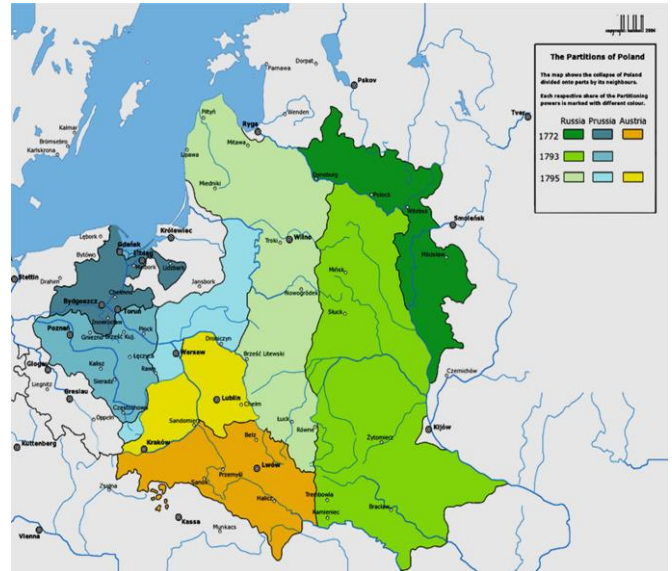


A Brief History of Poland's Road to Independence

1773 - 1918

The three partitions that resulted in the demise of the Sovereign State of Poland began at the end of the 18th Century. When in 1773, the Tzarist Russian Empire took over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and most of eastern region of Poland and made it a Russian protectorate.

By 1790, it was very evident that the first Partition greatly weakened the Commonwealth. In an attempt to save what was left, King Stanisław Augustus Poniatowski put into effect a series of reforms; to strengthen Poland's military, revamp the Polish economy and democratise the political and social systems. With these changes, he created a more egalitarian and united society. These reforms reached their climax in 1791 with the enactment of the famous Polish **3rd May Constitution**, resulting in the establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy; strengthening the rights of the Polish middleclass; the abolishment of the many privileges of the Polish nobility and the archaic laws dealing with serfs.



Poland in 1773

Some time later, for strategic reasons, mainly to promote Poland's standing in the international community, King Stanisław reluctantly signed the Polish-Prussian Pact of 1791, thereby, ceding more of Poland's land to Prussia in exchange for a military alliance with Prussia.

Concerned that the democratic reforms enacted by King Stanisław would spread across to Russia and angered by the establishment of the Polish-Prussian Pact, the Russian Tzar ordered the invasion of Poland in 1792. When Poland's new Prussian "ally" did not come to King Stanisław's assistance and his own Polish nobility refused to support him, as they were never happy with their loss of privileges, especially their loss of "veto" in the country's Legislature, Poland was partitioned for the second time in 1793. This time, losing all of its western provinces to Prussia and all its remaining eastern provinces to Russia.

Outraged by the further humiliation of Poland by her neighbours and incensed over the betrayal by the Polish nobility, the Polish peasantry quickly turned against the occupying forces of Prussia and Russia. Following a series of nationwide riots on March 24, 1794, the famous Polish patriot, **Tadeusz Kościuszko** (later, affectionately referred to as "*The Peasant Prince*"), took command of what was left of the Polish armed forces and declared a nationwide uprising against Poland's foreign occupiers. This marked the beginning of the **Kościuszko Uprising**. Catherine II of Russia and Frederick William II of Prussia were quick to respond and, despite Kościuszko's initial successes, by November 1794 the uprising was crushed. Tadeusz Kościuszko was arrested and later exiled from his beloved Poland. He ended up fighting for the causes of other countries, including, as an American army officer, in the American War of Independence. All in the hope that one day, these countries would assist Poland to achieve its independence.



Tadeusz Kościuszko

(Mount Kościuszko in Australia was named in his honour by Geographer/Explorer, Edmund Strzelecki)

In the Third and final Partition of Poland (1795), the southern provinces of Minor Poland (*Mała Polska*) were annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The final humiliating blow came when the three partitioning powers agreed to permanently erase any historical reference to Poland in the hope of curbing any Polish dissident and nationalistic fervour. To rub salt into the wounds, the Polish people, living in these occupied regions, were never referred to as “Poles” and the word “Poland” was not used officially for 123 years nor was it reference on any official maps.

In the years during the First World War (1914–1918), circumstances favourable to “*The Polish Question*” began to finally appear in the world’s political discourse. Furthermore, as disputes between Poland’s occupiers intensified, their previous solidarity on the Russification and Germanisation of the Polish people and their active suppression of Polish culture began to breakdown. On the other hand, the aspiration of regaining an independent Poland began to blossom in the hearts of the Polish people.

On 11th November 1918, Poland officially regained its independence and, once again, was recognised as a nation on the world stage. This was mainly due to two reasons. First, the perseverance and dedication of the active part of Polish society, which, during the period of 123 years of servitude, they secretly passed down the Polish language and Polish culture to the new generations of young Poles.

The other reason was the confusion that the World War I inflicted on the three occupying empires within the partitioned Polish territories. This allowed Polish insurgent armies to form, often supported by the occupying empires, who now were fighting with each other. A number of Polish heroes emerged from all this confusion; heroes like **General Józef Piłsudski**, who became the Chief of State when Poland gained its Independence but rejected invitations to stand for President in the ensuing elections. Later he did agree to serve as the Minister for Defence.



Józef Piłsudski



Ignacy Paderewski

Two years after regaining Independence, the Soviet Red Army attacked Poland. In the famous Battle for Warsaw, the Polish army, under the command of General Piłsudski, defeated the Russians. Consequently, regained most of the original Polish territories, which included parts of what is now Ukraine. Another Polish hero also emerged, **Ignacy Paderewski**, who was not a soldier but a famous pianist, Statesman and politician. Paderewski was elected the first Prime Minister of an Independent Poland in 1918. Paderewski was also instrumental in getting US President, **Woodrow Wilson**, to include in his *Fourteen Point Peace Plan*, which he drew up in 1916, the demand for a “*Free and Independent Polish State*”.

It would now be appropriate to end this part of our history with the words, “*...and the Polish people lived happily ever after, in their beloved Homeland.*”

Sadly, this was not the case. But this is another sad story, to be told on another day.....



Present day Poland, after WWII

