

I || An Introduction to Polish Democratic Thought

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THE PRESENT VOLUME BUILDS on an earlier publication, *Polish Democratic Thought from the Renaissance to the Great Emigration: Essays and Documents*, which was dedicated to the May 3, 1791, constitution and appeared shortly before its bicentenary.¹ The constitution provided a symbol of Polish determination to create a modern democratic state embracing all elements of the Polish nation through peaceful, or at least bloodless, action. These qualities were what made the eighteenth-century political philosopher Edmund Burke call it “the most pure . . . public good which ever has been conferred on mankind,” in sharp contrast to the bloodstained French Revolution, which Burke abhorred.² These qualities, in 1918, also led the newly independent Poland to choose May 3 for its national holiday. The Communist government shifted the holiday to nearby May 1 to celebrate the labor movement, but the May 3 holiday returned when Communism fell. Polish communities in the diaspora celebrated May 3 without interruption. The essays in the earlier volume discuss the period from about 1500 to the 1840s, with reference to later events, and significant laws and political manifestos in English translation and in the Polish or Latin original provide additional background. The essays in the current volume cover the period from the 1860s to the present.

In both volumes, the term “thought” is taken in its broadest sense to include both the written word and the organizational activities needed to put abstract ideas of democracy into practice. Amusingly, in a volume that rejects the Communist era as dictatorial and foreign-inspired, the approach is one of praxis, or putting thought into action, an approach that was adopted by Marxists to show the practical significance of abstract ideas. There is nothing wrong, of course, in using a good idea from any source, and the term

antedates Marxism by over two thousand years. These two volumes on Polish democratic thought provide a quick history of the country emphasizing its consistent democratic aspirations.

Despite its seemingly obvious meaning, “democracy” is a complicated term that needs careful definition. The English political scholar Bernard Crick has defined democracy as (1) “a principle or doctrine of government,” (2) “a set of institutional arrangements or constitutional devices,” and (3) “a type of behavior” that includes both respect for oneself and respect for others. He notes that all three characteristics “do not always go together.” When they conflict, it may be due to the conflict between two views: that democracy is liberty to do what you want, and that democracy requires limitations on unchecked behavior.³ As these two volumes on Polish democratic thought demonstrate, Poles have generally been attached to the principle of democratic government in Crick’s first definition. However, the set of institutional arrangements in his second definition has not always been suitable to make this principle work. Furthermore, and hardest to document, the type of behavior in Crick’s third definition has often interfered with the process of orderly government. Adherence to ideological or other principles and strong personal antipathies have often made it difficult to reach the compromises that are needed to hold a society together. In the 1920s, Józef Piłsudski identified a lingering Polish predilection to oppose government initiatives as the product of the partition era, and this attitude scarcely disappeared under German occupation during the Second World War or in forty-five years of Communist rule. Indeed, its origins may be found before the partitions, in early modern times, when nobles resisted authority, trying to protect their freedoms. The Polish suspicion of government has resulted in periods when weak governments failed to prepare for and react to domestic and international crises. This trait was glaringly obvious in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and led up to the partitions. The Second Republic (1918 to 1939) and Third Republic (1989 to the present) have shared this problem, although bold initiatives have also been launched. At present, post-Communist governments have adopted political, economic, and diplomatic measures that appear likely, barring major crises, to ensure a bright future.

However important these issues seem to Poles and their sympathizers, they have little resonance with the outside world. American textbooks paid little attention to east-central Europe fifty years ago, as the noted historian

Piotr S. Wandycz found, and in 1993 he still found it “a much neglected region.”⁴

Norman Davies’s *Europe: A History* provides a rare exception. Written by a Polonist with several significant books to his credit, this account integrates the history of the entire European continent.⁵ In most general accounts of European history and Western civilization, “Europe” ends in Berlin and Vienna. An exception may be made for Russia, thanks to its great power status in the modern world. For the typical west European or North American, the image of Europe resembles Saul Steinberg’s famous *New Yorker* magazine cover depicting a Manhattanite’s view of America—the urban peaks of lower New York, the Hudson River, a few farms in New Jersey, Chicago in the distance, some mountains, San Francisco, and the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, a Westerner’s map of Europe would show London, Paris, and maybe Florence; Berlin would be discernible in the distance; then there would be empty fields until St. Petersburg or Moscow loomed up on the edge of the abyss. Vibrant cities such as Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, and their countries, would not appear on the map at all. Mass tourism in the twenty-first century may erase the distinction between East and West, but it will take time.

The general textbook account of Polish history differs in degree only, since democracy is a relative latecomer as a primary value in European history. The main emphasis in Western civilization from the High Middle Ages until the French Revolution was on efficiency and power, and most textbooks praise European kings for centralizing power in their own hands. The feudal nobles who shared power with royalty or even dominated it are portrayed as obstacles to progress. An otherwise fine recent textbook typifies the approach, mentioning medieval Poland only through Nicolaus Copernicus. Early-modern Poland is discussed primarily to show the deficiencies of the Polish constitution and the partitions, although Jan III Sobieski’s 1683 victory at Vienna is also highlighted.⁶ This version scarcely varies from a classic statement by the great French historian Roland Mousnier thirty years earlier. Mousnier saw European kings as “embodying the national ideal.” Royal absolutism was socially progressive because, in “the antagonism of two classes, the bourgeoisie and the nobility,” royalty sided with the former.⁷ For him, as for many other historians, medieval parliaments and medieval privileges constructed bastions of class-based (or estate-based) social injustice, victimizing the lower orders and halting the construction of a state that would provide justice.

