Choosing an Ethnic Group to Target: The Case of the Jewish Minority in Interwar Poland

By Shannon Williamson

What qualities determine why one ethnic group is more susceptible to being singled out for persecution than others, especially when there are several vulnerable and disliked groups to choose from? After World War I, Poland contained four large ethnic minorities: Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The 1931 census reveals that around 13.9 percent of the newly independent Polish state’s population were ethnic Ukrainians, 8.7 percent were Jewish, 3.1 percent were Belarusian, and 2.3 percent were German.\(^1\) Despite having three other despised ethnic minority groups, the Poles took the most violent and intense actions toward the Jews. Why? I will argue that the discrimination Poles experienced under the Partitions would later contribute to how the Poles treated each ethnic minority in interwar Poland. Economic, political, and religious factors all help explain why the Poles targeted Jews more than the other three ethnic minorities in interwar Poland.

Partition Poland (1772-1918)

The history of Poland is a tumultuous one. Split apart, conquered, partitioned, and put back together again, Poland has been reconstructed numerous times. Ethnic Poles spread out over much of Eastern Europe, and Poland after World War I included numerous ethnic groups. The kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania joined together to create the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1386.\(^2\) This union lasted for four hundred years. Between 1772 and 1795, the Habsburg, Prussian, and Russian empires partitioned Poland three times. Following the third and final partition in 1795, the

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Habsburg Empire controlled Galicia, the Prussian Empire had East Prussia, Silesia and Pomerania, and the Russian Empire had Eastern Poland.\(^3\) Polish speakers were unevenly distributed between the partitioning powers. Russia gained 62 percent of Polish land and 45 percent of Polish speakers, Prussia gained 20 percent of Polish land and 23 percent of Poles, and the Habsburgs gained 18 percent of the land and 32 percent of the population.\(^4\)

![Figure 1: Map of Partitioned Poland](image)

Although divided and living under foreign rule, the Poles never identified with any of the empires that ruled over them.\(^6\) Polish experiences varied depending on which partition they ended up being

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\(^6\) Davis, *God’s Playground*, 11.
Varying levels of autonomy and freedom were given to the Poles in the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian partitions.

Polish speakers in the Russian partition – now known as Congress Poland – suffered the worst treatment. The Russians discriminated against both Poles and Jews. The Russians wanted to assimilate the Poles into Russian culture via “Russification.” Polish students were bombarded with Russian cultures and attitudes at school. Poles did not see themselves as Russians and definitely did not want to be assimilated into Russian culture. Rebellions ensued. Poles revolted against the Russians in events such as the January Uprising of 1863. All attempts at rebellion were Polish failures. The Russians successfully crushed all revolts, and began to describe Poles as “ungrateful, incorrigible, and anarchistic.”

Polish living in Russia enjoyed few freedoms and autonomy. Several ethnic groups in the Russian empire were discriminated against. Jews from elsewhere in the empire were originally attracted to Poland after freedom of movement in 1862 since life was better there.

Here both Russians and Poles continued to discriminate against the Jews. Russians attacked Jews in pogroms, like the incredibly violent pogrom in Kiev in 1881. The Poles’ quality of living in Russia was poor. Following the rapid industrialization of the 1890s, the German and Jewish minorities became the urban elites while Poles remained peasants. A small Polish intelligentsia did begin to emerge though. The Polish intelligentsia continued to have a negative view on Jews, only willing to recognize Jews as equal if they removed their “Jewishness”

This new, but small, emerging group of Polish intelligentsia had to compete with the Jews that already had these elite positions. Most Poles gravitated towards agricultural work and had little incentive to work in urban areas, leaving the urban areas

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7 Davies, God’s Playground, 86, 90, 95, 99, 352-356.
8 Hundert, Poland, 1394.
9 Davies, God’s Playground 251.
10 Davies, God’s Playground, 86, 251, 107.
jobs for the Germans and Jews. The Poles treatment and quality of life in Russia would have consequences for ethnic minorities in Interwar Poland. The Poles restrictions of freedoms and persecution by the Russians would influence them to act similarly towards the Jews. The Poles learned that severe repression was necessary in order to squash other rival ethnic groups. The only ethnic group the Poles could trust was their own.

