POLISH NATIONAL MYTHOLOGIES

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Everyone needs myths. Individuals need myths. Nations need myths. Myths are the sets of simplified beliefs, which may or may not approximate to reality, but which give us a sense of our origins, our identity, and our purposes. They are patently subjective, but are often more powerful than the objective truth — for the truth can be painful.

Some nations have more need of their myths than do others. Imperial nations invent myths in order to justify their rule over other peoples. Defeated nations invent myths to explain their misfortune and to assist their survival. Poland may well have belonged to this latter category, as political adversity over many generations seems to have created the sort of imaginative climate in which myths can flourish. Polish culture, and in particular literature, art and historiography, is full of instances where the national imagination triumphs over realism.

A facetious piece of evidence to support this point of view may lie in the fact that the Polish word for 'myth' is *mit* — pronounced like the English 'meat'. In the days of food shortages in the 1970s and 1980s, when Poles would stand in line for hours on end for the most basic of supplies, they used to pass the time telling jokes. One hoary teaser asked: 'What word has the same sound and meaning in both English and Polish?' The answer was, of course, '*mit*'.

More seriously, it is important to remember that, in modern times, the Poles have had to compete with the mythology of other stronger nations who have often given a pejorative twist to Poland's image. In the national mythology of Russia, for example, the Poles are usually cast in the role of the eternal Western enemy, the traitor to Slavdom, the religious foe of the Orthodox Church, the main resort of scheming foreigners, who constantly conspire to invade Russia and to undermine her traditional values. Russians love to remember the one occasion, in 1612, when a Polish army occupied the Moscow Kremlin. They conveniently forget the far more numerous occasions when Russian armies have trampled over Poland. It so happened that Russia's national identity was crystallizing in the mid-nineteenth century, in the very era when the two great Polish Risings of 1830–1 and 1863–4 shook the tsarist empire to its core. The opposition between noble Russian and ignoble Poland was fixed for the duration. One has only to watch one of the wonderful Russian operas of that era, such as

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Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* or Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, to see how deeply Russians are imbued with a negative stereotype of Poland. It was no accident that Dostoevsky gave Polish names to many of his criminal characters (notwithstanding that his own name was of Polish origin).

The Zionist myth, too, casts Poland in a negative role. It has gained widespread publicity due to the unparalleled tragedy of the Jewish Holocaust and to powerful American support for the state of Israel. In essence, it holds that the stateless condition of the Jewish people in pre-war Europe left them so vulnerable to persecution that the creation of a separate Jewish state in Palestine was the only viable solution. Unfortunately, since Poland was the European country where most European Jews had settled and where the German Nazis chose to perpetrate the Holocaust, an exclusively hostile image of Poland has become a central feature of the Zionist programme.

Germans have looked on their eastern neighbours much as the English once looked on the Irish. Just as Ireland proved to be the only obviously discontented part of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, so the Poles stood out as the most substantial and troublesome minority in the German empire. What is more, Poland provided the most accessible pool of cheap labour for German industries, and millions of poor migrants flocked westwards into the rapidly expanding cities. As a result, the widespread sympathy for Poland, which had been manifested in the era of the *Polenlieder* of the 1830s, faded away; and for at least a century German and Polish nationalism were irreconcilable. According to the hostile German stereotypes, 'Polack' summoned up images of hopeless romantics, feckless workers, undesirable tramps, and anti-German conspirators. *Polnische Wirtschaft* (literally 'Polish economics') became a standard German idiom for 'a right old mess'. So-called 'Polish Jokes', which type-cast all Poles as primitive and stupid, were a close parallel to the 'Irish Jokes' retailed in England. The long tradition of disdain for everything Polish provided a ready-made ingredient for the later Nazi policies of German racial supremacy, where Poles were officially included in the class of *Untermenschen* — 'sub-humans'.

There is no way that the riches of Poland's national mythology can be reduced to the space of one short chapter. They can be illustrated, however, from a number of different examples drawn from a variety of historical periods. In the exposé which follows, seven separate myths will be examined.

1587

In 1587, the memorable *Annales sive de origine et rebus gestis Polonorum et Lithuanorum* was published in Cracow by the Calvinist nobleman, Stanisław Sarnicki. This treatise on 'The Origins and Deeds of the Poles and Lithuanians' was by no means the first of its kind. Sarnicki had several prominent rivals in the historical profession of his day, including the Bishop of Warmia, Marcin Kromer (1512–89), whose famous chronicle, *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum*, had been printed more than thirty years earlier. Sarnicki is remembered for giving a new twist to an old tale.

