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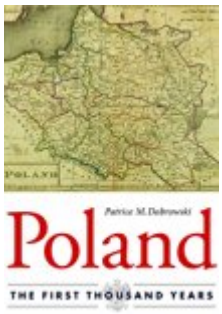
Patrice M. Dabrowski. *Poland: The First Thousand Years.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. 506 pp. $45.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-487-3.



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The desire to write yet another single-volume history of one country may arise from several motivations, most obviously among them: market needs, challenging traditional narratives, and—finally—a genuine author's sympathy to the object of study. In the case of Patrice M. Dabrowski's undertaking, the third reason seems to be the most fitting. From the book's first pages, the reader will appreciate the author's undaunted enthusiasm in dealing with a thousand years of Poland's history.

Dabrowski starts her synthesis with the observation that Poland occasionally serves as a metaphorical "nowhere." Outside native historiography, on the one hand, the first mentions of Poland generally appear—paradoxically—when this once strong and large state ceased to exist, partitioned by its neighbors in the late eighteenth century. Polish historiography, on the other hand, has undoubtedly privileged a very national—if not out-and-out nationalistic—perspective, often losing sight of the outside factors influencing the course of Poland's historical development. Consequently, there remains a need for historical overviews that do not marginalize the Polish experience while at the same time placing Poland's history in a larger European context. Although dealing with the gaps and weaknesses of the state of the art is not Dabrowski's aim, her book partially answers this need.

The volume, primarily a textbook, aims to introduce a nonspecialist, English-speaking audience to main milestones of Polish history and so offers more a chronicle of events in Polish history rather than any novel interpretation. The author emphasizes special features of Polish political development and places them within the broader framework of European political culture. This can be seen in the titles of all four chronologically organized parts (comprising thirteen chapters and an epilogue) "Poland in Europe," "The Europe of Poland," "Europe without Poland," and "Poland in Europe and the World." Dabrowski's book can be best positioned somewhere between the specialist-oriented textbooks on Polish history (by such classic authors as Oskar Halecki and Aleksander Gieysztor and new interesting studies dealing

with a millennium of Polish history by Adam Zamoyski, Jerzy Lukowski, Hubert Zawadzki, and Anita J. Prażmowska) and lively academic essays by Norman Davies, M. B. Biskupski, and Brian Porter-Szücs.[1]

Dabrowski has a coherent and comprehensive vision of what she wants to tell us about Poland in order to elevate its status beyond metaphorical "nowhere." Adhering to a rather traditional political history that emphasizes the importance of "nation building," Dabrowski guides the reader through constant themes and contingent elements of Polish history. She divides Poland's history into four periods. The first period, starting with first settlements and with the focus on talented monarchs, accentuates the negotiated nature of Polish-Lithuanian political settlements, based on voluntary contractual union. The second period begins with the Silver Era of the Republic (seventeenth century) and describes the recurrent waves crashing over its shores, caused by wars waged by Swedes, Cossacks, Turks, and Russians. The Polish-Lithuanian nobility is praised for the creation of their own sui generis republican state system and civic nation. The question that occupies Dabrowski in the third part is how Poles developed their culture, amid a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and lack of statehood in the long nineteenth century. In this part, Dabrowski interestingly dwells on the process of nation building, which she thoroughly explored in her previous book, ***Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland*** (2004). She quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's words to the Poles facing occupation from their neighbors, "You may not prevent them from gobbling you up; see to it at least that they will not be able to digest you" (p. 291).

Dabrowski takes Rousseau's words as a guiding principle for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as experienced by Poles. They are presented as quintessential freedom fighters, consistently resisting oppression from their neighbors Russians/Soviets, Austrians, and Prussians/Germans. This is, of course, one of the perhaps unavoidable leitmotifs of Polish historiography. The author includes other stereotypical threads of Polish historical writing, such as freedom of religion without persecution during the Reformation; freedom-loving Poles versus absolutist autocracies in the eighteenth century; and the key role of the Poles at times of world historical importances, for example, defeating the Turks at Vienna in 1683, turning back the Bolsheviks in 1920, defeating the Wehrmacht at the battle of Monte Cassino in 1944, and catalyzing the overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. This may appear a simple reiteration of the conventional Polish national historiography, but it does serve one aim: it imbues an English-speaking reader with the emotional intimacy with which most Poles perceive their country's past. At times, however, Dabrowski goes too far in adopting the Polish perspective, such as in the case of her treatment of the Kulturkampf, which was much more than a mere anti-Polish policy. At other times, she goes beyond traditional Polish perspectives, for example, in her analysis of the November Uprising that incorporates the Russian viewpoint. Undoubtedly, Dabrowski's praising of the Polish "habeas corpus act" ahead of its time or Europe's first constitution proclaimed in 1791 in Warsaw; relatively early enfranchisement of women; and the achievements of Copernicus, Chopin, Karol Wojtyła, and the Polish Nobel Prize winners would make the book dear to an average Polish reader.

