

Lecture 1

Introduction

1. Why study Polish History?

2. Polish Paradoxes

Poland is a country of paradoxes and extremes. In the last years of communism, it was probably the most pro-American country in Europe and yet the Soviet Union's most important ally; one of the most religious countries in the world and yet communist-ruled; instinctively pro-western yet frequently ignored or even abandoned by the West; a nation in which individualism is particularly strong, yet which had an economy based on collectivist principles; a nation marked by its fervent patriotism which had been under foreign domination for most of the past two centuries; a land of extreme shortages and poor standards and yet a nation reluctant to embrace the principles of competition and efficiency. Poles themselves have frequently reflected on these paradoxes.

Andrzej Szczypiorski, *The Beautiful Mrs Seidemann*:

What has my plot against history consisted of? Oh God, it is just not true that we have always been inspired by one ideal, a common goal, solidarity. It is just not true, it is an eternal Polish lie... My ordeal of internment was necessary. Indispensable Blessed. There has finally died the myth of our exceptional character, of our Polish suffering, which was always pure, right and noble. Did the torch behind which we marched not also illuminate the faces of the traitors hanged in 1794. Did the spies of the Grand-Duke Constantine escape its light? Who betrayed Traugutt in 1864? Who paid for the Cossack regiments to attack the workers in Łódź, Sosnowiec and Warsaw in 1905? Who tortured people in Brzesc in 1930 and beat them in Bereza after 1934? Who drove Henia Fichtelbaum on to the streets of Warsaw in 1942? Who betrayed Irma Seidenman into the claws of the Germans in 1943? Who drove her out of Poland in 1968? Holy Poland, suffering and courageous. Holy Polishness (Polskość), drunken, whoring, venal, its mouth stuffed with slogans, anti-semitic, anti-Russian, anti-human. Under the sign of the Most Holy Virgin. Under the feet of young ONR supporters and old Colonels. Under the roof of

the Belvedere Palace. Under the bridge. Holy Polishness in pubs and banks. The dull mugs of the navy-blue police. The foxy snouts of the szmalcownicy. The cruel faces of the Stalinists. The boorish snouts of March 1968. The terrified snouts of August 1980. The triumphant snouts of December 1981. Blaspheming Holy Polishness which dared to call itself the Christ of nations and gave birth to spies and denouncers, to careerists and obscurantists, to torturers and bribetakers, which exalted xenophobia and called it patriotism, while living at foreign expense, faithfully kissing the hands of tyrants. Indispensable. Blessed. Perhaps Poland would finally understand that villainy and saintliness are to be found in one house, here, too, on the Vistula, as in the whole of God's earth. (pp.127-8)

Czesław Miłosz in his *History of Polish Literature*:

To me the history of Poland and of its literature has always seemed extravagant and full of incongruities: a Slavic nation whose writers, up to the Renaissance, used only Latin; a huge state which, for centuries, stood up to the Teutons, Turkey, and Muscovy but owing to the abuse of its parliamentary system literally fell apart while its once weaker neighbors partitioned it and erased it from the map of Europe for some one hundred and twenty years; an astonishingly vital people who sink easily into moronic apathy and who show their virtues only in circumstances which would crush and destroy any other human group; a refinement of taste, which produced Iyrical poetry comparable to that of Elizabethan England, combined with irony and brilliance but always threatened by drunken torpor and parochial mumblings; habits of religious and political tolerance, acquired in the multidenominational and multinational *Respublica* headed by an elected king, which gave way, as a result of collective misfortunes, to a wounded, morbid nationalism; a country whose loyalties in this second half of the century are courted by two equally matched powers, the Communist Party and the Roman Catholic Church. This chaos of elements seemingly so disparate, yet interrelated by a logic of their own, may contain some lessons of universal portent.

It is tempting to see this duality as the product of the very specific conditions which formed the Polish political culture which, another paradox, while they equipped Poles to resist foreign domination and oppression, also inhibited the adoption of those attitudes and policies which are necessary to resolve the country's persistent political and economic crises.

