The Concept of the Border in the Polish Consciousness and its Impact on the Culture and Identity of the Central and Eastern Europe in the Modern Period

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the notion of the border in Polish consciousness as it was developed in the early modern period. The concept can be interpreted at three levels: spiritual, moral and political and can be seen in the light of linguistic, cultural, political and economic exchange between Poland and neighbouring countries. It can be argued that its very nature had both Christian and classical foundations and to a large extend was shaped by the policy and modus operandi of the Jesuit Order. The terms such as "intemarium", "bulwark of Christianity" and "borderlands" were also strongly associated with the chivalric culture, in which not only a particular territory but also spiritual values and moral virtues were defended and promoted. These high ideas could not be put into action, and much less fulfilled, without the grounding paradigm which found its finest expression in the concept of miles Christianus – a personal role model patterned after Christ and the Church Triumphant, which combined the idea of spiritual struggle for the salvation of one's soul with a physical combat waged in defence of Latin civilization against schismatics and Muslims.

Keywords: Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, Eastern Europe, Jagiellonian Commonwealth, bulwark of Christianity

Introduction

From the earliest times, Poland, geographically situated in the basin of the Vistula River, established ties with the Ruthenian lands, especially with the western part of the former Kievan Principality. This was determined by the fact that its eastern part came under the Tatar domination for more than two centuries after the terrible defeat at the Kalka River in 1223.[1] It is worth recalling at this point that the principality of Moscow managed to free itself from this Mongol yoke only after 250 years and the traces of that oppression have remained both in mentality of the contemporary Russian society and in the political and legal doctrines of the country. A different cultural and political development was pursued

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[1] NOSSOV, Konstantin (2016), "The ravage of Rus'," *Medieval Warfare* 5/6, 36.

by that part of Rus, which at that time came under the protectorate of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland.[2]

Concluded in 1385, the union of Poland and Lithuania began a process of remarkable political, religious and social transformation in the vast areas of Eastern Europe in the spirit of medieval federalism. Indeed, those changes mostly affected the Ruthenian lands. Those were the territories where the culture and mentality of the Latin West made its presence felt. This influence manifested itself in the introduction of new legal systems and political institutions, it stimulated cultural development which found its expression not only in architecture and urbanization, but it completely transformed the old patterns of life, touching almost every aspect of it, including local customs, clothing and cuisine.[3]

The Kingdom of Poland bordered with the kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary and the Moldavian Principality along the line of the Carpathian Mountains. Despite shared ethnic and language ties, Poland had disputes with Bohemia over the Silesian borderland. In the Middle Ages, these tensions on several occasions escalated into a long and bloody warfare. After the outbreak of the Hussite Revolution, the religious conflict added only fuel to fire and consolidated the causes of antagonism in the following century.[4]

The western border, where the Polish population coexisted with the German element was relatively peaceful. In that time, the Germans were represented by peaceful craftsmen and merchants living in towns and industrious, hard-working peasants living in the countryside. In the early modern era, the conflicts in the Polish–German borderland occurred rather rarely.[5] The notable exceptions were the disputed territories of Pomerania and Prussia which were at that time under the control of the Teutonic Order. The problem with the Teutonic Knights was that they brought a foreign civilization from the Middle East to the Baltic coast, where the Order had been established, which went against Latin political and religious practice, which believed and taught that you can convert pagans by force. Killing, stealing property, raping and doing violence in the name of Christ was unacceptable to the Poles. It has been a part of Polish political culture to defend "the rights of nations", criticize the "conversion by a sword", and impose any ideologies including the religious once by force. It was believed that the state is not in a position to tell what people should think and believe in. In other words, the state could not violate the individual conscience.[6]

This justified and reasonable opposition to the activities of the Teutonic Order was not always understood in the Roman Curia. The Teutonic Knights used their overwhelming financial and political position to convince the pope's officials to support them. In the Middle Ages, after each election of a new pope, Polish diplomacy had to explain the same problems again and again. That situation changed for the better for Poland only at the end of

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[2] LORD HOWARD, Robert (1944–1947), "The Russo-Polish Boundary Problem," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 68, 410.

[3] HALECKI, Oscar (1960), "Federalism in the History of East Central Europe," *The Polish Review* 5, 5–19.

[4] KOLBUSZEWSKI, Stanisław (1939), "Influences of Czech Culture in Poland in the Middle Ages," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 18/52, 155.

[5] KNOLL, Paul (1992), "Economic and Political Institutions on the Polish–German Frontier in the Middle Ages: Action, Reaction, Interaction," in BARTLETT, Robert – MACKAY, Angus (eds.), *Medieval Frontier Societies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 151–174.

