A Short History of Poland and Lithuania

Foreword.

Poland and Lithuania have been linked together in this history because for 400 years (from the end of the 14th century to the end of the 18th) they were united - at first by a personal union under the king, and then by a full political union.

As far as practicable this history is confined to that of Poland and Lithuania. But Russia and Prussia/Germany have played such a large part in Polish history that a certain amount of Russian and German history is inevitable in order to make that of Poland comprehensible.

The history has been compiled from the study of a number of works, including H.A.L.Fisher's "History of Europe', W.L.Langer's "Encyclopaedia of World History", the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Encyclopaedia Americana, and "Poland" by V.L.Benes and N.J.G.Pounds.

Chapter 1. The Origin of the Polish Nation.

The Poles were one of the Slavic peoples who moved westwards into Europe in the wake of the German tribes in the early years of the Christian era or before. By about the end of the last century A.D. the western Slays, who became the Poles, Czechs and Slovaks, had become separated from the eastern Slavs, who became the Russians.

The Poles settled in the plains of northern Europe between the rivers Oder and Vistula. To the west were other Slays who had gone as far west as the Elbe. For several centuries these Slavs formed a border between the Poles and the eastward expansion of the Germans thus allowing the Poles to develop their lands in peace.

A Polish nation came into being in the middle of the 10th century. By then the Swedish Vikings had advanced down the Dnieper and Volga rivers and had formed an embryo Russian Slavic state under their rue, based on the principality of Kiev. To the south a Oneoh dynasty ruled the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Hungarians had conquered Slovakia. To the north was Slavic Pamermia, and then along the southeastern shores of the Baltic Sea the Baltic peoples - Prussians, Lithuanians and Letts. These peoples spoke a language related to the Slavonian tongues, but belonged to a different ethnic group from the Slavs - the Baltic branch of the Indo-European races. The Lithuanians are thought to have lived in the region of the River Niemen long before the Slav invasions.

The history of the Polish nation starts with the reign of Mieszko 1 (962-992) of the House of Piast. Members of the semi-legendary family of Piast had united a number of the Polish tribes under the leadership of the Poljaue. The centre of authority were Gniezno and Poznan.

From the outset Poland had to contend with encroachments by Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, Russians and Prussians. To deprive the Germans of an excuse for further aggression, Mieszko accepted the overlordship of the (first) Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great; and to remove the danger of a hostile crusade he accepted Roman Christianity (helped by his wife, a Bohemian princess) for himself and his people, and placed his state under the authority of the Papacy. In the instrument performing this act the boundaries of Poland were defined - and included Pomerania, though its attachment to Poland was loose. In the east Mieszko lost some territory to Prince Vladimir of Kiev.

By these actions Mieszko linked Poland (like Bohemia and later Hungary) to western European culture. Vladimir, on the other hand (whose reign marked the end of the Viking period of Russian history and the beginning of the era of Russian civilisation) adopted the eastern, Byzantine, Christianity for Russia.

Chapter 2. The Piast Dynasty.

The Piast dynasty continued to rule Poland until 1370. These four centuries can be divided into three periods: until 1138 a period of varying fortune largely depending on the strength or weakness of the Polish kings, but on the whole one of consolidation of the new nation; then, from 1138 to the beginning of the 14th century, a period of internal division and national weakness; and then, in the 14th century, a return to unity and strength.

The strong rulers in the first period were Mieszkols son Boleslaw I (the Brave) 992-1025, Casimir I 1038-58, Boleslaw 11 (the Bold) 1O58-79, and Boleslaw III (the Wry-mouthed) 1102-1138.

Boleslaw I was a warrior and an able organiser. He raised Poland to the status of a great power. He conquered eastern Pomerania, Silesia and Cracow, and Poland's boundaries then approximated to those of the present clay. For a time Boleslaw's conquests went far beyond these boundaries - to the Elbe in Germany and to include Bohemia; but from these he was forced to withdraw by the Emperor Henry II. Boleslaw's friendship with Henry's predecessor, the Emperor Otto III, had enabled him to assume the title of King, and also to establish an archiepiscopal seat at Gniezno, making Poland ecclesiastically independent (of the Empire) under the Papacy.

Casimir I did much to restore the situation after a period of weak rule and dynastic struggles following Boleslaw’s death; and Boleslaw II fought many campaigns to secure the borders Of Poland, and also made some territorial advances in the east after marching to Kiev and reinstating his relative and protegé on the throne there. In his reign the capital was moved from Gniezno to Cracow.

Throughout this period - and beyond it - the three main frontier problems were German pressure in the west, Bohemia's claim to Silesia in the south-west, and the control of the pagan Pomeranians in the north. (At one time Pomerania had been lost to King Canute of Denmark and England.) Silesia, during the whole of the Piast dynasty, was ruled by members of the Piast family; but at times their overlord was the King of Bohemia, and Silesia periodically changed hands between Bohemia and Poland.

Boleslaw III checked the eastward advance of the Germans by a great victory over the forces of the Emperor. He also succeeded in subduing the Poseranians, and undertook their conversion to Christianity. Within Poland he reorganised the state, but then made the mistake of providing for the division of the country after his death into five principalities, to be ruled by his sons and their descendants.

This ushered in the second period - nearly two centuries of disruption, during which Poland ceased to be a united nation and principalities proliferated. Weakened by dynastic rivalries the royal power became insignificant, and that of the nobility - the great landlords and the clergy grew. The Church, however, with all the dioceses subject to the Archbishop of Gniezno, remained the one unifying influence.

During this 'period of division' external dangers were left to be coped with, as best they could, by the provinces directly threatened. In the north this resulted in the local ruler calling in the Teutonic Knights* for help against incursions by the pagan Prussians. The Knights thereupon, in the course of the 13th century incorporated Prussia within the German Empire. The Slavonic Prussians were converted to Christianity, and East Prussia was colonised by German settlers. The Knights also occupied the land to the west - known as West Prussia or eastern Pomerania - at the beginning of the 14th century.

Another blow which befell Poland in the 13th century was a Tatar invasion. In 1241 the Tatars devastated Poland (and Russia and Hungary) and reached Silesia, where they crushed a valiant resistance of Germans and Poles before they withdrew. They did not return to Poland; but they left on the south-eastern steppes of Russia the "Golden Horde", which dominated Russia for the next 200 years. In Poland the devastation was in time repaired, but the Poles had to live under the threat of further invasion. And in Silesia a result of the 1241 raid was an increase in German settlement there, to help in re-building and re-population.

The Germans were also steadily extending their political control over the thinly populated Slav territory to the west of Poland; and there was German economic penetration into the Polish states. This was encouraged by many of the Polish princes, attracted by the higher standards of Western Europe. The Germans settled mainly in the towns; and many Jews, too, expelled from other countries, were welcomed in Poland.

The first moves towards re-uniting Poland (now fourteen principalities) were made by the Silesian Piasts, but they failed owing to the hostility of the Piasts of Great Poland (in the central lands). In 1296 the magnates of Great Poland elected Ladislas, ruler of one of the principalities, to reign over them. They then changed their minds and elected King Vaclav of Bohemia to be King of Poland. But after Vaclav's death in 1305 Ladislas, with papal support, succeeded in uniting the principalities in Great and Little (southern) Poland under his, and was eventually crowned King.

Ladislas never reigned over Silesia, and, though holding his own in a long war against the Teutonic Knights, he did not succeed in dislodging them from Pomerania. But he strengthened Poland's position by friendship with Hungary (cemented by the marriage of his daughter to the Hungarian king); and he checked the ever-recurring raids by the pagan Lithuanians in the north-east by the recurring marriage of his son Casimir to the daughter of the Lithuanias Grand Duke Cudivin (see next chapter).

Casimir TTI (the Great) succeeded his father in 1333. He is best known for his administrative and legal reforms, and for his encouragement of learning. He founded at Cracow the first Polish university, which became the chief intellectual centre of Eastern Europe. He also promoted economic development, in the furtherance of which he befriended the Jews and German immigrants and improved the lot of the peasants. All these measures served to consolidate Polish unity.

An astute statesman, but a realist, Casimir abandoned Silesia** to Bohemia, then the most powerful state in central Europe; and he acquiesced in the loss of Pomerania to the Teutonic Knights; but he took advantage of Russia's weakness to extend Polish territory south-eastwards to Lvov (Lemberg) and beyond. At the end of his long reign (1333-1370) Poland was a strong, united and prosperous nation, and had resumed a position of diplomatic equality with other leading European states.

Casimir, who had no children, bequeathed the throne to his nephew King Louis of Hungary. Louis was a great king of Hungary, but took little interest In Poland. He had no sons, but secured the succession of his youngest daughter, Jadwiga, to the Polish throne - by making far-reaching and unwise concessions (including exemption from all taxes) to the Polish nobles.

Louis's death was followed by a short interregnum, while members of the many Piast families tried to capture the throne; but in 1384 Jadwiga was accepted as Queen. The nobles and the clergy, following the conciliatory policy of Ladislas and Casimir towards the Lithuanians, then arranged the marriage of (a reluctant) Jadwiga to Jagiello, Grand Duke of Lithuania; and in 1386 the marriage took place. Jagiello, who agreed to accept Christianity, became King of Poland (with the title Ladislas II). There then began four centuries of the union of Poland and Lithuania, the first two centuries being a period of personal union only through the Crown under the Jagiellon dynasty.

* On the failure of the Crusades in the Holy Land the Emperor Frederick 11 had transferred the activities of the Teutonic Knights to Germany, where, under their Grand Master Hermann von Salza, they were launched in 1226 as Christian missionaries and pioneers of Germanisation on the eastern frontier lands along the Baltic shore.

** Silesia was then lost to Poland for over 600 years; it was not fully recovered until the end of the Second World War. During those six centuries it belonged successively to Bohemia, to the Habsburg Empire, to Prussia, and then to the German Empire of the 19th-20th centuries.

Chapter 3. Lithuania until the Union with Poland.

In the forests and marshes of the Niemen basin the pagan Lithuanians in the 13th century survived the advances of the Teutonic Knights; and the threat began to bring some degree of unity to the various tribes. In the middle of the century Mindovg established a Lithuanian state, which appears then to have collapsed and been re-established by Viten (1293-1316).