The deficiencies of the Polish constitution, along with its virtues, excite one historian's comment that early-modern Poland's democratic practice was merely "the onset of political artero-sclerosis" and that "the [modern] nations of Eastern Europe had no tradition of democracy in the Western sense." As a result, "if one regards Soviet Communism as a disease, then it seems that Eastern Europe may have had a pre-disposition to the infection." This historian finds the roots of permanent backwardness in Charlemagne's failure to push the borders of his empire farther east in the ninth century.⁸ Other historians suggest different periods of history, such as western Europe's sixteenth-century commercial and industrial revolutions, which left east-central Europe behind.

A handful of enthusiasts saw feudal nobles as more than selfish reactionaries who stood in the way of progress. For example, Robert H. Lord must have drawn on his training as a Polish historian to argue that medieval parliaments laid the foundations for the modern state and modern democracy. He claims, "We may be grateful to them [medieval parliaments] for having through centuries, implanted and maintained . . . certain precious ideas about constitutional liberty, the rights of peoples as against monarchs, no taxation without representation, government carried on through and with the consent of the governed, the representative system." He further points out that modern "friends of liberty could find traditions, precedents, principles, and inspiration in the records of their own parliaments in the Middle Ages."⁹

While royal absolutism triumphed in France, Austria, Russia, and, eventually, the German states, the libertarian tradition of limiting royal power by creating legal safeguards triumphed in Poland, England, the Netherlands, and Venice, states described in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political terminology as commonwealths, republics, or free states even though they were ruled by kings, dukes, and doges. Like England, Poland created civil rights to prevent arbitrary arrest and protect due process, as well as political safeguards against absolutism, such as powerful parliaments and limitations on royal appointments. To be sure, such privileges protected only the nobility, but the Polish-Lithuanian nobility made almost 10 percent of the population in the eighteenth century. What is more important, a libertarian principle was established that could gradually be extended to cover other social groups.

Historians often see the roots of Polish democratic thought in the network of legal privileges that established the rights of the nobility to influence or even decide issues of taxation, patronage appointments, and legislation.¹⁰ These began with the 1374 privilege granted in Košice (now in Slovakia) by

King Louis the Hungarian, who succeeded Kazimierz III Wielki (Casimir the Great) but who rarely came to Poland. This privilege established a low taxation rate in perpetuity for Polish nobles. Succeeding monarchs proffered new privileges, generally as concessions to win support for wars. In the Nieszawa Statute of 1454, Kazimierz IV Jagiellończyk promised to consult provincial assemblies (*sejmiki*) before summoning a general military levy (*pospolite ruszenie*) or issuing legislation. In 1505, Aleksander granted the privilege of *nihil novi* (“nothing new”), a pledge to refrain from issuing legislative decrees without approval of the parliament (Sejm). The Polish parliament came to consist of three “estates”: the Senate, composed of Roman Catholic bishops and royally appointed provincial governors; a lower chamber (also called the Sejm) composed of deputies selected by provincial assemblies; and the king himself. Laws were passed by consensus. Some historians have suggested that the kings’ motivation in granting these privileges was to ally themselves with the lesser nobility as a counterweight to the rich, powerful aristocratic stratum known as magnates, whose power often overshadowed that of royalty.¹¹

After the Jagiellonian dynasty died out in 1572, the principle was established that all nobles could participate personally in royal elections by gathering in a mass assembly, usually on a field in Wola, a village near Warsaw that is now well within the city limits. The king had to swear to uphold the constitutional Henrician Articles (named after the first elected king, Henri Valois of France) and specific items negotiated at the time of election (*pacta conventa*). Furthermore, nobility held together in solidarity based on legal equality, as the proverb proclaimed: “The noble on his estate is equal to the king’s lieutenant.”¹² Although vast differences in wealth existed within the nobility, the principle of equality prevented the emergence of a separate legal group such as the English lords or the hierarchy of barons, earls, dukes, and marquesses within the western European nobility. Each of Napoleon’s soldiers may have carried a marshal’s baton in his knapsack, but poor Polish nobles, many of whom went barefoot and hung their swords on tree branches while plowing their own fields, could win promotion to high military and political rank. In theory, they could even become king. In fact, promotion from the depths to the heights rarely, if ever, occurred, but significant social mobility over several generations was not unusual.

In this fashion, Poles created a system of shared power in which the kings made the important decisions subject to restraint by the nobility. The results were admirable during Poland’s golden age, from about 1450 to 1648.

At a time when royal autocracy grew throughout most of Europe, Poland was, for the most part, an oasis of tranquility. There were few rebellions and no civil wars. The religious wars that raged throughout the Germanies and France skipped Poland, as did the persecutions and executions that secured regions such as Italy for Catholicism and countries such as England for Protestantism.¹³ Indeed, the religious situation was closely linked to the drive for political checks and balances as the 25 to 30 percent of nobles who adopted Protestantism in the sixteenth century sought to protect their new-found religion while Roman Catholic nobles, who might have been willing to persecute Protestants, held back for fear of undermining their noble privileges. The Warsaw Confederation (a confederation was a union of nobles in time of crisis) convoked during the 1573 Interregnum proclaimed the legal equality of Catholicism and Protestantism.

Other groups were treated relatively well. The Jewish community grew rapidly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Jews immigrated from the Germanies and Bohemia to take advantage of new opportunities and better conditions in Poland-Lithuania at a time when they were barred from England, France, Spain, Russia, and many of the German and Italian states.¹⁴ A Muslim Tatar community flourished in Lithuania as well. Accounts differ about the degree of persecution of witches, but Poland-Lithuania seems to have been relatively free of deadly witch hunts.