Ever since the Jagiellonian court historian, Canon Jan Długosz, writing in the previous century, most Polish writers had held to the theory that the Polish nation could trace its roots to the ancient Sarmatians, a nomadic Indo-Iranian people who had settled the plains of Eastern Europe before the Christian Era. The classical division of the Eurasian steppes into *Sarmatia europea* and *Sarmatia asiatica* with the boundary on the River Tanais or Don was still current in Renaissance Europe. Sarnicki's contribution was to claim that the Sarmatians were ancestors not of the Poles as a whole, but only of the Polish nobility. Henceforth, it was the *szlachta* alone who claimed Sarmatian descent. Very soon, *nobilis-Polonus-Sarmata* became synonyms for members of a 'Sarmatian race'. Non-nobles, burghers, Jews and peasants were not even counted as Poles. The 'Polish nation' was seen to consist exclusively of nobles.

Such was the haughty arrogance of this noble racism that it may be compared to the notorious *limpieza de sangre*, the belief in the purity of noble blood which flourished in Spain in the same period. Polish nobles were taught to believe that they were biologically different from the rest of the population, and that their privileges depended on 'the defence of their blood'. Miscegenation with the lower estates was treated as a crime. Walerian Nekanda Trepka, author of the *Liber chamorum* or 'Book of Hams' (1620), spent much of his life rooting out thousands of families of ignoble origin who, having fraudulently wormed their way into the *szlachta*, were busily diluting the race. For him, and his like, it was impossible to think without distaste of nobles and non-nobles marrying or breeding:

> Balsam, when added to tar, ceases to be balsam but turns to tar; and weeds, when sown in the finest fields, will not become wheat [...] so, if a noblewoman marries a peasant, she will certainly give birth to an ignoble

child. For what purity can come from such impurity, what perfume from such a stench! It is a wise proverb: Nightingales are not born from owls.[1]

Poland's 'Sarmatian Myth' has many parallels in other European countries. It has much in common, for example, with the Normanist Theory in Russia, which held that the founders of 'Kievan Rus'' and their kin in the modern Russian aristocracy were the descendants not of Slavs but of Vikings. What is more, like the Normanist Theory, it evolved over time. In the seventeenth century, in the era of Poland's closest contacts with the Ottomans, it helped to bolster the Oriental style of dress and armour which the Polish nobility adopted. In the eighteenth century, it underlay the conservative philosophy of 'Sarmatism' which favoured the complacent view that everything in Poland, including the 'Golden Freedom' of the *szlachta*, was unique and superior. By that time, on the eve of the Commonwealth's demise, the racial overtones of the ancestral myth had mellowed; and large numbers of Jews, for example, were able to buy their ennoblement without difficulty.

The question remains whether Poland's 'Sarmatian Myth' contains any grain of historical fact. Most historians have treated it as a colourful fantasy, a genealogical invention as eccentric as that of Polish nobles who claimed to be descended from Noah or from Julius Caesar. The evidence is certainly thin. But that does not stop scholars from trying. One intriguing curiosity lies in the passable resemblance which exists between the emblems of Poland's unusual system of heraldry and the *tamgas* or 'pictorial charges' of the ancient Sarmatians. Given that a tribe of Sarmatian Alans was said to have disappeared into the backwoods of Eastern Europe in the fourth century, it is nice to think that there might have been some sort of ancestral link between the most efficient cavalrymen of the Roman Army and the most distinguished cavalrymen of early modern Europe. Sobieski's 'Winged Hussars' were still carrying the same enormous lances, and riding the same oversize chargers, that had made the Alans famous more than a thousand years before.[2]

1620

On 11 March 1620, the Crown Chancellor of Poland, George Ossoliński, paid a visit to London, and read a Latin peroration before King James I in Whitehall Palace. He brought news of the latest

1. From W.N. Trepka, *Liber Generationis vel Plebeanorum* (Liber Chamorum), ed. W. Dworaczek, Wrocław, 1963; 'Proemium' quoted by Norman Davies, *God's Playground*, 2 vols, Oxford, 1981, vol. 1, p. 233.
2. See Tadeusz Sulimirski, *The Sarmatians*, London, 1970, discussed by Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea*, London, 1995, pp. 230–43.

invasion of Poland's eastern borders by the Ottoman Turks, and appealed to the English King for aid against the infidel. After all, as he explained, Poland was 'the most trusty rampart of the Christian world':

Tandem erupit ottomanorum iam diu celatum pectore virus [...] et publico barbarorum furore, validissimum christiani orbis antemurale, petitur Polonia.

