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The history of
POLISH diplomacy

from the 10th century until 1918
(from the origins of the Polish state
to the restitution of independence)
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dawn of Polish statehood to ONWEALTH VO NATIONS 10th–16th C.
The Polish state began to emerge towards the end of the 9th century. Its founders were the ancestors of the Piast dynasty: Siemowit, Lestek, and Siemomysł. They first succeeded in exerting power over their own tribe, which inhabited the lands between Gniezno and Poznań, and subsequently expanded their realm to take in neighbouring tribes. Until the borders of their nascent state reached the lands controlled by other rulers in the contemporary Europe, they had no need to maintain official contacts with them. But when the boundaries of the Piast state met those of Bohemia and Germany early in the first half of the 10th century, diplomacy became essential.

The first information we have about Mieszko I is gleaned from the Saxon chronicler Widukind, who around the year 963 recorded that Gero, the margrave of the Eastern March, following fierce battles in which his nephew perished and he himself was seriously wounded, subordinated the Lusatians to the German king. Around the same time a war was raging between Mieszko, duke of the Polans, and the Veleti, a Slav tribe under the Saxon outlaw Wichmann. Mieszko was vanquished, and in one of these battles his brother was killed.

These events spurred Mieszko into action. He began by initiating negotiations with his neighbour to the south, Boleslav, ruler of the Bohemians. These bore fruit in a Polish-Czech alliance, which was reinforced by Mieszko’s marriage to Boleslav’s daughter Dobrava. Around the same time, a Polish-German alliance was also concluded, in which Mieszko, as the weaker partner, undertook to make tribute payments to the German ruler. In return he became recognised as a friend of the emperor. It was at this point that he decided to take the step of baptism, and of Christianising his state. This, in turn, necessitated the forging of diplomatic links with papal Rome. Poland was baptised in 966, and just two years later Jordan, the head of the mission to Christianise Poland, was consecrated as missionary bishop directly subordinate to the pontiff.

Duke Mieszko’s decision to accept the new faith was part of his long-term strategy. His first contact with Christianity had come in the early years of his rule, when he visited Prague, and later Germany, on his mission to forge an alliance with Otto I. Perhaps he was impressed by the stone churches he saw there; he may also have become interested in the Christians’ religious ideas. But certainly no less, and perhaps even more important were the political benefits he expected to reap from conversion. Mieszko hoped that this new religion would enable him to integrate his realm. He was also aware that pagan rulers were treated with scorn by their Christian counterparts, and he was keen to achieve a status on a par with that of the Bohemian ruler or the German dukes. Through baptism and his alliance with the emperor, towards the end of his life he came to be regarded as an equal of the German margraves and dukes, and after the death of Dobrava he even married the daughter of one of the greatest German princes of his day, Margrave Theodoric, which brought him into the aristocracy in the western Empire.
Thanks to these diplomatic measures Poland, too, was now counted among those countries considered civilised. Describing the wars being waged between Poland and Germany at the beginning of the 11th century, the German chronicler Thietmar consistently referred to the pagan Veleti – the Germans’ allies – as barbarians, yet he never used this expression of his country’s enemies, the Poles. They may have been the foe, but they were Christians, and hence belonged to the same world as the emperor.

Mieszko’s alliances brought him almost immediate political gains. In 967 his state was attacked once again by the Veleti, again under the command of Wichmann. This time, Mieszko’s armies, with reinforcements in the form of two Bohemian hussar detachments, were victorious, and Wichmann fell in the battle. In 972 Mieszko’s alliance with the emperor and his conversion to Christianity once again afforded him protection from grave danger when Poland was invaded by the margrave of the Lusatian March, Hodon. The Polish detachments under Czcibór, brother of Mieszko, scattered the German forces at the Battle of Cedynia, and Hodon was lucky to escape. Mieszko, as a Christian emperor and “friend of the emperor”, along with his adversary, Hodon, was summoned before an imperial court at Quedlinburg. The imperial verdict was not too severe for the duke of the Polans: he merely had to hand over his seven-year-old son Bolesław as a hostage.