Poles did not have much freedom or autonomy in the Prussian Partition either. The government in Prussia was authoritarian, albeit mostly religiously tolerant, which encouraged Jewish immigration. 12 Germany was a tempting place for Jewish people, and they received full emancipation in 1869. 13 Warschau (Warsaw) and Lodz (Lódź) were the main centers of Jewish emigration and a large Jew industrial proletariat emerged there. 14 Like the Russians, the Germans wanted to assimilate the Poles into Prussia via “Germanification.” In schools for Polish children, the Germans replaced the Polish language with German. As a result, Polish peasants went on strike. 15 The Prussian Kulturkampfbanned the Polish language, attacked the Catholic Church, forced Poles to pass an exam in German culture, and encouraged German settlers to displace Poles from their land. The Prussian statesman Otto van Bismarck (1815-1898) believed that the Poles needed to be suppressed, and attacked the Catholic Church because he thought that the Church was trying to represent Polish interests. 16 The Germans wanted to “Lutheranize” the Poles. 17 Polish quality of life was poor too. When the Second Industrial Revolution took place in the 1870s it was completely in German hands. 18 The Polish peasants were not a part of the new growing urban class. The Germans were able to place themselves in an economically superior position through being well-established in

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12 Davies, God’s Playground, 115-117.
13 Hundert, Poland, 1391.
14 Hundert, Poland, 1394.
16 Davies, God’s Playground, 118, 126-127,124-126.
17 Kulczycki, School Strikes, 28.
18 Davies, God’s Playground, 118.
the industrial sector that would later help them to not be as severely discriminated and financially impacted in Interwar Poland. The suppression of Polish culture and the forced “Germanification” of Poles left lasting impressions on the Poles who would rule an independent Poland during the Interwar years. Poles remembered how their culture had been curbed by the Germans and applied similar measures against vulnerable minorities within interwar Poland.

Poles living in the Habsburg Empire enjoyed more freedoms than Poles in the other partitions. The Habsburg Empire was unstable and in disarray, with vast language differences and widespread poverty making it difficult for the Habsburgs to rule their minorities. Poles gained political, cultural, and educational freedoms after they rebelled in 1848. Both Poles and Jews enjoyed religious tolerance. The emperor Joseph II (1741-1790) made efforts to improve the economic situations of the Jews, and Jewish representatives were even elected to the Austrian Parliament. Despite, these efforts Galician Jews still predominately lived in poverty. Unlike the Jews, Poles could create political parties and had a degree of autonomy within the Habsburg Empire. They enjoyed greater rights and freedoms than either Jews or Ukrainians. A sense of superiority towards other ethnic groups remained with the Poles as they ruled over an independent Poland during the interwar period.

One aspect that could explain the Polish treatment of Jews during the interwar years is Polish notions about hierarchies of civilization. Poles believed that Germans were the most civilized, followed by Jews, Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians. The Germans were the most repressive of the Polish culture, and the Poles later copied how the Germans treated them in how they treated the Jews during the interwar years. Germans and Jews tended to have more urban careers, resulting in

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21 Hundert, *Poland*, 1393.
22 Davies, *God's Playground*, 144 and 233.
them rising economically above the Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians who tended to be peasants and in agricultural careers. Orientalism is when more modern and progressive cultures are privileged over backward and traditional societies. The Germans and Jews are more modern than the backward Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peasants. Jews were economically superior to Poles, which Poles saw as a threat. The Prussian Partition treated the Jews as equals to the Poles, which was something that the Poles completely disagreed with. The hierarchy of civilization may have influenced how the Poles treated the Jews, since the Poles were below the Jews. Their superior treatment over the Jews in the Austrian Partition contributed to the superiority the Poles felt over the Jews. The treatment of the Jews, over the Poles, while under the Prussian and Russian Partitions, may have led to the discrimination and violence that were later directed towards the Jews by the Poles during the interwar years. Most Poles were Catholic and Anti-Semitic. Catholicism and Polish nationalism would become closely intertwined in interwar Poland and religion helped to unify ethnic Poles. Poles were also mostly rural peasants. Between 80 and 85 percent of the Polish population in the Prussian, Russian, and Austrian partitions were peasants. During the partitioning years, a sense of nationalism grew amongst the Poles. The suppression of Polish nationalism fostered a new appreciation for a Polish state and a dislike for foreigners and minorities. Polish peasants in Austrian Poland had conflicts with Jews, Germans, and Ukrainians. They developed a sense of Polish nationalism by uniting against Belarusians and Ukrainians. Having a common enemy and feeling superior over another ethnic group was crucial in helping the Poles create a sense of commonality amongst themselves. The Polish peasants dominated the Jews economically. They boycotted Jewish

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25 Davies, God’s Playground, 222-223.
stores in favor of Polish stores. Poles were desperate to create and unite an independent Polish nation.

There were a few periods of Polish independence during the period of partition, which kept the hopes of Polish nationalists alive. The Prussians gave autonomy to the Grand Duchy of Posen from 1815-1849, but the duchy was dissolved after the failed Polish revolution of 1848. The Russians allowed the Poles to have autonomy in Congress Poland from 1815-1830. This period of independence also was destroyed after failed Polish revolutions in 1830, 1846, and 1863. One of the more infamous of the rebellions, the January Uprising, began in 1863 and lasted until 1865. Ultimately squashed by the Russians, this Uprising cemented the Poles losing all of their independence again. The Poles desired complete independence so strongly that they attempted several rebellions against the Partitions during the 1800’s, particularly the Russian Partition. The Polish revolutions never succeeded, and as a result they lost most of their autonomy. This constant suppression led them to be more nationalistic and distrustful of other ethnic groups.