[At last, the poisonous and hidden plan of the Ottomans has been revealed, and Poland, the most trusty rampart of the Christian world, has been assailed by the vulgar fury of the barbarians.][3]

The myth of Poland's role as the 'Bulwark of Christendom', the *antemurale christianitatis*, had a very long career. Initially inspired by the wars against Turks and Tartars, it was later employed to justify Poland's defence of Catholic Europe against the Orthodox Muscovites, and later against Communism and Fascism. It was still very much alive in the twentieth century, in the Polish–Soviet War of 1920, for instance, or in the spiritual sense, in Solidarity's stand against the decaying Communist regime of the 1980s. Not surprisingly, it inspired the name of a very distinguished academic journal, published in Rome.[4]

The myth of the *antemurale* does indeed encapsulate many splendid sentiments, but it can hardly be taken at face value as a perfect reflection of historical reality. For one thing, the Poles were not alone in seeing themselves as the watchmen of the Catholic world. Hungarians and Croats boasted very similar views, and used the same terminology. For another, it is not realistic to think of Poland's strategic role over half a millennium exclusively in terms of static defensive emplacements. On many occasions, the Poles did man the ramparts. On other occasions, they sallied forth and stormed other people's ramparts. It may have been something of an exception to the general rule, but the sight of Polish soldiers manning the walls of the Moscow Kremlin in 1612, or marching with Napoleon into Russia exactly 200 years later, is not what the *antemurale* was meant to signify. It is a sad fact that different European nations remember different historical dates.

3. *A True Copy of the Latin Oration of the excellent Lord George Ossolinski [...] as it was pronounced to his Majestie at White-hall by the said Embassadour [...]* (London, 1621); printed in W. Chalewik (ed.), *Anglo-Polish Renaissance Texts*, Warsaw, 1968, pp. 247–62.
4. *Antemurale*, Journal of the Polish Historical Institute in Rome (1954–).

1655

In 1655, the Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania had been overrun from all sides. The Russians had taken Minsk and Wilno, and were marching on Kiev. The Swedish armies of Charles X had advanced on two fronts, from Pomerania in the West and from the Baltic provinces in the East. They captured Warsaw and Cracow. The Pauline monastery of Jasna Góra near Częstochowa was one of the very few fortified positions in the country to hold firm. Protected by its holy icon of the 'Black Madonna', the *Matka Boska Częstochowska*, it resisted all attempts to seize it. As the monks intoned their prayers to the Blessed Virgin, and the Prior stood on the battlements hurling defiance, the Swedish cannonballs bounced harmlessly off the roof, and Swedish muskets backfired into the musketeers' faces. The monastery proved impregnable. After months of futile siege, the Swedish King sounded the retreat. Poland was saved. Indeed, she recovered so quickly that, within two years, the Polish armies of Hetman Stefan Czarnecki were advancing across the Baltic into Sweden. In recognition of the country's deliverance, the Polish King, John Casimir, vowed to dedicate his whole kingdom to the Virgin Mary. At the moving ceremony held in the cathedral of Lwów, the *Sluby lwowskie*, in 1656, the Virgin Mary was solemnly crowned as the 'Queen of Poland'. Henceforth, Catholic Poles were taught not just to revere the Mother of God as their patron, but increasingly to regard Catholicity as the touchstone of their national identity. Here was a key moment in the growth of myth of the *Polak-Katolik*, 'the Catholic Pole' — the belief that if you weren't a Roman Catholic, you somehow didn't qualify to be a true Pole.

Given that anything between one third and one half of Poland's population consisted of non-Catholics — Protestants, Orthodox, Uniates, Jews and Muslims — the growing association of Polishness and Catholicity was to prove extremely divisive. The divisions became most intense in the era of nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when each of Poland's numerous minorities developed strong national and ethnic identities of their own. It was no accident that the journal of Poland's most nationalistic political movement, the *Stronnictwo narodowe* or 'National Democracy' of Roman Dmowski (1870–1939), took the name of *Polakatolik*. It would have been news to Polish nationalists of that persuasion to learn that the Teutonic Knights, and the Kingdom of France, had both adopted the patronage of the Virgin Mary long before Poland did.

Even so, for generations of Poles, the serene and sorrowful face of the *Matka Boska* has been the source of great solace. The power of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and her counterpart in Lithuania, the *Matka Boska Ostrobramska*, is celebrated in liturgy and literature alike.

Best loved, perhaps, is the invocation which occurs in the opening lines of the national epic, *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz:

> Panno święta, co Jasnej bronisz Częstochowy
> I w Ostrej świecisz Bramie! Ty, co gród zamkowy
> Nowogródzki ochraniasz z jego wiernym ludem!
> Jak mnie dziecko do zdrowia powróciłaś cudem
> (Gdy od płaczącej matki pod Twoją opiekę
> Ofiarowany, martwą podniosłem powiekę
> I zaraz mogłem pieszo do Twych świątyń progu
> Iść za wrócone życie podziękować Bogu),
> Tak nas powrócisz cudem na Ojczyzny łono.

