The Polish Background

The Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania ceased to exist at the end of the eighteenth century when Russia, Prussia, and Austria, carved up the country in three partitions (in 1772, 1793, and 1795). The Prussian territory later came under Napoleonic rule and was called the Duchy of Warsaw, lasting from 1807 to 1815. In 1809, some of the territories annexed by Austria (Galicia) were added to the Duchy. At the Congress of Vienna most of the conquered land was ceded to Russia. Part of it was set up as the Kingdom of Poland (also sometimes referred to as Congress Poland) a semi-autonomous state in dynastic union with the Romanov rulers of Russia and included among its major cities Warsaw, Łódź, and Częstochowa. Areas to the east of the Kingdom were incorporated directly into the Tsarist Empire. After the Polish uprising of 1830 to 1832, Russia largely abolished the semi-autonomous status of the Kingdom of Poland. Galicia fell under Austrian control, while Prussia took over the north-western portion of former Poland. Most Polish territory remained under Russia’s brutal control, suffering national humiliation until 1915 when the Imperial German Army conquered Congress Poland during the First World War. Under German rule, Congress Poland was given semi-parliamentary autonomy. With Germany’s defeat in 1918, Poland declared itself an independent country and was formally recognized as such by the Versailles treaty a year later.

During the war, the allies had dealt with the pro-Russian right-wing and rabid antisemitic leader of the fascist National Democrats, (Narodowa Demokracja or Endecja, its members were called Endecy), Roman Dmowski (1864–1939). In exchange for his military assistance against the Central powers, Russia promised the Polish National Committee he had created that it would establish a Polish state within the Tsarist Empire. When in 1917 Russia ceased to play an active role in the war, Dmowski moved his Committee to the West, with offices first in Paris then in London, hoping the Western powers would halt Germany’s Drang nach Osten. Dmowski envisaged a homogeneous Polish Catholic state. He and the renowned pianist and composer Ignacy Jan Paderewski signed the Paris Accords, which promised full protection and a guarantee of minority rights to the peoples within its borders. It was a guarantee signed in bad faith and without any intention by the National Democrats of honoring its pledge of equal protection for Poland’s national minorities.

Dmowski’s arch rival in politics was the former socialist Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), a charismatic leader and fierce opponent of Russia. For his participation in a plot to assassinate Alexander II, he was exiled to Siberia for five years. To win independence for a united Poland, Piłsudski decided to take matters into his own hands and create an army that would fight the Russians alongside
Germany or the Austro-Hungarian powers in a future European war. In 1908, he had already participated in an attempt to create an armed force, and by 1914 had some 7,000 Polish Legionnaires at his disposal.

After the German offensive led to the Russian retreat from Congress Poland, he attempted to cooperate with the Central Powers. In 1917, he backed the Germans who assured him they would grant Poland independence. When Piłsudski realized that their promises were empty he ordered his men not to swear allegiance to the Kaiser. This landed him in a German prison for the duration of the war. He emerged as an uncompromising hero to the Polish people. Piłsudski became both head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces.

Between 1918 and 1921, Poland fought six simultaneous wars to establish its frontiers. The most serious of these was with the new Bolshevik state. Lenin hoped to expand westward and precipitate a communist revolution in Germany. Piłsudski decided to preempt this and take advantage of the weakness of the Soviets in order to expand Poland’s eastern borders, including parts of Ukraine and Belarus. This resulted in a near catastrophe, as the National Democrats had warned. However, in the “miracle on the Vistula” in August 1920, Piłsudski defeated the invading Soviet forces in the Battle of Warsaw and was elevated to the rank of Marshal, supreme leader of the military. Lenin sued for peace, ceding significant areas of Belarus and Ukraine to the new Republic. Both Germany and Russia were resentful of Poland’s expansion and the West offered little encouragement to the newly created state’s feeling of security.

Under Piłsudski’s leadership Poland between 1918 and 1921, the attempt was made to create in Poland a liberal, parliamentary democracy, with universal suffrage, an eight-hour workday, free education, a secret ballot, proportional representation and national rights for its minority populations: Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, Germans, and Lithuanians. Together these comprised a third of the Polish state. Piłsudski had hoped in his war with the Soviets to establish independent Ukrainian and Belarusian states which would be linked with Poland in a multi-national federation with Poles primus inter pares. Instead, Poland became a middle-sized state with large dissatisfied minority populations.

In 1921, Poland adopted a new constitution modeled on that of the Third French Republic; the first elections were held in November 1922. In the bicameral government, power rested in the lower house of parliament, the Sejm. The upper house, the Senate, served pro forma, and was headed by a figurehead presidency. It was not a position that interested Piłsudski. He also now renounced his position as head of the army and withdrew from political life, establishing himself in internal exile at his country house in Sulejówek.

