

The Reformation in Eastern Europe

Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary

Poland

Poland may be thoroughly Catholic today, but the Reformation made great progress in that country in the middle and later 1500s. It is a prime example of the weaknesses of the reforming movement and the successes of the Catholic Reformation.

Students from Wittenberg brought the reforming message early to Danzig and Cracow, but here as elsewhere national sentiments directly affected the course of the reform movement. Partly because of Polish political traditions, partly because of long-standing ties with France, and partly because of a growing antipathy toward Germans, the Poles took much more strongly to Calvinism and Calvinistic sects. It's worth pointing out, too, that the Hussites had flourished in western Poland, so the country had a long tradition of dissatisfaction with the clergy. Moreover, the country also had a long tradition of religious toleration: many Jews had fled thither from persecutions in the West, and there was even an Islamic Tatar population in Lithuania. In the event, a number of different reform churches took root in Poland, especially during the 1540s and 1550s. While ideas and enclaves could be found everywhere, different flavors of Protestantism flourished in different regions of Poland, for exactly the same reason they did in Germany: due to the preferences and protection of the local nobility.

The 16th century Polish kings were either indifferent to the reform issues, or genuinely believed it was not the place of a king to interfere in religious disputes. In any event, the Polish king could do little effectively without the cooperation of the Polish Diet (Sjem), and the Diet was dominated by reformist princes. Indeed, in the 1550s, they were strong enough to get legislation passed specifically excluding the Catholic Church from a variety of public spheres. Poland seemed to be travelling down the same road as other Protestant nations.

But it never got much further. The reasons are complex and make for a fascinating study. To oversimplify here, I will boil it down to two main factors: the variety of Protestant sects within Poland, and a renewed Catholic vigor.

Calvinists were perhaps strongest in Poland, but there were also a number of Zwinglians. Besides these, a strong group of Socinians (Anti-Trinitarians) were protected by a variety of princes. There was even a kind of re-birth of the Hussites, known as the Bohemian Brotherhood. While these (and other) groups could agree on a handful of core principles, when attempts at reform went further, their differences weakened them in the face of Catholic opposition. Even their great proclamation of 1570, the Concord of Sandomir, was boycotted by the Socinians.

Beyond these divisions, the poor of Poland never abandoned the Catholic cause. With the nobility going Protestant, the peasants and lesser nobility, who were steadfastly in opposition to the great nobles and viewed the king as their ally, naturally took the opposite view in religion. Thus, even where the Protestants were strong, a significant portion of the population remained Catholic.

This provided fertile ground for the post-Tridentine Church (that is, the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent). Led by Bishop Hosius of Warmia, and by the papal legate John Francis Commendoni, the Catholic Church in Poland made a determined effort to reform itself and to win back those who had fallen away. Here there was no Inquisition nor decisions on the field of battle. The Counter-Reformation in Poland was generally peaceful and successful. The Hosius and Commendoni brought Jesuits into the country, and the Order founded schools, debated the Protestants, and helped greatly to restore the credibility and respectability of the Catholic Church.

Interestingly, the Protestants were not run out of the country. Rather, they continued to be tolerated by the government. But throughout Europe, the Protestant cause only flourished when it was able to associate itself with the national identity, and that it failed to do in Poland. Protestants simply became fewer and fewer in number, until they were only a tiny minority.

A postscript is worth mentioning here. Nicholas Copernicus died in 1543. He spent most of his career in Poland as a practicing medical doctor but deriving his steady income as a canon in the Church at Warmia (Ermland). The Protestant Reformation was in full swing at the time, and was just really catching fire in Poland itself. Given that political-religious environment, and given his own position as a Church employee, it's hardly surprising that Copernicus chose not to publish his *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* until after his death.

The chief ecclesiastic was the archbishop of Gniezno, appointed by the pope. All other prelates were nominated by the crown. The Polish clergy were strong supporters of conciliarism and reform, especially at Cracow.

The Polish Church was firmly in noble hands. At the request of the Polish Diet, Pope Leo X in 1515 declared no one should be admitted to the episcopal clergy who was not born of noble parents.

Poland included Lithuania and Galicia, both Russian Orthodox. Lithuania looked to Kiev. The Ruthenians of Galicia were Orthodox but independent.

The earliest Lutheran influences came into the country by way of the many German communities, and by way of a strong Polish humanist community attending universities elsewhere in Europe. The influence was haphazard, driven by individual priests. We don't see the conversion of princes and cities that occurred in Germany.

The first place it did happen was in West Prussia, and it failed. West Prussia was heavily German and had a strong reformist population early on. In 1523 the local bishop tried to suppress some of their activities, which only spurred a stronger reaction. The reformers forced the city council of Danzig out of office and took over the town. The council appealed to King Sigismund and he responded in 1526 in force, occupying the city. Fifteen reformist leaders were executed and Sigismund issued a decree making apostasy punishable by death.

The first prince to convert was Albrecht, formerly the head of the Teutonic Knights. In April 1525 he became the vassal of King Sigismund, and in July he declared himself a Lutheran. The Duchy of Prussia became a Lutheran state. In 1544 he founded a university at Königsberg.

In the Kingdom of Poland, Sigismund tried to keep the reform impulses under control. In 1534, for example, he ordered all Polish students attending foreign, reformist universities to return to Poland. But efforts at control were inconsistent and not effective.

Lutheranism, in any case, made little impact on the Poles, perhaps because of its strong German associations. Calvinism, on the other hand, was well received. This began in the reign of Sigismund II Augustus (1548-1572).

Leaders and sponsors of Polish Calvinism were Mikolai Radziwill, a powerful noble; Jan Laski (Lasco); and Felix Krzyzak (Cruciger), a priest. Lasco had been an exile in London for three years in the reign of Edward VI and had actually met Calvin in Frankfurt in 1557. Cruciger was the key leader in promoting a strong presbyterian reform in Lesser Poland.

