

Solidarity and Strength: Poland's Saga with Russia

By Emily Hausheer

Poland, a land known for delightful cuisine such as kielbasa and pierogi. Famous names such as Kosciuszko, Lech Walesa, John Paul II and Chopin come to mind. Another prominent Polish feature is the struggle between two great powers of the Slavic world- Russia and Poland. At different times throughout history, one of these nations would dominate.

Poland was once a great power which dominated Europe. Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and vast parts of western Russia and Germany all were held under Polish rule. The "Rzeczpospolita" was feared for its "winged hussars" cavalry who wore wings on their horses. Poland was the only country to conquer Russia with exception of the Mongol Empire. Poland and Russia have been two warring powers both militarily and politically since the Middle Ages, large parts of Western Russia were at periods controlled by Poland.

Eventually the Rzeczpospolita was weakened from within due to political turmoil, and growing aggressive neighbors- Russia, Prussia and Austria partitioned Poland. Poland never yielded to its occupiers and rebelled constantly throughout the 19th century. After 123 years of being partitioned, Poland was reunited after World War I. The Soviets and Nazis conquered Poland in 1939, after the defeat of the Nazis the Soviets occupied Poland for 40 years. Poland staged the Solidarność Revolution, and became the first country to break free from the Soviet Bloc. After regaining its freedom, Poland has had one of the most stable economies in the EU and became the master of alliances.

National Mythology plays a strong role in the psychology of a nation. Nations like people all have unique circumstances. America had its city on a hill, France has their Marianne the French lady of liberty, and Poland the savior of the nations.

Like the idea of "American Exceptionalism" Poland has an idea of "Polish Exceptionalism." In the United States, there is a strong idea that we are God's chosen nation, a shining "city on a hill" that must stand before the world as an image of opportunity. This gave rise of the idea of the American Dream, which has diminished in modern times with the high rates of youth poverty and unemployment. The American Dream represented a time when we had hope, and something that we lost and want to strive for again. America is not unique in having an "ideal" view of the nation, every nation in history has a "dream" and an ideal. When Americans suffered, the Puritans largely believed it was God's judgement and we must get right with God. This idea of suffering and dreaming is not unique to America. Poland, like America, sees itself as a "city on a hill" but instead of using these famous words, Polish nationalists during the Romantic Era claimed they were the "Christ of the nations." These nationalists believed through Poland's suffering the world will be saved. The Romantic Era coincidentally fell within the 123 years of

history where Poland was held under foreign domination. Poland holds a special place in protecting Catholicism and the Western World. Like the “American Dream” this idea has fallen out of date. Poland is now in the top quarter of wealthiest nations (although they still share much of the struggles plaguing the rest of the developed world) and has one of the strongest militaries in Europe. The “Polish dream” however still plays a part in Polish Conservative parties such as Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) known in English as Law and Justice.

Law and Justice, whom I shall refer to as PiS for the rest of this article, is a conservative political party in Poland. It was founded by twins Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. The Kaczyński twins were members of Solidarność and allies of Lech Wałęsa. Eventually they had a fallout with Lech Wałęsa, who referred to the twins as being toxic people. The Kaczyński Twins have sought revenge against Wałęsa ever since, which included publishing documents framing Wałęsa as a communist era informer. Wałęsa has denied the charges, but the Kaczyńskis insisted there must be more investigation. Wałęsa and his allies are a part of the Civic Platform Party, which was in power from 2010-2015. Donald Tusk, the president of the European Parliament is also a part of this party which supports social conservative policies. Currently PiS has control over the presidency and a supermajority in the Sejm (Congress.) Both parties have their own controversy within Poland, but this article will examine the current government’s dealings with Russia. While Civic Platform favors the European Union, and believes the European Union will help against Russia. PiS does not place as high of value in the EU. It is very important to acknowledge that both Civic Platform and PiS are anti-Russian parties.