[O Holy Virgin, who guards the Bright Mount of Częstochowa / and shines in the Pointed Gate of Wilno! You, who / shield the castle wall of Novogródek and its faithful folk! / Just as you miraculously returned me to health as a child / (When, surrendered to your care by my weeping mother, / I raised a dead eyelid / And could walk straightaway to the door of your temple / To give thanks to God for a life redeemed), / So by a miracle you will return us to the bosom of our homeland.][5]

Personally, I would add the magnificent words of a later poet, Leszek Serafinowicz, who took the pen name of Jan Lechoń (1859–1956), one of the founders of the Skamander Group:

> Matka Boska Częstochowska, ubrana perłami
> Cała w złocie i brylantach modli się za nami...
> O Ty, której obraz widać w kazdej polskiej chacie,
> I w kosciele, i w sklepiku, i w pysznej komnacie,
> W ręku tego co umiera, nad kołyszką dzieci,
> I przed ktorą dniem i nocą wciąż się światło świeci.
> Która perły masz od królów, złoto od rycerzy
> W którą wierzy nawet taki który w nic nie wierzy,
> Która widzisz z nas każdego cudnymi oczami,
> Matko Boska Częstochowska, zmiłuj się nad nami.

[Oh, Holy Mother of Częstochowa, dressed in pearls, / Covered in gold and diamonds, pray for us all... / You, whose image one sees in every Polish cottage, / In every church, in every humble shop, in every proud hall, / You are there in the hand of the dying and in the baby's cradle; / Night and day, the light burns constantly before you. / You have jewels from kings, and the golden gifts of noble knights. / Yet they believe in you, even those who believe in nothing. / You watch over each of us through miraculous eyes. / Oh Mother of God of Częstochowa, have mercy on our souls.][6]

5. Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, I, ll. 5–13, translated by Norman Davies.
6. Jan Lechoń, 'Matka Boska Częstochowska' in *Poezja Polska: Antologia w układzie S. Grochowiaka i J. Maciejewskiego*, Warsaw, 1973, vol. 2, p. 188.

I take the key line here to be: 'Yet they believe in you, even those who believe in nothing.' Lechoń could see, as many did not, that Poland's supremely mystical Catholic symbol can give strength to Christians and to non-Christians alike.

1768

Umań, or Human´, is a little town near the Dnieper, deep in Ukraine and close to the easternmost border of the old Polish Commonwealth. In 1768, it was the scene of a series of terrible massacres. A fearful peasant rising, the *Koliszczyzna*, had sent bands of serfs on the rampage; and in those parts, the peasants were Orthodox. In the mayhem, Catholics and Jews were butchered together in their thousands, or herded into their churches and synagogues and burned alive. A Russian army appeared to restore order by methods little different from those of the rebels.

It is in the setting of that Peasant Rising that one of the great prophetic figures of Polish (and Ukrainian) history and literature most usually makes his appearance. Little of certainty is known about the Cossack seer Mojsej Wernyhora. It is not even certain that he really existed, although one source suggests that he was born in Dymitrówka in left-bank Ukraine and that he fled to Poland after killing his brother. His prophecies first circulated by word of mouth, and were only later written down. In the nineteenth century, when the Commonwealth had already been destroyed, he became a symbol of hope and resurrection. He spoke of a 'Golden Age' before the age of disasters, when all the peoples of the former Commonwealth, especially Poles and Ukrainians, had lived in unity. And he foretold the day when honour, harmony and happiness would return. He was celebrated in many different poetic versions from Goszczyński to Wyspiański. The Romantics were specially susceptible to Wernyhora's spell, not least the sublime Słowacki:

> Czy znasz prorocką dumę Wernyhory?
> Czy wiesz, co będzie w jarze Janczarychy,
> Gdzie teraz gołąb lub jelonek cichy,
> Ze łzą przeczystą w szafirowym oku,
> Gdzieś w księżycowym się przegląda stoku?
> Czy wiesz, że wszystkie te się sprawdzą śnicia
> W jednej godzinie rycerskiego życia?
> Ze zemścisz syna, ojca, matkę, brata,
> W tej błyskawicy, co na szabli lata?

