

# History of Poland

Polish history began in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century when the tribe of Polians ('dwellers of the field') obtained hegemony over other local tribes. Their principal dynasty of Piast accepted Christianity in 966. Polish borders underwent changes over the years, as parts of countries such as Ukraine and Lithuania formed part of the Kingdom. With the main line of the Piast dynasty ending in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a number of royal alliances with Lithuania, Hungary and Sweden were forged. No dynasty maintained itself for long due to civil wars and unrest.

In 1655 Charles X of Sweden overran Poland, while Tsar Alexis of Russia attacked from the east. John III Sobieski temporarily restored Polish greatness, but with his death Poland virtually ceased to be an independent country. Three partitions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the disappearance of Poland from the map for 123 years. Poland was declared an independent republic in 1918, when the First World War ended. Polish administration was established and Józef Piłsudski became the chief of state. Reconstruction of the economy and society began.

In September 1939 Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany from the west and by the USSR from the east. Great masses of people fled to the eastern border, many were deported later by the Soviets to Siberia and other distant republics. Concentration and labour camps were set up by German authorities on the Polish territory and were used to exterminate millions of people from all over Europe. Polish people with labouring skills were deported to Germany, often to die of exhaustion and malnourishment; others were subject to methodical extermination. The invaders didn't restrict their eradication to people - more than 90% of the pre-war industrial installations were destroyed. The capital city, Warsaw, had to be built totally anew. Polish prisoners of war in the USSR were allowed to form military units and fought with distinction alongside the Allies. Early in 1945 the last German troops were expelled from Poland. Poland's population was reduced from 27 million before the war to just over 19 million.

After the Second World War, some of the former German territories came under Polish sovereignty. Poland's frontier with the USSR was also shifted westward. A number of Polish-background people living in Australia speak several languages, i.e. Russian, German, Ukrainian, Yiddish or Lithuanian and are of diverse cultural and religious persuasions. Not all people born in Poland consider themselves Polish and many Poles were born outside the current Polish borders. It is recommended that issues of religion, cultural and national identities be treated with sensitivity – it is best not to assume but ask the person concerned instead.

Poland became a "people's democracy" based on the Soviet model. Land reform, nationalisation of industry and enthusiastic work of Polish people gradually improved living conditions. The People's Republic was established in 1947. The government's strict control was eased with the death of the Soviet leader, Stalin, in 1953.

In December 1970 an outbreak of strikes and demonstrations led to a wave of civil unrest. In 1981 the country was paralysed by a number of national strikes caused by the worsening shortages of food. Self-governing unions were formed under the guidance of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), led by Lech Wałęsa. Martial law was imposed in 1981.

In 1989 the country became the Republic of Poland, when the National Assembly approved the change of name. The elections of May 1990 were the first fully free and democratic elections for more than 50 years.



**Australian-Polish  
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