Polish Immigration to America: The Complicated History of Poland that Led to Mass Exodus

Bella Dragon

Major Department: History

Introduction

For over a century the United States has been viewed as the world's melting pot, a country where immigrants from across the globe can come to seek safety and economic security. One of the largest Anglo-European immigrant groups in the United States is the Polish American community, with an estimated 3 million Polish Americans living in America today (Nation of Polania, Library of Congress). The Polish people, who are no stranger to discomfort, have an often unstable relationship with their homeland, stemming from involvement in WWII and centuries of economic insecurity. When their homeland had become incompatible with a functional life, many decided to pursue the highly sought after "American dream." An understanding of the complicated history of Poland is integral to a comprehensive view of Polish immigrants and their subsequent culture within America. Centuries of instability in Poland led to a mass exodus of Polish citizens from their homeland. Many came to America in an attempt to secure stability in their Polish culture. Understanding the complex history of Poland plays an integral role in also understanding the trend of Polish immigration to America.

Poland: The Early History

The land known today as the country of Poland was first occupied by Slavic tribes in the 10th century. Their leader, Duke Mieszko I married Doubravka, the princess of Bohemia. This union was seen to symbolically represent the formation of the country of Poland as we know it. Miescko was baptized into the Catholic Church, putting the country under the pope's scope of authority. This immediate tie with the Catholic Church would spawn a long-lasting and extremely intermingled relationship between Poland and the Church. Though Mieszko I is viewed as the founder of Poland and the one to introduce Christian beliefs into Poland's values, it was eventually Bolesław I Mieszko's son who was the one to build Poland up into a thriving country. He led the acquisition of land in Pomerania and Lusatia, which are now both parts of current-day Poland and Germany. He also separated the Polish church from Germany's control. This allowed Poland, in 1025, to become a major European state. These two great leaders represent the start of the Piast dynasty in Polish royalty. For several centuries. Poland was left alone to build their economy.

In 1386, there was a major shift throughout Eastern Europe. In that year, “the last pagan ruler of Lithuania, Jogaila, married the child queen of Poland, Jadwiga, then in her early teens.” (Rohac, Foreign Policy) This marriage tied Poland and Lithuania and also united sections of what is known today as Ukraine and Belarus. This meant that a majority of Eastern Europe and some of Kyivan Rus were now within the Catholic Church of Western Christianity. This union also solved the immediate threat that they all faced: Teutonic knights. The Teutonic Knights were an order of German Christian soldiers, or mercenaries, who, during the time of Jogaila’s rule over Poland, were intent on taking over Eastern Lithuania and claiming more land for the German-Christian order. In 1410 these knights were defeated by Polish-Lithuanian soldiers, in a swift battle near the border of eastern Lithuania. Though all seemed well in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Jogaila (Władysław II) and his wife Jadwiga were unable to have children. This threatened to end their dynasty. With these concerns in mind, Władysław II sought to bestow new privileges to the *szlachta* (his noblemen.) This action effectively created the first monarchical democracies in Europe. Later Władysław II did have male children with his 5th wife, yet the system still prioritized the noblemen’s input. Władysław’s sons went on to rule both Lithuania and Poland, conquering more land and expanding the commonwealth as well as Polish-Christian beliefs along the way. Under this great dynasty (Jagiellonian) things remained about the same until the early 1500s.

The Jagiellonian dynasty retained power, though Poland began to struggle financially and economically. In the late 1400s, Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, and Hungary were all ruled by descendants of Władysław II. This division did not breed a thriving commonwealth, instead “A Jagiellonian bloc had come into existence, but its effectiveness was marred by the fact that the four countries were guided by divergent interests and faced different problems.” (Bolesław I, Brittanica) Even though the Jagiellonian dynasty seemed to have taken over, there were struggles among the countries that could not be tamed or swept under the rug. The youngest of Władysław II's descendants, Sigismund the Old (reigning 1506-48), saw this problem and became determined to resolve the instability he saw around him. In the long run, he found that he did not have a lot to work with, as there wasn’t a cohesive financial system within the country and their army was too small to exert Poland’s power. Following Bolesław’s reign, his son Sigismund II Augustus, who reigned 1548-72, sat on the throne, and like his father before him, attempted to make real political change and to fix the growing financial crisis. The struggle between an oligarchy and a dynamic gentry was a major theme during both of these men's reigns. An

“oligarchy” refers to when a country is controlled by a select few, maybe a king and his few advisors. A “dynamic gentry” alludes to a more democratic system including a broader span of powerful people in the country (noblemen.) Under the respective Sigismunds, the government leaned towards an oligarchical way of ruling, causing the gentry of Poland to fight for their inclusion. At this time, however, there was still the operation of the Polish legislature, the Sejm. First meeting in 1493, the Sjem consisted of two houses and would make official decisions on major political issues. An example of this would be the Nihil Novi constitution of 1505, which declared that no major new laws could be passed unless they gained the approval of the Sejm. Though this parliament was a rudimentary democratic system, this allowed only wealthy landowners and other noble Szlachta to assert dominance. This new gap was heightened when the masses of impoverished peasants grew, creating an impractical living environment for those citizens of Poland affected.