[Do you know the prophetic tale of Wernyhora? / Do you know what there will be in the Canyon of Yancharykha / Where now the dove or the silent young stag, / Through crystal tear in sapphire eye, / Watches his reflection somewhere in the falling moon? / Do you know that all those dreams will

all come true / In a single hour of this noble life? / That you will avenge father and son, mother and brother, / In the flash which flies from a swirl of the sabre?][7]

In the twentieth century, ideals similar to those of Wernyhora came to be associated with the Independence Movement of Józef Piłsudski, whose aspiration was to restore a modern version of the old multinational Commonwealth. In the work of historians, they were part and parcel of the so-called 'Jagiellonian Concept' — the idea that Poland's past should be shared by all the peoples who had once lived together in the *Rzeczpospolita*. They were abhorred — by Polish nationalists of the Dmowski persuasion who were looking to a 'Poland for the Poles'; by Ukrainian nationalists, who had a similar vision of 'Ukraine for the Ukrainians'; by the advocates of Russian and Soviet imperialism, who sought to divide and rule; and most bitterly by the post-war Communist regime. In a world of nationalisms and power politics, they may have been impractical; and they certainly lost out. But they were no less respectable for that. They had their moments — as during Piłsudski's ill-starred campaign in 1919–21 for a Federation of the Border Nations. In the spring of 1920, when Piłsudski and his Ukrainian allies liberated Kiev from the Bolsheviks in the name of an independent Ukraine, they seemed to be on the brink of realization. But a world misled by Bolshevik slogans shouted incongruously 'Hands Off Russia!', and the opportunity passed.[8] Yet their day may come again. After all, even today, a conscious policy of confraternity is the only barrier which stands between the sovereignty of the nations of Eastern Europe and the triumph of brute force.

1831

It is one of the ironies of Polish history that the national bard, Adam Mickiewicz, never saw Warsaw or Cracow. Born at Nowogródek in Lithuania, he spent most of his life in exile, first in Russia and later in France. In 1831, at the height of the Russo–Polish War that followed the November Rising, he was in Dresden, composing his mystical patriotic drama *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve). Whilst his peers were fighting in vain for the survival of a constitutional Polish Kingdom, he was forging the allegories and metaphors which gave sense to their struggle. Most powerful of all for a Catholic nation was the idea first launched in the scene in Father Peter's Cell, where Mickiewicz

7. Juliusz Słowacki, *Wacław*, ll. 28–36, quoted by W. Stabryła, *Wernyhora w Literaturze Polskiej* (1933), Cracow, 1996, p. 62.
8. See Norman Davies, 'The Kiev Campaign' in *idem*, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish–Soviet War, 1919-20*, London and New York, 1972, pp. 105–29.

imagined Poland's suffering to be a necessary evil for the eventual salvation of all the world. Poland, it was clearly implied, was 'the Christ of Nations'. As had first been mooted during Kościuszko's National Rising forty years before, the Poles were fighting for 'Our Freedom and Yours': 'The Saviour Nation will arise, and united, will heal the whole of Europe.'

Mickiewicz's contemporary, Kazimierz Brodziński (1791–1835) put it most succinctly:

> Hail, O Christ, Thou Lord of Men,
> Poland in Thy footsteps treading,
> Suffers humbly at Thy bidding,
> Like Thee, too, shall rise again![9]

Elsewhere, in his *Books of the Polish Nation*, Mickiewicz repeated the formula in truly biblical tones:

> But the Kings when they heard were frightened in their hearts, and said [...] 'Come let us slay this nation'. And they conspired together [...]. And they crucified the Polish Nation and laid it in its grave, and cried out 'We have slain and buried Freedom'. But they cried out foolishly [...].
>
> For the Polish Nation did not die. Its body lieth in the grave; but its spirit has descended into the abyss, that is, into the private lives of people who suffer slavery in their own country [...]. But on the Third Day the soul shall return again to the body, and the Nation shall arise, and free all the peoples of Europe from slavery.[10]

Notwithstanding its great emotive power, the myth of the *Chrystus narodów* had several major drawbacks. In the first place, it borders on blasphemy. Whatever the injustices involved, no rigorous Catholic can accept that the political fate of a people may be compared even metaphorically to the crucifixion of Christ. There was, in fact, a profound conflict between the patriotism of Catholic Poles and their loyalty to the faith. Those who were more patriotic than Catholic felt that the Church had betrayed them. Those who were more Catholic than patriotic felt that the insurrectionaries had created an impossible dilemma. Even today, many Poles choose to forget that Mickiewicz was not a conventional believer, or that the Pope in Rome actively condemned the Rising which inspired Mickiewicz's near-blasphemous metaphor.[11]

In the second place, the Christ of Nations concept reinforced the divisions already opened up by the older idea of *Polak-Katolik*. By

9. K. Brodziński, 'Na dzień zmarchwystania polskiego w 1831r', *Poezje*, Wrocław, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 239–40; translated by Norman Davies.
10. A. Mickiewicz, *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego*, ed. S. Pigoń, Cracow, 1927, pp. 55ff., quoted by Davies, *God's Playground*, vol. 2, p. 9.
11. See Norman Davies, 'The Religion of Patriotism' and 'The Divided Conscience' in *idem*, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 268–78.

strengthening Poland's mystical Catholicity, it weakened the bonds of a multinational society. It was more poetic than practical.