The Minorities Treaty (1918-1919)

When World War I broke out, Europe was in chaos. Each of the partitioning powers wanted Polish support. In August 1914, the Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia offered a “self-governing” Poland in return for Polish support in the war. In November 1916, the Germans and Austrians also offered a “self-governing” Kingdom of Poland. These overtures were somewhat successful,

28 Davies, *God’s Playground*, 112.
29 Hundert, *Poland*, 1390.
30 Hundert, *Poland*, 1390.
and by 1916, 1.9 million Poles were serving in the war. Ultimately the Entente powers won World War I, leaving Europe was in chaos. Germany was defeated, Russia was in the middle of a revolution and civil war, and Austria-Hungary dissolved. With the partitioning powers no longer able to control the region, Poland emerged as an independent country.

Figure 2: Map of Interwar Poland

Many Poles were dead, 700,000 had been deported to Russia, and 300,000 were forced laborers in Germany and Austria. But Poland was now completely independent for the first time since 1772. The newly independent Polish state was immersed in numerous wars. Lithuania and Poland fought

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34 Davies, *God's Playground*, 382.
over borders in early 1919. The Poles were also fighting against Ukrainians in 1918 because the Ukrainians wanted to include Eastern Galicia into what they hoped would become an independent Ukrainian state. The Germans were waiting for the Poles to make a mistake in order to reclaim lost territory. The biggest struggle was the Polish-Soviet War. During these conflicts, the Poles enacted horrific pogroms against Jews such as the one in Kielce. Poles also attacked the Jewish majority in Lwów. The Poles believed that the Jews in Lwów were aligning themselves with the Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia. By using violence, the Poles scared the Jews and asserted their dominance. Poles tended to be Anti-Semitic and seeing the Jews appearing to align with their enemies made them more prone to commit violence against them. These pogroms happened within the former Russian partition, where there was a small ethnically Polish population. In the chaos of war, the Poles could easily blame the Russians for these pogroms since the Russians had a history of persecuting Jews. Poland’s conflicts with its neighbors helped to strengthen Polish nationalism and the desire for an ethnically homogenous nation. While Poland was dealing with their own national conflicts regarding borders, the international community was debating how to deal with Poland and its rising acts of violence against ethnic minorities.

The issue of Poland was discussed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The growing Anti-Semitism in Poland brought great international concern. What exactly constituted Polish territory was also a major issue. Germans were upset because they believed that too much German land was being given to the Poles. The Germans wanted to use the pogroms to show that Poles did not know how to rule non-Poles. The Allies were very concerned about how Poles were treating their

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39 Fink, *Defending*, 173, 102-103, 105-106.
42 Fink, *Defending*, 109
minorities. Pressures from Jewish organizations also generated concerns over Polish treatment of minorities, especially Jews. However, the Jews’ concerns had to be pushed aside in order to get the treaty signed. It proved difficult to get the Poles to sign, so the Allies gave in to some Polish demands, conceding that the Polish language was to be used in Jewish schools and not Yiddish. This action took away Jewish national and cultural autonomy, and Poles continued to carry out violent pogroms against Jews, such as the one in Pińsk in March 1919. As a result, the newly formed League of Nations created the Minorities Treaty. Article 2 of the Treaty promised that Poland would assure full protection and freedom to all inhabitants of Poland, “…without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion.” Poland also agreed to give all Polish nationals equality, and to allow that native minority languages be used in Polish schools as well as Polish. The Polish reaction to the Minorities Treaty was overwhelmingly negative. The Polish premier and foreign minister, Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), challenged the Minorities Treaty in during the Paris Peace Conference. Public opinion in Poland was very hostile towards the Treaty, calling it a “Little Versailles”. Poles saw it as threat to the autonomy they had so desperately wanted for years. Their ability to rule was questioned and denigrated by the Allies. Poles also just plainly did not want minorities to be in the homogenous Polish state they desired. They saw minorities as foreigners. The Poles blamed the ethnic minority groups in Poland for the fact that the Great Powers were judging them. The ethnic minority group they blamed the most was the Jews because Jews had been the strongest supporters of the Treaty.

The Minorities Treaty was not effective. The Poles did not honor the Treaty and it was not enforced. It was difficult to bring cases to the League’s attention, particularly if petitions were not

44 Fink, Defending, 113, 126, 254, 173-175.
45 Theodore Woolsey, “The Rights of Minorities under the Treaty with Poland.” The American Journal of International Law 14, no.3 (July 1920), 393.
46 Woolsey, “Rights of Minorities”, 394.
47 Fink, Defending, 248-249, 237.
supported by other nation-states. Numerous complaints were made to the League Council from 1920-1925 regarding violations of the minority’s treaty in Poland. Great Britain did not support minority complaints at all, and believed these complaints were hindering assimilation. The German minority in Poland complained the loudest. Jews from the former Russian partition were continuously persecuted, but Germany complained about the treated of Germans in what had been the Prussian Partition. As the Polish-Soviet War intensified, minorities looked to the League for protection. The League Council did little to alleviate the situation in Poland. Minorities increasingly lost confidence in the League’s abilities, and the number of minority petitions dropped from 204 in 1930 to 15 in 1936. The Minorities Treaty’s only achievement was to make Poles detest the ethnic minorities in Poland even more.