The Jagiellonian bloc was dismantled. Sigismund II was childless, and in the mid-late 1500s, the concern of a continued Polish-Lithuanian alliance loomed large over Sigismund. From this came the Union of Lublin in 1569, which “tied together the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, creating the so-called Commonwealth of Both Nations, characterized by a single monarch, a common parliament, and one currency.” Though these two countries had been allies for over a century, they had retained separate kings and held slightly opposing views. They also had different laws and local governments. One of the biggest risks in aligning these two countries was the topic of religion. In Lithuania, there was a majority of Orthodox Christians as well as Catholic Christians. Lithuania feared the demonizing of Orthodox believers by the stringent Catholic Poland. Other religious movements were also emerging, Lutheranism and Calvinists among them. Because of these considerations and concerns, religious tolerance was written into law in the Compact of Warsaw in the year 1573.

The 17th century brought war and conflict to Poland. Among famines and epidemics, there were ongoing battles with other countries. Examples include the 30 years war, the Polish-Turkish War, as well as a myriad of other wars in Eastern Europe involving Poland. “The productivity of agriculture diminished dramatically owing to labor shortages, the destruction of many farm buildings and farming implements, and the loss of numerous cattle. The dynamic network of international trade fairs also collapsed. Grain exports, which had reached their peak in the early 17th century, could not redress the unfavorable balance of trade with Western Europe.” (Krzysztof, Britannica) The commonwealth was weakened and it seemed like it could

not be rebuilt. For most of the 18th century, Poland passed from king to king, with little to no economic or cultural growth. The great divide between the peasantry and the nobles became wider. In 1764, the last king of Poland began his reign, Stanisław II August Poniatowski. He was chosen by Catherine the Great of Russia because he was her lover. She also picked him as Poland's king because she believed that he would have full dependency on her, allowing her to weaken Poland from within. The conservative Szlachta viewed Stanisław as a puppet of the Czartoryskich in Russia, which meant that from the beginning of his reign, his legacy was doomed to fail. With some charm and big talk, he was able to win over much of the szlachta, but that did not last long. (Bolesław I, Britannica) Stanisław did not possess a strong inclination for military prowess and he did not have a strong personality that impressed the Polish legislation and even her citizens. Leading up to the late 1700s, Poland was experiencing a constant reshuffling of different leaders, and changing of borders. Unfortunately, it was the common people of Poland who were most impacted by these ongoing political and economic struggles. Since Poland's inception began with the birth of a new dynasty (Piast) and continued with debate over who should rule Poland, Polish citizens experienced extreme poverty at the hands of their revolving door of leadership. This gap between peasants and noblemen continued to widen until catastrophe hit in late 1795.

Immigration Begins

Crucial to understanding the motivations for the first wave of Polish immigration to America is the historical context of that particular time. By 1795, Poland ceased to exist as an independent country and was partitioned between the Austrian Habsburg Empire, the Russian Empire, and the Kingdom of Prussia. The division of the once flourishing Poland was complete. The three powers started to denationalize the Polish people by banning the speaking of Polish, banning Polish church services, and separating communities across partitioned borders. During the 123 years that Poland did not exist as an independent country, but as a broken land governed by three different powers, the Polish people, instead of being assimilated to their ruling cultures, were brought closer together by a strong sense of Polish national and cultural identity. One article outlining the history of Poland stated that "The survival of the Polish nation, which during the 19th century absorbed the peasant masses, was due in no small degree to a culture that continued to be all-Polish and dedicated to the Roman Catholic Church, whose role in

maintaining “Polishness” was very important.” (Krzysztof, Britannica) A nationwide belief in the Roman Catholic Church was an integral connector between the separated Polish people, by finding each other in shared religious values. No matter this strong movement towards preserving Polish identity, living conditions in Poland had become completely deplorable, especially for the majority peasant population. Faced with desperation and a lack of resources, the first wave of Polish immigrants left for America. When these large groups of majority Catholic Polish immigrants arrived in the United States, they continued to rely on their shared belief in the Roman Catholic Church. Tending to live in small Polish sub-communities within many American cities and towns, the Polish built churches to keep their new Polish American communities together. These communities became the blueprint for any future Polish immigrants who came to the United States. In the following centuries, hundreds of thousands more Poles arrived in America welcomed by these already established Polish-American communities.

Wartime Immigration

During World War II, most of Europe found itself involved. Poland, from the very beginning, was intensely involved with the inner workings of the Second World War. Before World War II even broke out internationally, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler had his eyes on Poland. He surmised that ethnic Germans were being persecuted in Poland, and once he had addressed Poland he gave them no time and fired on their country, claiming that Poland had fired first, yet “Those attacks were not launched by Poland, however, but were carefully choreographed operations stage-managed by the Nazi propaganda machine as a pretext for an invasion. In the border town of Gleiwitz, S.S. operatives donned Polish military uniforms and seized one of Germany’s own radio stations and broadcast an anti-Nazi message in Polish.” (History.com) This attack forced Poland’s permanent involvement in the war.