However, the Polish reader is obviously not Dabrowski's target. Occasional mentions of how historical images continue to resonate in today's Polish customs (***hejnał*** [the Krakow anthem], ***włoszczyzna*** [vegetable stock], etc.) have a good explanatory function, bringing the Polish mentality closer to the foreign reader. They also add lightness and clarity to the volume. Subtle dialogue with the reader ("perhaps you wonder…," "why is it worthy of our attention?") serves the same function. The author sets the events of Polish history in the broader perspective of Western history. The

American reader in particular should find Dabrowski's narrative palatable as she interpretatively Americanizes some elements of Polish history, emphasizing an inclusive and voluntary principle of national belonging, republican thought by Wawrzyniec Goślicki inspiring the Founding Fathers, and Tadeusz Kościuszko's "American-style Uprising," and even comparing Poles to the Iroquois (after the nineteenth-century Galician writer Ludwik Powidaj). As with all chronological synthesis, some readers may find Dabrowski's volume too conventional, especially the treatment of the early history of Poland. The author, however, tries to make it more attractive by including reflections on the personality of the monarchs, often narrating gripping stories of the moments that dramatically changed the course of their lives—and history.

Elegant writing with frequent vivid metaphorical language and skillful rearticulation of idiomatic and historic Polish proverbs into English make Dabrowski's prose captivating and easy to read. The author furthermore defuses more polemic and controversial threads of Polish history, often by offering an explanation or excuses for some disturbing Polish behavior. Thus the nobility gets away with its obsession with the "golden freedoms" and with discriminatory legislation toward peasants and non-Poles. Dabrowski does not adopt the critical approach toward landowners recently developed by Daniel Beauvois (*Trójkąt ukraiński: Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie, 1793-1914* [2005]), Tomasz Kizwalter (*O nowoczesności narodu: Przypadek Polski* [1999]), and Michał Łuczewski (*Odwieczny naród: Polak i katolik w Żmiącej* [2012]). In her analysis of the Warsaw Uprising, one will not find critique of the commandership who put the lives of all inhabitants at risk. When it comes to the reactions of the gentile Poles to the Holocaust, Dabrowski is undoubtedly one of the most gentle voices in the American discussion about Polish anti-Semitism. Moreover, the author sees the consequences of the German attack on the USSR mainly through the prism of the amnesty for the Polish prisoners of the gulag and fails to reflect on how it affected the fate of the Polish Jews in the region. Dabrowski also underestimates the ideological dimension of Operation Barbarossa when stating that Adolf Hitler attacked the Soviet Union mainly for its black earth and fertile fields to feed his people.

As a side note, I would like to use the opportunity to question one predisposition that we historians of Eastern Europe repeatedly show. Dabrowski, like Prażmowska (*A History of Poland* [2006]), and other authors of syntheses of Poland before them, use the Western European model as a point of reference and a background against which the development of Poland is set. For example, Dabrowski states: "The country did not lag far behind the West," "by Western standards," and "proved the equal of those to the west" (pp. 87, 116, 397). Glancing at these phrases one wonders how long the Western European context will still be an unavoidable framework of historiography pertaining to Eastern Europe.

Dabrowski prepared a well-written informative volume giving an adequate overview of Polish history avoiding controversial historiographical discussions. Instead of passing judgment, Dabrowski offers a positive, if occasionally anodyne, vision of Polish history, saying that Poles should start to appreciate their own success given their position not in "the heart of Europe" (as Davies wanted), but rather in an accident-prone European crossroads.

Note

[1]. Oskar Halecki, *The History of Poland*, 3rd. ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1961); Aleksander Gieysztor, Stanisław Herbst, and Bogusław Leśnodorski, *A Thousand Years of Polish History* (Warsaw: Polonia, 1964); Adam Zamoyski, *Poland: A History* (London: HarperPress, 2009); Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Anita J. Prażmowska, *A History of*

Poland (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); M. B. Biskupski, *The History of Poland* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000); and Brian Porter-Szücs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).