**Interwar Poland (1918-1939)**

Border disputes and a minorities treaty did not help the newly independent Poland begin well. The Western powers created the Polish Republic of 1921 as a liberal democracy, but Jósef Piłsudski (1867-1935), a great military hero, established himself as a dictator in 1926. Piłsudski did not want to be dictator and abdicated in 1923. There were two main political parties vying for the leadership power in Poland; the National Democratic Party and the Polish Socialist Party competed on different platforms. The National Democratic Party, led by Roman Dmowski (1864-1939), had the support of the Polish middle and lower classes and the intelligentsia. It was incredibly Anti-Semitic

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50 Fink, *Defending*, 267, 275.
51 Mazower, *Minorities and League of Nations*, 54
and wanted a homogeneous Polish state. Dmowski integrated Polish desires for autonomy and freedom that they had desperately yearned for during the Partition years. He advocated for a Catholic Polish nation that would eradicate negative Jewish influences, an Anti-Semitic belief shared by many Catholic Poles at the time.\(^{54}\) The National Democrats did not just discriminate against Jews, but also Belorussians and Ukrainians.\(^ {55}\) Piłsudski’s Polish Socialist Party also wanted an independent Polish state, but argued for a federation of autonomous peoples under Polish rule. The Polish Socialist Party was willing to grant rights to ethnic minorities, although to varying degrees. Both parties wanted a strong and independent Poland, but had different ideas on how to achieve that. Catholics and peasants supported the Dmowski in its discrimination against Poland’s minorities. The National Democrats wanted to expel Jews from Poland, and “Polonize” the Ukrainians and Belorussians through assimilation.\(^ {56}\) The National Radical Camp, a radical Polish political movement that emerged in 1934, decreed that national minorities had no place in Poland in 1936.\(^ {57}\) Boleslaw Piasecki (1915-1979) was one of the most influential leaders involved with the National Radical Movement. Boleslaw Piasecki’s propaganda magazine envisioned a Poland with no minorities left; Ukrainians and Belarusians would be assimilated, Jews would emigrate, and Germans would be subjected to a population transfer.\(^ {58}\) On the other side of the political spectrum, the Communist Party in Poland was weak and ineffective.\(^ {59}\) Communism had been associated with Russia since the October Revolution of 1917, and the Poles resented the Russians because of memories of the partition.

\(^{54}\) Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red*, 8,10

\(^{55}\) Abraham Brumberg. “Poles and Jews” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 5 (October 2002), 176.

\(^{56}\) Bergh, *Poles and Jews*, 176.

\(^{57}\) Kunicki, *Between the Brown and the Red*, 32.

\(^{58}\) Kunicki, *Between the Brown and Red*, 47.

When Piłsudski staged a successful coup d'état in 1926, the minorities believed that he would support them.\(^6^0\) Piłsudski did not give minorities what they wanted, but he did support a federation and rights to all those living in Poland. While he did not specifically protect the minorities, Piłsudski attempted to show that non-Poles were to be included in the newly independent and free Poland. Minorities saw this as the best support they were likely to get from Polish politics. Jews in particular supported Piłsudski.\(^6^1\) Yet the Polish Parliament still opposed protecting minorities. After Piłsudski’s death in 1935 the country’s leadership was in disarray. The Camp of National Unity (the OZN), a pro-government organization in 1938 advocated an economic struggle against Jews, and desired to purge Jews from being prominent in Polish culture.\(^6^2\) The National Radical Movement wanted to remove the Jewish “parasites” from Poland. These political parties and organizations blamed Jews for all of Poland’s problems. Hostility towards minorities, primarily Jews, continued.\(^6^3\)

The Polish economy did very poorly after World War I. The new governments had to construct a national economy from scratch. The middle and urban classes were mostly German and Jewish.\(^6^4\) This caused intense jealousy among nationalist Poles. As a response, Poles began to hinder Jewish employment and boycotted Jewish businesses.\(^6^5\) Poles suppressed Jews in order to rise economically. Poles hindered Jewish employment, and hired Poles instead. By enforcing discriminatory policies, Poles were able to essentially switch economic positions with Jews. The Polish economy was a large factor influencing the treatment of minorities, specifically regarding the Jews.

