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# A NATIONAL HERO AND A CHALLENGE FOR HISTORY TEACHERS

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The year 2025 has been declared by the Polish Parliament as the *Millennial Year of the Coronation of Poland's First Two Kings in Gniezno* – Bolesław the Brave (992–1025) and Mieszko II (1025–1034). With this decision, MPs sought above all to commemorate Bolesław as Poland's first crowned ruler, referring to an event that most likely took place in the Gniezno Archcathedral of St. Adalbert on Easter Sunday, 18 April 1025. His successor, Mieszko II, was also crowned in the same year, yet his reign was already marked by a deep crisis of the Polish state. Taking the occasion of this anniversary, it is worth pausing to consider how Bolesław the Brave has been depicted over the years in history education in Polish schools.

Let us begin by outlining the events of Bolesław's reign that are generally undisputed by modern historians. His achievements are mostly focused in the western direction, involving the papacy, Germany, the Polabian Slavs, and Bohemia. First, in that era, coronation was understood as an act of divine anointment, by which the ruler gained full sovereign status. Bolesław's coronation therefore signified the confirmation of Poland's independence, primarily in relation to the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Germany. Second, Bolesław capitalized on the death of Bishop Adalbert (*Wojciech*) during his mission to Christianize the Prussians in 997, using it to shape his own image as a protector of Christianity. As a result, he obtained papal approval for the establishment of the Gniezno archbishopric. Third, the Polish ruler took part in the Congress of Gniezno (also known as the Gniezno Summit) in the year 1000, meeting with Emperor Otto III (983–1002), who espoused a universalist vision of the Christian world. At the gathering, Bolesław's royal

aspirations were acknowledged, and he was designated as one of the key figures in the plan to restore the unity of Christian Europe. Fourth, Bolesław subsequently waged three wars against Emperor Henry II (1002–1024), which concluded with the Peace of Bautzen in 1018, affirming his rule over the conquered territories of Lusatia, the Milceni region (*Milsko*), and most likely Moravia. And finally, in 1018, Bolesław captured Kyiv, the capital of the neighboring state of Rus', where he installed his son-in-law, Prince Sviatopolk I, on the throne. Although Sviatopolk soon lost power, Bolesław's expedition demonstrated his ambitions in the eastern direction as well – opening a long chapter in the history of Poland's aspirations to lead in Central and Eastern Europe.

## Historical policy

The effects of Bolesław's reign, as interpreted by historians, elevated him to the rank of one of Poland's principal national heroes. He has retained this status to the present day and is likewise presented in the historical narrative taught in schools. Why, then, do I suggest that history teachers have found – and even today still find – teaching about him to be a challenge?

The core of the issue is that the historical narrative taught in schools, in any country, is never neutral: its content is shaped by the state and, in modern times, influenced by official historical policy. Every political actor engages in such policy – even those who publicly distance themselves from it. In fact, declaring that distance, as some left-wing parties in Europe do today, only confirms the existence of a political arena where rival groups compete for moral authority drawn from the past. Withdrawing from that arena rarely brings political advantage; instead, it leaves the historical narrative open to those who are eager to appropriate it. The strongest player in this field is usually the party in power. Ruling officials use their control over history education not only to legitimize their rule and promote their agenda but also (though this is rarely stated outright in Poland, where the term “historical policy” often has negative connotations) to try to strengthen national cohesion through a shared historical narrative.

Given the well-established consensus among historians, one might assume that teaching about Bolesław the Brave should not be particularly difficult. During the interwar Second Polish Republic, his legacy was used to mobilize Polish society in the face of the growing German threat. He was portrayed as a farsighted ruler – even a prophet of sorts – who had tried to prevent the disastrous consequences of the later *Drang nach Osten*.

The communist period, by contrast, offered more reasons to sideline Bolesław. The early Piast monarchy, framed as an exploitative state run by a narrow elite, and the Catholic Church, seen as its ally, were both criticized as pillars of an unjust social order. Yet on the other hand, Bolesław's military successes against Germany, his symbolic role in justifying Poland's postwar claim to the Western and Northern Territories (amid West Germany's refusal to recognize the Oder–Neisse border), and the prestige conferred by his royal coronation all made him useful to the communist regime. These elements served to legitimize the communist-era authorities and strengthen Poland's international position. At the same time, however, this reinterpretation created complications. Emphasizing other aspects of Bolesław's reign could have strained relations with Poland's "brotherly" socialist neighbors. As a result, his conquest of Moravia was largely omitted so as not to antagonize Czechoslovakia, and his expedition to Kyiv was judged negatively, in line with Soviet views – dismissed as a dynastic misstep driven by personal ambition.

In post-1989 Poland, Bolesław once again came to be viewed as a foundational figure in the history of the Polish state. Yet the focus of his story shifted. His wars with Germany were no longer central. Instead, emphasis was placed on his role in Otto III's vision of European unity, and his coronation was portrayed as a symbolic moment of Poland joining the cultural community of the Latin West. The Holy Roman Empire was no longer seen as a German national state bent on expansion, but as a political entity pursuing a universalist ideal in the shared interests of its members.

## The history teacher's dilemma

Still, the dilemma facing history teachers is very real. They have generally been fully aware, all along, not only of the shifting emphasis in historical interpretation, but also of the changing goals and enduring mechanisms behind state-led historical policy. As a result, they must ask themselves whether to present their students with only the version of Bolesław's legacy mandated – or at least strongly suggested – by the current curriculum, or whether to also explain how and why this interpretation has changed over time. But if they choose the latter path, do they risk under-



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mining the identity-shaping and patriotic aims that justify the inclusion of history in school curricula in the first place? This question is particularly relevant for teachers at the secondary-school level. But today, with children developing the ability to assess competing narratives from the moment they learn to use media independently, the dilemma is now creeping into earlier stages of education as well.

Teachers' personal convictions also play a role. Today, some may wonder whether to raise aspects of Bolesław's reign that were previously omitted from textbooks or treated only briefly. These include his relentless war-waging – fueled by personal ambition – that placed an enormous burden on the population and left the state weakened to the point of collapse shortly after his death, or the accounts of his violent behavior, which would today be considered criminal offences. Others, by contrast, in the current context of intensified calls to strengthen Poland's national defense, may see Bolesław as a powerful symbol of the country's military potential and soon return to the interwar-era portrayal of his reign as a model of patriotic strength. ■

Sculpture of King Bolesław the Brave on the Royal Route in Gniezno