A couple weeks prior to the start of World War Two, Germany took occupation of Poland. Additionally, the Soviet Union occupied land as well. Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a nonaggression pact, agreeing that neither country could invade the other for ten years. A crucial stipulation in this pact allowed for “the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact contained a secret protocol specifying the spheres of influence in Eastern Europe both parties would accept after Hitler conquered Poland. The Soviet Union would acquire the eastern half of Poland, along with Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia.”

(History.com) This now gave Hitler a clear path to invading Poland. Many rural border towns were affected by German occupation, and many Polish citizens were shipped out to concentration camps in Germany. Once the Allied powers had won, and Germany was defeated in May of 1945, Polish citizens in German concentration camps were released. However, they realized that their homeland was not compatible with repatriation. Thus began the second wave of Polish immigrants to America. The Polish Catholic Church had many cathedrals and churches around the United States. There were also many willing host families who brought new immigrants into their homes so they could adjust, find work, and find homes of their own. Polish families learned to speak English by living with their American host families, and children learned by playing in their neighborhoods. Because of these pre-existent Polish churches and large Polish American communities, wartime immigrants found some solace in America. However, this did not mean that all was well in Poland for those still living there. Post-WWII Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union, leading to forced communist economic policies and further decades of chaos and oppression.

Poland Under Martial Law

In 1980, Polish citizens began to revolt against the Polish communist government, leading to a constant struggle between the government and the people. In 1981, all the strife came to a head and Poland's Prime Minister General Jarulzelski pronounced martial law in all of Poland. The Guardian reported on this event on the following day: "Yesterday, Poland gripped in winter cold, and, be calmed by shock, remained relatively quiet. Largely isolated from the outside world, with communications cut and borders sealed, the information that did get out suggested that there was little resistance as party militia rather than army units were used to swoop on dozens of Solidarity offices throughout the country, arresting many of the union's activists. About one thousand Poles from various political groups were interned, the government spokesman disclosed." (The Guardian, 1981) The state of martial law turned Poland into a dictatorship. The objective of this martial law was to put an end to the Solidarity Party, which was a populist political group whose goal was to uplift the common man. The party advocated for worker's unions, championed anti-authoritarianism, and worked towards social change. Although the Polish people were not surprised when martial law was enacted, they did lose some faith in their nation's government. The Solidarity movement, however, did not back down in the

face of such a challenge. Instead, they worked to strengthen their beliefs and unite their people in hope. Once martial law was lifted on July 22, 1983, the Polish people had returned to some semblance of freedom, however, the communist-led party was still in control of the country. Between 1983 and 1989, the Polish people fought for their complete independence, until 1989 when the non-communist Sejm granted independence to Poland. In Poland's 1989 elections, tensions were high regarding who would take control of the Sejm. Prior to 1989, martial law had been enacted by the Polish communist-led party, creating an almost unbearable living environment for many citizens, especially those in urban areas. The Non-communist Solidarity Party won the majority in the Sejm. This spurred the independence of Poland, only after about a decade of constant riots and protests all over the country.

The Third and Final Wave of Immigration

Poland's newfound independence did not keep Poland's citizens in their homeland. Instead, it spurred a new wave of immigration to America. The unfortunate outcome of the of communist rule and the remnants of martial law was an impoverished country with a failing economy. Met with a lack of employment, limited access to land, and an insurmountable chasm between the poor and the rich, many citizens found it difficult to live comfortably or even survive. This spurred on the third and final wave of Polish immigrants to the United States. This wave of immigrants also found themselves welcomed by the already vibrant Polish American communities, just as the previous wave of immigrants had found, making the transition seamless from Poland to America. Combining old established Polish American families with newly arrived Polish immigrants, created a network of Polish culture within the United States. Though Poland has been unstable since the 10th century, the Polish people proved their resilience by forming a strong Polish community all throughout the United States and beyond.

Conclusion

It is incredibly difficult to pinpoint one event that sparked the instability of Poland. All through Poland's inception by a Slavic tribe claiming the land where modern Poland now exists, through its years of communist rule, there are many events that came together and created a constant feeling of insecurity among the Polish people. It is evident that this instability led to

millions of Poles leaving for America. Because of the wide gap between the rich royals, wealthy members of the Sejm, and the majority peasant population in Poland, for over a century a majority of Polish citizens did not have sustainable living conditions. Political and economic instability plays a major role in how the majority of a country's citizens are treated, and how they live. In analyzing the history, it becomes clear how unstable the economy in Poland was and has been, leading to 3 million people leaving their homeland. Through communist occupations, ties with Lithuania, “disappearance” for 123 years, and a revolving door of unequipped leaders; with poor working conditions, lack of employment, and a cavernous wage gap, life in Poland for the average citizen became unbearable for many people. This environment led to the forced migration of millions of Polish.

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