

CHAPTER 53 : POLAND PRE-1775

We had left Poland at the termination of the era of Protestant Reformation with its last auspicious opportunity to embrace established Protestantism and throw off the cords of Romish servitude. But, alas, she declined. The primary cause of her rejection of Protestantism was the subtlety of the Jesuits. Their corps in Poland successfully turned back the tide of Protestantism, deceiving many. They laid hold of the machinery of government, media, and education – as they did in so many other places – and suppressed Protestantism through a combination of covert and overt means.

Cardinal Hosius opened the gates of Poland to the Jesuits. Till then Poland was a flourishing country, united at home and powerful abroad. Its literature and science during the half-century preceding had risen to an eminence that placed Poland on a par with the most enlightened countries of Christendom. Foreign Protestants fled to it as a refuge from the persecution to which they were exposed in their native land, bringing to their adopted country their skill, their wealth, and their energy. Its trade increased, and its towns grew in population and riches. Italian, German, French, and Scottish Protestant congregations existed at Cracow, Vilna, and Posnania. Such was Poland before the foot of Jesuit had touched its soil.

But from the hour that the disciples of Loyola entered the country Poland began to decline. The Jesuits became supreme at court. The monarch Sigismund III gave himself entirely up to their guidance. No one could hope to rise in the state who did not pay court to them. The education of youth was wholly in their hands, and the effects became speedily visible in the decay of literature, and the growing decrepitude of the national mind. At home the popular liberties were attacked in the persons of the Protestants, and abroad the nation was humiliated by a foreign policy inspired by the Jesuits, which drew upon the country the contempt and hostility of neighboring powers. These evil courses of intrigue and faction within the country, and impotent and arrogant policy outside of it, were persisted in till the natural issue was reached in the partition of Poland. It is at the door of the Jesuits that the fall of that once-enlightened, prosperous, and powerful nation is to be laid.

But though the fall of Protestantism in Poland, and the consequent ruin of the Polish State, was mainly the work of the Jesuits, other causes co-operated, though to a less degree. The Protestant body in Poland, from the first, was parted into three Confessions: the Genevan in Lithuania, the Bohemian in Great Poland, and the Lutheran in those towns that were inhabited by a population of German descent. This was a source of weakness, and this weakness was aggravated by the ill-will especially borne by the Lutheran Protestants to the adherents of the other two Confessions. A party spirit kept the Lutherans from honestly acknowledging their theological errors. This meant that any union would be one of unsatisfactory doctrinal compromise, such as that effected by the Union of Sandomir. But such doctrinal compromise, even as we have seen in the case of Germany, is no long term solution. It will either result in greater doctrinal compromise, or fracture. In Poland's case fracture ensued. The Lutherans broke away from the united church. So divided, the Protestant cause was weakened.

The short lives of John Alasco and Prince Radziwill are also to be reckoned among the causes which contributed to the failure of the Reform movement in Poland. Had their labors been prolonged, a deeper seat would have been given to Protestant truth in the general population, and the throne might have been gained to the Reformation. The Christian chivalry and patriotism with which the great nobles placed themselves at the head of the movement are worthy of all praise, but the people must ever be the mainstay of a religious Reformation, and the great landowners in Poland did not, we fear, take this fact sufficiently into account, or bestow the requisite pains in imbuing their tenantry with great scriptural principles. Hence, the people were again transferred into the Roman fold with comparative ease.

But an influence yet more hostile to the triumph of Protestantism in Poland was the rise and rapid diffusion of Socinian views. Socinianism denied the Trinity, you will recall, and ultimately too denied salvation by grace. Socinianism sprang up in the bosom of the Genevan Confession, and inflicted a blight on the powerful Protestant Churches of Lithuania. That blight very soon overspread the whole land; and the green tree of Protestantism began to be touched with the sere of decay.

The Socinian was followed, as we have seen, by the Jesuit. A yet deeper desolation gathered on his track. Decay became rottenness, and blight deepened into death; but Protestantism did not perish alone. The throne, the country, the people, all went down with it in a catastrophe so awful that no one could have effected it but the Jesuit.