These features have to be explained by the country's history. The 'noble democracy' which had characterised pre-partition Poland bequeathed important and

contradictory legacies to Polish political life. In spite of the existence of a large unfree and oppressed peasantry and a high level of social differentiation among the nobility, this 'noble democracy' was undoubtedly a genuine phenomenon. All members of the *szlachta* (nobility), which made up perhaps 8 per cent of the population, regarded themselves as entitled and indeed obliged to participate in political life, whether in the central parliament, the Sejm, in local parliaments (Sejmiki or dietines), or in the election of the monarch. 'Nic o nas bez nas' ('Nothing concerning us without our consent') ran a widely repeated Polish principle of Polish gentry parliamentarism. This meant that when Poland was partitioned, there was a fairly large group of influential people who bitterly resented the autocratic rule of the partitioning powers, Russia, Prussia and Austria, states to which concepts such as consultation with their subjects or government by consent were largely alien. Linked with the belief in the importance of political participation was the concept of national sovereignty - the nation may have been embodied and represented by its nobility, but it had its own laws, its own traditions, its own rights, which should be respected. In the words of Hugo Kołłątaj, one of the leading eighteenth-century political theorists and the advocate of a reformed gentry state:

That every nation be free and independent, that every nation should be allowed to embrace that form of government which it prefers and that no foreign nation is entitled to interfere in its constitutional development - this is the first and most important maxim of the law of nations, so evident in the light of our century that no proofs are needed to justify it. A nation which has no right to rule its own country is not a nation.

These gentry traditions of self-government were not specifically Polish. They were also strong in western Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom. But here, in conditions of national sovereignty, they led to the development of representative government and the extension of civil rights to all persons of property, not just landowners. In Poland, after

the loss of political independence, much of the nation's energies was directed to its reacquisition. Polish gentry traditions activated these energies and, as a consequence, can be seen as lying at the root of the seemingly indomitable Polish desire for independence and self-government which frequently manifested itself throughout the nineteenth century and which contributed in large measure to the re-establishment of an independent state in 1918 and to the ultimate collapse of the communist system.

But the political traditions created by the gentry inheritance were not all positive in their effects. In one respect, 'gentry democracy', with its egalitarianism, exemplified by the formula 'szlachcic na zagrodzie równy wojewodzie' ('a nobleman on his small estate is equal to a palatine') stressed individualism. An extreme form of this individualism was the *liberum veto*, the principle of unanimity which paralysed the old Polish Sejm. It can be argued that the *liberum veto* was not only the reflection of a desire to respect minority opinions, but also the result of the belief that a collective unanimity embodied a higher form of consensus. In Marcin Król's words, 'The place of individual non-conformism was taken by social non-conformism of the group, which no longer required from the individual the courage of his convictions, but often did require personal courage'. It could be argued that in Poland, respect for simple majority decisions and for opposition views tends to lead either to unanimity and intolerance of dissent, or to anarchy.

A significant consequence of the habit of perceiving the nation in terms of the collective will was the belief that once the will of the nation had been expressed, the rulers would have to concede to it. The illusion often inhibited any clear-sighted analysis of the balance of forces in any situation. A good example was the behaviour of the

Solidarity leadership in the run-up to the introduction of martial law. Criticism of their conduct of affairs was often seen as disloyal, and as collaboration with a deeply unpopular government, which by its actions had destroyed all vestiges of its political legitimacy. Similar taboos have characterized the discussions of Józef Poniatowski's politically suicidal loyalty to Napoleon in 1813, of the outbreak and conduct of the 1863 Insurrection, and of the political good sense of those who began the Warsaw uprising of 1944.