Then came Gudimin, Grand Duke from 1316 to 1341, followed by his son Olgerd, 1345 to 1377. Gudimin founded Vilna as his capital, organised the Lithuanian nation, and made great inroads into a Russia weakened by the Tatar rule. He conquered Kiev and the land of the middle Dnieper, and made western Russia subject to Lithuania. As already mentioned, he married his daughter to Casimir of Poland; and he began to introduce western civilisation into his duchy, and made overtures to the Pope on the question of adopting Christianity.

Olgerd continued the vast expansion of Lithuania. Though often at war with the Teutonic Knights in the north, he made great advances to the east and south-east in Russia. He several times reached the outskirts of Moscow, and he extended Lithuanian domains to the Black Sea, where he defeated the Tatars. He became a Christian and died as a monk - after ruling a Lithuanian nation covering 350,000 square miles.

On Olgerd's death his son Jagiello became Grand Duke, and then came the union with Poland by his marriage to Queen Jadwiga, and the acceptance of Roman Catholicism for Lithuania. Both nations had much to gain from the union, notably a common front against the Knights - who continued an aggressive policy although for this their main reason had now really gone with the peaceful conversion of Lithuania.

Inside Lithuania, however, Jagiello had to contend with a family feud. His cousin Witold, who escaped from imprisonment by Jagiello, and who opposed the Polish union, was elected Grand Duke by the Lithuanian nobles; and Jagiello had to concede the rule of Lithuania to him as viceroy.

Chapter 4. The Personal Union of Poland and Lithuania under the Jagiellon Dynasty.

Jagiello was King of Poland and Lithuania for 48 years (1386- 1434). He was a firm and prudent ruler, and did much to make the personal union a success, in spite of difficulties with the fractious Polish nobility and with Witold in Lithuania. The Teutonic Knights exploited these differences, but their aggression eventually caused Tagiello and Witold to unite against them.

In 1410 the Polish-Lithuanian forces gained an overwhelming victory over the Knights at Tannenberg. The war, however, went on intermittently until 1466 when, by the Treaty of Thorn, Poland acquired West Prussia, which gave her access to the Baltic, including the port of Danzig.* The Knights retained East Prussia, for which they paid homage to the Polish king; but their day was virtually over, and Poland had no further trouble with them.

Meanwhile, in the east, Witold had conceived the ambitious idea of freeing all Russia from the Tatars and becoming emperor of the east. In this he was thwarted by a terrible defeat at the hands of the Tatars in 1399. All western Russia, however, remained under Lithuanian rule; and in the later years of the 15th century Poland-Lithuania reached its greatest extent, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

By then, a new power had arisen in the east - the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which during the previous hundred years had united the Russians of the central plain and freed them from their tutelage to the Tatars. Ivan the Great, Grand Duke of Moscow 1462-1505, as well as finally throwing off the Tatar yoke, extended his territories by annexing other Russian principalities, including his great rival Novgorod, which was allied to Lithuania. This gave Muscovy jurisdiction over a large area in the north and stretching to the Urals In the east. Ivan also took over from the Byzantine Empire (which passed away in 1453 with the loss of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks) the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church - and assumed the Imperial title of Tsar.

So Roman Catholic Poland-Lithuania now had on her eastern flank a powerful new Russia - and the problem of having many Greek Orthodox Russians and Ukrainians under her rule. This problem was handled with toleration by Tagiello and his successors. The Orthodox Catholics were free to practise their religion - though the Orthodox clergy did not have the same privileges as the Roman.

The brotherhood of the Polish and Lithuanian nobles, in battle, on the hunting field, and in councils, did much to cement the union. The aristocracy of the two nations intermarried, and in the course of the two centuries of the Jagiellon dynasty they practically merged into one class - and a very powerful one. (The social structure of the two countries was, however, different in that the lesser gentry in Poland became increasingly important.) The Polish monarchy was in theory elective, unlike the princely title in Lithuania which was hereditary in the Jagiellan family. But it so happened that in these two centuries there was nearly always an acceptable

Jagiellon candidate for the Polish throne, so that the election of the king was normally a formality.

Jagiello's son and successor, Ladislas VI, came to the throne at the age of 10. When 16 he was also elected King of Hungary, to whose affairs he devoted himself, leaving Poland to the magnates. At the age of 20 he was killed at Varna on the Black Sea when leading an unsuccessful Hungarian crusade against the Turks.

Casimir IV (Ladislas' brother) reigned from 1447 to 1492. It was during his reign that the Treaty of Thorn brought the wars with the Teutonic Knights to a successful conclusion. He also engaged in conflict with the Turks in Moldavia, over which Poland had a rather vague suzerainty.

On Casimir's death there was a temporary separation of Poland and Lithuania. One of his sons, John Albert, became King of Poland, and another son, Alexander, Grand Duke of Lithuania. Jobn Albert greatly increased the privileges of the lesser gentry in order to reduce the power of the great magnates - measures which also reduced the freedom of the peasants. On his death Poland and Lithuania were re-united under Alexander, in whose short reign the Muscovites ravaged the country.

Sigismund I (1506-48), another son of Casimir IV, was a capable ruler who concentrated on the defence of the eastern domains. He lost some territory to the Russians, but adopting a policy of neutrality towards the Turks he kept them from Poland. (The Turks, however, routed the Hungarians at the Battle of Mohacs in 1526. They then fought the Habsburgs of Austria for control of Hungary, and the country was divided between them.) At about this time, too, the Cossacks* of the Ukraine began to organise themselves into military bands at the disposal of the frontier lords.

Sigismund II (1548-72) had to contend, not only with Muscovite aggression, but also with the effects of the German Reformation. The Reformation made considerable headway in the northern towns. At first resisted by the King, the "dissidents" were then tolerated, and Poland became the happy hunting ground of Lutherans, Calvinists, and all forms of anti-Catholic sects. In the 1550s there was a Protestant majority of the lesser gentry in the Sejm (Parliament); and in 1573 religious liberty was granted to all denominations. However, after the formation of a Polish-Lithuanian branch of the Jesuit order in 1545 the dissident movement was chocked and the supremacy of Roman Catholicism gradually restored. There remained, though, large numbers of Orthodox Catholics in Lithuania.

An offshoot of the Reformation was chaos in Livonia, the Baltic land on both sides of the Gulf of Riga (part of modern Latvia and Estonia). The people had been forcibly converted to Christianity and the land occupied in the 12th and 13th centuries by the "Livonian Knights" or "Brothers of the Sword". With the Reformation the Knights accepted Protestantism, were opposed by the Archbishop of Riga, and both sides enlisted foreign aid. The Tsar Ivan IV intervened; so did Sweden and Denmark; and so did Sigismund II, to protect Lithuania. After a war lasting several years (1557-61) Livonia was divided between them. Southern Livonia was incorporated in Lithuania as a Protestant Duchy owing allegiance to the Polish crown.

In this settlement the Tsar, defeated by the Poles and Lithuanians, failed to achieve his aim of access to the Baltic, and Livonia remained a bone of contention between Poland and Russia. This convinced Sigismund of the necessity for a more effective union of Poland and Lithuania, to counter Muscovite aggression. And some

Lithuanians, who had borne the brunt of the fighting in Livonia, saw advantages in such an arrangement, though the idea was opposed by the magnates. After prolonged negotiations Sigismund succeeded in bringing the full union of the two nations to fruition. By the "Union of Lublin", 1569, Poland and Lithuania were formally united into one nation. In future they were to have a common sovereign and a common parliament; and the Polish crown, hitherto elective in theory, became so in practice.

The Union of Lublin was the last great act of the Jagiellon dynasty, which ended with the death of Sigismund II, who had no children, in 1572.

During the period of this dynasty Poland had prospered economically. Agriculture and lumber production increased (partly at the cost of the peasants who were reduced to serfdom on the great estates); and grain and timber were exported to western Europe in return for manufactured goods. And Poland from the Black Sea to the Baltic became the main overland trade route between the West and Asia. But in Poland a strong trading middle class, such as arose in western countries, never materialised; there was no real social intermediary class between the lesser gentry and the peasants.

In the towns crafts and the arts and science flourished, and the reign of Casimir IV in the second half of the 15th century was a "golden age" of Polish culture. At the end of that reign Nicholas Copernicus (1473- 1543) came to the University of Cracow, where his subsequent work earned his, and Poland, world fame. He proved that the sun is the centre of our system, and so became the founder of modern astronomy.

In the early part of the Jagiellon dynasty, Lithuania was a long way behind Poland in economic, social and cultural development; and the contacts between the two peoples were confined to the higher gentry. But the 200 years of the dynasty enabled the Lithuanians, to some extent, to catch up with the Poles by the time of the Union of Lublin.

*Danzig had become a thriving port as a member of the German Hanseatic League. This was a powerful league of trading cities which in the 14th century had political control of the southern Baltic, but in the 15th century its power faded.

**The Cossacks were originally peasant fugitives from serfdom or oppression in - Russia, Lithuania and Poland - or just adventurous spirits - who became self-governing communities on the Steppes. There were three main Cossack hosts, of which the Ukrainian Cossacks were one.

Chapter 5. The Full Union of Poland and Lithuania.

After the Union of Lublin Poland-Lithuania was In effect a republic - with an elected king whose power was severely limited. He could not make war or peace, levy a tax or alter the law, without the approval of the Sejm. The Sejm normally met every two years, and any member could veto any proposal put before it - a custom known as the "liberum veto". The King had no say in the choice of his successor; and the nobles and the lesser gentry, intent on preserving their own privileges, normally elected a king unlikely to interfere with them - preferably a nonentity, and, prevented by internal jealousies from electing one of their own number, usually a foreigner. In war, there being no national army, the available forces depended on the willingness of the various nobles to take the field with their retainers. Under all these circumstances no coherent national policy was possible.

The Lithuanians on the whole remained lukewarm about the union, sometimes wishing to break away. But they gradually became more dependent on Poland, and adopted Polish laws and customs - and the Polish language in the educated classes. The first king elected was a Frenchman, the feeble Henry of Valois, after the French ambassador had bought the support of many of the leading magnates. A year later Henry returned to France, disillusioned.