Implementing the democratic constitutional advances in Polish life against a background of political instability, economic chaos, and divisions in the ranks of
the military proved nearly impossible. Between November 1918 until Piłsudski’s
coup, there were fourteen different regimes. In 1926 there were ninety-two parties,
three-two of which were represented in the Sejm. The need to integrate the differ-
ent areas held by the German, Austrian, and Russian empires, with different polit-
ical, cultural, and religious, traditions, different languages and currencies, proved
to be a huge and protracted effort, which was met with mixed success. Akin to the
situation in Germany, Poland suffered runaway inflation (one dollar was worth
2,300,000 marks). The peasantry and agrarian workers that made up 74 percent of
the population was mostly illiterate. Poland suffered a severely war-torn, depleted
heavy industry (largely requisitioned by Germany and Russia), infrastructure, and
a housing crisis. Whichever government was in power lacked the means to take
control of the country. Violent counter measures taken to deal with riots and strike
waves that immobilized the cities and countryside accentuated the class struggle.

In its twenty-year history, the Second Republic never enjoyed a measure of
serenity, although the Jews felt more secure and protected by Piłsudski who kept
a check on antisemitism, as did the man he appointed Prime Minister after
the May coup, Kazimierz Bartel. Piłsudski was considered a friend of the Jews,
though he could not, in all cases, prevent open manifestations of antisemitism.
His passing was deeply mourned by the Jews. In Częstochowa the Jewish honored
his memory through the Jewish National Fund by planting a forest in his name
and calling a street Częstochowa Avenue.

With the exception of Roman Dmowski, and his Conservative supporters in
the bourgeoisie, the Church and the landed aristocracy, Piłsudski was held in the
highest esteem by the populace and the left and center left parties. But because
of the weakness of the office of president, Piłsudski turned it down. His real
power lay in the military. In the chaotic and bitter election campaign of 1922,
mandated by the constitution in 1921, the presidency was given by the center-left
to Gabriel Narutowicz who was blamed by the right of being a “Jew lover” and a
puppet of the minorities. He was assassinated five days after taking office by a
right-wing fanatic, Eligiusz Niewiadomski, who became a martyr to the right and
left the country, once again, on the verge of civil war. The crisis was averted by a
non-parliamentary council called by General Władysław Sikorski.

Efforts at conciliation in May 1925 through the coalition of the Piast Peasant
Party with the National Democrats failed. Its promise of land reform, did not mate-
rialize, nor was inflation curbed. Until the crisis was settled by compromise, work-
ers’ discontent increased and with the involvement of the Polish Socialist Party,
(Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, or PPS, founded in 1892) they seized Kraków.

The extra parliamentary government of Władysław Grabski, who was granted
special powers by the Sejm in 1925, tried coming to terms with the Jews (in an agree-
ment called the Ugoda-compromise), by eliminating anti-Jewish discrimination that
violated their minority rights. These included prohibition of using Hebrew and Yiddish as official languages, restrictions on Jewish employment, the interdiction against holding municipal posts, buying peasant land, prohibiting Jews from being guardians of Christians, etc. Not all these rules, handed down from tsarist times, were enforced. However, Grabski’s government collapsed in less than a year. His government was replaced by a broad coalition spanning the right and left, which would ultimately lose the support of the Socialists because of its deflationary policy. Violence ensued. Meanwhile, in return for Jewish allegiance to the Polish government, as negotiated with Poland’s minister of education and religious affairs, Aleksander Skrзynski, restrictions on minority rights, guaranteed by the Versailles treaty, and upheld by Poland’s 1922 government, would be lifted. It also expressed support for the creation of a Jewish national center in Palestine. Once in power, the government reneged on most of its agreements.

The efforts to form a center-right government outraged Piłsudski. With his increasing prestige in the army, and support of the PPS, Piłsudski quelled the armed resistance against him and was ready, but reluctant, to heed the call of the people. His coup on 12 to 14 May aimed at cleaning up the corruption and incompetence of the postwar parties and bringing stability to the government and the country. His party was called Sanacja (cleansing party) over which he ruled until his death in May 1935.

Although Piłsudski thought of himself a democrat, and nominally a socialist, he was in effect dictator of Poland, and regarded his position as unchallengeable, a position contested by his erstwhile supporters the PPS, which wanted new free elections and greater reforms. He had no particular program but was opposed to authoritarianism, allowing for limited personal freedom, freedom of the press, while permitting political parties to function and maintaining the Sejm. Attempting to establish a broad coalition of support, the Marshal formed a Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the government, BBWR (Bezpartyjny Blok dia Współpracy Rządem). With its help, Piłsudski was victorious in the election of March 1928. The Agudos yisroel, the party of the Orthodox Jews, took part in the election on the pro-government side (see below).