[6] WIELGUS, Stanisław (2022), "The Medieval Polish Doctrine of the Law of Nations. Ius Gentium," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 70/4, 27–60.

Middle Ages, after the victorious wars with the Teutonic Knights. The defeat of the Teutonic Knights by a united Polish–Lithuanian army in 1410 at the Battle of Grunwald put a stop to this expansion. However, it was not until the Polish victory in the Thirteen Years' War of 1454–1466 that the problem of the German threat from the Baltic Sea was resolved for nearly 200 years.[7]

It seems that Poland had the best relations with Hungary. What brought Poland and Hungary together was their immediate geographical proximity and historical concurrence of conversion to Latin Christianity which enabled both countries to enter the stage of European history.[8] The alliance with Hungary played a key role in the foreign policy of the last Piasts and undoubtedly contributed to the reunification of the Polish Kingdom during the reign of Wladyslaw Lokietek at the beginning of the 14th century. The rule of the Angevin dynasty in Poland brought about the transfer of Hungarian legal and political solutions to their new dominions as initiated by the Golden Bull of Andrew II. The first half of the 15th century saw a further tightening of these ties due to the increasing encroachment of the southern Hungarian borders by the Ottoman army. The assumption of the throne in Buda by Matthias Corvinus in 1458 led to the deterioration of good neighbourly relations and the Polish–Hungarian border became a typical case of the political rivalry.[9] Peaceful relations were restored with the return to the Hungarian throne of the Jagiellonian dynasty in 1490, but their ascendancy did not prevent the collapse of the Kingdom of Hungary after the battle of Mohacs in 1526. This tragedy partly resulted from the failure of Polish diplomacy, as Sigismund the Old pursued the northern policy at the expense of the Ottoman expansion, which not only posed a threat to Hungary but also to Christianity. Moreover, by entering the path of the so-called "political realism", a manifestation of which was the secularization of the Teutonic Prussia in 1525, the king of Poland badly misjudged the real state of affairs and made the fateful decision which had far-reaching and disastrous consequences for the countries of Central Europe.[10]

We should remember that the Middle Ages were the period of deeply rooted tensions between the secular rulers and the Church. The most crucial one was the rivalry between the Popes and the German Emperors. In that conflict, Poland always stood by the Popes. From the perspective of Rome then, Poland was an element of religious stability in Europe. Moreover, Poland was a loyal ally of the Church promoted that loyalty to other countries within the sphere of her influence.[11] In the 14th century, it brought Lithuania, which controlled vast territories of Eastern Europe, into close connection with Rome, and in the 15th

[7] MAKIŁŁA, Dariusz (2021), "Poland after the Thirteen Years' War (1454–1466). The Scope of Political and Structural Changes," *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 30, 205–217.

[8] FELCZAK, Wacław – FISCHINGER, Andrzej (1979), *Polska-Węgry, tysiąc lat przyjaźni*, Warszawa, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 12.

[9] STRZYŻ, Piotr (2017), "A Firearms in Military Activities in the Borderland of Bohemia, Silesia and Lesser Poland in the Times of Matthias Corvinus," *Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae* 30, 143–151.

[10] NOWAKOWSKA, Natalia (2018), *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther. The Reformation before Confessionalization*, Oxford, Oxfrod University Press, 64–65.

[11] BUCZEK, Daniel S. (1966), "Church, State and Holy See in Medieval Poland," *Polish Review* 2/3, 62–66.

and 16th centuries, it promoted the Union between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, not only in the eastern territories but in the Balkans as well.[12]

It can be argued that Poland was the defender of the proper understanding of the nature of the western civilization. Its very nature had both Christian and classical foundations and to a large extend was shaped by the policy and modus operandi of the university-educated people and church elites in the late Middle Ages and early modern era. In Poland of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Jesuit order made the greatest contributions in this field, through the establishment of schools, colleges and universities, where these ideas were preached and promoted.[13] It was then that concepts such "bulwark of Christianity", "borderlands" and "intermarium" were formed. They were strongly associated with the chivalric culture, in which not only a particular territory but also spiritual values and moral virtues were defended and promoted. These high ideas could not be put into action, and much less fulfilled, without the grounding paradigm which found its finest expression in the concept of *miles Christianus* – a personal role model patterned after Christ and the Church Triumphant, which combined the idea of spiritual struggle for the salvation of one's soul with a physical combat waged in defence of Latin civilization against schismatics and Muslims.[14]