Then came a king who was far from being a nonentity - Stephen Bathory, the Hungarian Prince of Transylvania. (After the partition of Hungary between the Habsburgs and the Turks, Transylvania became a semi-independent tributary of the Turks.) Bathory, as a condition of his election, married the last surviving Jagiellian princess. In his reign (1575-86) Poland reached the peak of her international power. Using peasant infantry raised from the royal estates to augment the forces of the gentry, and also units of Cossacks whose privileges he increased, Bathory fought several successful campaigns against the Russians in Livonia, halted Russian encroachment there, and brought most of Livonia under Polish rule. He then conceived the idea of uniting Russia and Transylvania with Poland-Lithuania in a great eastern empire to counter-balance the Turks and the Habsburgs, by both of whom Polish independence was threatened; but this grandiose project foundered with his sudden death from apoplexy.

At home Bathory, in spite of an uncooperative gentry, made some innovations. He reformed the judicial system, and he founded the University of Vilna in Lithuania as an eastern bulwark of western culture. He also extended the privileges of the Jews who, for the next 200 years had a parliament of their own.

In all his achievements Bathory was ably supported by his chancellor and commander-in-chief, Jan Zenoyski, who played a decisive role in Bathory's election - and in that of his successor, Sigismund III.

At the end of Bathory's reign Poland-Lithuania was apparently a powerful and stable state; and she had opportunities in the first half of the 17th century to consolidate a position of dominance in central-eastern Europe. But the weaknesses in her constitution, the selfishness of the gentry, Polish-Lithuanian friction, and the advent

of a spirit of religious bigotry in place of the old toleration, all militated against success as a nation; and the 17th and 18th centuries were a period of decline.

Chapter 6. The Decline of Poland-Lithuania.

Sigismund III (1587-1632) was the son of the King of Sweden and of Catharine, sister of the Jagiellon Sigismund II. He was cultured, reserved, and obstinate, and - handicapped by the limitations to his powers - was an ineffective monarch. Brought up by his mother as a Catholic, and Jesuit trained, his ambition was the formation of a Catholic alliance of Poland, Sweden (which had become Lutheran in 1527) and Austria. He married a Habsburg of Austria, and in 1592 he inherited the throne of Sweden, which he hoped to restore to the Catholic faith.

Protestant Sweden, however, would not have this, and in 1599 Sigismund was removed from the Swedish throne by his uncle Charles. Sigismund refused to give up his claim, and involved Poland in sporadic warfare with Sweden until 1629, when Charles's son, the great Gustavus Adolphus, quelled Sigismund's hopes - and took Livonia from the Poles.

At home Sigismund fell out with the chancellor Zamoyski, who opposed an Austrian alliance, and opposed Sigismund's efforts to amend the constitution. He also disapproved of Sigismund's militant Roman Catholicism when it was not in the interests of the Polish state; and in an effort to conciliate the Orthodox Catholics of Lithuania he created the Uniate Church, in which Greek Orthodox recognised Papal authority but retained the Eastern ritual members

This increased Polish influence in the eastern provinces; but this formation of another sect, looked clown upon by both Romans and Orthodox - and which became largely a "peasant religion" - led to more trouble rather than to unity.

Early in the 17th century Russian affairs dissolved into chaos when the royal House of Ruric came to an end. Poland tried to benefit from this. In 1610 the Poles occupied Moscow, and Sigismund’s son was offered the throne. But the Russian people, devout adherents of the Orthodox Church, rose in a national revolt against the idea of a Polish Roman Catholic Tsar, and evicted the Poles. War between Poland and Russia continued intermittently for the next fifty years.

In the Thirty Years War (1618-48) which engulfed Germany, and in which most of western Europe participated at one time or another (starting as a religious war between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism) Poland prudently remained neutral. But Sigismund's long reign did little good for Poland-Lithuania. Her prestige abroad declined, and internal politics remained chaotic. There was one important administrative move in this reign, though - the change of capital from Cracow to more central Warsaw in 1595.

Sigismund was succeeded by his son Ladislas IV (1632-48), who had been brought up as a Pole. Unlike his father, Ladislas was tolerant towards the Orthodox Church, and he enjoyed considerable popularity with his people. But, like his father, he could make no headway against the jealousies and lack of national spirit in the gentry; indeed, the parsimony of the Sejm, and its fear of any accretion of power to the king, allowed the Polish navy, which had begun to develop under Sigismund III, to sink into permanent decay.

Ladislas died in 1648 and was succeeded by John Casimir I* (1648-68). Just before Ladislas's death there came a new disaster for Poland - a formidable revolt of the Ukrainian Cossacks. For some time there had been growing discontent there, through Sigismund's intolerance of the Orthodox faith to which most of them belonged, the high-handed behaviour of the local magnates who tried to reduce the Cossacks to servility, and the failure of the Sejm to fulfil the financial terms of the agreements for military aid to the government. The revolt began in 1648, led by Bogdan Khmelnitsky, and joined by the Tatars. At first entirely successful, the Cossacks set up an independent state in the Ukraine; but, unable to hold the loyalty of his followers - turbulent Cossacks, Tatars, Ukrainian Uniates – Khmelnitsky was defeated by John Casimir. In 1654 Khmelnitsky, in an effort to recover his position, accepted allegiance to Moscow.

The Russians then invaded Poland, and this was closely followed by an invasion from the north by Charles X of Sweden, in search of military glory. The Swedes, allied to some Lithuanian magnates dissatisfied with their secondary role in the Polish-Lithuanian state, overran the whole country, taking Warsaw and Cracow.

From these further disasters Poland then quickly recovered. An alliance with the Austrian Emperor led to a truce with Russia, and the heroic defence of the monastery of Czestochowa against the Swedes inspired a revitalised Polish army to carry all before it. The King reached an agreement with the Cossacks, and Poland made peace with Sweden and eventually, in 1667, with Russia. But Poland did not do well under the peace treaties. The loss of Livonia to Sweden was confirmed; and the (Hohenzollern) Elector of Brandenburg acquired full sovereignty over East Prussia, hitherto held by his as a fief under the Polish crown.** And Poland, weakened by internal dissension amounting to civil war, and apprehensive of renewed Turkish aggression, ceded to Russia the eastern Ukraine and the city of Kiev.

In the short, reign of Michael Wisniowiecki (a Pole), 1669-74, the Cossacks rebelled again, now in alliance with the Turks. Their invasion of Poland was stemmed at Lvov by the Poles under John Sobieski, a brilliant general, but unscrupulous and ambitious for power. (In his youth he had fought for the Swedes against Poland). On King Michael's death Sobieski overawed the elective diet and was elected king.

Sobieski drove the Turks from the western Ukraine, and then, in 1683, led a Polish army which played a leading part in saving Vienna from a Turkish siege. This was the turning point in the Turkish advance into Europe. The Austrians, Poles and Russians drove them out of Hungary. Sobieski continued the Polish advance towards Moldavia, but here he was defeated and returned to Poland exhausted by his campaigns.

Sobieski, who has gone down to history as the last great heroic King of Poland, hoped to become an absolute monarch and found a dynasty; but in this he was thwarted by the Sejm. On his death in 1696 Frederick Augustus of Saxony was elected King (Augustus II), and Poland-Lithuania entered into its last hundred declining years as an independent nation.

During this hundred years, with the Turkish menace now removed, the main threats to Poland were a Russia westernised and strengthened by Peter the Great (1689-1725), and the rising power of Brandenburg-Prussia. (In 1701 the Elector of Brandenburg assumed the title King of Prussia - rather oddly, instead of King of Brandenburg.)

Augustus II (1697-1733) showed little interest in Poland. But he involved it in the Great Northern War (1700-1721), in which Saxony, Denmark, Russia and Poland combined to curb the power of Sweden. At first Charles XII of Sweden routed all his enemies; and after inflicting a crushing defeat on the Russians he spent six years in a series of victories over the Saxons and the Poles.

Poland was devastated - and plundered by Swedes, Saxons and Russians alike. With the support of most Lithuanians and some Polish magnates, Augustus was dethroned and Charles XII's nominee, the Pole Stanislas became king.

Charles then marched into Russia to dethrone the Tsar; but the Russians had been given time to recover while Charles was punishing the Saxons and Poles, and Charles's army, decimated by disease and the Russian winter, was annihilated at the Battle of Poltava, 1709. Poltava was decisive, though the war dragged on for many years. Augustus returned to the Polish throne, henceforth a dependent of Peter the Great - who, by the eventual peace treaty, gained Livonia and Estonia. And on Augustus's death a Russian army marched to Warsaw and compelled the Sejm to elect his son, Augustus III, rather than the Polish choice, Stanislas.

Augustus spent most of his time in his native Saxony, leaving Poland to be run by the powerful, and in general pro-Russian, Czartoryski family, whose efforts to save Poland by reform and the formation of a standing army were thwarted by their rivals and the liberum veto. (The liberum veto completely paralysed any progressive or patriotic move in the Sejm, because a selfish member - or one bribed by a foreign power - could always veto it.)

On Augustus III's death in 1764 Stanislas Poniatowski, a member of the Czartaryaki family, was elected King - backed by Catherine the Great of Russia, one of whose lovers he had been. Catherine's subsequent drastic interference in the affairs of Poland, and her alliance with Frederick the Great of Prussia*** (to whom the separation of East Prussia from the rest of his kingdom by Polish territory was an irritation, then led to the first "Partition of Poland".

*John Casimir, another son of Sigismund III, on his election was recalled from France, where he had been living as a priest and had become a cardinal.

**Early in the 16th century the then Elector of Brandenburg became Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights and secularised their possessions to found the Duchy of (East) Prussia, continuing to hold it as a Polish fief.

*** In the middle of the 18th century Frederick had seized Silesia from Austria in spite of a powerful coalition against him, including Russia; but subsequently Prussia and Russia became allies.

Chapter 7. The Partitions of Poland-Lithuania : The Napoleonic Interlude.