On 2 October, 1926, Minister of the Interior Kazimierz Młodzianowski restated Skrзynski’s promises and renounced Polish demands that minorities assimilate in order to be legal citizens. That year, the government of Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski issued a decree lifting some administrative restrictions and showed support for Jewish trade. A year later he promised to extend Jewish rights and took firm action stopping anti-Jewish violence. In 1927, minister of religious affairs Gustav Dobrucki declared the numerus clausus illegal. Most promises were empty and remained on paper.
In 1929, revelations that the government had used official funds to finance the campaign of the Non-party Bloc for the Support of the government (BBWR) in the 1928 elections, rocked Piłsudski’s government and threatened to bring it down. Soon thereafter, in 1930, the Christian Democrats, the National Workers’ Party (and the three peasant parties – Piast, Liberation, and the Peasant Party –) called for new free elections and reforms, hoping to remove Piłsudski from power. Piłsudski responded by arresting the leading opponents of his regime and confining them in the military prison at Brześć-nad-Bugiem, thus winning the election handily. Nevertheless, he was still against disbanding the Sejm or creating a totalitarian state, though he limited personal freedoms, a free press and the functioning political powers. While the Sejm continued to meet after Piłsudski’s death until the German invasion of September 1939, it was a sham democracy.

Piłsudski chose to work behind the scenes, focusing his energy on foreign policy leaving his cabinet advisors, his army comrades, the so-called Colonels to handle domestic affairs, but to little affect. Although he was twice prime minister, as was his appointed surrogate Bartel, Piłsudski always had the final say. Under his rule, the economy had periods of upswings. He won favor with the Ukrainians and the Jews, and although he seemed to have eased Polish-German relations, he was blind to the real perils Hitler posed to the country. He, like his successors in the post-Piłsudski era between 1935 and September 1939, deluded himself into believing that Hitler had designs, not on Poland, but rather on Austria, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. With high hopes, Piłsudski signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1934, ostensibly to balance the similar pact signed with Russia in 1932. However, although Poland considered itself a major power, its military preparedness “based to a considerable extent on bluff,” was quite inadequate.

The rule of law weakened still further after Piłsudski’s death in May 1935, which also brought Piłsudski’s right-wing subordinates, the Colonels, to power. Under the Colonels’ influence, violence against Jews increased and paved the way for the subsequent dictatorial governments (“a dictatorship without a dictator,” as they were called). Prime Ministers Marian Żyndram-Kościakowski (13 October 1935–30 September 1936) and Sławoj Składkowski (15 May 1936–September 1939) were exceptions among Poland’s top leadership in showing any positive concern for the Jews amid a frenzy of nationwide violent antisemitism. Składkowski had imprisoned instigators and participants in anti-Jewish violence, albeit for shorter

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terms than required by law. However, some 1,500 Jews who protested the lenient sentences were given much longer sentences for “insulting the Polish nation.” The ministers’ moderate position vis-à-vis the Jews did not reverse the antisemitic trajectory of the country.

The catastrophic impact of the Great Depression was especially severe in an already impoverished country and further exacerbated political divisions while Piłsudski’s deflationary policy prolonged it until 1936. (The average life expectancy was forty-nine years of age.) And yet, over the years, government efforts to lower the illiteracy rate in the country, creation of free public schools enjoyed significant success. Establishment of a government and training individual for civil service, benefitting from the opening of a port in Gdynia in the 1920s, as world markets expanded, and the creation of a single railway system in the 1930s brought a measure of relief. Short lived periods in the 1920s and ’30s saw an improved economy through the establishment of a national bank (Bank Polski), tax reform, foreign loans, investment in public works and rural improvements. All aspects of cultural life, in the arts and literature were equal to that of any advanced country. Jewish culture experienced one of its richest periods in the arts and Yiddish letters. At the same time, the economic situation of the Jews was severely undermined by the Great Depression. By 1939, out of three million Jews, one million lived off relief organizations based home and in the United States.

From the start, Jews participated in all aspects of national and municipal electoral politics, but influence dwindled in the post-Pilsudski Sejm elections. There was one minor exception, in 1938, when the government wanted to draw the support of the democratic opposition. Nevertheless, the Jewish position in Poland remained precarious at best. As a matter of policy, the Algemeyner yidisher arbeter bund in lite, poyn, un rusland (The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), commonly called the Bund, and the other socialist parties boycotted unfair elections, whether in the gmine (the state-approved semi-autonomous governing board of the organized Jewish community, also called by its Hebrew name, Kehilla), municipal councils, or the Sejm, unless their participation was crucial. In the 1938 elections to the Sejm, the Bund running as the sole Jewish party overall won 9.5 percent of the votes.