\(^6^0\) Gutman and Krakowski. *Unequal Victims*, 3, 4, 6-7.
\(^6^2\) Kunicki, *Between the Brown and Red*, 45
\(^6^5\) Heller, *Edge of Destruction*, 94-98.
Minority Politics

The four main ethnic minority groups in Poland - Belorussians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Jews - made up roughly 30 percent of Poland's population. Together they were obstacles to the dream of a heterogeneous ethnically Polish Poland. Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Germans all identified with foreign nation-states. Jews were different in that they had no “mother country,” which made them easier to persecute. Poland idealized an ethnically homogenous Poland, and actions were taken with all four minorities to create this.

Belarusians and Ukrainians were integrated into Poland against their wishes after World War I. Both minorities lived in the eastern part of Poland, which had belonged to Congress Poland before 1918. Battles were fought early on in 1918 and 1919 between the Poles and the Ukrainians during the Polish-Ukrainian War. Ukrainian nationalists wanted their own separate nation. Ukrainians had no desire to be integrated into Poland. Ukrainians had brief periods of statehood, like the Ukrainian state, the Hetmanate in 1918, but all attempts at a separate Ukrainian state failed. Nationalists formed the Ukrainian Military Organization (UMO) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in an attempt to create a separate Ukrainian state. The OUN was founded by

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67 Gutman and Krakowski, Unequal Victims, 14, 3.
68 Rothschild, Ethnic Peripheries, 596.
69 Rothschild, Ethnic Peripheries, 597.
71 Kunicki, Between the Brown and the Red, 7.
72 Horak, Belorussian and Ukrainians, 133
73 Horak, Belorussian and Ukrainian Peasants, 146
Galician Ukrainian veterans of the Polish-Ukrainian War in 1929. This organization was incredibly violent, killing Ukrainians that cooperated with Poles, and Polish officials.⁷⁴

Belarusians had a much weaker collective consciousness of their national identity than the Ukrainians did, but they still had minor conflicts with the Poles.⁷⁵ Unlike the Ukrainians, there were few Belarusian organizations. Belarusian peasants formed Hramada. One of the leaders of Hramada was Belarussian politician and writer, Branislaw Tarashkyevich, in order to promote the Belarusian cause for independence and equality.⁷⁶ Hramada was a community of Belarussian workers and peasants. The Ukrainians and Belarusians living in Poland were predominately peasants, and Polish agrarian reforms upset them. Ukrainians fought back by establishing a market based system, which entailed trading only with other Ukrainian peasants.⁷⁷ The Poles became violent with the Ukrainians after the Ukrainians began attacking Polish property. The Ukrainians were angry over Polish attempts to “Polonize” them by banning Ukrainian language in government agencies, replacing Ukrainian with the Polish language in schools, and by efforts by the Polish government to resettle Poles in Galicia. In response to the Ukrainians destruction of Polish property and rebellion, the Poles aggressively repressed the Ukrainians and put nearly 2000 of them in a concentration camp in 1934.⁷⁸ The Poles still believed that they could assimilate the Ukrainians and Belarusians into Polish society, so the violence directed towards these two groups was nowhere near the amount of violence directed towards the Jewish minority.

Ukrainians veered toward Ukrainian nationalist groups, while Belarusians veered toward Communism. Belarusians slowly began to develop a class consciousness and started voting for Communist parties during the late 1920s. In 1928, 44 percent of Belarusians that voted in the

⁷⁵ Fink, *Defending*, 102-103, 173.
⁷⁶ Snyder, *Reconstruction*, 66.
⁷⁷ Horak, *Belorussian and Ukrainian Peasants*, 133-134, 139, 144, 146, 152.
election voted for the Communist party. The Communist party was very attractive to the Belarusian minority, being that many were peasants. The Belarusian’s connection to Russia also helped make Communism even more desirable. Being the most prominent minority supporter of Communism, Belarusians should have been seen as a large threat to the Poles. Communism was associated with Russia, a country which Poland had a poor relationship and history with. Communism was also a threat to the pro-government political parties controlling interwar Poland. The Ukrainians did not support Communism. Ukrainians, with their strong sense of Ukrainians nationalism and tendency to rebel against Poland, should have also been considered a viable threat to the Poles. Despite their actions against Poland, Ukrainians and Belarusians were rarely seen as a significant threat to the Poles. The Ukrainians and Belarusians were mostly peasants, and did not pose as large of an economic threat to the Poles as the Jewish minority did. Religiously, the Ukrainians and Belarusians were predominately Greek Catholic and Orthodox respectively. These religions were much closer to the Polish Catholic ideology than Judaism. Religiously and economically, the Belarusian and Ukrainian minority were viewed as a minor threat compared to the large threat of the Jewish minority.

Germans were the smallest ethnic minority in Poland with around 2.1 million Germans in Poland in 1921. They were very reluctant to integrate into Polish society and culture. The German minority tended to stick together. Germans made up a significant portion of the population in the cities and were involved in agriculture and industry. Poles still remembered their harsh treatment from Germans under the Prussian Partition, and they boycotted German-owned stores. Poles attempted to “Polonize” the Germans just like the Germans had tried to “Germanize” the Poles.

