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A country in Central Europe, Poland in 2000 had a population of 38.7 million. Since 1945, its boundaries have been set by the Odra and Nysa rivers in the west, the Baltic Sea in the north, the Bug river in the east, and the Carpathian and Sudeten mountains to the south. Although Poland has a rudimentary gay subculture, the country's predominant attitudes toward homosexuality are negative.

History

The Polish state is traditionally dated from 966; Warsaw has been the capital since 1611. The Union of Lublin (1569) united the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, resulting in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which became famous for its tolerance of religious dissidents during the Reformation. It was also celebrated as the protector of the West at the Siege of Vienna in 1683.

Despite the significant accomplishments of the Polish Enlightenment, including Europe's first written constitution, the country suffered three partitions (1772, 1793, 1795) that divided the Commonwealth among Austria, Prussia, and Russia, erasing the Polish state from Europe's map. Although Napoleon established the Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1813), followed by the Congress Kingdom (1815-1830), there was no truly independent Polish state until 1918. The nineteenth century was marked by a series of national uprisings.

Poland won its independence after World War I, although democratic rule was extinguished by a coup d'état in 1926. World War II began with Nazi Germany's attack on Poland, followed by the country's occupation and partition by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The German occupation was notable for its brutality; Poland became the site of the Holocaust. In total six million Polish citizens--20 per cent of Poland's population--perished during the occupation. Poland's Jewish community was almost entirely wiped out. Warsaw was left depopulated and completely in ruins.

After World War II, Poland became part of the Communist world until 1989, when democracy was restored. The country is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic and the Church gained widespread respect by serving as an important source of resistance to the Nazis and the Communists. Its prestige was reinforced by the election of the first Polish pope, John Paul II, in 1978.

Homosexuality in Early Polish History

Homosexuality appeared early in Polish history: Boleslaw the Bold (1076 -1079) was accused of sodomy by the medieval historian Jan Dlugosz. Dlugosz also condemned Wladyslaw IV (1434-1444), who led a crusade against the Turks and died at the Battle of Varna. Dlugosz attributed the Christian defeat to the king's lying with a man before the decisive battle. (He is the only crusader-king not canonized.)

During the eighteenth century, Poland was affected by the fluid attitude toward sexuality that was favored by the Enlightenment's tolerance and secularism. Poland's last king, Stanislaw Augustus (1764-1795), was said to have slept with the British ambassador in St. Petersburg, where he was employed as the ambassador's secretary. (The young man was also a paramour of Catherine II of Russia.)

Jerzy Marcin Lubomirski, a scion of one of the wealthiest magnate families, was known to contemporaries

as a "sexual pervert." A Warsaw newspaper reported the scandal when Lubomirski appeared in women's clothing at a Warsaw masked ball in 1782.

The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The Napoleonic Code was introduced in the Duchy of Warsaw in 1808. The Code was silent on the issue of homosexuality, which meant there was no legal framework for the oppression of homosexuals. However, after 1815, the three occupying powers' own legal codes made homosexual acts illegal.

In 1835, for example, Nicholas I decreed male homosexual acts to be illegal throughout the Russian Empire.

Although not much information exists about lesbianism in the nineteenth century, Narcyza Zmichowska (1819-1876), a writer and founder of the Polish feminist movement, carried on an affair with the daughter of a rich magnate. The affair was used as the source for Zmichowska's novel *Poganka* (The Pagan Woman) (1846).

After 1918, an independent Poland returned to the Napoleonic tradition and the 1932 criminal code was silent on homosexuality. However, the police used gross indecency laws to harass homosexuals. Nevertheless, inter-war Poland had a thriving gay subculture. Many of Poland's most important cultural figures during this period, including the composer Karol Szymanowski, the poet Boleslaw Lesmian, and the novelists Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz and Maria Dabrowska, were homosexual.

The Communist Era

In 1948, the Communist regime made age 15 the age of consent for all sexual acts, homosexual or heterosexual. However, the powerful influence of the Roman Catholic Church made open homosexuality scandalous in all but a few circles. As in other countries, the Roman Catholic Church traditionally has had a large percentage of gay priests, since the priesthood is one of the few acceptable ways to avoid marriage in a traditional society.

Despite social disapproval, a network of cafés, pissoirs, and street cruising provided opportunities for a gay subculture to grow. A 1981 article in the prominent weekly *Polityka* set off a national discussion on homosexuality.

Beginning in 1986, the underground gay newspaper *Filo* from Gdansk was distributed in editions of less than 100. In addition, the gay poet Grzegorz Musial was officially published. However, Jerzy Andrzejewski's last novel *Miazga* (*Pulp*), which dealt with homosexuality, could be published only abroad in its uncensored version.

The Communist government used traditionally negative attitudes toward homosexuality as a way of blackmailing homosexuals and the police felt free to harass gay men and lesbians. This activity culminated in the 1985 "Operation Hyacinth," which led to the arrest of many gay men.

The Gay Movement

Since 1989, a public gay movement has developed. Warsaw is the center of Polish gay life with bars and baths, in addition to the cruising areas mentioned earlier. Cracow, Gdansk, Poznan, and Wroclaw also have gay commercial infrastructures, as well as gay organizations.

Lamba, a gay umbrella organisation, was legally registered in 1990. The abolition of censorship saw a wave of gay periodicals, such as *Inaczej* (Poznan), but this quick efflorescence has now been reduced to the commercially successful and sex positive *Nowy Men* (New Men).

The first Gay Pride Parade took place in Warsaw in 1995. In 1996, the Lesbian Information and Counseling Center was established.

AIDS in Poland results primarily from drug injection, although it has touched the gay community. For example, in 1995, an exhibition on "I and AIDS" was organised in Warsaw and featured the work of the openly gay artist Andrzej Karas. Swedish, Canadian, and German groups have actively aided the anti-AIDS campaign in Poland.

The 1997 constitution bans discrimination "on any grounds," although the Roman Catholic hierarchy prevented specific protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In addition, the constitution limits marriage to heterosexuals.

Opinion polls consistently show that 70 to 80 per cent of Poles despise homosexuals. The Campaign against Homophobia has featured controversial posters to challenge viewers' assumptions.

There is no distinct lesbian movement, but secular women's organizations are supportive of homosexual causes.

Although the foundation for a gay and lesbian community has been laid and the legal framework is favorable to gay life, the Roman Catholic Church encourages public anti-gay attitudes so the lives of individual gay men and lesbians continue to be difficult.

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About the Author

John D. Stanley is an independent scholar who has lived in Toronto since 1971 and specializes in the history of Poland, particularly during the Enlightenment. He received the Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has published in such journals as *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism and Canadian Slavonic Papers*. He contributed two articles to *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II* (2001).