On the other hand, the restrained behaviour of the broad masses of the Polish people during the not infrequent uprisings of the last two centuries, including the 'Polish revolution' of 1980-1, may suggest that common sense and survival instinct, rather than the romantic ideas of the gentry and the intelligentsia, have guided their behaviour. The particular Polish predicament of a nation fighting desperately for the survival of its identity has meant, paradoxically, that the revolutionary spirit and readiness for sacrifice of its romantic insurrectionaries, and the denial to them by ordinary people of full support have both been a feature of Polish life.

The tradition of 'gentry democracy' was created in Poland before the development of capitalism and the liberal values bound up with it. This was to have serious consequences. In Andrzej Walicki's words:

Poland had not passed through the school of liberal individualism, had not developed such 'bourgeois' values as economic capacity and industriousness, self-reliance in economic life, thrift and so forth. Its elite remained faithful to the values characteristic of the nobility, such as honour, courage in open fight (as distinct from civil courage), freedom conceived as participation in political power; it did not pay much attention to the prosaic, down-to-earth concerns of private law and could hardly understand Napoleon's famous dictum that the essence of freedom is a good Civil Code.

These attitudes contributed greatly to the anti-industrial and anti-bourgeois attitudes which were a feature of the Polish political culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which inhibited the emergence of a successful entrepreneurial class and the achievement of self-sustaining economic growth.

Messianic romantic nationalism has been less dominant in Polish political culture in most recent times, but until 1918, its impact was both complex and potent. In the first place, the previous noble loyalty to the then no longer existing institutionalized forms of national life was superseded by loyalty to the national idea, which derived from national traditions and imposed on the nation its mission. In these circumstances, the nation ceased to be merely a group of citizens but became instead 'a community of spirits sharing a common destiny and realising a common task'. In the words of Adam Mickiewicz, the greatest of the Polish romantic poets, 'The Fatherland of the Poles is not a mere piece of land bound by frontiers which limit the national existence and activity of the Pole'. The elevated character of the national dream also contrasted starkly with the bleak reality of everyday life. In one sense, romantic nationalism can be seen as an attempt to bridge this gap between 'Holy Ideals and Prosaic Life'. Juliusz Słowacki, another of the great Polish romantic poets wrote, almost threateningly, that he would leave behind him a 'fatal force' of prophetic poetry, which 'itself invisible will crush you until you eaters-of-bread are made into angels'.

An important component of Polish romantic nationalism was its internationalism, which saw the Polish revolution as an integral part of the European revolution, and which stressed that Poles would fight everywhere *za waszą i naszą wolność* ('for your freedom and ours'). This internationalism was undoubtedly a noble sentiment, but it had a number

of deleterious consequences, which have persisted up to the present. It created among Poles an exaggerated belief in the willingness of the nations of the West to identify with the Polish struggle and to provide concrete aid in difficult situations, a view which was intensified by the Polish view that in the early modern period, they had defended the European heartland from Muslim invaders from the steppes and the Ottoman Empire. Conversely, when this aid was not forthcoming, it led to a feeling that the West in the pursuit of short-term interests had betrayed its own long-term values, was corrupted, and that the Poles alone were holding up the banner of these values. It was Mickiewicz who told the Polish refugees to France after the failure of the 1831 uprising to regard themselves while in the materialistic, mercantile West as ‘apostles among the idolaters’, pilgrims of freedom, precursors of a new era of Christian politics in Europe.

Romantic patriotic ideals were widely accepted by the educated classes in Poland. But they could not be put into practice or their espousal could have serious and unpleasant consequences. Most people faced with this dilemma created a division, acknowledging the authority of the partitioning powers in everyday life, for which no responsibility was felt and preserving what Jerzy Jedlicki has described as a patriotic ‘sanctuary . . . in the privacy of the home and heart’.

The insurrections of the nineteenth century all failed. This has created a cult of heroic failure, the belief that political actions should not be judged by whether they succeed, but by their moral impact. As Andrzej Bryk has written:

Modern Polish history has been a story of nearly consistent defeat and internal failure. A defeated people lives by myths, clings to myths. Apologetic and martyrological visions of national history only mirror an incurable romantic despair. Poles thus look at their history in terms of ‘honour’ versus ‘shame’ because categories of victory or national success are largely beyond the modern

Polish consciousness and any of the institutions which shape it. Honour seems to Poles the only reliable justification of the national existence.

