

# Shadows of the Past

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## The spread of anti-Semitism in Poland during the interwar period was linked to the rising impact of nationalist ideology, as promoted by Roman Dmowski, co-founder of the National Democracy

While historical researchers now agree about the widespread presence of anti-Semitic attitudes in interwar Poland, the dictionary definition of anti-Semitism – a hostile attitude towards Jews – fails to capture the complex social underpinnings of the phenomenon in Poland. Here, its spread was profoundly intertwined with the rise of modern nationalism, specifically with the figure of Roman Dmowski, the chief ideologue of such nationalism and founder of the National Democracy.

In the late 19th century, anti-Semitism had existed on the fringes of social life in the Polish lands, then held under partition by Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary. Yet even these early anti-Jewish sentiments bore traits of anti-Semitic ideology: aggressive dislike for Jews, anti-liberal leanings, chauvinism, and strong ties to Christian tradition, albeit not always to the Church hierarchy.

Polish anti-Semitism would then change as the Jewish population's position within the social structure of the time altered. Unlike in Western Europe, most Polish Jews had so far been living in traditional societies. The reforms of the 1860s, however, would cause a noticeable increase in Jews' active participation in society. This social advance of assimilators sparked a hostile reaction from conservative circles.

### Early 19th century

Nationalist movements throughout Europe emerged on the basis of dislike for "others" (in Poland, meaning both for the partitioning powers and for the Jews), and above all as a consequence of the ideological watershed which came at the end of the century. Polish nationalism was not initially characterized by prominent anti-Semitism. It was the dialectic of social Darwinism underpinned Polish nationalism in the early years of the 20th century that brought about a distinct rise in anti-Semitism.

The radicalization of the National Democratic movement's anti-Semitic rhetoric became more evident after the revolution of 1905, when processes of social and political emancipation likewise came to encompass sizable numbers of Jews. The ideologization of anti-Semitic discourse culminated with the events of 1912, when the National Democracy, having lost the elections in Warsaw to the Fourth Russian Duma, initiated a boycott of the Jewish population. The events of 1912 evidenced another trait of ideological anti-Semitism: it was targeted not just against Jews, but also against their alleged allies. This was therefore not just a struggle against a single ethnic group, but part of a broader conflict over the shape and future of the nation *per se*. This paranoiac element would render anti-Semitism conducive to absorbing conspiracy theories. From that date onward, too, grass-roots anti-Semitic movements would become incorporated into the nationalistic movement.

The WWI years did not alleviate these ethnic tensions – numerous riots and pogroms of an anti-Semitic nature took place in 1918–1919.

### Nationalism in revived Poland

The Polish state, newly-revived following WWII, granted all citizens equal rights regardless of their faith or origins, with the rights of national minorities furthermore enshrined in a special international treaty. Yet a considerable segment of the public was reluctant to accept that modern formula, treating it as the outcome of foreign pressure. Within the right-wing camp, dominated by the National Democrats, the notion of restricting minority rights (chiefly Jews) had been on the agenda from the very beginning. The election of Gabriel Narutowicz, a left-wing candidate

## The crisis of democracy in interwar Poland was accompanied by a rise of anti-Semitism in its extreme forms

backed by national minorities, to the office of president sparked a hysterical reaction among National Democratic circles, ultimately prompting the president's murder by the extreme nationalist Eligiusz Niewiadomski. Although the sharp polarization of opinions was soon averted, these events illustrated the power of anti-Semitic slogans. They likewise revealed divisions among the National Democrats themselves. Some of the camp then backed off on its aggressive rhetoric, while the extremely nationalist All-Polish Youth began to rally around Dmowski and to build its own



Arkadiusz Ścibicki/Agencja Gazeta

The erection of this monument to Roman Dmowski, the chief ideologue of the National Democratic movement, in Warsaw in 2006 drew such protests from those who associate him with the spread of anti-Semitism in interwar Poland (the word scrawled in chalk is "SHAME")

political agenda centered on radical anti-Semitism. It was this group that advocated the *numerus clausus* principle, a cap on the number of students of Jewish origin permitted to study at universities.

The first years of Poland's newfound independence brought a crisis of the democratic order, prompting a *coup d'état* by Józef Piłsudski, one of the fathers of Polish independence. His new authoritarian *Sanacja* regime gained the support of the left as well as that of the Jewish population, which saw Piłsudski as the defender of their rights. For the National Democrats, that represented even more evidence of tight bonds between the left and the Jews.

The 1920s illustrated one more important element of Polish anti-Semitism: its close links to the popular religious mentality. This was perhaps symbolized by the St. Adalbert Bookshop in Poznań, one of the main publishers of popular religious literature in Poland, also the largest promoter of anti-Semitic publications.

The early 1930s saw anti-Semitic rhetoric move into the streets, an economic crisis and the attendant high unemployment forming fertile ground for ethnic tensions.

Hitler's successes in Germany helped to further escalate anti-Semitism in the entire region. In Poland, Nazi

solutions began to be advocated openly. Against the backdrop of these events, the National Democrat movement began to splinter, with new groups professing out-and-out anti-Semitism.

Piłsudski's death in 1935 precipitated a crisis within the *Sanacja* camp, something the entire opposition tried to take advantage of. The latter half of the 1930s brought an intensification of violence to villages and small towns throughout nearly all of Poland. The scope and consequences of this anti-Semitic terror still remain little-known.

The breakup of the ruling camp also led anti-Semitic slogans to be taken up by some *Sanacja* politicians. Such mass anti-Semitism did abate somewhat in the run-up to WWII, yet it still had a significant impact on the indifference and hostility the Jewish population encountered in wartime. ■

#### Further reading:

- Landau-Czajka A. (1998). *They Stood in One Home: Concepts for Resolving the Jewish Issue in Polish Press Commentaries, 1933-1939* [in Polish]. Warsaw: Neriton & IH PAN.
- Blobaum R. (Eds.) (2005). *Antisemitism and its Opponents in Modern Poland*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.