"A remarkable achievement, Poland in the Modern World offers the stuff of real history. Instead of heroes and villains so often featured in national narratives, Porter-Szűcs emphasizes the everyday lives of ordinary people in a global context, bringing the history of modern Poland down to earth in an easily accessible yet highly informative text."

Robert Blobaum, West Virginia University

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Challenging traditional, nationalistic accounts of heroism and tragedy, the author sets the major political events in Polish history alongside broader developments within society. He provides particular insight into the regional, cultural, and economic diversity of the country, and focuses on the experience of individuals’ daily lives. For instance, readers learn of the day-to-day relations between people of differing religion and language between the two world wars, the realities of life in the Warsaw ghetto, what Stalin’s industrial expansion meant for the peasants who took up factory jobs in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the effects of changing concepts of masculinity and femininity over time. The result is a lively and nuanced historical overview that recognizes both the particularities and the universality of modern Poland’s story.

BRIAN PORTER-SZŰCS is an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of History at the University of Michigan, USA, where he has taught since 1994. He is the author of Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland (2011) and When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland (2000). He is also the co-editor, with Bruce Berglund, of Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe (2010).
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Writing a survey history that covers this much material requires both an inordinate amount of chutzpa and enough humility to ask for help. Thankfully I was able to rely upon a great network of friends and colleagues who could provide me with tips and correct some of the embarrassing errors in my preliminary drafts. In particular I want to thank those who gave me invaluable input on the draft manuscript, as well as those who provided me with key pieces of advice at crucial moments: Paul Brykczyński, Anna Cichopec-Gajraj, John Connelly, Małgorzata Fidelis, Jesse Kaufman, Padraic Kenney, Michael Meng, Ray Patton, Antony Polonsky, Natalie Smolenski, Dariusz Stola, Ron Suny, Andrzej Paczkowski, and Jessica Żychowicz. I also want to thank the wonderful staff at Wiley Blackwell who helped shepherd this book to completion, particularly Georgina Coleby, Sally Cooper, Tessa Harvey, Nik Prowse, and Janey Fisher.

My family has always been unfailingly supportive of my work, but this time they were able to make a more direct contribution: they were my guinea pigs, serving as examples of the general readers for whom this book is written. They were able to warn me whenever I veered off into the thickets of academic jargon or obscure references, or when I was just plain dull. So I want to give a special thanks to my father Burchard Porter, my mother Susan Barfield, my aunt Ann Cunningham, my beloved wife Ildi Porter-Szuć, and my oldest daughters Sofi and Alex Porter-Castro. Their younger sister Stefi Porter-Szuć is the only one who wasn’t asked to read the book – prodigy though she surely is, I don’t think a six-year-old is quite ready for this volume. But it will be there for her in a few years! A special thanks goes to Ildi for her tireless work proofreading the final version. Finally, I want to dedicate this book to my late grandmother Stella Spitzner (née Stolarska), who first instilled in me a fascination with her Polish heritage. Dziękuję, Babciu, za przekazanie mi Twojej miłości do Polski.
Polish names are notoriously difficult for English-speakers, but the pronunciation is not as hard as it might seem once you learn a few simple rules. To compensate (at least partially) for the unfamiliar letters, the stress of every word is on the second-to-the-last syllable. The following chart is not intended to be a precise guide, but only a rough approximation of equivalent sounds in each language. For example, there is an important difference between ś and sz, but an Anglophone can say “sh” for both and get away with it. Just don’t tell any native Polish speakers that I said so. Study this chart, and before long you’ll be reciting the infamous tongue-twister, “W Szczebrzeszynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzciniie….”