Piłsudski, who, as stated, was chiefly concerned with foreign policy rather than domestic matters, was considered a friend of the Jews. He forbade open manifestations of antisemitism; his passing was deeply mourned by them. The Jewish community in Częstochowa honored his memory through the Jewish National Fund by planting a forest in Palestine in his honor and naming a street there Częstochowa Avenue.

The Sanacja government after Piłsudski’s death included people who wished to restore constitutional government, but also younger supporters of his arch-
enemy, Roman Dmowski, who had been kept in check under the Marshal’s mild dictatorship. The Jews were justifiably worried about the recrudescence of antisemitism in the wake of Piłsudski’s death and the threat it posed to the BBWR.

Upon Piłsudski’s passing, the Colonels, belonging to the right wing of the Sanacja, consolidated their power, and in cahoots with National Democrats and right-wing fringe parties, turned overtly and increasingly fascistic and antisemitic. As the economy began its decline in the postwar years, inter-party discord became shrill and, intensified the Jews’ sense of being embattled against antisemitism in the street and in high places. Antisemitism was a constant, planned and played out on the political level with Church encouragement by street thugs belonging to the Endecja and Christian Democrats, the Chadecja. In the new state, the persecution of Jews was officially outlawed by the Treaty of Versailles, but practiced as freely, as in tsarist days, and often with outright government sanction and the encouragement of the Church.

Typically, the Church spoke out of both sides of its mouth, preaching against violence and “love thy neighbor” on one side, and on the other, in not too subtle, coded messages, to fight the Jews, “the Kingdom of Satan.” Emanating from August Cardinal Hlond, the Primate of Poland, and reaching down the hierarchy to local parish priests, Poles were obligated to “defend” themselves against supposed Jewish promulgation of anti-Christian values: their cutthroat economic competition and the moral corruption manifest in Jewish-Communist atheism, the purveying of pornography and in fostering white slavery. In the mid 1920s, Father Maksymilian Kolbe (now St. Maksymilian Kolbe) actively spread the message of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and attacked their “tool,” the Free Masons. In 1937, until the start of World War II, under its political front, the Party of National Unity, or OZON (Oboz Zjednoczenia Narodowego, 1937–1939), antisemitism reached a boiling point.

Even after the Holocaust, Hlond refused to denounce antisemitic atrocities against Jews that were motivated by the blood libel. In so far as the Church preached the sole salvation of the Jews through conversion, they were technically not racist antisemites, just old-fashioned Jew haters.

State policy and popular sentiments were geared towards isolating the Jews socially and economically, making their lives in Poland untenable and forcing them to emigrate, even though there was no safe haven for them anywhere. Immigration had been restricted in America since 1924, and the English 1939 White Paper limited immigration to Palestine to 75,000 Jews over the next five years. Amid an uptick of anti-Jewish violence, the National Democrats petitioned the Sejm to deny Jews all political rights and establish legal *numerus clausus* in the universities, which in practice already existed in some form since tsarist days.
The government, while under Piłsudski’s leadership, was hostile to antisemitism. In March 1932, the Sejm Education Committee directed by Józef Stypiński rejected the Endecja petition. Opposition to the *numerus clausus* had already been expressed earlier by the minister of religious affairs, Gustav Dobrucki, in 1925 and again in 1927. Although Piłsudski supported national minority rights as provided by the Versailles treaty, and the abrogation of all legislation against Jewish interests, he was silent on the *numerus clausus*, not wanting to be accused of philosemitism. Despite government opposition, at the instigation of the National Democrats, violent actions against Jewish students were taken anyway, especially in 1937; the numbers of Jewish enrollment declined precipitously. The only law that was actually passed was the ban on the kosher slaughtering of meat in 1936.

Before he died, Piłsudski’s mild dictatorship had become more autocratic and introduced measures to strengthen the role of the president and supreme leader. The parties that had opposed the new electoral law before Piłsudski’s death, boycotted the elections of 1935 and 1938. Piłsudski’s chosen successor, Walery Sławek, one of the Colonels, was not up to the task, and conflict broke out between those who wanted a return to the authority of the Sejm led by Ignacy Mościcki, and followers of Edward Rydz-Śmigly, who wanted a totalitarian state. As of September, 1939, the conflict remained unresolved.

The more liberal elements of the National Democrats and of the center-left formed a democratic Polish government in exile. Their political differences became increasingly bitter upon Sikorski’s death in July 1943. The emigre government in London maintained contact with the underground forces of the Armia Krajowa (AK) throughout the war. Moscow acted behind the scenes of the Armia Ludowa (AL), the People’s Army, until the complete communist takeover of Poland in 1945.