

20th anniversary of the Third Polish Republic

Two free Poland's: 1918 and 1989

By: **Robert Strybel**,

Our Warsaw Correspondent

WARSAW—Last year, Poland celebrated the 90th anniversary of its re-emergence as an independent state following 123 years of foreign occupation. The Second Republic (II Rzeczpospolita) that arose in the wake of World War I in 1918 lasted until the joint Nazi-Soviet invasion of 1939. This year a similar anniversary is being celebrated – 2009 marks the 20th anniversary of the collapse of communism and the rise of the Third Republic (III Rzeczpospolita).

But, although those periods (1918-1939 and 1989-2009) each covered two decades, comparing them is no easy matter. In 1918 Poland was faced with integrating into a single state three separate partition zones. This necessitated creating a new Polish state with a whole new infrastructure: the institutions of a parliamentary democracy, a single currency (first the Polish mark and then the zloty), armed forces, post office, educational system and other institutions and public utilities. Even rail widths had to be unified.

The country that re-emerged on the map in 1918 had been ravaged by the Great War. Many people today do not realize that there had been no fighting on German soil in World War I, but Poland territory had been the chief battleground on which Germany and Austria had clashed with Tsarist Russia. That had left Poland badly scarred with the loss of some 1.2 million lives and seriously damaged infrastructure. The communist Poland that peacefully collapsed in 1989 had antiquated infrastructure and in many ways was 50 years behind America, but it was no longer the war-ravaged country it had been in 1945.

Another difference was that only 68 percent of pre-war Poland's citizens were ethnic Poles. Ukrainians, Jews, Germans and a few smaller groups made up the balance. This caused various problems. The outlawed largely Jewish-led Communist Party of Poland was a subversive group taking orders from Stalin. Ukrainian nationalists incited disturbances in eastern Poland and the German Fifth Column provided Hitler's Third Reich with anti-Polish propaganda.

The Poland that emerged after World War II, a Soviet satellite officially called the People's Republic of Poland, was smaller in area than the Second Republic of 1918-1939. The one-half of Poland annexed by Stalin in collusion with Hitler in 1939 was never returned. As partial compensation, the Big Three Allies gave Poland northern and western lands that had been part of Germany before World War II. Despite the 20 percent net territorial loss, a major advantage was that post-1945 Poland was ethnically homogenous. Poles accounted for some 98 percent of the population hence the ethnic minority problems that had plagued pre-war Poland became marginal.

But the Third Republic, which arose after Poland dumped communism in 1989, inherited a country that had been subjected to six years of ruthless German occupation and 45 years of communist misrule and mismanagement. Especially in the first post-war decade (1945-1956) the Polish nation was subjected to wholesale Sovietization, and many of those who tried to oppose it were jailed, tortured or killed. Warsaw's central planners mainly developed heavy industry geared to serve Soviet military power.

Since under communism everyone was guaranteed a job, there was gross over-employment. Office workers drank tea

Third Polish Republic to page 14

Polish firsts, records and superlatives

Did You Know That ?

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The following entries can be looked upon as interesting bits of trivia FYI – things to inform, entertain and possibly learn more about online. They can use in parlor games or contests at Pol-Am social events or quizzes at Polish Saturday Schools. Many of the entries might even provide ideas for an English composition assignment, essay or social-studies project. Properly researched and developed, many could even become scholarly dissertation topics or even serve as the basis for works of fiction.

*** In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a sprawling empire stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic up north and including Ukraine, Belarus and large swaths of Muscovy (as Russia was called back then). Apart from its territorial expanse and military might, it was also the Golden Age when trade, culture and learning flourished.

*** The Royal Air Force's All-Polish 303 Fighter Squadron began operations in the Battle of Britain in 1940 and by the end of the war was credited with 126 "kills", the highest score in Fighter Command. Of the 17,000 Polish airmen who served in the RAF, 1,973 gave their lives.

*** Known in Polish as Adampol (after Poland's 19th -century bard Adam Mickiewicz), the village of Polonezköy, Turkey was established by Polish émigrés on land granted to them by the Sultan for supporting Turkey against Russia in the Crimean War of 1853. Although few Poles live there anymore, its ethnic mementoes continue to attract Polish visitors – statesmen and tourists alike.

*** The nucleus of a modern parliament was created in Poland in 1493, when the Sejm (lower house) and Senate were established. One of its landmark decisions was the 1505 Nihil Novi Act which said the king could do "nothing about us without us". That was many generations before the late-18th-century American colonists the told their British overlords: "No taxation without representation."