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about a vaguely defined space in northeastern Europe and the people who have lived there during the past two hundred years. Most of them have usually (but not always) called themselves “Poles,” and the country they live in has usually (but not always) been called “Poland.” Neither the place nor the people are all that noteworthy in the grand scheme of things. Nowadays about two thirds of the population live in towns and cities, but a century ago the area was mostly agricultural. It isn’t a particularly prosperous region, but by world standards it isn’t particularly poor either. The United Nations Human Development Index, which combines measures of health, education, and wealth, places Poland at 39th out of 187 countries. Actually, if income inequality (or the comparative lack thereof) is taken into account, Poland jumps to number 30. Polish life expectancy at birth is just over 76 years, above the global average of 69.8 but below the 80+ years enjoyed by the earth’s most long-lived peoples. With a gross national income per capita of US$17,451 per year, the people we’ll be discussing in this book are placed 41st in the world, quite distant from the rarified wealth of the Qatars, Singaporeans, or Norwegians, but also well above the global average of $10,082.¹

As we move back into the past, we can’t be quite so precise about the comparative standing of the people calling themselves Polish, but in very rough terms the picture looks about the same: most of them were more prosperous than most people in the world, but less so than their contemporaries in North America and Western Europe. For example, in 1925 the average income per person in Poland was
the equivalent of US$3,221 per year, adjusting for inflation. That
compared badly to $9,582 for the United States, $5,542 for Germany,
and $5,578 for France, but it compared very well to $960 for Brazil,
$918 for Nigeria, or $954 for China.² Industrialization and urbaniza-
tion arrived about a half-century later in northeastern Europe than it
did in Britain or the United States, but in the region stretching from
Warsaw southwest towards Silesia there were sizable islands of
development that were truly booming by the 1880s and 1890s, not far
behind the production centers of Germany or the Czech lands. The
Poles reached that tipping point when more people worked in
industry than in agriculture shortly after World War II, a century
later than England but decades ahead of the world outside the North
Atlantic region.

Poles had little or no say in how they were governed for most of
the 19th century. In fact, no Polish state existed between 1795 and
1918, unless one counts a few small puppet states with limited
autonomy set up by one or another of the neighboring powers. But
without downplaying this lack of independence, it is worth noting
that not very many people anywhere had a meaningful role in
political life in the 19th century. Only about 20 percent of the world’s
population in 1914 lived in countries that could claim to be inde-
pendent – the rest lived in outright colonies or in countries with only
nominal sovereignty.³ Perhaps even more important, the overwhelm-
ing majority of the citizens (if we can even use that word) of the
imperial powers were every bit as deprived of genuine self-rule as
were their Polish contemporaries. Nowhere could women vote or
otherwise participate in politics, and even giving the vote to all
adult males regardless of wealth or education was still considered
radical almost everywhere.

Things improved only marginally in the 20th century. Between
World Wars I and II there was an independent Polish republic with
an elected government and a vibrant (though censored) press, but
widespread corruption and a military coup in 1926 limited the
effectiveness of democracy. After World War II Poland was part of
the Soviet bloc, with a one-party state and a tightly controlled pub-
lic sphere. But again, in global terms this was hardly unusual. The
government of the Polish People’s Republic was oppressive and
violent, but most governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in
those days were much worse. Even Western Europe and the United
States were hardly pristine democracies in the Cold War years. After the fall of communism in 1989 the Polish state matched the democratic norms of their Western European neighbors, and whatever problems remained were those faced by all capitalist systems with representative governments. Tracking the expansion of meaningful civil rights, Poles would follow a winding path of accomplishments and setbacks (some severe), but most of the time they were neither significantly more nor significantly less empowered than most of their fellow humans.

It might seem odd to start a book on the history of Poland by acknowledging that the country is rather ordinary, but I would argue that it is worth studying not because it is exceptional, but precisely because it is not. Although the Poles live in Europe, in some ways their experiences have been closer to those outside that fortunate continent. Whether we look at economic prosperity, cultural development, or political liberty, the people of northeastern Europe consistently fall below the ranks of the privileged, but well above the global norm. They are not part of the club of imperial powers that have dominated the world during the past few centuries, but they don’t quite fit into the category of colonized subjects either. They are among the weakest of the mighty and the mightiest of the weak, among the poorest of the rich and the richest of the poor. This in-between status makes Poland a useful portal for anyone hoping to view the broad tendencies and characteristics of the modern world.

