

A Multiethnic Patchwork



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The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, also known as the Commonwealth of Both Nations, was one of Europe's most highly populated and ethnically diverse countries. Who inhabited her lands? What made this extraordinary coexistence of different nations, languages, and religions possible?

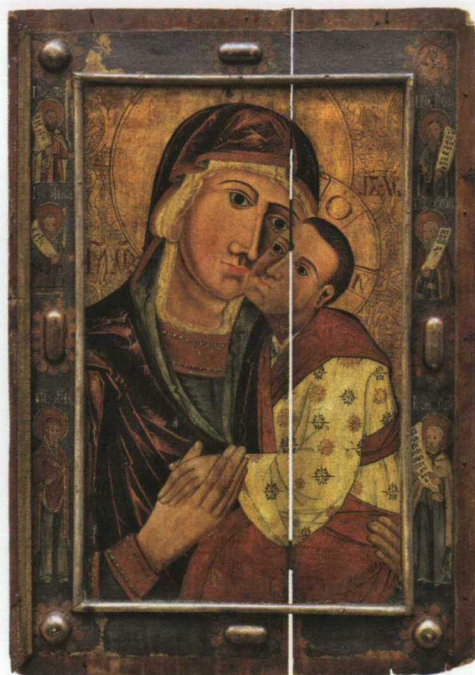
Searching for examples and past multi-ethnic societies and understanding how they functioned remains relevant in contemporary discourse – both on the need to maintain harmony in today's multicultural European Union, and on the current crisis of multiculturalism both in the most developed European countries and those still emerging from decades of Communist regimes. Poland doesn't need to look far: apart from during the Communist era and in the years since the regime's collapse (which have both been largely monoethnic periods), for most of the country's history as an independent state – from mid-14th century until the turn of the 19th century, and again during the interwar period – Poland was as a distinctly multiethnic country.

The state that was emerged in 1569 as a result of the Union of Lublin was called the “Commonwealth of Both Nations” (*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*) to stress that it was a federation of two coequal partners: the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In reality, the state's high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity meant that a more appropriate name might have been the “Commonwealth of Many Nations.” Let us ex-

amine more closely this patchwork of numerous ethnicities and faiths.

Own languages

Polish experts on historical demographics estimate that after 1569, Polish speakers constituted approx. 50% of the state's entire population. A few decades later, during the 1630s, in the wake of the annexation of western territories of the Muscovite state, the number fell to around 40%. It wasn't until the first partition in 1772, involving the loss of a part of the eastern and northern territories, that the percentage of people using Polish as their first language rose to approx. 60%. Apart from its use by peasants, burghers and *szlachta* (noblemen) from the lands forming the core of the medieval Kingdom of Poland (the Wielkopolska, Małopolska, and Mazowsze regions), after 1569 the language became increasingly adopted by the majority of *szlachta* from Lithuania. Lithuanian, in turn, was mainly preserved in the northern territories of ethnic Lithuania (Samogitia). The Lithuanian population was a minority in the Grand Duchy during



National Museum in Premyśl

The Eleusa Icon, early 17th century. The Greek *eleusa* means “tenderness” or “showing mercy”. Similar icons can be found in many Orthodox and Uniate Churches across the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

the 17th and 18th centuries. The dominant faith of the Polish and Lithuanian language groups at the time was Roman Catholicism, in spite of progressing Reformation during the 16th century and a gradual shift among some szlachta in the Kingdom and the Grand Duchy towards Evangelical and Reformed (Calvinist) denominations, as well as the Unity of the Brethren (Bohemian Brethren) and the Polish Brethren faiths.