This is not to say that the values of messianic romantic nationalism have gone unchallenged. Cyprian Norwid, one of the greatest Polish nineteenth century poets, on the eve of the disastrous uprising of 1863, contrasted 'Poland as a society' with 'Poland as a nation'. According to him, the Poles were second to none as a nation because their patriotism in crucial moments was unsurpassed; as a society they could not measure up to the countries of western Europe because they were deficient in the virtues of will and character indispensable to normal, everyday life. In his words:

This is Polish society! - this is the nation which is undeniably great so far as *patriotism* is concerned but which as a society represents nothing....
We are no *society* at all.
We are a great *national* banner.

This view was put in even more extreme form by Witold Gombrowicz, one of the greatest Polish writers of the twentieth century. He wrote in 1969:

There was something unhealthy, something perverted in our attitude to the world and I, as an artist, felt, in some measure, responsible for this fatal 'Polish legend'. I felt that one must somehow put an end to it. . . but how? The Poles, being a nation highly bound up in fantasies, illusions, phrases, legends, declamations, were also closed to that reality in *crudo, sans phrases*, which can break bones.... Only the sharpest realism could drag us out of the swamp of our 'legend'... [My goal was] to pry the Pole free of Poland, so that he would become simply a human being.

There were also political challenges to what I have set out as the dominant Polish paradigm. Even before the 1863 uprising, a movement developed in Russian Poland, modelled on Western positivism, which stressed the need to abandon romantic dreams and concentrate on realizable goals. Independence could not be obtained, and Polish society should concentrate rather on building up its economic strength by participating in the capitalist revolution which was now beginning to penetrate to the Tsarist Empire.

This would enable other unresolved problems, such as the status of the peasantry, of women and of the Jews to be dealt with in a civilized and liberal manner which would help establish the foundations of a civil society. Warsaw positivism gained greatly in influence as a result of the catastrophic failure of the 1863 Uprising and acquired many impressive advocates, including the writer Bolesław Prus and the political theorist Alexander Świętochowski, editor of the main positivist newspaper *Prawda*. But although a degree of industrialization was achieved, material gains seemed to many among the educated of little significance in the face of the increasingly repressive character of Tsarism in Poland. With the revival of nationalism in the 1890s, positivism came to seem little more than a servile and time-serving justification of alien rule.

But at the same, with this revival of nationalism, there emerged in Poland, under the ideological guidance of Roman Dmowski, a new challenge to romantic nationalism in the form of a Polish variant of the general European reaction against the dominant ideologies of liberalism and capitalism, which elsewhere produced thinkers like Corradini, Pareto, Gustave le Bon and Charles Maurras. Like its West European radical right-wing counterparts, this movement was strongly social-darwinist, seeing the nation as an organism fated to struggle against other national organisms to ensure its survival and development. In Dmowski's words:

The surface of the globe is not a museum to preserve ethnographic displays in order, unities each in its place. Humanity is going forward swiftly, and in the contest of the nations, each is bound to do as much as it can for progress, for civilisation, to raise the value of man...[Yet] the fact is that continual improvement and progress are not natural characteristics of man - the majority of today's population of the earth is standing still and not advancing at all. And the greatest factor in progress is competition, the need continually to improve the weapons which enable one to defend one's own existence...Is this a philosophy of struggle and oppression?...Perhaps. But what if this struggle and this oppression

are a reality, and universal peace and universal freedom a fiction...? One must have the courage to look the facts in the face.

Dmowski also set out a cogent critique of gentry romanticism which has been clearly expounded by Andrzej Walicki. To quote him:

1 Against an idealistic belief in justice he set the view that international relations are subject to severe laws of the struggle for survival and that it is stupid to believe in the final victory of the 'right cause', since the fate of any cause depends first of all on material forces.