Lech Kaczyński in particular, has taken a very solid stance against the Kremlin. When Russia invaded Georgia, Kaczyński personally flew down to Georgia to make a speech against the Kremlin. Kaczyński’s pilots insisted it was too dangerous to land, but Kaczyński insisted they had to land. While in Georgia Kaczyński declared “today it is Georgia, tomorrow it will be Ukraine.” Kaczyński promised Georgia that Poland will make sure that Russian domination never comes to place.

Lech Kaczyński was elected president of Poland in 2005. He was determined to secure Poland’s place in the world. Kaczyński helped arrange a missile shield treaty with the United States, which President Obama backtracked on. Obama happened to backtrack on the anniversary of the Ribbentrop-Molotov invasion of Poland. Obama was unaware of the historical and cultural significance of this date, but Poland took great offense. In Poland, dates and history are held very seriously. The Ribbenstop-Molotov Pact divided Poland between the German Nazis and the Soviet Communists. This resulted in numerous human rights violations that both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union committed while they were occupying Poland. One of the most noticeable crimes was that of the Katyń Forest Massacre.

A group of over 22,000 Polish officials were secretly massacred by Stalin in 1941. The Nazis discovered the mass graves during their invasion of the Soviet Union. Poland’s Prime Minister in Exile, Władysław Sikorski caught news of this crime. Sikorski alerted Winston Churchill, who was afraid to bring the issue up to Stalin because they needed Stalin’s help to defeat Hitler.

Sikorski took matters into his own hands and raised awareness of the massacre. This became very personal for Sikorski since many of his own friends were among those murdered in Katyń. Sikorski called on the International Red Cross to investigate the massacre, and proved to be an obnoxious pain for Stalin. Sikorski started receiving threatening phonecalls about his “death in a plane crash” Sikorski laughed this off as somebody getting the wrong information. On July 4th 1943, Sikorski’s plane plunged into the Mediterranean Sea. The causes of this crash are still a controversy today. After the fall of the Soviet Union, more documents were released revealing Stalin’s order to commit genocide against the Polish people.

Lech Kaczyński gave a speech to commemorate the Katyn massacre, that he never delivered due to his own death in a crash but the speech reads

The most tragic station on that path was Katyn. Polish officers, priests, officials, police officers, border and prison guards were killed without a trial or sentence. They fell victims to an unspeakable war. Their murder was a violation of the rights and conventions of the civilized world. Their dignity as soldiers, Poles and people, was insulted. Pits of death were supposed to hide the bodies of the murdered and the truth about the crime forever. The world was supposed to never find out. The families of the victims were deprived of the right to mourn publicly, to proudly commemorate their relatives. Ground covered the traces of crime and the lie was supposed to erase it from people’s memory. In attempt to hide the truth about Katyn – a result of a decision taken by those who masterminded the crime – became one of the foundations of the communists’ policy in an after-war Poland: a founding lie of the People’s Republic of Poland. It was the time when people had to pay a high price for knowing and remembering the truth about Katyn. However, the relatives of the murdered and other courageous people kept the memory, defended it and passed it on to next generations of Poles. They managed to preserve the memory of Katyn in the times of communism and spread it in the times of free and independent Poland. Therefore, we owe respect and gratitude to all of them, especially to the Katyn Families.¹

The Katyn Forest Massacre to this day is a sore spot between Poland and Russia, PiS in particular wants revenge against Russia for past human rights violations during the Soviet Union days. Kaczyński’s speech though echoes a tone of forgiveness, which is uncharacteristic of other Kaczyński speeches. Kaczyński closed the speech with “We Christians know it very well: truth, however painful it might be, sets us free. It connects us. It brings justice with it. Truth guides us on the road to reconciliation.” This powerful speech failed to close the wound between Poland and Russia. Kaczyński’s plane attempted to land in the thick fog of Smolensk, and what happened from here remains a controversy. Many believe it was just a tragic accident, and the succeeding investigations confirmed the crash appears to be a tragic accident. However, PiS and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Lech’s twin brother, believe that Putin and Russia orchestrated this entire crash to destroy Kaczyński and Poland. President Andrzej Duda also believes there needs to be