Poland-Lithuania at the beginning of the reign of Stanislas II (Poniatowski) was the largest European country in area except Russia, and had an estimated population of some 11 million. It was a mixed population, probably not more than half of them Poles. The urban population was comparatively small - perhaps about a million, probably half of them Jews. The nobility and lesser gentry are thought to have totalled about 700,000 (some very rich but the majority very poor). The rest of the population were the peasants, living in a state of serfdom. It was largely due to the lesser gentry, proud and determined to maintain their privileges, but often uneducated and illiterate, that Poland had been reduced to political impotence.

This political decay had been accompanied by economic decline, partly due to the lack of a middle class, and partly due to the overland Polish trade route being obstructed by Turks and Tatars, and then by-passed by the new sea route to the east.

So a weak Poland was an easy prey for her strong and ambitious neighbours. The first move in a chain of events which culminated in the total dismemberment of the Polish-Lithuanian state - was a demand by Catherine of Russia for political and religious equality for the Dissidents (Orthodox Catholics and Protestants), of whom there were about a million. Russian troops forced the acceptance of this measure by the Sejm. This led to a Roman Catholic and anti-Russian revolt by a group of nobles in the Ukraine. A Russian army suppressed this patriotic rising - and defeated the Turks, who supported it. Frederick of Prussia then seized the opportunity to extend his territories by suggesting to Catharine and to Maria Theresa of Austria that each of them might take parts of Poland-Lithuania without interfering with the interests of the other two. The result was the First Partition in 1772.

By this partition (see map) Prussia took West Prussia excluding Danzig, Austria took a large area in the south including Lvov, and Russia took the north-eastern provinces of Lithuania. Poland-Lithuania lost about a quarter of her territory.

The shock caused Poland to make great efforts to set her house in order. The Pope's suppression or the Jesuit order in 1773 provided the opportunity to secularise and modernise education. Trade and industry made progress. And in 1791, after much debate - and opposition - a new constitution was introduced. The liberum veto was abolished, the monarchy was made hereditary (in the Saxon house), the lot of the peasants was improved, and the nobles were subjected to taxation.

A revived Poland, however, was not to the liking of Catharine of Russia, nor were some of the reforms to the liking of all the Polish gentry. Some of the nobles of the Ukraine formed a confederation to oppose the new constitution; and the King, who had previously strongly supported this constitution, now joined the opposition to it. The Russians hastened to the support of the confederation, and crushed a brave resistance by the small Polish army; and Frederick of Prussia, fearing to be left out of further spoils, joined Russia in imposing a "Second Partition", in 1793.

This time Russia took a huge area in the east, including most of the western Ukraine, and Prussia took Danzig and Great (central) Poland. Poland-Lithuania was now reduced to about a third of its size and population before the First Partition.

A national insurrection was then organised by Thaddeus Kosciuszko*, a distinguished army officer, democrat, and patriot. At first Kosciuszko was successful, and much of the ancient Polish land was recovered; but the might of the Russian and Prussian armies prevailed, and in 1795 a Third Partition removed Poland-Lithuania from the map. Russia took most of the rest of Lithuania, Prussia took the remains of northern Poland including Warsaw, and Austria joined in the partition, acquiring the rest of southern Poland, with Cracow. King Stanislas was forced to abdicate - and retired to a luxurious Russian prison in St Petersburg (the Russian capital since the days of Peter the Great).

At this time France was emerging from the effects of the French Revolution. Catharine encouraged Austria and Prussia to invade France and restore the monarchy there; but her own invasion of Poland in 1792 diverted their efforts to seeing that they got their share of the Polish spoils, thus unwittingly allowing revolutionary France time to recover and Napoleon was able to consolidate the new French army without serious interference from the European powers.

After the Third Partition Polish armies fought for Napoleon all over Europe and beyond - though Kosciuszko himself, distrusting Napoleon's intentions regarding Poland, remained aloof. In 1807 Napoleon, after defeating the Austrians, the Prussians, and the Russians in three crushing victories, met the Tsar (now Alexander I) at Tilsit (in Lithuania) and got his agreement to the creation of a Polish state out of Prussian Poland (plus Cracow from Austrian Poland). Thus came into being the Grand Duchy of Warsaw - under the King of Saxony, who had joined in with Napoleon's plans for Germany.

The Grand Duchy had a democratic constitution, laid down by Napoleon, and its administration was virtually controlled by the French. In a short existence it made good progress, particularly in education and in the economic sphere. It also produced an army of nearly 100,000 men, which took part in Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. Napoleon's retreat from this enterprise marked the end of the Duchy, which was occupied by the Russians. One result of the Napoleonic interlude, however, was a lasting infusion of French democratic ideas.

By the Congress of Vienna, which re-drew the map of Europe after Napoleon's final defeat, Polish hopes of a re-united and independent Poland were dashed. Prussia retained West Prussia and the western part of the Grand Duchy with Poznan. Austria kept her "partition" acquisitions except for Cracow, which became an independent city republic under the protection of Russia, Austria and Prussia. Russia kept all her "partition" gains - which included nearly all of the old Lithuanian empire. And the greater part of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw (including Warsaw itself) became the "Congress" Kingdom of Poland, with the Tsar as King. For over a hundred years independent Poland and Lithuania ceased to exist.

*Kosciuszko had been one of the leaders of the Polish army in its resistance to the Russians in 1792. Before that he had fought with distinction for the rebellious Americans in their War of Independence against Britain.

Chapter 8. Divided Poland-Lithuania in the 19th Century.

Russian Poland.

In Russian Poland in the early 19th century the Lithuanian provinces and the Ukraine were assimilated into the Russian administrative system; and the Kingdom of Poland, which in theory had considerable autonomy, in fact was ruled autocratically by the representatives of the Tsar. The kingdom in these years made good economic progress; but this did not prevent growing unrest which culminated in the Polish rebellion of 1830, in which the Lithuanian nobility also took part.

The Polish drove the Russian garrison from Warsaw, and a revolutionary government was proclaimed. It then took another ten months for the Russians to regain control, the eventual collapse of the rebellion being largely due to poor leadership and dissension among the rebels. Many of the leaders escaped to France. (The Tsar's intention to use Polish troops to put down a French revolution in 1830 which dislodged the restored Bourbon king was the spark which set off the rising in Poland.)

Paris now became the headquarters of Polish nationalism and the intellectual capital of the Polish people. Among the exiles were the poets Mickiewiez, Slowacki and Krasinaki, and the pianist/composer Chopin, son of a French father and Polish mother. The image was created of a noble, romantic Poland, suffering under the misfortunes of partition but destined to rise again.

With the suppression of the 1830 rebellion "Congress" Poland was absorbed into the autocratic administration of the Russian empire, and a policy of "Russification" in Poland and Lithuania started. The universities of Warsaw and Vilna were closed. Polish recruits were distributed in Russian regiments; and the use of the Russian language in the civil administration increased. The Russian grip was now so firm that there was no reaction in Russian Poland in the "year of revolutions" in Europe in 1848, nor during the Crimean War (1854-55).

One of the Russian measures to absorb Poland into Russia was the abolition in 1851 of a former customs barrier between Congress Poland and the rest of Russia. This had (from the Russian point of view) the unintended result of a great expansion of Polish industry. Foremost in this expansion were the textile factories of Lodz which, with access to a large Russian market, became the chief industrial region in all Russia.

In 1855 the new Tsar Alexander II, realising from the Russian disasters in the Crimean War that changes were necessary, set about reforms in Russia - and adopted a liberal policy towards the Poles. His measures satisfied the Polish moderates, but not the extreme nationalists, largely revolutionary students in the cities. After much disorder it was decided to draft these en masse into the Russian army. The result was the second great Polish rebellion, in 1863.

The Poles now having no army, this rising took the form of guerrilla warfare, which went on for nearly two years. Public opinion in Western Europe, and even in Austria, was stirred by this heroic (though ill-organised) revolt; and England, France and Austria made representations to Russia advocating home rule for Poland. But the Prussian chancellor Bismarck supported Russia, so nothing came of international intervention and the rebellion was crushed, followed by executions, confiscations and deportations.

Russificatian was then intensified. The use of the Polish and Lithuanian languages was further curtailed, and Russian made obligatory in the schools. The press and literature were severely censored, and the Roman Catholic Church was attacked. The whole administration was run by a corrupt and inefficient Russian bureaucracy. To punish the gentry for their part in the rebellion, the serfs were emancipated in 1864; the Russians hoped that the Tsar would be looked upon by the peasants as their protector against the gentry. In the event the peasants, who had previously shown little enthusiasm for following their masters in rebellion against Russia, now had a stake in the land, and a spirit of patriotism began to grow among them.

In Russian Poland as a whole the collapse of the 1363 rebellion was a turning point in the attitude of the Poles. The "romantic" period and pre-occupation with ideas of rebellion gave way, to a more practical approach to their problems - further economic progress to improve living standards, combined with the preservation of the Polish language and culture. A thriving middle class arose, and feudal Poland changed into a modern industrial Poland. And in Lithuania towards the end of the century a spirit of nationalism began to revive.

Austrian Poland.

In Austrian Poland (known as Galicia) the autocratic Austrian regime in the first half of the 19th century firmly controlled the administration and restricted the Polish language and culture, particularly after the 1830 rising. And in 1846 Austria used the excuse of Polish unrest to get the consent of Russia and Prussia to the suppression of the republic of Cracow which had enjoyed a liberal constitution - and to its inclusion in Galicia.

After the 1863 rebellion - in which the Galician Poles co-operated - and still more after Austria’s defeat by Prussia in 1866 and the formation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, the Austrian attitude to the Poles changed to one of conciliation in order to bolster up her unstable empire. In the last decades of the century Galicia, with a Polish administration, became almost an independent state within Austria; and Cracow and Lvov, with their universities, became intellectual and literary centres for all Poles. Galicia also became the base of a new Polish political life. The National Democratic Party, with Roman Dmowski one of the leading spirits, was formed there; and the activities of the Polish Socialist Party, first organised by Joseph Pilsudski in Vilna in 1892, were later transferred to Galicia. At the end of the century, too, a Peasant Party came into being.

Galicia, however, had weaknesses. The ruling Polish landed aristocracy made no effort to emulate the industrial progress taking place in Russian - and Prussian - Poland. And they also alienated the Ruthenes (Ukrainians) who formed a large part of the population in eastern Galicia, and a Ukrainian national movement started to develop there. (See note on the Uniate Church)

Prussian Poland.