2 Against 'political romanticism', that is, 'building political activity on purely illusory grounds' and 'embarking on political activity with no prior estimation of the means at disposal', he set a programme of 'political realism', with special stress on the difficult geopolitical situation of Poland.

3 Against such concepts as the 'national idea', national honour, or national glory, he set the concept of the national interest, emphasizing that each nation has a natural right to national egoism and that the brotherhood of nations is a naive illusion.

4 Finally, he offered a new, simple definition of nation which rejected both the old Polish tradition of defining nation in purely political terms, irrespective of ethnic criteria, and the romantic tradition of defining 'Polishness' in terms of certain spiritual values inherent in the national tradition and in the national mission. He thought of nations as the natural product of ethnic differentiation, defining them in terms of language and ethnic origin.

It was this definition of the nation which lay at the root of Dmowski's hostility to non-Polish groups within the borders of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In particular, he regarded the large Jewish community in Poland as unassimilable and a barrier to the creation of an organic national community. The National Democratic movement (Endecja - its followers were called Endecy), of which he was the main ideologist, became increasingly powerful in Poland, both before the First World War and in the inter-war period. The politicians who adhered to its views, whether in the National Party or in the various smaller fascist groups which seceded from it, never succeeded in establishing themselves in power, although an increasing section of Polish society had

accepted their view of the world by 1939. Their influence diminished somewhat in the post-1945 era, both because of communist repression and because of the general compromising of radical right wing views as a result of the fascist experience in Europe. There have been a number of attempts to revive this tradition of Polish political realism both with, and more generally without, its anti-semitic component. Indeed, the Polish People's Republic - mono-ethnic and mono-religious, anti-German and allied with Russia - bears a striking resemblance to Dmowski's blueprint for the future of Poland as set out in *Myśli nowoczesnego Polaka* (Thoughts of a Modern Pole, L'viv, 1903). His idea of 'political realism' was embraced wholeheartedly by Polish communists during and after World War II. This was especially evident in the policies and attitudes of their more national-oriented wing, led by Władysław Gomułka. The new western borders and the satisfactory outcome of the Polish-Soviet confrontation in October 1956 have been its greatest successes and major influences on the modern political culture in Poland. Dmowski's political ideas have also been popularized in the form of the neo-Endek views of the Catholic publicist Andrzej Micewski and by the explicitly National Democratic group of Alexander Hall.

The imperatives of running a state in the inter-war period caused a diminution in the appeal of romantic and insurrectionary political views. But they gained a new strength in the conditions of brutal Nazi and Soviet occupation after 1939. The Polish underground state, one of the largest and best organized anti-Nazi resistance movements in Europe, drew much of its inspiration from these traditions. They were given a further lease of life by the imposition after 1944 of an unpopular and unrepresentative communist regime, ultimately controlled by Poland's historical foe. Indeed in the

post-war years, political romanticism gained significant new adherents. But it has lost many more as a result of such brutal lessons in political realism as the Yalta agreements, the disastrous outcome of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, the domestic impact of continuous communist rule for two generations and the international implications of the Soviet-American parity in nuclear arms. Yet the influence of 'dreams', 'myths' and other similar syndromes of the romantic tradition remains powerful in post-war Poland. It will be interesting to see how it fares in the conditions of independence and the need to establish a pluralistic and market-based society.