Mieszko twice became involved in German domestic struggles for the imperial throne. On both occasions he supported Otto’s rival, his cousin Henry, Duke of Bavaria. Ultimately, however, in 985, he crossed over to the camp of Empress Theophanu, who was ruling as regent on behalf of her son, Otto III. German annals report that Mieszko recognised Otto as king and bestowed on him the gift of a camel. This gesture made an immense impression not only on the small boy, but also on everyone else who saw the exotic creature. Mieszko’s rapid switch to the ranks of Empress Theophanu and her son was prompted by events that took place after the death of Otto II. In 983 the news of the emperor’s death sparked an uprising among the Veleti tribes, who were joined before long by the Obodrites. The empress was forced into combat against not only the supporters of Henry the Bavarian’s claim to the throne, but also the Slavs, who posed a particular threat to Saxony. The Veleti were also a potential threat to Mieszko’s realm; moreover, both Mieszko and the Saxons stood to benefit from expansion into the lands of the Veleti. So the duke of the Polans joined forces with Theophanu against the common peril, and their alliance was cemented by their hopes of future gains. Mieszko soon reaped the benefits of this alliance: following the victory scored by the camp of Theophanu and Otto III, with the support of German detachments sent by the empress he was able to poach the Kraków lands and Silesia from the politically isolated duke of Bohemia, Boleslav.
Mieszko I’s final diplomatic move was to offer his state up to St Peter – i.e. to the papacy. Although the purpose of this act was undoubtedly to protect his younger sons, by Oda, from their half-brother, Dobrava’s son Bolesław, in the longer-term future it would afford the Polish rulers strong support in the face of pressures from the German kings. Mieszko I’s policies and his diplomatic activity thus brought him vast gains, and enabled his state to expand in size and take a prominent place among the European states of the day.

Mieszko’s successor, Bolesław the Brave, banished Oda and her sons – his agnate brothers – from Poland. This was a violation of his father’s testament, which had been attested by the pope himself, and thus risked the fury of Mieszko I’s second wife’s family, a powerful German dynasty. Nevertheless, he succeeded in preserving excellent relations with both the German rulers and the papacy. The root of his success lay not only in the fact that he pursued key elements of his father’s policies, but also in his ability to convince the German rulers that they needed him. He also continued to observe all the commitments toward the pontiff that Mieszko had undertaken, including the tribute payments.

In the first years of Bolesław the Brave’s rule the relations of greatest significance to the Polish state were those with the Roman Empire of the German Nation, represented by the German King Otto III. There is documentary evidence of some disagreements between Poland and Rus, but these did not inordinately concern the Polish ruler or his advisors. At the end of the 10th century the climate was exceptionally favourable for Poland, and Bolesław the Brave succeeded in exploiting this to the full. In the mid-990s Otto III achieved his majority and began to rule independently. The idea of restoring the Roman Empire to its former glory held great fascination for him; his model was the Empire in the times of Constantine, and he dreamed of returning its capital to Rome. Among those who abetted him in these strivings was his cousin Bruno. Bruno was appointed pope by Otto, taking the name Gregory V. Another avid supporter of the restoration of the Roman Empire’s onetime splendour was Gerbert d’Auriillac, Otto’s former tutor. He was ensconced by the emperor in the Holy See as the next pope and assumed the name Sylvester II. Otto and his circle had a vision of the Empire as a union of kingdoms under the primacy of the Roman emperor. As they were looking to expand their Empire eastwards, they were keen to find suitable leaders to serve as kings in such a union. Two of the eastern European rulers proved suitable for such exalted roles: Stefan, Duke of Hungary, and Bolesław, Duke of Poland.

Bolesław the Brave did his utmost to make himself one of the most important people in Europe. He maintained very good relations with the emperor, to whom he was a key ally in battles against the pagan Slavs from...
the Baltic regions. He also supported Christian missions in the pagan lands bordering what was then Poland. In 997 he organised the Prussian mission of the former bishop of Prague and later saint, Wojciech (Adalbert), son of Slavnik. His support for these missions proved him a true Christian ruler and worthy of the title of king.

