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 **Reviews**  
**in History**

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The author's statement that he proposes to present a history of modern Poland which goes beyond martyrdom is dynamite. The very suggestion that martyrdom is something that a nation can and furthermore should transcend is not an idea with which many Poles, notably present day politicians, would like to advocate. At present, history in Poland is a weapon to be deployed in battles, confrontations and rivalries. No one does that better than *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, the main opposition party in Poland. Aided and abetted by the Institute of National Memory (IPN) which not only controls all secret service archives of the Communist period but which specialises in nationalist interpretations of Polish history, a particularly partial school of interpretation has taken root in Poland. The fact that *PiS* might win a majority in the forthcoming elections will only make it more difficult to study and disseminate historic interpretations, other than those which are moulded around the party's need for symbols of martyrdom. And thus we face the paradox of a country in which the recent past is cast in conveniently dark shades and where the Communist regime is castigated for its lack of freedom, only to see contemporary politicians also approving the narrowing down of historical debate. *Beyond Martyrdom* suggests that the reader should either have doubts about Polish claims to martyrdom or that it might well be time for a more sophisticated debate on Poland's modern history. If these are indeed the aims of the book, it delivers. Since Poles and the Polish media tend to have an exaggerated regard for foreigners who take an interest in Polish history, as witnessed by the esteem in which they hold Norman Davies, this modest book is very much to be welcomed. Here is a foreigner who writes well on Polish history, one who knows his subject, but most importantly, one who has not fallen into the trap of taking Polish pronouncements of victimhood at face value.

Brian Porter-Szűcs' starting point is the period after the third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795. The book ends with the year 2012 though the author adds a few intelligent pointers as to the future. Most would agree that the choice of the starting date is appropriate as it marks the historic time when the political and economic power of the landed nobility was broken by the new modes of production and by the partitioning powers. The author discusses whether the concept of national identity as understood nowadays can be applied retrospectively. He points to the fact that peasants, the landed gentry and the urban population did not have fixed ideas about their identity, instead relating to their religious community or geographic place. He also questions the benefits of industrialisation and debates whether the village-to-town and land-to-industry migration was conscious or merely a response to opportunity and to poverty. The tone is thus set from the outset with the author frequently dwelling on what have been presented as historic certainties and clear trends. Here Porter-Szűcs cautions that one should always be sceptical of claims that history progressed in a clear and purposeful way towards a nation state. As an example he indicates that political parties were not necessarily in charge of the revolutionary groundswell in the Russian-held parts of Poland in 1905, that in 1918 independence was not inevitable and that Piłudski was far

from being the obvious leader of the new Polish state. The author is equally good on the dilemmas facing Poles during the inter-war period when the critical question of the role of the state in upholding the interests of the nation was faced but in the end left unresolved. In all cases Porter-Szűcs distinguishes between ethnic Poles and those who were Polish citizens and whose rights were gradually diminished. The Second World War, which is only too frequently portrayed by present-day nationalists as a time of national unity in the face of the brutal German and Soviet occupation, is likewise debated sensitively by the author. He sees neither unity nor heroism. He is not inclined to see the period in simple terms and rightly notes how war and occupation created unexpected scenarios.

The post-war period, the establishment of Communism in Poland, and finally the period of Communist governance are all subjects which clearly challenged the author. He frequently asks himself whether what happened in Poland was exceptional. Was the aim to establish spheres of influence and to thus deny the local community the right to self-determination unique to the Soviet Union? Porter-Szűcs suggests it was not and he draws on examples from the Americas where the United States pursued similar aims, even if by different means. The Communist period is seen as a time of change and of social reconfiguration but the author suggests that this should not be overstated as the pre-war elites were in many cases able to position themselves during this time so as not to fall to the bottom of the social and economic ladder. The author is clearly familiar with daily life in Communist Poland. He rejects the stereotypical images peddled by those who wanted to portray daily life in Poland as one of grim endurance. He is able to point out that the Communists were neither able nor necessarily willing to influence changes in Polish society. Nor was Poland a cultural desert. Jazz, cinema and cabarets all had a legal place in the Polish life during the 1960s and 1970s.

In his analysis of the rise of the Solidarity trade union movement and the final dismantling of the Communist regime, the author finds many inconsistencies between public images and the realities of the time. Solidarity did not seek to destroy Communism but to recast it in its own image. The Church did not support the dissidents unquestioningly; on the contrary, Father Popiełuszko, murdered by the security service in 1984, had earlier faced the disapproval of his superiors because he challenged the cosy relationship which had evolved between the Church and the Communist state. Only after his death did the Episcopate embrace his legacy. Communism when it came to an end could hardly be described as a system which was brought down. It had in fact withered, was negotiated with, and then transformed. But what was to follow? Porter-Szűcs notes the same messy search for electoral support and winning economic formulas which are the norm in all countries with liberal democratic institutions. In the end the author is willing to nail his colours to the mast; Poland will do well, democracy will endure and the economy will continue to develop. Poland will likewise change again as it has over the last century. But this will not be because of Poland's uniqueness,

rather because of its ordinariness, in other words Poland has become one more European state.

It would not be right to end this review without highlighting some potential criticisms, beginning with the reasonable question of whether such a book was necessary, and whether the market is short on general and survey books on Polish history. The reviewer's response to is to suggest that there is no shortage of such books, and as the author of two such items, I did repeatedly wonder: 'why another book on Poland?' In the end the author does not offer something new, as the writing is not informed by archival research, and although the book shows a very thorough awareness of Polish-language publications, there is a clear neglect of items published in the United Kingdom both in English and Polish. His examples and comparisons will perhaps be more familiar to an American audience. In addition, Poland's context in terms of European politics and history is not clearly developed. One such example is the seminal point of the beginning of the Second World War, in particular Porter-Szúcs is not strong on the diplomacy of the period. The Cold War period is likewise seen as a confrontation between the two diplomatic blocs but the European context should not have been ignored so obviously. In the end most Poles saw themselves as part of Europe and it is important to understand and explain what they had hoped for in this context.