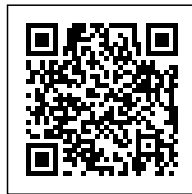


WHY POLAND MATTERS

Posted on November 1, 2020 by Arkady Rzegocki



The year 2020 is a memorable year in many respects. It is the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw, that decisive battle of the 1920 Polish-Soviet war during which the Polish armed forces defeated the Red Army's advance westwards. Such was its importance that [Lord Edgar Vincent D'Abernon](#), the then British Ambassador to Berlin and member of the [Interallied Mission to Poland](#), called it the "Eighteenth most decisive battle in the world." It was a crucial battle that stopped Bolshevik expansion, for what was at stake was not only Poland's sovereignty but also Europe's. As Pope Benedict XV wrote at the time: "Not only Poland's national existence is in danger, but also all of Europe is threatened with the atrocities of a new war."

The year 2020 is also the fortieth anniversary of the [Solidarity movement](#). First formed in August 1980 by labour workers in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk, Solidarity was the largest social movement in the world that, through civil resistance, advocated workers' rights, and led to the toppling of the communist regime in Poland. It was the first civil rights movement in any Warsaw Pact country and inspired the formation of similar civil societies throughout the Eastern Bloc.

The year 2020 is also the centenary of the birth of Pope John Paul II, the pope from the "faraway land," who proved instrumental in the collapse of the communist regime in Poland and in the entire Eastern Bloc. As Timothy Garton Ash wrote, he was "the greatest political actor in the last quarter of the twentieth century," for "without the Polish Pope, no Solidarity revolution in Poland in 1980; without Solidarity, no dramatic change in Soviet policy towards eastern Europe under Gorbachev; without that change, no velvet revolutions in 1989."

All these important anniversaries are an opportunity to reflect on Poland, its unique heritage of freedom and solidarity, and their meaning in this day and age.

While the economic effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be fully assessed, it is useful to note that Poland has been one of the most economically stable countries in Europe. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Poland as a country has seen continuous economic growth in the past thirty years. As economist [Marcin Piątkowski](#) argues in his book, [Europe's Growth Champion](#), Poland has become one of the most successful economies in Europe, with GDP growth up by 150% per capita since 1989. Translating that into purchasing power parity terms, Poland's GDP has grown faster than that of the average eurozone country, from US \$10,300 in 1990 to more than US \$23,000 in 2018 - a growth comparable to that of the Asian tigers of South Korea, Singapore or Taiwan. By 2018, the average level

of income reached its highest level, so much so that Poland became the first post-communist country to join the FTSE-Russell list of developed countries.

How did this former communist country, ruled by an oppressive regime, emerge to be "Europe's Growth Champion?" The answer lies partly in the resilience and ingenuity of the Polish people, and the values they uphold. The Poles have a natural love for freedom, tolerance and solidarity, values which have been forged through centuries of history and tradition. If 1989 was a watershed moment in Polish history, it is because it saw the renewal of those civic virtues.

Situated in the north of Europe, it has close affinities with Roman culture. Locked between the East and the West, for centuries it transmitted vital cultural ideas in both directions. Its rich history and culture have been part of the European network of ideas for centuries.

Prior to its partition in 1795 by three neighbouring empires, Prussia, Austro-Hungary and Russia, the then Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was one of the most successful political projects of Western Europe. Originating from a personal union dating back to 1385 and formally established in 1569 in the [Union of Lublin](#), the Commonwealth united the Polish Crown with the [Duchy of Lithuania](#), and was one of Europe's largest multicultural and multi-ethnic states.

At the time of fierce religious conflicts in the rest of Europe, Poland-Lithuania established a political tradition of tolerance, embodied in the [Warsaw Confederation Act](#) of 1573, which guaranteed its nobility religious freedom. As an extension of an earlier [Statute of Kalisz](#) (1264), which provided unprecedented legal rights to Jews, the Warsaw Confederation de facto protected the right to freedom of worship. In effect, the legislation was the fruit of a long-standing tradition of tolerance, best exemplified by the relatively peaceful co-existence of such diverse communities as Poles, Lithuanians, Ruthenians, Jews, Tartars, Karaites, Germans, Italians, Scots and Dutch. In many respects, it was a truly modern state, with a parliament which represented the diverse political and religious communities of the Commonwealth and which reserved the right to elect its monarch.

In the wider context of its European neighbours, elective monarchy in the Commonwealth was a unique political system that accounted for high political and civic engagement - up to 10% of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility participated in the Commonwealth's civic life. The underlying motto of the 1569 Union of Lublin testifies best to this deep sense of social equality and freedom enjoyed by all, regardless of state, race or religion: "As free with one, so free with all; as equal to one, so equal to all."

One of the best legacies of this political project was the [3rd May Constitution](#), ratified by the Polish parliament (Sejm) in 1791. Considered the oldest written constitution in Europe and second in the world, it de facto implemented a constitutional monarchy, provided a clear division of powers between the executive, legislative and judiciary branch, introduced political equality between townspeople and the nobility, and protected the rights of peasants against the abuses of serfdom. This deep respect for individual liberties and resistance to any absolute power were the values shared with the American revolutionaries by two of Poland's greatest military engineers, [Tadeusz Kościuszko](#) and [Kazimierz Pułaski](#), who joined in the fight for American independence.

This long-standing heritage of active civic participation and deep respect for freedom and sense of social solidarity have formed an integral part of the Polish character, and, arguably, strengthened and inspired Poles to withstand centuries of partition and the two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.

Today, over thirty years after the fall of communism, Poland has emerged more compassionate, confident and more experienced as a nation. It is the legacy of the Commonwealth that continues to inspire Poles and Poland's international policy of peaceful co-existence between nations, combined with the deep respect for their heritage and culture.

Therefore, one cannot ignore the current situation in Belarus, a country which has had a long-shared history with Poland, and is a country of outstanding heritage which is to be respected in its cultural and political autonomy. Poland strongly supports the right of Belarusians to determine the fate of their nation. It is for this reason that the Polish president, [Andrzej Duda](#), appealed at the 75th session of the United Nations Assembly in September, "to speak with one voice, and demand that fundamental human rights be respected." And he added, "Belarusians like any other free nation, have the right to shape their political future in a sovereign way, without external interference."

This appeal to solidarity is in fact an appeal to the international community, to uphold and defend the fundamental rights of freedom and self-determination in a true spirit of solidarity, values which sadly are still being undermined today.

Speaking on the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in 1995, Pope John Paul II discussed what he called the "moral dynamics of freedom" during the non-violent revolutions of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe.

His words of twenty-five years ago, still resonate strongly with us today and deserve to be quoted in full. For "modern totalitarianism has been, first and foremost, an assault on the dignity of the person, an assault which has gone even to the point of denying the inalienable value of the individual's life. The revolutions of 1989 were made possible by the commitment of brave men and women inspired by a different, and ultimately more profound and powerful, vision: the vision of man as a creature of intelligence and free will, immersed in a mystery which transcends his own being and endowed with the ability to reflect and the ability to choose - and thus capable of wisdom and virtue. A decisive factor in the success of those non-violent revolutions was the experience of social solidarity: in the face of regimes backed by the power of propaganda and terror, that solidarity was the moral core of the 'power of the powerless,' a beacon of hope and an enduring reminder that it is possible for man's historical journey to follow a path which is true to the finest aspirations of the human spirit."

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The [image](#) shows, "The Union of Lublin," by Jan Matejko, painted in 1869.