St Wojciech’s mission expedition was a failure: he was murdered by the Prussians. It nevertheless brought the Polish leader vast gains. Bolesław bought Wojciech’s body back from the Prussians and gave him a magnificent funeral in Gniezno. He also sent messengers to all the important figures in the contemporary world informing them of what had happened in Prussia. Otto was distressed by the news of the death of Wojciech, whom he had greatly respected, but at first he failed to comprehend the significance of the matter. It was probably the Polish emissaries, instructed by Bolesław, who brought home to him the magnitude of the case. Otto took action: he had the martyr canonised and his brother and companion on the Prussian mission, Gaudentius, elevated to the rank of archbishop. Gaudentius was to be made archbishop at his brother’s tomb. Emperor Otto then decided to make a pilgrimage to Gniezno, to the tomb of the new saint and martyr, and also to his friend.

Emperor Otto III arrived in Gniezno in the early spring of the year 1000. Bolesław received him with great honours. He met him at the border, standing at the head of numerous detachments of his army, each dressed in a different colour. He then escorted Otto on to Gniezno, where, following church ceremonies and the reburial of St Wojciech in a new tomb, the secular celebrations began. The banqueting lasted three days, and at its close every guest, from the emperor to the lowliest servant, received gifts from Bolesław. The splendid feasts, the display of troops, and the costly gifts were all part of the Polish ruler’s diplomatic campaign to show off the might and wealth of his state and win the friendship of the Germans.
The political outcomes of the congress were the most significant, however. Gniezno was established an archbishopric, the seat, as had already been agreed in Rome, of Wojciech’s brother, Radzyn-Gaudentius. Three suffragan bishoprics under Gniezno were also appointed. New cathedrals were erected in Krakow, Wrocław and Kolobrzeg. A diocese was also established in Poznań, with Unger, hitherto the Polish missionary bishop, at its head. Indeed, he remained answerable directly to the pope; the Poznań diocese was only subordinated to Gniezno after Unger’s death.

The Gniezno congress was also instrumental in raising the rank of the Polish ruler. Emperor Otto III laid the imperial crown on his brow and named him “brother and partner of the Empire”. He also bestowed on him a gift of the lance of St Maurice, together with a nail from the cross of Christ. In placing the imperial crown on Bolesław’s head he was expressing his consent to the latter’s royal coronation. This was not the coronation itself, which could only be performed by the archbishop, with the prior consent of the pope and the emperor. The elevation of Poland to the rank of a kingdom and its ruler to that of king was ultimately the decision of Emperor Otto III, who envisioned that his empire should be composed of equal kingdoms, one of which was to be Poland. The political, military and diplomatic efforts of Bolesław the Brave undoubtedly influenced that decision, however.

In exchange for these honours, Bolesław bestowed on the emperor some of the relics of St Wojciech from Gniezno. He also made over to him a division of 300 knights, as additional support for his journey to Rome.

The programme of the Gniezno congress was prepared well in advance by both parties. The decision to appoint St Wojciech’s brother archbishop was taken the previous year, and prior to his arrival in Gniezno the emperor ordered a gold altar to be made, under which the remains of the new saint were to be deposited. Nevertheless, certain misunderstandings did occur in the course of the visit. In one incident, Bishop Unger protested against the establishment of the archdiocese. The potential conflict was averted by talks between Otto and Bolesław.

Alas, just two years after the Congress of Gniezno, the situation changed diametrically with the death of Otto III. His elected successor was Henry, Duke of Bavaria. The new German king’s vision of the Empire was entirely different to that of his predecessor. He had no plans for an empire in which equal kingdoms recognised the emperor’s supremacy; instead, he was of the opinion that states such as Poland should be subordinate to the king of the eastern Franks, i.e. to the German realm. In an empire of this structure Bolesław the Brave would be downgraded to the rank of one of many dukes within the kingdom, which was, of course, unacceptable to him.