The constitutional and legal principles established in Poland were gradually extended to the vast Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which became linked to Poland by the marriage of “King” Jadwiga of Poland and Grand Duke Jagiełło (Jogaila) and the associated Union of Krewo (Kriavas) in 1385–86. The dynastic union was made a permanent federal union with a common ruler and parliament by the Union of Lublin (1569), and Lithuanian nobles enjoyed the same legal and democratic rights as their Polish counterparts, although Poland and Lithuania continued to maintain separate officials, treasuries, armies, and law codes. The term “Lithuanian” denoted a place of residence and a political allegiance rather than ethnicity. Lithuanian nobles might be ethnically Lithuanian, Polish, or Ruthenian (Belarusian or Ukrainian), and they might follow Roman Catholicism, Eastern Rite Catholicism (Greek/Ukrainian or Armenian Catholic), Orthodoxy, or even Islam. Despite this diversity, extending noble privileges to these groups helped assimilate and denationalize them, particularly during the peaceful Catholic Reformation, when Zygmunt III Waza (Sigismund Vasa) reserved his po-

litical and economic patronage for Roman Catholic nobles. Most Protestant and many Orthodox nobles became Roman Catholic, and their peasants saw them as Poles well into the twentieth century.

Although the institutions of *szlachta* democracy (noble democracy) were highly prized as it emerged from legal privileges, the term “democracy” itself had pejorative connotations in Renaissance European thought. Defined as rule by the *demos*, or lower classes, over the rest of society, democracy seemed to classical philosophers and their Renaissance pupils to be no better than the rule of the rich and powerful over the poor. Instead, Renaissance philosophers endorsed a mixed constitution that included royal, aristocratic, and democratic elements, and the mixed Polish-Lithuanian constitution reflected these views. The rights of all three groups were protected by legal safeguards through the three elements of the parliament: the king himself; the highest levels of the nobility through the Senate; and the mass of the nobles through the lower chamber.¹⁵

Looking back on the achievements of the Polish (and Polish-Lithuanian) nobles, we see a distinct system of political democracy and civil liberties that emerged at a time when autocracy was growing in Europe. The system of shared power was, as it turned out, prone to gridlock and eventually undermined the existence of the state, but collapse was not inevitable and might have been averted had wiser policies been followed later. Regardless of the values and shortcomings of noble democracy at the time, it provided a model and an inspiration for future generations. As the current volume on Polish democratic thought shows, democratic ideals came to be typically Polish; democracy was never a foreign import that threatened the moral basis and unity of the Polish nation as it was for European opponents such as French monarchists (from the Vendée to Vichy) and Russian Slavophiles.

Sadly, the problems inherent in noble democracy reached crisis proportion as the unfortunate excesses of democratic practice undermined the strength of the Polish-Lithuanian state.¹⁶ Republicans, determined to minimize the role of the monarchy, clashed with Poland’s Vasa kings, who tried to maintain and occasionally extend royal prerogatives. Wildly exaggerated fears of royal absolutism on the one hand, and, perhaps, a lack of sympathy with Polish traditions on the other, led to the outbreak of noble rebellions that became increasingly serious as the seventeenth century wore on. Furthermore, the failure to find a satisfactory resolution of the Ruthenian (Ukrainian) problem led to a massive revolt in 1648 by Cossacks, Orthodox nobles,

and peasants, supported by the Orthodox clergy. After years of damaging warfare, Poland-Lithuania lost its territories east of the Dnieper River. In addition, Swedish, Russian, and Transylvanian armies overran most of Poland-Lithuania in 1654–55. They all were expelled by 1660, but the state was irretrievably damaged.

As if the weaknesses had not been made obvious by events, a comprehensive set of golden liberties became a sacred principle of noble democracy by the 1660s. The *liberum veto*, the idea of consensus government taken to an impractical extreme, allowed a single negative vote in parliament to block enactment of a bill under discussion and also canceled everything that had previously been approved unanimously. Deputies cast this veto with increasing frequency in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, making the Sejm irrelevant. Other dangerous practices included the elected kingship and lifetime tenure for ministers, which undermined royal power. As a result, central authority collapsed to such a degree that it was sometimes impossible to collect taxes and maintain an army. The government that was restored in 1717 functioned at a low level. To use only one index, the army numbered about twenty thousand men, while Poland-Lithuania's neighbors fielded anything from one hundred thousand to four hundred thousand men each. The disastrous political system of the late seventeenth century was made worse by a severe economic decline caused by decades of warfare and structural factors.

Luckily, a healthy reform tradition emerged that sought to marry effective government with popular representation (by nobles), curbing the worst excesses of the golden liberties. Later theorists further developed and put into practice this strand in the eighteenth century. Economic revival in the second half of the eighteenth century created a greater sense of confidence and the means to act.