79 Kopstein and Wittenberg, Communism, 102, 101, 94.
80 Richard Blanke, “The German Minority in Inter-War Poland and German Foreign Policy-Some Reconsiderations”, Journal of Contemporary History 25, no. 1 (January 1990), 88.
81 Kopstein and Wittenberg, Communism, 97.
82 Gutman and Krakowski, Unequal Victims, 8.
83 Blanke, German Minority, 91, 97.
German students in Poland attended only Polish-language schools. The ultimate goal of the Poles for the German minority in Poland was to send them back to Germany because they did not believe that Germans could assimilate into Polish society. Germans in Germany used the Minorities Treaty to condemn the Poles and by complaining to the League of Nations. The German minority also received financial support from Germany. Yet violence was rarely directed towards the Germans because they were protected by Germany. For this reason, discrimination against the German minority never reached the levels the discrimination against the Jews in Poland did.

During World War I, Jews were suspected of sympathizing with the Red Army when in reality the Jews were trying to support the Poles. Poles even created a detention camp for Jewish military officers suspected of supporting the Russians. Ironically, Poles also suspected the Jews of having a pro-German mentality. The Polish suspicion of the Jews stems from Jewish support for Austria-Hungary. Violence against Jews ensued. During the Polish-Ukrainian War (1918-1919), Jews remained neutral. The Poles believed the Jew’s neutrality meant that they were siding with the Soviet Communists over the Poles. As a result, they were subjected to incredibly violent pogroms by the Poles, who then blamed the pogroms on the Russians. Horrific pogroms were enacted against the Jews during the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921), like the one in Pinsk. Poles did not want the international community to know they were the ones attacking the Jews, and it was easier to blame the Russians since the Russians had a history of persecuting Jews. Poles demonstrated murderous brutality against the Jews through these pogroms. During a pogrom at Kielce, Jews were publicly

84 Gutman and Krakowski, Unequal Victims, 10.
85 Blanke, German Minority, 98, 90, 93.
86 Heller, Edge of Destruction, 51-52.
89 Gutman and Krakowski, Unequal Victims, 11.
90 Fink, Defending, 173-175.
whipped, abused, and murdered. Poles blamed these waves of violence against Jews on Russians or Jews themselves. Poles accused Zionists of wanting to undermine the independent Polish state.⁹¹

Violent attacks against Jews were also predominately made by Polish university students during the interwar years. Polish university students were overwhelmingly Anti-Semitic. *Numerus Nullus* discriminatory policies were enacted in universities limiting the number of Jewish students allowed. Jews were blamed for problems in Polish universities. When there were increases in tuition costs or University reforms, there was an increase in violent Jewish pogroms.⁹² In his autobiography, the young Polish Jew Ludwik Stockel described how *Endecja* students attacked their Jewish classmates.⁹³

Poles attacked Jews outside of Universities as well. Government policies, such as “Beat up a Jew” were greatly encouraged. Any kind of sympathy or support for Jews was discouraged. Ethnic Poles who supported Jews were severely beaten.⁹⁴ Fear was instilled throughout Poland about being a Jew or being seen helping a Jew.

Jews were also frequently blamed for economic problems in Poland, including high food prices.⁹⁵ Jews were characterized by the Poles as wealthy capitalists.⁹⁶ As they had done with the Germans, Poles enacted economic discriminatory policies targeted at the Jews and Endek propagandists encouraged boycotts of Jewish businesses.⁹⁷ These boycotts hurt the Jewish minority financially. The Poles were able to grow economically through Jewish economic oppression.⁹⁸ Jews paid more taxes than Poles and government policies restricted public Jewish employment as doctors and other professions.⁹⁹ Equal rights to Jews, and other minorities, were enacted into law, but rarely

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⁹⁶ Davies, *God’s Playground*, 404.
⁹⁹ Hundert, *Poland*, 1400.
enforced. Laws were also passed by the Polish government that indirectly negatively impacted the Jews. Such laws included restricting animal slaughter, decreeing that no work was to be done on Sundays, and by officially recognizing Catholic holidays.  

Most political parties and organizations were united around anti-semitism. Jews became the Polish scapegoat. Jews were an easy scapegoat since they did not have the same protection as the other minorities from “mother countries” and because of the prevalence of Anti-Semitism. Being labeled as a Jew or associated with Jews was considered an insult in Polish politics.

Jews were split about how to respond to the discrimination and violence inflicted on them. There were two social types of Jews. These types were Orthodox-Traditionalist and Assimilationist. Each had different approaches to their dire situation. Orthodox-Traditionalist Jews – the older generation – argued in favor of accommodating and self-segregating from the Poles. Younger, Assimilationist Jews saw themselves as Poles and did not identify as being Jewish. Assimilation was not possible for the Jews according to the Poles. Jews had few options when they faced discrimination. Jews hardly ever appealed to the League of Nations for Polish violations of the Minorities Treaty. The Jews believed that appealing would not really help their situation, and that tensions between them and the Poles would naturally soften. Poles, however, blamed Jews for all complaints about them at the League of Nations even though Germans were the main accusers.