Lastly, there is the vexed question of altruism. 'Christ died for the sins of others.' Therefore, Poland fights for the freedom of all. What a wonderful political spin! Of course, there was a sense in which Poland, by opposing the three great empires of Eastern Europe, was *ipso facto* supporting the cause of other oppressed nations. There were many individual cases of generous exiled Poles who gave their lives in the service of far-flung causes. They belonged to an ancient and honourable tradition. The Republic of Haiti has never forgotten the Polish legionaries who helped throw off the rule of France in 1802–3. There is no Hungarian who has not heard of General Józef Bem, hero of the war of 1848–9. And there was Mickiewicz himself, who went to fight for the Roman Republic (that is, against the Pope) in 1849, and who died in Constantinople in 1855, whilst trying to organize auxiliaries to fight against Russia in the Crimean War.

Yet that is not the whole story. When it came to matters closer to home, the Poles were not always so generous. In the politics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was little Polish sympathy for the cause of the Czechs or the Slovaks. In Russia, the task of the tsarist authorities in the western gubernias was greatly assisted by the growing animosities between Poles and Lithuanians, Poles and Jews, Poles and Ruthenians.

1892

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the birth of Poland's modern political parties. The Polish Socialist Party (PPS) came into being, in exile in Paris, in 1892. The Polish Peasant Movement (PSL) held its first gathering at Rzeszow in Galicia in July of the same year. The National League, forerunner of Dmowski's National Democrats, emerged in Warsaw a year later. So too did the Polish Communist group, the SDKP, and its sister circle in Lithuania, the SDWKL. The Polish Christian Democracy or *Chadecja*, which was mainly based in the Prussian Partition, in Silesia, appeared a bit later, in 1902.

Of these, the two parties with the strongest mass support were undoubtedly the Peasants (known as the *ludowcy*) and the Nationalists, the *narodowcy*. The two groups appealed to very different social constituencies, but they both shared a belief in perhaps the most powerful ideological construct of early twentieth-century European politics — what political scientists sometimes call 'integral nationalism'. The central aspect of this construct, most eloquently expounded in this same period in France by the founders of *Action Française*, lay in the mystical union of the nation and the national

territory. Germans invented the slogan 'Blut und Boden' (Blood and Soil). In the Polish case, similar ideas were rooted in the notion which came to be known as the *koncepcja piastowska*, 'The Piast Concept'. One of its early propagators was Bolesław Wysłouch (1855–1937), the founding father of the PSL. The other was Jan Popławski (1854–1908), a leading ideologist of the nationalists.

Reduced to its essentials, the Piast Concept rested on a simple and persuasive historical myth. A thousand years ago and more, the Polish nation had supposedly lived on its ancestral land in unity and harmony, ruled by the benevolent hand of its first legendary ruler, a peasant son called Piast. Over the centuries, however, the Poles lost their unity, and lost control of their native land. All manner of aliens and intruders — Germans, Jews, Ukrainians and Russians — abused Poland's natural hospitality and took large parts of Poland's towns and countryside for themselves. Foreign kings were seated on the Polish throne, to the point when the throne itself was abolished. Poland was robbed of her inheritance. So the message was clear. All patriotic Poles had a duty to unite and drive all foreigners from their native soil: 'Poland for the Poles!' The Piast Concept was the natural ally of the *Polak-Katolik*. It was diametrically opposed to the multinational Jagiellonian Concept which was preferred by the PPS and by Piłsudski's Independence Movement, and which gained the upper hand in the ruling circles of the inter-war period.[12]

One should perhaps recall that modern party politicians were by no means the only ones to have used the Piast legend for their own purposes. In the days of royal elections it had been used as an argument to oppose the rule of foreign kings. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became the custom to give the name of 'Piast' to all Polish-born candidates for the throne. In the Romantic era, Piast was used as a symbol of Poland's distant pagan past, full of mystery, simplicity and bounty:

> Kmieć Piast, przed chatą, dobrego wieczora
> Używał, stary kmieć pełny dobroci;
> A wtem skrzypnęła domora zapora
> I weszli do wrót Aniołowie złoci.
> Wnet przed niemi stół, stągiew miodu spora,
> Pełno mięsiwa i mącznych łakoci,
> Pełno owoców rozsypano różnych.
> Duchów przyjęto jadłem — jak podróżnych
> [...]