In the eighteenth century, the so-called Sarmatian ideology, which clung to the tradition of the golden liberties, was challenged by a growing movement that united native reform tendencies with Enlightenment thought and spread widely throughout Poland-Lithuania in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ Enlightened Poles proposed methods of combining good government with constitutionally protected liberty, and their proposals gained urgency after the First Partition stripped Poland-Lithuania of about one-third of its lands and population. Equally significantly, reformers began to break down the limitations of noble democracy, proposing social reforms

that eventually affected all disenfranchised elements of society, primarily the burghers but also peasants and Jews. Reformist views spread widely through publication of a wide range of material, from scholarly treatises to magazine and newspaper articles. The ideas were put into practice when the political circumstances permitted, especially by the enacting of the May 3, 1791, constitution. This important achievement abolished the liberum veto and elective kingship, provided limited representation in parliament for burghers, and put peasants under the jurisdiction of state courts, without, however, abolishing serfdom. Jewish emancipation was discussed but not enacted. Poland's neighbors responded by declaring war and forcing a Second Partition. The 1794 insurrection fought valiantly against overwhelming odds. Its leader, Tadeusz Kościuszko, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War, recruited burgher and peasant units. His Połaniec Manifesto gave peasants personal freedom and reduced serfdom (abolishing it temporarily for peasants serving in the armed forces). Although the insurrection was defeated and the Third Partition extinguished the state, the effort was memorable.

After the partitions, it was obvious that many Poles had thoroughly assimilated the progressive lessons of 1791 and 1794, and gone beyond them.¹⁸ As both a historian and a political activist, Joachim Lelewel laid primary emphasis on the peasantry as the defining force in Polish life and concluded that politics should be directed toward their liberation from serfdom as well as toward political independence. Similarly, Maurycy Mochnecki stressed the need for a change in thinking by nobles to create a "New Poland" with social equality. The failed 1830 insurrection produced the "Great Emigration" of approximately eight thousand insurrectionaries, who founded numerous political and cultural societies in exile to continue the fight for Polish independence. Some, such as the Polish Democratic Society in its 1836 manifesto, called for radical social reform. In addition to working for a free and democratic Poland, numerous exiles joined Italian, Swiss, German, Hungarian, and other democratic liberation movements whose triumph, they hoped, would lead to Polish independence.

Between about 1500 and the mid-nineteenth century, Poland created a rich democratic legacy that started with the practices of noble democracy and proceeded, particularly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to embrace social democracy as well. A sense of social justice was present in earlier centuries too, even though it often was overshadowed by concern for the nobles' golden liberties. Democratic practices helped Poland-Lithuania

achieve national cohesion and tranquility in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and helped assimilate the non-Polish nobles from across the vast lands of the Polish-Lithuanian state. However, unsolved problems with Ruthenian (Ukrainian) and international conflicts led to prolonged warfare from which the state never recovered. Constitutional weakness, particularly the liberum veto and elective kingship, made it impossible to correct political and social ills, while economic trends made the taxpayers poorer and the state weaker. Reform movements arose in the eighteenth century that sought to make the state reasonably effective while still democratic and led to the enactment of the May 3, 1791, constitution. This was a major step forward despite its shortcomings. Enlightenment reformers and their nineteenth-century successors sought to extend the benefits of democracy to the burgher and peasant classes.

The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy carries the story through to the present day. It covers the emergence of a mature democratic movement in the nineteenth century, the travails of creating a democratic state in independent Poland after 1918, the discussions of democracy at home and in exile during the Second World War, the renewal of democracy by Polish opposition to Communism, and, finally, the difficulties of creating democracy in the post-Communist world. As the volume demonstrates, democratic values have remained deeply ingrained in the Polish body politic, but it has not been easy to put them into practice in the face of complex social and economic problems.

In the second chapter, the late Stanislaus A. Blejwas analyzes the transition toward popular participation in politics at the end of the nineteenth century. Briefly mentioning the democratically inclusive aims of the January 1863 insurrection, he concentrates on the need for broad-based political action to attract peasants, burghers, and ethnic minorities who generally declined to fight for Polish independence during the insurrection. But first, Blejwas notes, Poles had to come to terms with the rapid spread of the industrial revolution and commercialization of agriculture, both of which transformed the Polish economy and Polish society. Seeing no possibility of continuing armed revolt or even political opposition, “positivists,” inspired by western European philosophical trends, urged their countrymen to undertake industrial and commercial investment and management, and to encourage previously neglected social groups such as peasants, women, and Jews to join in. Positivism was particularly noted in the Russian partition, but it closely resembled established programs of “organic work” in the more

peaceful Austrian and Prussian (German) partitions; the Russo-Polish variant embraced social progressivism to a far greater degree. At the same time, participation in the parliamentary governments in Germany and Austria gave Poles practical experience in organizing political parties, campaigning for votes, developing parliamentary tactics, and exercising ministerial powers. Poles participated in both local and national politics. After 1867, Austria offered Galician Poles control of their home province in exchange for political loyalty. Such opportunities did not exist in the repressive Russian Empire, which eschewed electoral politics throughout the realm and dismantled the last vestiges of Polish autonomy in the former Vistula Territory.

An era of mass politics developed, as Robert E. Blobaum shows in the third chapter. At this time, the industrial revolution activated a new generation of factory, mine, and transportation workers, to name only a few occupations, who joined a kaleidoscopic variety of socialist parties, while peasants, whether landowners or wage laborers, saw the need for political action, and urban workers, from the merchants to their employees, also organized to win governmental support for their economic role. It was the task of Polish political leadership to ensure that all three groups, workers, peasants, and the bourgeoisie, identified with the cause of Polish independence rather than seeking concessions from the partitioning powers. They were successful with Polish speakers, for the most part, but linguistic and religious minorities such as Ukrainians and Jews generally preferred to create their own political parties to concentrate on their own needs. Polish socialist parties, however, which stressed international solidarity, attracted considerable minority support and attracted liberal intellectuals from all ethnic groups as well as workers.

