

Excerpt from John Radzilowski, Traveller's History of Poland (Gloucester, UK, 2007).

Throughout the 1200s, Poland was fragmented between a large group of regional princes of the Piast dynasty and lacked a single crowned monarch. In the early 1300s, Władysław Łokotiek (or "Elbow-high") managed to reunite sections of the country and was crowned king. Despite numerous setbacks in the face of powerful external foes, Władysław persevered and handed on a united but fragile kingdom to his son, Casimir.

3. FROM WOOD TO STONE

Kazimierz Wielki

Perhaps not much was expected of the young Casimir when he took the throne in 1333. He had received a basic education, especially in law, and had gained some administrative experience under his father as a regional officer (*starosta*). The new king had seen battle, both successful and unsuccessful. He had an eye for beautiful women and had gotten himself in trouble during a diplomatic visit to Hungary when he seduced the daughter of a powerful Hungarian lord. There was nothing unusual or unique in his resume. The troubles he faced—powerful external foes and a country divided and partly ravaged by war—certainly did not bode well for his rule.

Yet, in the history of every land and people, there emerge leaders whose ability and vision change their countries forever. Casimir would reign for 37 years and where many of his predecessors were granted derisive or unflattering nicknames, the new king would be

remembered simply as Kazimierz Wielki, or Casimir the Great. His rule would completely transform Poland.

At the time of his father's death, Poland faced conflict with powerful neighbors—Bohemia, Brandenburg, and the Teutonic Order—each of which could have destroyed Poland on its own. Bohemia and the Order had even developed an anti-Polish alliance, although a temporary truce restrained the dogs of war. Without giving up his father's goals of reunifying the country and recovering her lost territories, Casimir chose diplomacy over war. The last years of Władysław's reign had conclusively demonstrated that Poland could not win back Pomerania and Silesia with force of arms. The Teutonic Order was far too powerful and the kings of Bohemia had the vast resources of a prosperous and well-organized land to call against Poland. After a series of protracted negotiations lasting years, Casimir eventually agreed to give up Pomerania to the Knights in return for the territories of Kujawy and Dobryń which they had occupied. It was a humiliating treaty, made worse by the Knights' supremely arrogant treatment of the Polish king, and many of Casimir's subjects would never wholly resign themselves to this peace.

On the other side, Casimir paid off King John of Bohemia to renounce his claims to the Polish throne. He also had to give up control of much of Silesia to the Bohemians, though he managed to keep the Duchy of Świdnica independent and under the control of his ally and cousin, Duke Bolko, which was an effective check on King John's ambitions.

Casimir's goals were two fold: first to break up any potential alliance between Bohemia and the Teutonic Knights and second to give his country breathing space to recover from years of war and build up its resources. Although the loss of Silesia and Pomerania was bitter, Poland was

too weak to retain effective control over these provinces in the face of powerful enemies. There was every hope that Poland could recover them sometime in the future.

As Casimir was forced to give up territories in the west and north, new opportunity beckoned to the east. The ruler of Halicz-Ruthenia, a principality on Poland's eastern border, died without an heir. As a relative of the ruling house, Casimir quickly advanced his own claim to this territory. In 1340 and 1341, the king mounted expeditions to secure his control, bringing cities such as Lwow, Przemysł, Chełm, and Vladimir under Polish control. This territory had been technically under the overlordship of the Khan of the Golden Horde whose Tatar horsemen represented a major threat to Poland. However, the Tatars were faced with internal strife of their own and proved unable to mount sustained expeditions to keep Halicz under their thumb.

A more serious challenge came from Lithuania whose pagan rulers had been successfully pushing back the remnants of Mongol control and claimed parts of Halicz, especially Vladimir and the fortress town of Belz. Local boyars (gentry) were divided, some preferring the Lithuanians, other backing Casimir, and still others favoring neither. A protracted struggle followed and the Poles mounted regular expeditions into this new territory to repel Lithuanian incursions. By the 1350s, most of the territory was under Polish control, though Belz, Vladimir, and Chełm took longer to secure. Eventually, an agreement was struck that Lithuanian princes would rule these cities as vassals of Casimir.

The new territory represented a major expansion of the kingdom. Halicz-Ruthenia provided new resources and population. It was also the first Polish territory with a significant population of Orthodox Christians. Practical considerations overrode any notion of following the Teutonic Knights in their practice of conversion by the sword. Casimir needed the cooperation of

local leaders—lay and clerical. Although the Catholic population would increase over time, the ancient faith of the inhabitants would be respected.

The acquisition of Halicz also changed Poland's traditional westward orientation. The growing weakness of the Golden Horde left a new power vacuum in this region. Though sparsely populated, it had important resources and provided access to trade routes stretching to the Black Sea, Central Asia, and Persia. Although Poland remained firmly anchored to the West, it was the first step in a long process that caused Poland to develop in ways quite different from its western neighbors.

Casimir did not neglect his western and northern frontiers either. He began the process of reabsorbing Mazovia into the kingdom, turning its local princes into royal vassals. He also acquired a number of small but important territories in Pomerania that effectively separated the Teutonic Knights from a common border with Brandenburg and the Empire.

As important as these military and political steps were, however, it was Casimir's internal reforms that put Poland on the path to greatness. He completely reformed royal administration, basing royal power in the provinces on *starostas*, an office introduced to Poland during the brief rule of the Bohemian kings at the start of the fourteenth century. Old offices are consolidated, making the king's rule more effective and its enforcement based on appointed men loyal to the throne rather than local gentry. The currency was standardized. He also modernized the military structure of the kingdom, creating a single *levee en masse*, with obligations for providing troops specified from the richest nobles down the modest village headmen. Where the country had been vulnerable to attack, during Casimir's reign Poland built 66 castles of the most modern type, rebuilt the defenses of 23 cities, and supplemented this with lines of field defenses and watch towers, closing off every major invasion route into the country.