Alongside Poles, the most numerous ethnic and language group before and after 1569 were Ruthenians - inhabitants of the present-day Ukraine and Belarus. Linguists assume that the process of differentiation of Old Ruthenian into separate dialects, and later separate languages - Belarusian and Ukrainian - started towards the end of the Middle Ages. At the time, the tongue known as "Chancellery Ruthenian" was one of the official languages of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For a long time, Lithuania's ruling elites perceived Ruthenian as a marker of the distinctiveness of its statehood within the federal Commonwealth. Also worth noting is another fact crucial for the consolidation of the szlachta in the multiethnic Commonwealth. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the ethnically-Lithuanian szlachta showed a tendency towards Ruthenization, and later Polonization. Other ethnic groups inhabiting the Eastern reaches of the Commonwealth also showed a greater or lesser tendency towards Ruthenization; this included Tatars, Armenians, and Vlachs, as well as Polish peasants resettled in Ukraine. This makes it difficult to imagine the cultural consolidation of the (formally) Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth without the participation of two languages - Polish and Ruthenian - which were spoken by at least 70% of the population during the 16th and 17th centuries. It wasn't until the losses of territory and population that came in the wake of a series of wars during the 17th century, and the progressing Polonization that came a century later - in particular among the szlachta - that the proportions shifted in favor of Polish.

Different faiths

The Union of Brest in 1596 resulted in the breaking off of relations between the Ruthenian Church and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople; the formation of the Eastern Catholic Churches - known as the Uniate Church - and the outlawing of the Russian Orthodox Church were supported by King

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The Torah is the main book of Judaism. It comprises the first five Books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). The Sefer Torah is the actual scroll wound onto two handles

Sigismund III. In spite of this, the majority of the population - particularly the szlachta and peasants until the mid-17th century - remained with the Russian Orthodox Church. It wasn't until major losses of ethnically-Ruthenian lands during the second half of the 17th century, the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church, the Polonization of many of the Ruthenian szlachta, and the Uniate Church regaining its influence, in particular among urban populations, that the Orthodox population dropped to just 3.5% and the Uniate population rose to around 30% in the second half of the 18th century.

In addition to Poles, Lithuanians, and Ruthenians - nations long settled on lands forming the Union - the country was also inhabited by other ethnic groups that migrated in. The most notable were Germans, Armenians, Jews, and Tatars; the cultures of the two Christian and two non-Christian societies all contributed to the Commonwealth serving as a melting pot for Eastern and Western civilizations.

Large groups of German speakers started migrating to Poland as early as the 13th and 14th centuries as part of efforts to colonize rural areas and campaigns to establish new cities following a German statute; estimates claim around one hundred thousand new arrivals during the 13th century. The German immigrants were able to preserve their language until at least the early 16th century.

The German-speaking group included some szlachta and upper classes of burghers in Royal Prussia and the Duchy of Livonia. Lutheranism (the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession) gained a significant influence among these groups during the 16th century.

One small but distinctive group, especially in Ruthenian lands, were the Armenians, a

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: a successful experiment in multiculturalism

Christian people from beyond the Carpathian Mountains. They first started reaching Ruthenian (Ukrainian) lands in the 11th and 13th centuries, with numbers rising to three to four thousand by the 14th-15th centuries; the migrants mainly settled in Lwów and Kamieniec Podolski where they had their own local authorities and courts. Traditionally, Armenians followed Monophysitism; it stressed the single nature of God, and as such it was rejected as heretic by both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Between 1627-1634, some of the Armenians adopted a union with Rome, which resulted in the creation of a distinct Armenian Catholic Church.

Voivne Art Archives, Jasna Góra Sanctuary, Częstochowa



A rosary that according to tradition was donated by King Stefan Batory to the Jasna Góra Sanctuary. Country of origin: Poland or Transylvania; 16th/17th century. The term "rosary" also refers to a Catholic prayer, dating back to the Middle Ages

The Diaspora

Over the centuries, Jews became one of the most numerous ethnic and religious groups in Poland. The origins of Jewish settlements in the Polish lands date back to the 11th century. Fleeing persecution in Western Europe, in particular in the German Reich, Jewish merchants and tradesmen arrived in droves at cities across the Kingdom of Poland, moving on to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by the 15th and 16th centuries. Major demographic explosions, mainly resulting from increasing birthrates, took place first in the 16th century, and again in the wake of mass slaughters of the Jewish population during the Cossack Uprising in 1648. By mid-18th century, there were around seven or eight hundred thousand Jews living on Polish lands, constituting around 10% of the total population. This was the largest agglomeration of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe. The liturgical language of the Polish and Lithuanian Jews was Hebrew, with Yiddish - originating from Germany - mostly serving in everyday communication. The vast majority of the Jewish population settled in cities. The wealthiest ran banks; in the early 16th century, they also collected taxes, duties, and levies, for example from salt mines, and later also managed leased land owned by magnates and wealthy szlachta. They were also important suppliers of goods and trade to the Royal Court. Those who were not quite as affluent mainly worked in trade, acted as intermediaries for the szlachta - for example in the sale of grain produced at farms - or as leaseholders of mills, fish ponds, and inns. Additionally, there were large numbers of Jewish artisans living in cities.