Blobaum traces the emergence of mass parties by different social and ethnic groups in each of the partitions. Numerous socialist parties represented a variety of approaches. Peasant parties flourished in Galicia and Russia and developed platforms calling for land reform, cooperatives, and better bargaining conditions for agricultural employment vis-à-vis the landowners, among other demands. Catholic parish priests initiated and led peasant parties in Galicia; their activities forestalled the emergence of a separate peasant party in the German partition.

A powerful rival for mass support was the National Democratic Party, which parted ways with the socialists in the early 1890s in order to concentrate on national issues. The party adopted a program of political democracy and national independence. Its interpretation of national independence

included strengthening the Polish ethnic element and reducing the role of national minorities, especially the Yiddish-speaking Jews; nationalists differed about the acceptability of acculturated, Polish-speaking, middle-class Jewish Poles. However, the implications of the National Democrats' hostility to national minorities and its tendency to undercut democratic practices did not become fully apparent until after 1918. Founded in the Russian partition, the National Democrats achieved their greatest strength in the German partition, where the party won a considerable following among peasants and Silesian workers as well as its natural middle-class constituency. National Democratic groups followed a secular orientation and often competed with the Church for adherents. Through the competing parties and movements, all of which were divided into numerous competing factions, all elements of the Polish nation were activated politically and came to endorse democratic means. Most participated in elections to parliament and local governments, when they existed. The rigidity of the parties' ideological positions and rivalries boded ill for a future independent Poland, however. Furthermore, the activation of the masses and the emergence of clerical and nationalist directions underlined the differences between Poles and the ethnic minorities such as the Ukrainians and Jews. Although some members of these minorities found a home in the Polish parties, the large majority organized their own parties to seek autonomy or independence.

The period during World War I is covered by Włodzimierz Suleja in the fourth chapter. While the Central Powers, despite some initial difficulties, overran the Russian partition, Polish political groups from all three zones trumpeted their support for independence and democracy, setting formal democratic procedures and socioeconomic reforms in an autonomous Poland as their war aims. There was, of course, wide variation in the prescribed reforms, as well as a dramatic difference in the political direction chosen. "Activist" forces headed by Józef Piłsudski joined forces with the Germans and Austrians in order to defeat Russia, while "passivist" forces, headed by Roman Dmowski, sided with Russia, France, Britain, and, eventually, the United States to defeat the Central Powers. Within this framework, all subjects were open to debate. Some groups, particularly the Polish Socialist Party in the Russian partition, called for the creation of a democratic republic with progressive social legislation such as wages and hours regulation, and insisted that equal treatment of the large blocs of national and religious minorities be ensured. At the other extreme, prominent Polish groups in

Austrian Galicia called for a postwar constitutional monarchy and accepted continued union with Austria. There was no special provision for national minorities. As the war continued, republicanism gained popularity at monarchy's expense. Discussions of a constituent assembly played a larger part in both the (occupied) Russian and Austrian partitions.

The end of World War I in 1918 brought the creation of an independent Polish state after more than one hundred years of sacrifice and effort, but it also brought challenges that could not be met easily. The interwar state accomplished much in its short lifespan, yet it ultimately failed, as Piotr J. Wróbel argues in the fifth chapter. Politics at this time was carried out under the shadow of the prewar Dmowski-Piłsudski rivalry, which decisively affected the shape of the Polish state and constitution. Returning to Warsaw from a German prison to assume virtually unlimited, although temporary, powers, Piłsudski distanced himself from the radical Left and created a progressive government acceptable to most Poles. The strains of organizing government in the midst of a series of border wars, especially the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–21, and general economic dislocation led Piłsudski and his National Democratic rivals toward extreme positions. Dmowski's National Democrats dominated the Constituent Assembly and imposed a parliamentary constitution that limited Piłsudski to a largely ceremonial role. The atmosphere continued to be heated, as the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz, the first Polish president, made shatteringly clear. When political life calmed down, a multiparty system based on proportional representation created unstable coalition governments, while parliamentarism itself fell into disrepute because of deal-making and corruption. Piłsudski reentered political life after a brief retirement and engineered a coup d'état in May 1926. In power, he exercised dominant authority from his cabinet post as minister of military affairs. He pushed through a constitutional amendment to give the president more power but installed a political factotum instead of taking the position himself. Piłsudski leaned increasingly on landowners and big business groups for support, outflanking the National Democrats to the right. He formed a parliamentary bloc of loyal deputies called the Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government, which won only 25 percent of the seats in the 1928 election and governed, with difficulty, against increasingly militant attacks from the Right.

To win a majority in the 1930 elections, the Piłsudski regime manipulated the elections and jailed opposition leaders, thereby bringing, as Wróbel

says, “a definite end to democracy in interwar Poland.” For the last five years of his life, Piłsudski governed largely by decree and used his control of the police, the military, and the civil service to suppress opposition. Unlike some authoritarian rulers, however, Piłsudski allowed parliament and the political parties to function, and opponents boldly took to the streets, articulating ever-more-radical slogans to attack the ills of the Great Depression. The April 1935 constitution, enacted by a parliament that ignored its own procedures, increased presidential power officially, but too late for Piłsudski, who died of cancer a few weeks later. His successors, called the colonels because several had been army officers during and after World War I, administered his constitution with an undemocratic electoral law that gave them a majority in parliament. They were challenged by small ultra-rightist groups, mostly university students, who proclaimed antidemocratic aims, struggled to control the streets, and launched attacks on Jews. The BBWR was dissolved in 1935.

