient erudite. Linguistic extrapolations, scientific discoveries, artistic styles, and scholarly personae abound on the pages of Poland. We learn that in the middle of the 20th century "the Polish language" had over 100,000 words; of these, about 10% were in useby an average Pole (of this everyday vocabulary, one-fourth was of Old Slavic origin)." Professor Pogonowski makes tongue-twisters like Swarozyc ("sfah-ro-zhits") sound amiable, even if he keeps silent about the dark secrets of this sun-deity. Panie Profesorze, is it true that maybe human sacrifice was involved? I have no idea but I'm curious. Nonetheless, I bet it is not common knowledge that "the earliest written polyphonic religious music by anonymous Polish composers can be traced back to the 12th century." Strangely, dudy, or bagpipes, merited transliteration, while gesle (a proto-violin) did not. Pronounce that!

Professor Pognowski is at his best while covering the Noble Commonwealth in the 16th and 17th centuries. One can just imagine him haranguing his peers in the Seym, enacting freedom-loving legislation, and disrupting the proceedings with a liberum veto. Noble democracy and equality seem to be his favorite. "Throughout the huge territory of Poland-Lithuania, every Polish noble, no matter how small his holdings, was proclaimed equal to a provincial governor." Even the common people were all right, in particular when they fought for Poland: "the peasant elite infantry ... soon became renowned for its patriotism." Forever enamored in the "winged cavalry" (husaria), however, the author reminds us that "the 17th century Poilsh saber became the European and American standard until the Second World War."Professor Pogonowski's chirping prose becomes somber when dealing with the downfall of the Commonwealth in the 18th century and its subsequent partitions. Only occassional rays of sunshine shoot through his narrative, while the author regales us with the tales of cultural and scientific achievements of captive Poles. But triumph is overshadowed by tragedy: bloody wars and uprisings.

None was more tragic than the Second World War. For the Poles, it was a war against two enemies: Hitlera and Stalin. "Hitler's Plan East to obliterate Poland and other Slavic countries included the genocide of 51,000,000 Slavs in order to open the fertile lands between Riga and the Black Sea for German colonization. The extermination of the Polish intellectual community started from the first days of war. Both the Germans and the Soviets had long lists prepared ... of Polish citizens who were to be executed."

The results were staggering. "6,028,000 or 22.2 percent of Polish citizens were killed by the Germans, including 644,00 in combat; an additional 1,000,000 perished as a result of the deportation of 1,900,000 to the Soviet Union." These official statistics have been recently revised downward to about 3 million Jewish and over 2 million Christian victims (including approximately 500,000 Catholic Poles killed by Soviet Communists and their supporters). In any event, Professor Pogonowski correctly reminds us that Poland's refusal to join Hitler against Stalin in all likelihood saved the Soviet Union and the world from German supremacy.

In his very brief treatment of the post-1989 period the author takes an exceedingly critical view of the political and economic developments. Unlike most of the contemporary Polish (and Polonian) elite, Professor Pogonowski is refreshingly Euro-sceptical. He worries about the "threat of German economic domination." Generally, he also is concerned that "the cultural history of Poland constitutes an uninterrupted and original achievement which, unfortunately, has not been reflected in her political history. However, the spirit of the Polish nation lives on with the knowledge that the Poles have done great things together and have the will to do them again." Amen.

To interrupt my pean, I'd like to register a few objections. Professor Pogonowski advances his pet theory about the quest for oil by the 20th century dictators, Stalin in particular. Although plausible enough, it is yet to be substantiated by a thorough search in the post-Soviet archives. It is not a given that "oil" was behind the alleged secret police anti-Jewish provocation in Kielce in July 1946. The author also impishly indulges in sniping at contemporary cultural icons and institutions. Although I have read the repugnant Stalinist verse of Wieslawa Szymborska, who won a Nobel price for poetry, I did not know that the venerable Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny was, so to speak, blessed by the NKVD to commence its operations in March 1945. I'm not sure that a tidbit like this belongs in a short entry of a reference book without footnotes. Is it perhaps because Poland reads as a telegraphic outline of a much more extensive work still brewing in its author's brain?

There are a few other critical remarks that can be made about Professor Pogonowski's book but I'm afraid that he'd charge out of its pages with his husaria and smite me down. Perhaps he'd better challenge his English editor to a duel. That would be so deliciously Sarmatian. Suing is so ... Anglo-Saxon

About the author

The author, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of History with the Kosciuszko Chair in Polish Studies at the Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. During the summer of 2003, he will teach courses on Polish history at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.