

## **Poland between the Wars by Jan-Ruth Mills**

### **KEY POINTS**

- Antisemitism in pre-WWII Poland was fueled by a fear of minorities working against the state to establish separate nations based on ethnicity rather than political will.
- Jews, who had been seen as outsiders within the ethnic minorities formed by the Polish (state re-established after World War I) were perceived as the most dangerous outsiders of all.
- While Polish Jews were some of the least assimilated in Eastern Europe, antisemitism did not decrease in countries such as Hungary where there was a high degree of assimilation. The Holocaust in Poland cannot be attributed to their separateness.

### **Breakdown of Pre-World War II Polish Society**

63% Poles (35,000,000)  
15% Ukrainian  
8.5% Jewish (of all nationalities)  
4.7% Byelorussian  
2.2% German

### **Background**

The 1815 Congress of Vienna, ending the Napoleonic Wars, sanctioned Poland's partition between Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Russia. Rather than adopting the traditions of the countries in which they found themselves, Poles believed that nationalism was one way to legitimize their demands for the re-establishment of a Polish nation.

In the 1880s, Marshal Józef Piłsudski started rifle clubs as a means to clandestinely develop cadres for a future Polish National Army. These rifle clubs evolved into a Polish legion which Piłsudski led to fight with Germany against the Russians on the eastern front during World War I. The Treaty of Versailles re-established the Polish nation in 1918. American President Woodrow Wilson supported the establishment of the Polish Corridor between and the historically German city of Danzig (Gdansk in Polish) to ensure the new Poland would not be landlocked. This, however, divided East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Reuniting these Germans living in the Polish Corridor with the "Fatherland" would become a focus of Nazis propaganda.

The Treaty of Versailles did not establish the eastern border of Poland. This was established by the Russo-Polish War (1920-1921). The Treaty of Riga established the eastern border of Poland within what had been Russian territory. This new Polish territory contained large numbers of Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and Lithuanians, the majority of whom were Eastern Orthodox. Since Poland is largely Catholic, these new citizens were seen as doubly alien, neither Catholics nor Poles.

The Polish majority feared these new Slavic minorities would appeal to Russia for assistance in self-determination, just as the Polish government-in-exile during World War I had appealed to the Allies for assistance in helping them establish their own nation. Poland began a program of forced assimilation, requiring schools to teach only Polish, in hopes of eradicating minority cultures. Eastern Orthodox Slavs felt they were being dominated by Roman Catholics.

Even further stigmatized were the Jews among the new citizens. Never accepted in their former countries, they were perceived to be even less acceptable by the Polish majority. As economic troubles arose for the Polish Republic, Jews were increasingly scapegoated for Poland's problems.

### **Polish Democracy to Polish Dictatorship**

The new Poland had a multi-party Parliamentary state. The Polish inability to form a stable government resulted in 13 different governments between 1921 and 1926. As a result, the military was not being paid, the economy stalled, and no budget was passed. In May 1926, after receiving support from the army, the Socialist Party and Aristocrats, Marshal Piłsudski carried off a bloodless coup d'état. Piłsudski suspended parliament and ruled by decree until he died in 1935. Concurrent with Mussolini in Italy, Piłsudski was one of the first dictatorships established in Europe. His government received backing from the US and British governments. Unlike most dictators of the period, Piłsudski eased restrictions on Jews. By 1931 he had repealing those imposed by the Russian tsars.

When Piłsudski died in 1935, the fascist Falanga Party took power. According to Dr. Edward Wynot, Professor of History, Florida State University, they were increasingly antisemitic although not officially so. However, antisemitic boycotts and violence spread.

To illustrate how much tension the minority issues caused between and within European nations, Dr. Wynot points out the response Poland gave to the USSR when it joined the League of Nations in 1935. According to the League of Nations' charter, one country could sue another for minority mistreatment. In fact, before Nazi Germany left the League altogether in 1933, pre-Hitler Germans used the League of Nations to confront the Poles regarding their treatment of ethnic Germans. The Poles were concerned that the USSR would use the charter to confront them over their treatment of Ukrainians, although there was no indication that this would happen. At the opening session of the League of Nations in 1935, the Poles were ready. The Soviet minister made his introductory speech. Two speakers later, the Polish minister rose and declared Poland would not recognize any other nation's grievances regarding Poland's treatment of minorities. This challenge to the Treaty of Versailles opened the door for others to do the same. Hitler congratulated the Poles.

### **Sources**

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