Some Jews saw emigration as the only solution to their constant discrimination, and they tried to emigrate to Palestine, U.S., or elsewhere. But immigration restrictions in the U.S. and Great Britain

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101 Gutman and Krakowski, Unequal Victims, 13, 19.
102 Kunicki, Between the Brown and Red, 34, 50.
103 Heller, Edge of Destruction, 143-144, 168.
104 Heller, Edge of Destruction, 183.
made emigration very difficult. Other Jews tried creating pro-Jewish political parties. The three main types of political parties Jews looked to were ones that were involved with Zionism, the Bund, and the Agudas Yisrael. These groups were mostly ineffectual. These political groups tried to fight for Jewish rights through Parliament, but ultimately to no avail.

Why the Jews?

Jews were the most heavily and violently targeted minority group in Interwar Poland. The history of Anti-Semitic attitudes in modern Poland was certainly an important reason why Poles blamed Jews for the problems in Poland. According to William Brustein, Anti-Semitism has four roots; religious, racial, economic, and political. Each offers a reason for why the Poles targeted the Jewish minority for persecution more than the other three minorities in Interwar Poland. Brustein’s first root of Anti-Semitism, religious, is the oldest and longest lasting root. Christians blamed Jews for Christ’s death, and were insulted by the fact that Jews deny Christ. Since the death of Christ, and increasingly from the twelfth century onwards, Jews were accused of killing Christ, denouncing Christ, the ritual killing of Christian children for blood rituals, causing the Black Plague, desecrating the Eucharist, and being agents of the Anti-Christ and Devil. The religious root of Anti-Semitism offers an explanation for why Poles were specifically targeting Jews. Poles were predominately Catholic and the Catholic Church became strongly Anti-Semitic in the nineteenth century. Through the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which was founded by Pope Pius IX, Anti-Semitic views from Catholics were showcased. In this journal, Jews were connected to Satan, accused of murdering Christ, called a

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106 Hundert, *Poland*, 1400, 1401.
108 Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 45
“foreign” race, and accused of simulating assimilation to Christianity in order to obtain Christian privileges.\(^{111}\) The Polish Catholic Church saw the Jews as a huge threat to the Catholicization of Poland. They wanted Catholicism to be the superior religion in Poland. The Polish clergy needed a Catholic power in order to maintain their power and their higher economic elite status. The clergy lived off the Church, and the Jews were a threat to their economic security. Judaism challenged the Catholic Church ideologically. The Polish clergy believed that the spread of Judaism would lead to decreased Catholic membership. They began to blame the evils of society- Communism, secularism, and corruption- on the Jews. To combat this perceived threat, the Polish clergy united Polish nationalism with Anti-Semitism.\(^{112}\) The German minority was predominately Protestant, Ukrainians were either Uniate or Orthodox, and Belarusians were Orthodox. These minority religions were still branches of Christianity, but Judaism was profoundly Other.

Brustein’s second root of antisemitism is racial. Scientific racism emerged in the late nineteenth century, and defined Jews as a separate race.\(^{113}\) Anti-Semites used this type of reasoning to justify being oppressive to Jews. The racial root seems the least plausible at explaining why Poles targeted Jews during the interwar years, but there may still be a connection between the two. Poles did not seem too interested in using science to explain why the Jews were the reason for all their problems. Poles may have been able to more easily justify their discriminatory and violent behavior to the Jews if they believed that the Jews were biologically inferior to them.

Brustein’s third root of Anti-Semitism is economic. Jews were characterized as miserly, wealthy, money manipulators, and as ultra-materialists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth


\(^{113}\) Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 117.
centuries. During the Medieval period in Europe, Jews could only get jobs as moneylenders, a characteristic that would be associated with them for centuries to come.  

Eastern European Jews were craftsmen that believed they had to work in order to live a fulfilled life. They were more than happy to be given important jobs to do. A myth emerged that Jews were overrepresented and monopolizing finance and commerce. Arnold Zweig summed up the problems this myth brought to the Jews perfectly, saying that, “Money leads Jews and non-Jews alike toward a trifling and wretched upward mobility.” Europeans believed that Jews were all greedy and money-hungry. The image of the Rothschild Jewish banking dynasty was used to describe Jews as a whole. Jews were actually not as rich as Europeans believed they were, but seeing a few rich Jews like the Rothschilds helped to perpetuate myth of Jews monopolizing commerce and finance. This led to jealousy and anger towards the Jews. Jews were blamed for hoarding and taking money. The Jews were easily blamed for poor economies. During periods of economic depression, Anti-Semitism increased, but in periods of economic growth it decreased. The economic root of Anti-Semitism could explain why Poles were so willing to target Jews during the interwar period. The Polish economy was greatly affected by the aftermath of World War I. Buildings were destroyed, and much cattle were killed. Financial chaos was prevalent since there were numerous different currencies. The majority of Poles were peasants. Mass unemployment increased as many Poles began to enter the industrial lower working class. The Poles were directly competing with Jews for jobs. Peasants were jealous of the perceived wealth of the Jews. To change that, Poles targeted Jews economically in order to