¹ Lech Kaczyński “the Last Speech.” 2010. <http://www.prezydent.pl/en/archive/news-archive/news-2010/art,12,125,freedom-and-truth.html>

more investigation, but he appears annoyed at the politicizing of it. Duda said that "Today we owe them this kind of unity in face of what happened then. ... We owe them a fair and calm investigation of what happened then, without political wrangling." ²

Duda, is a very ambitious Polish leader who came to the scene recently. He was a close advisor and friend of Lech Kaczyński . After the Smolensk crash, many of Andrzej Duda's friends believed that he died in the plane crash. Duda was not on that plane, but did travel to Smolensk afterwards to identify the bodies. Duda is known to have a strong sense of loyalty, and feels it is his duty to carry on the twins' legacy. The Bloomberg website recalls that a few days before Lech Kaczyński's death, Kaczyński told Duda that somebody needed to take his place someday. Duda took these words to heart and promised he will make Kaczyński proud. Duda is also one of the most vocal NATO leaders. President Obama agreed to give Poland the missile shield, as well as American troops stationed in Poland. Duda also has persuaded each NATO head of state to give him some control over their armies in case of a threat. Not only to Poland, but a threat to the Baltic States. Duda has ambition to change history, and is known to be a man of strong faith-which would attract support in the Evangelical United States, and Duda knows it. Andrzej Duda is not afraid to speak his mind because he has repeatedly said that he must always speak the truth regardless of the consequences. He does not shy away from repeatedly sassing Russia's President Vladimir Putin, much to the annoyance of Russia. At the Atlantic Council forum, Andrzej Duda called out Putin by saying "this threat name is the violation of human dignity and international law. The threat of force is greater than the threat of law, we can see this in Eastern Ukraine we are also seeing this in Syria." Duda continues and says "what threatens Europe today is neither a particular state or a particular nation. Its the policy of a certain state [Russia] which results in the violation of international law. Poland, just like the whole of Europe, does not seek to isolate Russia."

Duda is more vocal in international affairs than he appears to be in domestic. At the Munich Security Conference in 2016, Duda said "our goal is to establish more NATO bases in our part of Europe." Duda got exactly what he wanted at the end of 2016. Duda continued and said "these are the problems of the whole free world, Russia's imperial ambitions." Like previous Polish presidents, Duda has made frequent usage of words such as "solidarity." The following year in 2017's Munich Conference, Duda again asserted a position of actively pushing for a change in world affairs when he compared leaders who were sitting idle to "the aristocracy during the French Revolution. The winds of political change could be felt throughout the Western World, the political elites should not try to stop this change because its inevitable, on the contrary they should turn to engaging it." Duda also inserted "I also want to see us [our allies] as a union, not as a group of separate countries." Poland wants to shape world affairs which is also apparent in their nomination to become part of the UN Security Council. Poland actively wanted to end the war in Georgia, and now wants to lead NATO into intervening in the war in Ukraine. Duda loudly calls for sanctions against Russia, and refuses to stop speaking about the war in Ukraine. Duda also repeatedly calls for Ukraine to come to NATO meetings and partake as one of the

² Andrzej Duda « Fair Investigation" 2016. <http://www.prezydent.pl/en/news/art,142,fair-investigation-needed-into-smolensk-air-crash.html>

NATO and EU members. The world may soon become divided based on who is loyal to Russia and who is loyal to Poland. These two nations which have been arguing for 1,000 years will continue to shape the world.

When compared with the Baltic States, and Ukraine, Poland is in a position of strength. Poland knows exactly what they are doing with their alliances and should not be overlooked but the world must acknowledge them for what they are- a developed nation getting increasingly active and vocal in world affairs. It would be in our best interest as a nation to maintain our alliance with Poland, and allow visa free travel, more cooperation and more exchange of culture. Due to their strategic location and long vocal history, it would be beneficial for the United States to keep a better eye on what is going on.

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