It was then that the privileged position of the gentry in Polish language *szlachta*, which had been developing throughout the preceding centuries, was legally established. The most important concession had to do with money. The king agreed to reduce taxes to a small, merely symbolic payment. Since that time no extra taxation was possible without the agreement of the Polish gentry. Equally important was the participation of the nobles in political affairs. They could decide about all important internal and foreign affairs, both at local and central levels. In fact, those concessions were the origin of parliamentary government in Poland.[15]

The assumption of power in Poland by Jadwiga of Anjou decided that these freedoms extended far to the East with Hungarian help. A bishopric was founded in Vilnius. This gave birth to an ecclesiastical structure and charters of liberties patterned on the Polish model which were granted to the Lithuanian Church and nobility. At the same time, the queen conducted an expedition into the Ruthenian province. The whole region with Lwow as its capital accepted Polish sovereignty and in exchange was granted similar privileges.[16] What we witness in Eastern Europe at that time is a great civilizational process, similar in

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[12] SMOŁUCHA, Janusz (2022), "Poland as the Bastion of Christianity and the Issue of a Union with the Orthodox Church," *Perspektywy Kultury* 36/1, 35–50.

[13] RZEGOCKA, Jolanta (2016), "Civic Education on Stage. Civic Values and Virtues in the Jesuit Schools of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth," in MARYKS, Aleksander (ed.), *Exploring Jesuit Distinctiveness. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ways of Proceeding within the Society of Jesus*, Boston: Brill, 41–61.

[14] TAZBIR, Janusz (1977), "Poland and the concept of Europe in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries," *European Studies Review* 7, 29–45; LENART, Mirosław (2020), "Pojęcie granicy jako klucz hermeneutyczny myślenia o polskiej historii," *Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum* 26/1, 14.

[15] TAZBIR, Janusz (1982), "Polish national consciousness in the 16th–18th centuries," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 46, 47–72; GRZEŚKOWIAK-KRWAWICZ, Anna (2012), *Queen Liberty. The Concept of Freedom in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 3–24.

[16] JANECZEK, Andrzej (2002), "New authority, new property, new nobility. The foundation of noble estates in Red Ruthenia during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries," *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae* 7, 77–125.

its scale to that one which accompanied the transformation of societies and cities in Poland due to Magdeburg law. This process introduced to Eastern Europe something which could be called a civil society rooted in the Mediterranean civilization. In this territory, a political mentality and culture began to form a type of Western republicanism, based on a theory derived from the Roman Republic. We can argue, that the process of the formation of civil society in Eastern Europe is strongly related to Polish history and political culture. People who belonged to that sphere of influence, be it Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and many others greatly benefited from it.[17] At the same time, Moldova and Wallachia (nowadays parts of Romania) found themselves within the sphere of Polish and Hungarian influence and paid homage to the Polish and Hungarian King.[18]

It is important to emphasize that for a long time the University of Krakow was the most important scientific institution in the entire region. The role of the University in Krakow increased even more in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 15th century. It was due to the Hussite revolution, which broke out in Bohemia, and which ideology began to be propagated at the University of Prague. The Hussites attacked traditional culture and science, and the people who did not agree with their ideas. They hated the people who thought differently. The Hussite government expelled many professors from Prague University and the students who supported them. Many of the expelled scholars and students from Germany, Silesia, Moravia, Hungary, and other nations went to Krakow. Since that time the role of the university in Krakow grew immeasurably as a center of tolerance and freedom.[19]

The union between Poland and Lithuania is a success story. We cannot talk now about all the positive aspects of it. But let me state the obvious. The union completely changed the map of Europe and strengthened both countries politically, culturally and economically. Not everybody in Europe was happy with that development. There should not be a surprise that Moscow, traditionally Polish and Lithuanian opponent, tried to interfere in the unifying process, but the biggest threat came on the part of the Germans in Prussia. The union existed even after the extinction of the Jagellonian dynasty in 1572 for more than two hundred years. From the beginning, it was a family of nations bringing together Poles, Lithuanians, and Ruthenians, into one political body. It was a safe haven for various peoples: Germans, Jews, Armenians, and even some of the Muslim Tatars. In terms of territory which was almost 1 million square kilometers, it was the biggest country in Europe. It stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. It attracted also smaller neighboring territories because of its freedom and political culture.[20] And at the height of its power, the members of the Jagiellonian dynasty were kings of Bohemia and of Hungary. They ruled over the area which is now called "the Land Between the Seas" (in Latin *Intermarium*), limited by the Baltic, the

[17] SNYDER, Timothy (2003), *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, New Haven – London Yale University Press, 17–25.