This way of describing Poland provides an alternative to two familiar depictions of the country’s past and present. On the one hand, in Western Europe and the United States it is common to depict Poland as a land of backward peasants, either beloved for their homespun simplicity or denigrated for their violent xenophobia and their primitive superstitions. These portrayals are at best exaggerations, and at worst arrogant slurs. For a long time Poles have resented being called East Europeans, not merely because it is geographically wrong (using the conventional boundaries of Europe, Poland sits almost exactly in the center) but because of the old habit of using the adjective “Western” with the noun “civilization,” and assuming that life becomes more barbaric the further east one goes. Instead of playing word games with Poland’s geographical description, I’d rather set aside the whole idea that Europe is divided between a “progressive” West and an “uncivilized” East. Making Poland seem more normal will help us
see that Poles are actually quite similar to the rest of us. In fact, for most practical purposes they are us.

The second corrective that comes from normalizing Poland is to burst the balloons of Polish nationalism. All too many historians of Poland have represented the country as unique because of its tragic suffering. We often get a story that marches from battlefield to battlefield, from oppression to oppression, from massacre to massacre, with Poland standing as an inevitable collective victim. This produces a national martyrology – an elevation of the entire collectivity to the status of sanctified victim. Within this lachrymose worldview, to impugn any Pole is to impugn Poland as such, because only the virtuous victims are allowed to represent the whole. When faced with stories about Poles who have done bad things, proponents of this view either insist that the evildoer was not a true Pole, or that the historian is lying. Even worse, there is no room in this approach for stories of everyday life that do not involve oppression or resistance. The only genuine Pole in such stories is either a hero or a victim (or both).

In no way would I belittle the pain and anguish that people in Poland have experienced in the modern era, and I would be the first to emphasize that at certain points (particularly during World War II) they’ve suffered more than most. But I also want to emphasize that nations don’t suffer – people do. Although this book is titled *Poland in the Modern World*, readers should not expect a story in which some collective historical actor named “Poland” plays a starring role. This will not be a tale of how Poland accomplished this or that, how Poland endured this or that injustice, how Poland navigated the turbulent seas of the 20th century. Instead, this is a story of actual human beings – some good and some bad; some prosperous and some poor; some happy and some miserable; some successful and some not. Poland is neither a collective national martyr nor a collective national villain. Poland is a group of people who have had to make sense of a changing world over the past two centuries, and their effort to do so will be the topic of this book.

**Notes**

2 Mattias Lindgren, Gapminder, at www.gapminder.org/data/documentation/gd001 (accessed August 29, 2013). These figures are based in per capita GDP and are expressed in “purchasing price parity,” inflation adjusted to 2005.


POLES WITHOUT POLAND, 1795–1918

There was no Poland on the map between 1795 and 1918. That sentence might seem like a simple historical fact, but it actually raises a whole series of problems that make it really hard to tell the story of 19th century northeastern Europe.

The first date – 1795 – was when Russia, Prussia, and Austria signed a treaty that destroyed the Polish–Lithuanian Republic. That was the culmination of a long process of decline, but it was nonetheless a shocking event at the time. In the 18th century it was routine for the elites of one country to meddle in the internal affairs of another. For example, in 1740–48 the European powers fought a major war over the succession to the throne in the Austrian Empire, and it seemed self-evident to most diplomats at the time that the warring parties had been justified in getting involved. The Polish–Lithuanian Republic had been the object of that sort of interference for a long time. In 1733–38 the so-called War of Polish Succession pit France and Spain against Russia, Austria, Saxony, and Prussia, with each coalition fighting to place a different candidate on the Polish throne. So the principle of non-interference was non-existent. Nonetheless, that sort of intrusion was taken to a whole new level in 1772, when Poland’s three neighbors simply annexed wide swaths of the country in what came to be known as the First Partition (Figure 1.1a, Figure 1.1.b). The background to that startling act of plunder need not detain us here; suffice it to say that it was primarily the result of maneuvering by diplomats in Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna. Poland itself was merely the board on which they were playing their game of Great Power politics.
Responding to this humiliation, a reform movement in Poland began pushing for political changes that would strengthen the country against further aggression. Their efforts culminated in a new constitution on May 3, 1791 – a date that is a major national holiday today. The specific provisions of this document were less important in the long run than the rhetoric used to explain and justify them. Slogans like “justice,” “independence,” “fatherland,” “nation,” and above all “freedom” evoked the ideals of the Enlightenment. The very act of writing a binding constitution implied that the law stood above any particular ruler, and not vice versa. Such liberal democratic theories were abhorrent to much of the political elite in Europe at the time, particularly in Russia.
and Prussia. After the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, conservatives were committed to stopping the virus of revolt wherever it appeared. The May 3 Constitution was a provocation to them, and they responded accordingly: in 1793 Poland was partitioned a second time (Figure 1.1c), leaving only a small rump of a country. In response, a reform-minded military hero named Tadeusz Kościuszko (who had earlier fought in the American Revolution, earning the rank of general in Washington’s army) launched a desperate rebellion. The unsurprising retribution was the Third Partition, in 1795 (Figure 1.1d). Poland–Lithuania was no more.