114 Brustein, Roots of Hate, 177, 178-179.
116 Brustein, Roots of Hate, 195-196.
117 Zweig, The Face of East European Jewry, 12.
118 Brustein, Roots of Hate, 181, 205.
120 Berend, Decades of Crisis, 295, 297.
increase their own wealth. Jews would be an easy scapegoat to discriminate against, since it was a commonly held belief that Jews were all rich and money-hungry.

Brustein’s last root of antisemitism is political. This type of antisemitism emerged after 1879 in Poland. The belief of a Jewish world conspiracy has been prevalent since the twelfth century. The Jews were often targets of horrific massacres by Christians in Barcelona, Tàrrega, Cervera, and Lleida in 1348. The Jews were seen as fiscal agents of the state and were under the King’s protection, since the Jews were collecting taxes from them. This angered the poorer Christians and led them to attack the Jews since they represented the King. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (1903) were believed to contain the plans for Jewish world domination. Belief in the “Protocols” veracity led to the growth of Anti-Semitism. Another aspect of politics that led to antisemitism was the belief that Jews were associated with the Communist party. Poles were some of the most avid believers of the idea that Jews were Communists. This belief was unfounded in reality. In the 1928 election in Poland, only 7 percent of Jews voted for the Communist Party, while 44 percent of the Belarusian minority voted for the Communist Party. While there were some Jews involved in Communism, many were not. The belief that Jews were Communists in Poland led the Poles further towards violent and discriminatory actions against them.

The Pole’s treatment while living in the three partitions also played a large role in why they targeted Jews. The Poles later treated the Jews in interwar Poland similarly to how the Germans, Russians, and Austrians treated them. The Jews within these partitions also lived economically higher than Poles did. Poles were peasants, and Jews took the urban and commerce related jobs.

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121 Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 266, 265.
125 Kopstein and Wittenberg, *Communism*, 87, 102.
Jealousy led the Poles to economically target the Jews when the Poles were finally in power during the interwar years. Russians enacted pogroms against Jews often, and Poles did the same. Efforts to take away Jewish culture stems from the Germans and Russians trying to take Polish culture from the Poles.

The Minorities treaty also created tensions amongst Poles and their minorities. The treaty was a threat to Polish autonomy and an insult to the Pole’s ruling capabilities. Many supporters of the treaty were Jews and the German minority. The Poles blamed the Jews for the treaty though. The Poles did not blame Germans because they had Germany to protect them. The Minorities treaty did the exact opposite of its goal. Instead of creating peace and freedom for minorities, it helped further Polish anti-Semitism.

Antisemitism played a large role in why the Poles specifically targeted the Jewish minority rather than the Ukrainian, Belarusian, and German minorities during the Interwar Years. Poles were predominately Catholic, and Catholicism became intertwined with Polish nationalism during the interwar years. Christianity has a long history of being anti-Semitic. Jew may have been picked over the other three minorities because of the beliefs that Jews killed Christ and were conspirators with the Devil. Poles also saw Jews as an inferior race. Poles wanted to force the Ukrainians and Belarusians to assimilate into Polish society through “Polonization”. In regards to the Germans, Poles wanted to just send them back to Germany. Jews posed a huge problem. There was no “mother country” to protect them or send them back to. Poles may have targeted Jews because the Germans, Belarusians, and Ukrainians had other nations to protect them. They thought that Jews were wealthier than they were. This jealousy coupled with the long-held belief of all Jewish riches may have made the Jews more attractive as targets as well. Poles also targeted the Jews because of the belief of Jews being Communists. Communism was a threat to the overwhelming Polish
nationalist majority. Because of the association of Communism with Jews, the Poles believed the Jews were trying to undermine the Poles. The Poles responded to all these perceived threats from Jews through violence and discriminatory policies. The Poles also attacked the Jews economically by attempting to block them from competition in the employment sector. Jews were easy for the Poles to blame for their problems. The Poles blamed the Jews for poor economics, the creation of the Minorities Treaty, and the spread of Communism. In actuality, the Jews were not to blame for any of these problems. Belarusians were the minority group that most veered towards Communism, Ukrainians were the minority group that kept fighting back against the Poles, and the Germans continuously complained to the League of Nations and were a constant reminder of the Pole’s past harsh treatment in the Prussian Partition. Despite that, the Poles specifically targeted the Jewish minority over the Belarusian, German, and Ukrainian minorities.