[18] KACZKA, Mariusz Wiesław (2011), "The Gentry of the Polish–Ottoman Borderlands. The Case of the Moldavian–Polish Family of Turkuł/Turculeṭ," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 104, 129–150.

[19] KRAS, Paweł (2002), "Polish–Czech Relations in the Hussite Period – Religious Aspects," in DAVID, Zdeněk V. – HOLETON, David R. (eds.), *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice*, Praha, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 177–192.

[20] DEMBKOWSKI, Harry E. (1982), *The Union of Lublin. Polish Federalism in the Golden Age*, New York, East European Monographs.

Adriatic and the Black Seas, and which was free from foreign oppression, be it German, Muscovite or Turkish.[21]

The Jagiellonian Commonwealth was based on the rule of law and the conviction that that rule should be protected by the growing participation of representatives of the constituent nations. It promoted a parliamentary form of government and its political and social system was rooted in the old, Latin culture. In the Commonwealth, which was also described as the Crowned Republic, not only clergy and scholars but almost all nobility used and benefited from the Latin language still in the 18th century. It enabled the leading elites and nobility from various nations and ethnic circles to communicate with one another more easily and efficiently. For a long time, "the Land Between the Seas" was a bulwark of Catholicism, favoring a reunion of the Orthodox population with Rome but without enforcing it. Serious internal, social and political problems began to appear with the Reformation. In the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that Reformation grew out of the spirit of tolerance and the right to individual freedom. It is worth noting that the first Protestant country in the world was the Ducal Prussia established as a result of the secularization of the State of the Teutonic Order in 1525.[22]

There is a great number, not only Polish historians, who believe that the consent to the secularization of the Teutonic Order in Prussia was one of the biggest mistakes of the Jagiellonian dynasty. Later, a fatal threat to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth came from that side. To defend the Jagiellons, it is worth remembering the following exchange. Once King Sigismund Augustus was asked why he would not impose one religion on all citizens according to the principle of "cuius regio eius religio" ("Whose realm, his religion"), as it was the case in the West. He replied briefly: "I am not the King of the human conscience".[23]

Polish culture promoted also the rule of law and the Christian values, which served as the foundation of civic virtues. There was the saying in Poland that: *in Polonia lex est rex sed rex non est lex*. [In Poland the law is the king, but the king is not the law.][24] The Polish people prided themselves on this principle not only because they embraced rulers but also because it respected the rationality of human existence. Hence the Crowned Republic. This rule differed in Poland from almost all of Europe, which was dominated at that time by the royal absolutism and the interest of the state.

Poland is one of those Central European nations which does not limit the concept of border to political and economic interests only. Equally important for the Poles are spiritual and intangible dimensions of the border, which are traditionally associated with the sense of honor, dignity and freedom. What united the former Commonwealth with its closest neighbors were both the common civilizational and cultural values and historical experiences that compelled them to help each other in case of danger. With Hungary or the Romanian prin-

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[21] CHODAKIEWICZ, Marek Jan (2012), *Intermarium. The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas*, New Brunswick – London, Routledge, 46–59.

[22] WANDYCZ, Piotr S. (1992), *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages*, London – New York, Routledge, 48–77; GRZEŚKOWIAK-KRWAWICZ, *Queen Liberty*, 25–40.

[23] STYCZEŃ, Tadeusz (1994), "Towards an ethos of right," *Aletheia, an International Journal of Philosophy* 6, 243.

[24] KARABOWICZ, Anna (2023), "Anna Jagiellon (1523–1596)," in LONGCHAMPS DE BERIER, Franciszek – DOMINGO, Rafael (eds.), *Law and Christianity in Poland*, London – New York, Routledge, 91–93.

cipalities, this social and political glue was manifested, among other things, in the unassailable conviction that Islam could only be restrained by force. With Lithuania and most of the inhabitants of the Ruthenian lands, the shared belief was that the greatest danger to their existence was both the Moscow's autocracy (*samoderžavie*) and the Prussian arrogance and haughtiness. The common set of values and similar legal systems were a mark of distinction not between the countries of Central Europe on one side and the Muslim Turkey, schismatic Moscow and, also, the Holy Roman Empire on the other. This sense of belonging to the same social world was naturally linked to the idea of maintaining and defending the border. Until recently, we lived in the borderless world where nothing was worth defending and fighting for except the open societies and nations. In this utopian world there was no need for any walls, borders and limites. However, history has come full circle again and it forces the countries of our region to take a clear stand about the civilizational and cultural borders, which they used to defend in the past.