In Prussian Poland the Poles were at first treated well, but were later repressed - the reverse of the course of events in Galicia. Until 1830 the Poles took part in the administration of Prussian Poland, and their culture was protected; and the peasants were enfranchised in 1823. In the middle decades of the century periods of repression - and Germanisation and German colonisation - after 1830 and 1848 alternated with periods of concession and relaxation. But with Bismarck's rise to power in 1862 systematic repression was resumed and continued.

Bismarck's part in preventing international support for the Polish rising of 1863 has already been mentioned; and after the Prussian victory over France in 1870 and the creation of the German empire, Germanisation of Prussian Poland was intensified. But there was resistance to it. A struggle developed between Prussian Lutheranism and Polish Catholicism, but the Prussians could not break the hold of the Roman Catholic Church, which remained the rallying point of Polish culture and nationalism. And also the peasants, who had been able to acquire land since 1823, had become a more self-reliant class than in Russian or Austrian Poland, and used what rights they had to resist Germanisation.

Included in Prussia itself (after 1870 in Germany) was Silesia (see note Chapter 2). Lower (north-western) Silesia was by now almost entirely populated by Germans; but in Upper (south-eastern) Silesia - now an important mining district - there was a high proportion of Poles, whose culture had survived 500 years of separation from Poland. Here there was no Polish nobility nor middle class. The Poles were agricultural or industrial labourers, and, as in Prussian Poland, they were subjected to Bismarck's policy of Germanisation.

During the later part of this partition period (the late 19th and early 20th centuries) Polish voluntary exiles achieved much fame abroad. Joseph Conrad (Korzeniowski) (1857-1924), born of Polish parents in the Ukraine, joined the French and then the British mercantile marine, became a naturalised British subject, and later became a great writer - in English - of stories of the sea. The scientist Marie Curie (1867-1934), born in Warsaw (née Sklodovska), went to Paris in 1891, and with her French husband gained world renown for the discovery of radium and polonium (named after Marie Curie's homeland) and work on radioactivity.

Poland at this time also produced several great names in the world of music. Paderewski has already been mentioned. Two other celebrated pianists, Joseph Hofmann (1876-1957), born in Cracow, and Arthur Rubinstein (1886---), born in Lodz, both later settled in the United States and became American citizens. And Wanda Landowska (1877-1959) in France and the United States established herself as the world's greatest player of the harpsichord.

Note. The Uniate Church. In Russian Poland the Uniate Church was re-absorbed into the Orthodox, but it continued to flourish in the western Ukraine in Austrian Poland. (After the Second World War, when the Ukraine became a Soviet Socialist Republic, the Uniate Church was dissolved - but continued a secret existence, largely among exiles, bound up with Ukrainian nationalism.)

Chapter 9. The Early 20th Century : The First World War and The Revival of Poland and Lithuania.

In Russia in the closing years of the 19th century there was growing discontent among the factory workers at their miserable conditions, and their resentment was fostered by the revolutionary propaganda of Lenin. To divert the rising agitation the Tsar and his advisers intensified the repression of the Poles and other subject peoples, and embarked on an adventurous far-eastern policy - which led to war with Japan in 1904-5. Russia was disastrously defeated; and the losses and hardships suffered by the peasants in the war, together with conditions at home, caused the Russian revolution of 1905.

The Tsar made concessions, including an elected parliament (Dama), and order was restored; but during the next ten years autocracy in Russia resumed control, unrest grew, and a further revolution seemed imminent. However, on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the Russian people rallied to the support of the Tsar.

In Poland in these early years of the 20th century two opposing political trends developed. Dmowski and the National Democrats considered that Germany was the main enemy and advocated loyalty to Russia, aiming first at the re-union of Poland, if necessary not fully independent. But Pilsudski and his Polish Socialist Party planned first for the defeat of Russia, to result in complete independence for Poland. During the Russo-Japanese war both Dmowski and Pilsudski visited Japan - Pilsudski to get Japanese support for a Polish insurrection (in which he failed) and Dmowski to oppose it. After the war and the 1905 revolution Dmowski and the Polish (National Democrat) deputies in the Russian Duma tried to interest Russia in the creation of a united autonomous Poland within the Russian empire. Meanwhile Pilsudski started to organise and train a 'private' Polish army In Galicia.

He considered a major war inevitable, and hoped for a German-Austrian victory over Russia, and then a French victory over Germany. When the First World War started Pilsudski threw his tiny force against the advancing Russian armies. This did little but build up Pilsudski’s reputation as a military leader and champion of Polish independence*; but the expanded Polish Legion continued to fight for Austria against Russia. Poles in Russian and Prussian Poland were forced to fight in the opposing Russian and German armies, and Poland became the battleground between those armies, suffering terrible devastation. The Russians, and later the Germans, both made promises of varying degrees of future independence for the Poles, in order to enlist their support.

In 1915 the German and Austrian armies drove the Russians back right across Poland; and late in 1916 the Germans announced the creation of a Kingdom of Poland (carved out of Russian Poland), to be closely attached to Germany, and Austria promised autonomy for Galicia. The immediate German aim was the formation of a Polish army to fight as an appendage of the German army, an arrangement which did not appeal to Pilsudski; and, when the first 1917 revolution occurred in Russia and the leaders promised Polish independence, Pilsudski and his legions refused to accept allegiance to Germany. Thereupon he was interned by the Germans.

Meanwhile Dmowski, after Poland had been overrun in 1915, decided that the best hope for his country's future lay with the western powers. He left for Britain and France, from where he conducted a propaganda campaign in the Allied countries. In August 1917 he set up a Polish National Committee in Paris, with representation in other Allied capitals. Of these the most influential was the world-renowned pianist and composer Paderewski (1860-1941), an ardent Polish nationalist. He became the guide and mentor of the four million or so Americans of Polish descent*, urging them to join a Polish army being organised in France, and collecting vast sums of money to further the Polish cause. Influenced by Padererski, President Wilson of the United States (which entered the war on the Allied side in April 1917) included in his statement of war alms in January 1918 (the "fourteen points") the creation of an independent Poland with free and secure access to the sea.

In Europe the second 1917 revolution in Russia, which brought the Bolsheviks to power, changed the Polish situation again. It tended to revive German-Polish co-operation, but this faded when, in a treaty between Germany and the Bolsheviks in February 1918, the Germans made concessions to the Ukrainians which angered the Poles. The Polish armies, now opposed to Germans, Russians and Austrians, finally capitulated; but with the subsequent collapse of Austria and Germany Polish hopes revived. Pilsudski returned from internment and became 'Chief of State'.

When the war officially ended in November 1918 Poland continued to fight the Bolshevik armies in the east, the Germans in Poznan, and the Ukrainians in Galicia. Frontier disputes on all sides took several years to settle, the western frontier was debated at the peace conference at Versailles, where the chief Polish representatives were Dmowski and Paderewski (who became prime minister of Poland in January 1919). By the Treaty of Versailles Germany ceded to Poland West Prussia (apart from the province of Danzig which became a free state) and Poznan - which had revolted against German rule; and Upper Silesia, after a plebiscite, was divided between Poland and Germany.

Bolshevik Russia, which was still engaged in a civil war with the Russian "Whites", was not represented at Versailles; and Poland's frontiers other than that with Germany were settled by her own military actions. The Ukrainians in Galicia were defeated, and the Poles occupied the province in May 1919. (See map at end)

In the east the Poles had advanced by the end of 1919 roughly to the present eastern frontier of Poland - a line then proposed by Britain as the new frontier (known as the "Curzon line"). But the Poles, led by Pilsudski, and carried away with the idea of renewing Poland's ancient glory, advanced into the Ukraine and occupied Kiev. The Bolsheviks then drove them back all the way to Warsaw, and disaster for Poland seemed imminent. However, Pilsudski, helped by a French military mission and ably assisted by the Polish General Sikorski, out-manoeuvred the Russians, and after several victories went over once more to the offensive. Eventually, by the Treaty of Riga in 1921, peace was signed with a territorial compromise. Poland obtained an eastern frontier well to the east of the Curzon line, roughly along the line of the frontier after the 2nd Partition in 1793.

Meanwhile Poland had fallen out with Lithuania, which had proclaimed independence in February 1918. In 1919 the Bolsheviks had entered Vilna, but evacuated it during their retreat after their defeat by the Poles in 1920 and recognised Lithuanian independence. But the Poles themselves then seized Vilna, where a subsequent

plebiscite showed a majority vote for union with Poland. Vilna remained in Polish possession, Kaunas becoming the Lithuanian capital, but the loss of Vilna was not accepted by Lithuania, which continued to have no diplomatic or commercial relations with Poland until 1938.

The new Poland had a population of about 27 million, one of the largest states in Europe. Of these, about 8 million were non-Poles - mainly Ukrainians, Russians, Germans, and Yiddish or Hebrew speaking Jews who remained outside the Polish communities.

Pilsudski remained Chief of State. Paderevski had resigned as prime minister after less than a year in office, despairing of national unity and peace with Russia, and in 1921 he retired to the United States. Dmovski also retired from political life in 1923- The republic of Lithuania was a small country of some 3 million people, about 80% Lithuanians. There had been a very high rate of emigration in the fifty years before the First World War, amounting to between a quarter and a third of the population.

The emigrants had gone mainly to the United States, Canada, South America, Australia and Western Europe.

He later settled in Switzerland. After Poland was overrun at the beginning of the Second World War, Paderevski, in his 80th year and in poor health, declined an invitation to be President of the Polish government in exile in France, but he did become president of a National Council advising that government. He died in New York in June 1941.

* And Lithuanian - Pilsudski himself was of Lithuanian descent. The cultural and nationalistic revival in Lithuania had gathered pace after the 1905 revolution. * In 1940 there were still nearly 3 million Poles in the United States who were "foreign-born" or of Polish or mixed parentage, as well as many more of more distant Polish descent. Some cities, notably Chicago, had large self-contained Polish communities.

Chapter 10. Independent Poland and Lithuania between the Two World Wars.

Poland.

A constitution for the new republic of Poland was adopted in 1921, modelled on that of France. It provided for a president, to be chosen every seven years by a two-chamber parliament (Senate and Sejm). This was elected by universal suffrage and proportional representation. With the first election, in 1922, Pilsudski resigned as Chief of State and devoted himself to the army.