Without an independent state, what is “Polish history” supposed to describe? Many authors have focused on the political and military struggle to regain independence, on the assumption that with the Republic gone, the fight to get it back must necessarily be the main topic of Polish history. That effort was ultimately successful, but there were lots of defeats along the way. There were two major rebellions in the Russian-occupied territories in 1830 and 1863, each leading to crackdowns that only made the situation worse. There were also several smaller armed revolts and countless aborted conspiracies in all three partitions, none of which brought independence any nearer but all of which created heroes and legends that could serve as inspirations for later generations of national activists. An archetype emerged: the valiant freedom-fighter who would risk anything, even death (particularly death), for the sake of the nation. This figure was a tragic hero in the classic sense: a person whose virtue was tied up with a fatal flaw that would always lead to defeat. Poland itself became such a hero, with novelists, poets, and historians telling the story of the nation as if it were a collective agent fighting for its existence, only to fail, inevitably but gallantly, each time. Its virtue was a love of freedom and a courageous willingness to fight for it; its fatal flaw was the tendency to do so regardless of the chance of success.

Corresponding to the heroic but tragic freedom-fighter was another model that resonates to this day in Poland, the so-called Matka-Polka (Mother-Pole). This figure provided a model of national femininity to support the masculine ideal of the insurgent. The Matka-Polka was also defined by sacrifice: that of the wife who willingly accepts her husband’s departure and death for the national cause, and who raises children who are prepared to give their lives in the same way. She is stoic and rather joyless, a beacon of moral rectitude for her warrior-husband.
In many ways the Matka-Polka is a variation on familiar 19th century bourgeois norms of femininity (see Figure 1.2). Throughout Europe at the time women of means were told that their purpose was twofold: to raise children and to embody morality for their husbands. As industrial capitalism was replacing older ethical values with norms better suited to a cut-throat business world, women were often held up as the only thing standing between modernity and perdition. In Poland as in France or Britain, this ideal of femininity was narrowly limited to those wealthy enough to sustain a family on just a man’s income (an unattainable luxury for industrial laborers). In Poland this economic stratum was, until the very end of the 19th century, limited to the hereditary nobility – precisely those who were most likely to be drawn to the national movement. Thus the Matka-Polka offered a local twist on the familiar elite feminine norm by giving her the added duty of sustaining not just morality and social order, but the nation as well.