Wróbel blames the failures of democracy in interwar Poland on a lack of preparedness, aggravated by war and economic hardship. This failure was common to the states established after World War I and can be ascribed, Wróbel argues, to the lack of “key social and economic organizations that had been developed in the older western European democratic states.” Wróbel’s judgment, while justified within the period 1919–39, may be harsh in a longer-term perspective. The ideal of democracy was never fully abandoned by the government as it was in fascist, Nazi, and Communist states, and it remained intact in many quarters. If the Great Depression and World War II had not intervened, the failure of Polish democracy might have been seen as growing pains, and the Polish state would probably have returned to democratic practice within a reasonable period.

The destruction of the Piłsudskiite regime in World War II allowed democratic forces to resurface, as Andrzej Friszke shows in the sixth chapter. Most, but not all, political groupings cooperated during the war under the umbrella of the London government-in-exile, but they retained their individual goals. The principal supporters of democracy were found on the Left, especially in the peasant and socialist camps, but they became radicalized and aimed to create political and social democracy by limiting economic liberalism; some of their ideas were drawn from the British Labour Party. Anti-democratic elements also cooperated with the mainstream parties to form the impressive underground state. However, the failure of the prewar government contributed to the feeling in the nationalist Right that parliamentary

governments were weak and could not protect the national interest. The small Communist party, which worked outside of the national framework, refrained from discussing postwar plans as long as possible.

While Poles at home discussed democratic and other ideals under Nazi, and later Soviet, domination, Polish émigrés discussed the same topics abroad, as Rafał Habielski shows in the seventh chapter. Habielski discusses the reconstitution of a government-in-exile in France and later in England, which lasted until the fall of Communism in 1989–90. Under its major wartime leader, Władysław Sikorski, a respected general who served as prime minister during the political crisis following President Narutowicz's assassination in 1922 and who had been forced to go abroad because of his disputes with Piłsudski, the government-in-exile sought to restore Polish democracy, free of Piłsudski's authoritarianism but with an executive that could govern effectively. While these principles were generally respected by the numerous political parties comprising the government-in-exile, it was hard to reach agreement on details and decisions were deferred until after the war. The important Socialist and Peasant Party representatives, like their counterparts at home, demanded economic and social reforms to create a "people's democracy," an idea that was tacitly accepted without details. These were not empty games. The government-in-exile confidently expected to lead the Polish people to democratic reform after the war, so the Allied agreement at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945 to allow the Soviet government to dominate Poland came as a rude shock. Debates in London continued after the war, but, lacking Allied recognition and deprived on contact with the homeland, the exiles had little influence on Polish developments. In general, Habielski shows, they supported faithfully, even rigidly, their ideal of an independent, democratic state and refused to acknowledge liberalization within the Communist system at home. It was only after the Communists abandoned their monopoly in 1989 and permitted democratic elections in that year that the London exile government closed its doors with relief and transmitted the pre-World War II insignia to a free and democratic Poland.

Throughout the postwar period, Poles at home were forced to confront Soviet dictatorship, as Andrzej Paczkowski describes in the eighth chapter. Acknowledging the need for more source material, Paczkowski describes the debates of the period, especially in the first postwar years, before the Communists had solidified their control. Relatively few parties and individuals bothered to debate the finer points of democracy, although most recognized its primacy and discussed accommodations that could be made with

the dominant Communists without losing democracy entirely; some insisted on fighting, however. The Peasant and Socialist parties, in particular, had always distrusted industrial capitalism and favored state or social controls within a system of political democracy. Their postwar program of social and economic reforms differed little, on paper, from what the Communists articulated at that time. Concerns about a right-wing resurgence after the war led many socialists and populists to ally themselves actively with the Communists, even though, as individuals, many withdrew from the emerging totalitarian regime. Even those forces that merged under the banner of Stanisław Mikołajczyk's Peasant Party to contest the 1946 referendum and 1947 elections had little hope of success. They aimed primarily at moderating the Communists' eventual behavior. Open debate on democracy and independence disappeared after the 1947 elections, particularly with the Stalinist arrests and propaganda programs that appeared in 1948 and lasted until the mid-1950s. For the most part, advocates of democracy and independence were effectively silenced and never stepped forward again after conditions improved.

Władysław Gomułka's 1956 de-Stalinization allowed some dissenting voices to be heard, but the only ones that lasted more than a few months were Marxist "radicals" who demanded that human rights and political freedom be restored within the framework of the largely nationalized economy; farming remained largely private, an important departure from the Soviet model. While the government weeded out independent voices, the underground circulation of manifestos and the lighter punishments accorded to dissident Marxists, as opposed to anti-Marxists, ensured that these ideas remained current within the Party and within the intelligentsia, as the student demonstrations of March 1968 showed. Similarly, under reduced censorship, compared to Stalinist years, and with freer travel abroad, the émigré press began to influence Polish readers.

Not surprisingly, Paczkowski and the other authors in this collection disregard the contributions that Communists made to Polish democracy. For all its faults, which obviously included terror, dictatorship, suppression of civil liberties, and incompetent economic management, the Communist state provided universal education and opportunities for peasants and workers, who had been disregarded throughout most of Polish history. The trappings of bourgeois and commercial exploitation that had been common in the capitalist world no longer existed in Communist Poland, and it is not surprising

that many Polish youth were inspired by the Party's promises. The creation of dictatorial "real socialism," instead of democratic socialism, made young, idealistic Marxists into opponents of the regime, particularly during the memorable dates of the 1968 student demonstrations, the worker demonstrations and riots of 1970 and 1980, the formation of the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) in 1976, and the suppression of Solidarity in December 1981. And not only youth. In Poland in January 1982, I witnessed a senior academic announce to a dinner party that he had just turned in the party card (*legitimacja*) that he had held proudly for decades. His was not an isolated instance.