One of the reasons for the dominance of romantic-nationalist modes in Polish social life was the way a new social formation, the intelligentsia, established itself as the opinion-forming part of society in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the gradual eclipse of the social and economic hegemony of the *szlachta*. The intelligentsia in Poland, as in other relatively under-developed countries, was a separate culturally homogeneous stratum made up of those possessing academic secondary education. As the sociologist Maria Hirszowicz has pointed out, the intelligentsia did not exist as a separate stratum in western Europe 'where the educated strata were from the start fragmented by serving different classes and institutions. In conditions of a rapidly developing economy ...[the] emergence of political parties and the expansion of public and private services, educated people were to be found everywhere, wherever general knowledge and specialised training were necessary: their status was determined primarily by the prestige of the professions they pursued and the positions which they occupied in the political and social structures.' As she notes:

In Russia and in Poland the situation was completely different: the practical applications of education were limited by the backwardness of social and

economic life, while at the same time the advance of progress and the desire for social change manifested themselves primarily in the realms of culture, ideology, and social and political thought. The cultural heritage of the Enlightenment, the belief in progress, the budding movements of the working masses, and national aspirations reflected themselves in the East in the new mood of the educated elites, who resented their marginal position and aspired to the function of spiritual leadership. In partitioned Poland the importance of the national problem enhanced the leadership functions of the educated stratum: the Polish intelligentsia became the major force in preserving national traditions, developing national identity and cultivating the idea of national independence.

After 1863 the Polish intelligentsia replaced the nobility as the leading stratum in Polish society – indeed its claim that it was entitled to ‘lead the nation’ was in fact a modernised version of similar noble claims. It became not only the principal standard-bearer of the Polish national idea but one of the principal sources of the almost schizophrenic attitude to what Karl Polanyi has referred to as the ‘long revolution’, the widespread expansion in the nineteenth century of societies based on the two principles of market capitalism and constitutional government. The Polish intelligentsia was bitterly conscious, both of its own isolation and weakness and the backward character of social and political relations in Poland. In the words of Andrzej Walicki:

It saw itself as part of the world of European culture, but a somewhat underprivileged part, since its learning, development and social advancement were hampered in every possible way. It regarded its own country as a poor and neglected suburb of Europe, a suburb that looked at the Metropolis with contradictory feelings of envy, admiration and distrust—and sometimes with sincere or feigned contempt for the West’s corrupt values and false glitter.

This curious combination of collective inferiority complex and national megalomania which was to compensate for it, seems typical of the educated strata of peripheral countries. It is difficult and painful to accept one’s own country’s peripheral status in the framework of a supranational civilization, and yet without such a recognition, no realistic program of development may be formulated.

In inter-war Poland, the intelligentsia became more stratified and fragmented and began to lose the special role which it had claimed for itself. One might have expected

this process to have continued at an accelerated pace under the communists, who introduced a programme of rapid industrialization and mass education which not only greatly increased the size of the intelligentsia, but opened up for it a much wider range of employment possibilities. To quote Maria Hirszowicz again:

the development of communist Poland between 1945 and 1980 brought about the rise of a 'new intelligentsia', which was closely linked to the establishment, serving the authorities as administrators, managers, professionals, teachers and doctors. There were reasons to believe that the new intelligentsia was on the way to merging with the Party state bureaucracy in a process which could be described as the bureaucratization of the intelligentsia and the professionalization of the bureaucracy.

Yet as the economic and political crisis deepened in the last years of Gierek's rule, the ethos of the old Polish intelligentsia, which had seemed moribund, revived and assumed a new and vigorous life. The intensified political and cultural activity of the intelligentsia, which affected wide groups of people and extended over the whole country, was one of the main factors which led to the emergence and success of Solidarity. It was characteristic that the demands of the intelligentsia did not focus in these years on their sectional or material interests but expressed, in a quite traditional fashion, the demands and aspirations of society, or, perhaps more accurately, of the nation as a whole. It has only been since the collapse of the communist system that the intelligentsia has begun to lose its dominant role and to be replaced by something like a Western middle class.

3. Themes

a. Emergence of modern nations on area of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

- b. Undermining of the hegemony of the *szlachta*; the other social groups which made up Polish society. Peasant societies and their politics.
- c. Impact of the 'great transformation' on an economically and politically backward area
- d. Impact on Poland of totalitarian ideologies of twentieth century

4. How we will study the subject

- a. lectures
- b. sections
- c. essays and final exam
- d. web-site

5. Books