The problem with these archetypes was that many (perhaps even most) people in the lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Republic refused to take part in this fight. It wasn’t really Poland (in the abstract) that fought for independence, but a specific subset of the population. This brings us to one of the most important but most challenging aspects of Polish history: the meaning and scope of the very word “Poland.” Not all the people living in the lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Republic always called themselves Polish or were recognized as Polish by others, but exactly how that adjective should be defined has been a topic of heated debate for more than two centuries. One approach has been to focus on those who spoke Polish and/or self-identified as Poles. That seems appealing at first glance, but in fact it leads to a lot of problems. For example, during the 19th and early 20th century around a third of the people living in Warsaw spoke Yiddish as their primary language, and this figure was even higher in many smaller towns and cities. In the eastern parts of the former Republic only a small minority spoke Polish, with Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian dominating. The largest and richest city of the Republic was known by its German-speaking majority as Danzig, though many of the peasants living outside the city spoke Polish (or a closely related language called Kashubian) and called it Gdańsk. Should we relegate all these non-Polish speakers to the tangential category of “ethnic minorities,” best discussed in separate books? That would be misleading, because we can’t make any sense of Polish history unless we place diversity front-and-center. A history of
Figure 1.2  Portrayals of 19th century ideals of masculinity and femininity. (a) Artur Grottger, *Bitwa* (The Battle), 1863, reproduced by permission of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest; (b) *Pożegnanie i powitanie* (Farewell and Welcome), 1865–66, courtesy of the Polish National Museum in Kraków.
Poland that failed to fully consider Jews and Ukrainians would be as flawed as a history of the United States that dealt exclusively with white English-speaking Protestants. We must never forget that the country destroyed by the partitions had been called the Polish–Lithuanian Republic, not simply Poland. In other words, it was an amalgamation of two separate polities, not a homogeneous nation-state. In 1386 Queen Jadwiga of Poland married Grand Duke Jogaila (Jagiełło) of Lithuania, and their heirs ruled both countries for almost two centuries. During that time the elites of Lithuania gradually drew closer to their Polish counterparts, and by 1569 the bonds were close enough to enable the transformation of this dynastic alliance into a united Polish–Lithuanian state. Cultural homogenization, however, came very slowly: Polish was made the official language of governance for the whole Republic only in 1699, and although Roman Catholicism was dominant by the late 17th century, many Eastern Rite Catholic (and some Protestant) nobles remained. In this context “Lithuania” was the name of a large administrative region with its own separate laws and customs, but the landowning nobles who lived there participated fully in Polish politics and culture. The word “Poland” was therefore used to refer to a specific territory within the Republic (the part that had been the medieval Kingdom of Poland), but people often casually used the term to describe the entire country (thus “the War for Polish Succession” or “The Partitions of Poland”).

This slippery nomenclature allows us to make sense of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), who is to Poles what William Shakespeare is to Anglophones. Schoolchildren still have to memorize his poems, and his plays have been made into countless films – most recently in 1999, when the famous director Andrzej Wajda released a much-praised rendition of Mickiewicz’s masterpiece, Pan Tadeusz. That particular Polish-language work is noteworthy because of its opening lines:

Lithuania, my Fatherland
You are like health.
Only those who have lost you
can fully appreciate you.\(^2\)

In other words, the most famous Polish poet began his most famous work with a homage to his homeland: Lithuania. There is, appropriately enough, a statue to Adomas Mickevičius in Vilnius, the capital of
Lithuania. But that’s not all: Mickiewicz’s birthplace was in the village of Zaosie, which is located in what is today Belarus. That country put the image of a young Адам Міцкевіч on a national stamp in 1998 to commemorate the bicentenary of his birth. So is Mickiewicz Polish, Lithuanian, or Belarusian? Well, he was all of the above and none of the above. All of the above, insofar as Mickiewicz did not see these labels as mutually exclusive. None of the above, insofar as those terms meant something for him that bears little relation to what they mean to us.

Sometimes the Polish–Lithuanian Republic is characterized as a haven of ethnic tolerance and cohabitation, and while that claim is not necessarily false, it can be misleading. On the one hand, the Republic was probably the most religiously and linguistically diverse place in Europe. We don’t have exact numbers, but best estimates are that by the 18th century about half the population was Western Rite (Roman) Catholic, and another third was Eastern Rite Catholic. The latter group was created in the late 16th century in a failed attempt to reunite the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) branches of Christianity. On matters of ritual and tradition the Eastern Rite Catholics retain Orthodox practices, but they acknowledge the authority of the pope in Rome. Just to make matters more confusing, they are sometimes called “Uniates” or “Greek Catholics.” About 7 percent of the population of the Polish–Lithuanian Republic was Jewish, and the Protestants and Eastern Orthodox were at about 5 percent each. Language and religion did not precisely overlap, but in very broad terms the Roman Catholics mostly spoke Polish or Lithuanian, the Eastern Rite Catholics mostly spoke Ukrainian, the Eastern Orthodox mostly spoke Russian or Belarusian, the Protestants mostly spoke German, and the Jews mostly spoke a language that would later come to be known as Yiddish. That said, it would be a huge mistake to transpose our modern ethno-national categories (Pole, Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian, Jew, German), back onto the inhabitants of the Republic. If we want to understand those people in their own terms, we have to accept that in their world, social status and function mattered more than language or even religion.