During the first years of the republic the main problem was reconstruction after the devastation caused by the war, a task in which the American Relief Administration gave great assistance. On the political front, the parties of the right (including the old National Democratic Party, now called the National People's Union) had most seats, but no overall majority over the Socialists, Peasant Parties, and parties representing the minority races. (There was much friction with the minorities, particularly the Ukrainians and the Germans.) The result, in spite of the efforts for stability made by General Sikorski, who was prime minister in 1922-23, was a series of short-lived governments. This was stopped in 1926 when Pilaudski, exasperated by the political bickering, staged a military coup. He refused to be president, but from then until his death in 1935, although he only assumed the premiership for two short intervals (being content to be Minister for War), Pilsudski was dictator of Poland in all but name.

Poland's foreign policy in these years was based on alliance with France and support for the League of Nations. The chief objective was security from Soviet Russia and, after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, from Nazi Germany. In 1932 a non-aggression pact was signed with Russia - and in 1931, Pilsudski and the Foreign Minister Colonel Beek achieved a similar pact with Germany, hoping to avoid being embroiled in any European war. The "Polish Corridor" - Poland's access to the Baltic in West Prussia, cutting off East Prussia from the rest of Germany - was an irritation to Hitler, as it had been to Frederick the Great nearly two hundred years earlier. And there was continual friction between Germany and Poland regarding the (basically German) free city of Danzig. (At first Danzig was Poland's main Baltic port, but owing to this friction the Poles built a new port at Gdynia, which in the 1930s surpassed Danzig as a trade centre.)

In 1935, after several years of discussion, the constitution was revised, at Pilsudski's instigation. The size and power of the Sejm were greatly reduced, and the power of the president greatly increased. The democratic parliamentary system was virtually ended.

A month after the adoption of the new constitution Pilsudski died. The President, whose powers had now become practically dictatorial, was Ignacy Moscicki who, then a non-political scientist, had been Pilsudski's nominee and had been elected in 1926. He had been re-elected in 1933. His power was now largely shared with Marshal Smigly-Rydz, Pilsudski's successor as head of the army. Moscicki and Smigly-Rydz were both men of moderate political opinions, but government support fell

increasingly into the hands of an extreme right-wing "colonels' clique". Opposed to the colonel's regime were the peasants, workers in the cities, and a group of intellectuals, and this opposition slowed down a trend towards totalitarianism. Strikes were widespread, and the government was unable to cope with the economic depression of the 1930s. Moreover the colonels, although stressing the importance of the defence of Poland's independence, failed to modernise the armed forces.

When Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938, Poland took advantage of the preoccupation of the great powers with the international situation to settle her dispute with Lithuania. Presented with an ultimatum, Lithuania agreed to the resumption of diplomatic and commercial relations, and acquiesced in the loss of Vilna.

Then, when Hitler annexed the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in September 1938, Poland demanded from the Czechs cession of their part of the Teschen area, which had been disputed and divide between the two countries after the First World War. The Czechs, fearful of a German invasion, agreed although less than half the population was Polish.

In March 1939 Hitler annexed the rest of Czechoslovakia, and then turning his attention to the Polish Corridor, demanding German possession of Danzig and rights of transit. Poland rejected the demands, and now realising the intentions of Nazi Germany accepted a British-French guarantee of assistance against a threat to her independence. This guarantee was of little value, for geographical reasons, and because Britain and France were unready for war, unless joined by Russia - with whom British-French negotiations were opened. But they made slow progress because of mutual suspicion, and because Poland was reluctant to accept Russian aid, knowing that it would mean Russian occupation of her territory.

Hitler then came to an agreement with Stalin. Russia was given a free hand in the Baltic states and eastern Poland (a condition which had been an obstacle to a Russo-British agreement); and on 1st September the Germans invaded Poland without declaring war, thus starting the Second World War. Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3rd.

In the last 20 years independent Poland, in spite of internal political differences and the world depression of the 1930s, had achieved a remarkable recovery from the devastation of the First World War and from the effects of the period of partition. Poland had to be organised as one entity instead of three, the finances reduced to order, roads and railways built. Good economic progress was made, including the building of Gdynia and a merchant marine. Agriculture was reformed, giving more land to the peasants, education rehabilitated, and welfare projects started. And Polish nationalism and heroism, after over a century of repression which had failed to quell it, was undiminished.

Lithuania.

Lithuania was recognised as an independent republic by the major powers at various times after the First World War, and became a member of the League of Nations in 1921.

After the loss of Vilna to Poland in 1923, the Lithuanians imitated the Polish action by seizing the port of Memel (Klaipeda) at the northern tip of East Prussia. (Memel,

founded by the Livanian Knights, had been in Prussian/German possession since the 17th century, and at the end of the First World War the district was ceded by Germany to an Allied administration.) So relations with Germany, as well as with Poland, remained strained.

In internal politics a swing to the left in 1926 resulted in an opposing coup which installed the Nationalist leader Antanas Smetona as President - and in effect dictator. Smetona had been the leader in the Lithuanian proclamation of independence in 1918 and the first president in 1919-20. He now remained president until the Second World War. His foreign policy was pro-western. and relations with the Soviet Union were cool. As already mentioned, the long-standing quarrel with Poland was settled in 1938, when Lithuania acceded to Polish demands. A year later, in March 1939, Nazi Germany, at the same time as making demands on the Polish Corridor, sent an ultimatum to Lithuania demanding the cession of Memel - to which Lithuania agreed. But attempts to placate her neighbours did not for long keep Lithuania from becoming involved in the Second World War.

Chapter 11. The Second World War.

Poland's obsolete forces could do little against the German "blitz'. Two thousand German aircraft destroyed most of the Polish air force on the ground; and the Polish army, with horse-drawn transport, was out-manoeuvred by German mechanised columns. The Poles, with their armies spread out trying to hold their extensive frontiers, and with misplaced confidence in the counter-attacking powers of their horsed cavalry, were outflanked by German attacks from East Prussia in the north and from Slovakia in the south.

The Germans quickly advanced to Warsaw, and a French attack in the west to relieve the pressure on Poland was too weak and too late to have any effect.

On 17th September the Russians, as agreed between Hitler and Stalin, invaded Poland from the east. Poland had practically no forces left to resist this further onslaught, and demoralisation and disintegration set in. The government and high command fled to Romania*, where they were interned. Pockets of resistance continued the fight - Warsaw held out until 28th September - but by the end of the month the war in Poland was over, and Germany and Russia divided the country between them.

President Moscicki (in Romania) resigned and later retired to Switzerland; and Smigly-Rydz (also in Romania) was deprived of his position as Commander-in-Chief - and died in 1941. A government in exile was formed in France, under General Sikorski as prime minister and head of the army. Sikorski had retired from political life after Pilsudski’s coup in 1926, spending ten years in Paris. He now started to build up Polish forces in the west, from Poles already there and from remnants of the Polish armies which had escaped via Romania and Hungary.

This new Polish army, numbering nearly 100,000, sent a contingent in the Allied expedition to Norway and then fought in the Battle of France. On the fall of France, a part of the Polish army was evacuated to Britain, where Sikorski resumed the task of rebuilding his forces. Polish airmen fought in the Battle of Britain, Polish ships joined the British navy and mercantile marine, and Polish formations later fought alongside the British armies in overseas campaigns.

Meanwhile, in German-occupied Poland a reign of terror was in force. The Germans could find no Polish "Quisling" to act as their puppet, so the administration was entirely German, and a five-year period of ruthless repression ensued. Huge numbers were deported to labour camps in Germany, all Polish intellectual activity was suppressed, the people were reduced to starvation level, and any open resistance was met with wholesale consignment to concentration camps or extermination camps - of which the most notorious was that at Auschwitz. It is estimated that some 6 million Poles were killed or died of hunger or cold, including the great majority of Poland's 3½ million Jews.

Nevertheless a strong underground resistance movement grew. Taking its orders from the government in exile in Britain, it rendered considerable service to the Allied cause, for instance by sabotage of German communications, and reports on German

troop movements and the location of German rocket sites. It also continued in secret a Polish cultural and social life.

In Russian-occupied Poland repression was not so forceful or so blatant; but there were mass deportations to Siberia, including political leaders and the bulk of the educated classes. The situation here was completely changed by Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941, at the beginning of which the Germans quickly overran the rest of Poland. Sikorski's government then entered into an agreement with Russia providing for co-operation in the war effort, and in particular for the formation in Russia of a Polish army from released prisoners of war. Sikorski, however, could get no definite guarantee of Poland's future borders - and the release of prisoners of war proceeded very slowly. Disagreements about the use and equipment of this proposed Polish army led to the Russians transferring some 100,000 Poles via Persia and Iraq to the British. From them a Polish army, under General Anders, was organised and trained in the Middle East; and later this Polish corps fought in the North African campaign and then played a prominent part in the Allied invasion of Italy, particularly distinguishing itself in the capture of Monte Cassino in May 1914.

In 1943 the Russians drove the Germans back nearly to the Polish frontier, and in 1944 their advance continued into Poland and Lithuania. This advance was much helped by the activities of the resistance movement's "Home Army". But the Russians, supported by a small number of Poles, now set up their own "Polish Committee of National Liberation" - known as the Lublin Committee - In opposition to the London government and the Home Army. As the Russians advanced the Lublin Committee, recognised by the Soviet Union as the provisional government of Poland, started a 'liquidation" of the underground movement.

By the end of July 1945 the Russians were on the outskirts of Warsaw. The Home Army, encouraged by the London government - and apparently by the Russians - to rise in support of the expected Russian siege, rebelled against the Germans, backed by the whole population of the city. But the Russian army remained inactive, and after two months of heroic resistance the revolt was crushed and the Home Army destroyed, followed by mass deportations to labour and concentration camps.

In January 1945 the Russian advance was resumed, and the Germans were soon driven from the rest of Poland, having totally destroyed Warsaw before leaving it. Polish forces accompanied the Russian armies on their final advance to Berlin.