National Museum in Gdańsk



Wine jug used during the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession. This particular item originates from the workshop of Michael Dietrich (1709)

Completing the puzzle

Another distinctive group in the ethnic and religious mosaic of the Commonwealth were Tatars - an Islamic people originating from the Black Sea coastal territories dependent on Turkey, speaking Kipchak. They first started arriving in Ruthenian lands in the 14th century. Early in the following century, Grand Dukes started resettling Tatar prisoners of war in Lithuania, near strategically-important cities including Wilno, Troki, Kowno and Grodno. Tatars also started settling in Red Ruthenia and Podole in the late Middle Ages. By the mid-17th century, the group is estimated to have numbered around six to ten thousand. Resolutions taken by the Sejm in the mid-16th century granted Tatars the right to build temples; by the 17th century, there were mosques in 26 towns, including Wilno and Mińsk.

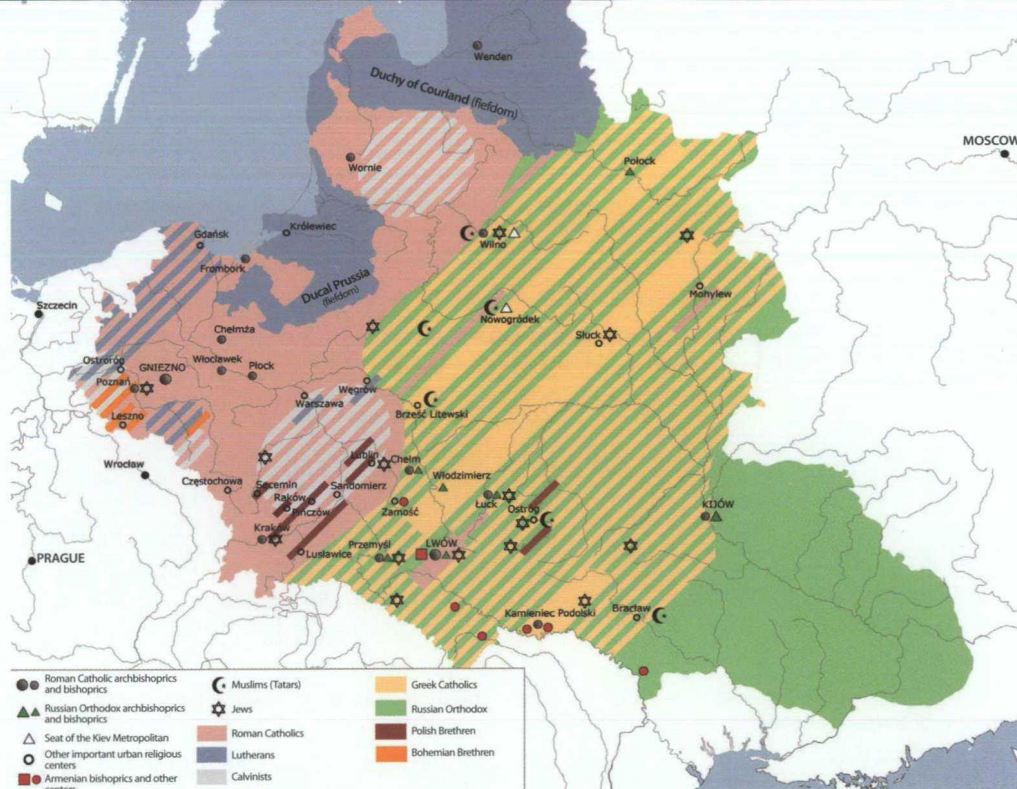
Other ethnic groups also included inhabitants of lands that over the years had become part of the Commonwealth, such as Latvians and Estonians, as well as groups of migrants such as Karaites (mostly of Turkish origin, adherents of Karaism - a modified form of Judaism), Vlachs (Orthodox migratory people from today's Romania and Moldavia), and a few thousand Scots. Less numerous groups included Dutch Anabaptists (a radical Protestant group), Orthodox Greeks involved in long-distance trade with the Levant, and Hungarians, mainly Catholic mercenaries. Another important group consisted of Italians, numbering a few thousand in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Secrets of integration