Relations between Bolesław the Brave and Henry II were initiated at a meeting of the two rulers in Merseburg in 1002. Henry went there to receive homage from the eastern German dukes. The Polish ruler, Bolesław, also travelled to the event. He recognised Henry II as the future emperor and paid him homage. There then ensured long and difficult negotiations between the two rulers.
Bolesław was hoping for an investiture – the Margraviate of Meissen – but Henry would not hear of it. In the end they reached a compromise: Bolesław was granted Milsko (then known as Milsca) and Lusatia, while Meissen was awarded to his close ally, Guncelin. This solution satisfied Bolesław, but the illusion of agreement was shattered with an attempt on the Polish ruler’s life. As he was leaving Merseburg, he was attacked by a body of armed men. He only survived the assassination attempt thanks to the aid of his German friends. Henry of Schweinfurt engaged his own detachments, while Bernard, Duke of Saxony, safeguarded Bolesław’s flight from Merseburg.

A war broke out between Poland and Germany that lasted for over a dozen years, punctuated by two peace treaties. The subject of the conflict between the two countries was not their borderlands, but the structure of the Empire. The struggle concerned the question of whether Poland was to be a fiefdom of the Kingdom of Germany, or whether its ruler was to be directly subordinate to the emperor, putting the country on a par with other kingdoms in Europe. This difference is illustrated clearly by the seals of Otto III and Henry II. Otto’s seal reads *Renovatio Imperii Romanorum*. His successor, however, revived the conception of a Carolingian empire, which is expressed in the inscription *Renovatio Imperii Francorum*.

Bolesław the Brave was successful in defending his rank, superior to the position of vassals of the German king. The importance of the Polish ruler in the contemporary world was illustrated by the chronicler Thietmar in his description of a meeting between Boleslaw and Henry in Merseburg in 1013. The Polish monarch recognised the superiority of Henry, whom he now accepted as emperor, and in exchange he was treated differently than the other vassals of the German king. An indication of Bolesław’s rank in the world of his day is the marriage of his son, Mieszko, contracted after the restoration of peace between Poland and Germany: Mieszko was married to Richeza, the granddaughter of Emperor Otto II. The primary factor in Bolesław’s rise to such an elevated rank was his military success. Nevertheless, in order to leverage this, he also had to demonstrate diplomatic prowess.

In the interim periods between the wars, Boleslaw the Brave worked to win over the Germans’ allies, the Veleti and the Bohemians. Both refuted his advances, but he did succeed in forging contacts with the Italian king, Arduin of Ivrea, and even with the pope. This was the easier that Mieszko I had sub-
ordinated the Polish state to the Holy See and Bolesław recognised that act and was able to turn his father’s policy to his advantage. In order to safeguard good relations with Rome, he kept up his tribute payments to the pope, and in return was rewarded with the support of the highest authority of the Western Church. Bolesław’s contacts with so many partners testify to his political acumen. Of greatest significance, however, were the extremely satisfactory conditions he negotiated in the three successive peace treaties ending the Polish-German wars. Much of the credit for this is due Bolesław himself, but a major role was also played by those whom he charged with preparing the peace talks.

Bolesław’s wars with the Germans were finally ended with the Peace of Bautzen, concluded in 1018. The German chronicler Thietmar reported that the treaty was not what it should have been, but was all that could be negotiated. The agreement gave Bolesław Milsko and the Lusatian lands as his own, rather than as a German fiefdom. At the same time, he recognised the supremacy of Henry as emperor but not as the German king. This meant he had defended the position he had achieved in Gniezno in the year 1000. In order not to provoke further conflict, however, Bolesław decided not to hold his coronation until after Henry’s death.

One of the terms of the peace concluded in Bautzen was imperial military aid for Poland, which it needed to fight Rus. This was a war for which Bolesław was preparing with a view to restoring the throne to Duke Świętopelk, his son-in-law. Emperor Henry’s motivation in supporting the Polish ruler was the prospect of extending the Empire’s sphere of influence to take in Rus.