The future of Poland - its government and its frontiers - was discussed in February 1945 at the Yalta conference between Stalin, Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt. The result was a triumph for Stalin's plans - which included the complete Sovietisation of Poland. The Lublin Committee was declared to be the basis of the future Provisional Government of National Unity, "with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland and Poles abroad". After Yalta the London government* and the Polish resistance organisation faded out, and at the end of the war Poland became a "people's republic" under Soviet domination. The only "leaders from Poles abroad" in the new government were Mikolajczyk and one other.

At the Yalta conference the Curzon line was accepted as the eastern frontier. The consequent large loss of Polish territory in the east (some 70,000 square miles, with a large Russian population) was to be compensated for by gains in the west at the expense of Germany. In the event these gains, which included the southern part of East Prussia (and Danzig) and German territory as far west as the line of the rivers

Oder and Neisse, went further west than was thought reasonable by the western powers - but they could not prevent the Russians and Poles from taking them. The gains amounted to about 40,000 square miles. Poland was in effect moved some hundred miles or more westwards; and although there was a net loss of territory in area Poland gained a highly industrial region. In the south the disputed Teschen district was restored to Czechoslovakia.

Lithuania.

In October 1939, after the German-Russian occupation of Poland, the Russians obtained the right to station troops in Lithuania - and in return gave Vilna (taken from Poland) back to Lithuania. The country maintained a precarious independence until June 1940, when -Russia imposed an "acceptable" government - and in August Lithuania became a Soviet republic. Smetona departed to the United States, where he died in 1944.

In 1941 the Germans, in their advance into Russia, conquered Lithuania, and a regime similar to that in Poland was introduced. Large numbers of Lithuanians were sent to labour camps in Germany, universities were closed and nearly 100,000 books removed from libraries in Kaunas and Vilna; and, as in Poland, the Jewish population in particular suffered, many being executed.

The Russian offensive in 1944 re-took Lithuania, and the country was again established as a Soviet republic. In the redistribution of territory after the war the northern part of East Prussia, including Memel, was incorporated in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. (The central part of East Prussia, including Konigsberg, the ancient capital - now Kaliningrad, became part of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic,)

* Romania had a long-standing alliance with Poland, but was powerless to help.

*This government was now headed by Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, after the unfortunate death of General Sikorski in an air crash in 1943. An able and patriotic man, Mikolajczyk, however, did not have the authority and prestige of Sikorski.

Chapter 12. Domination by the Soviet Union.

In the immediate post-war years the main priorities in Poland were recovery and reconstruction after the devastation and losses during the war, and movements of population to accord with the new boundaries. Reconstruction was rapid - by 1948 rebuilding of the cities was well advanced; and recovery was helped by the United Nations relief organisation.

The movements of population were vast. Millions of Poles moved from the lost eastern lands into Poland, and millions of Germans moved from western Poland into Germany. (In 1944 there were some 10 million Germans in the territory to be transferred to Poland. About half of them retired in front of the advancing Russians, and the rest were moved later.) Within a few years of the end of the war the 25 million inhabitants of the new Poland were almost 100% Polish.

Meanwhile complete Sovietisation was taking place, Poland becoming a one-party Communist state. Mikolajczyk, accused of being an ally of foreign imperialists, escaped to London in 1947; and there were purges within the Communist Party itself. In 1948 the Secretary-General, Wladyslaw Gomulka, accused of "rightish and nationalist deviation", was forced to resign. Russian control, through the Communist Party, became complete. The Church continued to resist this Soviet penetration - and in 1953 its leader, Cardinal Wyszynski, was arrested and confined to a monastery In 1955 Poland signed an alliance (the Warsaw Pact) with the Soviet Union and her other satellites - East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania (and Albania which was later excluded) - an alliance which counter-balanced the western N.A.T.O. (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation).

In 1956 growing discontent with harsh labour conditions, bad housing, scarcity of consumer goods, and the repressive administration, led to workers' riots in Poznan and other industrial centres. The riots were crushed by military action; but there was an anti-Soviet reaction, even among Communists. Reformers gained control of the party and installed Gomulka; (who had been in prison for several years since his resignation in 1948) as First Secretary - effectively the head of state.

A period of liberalisation followed. Personal freedom increased, collectivisation of agriculture ceased and private enterprise re-appeared. Press censorship was relaxed - which resulted in a guarded condemnation of the Soviet army's suppression of a Hungarian revolt in October 1956. Cardinal Wyszynski was released, and religious instruction was again allowed in the schools.

In the 1960s, however, Gomulka abandoned his liberal tendencies, and a tougher Soviet policy was reintroduced. Friction between the Party and the Church recurred - friction which marred the celebration in 1966 of Poland's millennium as a state combined with the thousandth anniversary of her adoption of Christianity. In 1968, when Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the liberalising regime of Alexander Dubcek, Poland - and the other Soviet satellites - sent contingents to help the Russians. Gomulka diverted any popular opposition to this move by playing on the Poles' deep-seated fear of Germany; he represented Dubcek's reforms as being part of a West German plot to detach Czechoslovakia from the Communist bloc.

From about this time, however, dissatisfaction with Gomulka and his pro-Soviet policies grew; and in 1970 food shortages and soaring prices sparked off a revolt by the shipyard workers of the Baltic ports. Gomulka was once more forced to resign, and was replaced by Edward Gierek, formerly Gomulka's second-in-command. Since then, as at the beginning of Gomulka's "reign", a more tolerant system has returned, with the emphasis on better living conditions for the workers and reviving prosperity. And relations have improved with the Church - whose prestige was boosted by the election in 1979 of the Polish Cardinal Wojtyla to be Pope.

Lithuania.

There is little that can be said about the (separate) history of Lithuania since its inclusion in the Soviet Union. Previously predominantly an agricultural country, Lithuania has to a considerable extent been industrialised; and economically as well as politically it has been “Sovietised” - nationalised industries, and state and collective farms instead of private. There has also been persecution of the Roman Catholic Church, of which Lithuanians remain the chief adherents within the Soviet Union.

Appendix. Some Population Statistics.

(Figures relate to the mid-1970s.) Poland.

Population – 33 ½ million- Minorities (mainly Russian and Ukrainian) less than ½ million.

Density of population-- about 225 to the square mile. (For comparison England 900, Scotland 170, Hungary 290.)

Religion - Roman Catholic 95%. About 30,000 Jews. Language - Polish. Literacy - 95%.

Chief towns:-

Warsaw 1,400,000 Capital since 1595. University.

Lodz 780,000 Centre of textile industry. University.

Cracow (Kracow) 650,000 Capital of Poland c.1050 to 1595. Ancient University (1364).

Wroclaw (Breslau) 560,000 In Silesia. Acquired by Poland 1945. University. Industrial centre and port, on the River Oder.

Poznan 500,000 Residence of Boleslaw the Brave (c.1000). Poland's first bishopric (10th century). University. Manufacturing centre.

Gdansk (Danzig) 400,000 Ancient Baltic port, originally Polish. Main city of Teutonic Prussia 1308-1466. Polish 1466-1793. Prussian/German 1793-1919 Free City 1919-39. To Poland 1946.

Szczecin (Stettin) 360,000 Baltic port at mouth of River Oder. Formerly capital of Pomerania. Member of Hanseatic League 13th-15th century. Swedish 1648-1720. Then Prussian/German until 1945.

Katowice 320,000 Mining and industrial centre.

Bydgoszcz 300,000 Communications centre. Timber trade.

Gdynia 210,000 Baltic port, built in 1920s.

Gniezno 50,000 First capital of Poland. With Poznan, the ecclesiastical centre of Poland.

Lithuania.

Population - 3 million (Lithuanians 80%, Russians and Poles each about 8%).

Language - Lithuanian.

Religion - Mainly Roman Catholic, Klaipeda Lutheran.

Chief towns

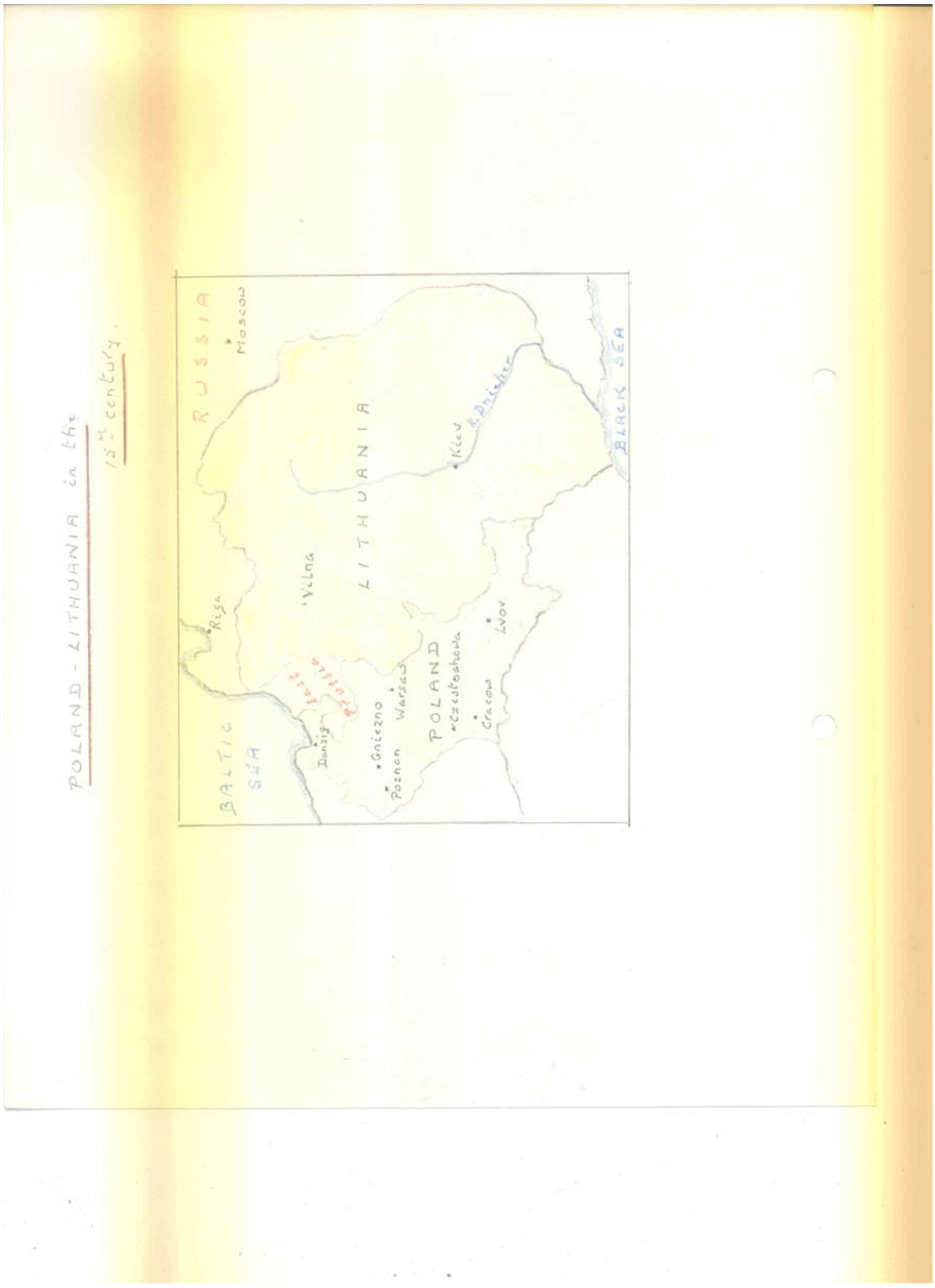
Vilna (Vilnius) 370,000 Capital since 1323, except 1923-39 when occupied by Poland. University (1579)