At the top of that social world was the szlachta (nobility), which made up around 8–9 percent of the population in the late 18th century. The adult males among them had a virtual lock on political and economic power. The right to own land was limited to the szlachta and the Church, and the military was dominated by men of noble birth. Nearly all the members of this caste spoke Polish as their primary language, and
nearly all were Roman Catholics – but their family lineage, rather than language or religion, constituted the focal point of their identity. Moving down the social hierarchy, about 6 percent of the population were townspeople, and another 0.5 percent were members of the clergy. Each of these groups had its own internal self-governance, its own system of courts, and its own distinct laws. The 6–9 percent of the population that was Jewish was also set apart, and their autonomy was in accordance with the overall decentralized structure of the state. For the most part, as long as the Jewish communities of Poland paid their taxes they could manage their own internal affairs, just as the nobles, the townspeople, and the clergy could. There were other (much smaller) groups as well: Armenians, Muslim Tatars, Dutch and Scottish religious dissidents, and more.

Finally there were the peasants, making up almost three quarters of the population. Unlike the nobles, the townspeople, the clergy, or the Jews, the peasants had virtually no self-governance. They were serfs, subject to the will of the landowners. Serfdom was not quite the same thing as slavery, because they could not be bought or sold like the Africans deported to the chattel markets of the United States or Caribbean. But serfs were not free: they had virtually no civil or legal liberties, and they were subordinate to their lords in all matters. They were tied to the estates on which they lived, and had to provide their lords with dues (either in the form of their own produce or labor on the noble’s land). It would have been meaningless to speak about a “Polish nation” that encompassed both the landowners and the serfs; in fact, some 17th and 18th century texts even referred to a separate “noble nation” that ruled over a “plebian nation.” The serfs were subjects of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, while the nobles were citizens. Revealingly, as late as the early 20th century the Polish word obywatel could be translated as both “citizen” and “noble landowner.”

The nobles spoke of privileges (przywileje, from the Latin privus [private] and lex, [law]) rather than rights, and these existed at least in part to sustain control over the peasantry, free from interference from any central royal authority. The country was called a republic because the monarchy was tightly constrained by an elected assembly of the noblemen (the Sejm). The crown could not arrest or punish a nobleman without a trial, and could not raise revenue, declare war, or enact laws without the consent of the Sejm. Many monarchies in early modern Europe had noble assemblies that placed some checks on royal
power – in fact, nowadays historians recognize that 17th and 18th century absolutism was never as absolute as was once imagined. But the power of the Sejm was extraordinary: according to a constitutional document from 1505, the basic governing principle of the Republic was *nihil novi nisi commune consensu* (nothing new without general consent), which was more commonly rendered in Polish with the rhyming phrase *nic o nas bez nas* (nothing about us without us). The “us” in that slogan were the nobles, not the population more generally; in other words, this was a statement of noble privilege rather than an affirmation of general liberty. And what, precisely, was the nobility protecting with this privilege? Four years prior to that 1505 constitution the Sejm forced the king to agree to a law that banned all peasant mobility without the permission of the landowner, and in 1519 the monarchy renounced all authority over how the landowners treated their peasants. In other words, peasants could no longer appeal to a royal court over the heads of their masters, and members of the nobility were free to run their estates as they saw fit. The liberty of the nobles was therefore inextricably linked to a loss of liberty for the peasants.