*** When he died in April 2005, Polish-born John Paul II had served longer than any other pope except Saint Peter and Pius IX. The former Kraków Archbishop Cardinal Karol Wojtyła was widely regarded as one of the most influential figures of the 20th century and instrumental in the collapse of communist rule.

*** Polish inventor Kazimierz Prószyński patented the first successful hand-held movie camera in England in 1910. Known as the Aeroscope, it was powered by compressed air pumped into the camera before filming.

*** Polish-American Net-surfers have found that when they type the word "Polish" into a search engine, many of the entries have to do without car, floor and other polishing compounds designed to impart a bright luster to hard surfaces.

*** Nagra (Polish for "it will record") is a generic term referring to any of the series of professional audio recorders produced by the Swiss-based firm of 1, established by Polish inventor does not exist)" Stefan Kudelski. Nagra-brand tape recorders were the standard sound-recording systems for motion picture and one-camera TV productions from the 1960s into the 1990s.

*** Solidarity, which emerged as the Soviet bloc's first independent labor union in 1980, was temporarily crushed 16 months later under martial law, simmered in the underground for years, and victoriously re-emerged in 1989 when it peacefully toppled Poland's 45-year-old Soviet-backed regime. The collapse of the

Soviet bloc and the USSR itself followed.

*** "My Melody of Love", which topped the charts in 1974, was the first song with Polish lyrics to make it big in America. It author, Canonsburg, PA-native Bobby Vinton bankrolled it with his own money after major record companies said it wouldn't go over. Its Polish lyrics go: "Moja droga ja Cię Kocham" and "Kocham Ciebie całym sercem."

*** The first shot of World War II in Europe was fired 20 years, 9 months, 19 days and 18 hours after the last shot of World War I. During a visit to Poland on September 1, 1939 at 4:47 AM, the 13,000-ton German battleship Schleswig Holstein opened fire on the Polish military supply base at Westerplatte, marking the start of the Second World War.

*** In the late 19th century, Casimir Żegleń of Chicago developed a bulletproof vest made of silk fabric. Such a protective garment, worn by Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand, could have prevented the outbreak of World War I in 1914, but a Serbian assassin fatally shot him in the neck to which the vest did not extend.

*** There are more Polish trees planted at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Institute than any other. Since the Institute began honoring Gentiles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust at the risk of their own lives, nearly 6,000 Poles have been awarded its Righteous Among Nations medal out of a world-wide total of some 21,000. Each honoree gets a tree planted in his/her name.

*** Jan Józef Ignacy Łukasiewicz (1822 - 1882) was a Polish pharmacist who devised the first method of distilling kerosene from crude oil. One of the pioneers of the world's oil industry in the world, he created the first modern kerosene lamp (1853), established Poland's the first oil well (1854) and built the world's first oil refinery (1856).

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*** World-wide, the best-known Poles include Copernicus, Frédéric/Fryderyk Chopin, Madam Skłodowska-Curie, Joseph Conrad (Korzeniowski), Pope John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa, Roman Polański, Andrzej Wajda and – especially in the US – Casimir Pułaski and Thaddeus Kościuszko. Lesser known outside Poland are King Casimir the Great, novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz and composers Karol Szymanowski and Krzysztof Penderecki.

*** It is said that back in 1311 in Poland's old royal capital of Kraków, the Polish army was fed up by the rapidly growing number of German-speakers and other foreigners and decided to do something about it. They rounded up a number of inhabitants and asked them to recite a Polish tongue-twister. Those who stuttered, stumbled, hissed or spat were beheaded.

*** Cheap-beer commercials have helped make the southern Polish cities of Kraków and Wrocław among Britain's favorite stag-party destination. Although this has provided hotels, pubs and restaurants with plenty of new business, the loud, lewd, unruly behavior of many drunken British visitors has turned Poles off on the idea.

*** Jews escaping persecution in Western Europe found a safe haven in medieval Poland, where their religion and culture flourished and their material assets multiplied. Jews were not bound by Polish law and were liable only to their own rabbinical courts. Just before the late-18th-century partitions, some 80 percent of world Jewry lived in Poland.

*** Mine detectors based on the 1941 design of Lieutenant Józef Kosacki were used by the British army until 1995. First used during the North African campaign, they doubled the speed of the British 8th Army in the victorious Battle of El Alamein against the Germans.

*** One of the world's most prolific writers was Polish novelist Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812-1887). In the course of 57 years he wrote some 600 volumes, including 232 novels, and countless fables, press articles and other shorter works. □

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