This growth of an opposition movement is discussed in the ninth chapter by Jan Skórzyński, who argues that the Polish dissent formed primarily among disillusioned Communists and socialists who had given up on reforming Communism but who still thought that "socialism with a human face" was possible if the Communist party's monopoly on power were broken. This near-unanimous support for democratic socialism made Poland's relatively quick and successful transition to capitalism after 1989 puzzling.

The year 1968, in the Polish context, refers to the March events when student-based reformism was overcome by Communist mobilization of working-class suspicions and anti-Semitic traditions. For the generation of 1968, the Communist state had passed the point of reform, but socialism was still attractive since, as they saw it, state control of the economy was needed for social justice. Domestic disillusionment was bolstered by the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring.

Most of the Polish intelligentsia subscribed to ideas that were clearly articulated by political exiles abroad. Juliusz Mieroszewski in Paris and Leszek Kołakowski in Oxford stressed the need to develop ties with Polish workers, an idea that took concrete form in the KOR, and a program of fundamental, if nonspecific, opposition to the regime. At home, with greater difficulty, Jacek Kuroń called for the creation of a parliamentary democracy to preside over a socialist economy that contained some private elements. Over the next fifteen years, reformers continued to advocate worker self-government rather than bureaucratic control of wages, profits, working conditions, and even production within a nationalized system. The best-known opposition figures and groups saw political reform and economic modification as possible and desirable within a socialist system. The overwhelmingly popular Solidarity Trade Union leadership refrained from challenging the

political and economic structure of Polish Communism openly, endorsing trade union activism and worker self-government. In November 1981, on the eve of the Communist suppression of Solidarity, a few well-known leaders called for the transfer of state property to collective ownership, but not privatization. Similar ideas were held by Catholic intellectuals. Their ideals of social justice and political democracy resembled the views of Marxist oppositionists. The Church itself did not take a part in discussions, although one might add that the sermons and discussions of human dignity and human rights by Pope John Paul II, the hierarchy, and parish priests contributed substantially to the opposition and implied a democratic direction.

The first chink in the socialist monopoly on economic thought opened in the 1970s, Skórzyński reports, when Stefan Kisielewski argued that free economic activity was both an inherent part of democracy and desirable in itself. Kisielewski's ideas attracted little favorable attention, however, until the eve of Communism's collapse. In 1986, a few articles in extralegal publications called for the creation of an economy based on market principles and warned that adjustments would be painful.¹⁹ In 1987, Solidarity accepted the need for market principles and free economic activity but did not discuss privatization. Solidarity's position was not yet fully developed and embraced contradictory elements, since it both advocated market principles and demanded full employment. Sadly, the pessimists were right. The first non-Communist government under Tadeusz Mazowiecki moved rapidly to restructure the economy, and the resulting loss of wages and jobs bitterly disappointed trade unionists. Writing in the mid-1990s as former Communists won free elections, Skórzyński concludes by asking whether the reformers were the victims of their own success because market principles created more losers than winners in the first post-Communist years, especially among Solidarity's supporters. One might add that the orderly, nonrevolutionary transition to political democracy permitted many ex-Communists to become capitalists.

Skórzyński shows that the growth of political democracy can be explained by a "deeply ingrained Polish tradition," while the rapid acceptance of capitalism needs further explanation. The answer is probably found in the thoughts of ordinary people who traveled abroad in increasing numbers, first to visit their relatives in capitalist countries and then to engage in small-scale trade. Visitors to Poland in the 1990s will remember how bazaars sprang up in city squares, broad streets, and stadiums—and, ironically, in the shadow

of the Joseph Stalin's "gift" to the Polish people, the Palace of Culture in downtown Warsaw. Poles also responded positively to western enthusiasm for capitalism, preached with particular enthusiasm by Ronald Reagan throughout the 1980s. In these conditions, there was little need to reflect, as did the Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, on capitalism as a necessary condition for political liberty.²⁰

Piotr J. Wróbel brings developments up to date in the tenth chapter, describing how Poland "patiently buil[t] a new democracy" but concluding that the process is far from complete. Poland was the first central European state to abandon Communism. Surprising parliamentary maneuvers following Solidarity's overwhelming victory in the partially free 1989 elections led to the emergence of a government headed by Mazowiecki, a longtime activist who bridged the Solidarity and Church elements of the opposition. In short order, his government instituted full democracy and, to deal with a catastrophic economic situation in which inflation exceeded 50 percent annually and the state budget had an unmanageable deficit, instituted a program of "shock therapy," which drastically cut state subsidies and expenditures. The economy stabilized and began to grow, but many ordinary Poles suffered poverty. As a result, wide sections of the public came to dislike and distrust post-Communist democracy. Political maneuvering since this rocky start has only confirmed this distrust for many Poles. Furthermore, the privatization of the economy, in which many former Communist bureaucrats used their skills and connections to take over former state firms or start new ones, has only deepened suspicion.