Poland also provided a refuge for anti-Trinitarianism, as well as to Socinians, Italian protestants, Arians, and others.

Sigismund Augustus died in 1572, the last of the Jagiellons. He had ruled Poland, Lithuania, Mazovia, royal Prussia, ducal Prussia, Curland, and Livonia. Henry of Valois was elected and reigned two years (1573-1575), whereupon the nobles turned to Stephen Báthory (1576-1586) and Sigismund Vasa (1587-1632). Henry was focused on France, Báthory on Transylvania, and Sigismund on Sweden.

Bohemia

Bohemia had already had a reformation: the Hussite rebellion of the 15th century had yielded a church with its own rules. On the surface, the main difference was that the Bohemian Church allowed communion in both kinds. A closer look shows that the Bible had been translated into Czech, churches were bare of images, many hymns were in Czech, and the Utraquists denied the authority of pope or council to tell them otherwise; only the Bible was the supreme authority. Moreover, Church property had long ago been seized, and most monasteries were long gone. Due mainly to politics, there was no archbishop at Prague from 1431 to 1561. In short, much of the Lutheran programme had already been accomplished in Bohemia.

Utraquists were theologically conservative, though. They honored saints and kept the sacraments. Their view of Christ and of communion was orthodox. Some even wished for a reunion with Rome. Moreover, the Bohemian Church was founded on a strong sense of Czech national identity, closely tied to the Czech language, and was suffused with a strong anti-German sentiment. In other words, though there were many points in common with the Lutherans, the differences were significant and insurmountable.

The emperor was the ruler of the Hussite Church and had to swear to the Compact of 1436, which preserved Hussite privileges. Since there was no archbishop, bishops had to find someone to consecrate them, sometimes going as far as Venice.

Lutheranism could make little headway here. What inroads were achieved came mainly among German Catholics. But the Hussites were friendly to the Lutherans, not least because Luther himself openly acknowledged his debt to Hus.

The Hutterites found a home here, in Moravia in the 1520s and after. Calvinism, on the other hand, made few gains.

After 1547 Ferdinand made a serious effort to eliminate the Bohemian Brethren, but succeeded only in driving them into exile in Moravia and western Poland.

The Counter-Reformation was ineffectual in Bohemia. Jesuits were established in Prague in 1556, but they won few converts. Protestantism, including Hussitism, became well-rooted in Bohemia. It took the calamity of the Thirty Years War to uproot it.

In 1575, in response to the Counter-Reformation, the Lutherans, Utraquists, and Brethren signed the *Confessio Bohemica*, which created a common document for all three. As everywhere else, Anabaptists were excluded.

Hungary

The crown in Hungary was weak, but it did still possess rights over the bishops. The Hungarian episcopacy was worldly and political, an extension of the nobility. At the opening of the Reformation, the king was Lewis II, who died at Mohács in 1526.

Battle of Mohács

The Turks brought a large army into the field that year, about seventy thousand. Lewis, calling upon his Habsburg relatives, managed to field about fifty thousand, a very large European army for the time. Lewis delayed at Buda while Suleiman's armies advanced.

When he finally did decide to fight, he was able to choose his ground, a wide gentle slope up from the Danube River. But he was not at all a good field commander. The Hungarians managed to win some early advantage, but did not exploit it. When they finally did advance on the right, their forces became detached.

Meanwhile, the Turks were giving a memorable demonstration of the effectiveness of cannon and musket fire. The Hungarian troops fought bravely, which simply meant they died in large numbers. An indication both of the ferocity of the battle and the nature of the Hungarian episcopacy is seen in the fact that of sixteen Hungarian bishops, seven were killed at Mohács. Lewis himself also died in the battle.

After Mohács

This disaster was followed by a generation of civil war as Ferdinand of Germany (Lewis' brother-in-law) claimed the crown but the magnates elected John Zápolyai. The conflict left Hungary exposed to the Turks, who took full advantage, culminating in the siege of Vienna in 1529. By 1541 about a third of Hungary was controlled by the Turks, about a quarter was controlled by Ferdinand, and the remainder was ruled by Hungarians.

With the situation so dire, neither claimant tried to suppress the Lutheran reformers. Even the Turks tolerated them. Especially in Magyar Hungary, Lutheranism made considerable progress. In the 1550s and after, Calvinism also enjoyed considerable success. Protestant progress ended only with the election of Stephen Báthory as king.

Lutheranism was strongest in the German towns, Calvinism in the Magyar countryside, with Antitrinitarian groups also strong through the 16th century. Gaspar Károlyi translated the Bible into Hungarian in 1590. The Calvinists in Hungary signed on to the Second Helvetic Confession in 1567.

Hungary was still technically ruled by the Hapsburgs, though, and that family remained staunchly Catholic. Because of the strong element of nationalism, the Hapsburgs proceeded slowly, but with the help of the Inquisition the Counter-reformation made progress.

A second crisis occurred with the Turkish invasion of 1671, in part because of Calvinist cooperation with the Turks. It became easy to associate the Protestants with treason and thirty-three pastors (thirty-two Lutheran and one Reformed) were brought before a royal court in 1673. Many renounced their faith, but those who refused were sold as galley slaves. Their plight became a cause célèbre across Europe, with attempts at ransom. They were finally freed by the Dutch admiral Ruyter.

The Thirty Years War resulted in gains and losses on all sides and in 1645, with the Treaty of Linz, religious freedom was granted. About 80% of the Hungarian churches were by this time Roman Catholic. The religious element continued to be entangled with religious sentiments, and Calvinist groups in particular were often associated with rebellions.

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