Kaunas (Kovno) 300,000 Capital 1923-1939. University and educational) centre.

Klaipeda (Memel) 150,000 Baltic port. Founded 1252 by the Livonian Knights, member of the Hanseatic League Belonged at various times to Sweden, Russia, and Prussia/Germany, the latter from the 17th century until taken by Lithuania in 1923.

Map 1; Early Times

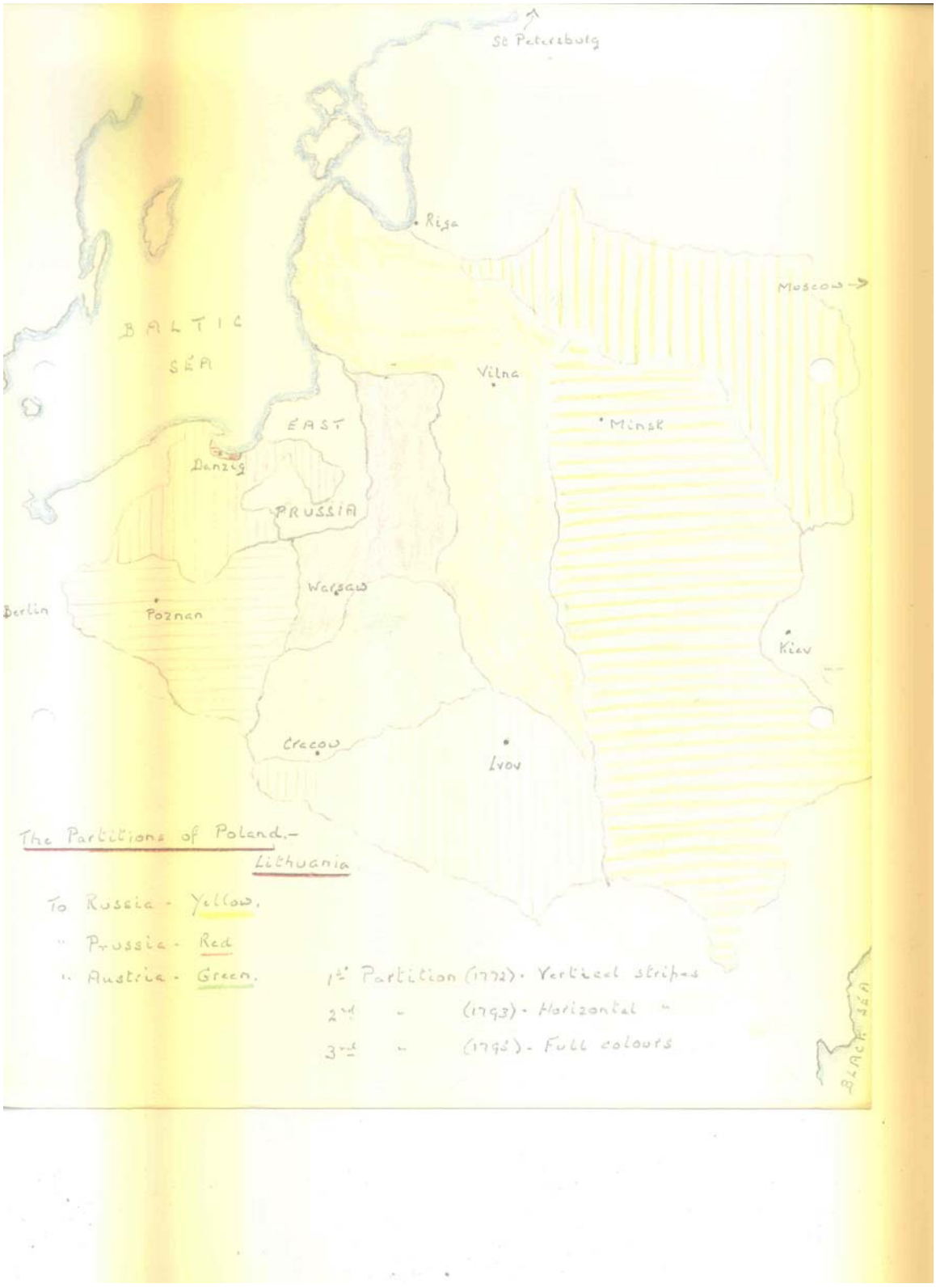
Map 2: Poland Lithuania in the 15th Century



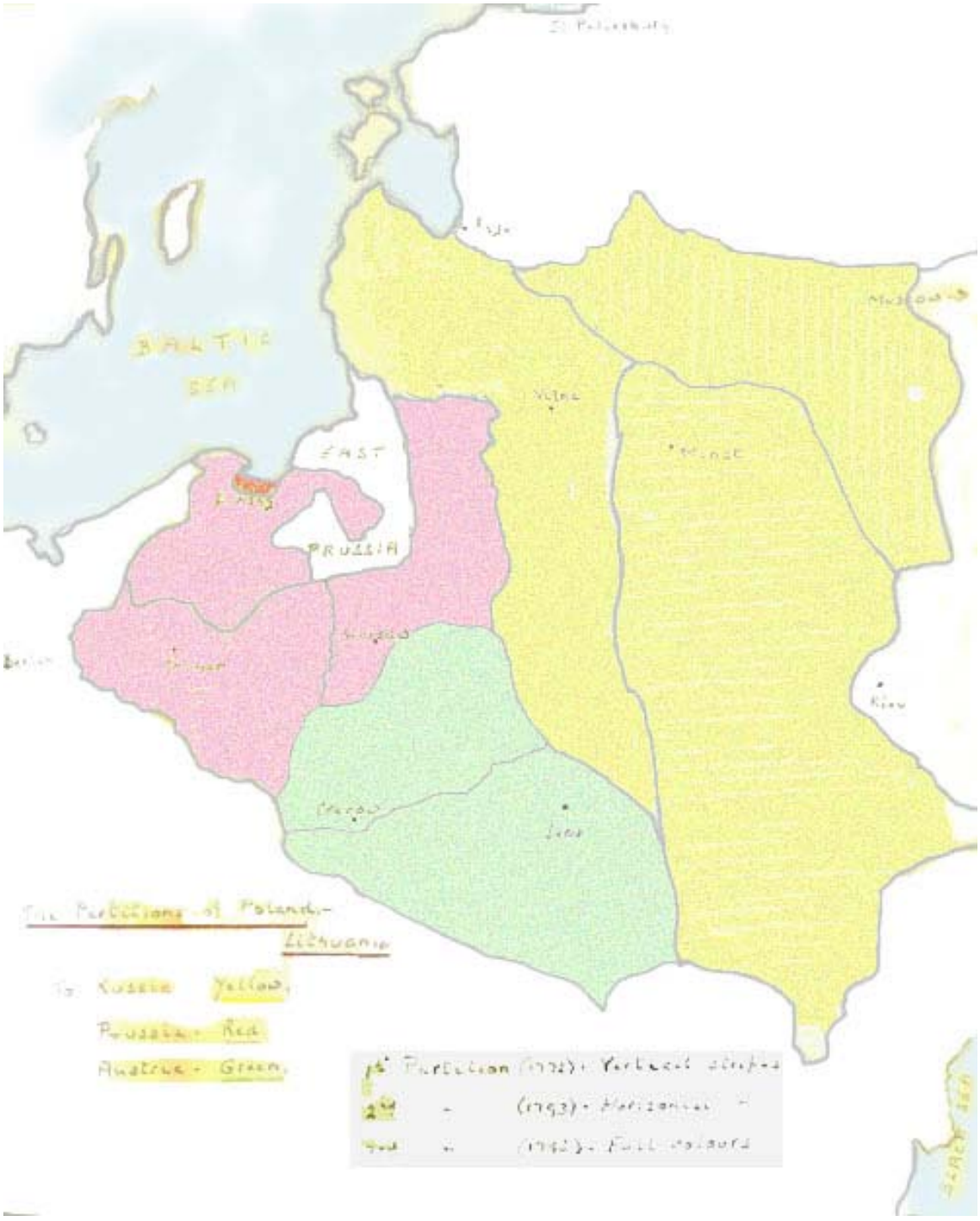
MORE DETAIL


POLAND - LITHUANIA in the 15th century
BALTIC SEA
Riga
RUSSIA
Moscow
Vilna
Danzig
East Prussia
LITHUANIA
Gniezno
Poznan
Warsaw
POLAND
Czestochowa
Kiev
R. Dniepher
Cracow
Lvov
BLACK SEA

Map 3: The Partitions of Poland-Lithuania



MORE DETAIL


BALTIC SEA
EAST PRUSSIA
The Partitions of Poland:-
Lithuania
Russia Yellow.
Prussia - Red
Austria - Green.

Map 4: Modern North-east Europe