Studying the colorful multiethnic patchwork of the Commonwealth raises an intriguing question: how was the coexistence of so many national, language and religious groups possible within a single state?

It should be noted that the Commonwealth of Both Nations was a state based on the system of "estates" or social orders (a type of statehood that existed in Europe until the 19th century and only at the turn of the 20th century was largely replaced by the nation-state, based around monolingual and monocultural ethnic bonds). Some of the ethnic (and religious) groups - such as Jews and Armenians - had such "estate" status: they were granted distinct rights and privileges concerning faith and governance, which made it easier for them to integrate as part of a major multinational state.

Faiths and religions in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the early 17th century



Additionally, representatives of various ethnicities were able to join the privileged noble estate (the *szlachta*) – a group of fully empowered citizens of the political nation ruling the Commonwealth. A developed sense of regional belonging helped give rise to a multi-layer group consciousness, particularly among multiethnic communities, allowing individuals to identify with several groups at the same time.

It appears that this type of pre-modern type of state, with its distinctive regionalized, multiethnic, and multicultural character, created a better vehicle for the integration and cohabitation of different ethnic and religious groups than the contemporary nation-states striving towards full assimilation.

Additionally, the simplified assumption that the multiethnic nature of the Commonwealth of Both Nations was an indirect cause of the subsequent partitions is also incorrect. After all, the Habsburg Austrian and Hungarian monarchies – equally ethnically and religiously diverse – went on to build a substantial empire during the 18th century, which only finally collapsed in the wake of the First World War, at a time when the nation-state had already become the norm across the rest of Europe. We can only conjecture that Commonwealth of Both Nations would have met a similar fate in 1918, had it survived its 18th-century crisis.

Similarly, the theory that mythologizes about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a “state without stakes” and about the uniqueness of Polish tolerance as a keystone of a multi-faith society is equally inaccurate. The fact is that in Poland-Lithuania some people were indeed burnt at the stake, and in the

16th and 17th centuries both the Kingdom and the Duchy took what was a very pragmatic attitude to religious tolerance involving a kind of “endurance” (in keeping with the word’s Latin origin – *tolerare* “to bear, endure”), instead of actively positing an ideological pluralism and equality (the latter concept of tolerance was not formulated until the Enlightenment). Comparative studies show that extensive, pragmatic tolerance during the era of bloody religious wars that scoured Western Europe was not unique to Poland; it was also typical of the society of the territorially-divided Kingdom of Hungary (in particular Transylvania), itself a multiethnic monarchy. It transpires that it was precisely this multiethnicity of certain regions and countries, characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, that helped create more tolerant and open-faith policies. Multiethnicity can be seen as typical of not just the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but of a major part of the wider historical and cultural heritage of Central and Eastern Europe. ■

Further reading:

- Litwin H. (1993). *Narody Pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej* [Nations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth]. In: *Tradycje polityczne dawnej Polski* [Political Traditions in Historical Poland], eds. Sucheni-Grabowska A., Dybkowska A. Warsaw: Editions Spotkania, pp. 168-218.
- Kopczyński M. and Tygielski W., eds. (2010). *Pod wspólnym niebem. Narody dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* [Under a Common Sky: The Nations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth]. Warsaw: Bellona.
- Kąkolewski I., Kopczyński M., eds. (2012). *Pod wspólnym niebem. Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów, wyznań i kultur* [Under a Common Sky: The Commonwealth of Many Nations, Religions, and Cultures]. Catalog from an exhibition at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, May-July 2012. Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Polski.