Wróbel traces in detail the fragmentation of the Solidarity coalition and the emergence of political parties along the spectrum from right to left, as well as the successes of the new system. Throughout the 1990s and in the new millennium, elections have been acrimonious and public participation has often been low. Even Lech Wałęsa, initially greeted with enthusiasm, soon found himself obsolete, his views controversial, and his political allies distrusted. He disappeared from public life after serving as president of the republic from 1990 to 1995. Nonetheless, the new government continued the course of economic reform fairly successfully and enacted a "Little Constitution" in 1992 that confirmed parliamentary supremacy while giving the president special powers to oversee defense and foreign affairs and the power to call elections. As Solidarity disintegrated into rival factions, former Communists reconstituted themselves as an effective political force and won first

the 1993 parliamentary elections and then the 1995 presidential election. The former Communists now represented a party firmly committed to capitalism and privatization, from which many of their members profited. In 1997, they passed a permanent constitution that clarified the division of powers and enshrined civil rights effectively. Despite economic improvement, many ordinary people, especially factory workers and peasants, found their condition worse, and their political support moved to the right, leaving no clear winner in the 1997 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, economic progress permitted Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a former Communist, to win reelection as president handily in 2000 and allowed the Left Democratic Union (SLD), the major post-Communist party, to gain a plurality in the 2001 parliamentary elections. The former Communists implemented their pro-European policies, completing negotiations to join NATO (1999) and the European Union (2004). The latter required winning a national referendum against nativist groups that feared an erosion of Poland's Catholic traditions and the loss of farm jobs to more advanced western European agriculture.

In thematic sections, Wróbel traces a number of problems that divide Polish society and seem incapable of resolution. Despite enormous progress, the economy is still fragile and recently suffered substantial unemployment rates (over 15 percent). Whole provinces, especially in the east, are chronically depressed. The losers are bitter and distrustful. Many Poles have endorsed "lustration," or the identification of former Communist workers and informants and their exclusion from public office, while others see little to be gained by raking up the past with the help of faulty archival documentation; the whole process is subject to political manipulation. Corruption is a serious problem that affects all elements of Polish life, from local offices to international investment. The Catholic Church, whose moderate policies contributed greatly to anti-Communist resistance, tried to reap the fruits in the post-Communist world and alienated many practicing Catholics by trying to outlaw abortion and teach religion in the public schools. Part of the Church hierarchy has expressed distrust of "European" positions, and extremist factions have taken strident xenophobic and occasionally anti-Semitic positions. These developments indicate to Wróbel that Poland is now a "transitional democracy" in which a substantial majority of the population is unhappy with the results of post-Communist formation. Writing in 2004–5, he considered the prospects for attaining a mature phase good thanks to inte-

gration in NATO and the European Union, but warned that the future was not yet secure.

While the present situation causes concern, there is no reason to expect the worst. Polish democratic traditions are deep-rooted. Democracy is a fundamental value in Polish life, and authoritarian governments, no matter how impressive they seem at first, have never enjoyed long-lasting popularity. Poland's post-Communist integration into NATO and the European Union seem to ensure military protection and economic security to a degree not experienced before in Poland's long history. The multilateral structure of both institutions offers more assurance than past alliances, some of which failed at crucial moments. At the very least, Poles and their sympathizers can savor the moment. Poland has once again rejoined the family of nations on a footing of equality. It has a well-educated, enterprising population and has demonstrated an impressive ability to adapt to the post-Communist world. A Solidarity slogan demanded that Poland be allowed to be Poland, and now has been. Poland's fate rests in its own hands. This is just as it should be.

Notes

1. M. B. Biskupski and James S. Pula, eds., *Polish Democratic Thought from the Renaissance to the Great Emigration: Essays and Documents* (Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1990).

2. Edmund Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs in Consequence of Some Late Discussions in Parliament Relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution, 1791," in *Burke's Writings and Speeches*, vol. 4 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1887), 196.

3. Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5, 9.

4. Piotr S. Wandycz, "The Treatment of East Central Europe in History Textbooks," *American Slavic and East European Review* 16, no. 4 (1957): 515-23; Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.

5. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6. Donald Kagan, Steven E. Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995), 514-17, 560, 580-81, 613, 680-82.

7. Roland Mousnier, in *The "New Monarchies" and Representative Assemblies: Medieval Constitutionalism or Modern Absolutism?* ed. Arthur J. Slavin (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1964), 9–11.

8. Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 7–8, 230–31.

9. Robert Howard Lord, "The Parliaments of the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period," in Slavin, "*New Monarchies*," 76–77.

10. James Miller, "The Sixteenth-Century Roots of the Polish Democratic Tradition," in Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 11–28.

11. Andrzej Wyczański, in *A Republic of Nobles*, ed. J. K. Fedorowicz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 99.

12. Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 55.

13. Janusz Tazbir, *A State without Stakes: Polish Religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Kosciuszko Foundation, 1973).

14. See Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973). In the outpouring of excellent recent works, one that stands out because of its broad scope is Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

15. See also Crick, *Democracy*, 32–38; Quentin Skinner, "The Italian City-Republics," in *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*, ed. John Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 59–92.

16. Robert I. Frost, "'Liberty without Licence?' The Failure of Polish Democratic Thought in the Seventeenth Century," in Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 29–54.

17. Daniel Z. Stone, "Democratic Thought in Eighteenth Century Poland," in Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 55–72.

18. Joan S. Skurnowicz, "Polish Szlachta Democracy at the Crossroads, 1795–1831," in Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 73–92; Kenneth F. Lewalski, "Fraternal Politics: Polish and European Radicalism during the Great Emigration," in Biskupski and Pula, *Polish Democratic Thought*, 93–108; Daniel Stone, "The First (and Only) Year of the May 3 Constitution," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 35, nos. 1–2 (1993): 69–86.

19. Solidarity publications circulated so freely that they could scarcely be called "underground," although they had never been submitted to state censorship and were illegal.

20. Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7–21.