

Know Your European Neighbour.

Poland.

Boleslaw the Brave is credited with founding the kingdom of Poland in 1024, but greedy kings and ambitious princes fought over the country and neighbouring regions for the next few centuries encouraging successive waves of invaders. The Teutonic Order, Tartars, Czechs, Magyars, Swedes, Turks, Muscovites and Cossacks all came and went. Casimir the Great restored order and Poland eventually enjoyed a golden age in the 1500s. However in the late 1700s, it was carved up and partitioned between the Russians, the Prussians and the Austrians, only becoming independent again in 1918. With the Second World War, Poland was once again invaded, this time by the Germans and the Russians.

During the German and Russian occupation, nearly a quarter of the population of Poland died; 6 million civilians. Almost all were victims of prisons, death camps, executions, annihilation of ghettos, starvation, ill treatment, or worked to death. Three million of the Jews killed by the Germans in the Holocaust were Polish. One million children were made orphans.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire, Poland finally became independent, a republic, and allied itself with the EU and NATO.

Population: 38.5 million

Largely Catholic

Literacy 99.8%

16 political parties

Major pressure groups: 2 Trade Unions and the Church

Biggest export and import partner: Germany.

300,000 entirely new jobs created in 2006

Unemployment steady at 15%

The minimum legal age for marriage is 18

Poles are musical - witness Chopin and the virtuoso pianists Paderewski (briefly Prime Minister), Wanda Landowska and Artur Rubinstein. Other famous Poles include Marie Curie, Copernicus and, of course, Lech Walesa. Joseph Conrad was a Pole by birth.

Favourite foods include Bigos, or Hunters' Stew, Golebki Stuffed Cabbage, Yoghourt and Beetroot Soup, and Paczki doughnuts. Vodka was first distilled in Poland in the 11th. Century being then called Gorzalka, or medecine.

Poland is the biggest of the new entrants to the European Union.