The system of serfdom would change a lot between the early 16th and the late 18th centuries, but the one constant was a social structure that established almost impenetrable barriers between nobles and peasants (and Jews, clergy, and townsmen). Each group was a world unto itself, with its own laws and its own forms of governance. The resulting decentralization meant that the Republic was ill fitted to stand up against the growing strength of the more centralized monarchies of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Perhaps more important, the disempowerment of the peasantry led to their impoverishment, which in turn meant that there was only a tiny domestic market for any goods that were not necessary for basic subsistence. The Republic had very little of what we would today call “consumer demand,” which served as a crucial impetus for the early commercial revolution (and later the industrial revolution) in northwestern Europe. This meant that by the 18th century Poland-Lithuania occupied a large space on the map, but was falling far behind its immediate neighbors in terms of political might and its northwest European contemporaries in terms of economic might.

In the midst of that decline, however, the linguistic and religious diversity of the country survived (in practice if not always in law and
ideology). The nobility was mostly Roman Catholic, and by the early 18th century this was reflected in the official Catholicism of the state institutions and high culture. But even that degree of homogeneity had not always existed. In 1573, in the midst of the wars of the Protestant reformation, the members of the Sejm signed the following affirmation: “We promise together, on our own behalf and in the name of our heirs for all time, on our faith, honor, and conscience, that though we are of different religions, we will maintain peace among ourselves, and not shed blood because of differences of faith or church.” Significantly, this was not a claim that “we” Catholics will tolerate “you” Protestants: it was an assertion that “we” could be from either religion. This broad-mindedness would erode over the coming decades, but that’s beside the point. Since those outside the szlachta did not count for anything politically, it simply didn’t matter if they worshiped differently or spoke different languages. Diversity could flourish among the commoners, because it was (mostly) irrelevant for public life. This was not merely a case of a Polish majority tolerating non-Polish minorities, because there was no sense that the Polish-speaking Roman Catholics (both nobles and peasants) belonged to a common community that excluded those other languages and faiths. The 750,000 or so nobles were indeed such a community, and they frequently expressed their patriotism. But that patriotism was emphatically not something that encompassed those of different social status – and the apathy was mutual.

Because of serfdom and the ensuing cultural barriers, expecting peasants to fight for Poland in the late 18th or early 19th centuries was akin to asking slaves to fight for the Confederacy in the US Civil War. Today we might take it for granted that any Pole ought to be opposed to foreign occupation, but from a peasant’s point of view it was not obvious why this should be so. To be more precise, it was not obvious who counted as “foreign.” Just because a noble lord spoke the same language as an enserfed peasant (approximately the same, because class differences were marked by differences in dialect), it didn’t mean that the latter would see the former as “one of us.” Even before the partitions some national activists were concerned about this, and the controversial idea of emancipation was already being discussed. That debate intensified after 1795, with more and more nationalists arguing that only if the cause of Poland came to be identified with the cause of radical social reform did they stand any
chance of success. Increasingly the idea of Polish restoration was packaged with the idea of liberation for the poor and oppressed, and the so-called “Polish question” was seen throughout Europe as primarily the concern of the left. No less a luminary than Karl Marx declared that “[Poland’s] liberation has become a matter of honor for all the democrats of Europe.”

The dilemma, though, was that the more Polish patriotism radicalized, the less popular it became among its original base, the nobles. Most members of the nobility longed for a restoration of their state; after all, for them the old Republic had been a magnificent place. In the more centralized monarchies of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, those nobles had lost much of their political authority, but they had not lost their economic power. Most did not want to surrender this final component of their former status, so they faced a difficult problem: accept radical land reform so as to win the peasants over to the cause of national restoration, or maintain their wealth and power within the context of a Russian, Austrian, or Prussian state. Different nobles would make different decisions at different times, but in no case was that choice an easy one. Broadly speaking (and with many prominent exceptions), the national movement was made up of the lesser nobility: those with close enough ties to the old Republic to desire its restoration, but without quite as much economic stake in the status quo.