In 1347, Casimir undertook his most ambitious project—completely rewriting the Polish law code. Until that time, there had been no uniform code of law, but a jumble of custom and local laws. Cities were often organized under German-style law codes and surrounding rural areas handled under noble or ecclesiastical courts. During the period of fragmentation, local princes enacted provisions that applied to one region but were absent in another. Abuses were rampant and common folk without legal training stood little chance of getting justice. According to the chronicler Jan Długosz:

The King convenes an assembly . . . attended by all the bishops of the kingdom, its voivodes, castellans, officials, and eminent personages. The King presides and has with him experts in canon and civil law. The assembly then sets about organizing Polish law, writing it all down and publishing it. . . . All are written in clear, simple language so that their meaning cannot be cleverly twisted or distorted. Various confused enactments of his predecessors are carefully corrected and clauses that have been overlooked are added, while those that are unnecessary are removed. . . . All courts of justice, however small or large, and their judges . . . are to conduct their cases solely in accordance with the written, published laws and to give their verdicts accordingly; also, that everyone, even the poor and those of humble origin, are to be free to appeal to the written law.

Casimir's rule was particularly beneficial to peasants and tradesmen as he restrained the abuses of the gentry. One chronicle noted "Under his reign no powerful lord or squire dared harm the poor, for justice was even for all." He was also a friend to the country's small but growing Jewish population. During his reign, Jewish immigration grew steady as Jewish communities were placed under royal protection and royal justice. During the same period, as the Black Death raged across much of Europe, Jews were persecuted in western and central Europe. Many fled to the safety of Casimir's Poland, where for reasons that are unclear, significant parts of the country were spared the worst ravages of the plague. The earlier Statutes of Kalisz were expanded. Penalties for attacking or robbing Jews were increased and firmly enforced. A

common legend has it that Casimir's actions were motivated by his passion for a Jewish mistress named Esther, but this is merely a convenient myth. Casimir's interest was not only justice but economic growth. Jewish migrants brought skills the country needed and provided a bit of free market competition for local craft guilds (which many of them, of course, resented).

Casimir's policies and the expansion of Polish rule into Ruthenia and Mazovia resulted in economic growth and increased trade that had a ripple effect across the entire country. Royal tax revenues increased and the additional money was plowed into new building and new projects which in turn created additional jobs. The king as well as bishops and nobles founded 65 new towns and about 500 new villages. Canals were built, marshes drained, forests cleared for new farmland, new mills and mines created. Nobles and merchants had more money in their pockets, resulting in greater spending on arts and culture. New churches and monasteries were endowed. The new law codes and the expanding royal administration created a huge demand for trained scribes, scholars, and lawyers. In 1364, with the approval of the Pope, Casimir founded a university in Kraków to produce a cadre of skilled, literate men who would administer the new Poland he was creating. The school, later to become the famous Jagiellonian University, was only the second university in east-central Europe, following Charles University in Prague by only a few years.

Poland's growing power and wealth allowed Casimir to practice diplomacy on a grand scale. In 1363, Casimir played an important role in brokering a peace treaty between the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Hungary that was to be sealed by the marriage of one of Casimir's granddaughter to the Emperor. The wedding would become the largest summit of medieval European royalty. Kraków played host to the kings of Hungary, Poland, Denmark, and

Cyprus, and the Emperor Charles as well as numerous princes, dukes, bishops, and knights.

Guests were provided with sumptuous lodging, mountains of food, and gifts:

At the end of all this banqueting, which lasts more than twelve days, the kings and princes, having established friendly relations and sworn to make a pact of eternal peace, exchange gifts, give cordial thanks and praise to King Casimir for the honour done them and the gifts they and their people have received, and so depart for home, again provided on the way with all their needs by the King's starostas.

Casimir's one signal failure, however, was to produce a legitimate male heir. The king had children by many mistresses, but only daughters by a succession of wives. Only Casimir's first wife, the Lithuanian princess Aldona, seems to match the king's lively and passionate temperament. After her death, his marriages were loveless dynastic affairs. To secure his succession, he turned to his nephew and ally, Louis of Hungary. Louis was designated Casimir's successor as his heir. To secure the agreement of the Polish gentry, Louis promised to grant them a wide-ranging series of privileges.

In 1370, the king was sixty years old, but still vigorous and active. In September he went hunting and while pursuing a deer was thrown from his horse and broke his leg. A fever set in. The king seemed to recover but returned to his royal duties too soon and suffered a relapse and his condition went downhill steadily. On November 5, 1370, Casimir the Great died and was buried in Wawel Cathedral in Kraków.

It was popularly said that Casimir found a Poland made of wood and left behind a Poland made of stone. Długosz wrote:

King Casimir was so eager to make his country illustrious and rich that he went to great expense building churches of brick or masonry, as well as castles, towns, manors, etc. so as to make Poland, which he found dirty and with buildings only of clay or wood, a place of brick and

masonry and famous. This he did. He was particularly concerned that prelates, canons, and rectors of parish churches should build their private residences near their churches, and that peasants and villagers should not suffer injury from the nobles and knights. So, too, the peasants and settlers . . . whenever they were oppressed by their masters, obtained some protection from him. The knights and nobles called him “the King of the peasants.”

With Casimir’s death, the line of Piast rulers, begun with Mieszko I four centuries earlier, ended. Yet, the last Piast was the greatest. In 37 years, a land that had been little more than a collection of squabbling principalities had become a powerful, unified kingdom. Casimir established his country as a player on the chessboard of European politics. He rebuilt its governmental, economic, legal, educational, and military structures. It is little exaggeration to say that without Casimir the Great, Poland would never have become a significant Europe state.