[The peasant Piast stood in front of his hut, / A good natured old yokel enjoying the fine evening; / Then suddenly the balcony of his cottage creaked / And in through the gates came the golden angels. / Before them —

12. Davies, 'The Ethnic Core' in *ibid.*, pp. 323–7.

a table, laden with flagons of mead, / And groaning with meats and baked delights, / And covered with fruits of rich variety. / The spirits were treated to the food, as if they were travellers / ...][13]

It is perhaps futile for historians to discuss how much of the Piast Concept was true and how much was false. The point is that millions of Poles believed it, and many still do. What is more, many of the foreign statesmen and politicians, from Woodrow Wilson to Stalin, seemed to believe it. Although no one could actually agree where Poland's 'ethnographic territory' lay, and no one could easily define who exactly was a Pole and who was not, there was a widespread assumption that ethnographic Poland had somehow to be defined and that 'the Poles' were suffering an intolerable injustice until they were given it back. It was a ready-made recipe for blood-spilling. Every attempt to define and reorganize Poland along these lines, from the Paris Peace Conference to Potsdam, ran into immediate trouble. In a region of Europe where historical complexities and ethnic minorities abounded, the problem of Poland's frontiers could never be peaceably solved by the nationalist agenda. In the end, it was solved by brute force. In 1945, with Stalin's backing, the Polish Communists callously adopted the Piast Concept of their pre-war peasant and nationalist opponents, and imposed it by methods which would now be called 'ethnic cleansing'. Official maps were drawn up to show that Poland's frontiers under the first known Piast princes, *c.* AD 1000, coincided almost exactly with the frontiers of the Polish People's Republic as approved by the Allied governments at Yalta and Potsdam.[14] All that remained was to make the population fit the frontiers. All the millions of 'non-Poles', mainly Germans and Ukrainians, who lived on the wrong side of the new lines, had to be expelled from their homes; and millions of Poles, whose homes were now in territory 'recovered' by the Soviet Union, had to be expelled to the People's Republic. (All expellees were conveniently called 'repatriants'.) It was the biggest population exchange in European history. It was the natural consequence of nationalist myths about 'blood and soil' in which so many Europeans had believed since modern mass politics began in the 1890s.

13. Juliusz Słowacki, *Król Duch* (King-Spirit), I, ll. 9–16, translated by Norman Davies.
14. See endpapers, *Polska w Roku 1000* and *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, *Słownik Historii Polski*, Warsaw, 1973.

1920

On 20 January 1920, at the little port of Puck, a ceremony took place in which hundreds of Poles waded into the near-freezing waters of the Baltic to celebrate Poland's mystical union with the sea. It was the day on which the Treaty of Versailles was put into force and a stretch of the Baltic shore was transferred from Germany to the newly independent Republic of Poland. A similar ceremony was repeated a quarter of a century later in January 1945, when, at the end of the Second World War, Poland was to receive a much longer stretch of the Baltic shore. The festivities were probably modelled on the annual *sposalizio del mar* at Venice, the festival which celebrates the wedding of St Mark's city with the Mediterranean Sea. In Polish, they are known as the *Zaślubiny Polski z morzem*, the 'maritime nuptials'.

Far be it from a Cracowian like myself to suggest that Poland's traditions lie much more with the plentiful plains and magnificent mountains of the South than with the desolate dunes of the North. For many, the notion of the Poles as a historic seafaring nation is, to say the least, eccentric. Apart from the ancient cities of Danzig and Elbing, both of which were heavily dominated by Germans, the historic Kingdom of Poland had no important coastline from the fourteenth century onwards.

Of course, in the very earliest years of Piast history, Poland had controlled the coast of Pomerania from the Oder to the Vistula. Western Pomerania, fiercely contested by Bolesław Krzywousty in the twelfth century, fell into the hands of the local dynasty after Krzywousty's death in 1138. Krzywousty's court chronicler, Gallus Anonymus, immortalized the Pomeranian connection when he recorded a popular Latin song of the day about the joys of life by the seaside:

> Pisces salsos et foetentes apportabant alii
> Palpitantes et recentes nunc apportant filii.
> Civitates invadebant patres nostri primitus
> Hii procellas non verentur neque maris sonitus.
> Agitabant patres nostri cervos, apros, capreas,
> Hii venantur monstra maris et opes aequoreas.