Bolesław was victorious over the armies of Rus, and he occupied Kyiv, from where he dispatched two letters, one to his ally, the Western emperor, and the other to the Eastern emperor, Basil. To Basil he extended the offer of peace, threatening war in case of rejection.

We know the identities of several Polish diplomats from this period. One of them was Bolesław’s son, Mieszko. In the year 1015 he was dispatched...
by his father on a mission to Prague to bring about an anti-imperial Polish-Czech pact. This mission was doomed to failure from the outset, since it was in the Czech interest to bring about an alliance with the Germans. It ended dramatically, however: Duke Oldrich had the Polish emissary arrested. This prompted the protest of Emperor Henry, and the Bohemian duke was forced to cede his Polish prisoner to the emperor, who subsequently also proved unwilling to free Mieszko. He was only persuaded to do so on the intervention of Bolesław’s German friends.

Another Polish diplomat was Abbot Tuni, of whom Thietmar wrote that Bolesław not only sent him on important missions to the emperor, but also entrusted him with espionage. We also know of a Polish envoy called Stoigniew, who, burdened with a mission that ended in failure, decided that in order to salvage the credibility of both the emperor and Bolesław himself, he must assume that he had misunderstood his task. This initiative allowed talks between the Polish and German rulers to continue.

Thietmar’s chronicle also tells us that in the years 1005–1007 Polish envoys were sent to the Veleti state to try and persuade them to abandon their alliance with the Germans. He says that this mission was a fiasco, but does not cite the names of the Polish envoys.

Bolesław’s reign ended in 1025 with the royal coronation. We do not know whether this event was preceded by deputations to Rome, but it probably was not; Bolesław was likely of the opinion that it had been his right since 1000, given that he had an archbishop in his realm.

Bolesław’s successor, Mieszko II, maintained contacts with the western German opposition but waged wars with both Emperor Conrad II and Rus. His reign ended in disaster, which almost precipitated the collapse of the Polish state. It was the son of Mieszko II, Kazimierz, who undertook the rebuilding of Poland. He regained power in Poland with the assistance of Emperor Henry III, in gratitude for which he had to accept the position of the latter’s vassal. Nevertheless, his superb diplomatic faculties enabled him to negotiate himself a broad margin of liberty. He forged an alliance with the ruler of Rus, Yaroslav the Wise, which was cemented by the marriage of Kazimierz to Yaroslav’s sister, and the marriage of Kazimierz’s...
sister Gertruda to the son of the Kyivan duke Iziaslav. This position lent
Duke Kazimierz a greater sense of power and emboldened him to flout
the emperor’s ban and retake Silesia, which the Czechs had reoccupied.
Enraged at being overruled on this matter, Emperor Henry III threat-
ened Poland with war. He was ultimately persuaded to let the Polish duke
keep Silesia, but he ordered Poland to pay the Czechs tribute on the dis-
puted land.

The son and heir of Kazimierz, Bolesław II the Generous, achieved com-
plete independence from the German ruler. He cooperated with anti-Ger-
man members of the Hungarian royal dynasty, Geza and Ladislaus
(Laszlo), in armed revolts against the Czech dukes, who were allies of
the Germans. Bolesław adeptly turned the conflict between the German
king Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII to his own advantage. By coming
down firmly on the side of the pontiff, he engendered new contacts with

last visit to the German lands took place in 1072, probably in order to
meet with the Saxon opposition to the king.

Another object of the Polish ruler’s political, military but also diplo-
matic attentions was Rus. Bolesław twice supported his aunt’s husband
Iziaslav when he was exiled from Kyiv, though the second time he was
rather less willing, only goaded into action by Pope Gregory VII.