So by the time of the Thirty Years' War Poland was largely sold to the false Romish faith. When in the course of that war Charles Gustavus of Sweden had subdued it, the Poles protested against Protestant rule. "It did not need," Gustavus said, "that the Diet should elect him king, seeing he was already master of the country by his sword." The self-love of the Poles was wounded; the war was renewed; and, after a great struggle, a peace was concluded in 1660, under the joint mediation and guarantee of England, France, and Holland. John Casimir returned to resume his reign over a country bleeding from the swords of two armies. The Cossacks had exercised an indiscriminate vengeance: the Popish cathedral and the Protestant church had alike been given to the flames, and Protestants and Papists had been equal sufferers in the calamities of the war.

The first act of the monarch John Casimir, after his return, was to place his kingdom under the special protection of the "Blessed Virgin." To make himself and his dominions the more worthy of so august a suzerainty, he registered on the occasion two vows, both well-pleasing, as he judged, to his celestial patroness. Casimir promised in the first to redress the grievances of the lower orders, and in the second to convert the heretics — in other words, to persecute the Protestants. The first vow it was not even attempted to fulfill. All the efforts of the sovereign, therefore, were given to the second.

But the shield of England and Holland was at that time extended over the Protestants of Poland, who were still numerous, and had amongst them some influential families. The monarch's efforts were, in consequence, restricted meanwhile to the conversion of the Socinians, who were numerous in his kingdom. They were offered the alternative of

return to the Roman Church or exile. They seriously proposed to meet the prelates of the Roman hierarchy in conference, and convince them that there was no fundamental difference between their tenets and the dogmas of the Roman Church. The conference was declined, and the Socinians were driven out of the kingdom. If Casimir's enterprise stopped there we might applaud, but it did not. England, with Charles II. on her throne, grew cold in the cause of the Polish Protestants. In the treaty of the peace of 1660, the rights of all religious Confessions in Poland had been secured; but the guaranteeing Powers soon ceased to enforce the treaty. The Polish Government paid but small respect to it. Persecution in the form of mob violence was still continued. Thus, when the reign of John Casimir, which had been fatal to the Protestants throughout, came to an end, it was found that their ranks were broken up, that all the great families who had belonged to their communion were extinct or had passed into the Church of Rome, that their sanctuaries were mostly in ashes, their congregations all dispersed, and their cause hopeless.

There followed a succession of reigns which only furnished evidence how weak the throne had become, and how powerful the Jesuits and the Roman hierarchy had grown. Religious equality was still the law of Poland, and each new sovereign swore, at his coronation, to maintain the rights of the anti-Romanists, but the transaction was deemed a mere fiction, and the king, however much disposed, had not the power to fulfill his oath. The Jesuits and the bishops were in this matter above the law, and the sovereign's tribunals could not enforce their own edicts. What the law called rights the clergy stigmatized as abuses, and demanded that they should be abolished. In 1732 a law was passed excluding from all public offices those who were not of the communion of the Church of Rome.

The public service was thus deprived of whatever activity and enlightenment of mind yet existed in Poland. The country had no need of this additional stimulus. It was already pursuing fast enough the road to ruin. For a century, one disaster after another had devastated its soil and people. Its limits had been curtailed by the loss of several provinces. Its population had been diminished by the emigration of thousands of Protestants. Its resources had been drained by its efforts to quell revolt within and ward off invasion from without. Its intelligence had been obscured, and well-nigh extinguished, by those who claimed the exclusive right to instruct its youth, but who in truth taught the youth lies. In that land it was a greater misfortune to be educated than to grow up untaught. Overspread by torpor, Poland gave no signs of life save such as indicate paralysis. Placed under foreign tutelage, and sunk in dependence and helplessness, if she was cared for by her powerful protectors, it was as men care for a once noble palace which they have no thought of rebuilding, but from whose fallen masses they hope to extract a column or a topstone that may help to enlarge and embellish their own dwelling.

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This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.