[Our fathers brought us reeking, salted fish. / But we, their sons, bring fish that's fresh and wriggling. / In the olden times our fathers attacked and captured cities. / But we fearlessly pit our strength against storms and thundering waves. / Our fathers dealt with deer, and bees, and goats. / Their sons hunt for the monsters and the treasures of the deep.][15]

In contrast, Eastern Pomerania, which was also known by its German name of Pommerellen, remained part of the Polish Kingdom until

15. 'De expeditione in urbem Coloberg facta', *Galla Kronika Xięga*, II, 28, in *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*, Warsaw, 1968, vol. 1, p. 447.

conquered by the Teutonic Knights in 1308. From then on, until the incorporation of the League of Prussian Cities in 1454, Poland had no shoreline at all. But the memory survived. And when a reborn nation was handed back a stretch of the coast in 1920, it needed a suitable myth and pseudo-medieval ritual to justify it. The 'maritime nuptials' fitted the bill exactly.

22 July 1952

The Constitution of the Polish People's Republic was the most mythical document of contemporary Polish history, and may serve as a fitting conclusion.

As all competent commentators know, constitutions played only a marginal role in the workings of a Communist-type party-state. They were not, as in most true democracies, the supreme basis for the rule of law. On the contrary, they provided a set of regulations relating exclusively to the institutions of the state, behind and through which the institutions of the party could exercise an absolute, unaccountable, totalitarian dictatorship. In short, they listed all the official fictions which masked the reality of Communist power. It was no exaggeration to say that the only clause of a Soviet-style constitution which carried any real weight was the one giving the party 'the leading role' in the state. What this meant, in practice, was that the party comrades could manipulate, or ignore, all other aspects of the constitution with impunity. The odd thing is that the comrades who framed the Constitution of the PRL in 1952 were so complacent that they forgot to include the usual clause about the party's leading role. As a result, they were obliged, under Soviet pressure, to add the clause as an amendment to the Constitution in 1976, together with another clause about Poland's unshakeable alliance with the Soviet Union.

For whatever reason, many people in the West, including far too many political scientists, failed to understand these mechanisms. All too often, the Communist system was described as a 'one-party state', perhaps on the Latin American model, where small cliques of generals or politicians had eliminated their rivals and captured exclusive control of the government. This sort of description seriously underestimates the sophistication of the Communist dictatorship, ignoring the dual nature of the party-state and the fact that the party was itself the executive branch of government. Real power lay with the party's Secretary-General, the Politburo and the Central Committee

Secretariat, not with the 'President', the Council of Ministers, or the state bureaucracy.[16]

These elementary truths used to be all but inexplicable to Westerners unfamiliar with the conditions. If a personal reminiscence is permitted, I would recall a lengthy altercation with an American editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* who consulted me in the mid-1980s about revising the entry on Poland. I had noticed that the existing entry began with a description of the Constitution of the PRL; and I told him that this gave a very misleading impression of how the country was really ruled. But the editor was unmovable. Several hours of pleas and explanations failed to shift him from the view that all country entries in his *Encyclopaedia* started with a description of the Constitution and that there was no reason why an exception should be made for Poland.

In retrospect, one of the most astonishing features of Communism lay in its addiction to myths, fictions, taboos and fetishes of all sorts. Although it claimed to be based on a rational and scientific ideology, it fostered the most irrational and unscientific practices imaginable. It was, in fact, a pseudo-religion, where black was routinely described as white and two plus two was officially proclaimed to make either three or five, as circumstances demanded. Prior to the amendments of 1976, the Constitution of the PRL revealed absolutely nothing about the ruling order. Yet is was published in millions of copies, studied in all schools, conscientiously expounded to all foreigners who were daft enough to listen, and regularly celebrated on the country's National Day (which, of course, was *not* the National Day). For people brought up in democracies, where constitutions set out the basic rules of public conduct, it is impossible to conceive of a so-called 'constitution' whose 'laws' were essentially irrelevant to a totally lawless polity.

All myths serve a purpose. As the purposes change, the myths change with them. The critical question in Poland today, therefore, is whether any of the traditional myths can be revived or modified to match the conditions of life in the 'Third', post-Communist, Republic. After only five or six years, it is difficult to say. Some of the myths are as dead as dodos; the constitution of the PRL is as *passé* as the Sarmatians. The myths of the *Polak-Katolik* or of 'Piast Poland' seem to have little point in a mono-ethnic country whose frontiers are no longer under threat. But the myth of the *antemurale* may rise again if Poland becomes the frontier zone of NATO or Russia renews its ambitions to dominate Central Europe. And the prophecies of

16. On the workings of the party-state, see 'Spiders' Webs and Galley-slaves' and 'Two Nations' in Davies, *Heart of Europe*, pp. 29–62; also in *idem*, *Europe: A History*, Oxford, 1996, pp. 1093–6, 1321.

Wernyhora are never out of date. There may never have been a truly 'Golden Age' on Poland's eastern borders. But the need for Poles to cultivate fraternal relations with their eastern neighbours has never been greater. We shall see. One thing is certain. If the old myths do not suffice, then new ones will be invented.