A growing number of peasants were in fact drawn into this national movement, but never enough to generate the sort of uncontrollable revolt that might have really shaken the authority of the partitioning powers. During the Kościuszko revolt of 1794, only a handful of peasants took part (though they attained a huge symbolic role in later retellings of the uprising). When another rebellion came in 1830 there was more plebian support, and during the last major uprising in 1863 (the so-called January Uprising) there was even more. Never, though, were these numbers anywhere near enough to spark the sort of truly universal insurrection that could succeed against the partitioning powers. In fact, peasant activism could go in the other direction. After a violent peasant uprising in the region of western Galicia (what is today southern Poland) in 1846, many of the participants referred to their enemies in the manor houses as “Poles,” as if that label could only be applied to a member of the nobility. The fact that both master and peasant spoke Polish was not relevant in that context.
Languages and Labels

If it took time for Polish-speaking peasants to accept the label “Polish,” it was even harder for those who spoke other languages. Today we take it for granted that someone speaking Ukrainian is a Ukrainian, someone speaking Belarusian is a Belarusian, and someone speaking Lithuanian is a Lithuanian. We shouldn’t. For most of the 19th century Russian mapmakers used the expression “Little Russia” (Малороссия) for the region that we call Ukraine, while their Polish counterparts and most locals preferred the term “Ruthenia” (Руси). The name “Ukraine” had been used by some cartographers in the middle ages, but not much since then. For several centuries this region was part of Poland, until Russia conquered the eastern part in the 17th century. During the 19th century it was almost entirely in the Russian Empire, except for a bit in the west that was part of Austria. Prior to the modern era the self-identity of the peasants living in these territories simply wasn’t important. They were serfs, and that was all that mattered. However, with the Polish national movement (and counterparts in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and many other places) spreading the idea that each ethno-linguistic group constituted a separate community, some writers and political activists began demanding recognition for the Ukrainians. Since both the terms “Little Russians” and “Ruthenians” had somewhat pejorative undertones when used by Russians or Poles, the older term was brought out and dusted off. But picking a label is one thing; inculcating an identity is another. It would take many decades to convince people in that region to think of themselves as part of a single Ukrainian nation, and even at the start of the 20th century that process was far from complete.

What was true for the Ukrainians was doubly so for the Lithuanians, and triply so for the Belarusians. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania had been a constituent part of the old Republic, but that was a territorial and political expression rather than an ethno-linguistic one. In fact, the language of state for the Grand Duchy prior to the union with Poland was a now-extinct Slavic language; what we call Lithuanian was used only in a small region in the north of the country, along the Baltic Sea. Nonetheless, the popularity of ethno-national mobilizing eventually came to the area around Vilnius and Kaunas, and by the start of the 20th century there was a small group of activists pressing for the creation of
a totally separate Lithuanian state. The inhabitants of the old Grand Duchy who spoke neither Lithuanian, Polish, nor Ukrainian were called Belarusians by ethnographers. They were almost entirely illiterate and very poor, living in a region with few good roads or large towns. While a handful of ambitious intellectuals were talking about a Belarusian national movement, there really wasn’t much of one prior to World War I. But the lack of a firm Belarusian identity did not imply that those peasants thought of themselves as Polish, or Lithuanian, or Ukrainian, or anything else. They had a strong sense of local belonging, but that didn’t map well onto the grand categories of identity that national activists preferred.

Since these ethno-linguistic labels were all in flux during the 19th century, many Polish national activists nurtured hopes that the territories of the old Polish-Lithuanian Republic would all become part of a future Poland. With each passing decade this sort of multicultural vision became less and less plausible, as ethno-linguistic nationalism took root throughout the region. That said, it wasn’t that these peasants had once been Polish but then were “lost” to Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian separatists. Instead, prior to the partitions they had been enserfed peasants with no political rights, no stake in the success or failure of the Republic, and little sense of national identity at all. In the 19th century a number of national activists began vying for their loyalty, but it was by no means certain which group would win. What was clear, however, was that peasants who didn’t speak Polish were even less likely than their polonophone peers to join the Polish cause.

Faith and Fatherland

In the 19th century the Roman Catholic Church was ambivalent about the struggle for Polish political restoration. Around the time of the partitions the Church was locked in a fierce battle with the proponents of democratic change all across Europe, and this would shape papal attitudes towards the Polish cause. In 1790 the revolutionary French national assembly confiscated the vast wealth of the Church, abolished all contemplative religious orders, established elections for priests and bishops, and forced the clergy to take an oath that placed the authority of the French nation above that of the pope. Eight years later, French-backed revolutionaries in Rome deposed Pope Pius VI