As a result of internal tensions, Bolesław was deposed and forced to
flee the country. The victorious magnate camp ensconced his younger
brother, Władysław Herman, on the throne. He took power in a coun-
try that was conflicted with virtually all its neighbours. Thanks to his
adroit politics, Władysław Herman was able to forge good relations
both with the Czech ruler, Vratislaus, and with Emperor Henry IV.
Władysław took as his wife Vratislaus’s daughter, Judith, and when she died he married the emperor’s sister, also called Judith. Good relations were sustained with Bohemia until the death of the Czech king Vratislaus, and with the Germans until the early part of the rule of Duke Władysław Herman’s successors. Sadly, we know little of the diplomacy under Władysław Herman. We may only assume that he was assisted in establishing positive relations with Bohemia by his sister Swatawa, who was the wife of King Vratislaus.

In 1102 Poland was divided for the first time, into two “districts”. Northern Poland came under the rule of Duke Władysław Herman’s elder son, Zbigniew, and southern Poland was ruled by his younger son Bolesław. Initially Bolesław was a political outsider, with fewer foreign contacts, but within a few years, with the assistance of his advisors, he had engineered Zbigniew’s political isolation. Zbigniew’s main ally, Duke Bretislaus II of Bohemia, was neutralised by the Polish envoy, the count palatine Skarbimir, the doyen of Polish politics. Skarbimir went to Prague and convinced Duke Bretislaus to commit to neutrality with the aid of a large sum of money. Bolesław also succeeded in establishing very good relations with the king of Hungary, Koloman, and the duke of Moravia, Svatopluk. After orchestrating Zbigniew’s isolation on the international scene, Bolesław exiled his brother from Poland, exploiting the civil war raging in Germany.

In the early period of Bolesław the Wyrmouth’s independent reign, Poland was united by alliances with the principality of Volhynia and the kingdom of Hungary. Bohemia, on the other hand, though it had been neutralised in 1106–1107, was allied with Germany. This political arrangement survived the Polish-German war of 1109, after which peace was concluded with the Germans. The Polish ruler then went to war with pagan Pomerania, and at the same time waged battles against the Bohemians.

Bolesław the Wyrmouth used a raft of methods in his politics. Many of his objectives he attempted to achieve by force: he waged several wars. Some of them had positive outcomes for Poland, such as the abovementioned Pomeranian campaign. The war against the Czechs in the early
1110s also brought victory. But true peace between the Poles and the Czechs was achieved as a result of other events entirely. Bolesław, Duke of Poland, married Salomea, Countess of Berg, one of whose sisters was the wife of Ladislaus, Duke of Bohemia, and the other the wife of Svato- pluk, Duke of Moravia. These three women undoubtedly contributed to bringing peace in this part of Europe.

The diplomacy practised by Bolesław the Wrymouth was often brutal. At the beginning of the 1120s, as the Polish ruler was preparing to conquer Pomerania once and for all, Volodar, Duke of Rus, began to issue threats aimed at Poland. In order to neutralise this danger, Bolesław accepted a scheme hatched by one of his counts palatine, Piotr Włostowic: the duke of Rus was drawn into a trap, kidnapped and brought before Bolesław. As a condition of his release, the Polish ruler bound him over to keep the peace.

In the 1120s Polish diplomacy was facing some tough problems. Following its conquest, Pomerania needed to be Christianised. In the eastern part of the region this was simple; nobody other than Poland laid claim to these lands, so their Christianisation by the Polish Church was undisputed. The mission in Western Pomerania was more problematic, even though its ruler, Duke Wartislaw, had been baptised even before recognising the supremacy of the Polish ruler. But Western Pomerania straddled the Oder, the river that marked the eastern boundary of the sphere of influence claimed by the archbishopric of Magdeburg. Bolesław the Wrymouth hoped to establish a Pomeranian diocese that would be subordinate to the archbishop of Gniezno. Given this conflict of interests between Poland and Germany, a compromise was worked out.
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PHOTOGRAPHIC EDITING
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PRINTED BY
Gorenjski Tisk, Kranj
Printed in Slovenia

PUBLISHED BY
Wydawnictwo Bosz


©Copyright by Bosz, Olszanica 2010
Design and layout ©copyright by
Maciej Buszewicz, Warsaw 2010

First edition

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