

## ■ The Union of Poles in Germany (1922-1939/1940)

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**The Union of Poles in Germany was the leading Polish community association in the Weimar Republic, and subsequently in the Third Reich. Established in 1922, it remained active until September 1939. Its members suffered repressions from the first days of the war. One in ten of the approximately 2000 arrested Poles lost their lives.**

One of the consequences faced by the German Reich following its defeat in the World War of 1914-1918 was a significant loss of state territory, both in the west and east of the country. One such loss, perceived in Germany as very severe, was that to Poland of the majority of the former Prussian partition, including Greater Poland and Gdańsk Pomerania as well as the most affluent part of Upper Silesia.

These territorial losses substantially reduced the size of the Polish minority living within German borders. Nevertheless, following the demarcation of the new Polish-German frontier in 1919-1922, Reich citizens of Polish nationality remained a relatively large community numbering about one and a half million (estimates range from 1.3 million to 1.7 million). According to recent studies carried out from Poland, over a million Poles resided in Silesia, Warmia, Masuria and the Borderlands at the time while another 200,000 resided in Westphalia-Rhineland. The areas of greater Berlin and Potsdam were home to ca. 80,000 Poles. However, the 1925 census showed only half the actual Polish population of the Reich, i.e. 784,000. Of these, 528,000 were found to be living in the German part of Upper Silesia. A large proportion of Poles returned from Germany to Poland (mainly from Westphalia) after the Great War, while others moved westward.

Even before World War I, Polish communities in two parts of Germany, Westphalian-Rhineland and Berlin, competed with one another. After the war, pronounced differences persisted between activists from both communities. Accusations were levelled about embezzlement, etc. In the early 1920s, local Polish organisations were established in various parts of the Reich. In view of anti-Polish sentiments that spread among the German public after the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the division of Upper Silesia (1921/22) in Germany's disfavour, the idea was floated to consolidate the Polish national movement in the Reich. The hopes of having Poles serve in the parliaments of both the Reich and Prussia played a key role.

On August 27, 1922, the Union of Poles in Germany was formed in Berlin, becoming the main organisation of Reich citizens of Polish descent. It emerged through a merger of regional Polish organisations from Berlin, Olsztyn, and Bochum. Respecting the existence of independent Polish economic, social, cultural, sporting, and other organisations, the Union became their chief association.

The main mission of the Union was to defend Poles in Germany against denationalisation. It also aimed to act as an intermediary in relations with German state authorities, the government of the



Republic of Poland and organisations operating in Poland. While the Union remained loyal to the German state, it demanded that its government respect the national and civil rights enshrined in the constitution. On August 28, 1922, the Polish-language *Dziennik Berliński* daily reported on its front page on the formation of: "A Unified Polish Front extending from the Rhine to the Oder and Kaliningrad: the Union of Poles in Germany ...". Soon afterwards, the officially recognised date of the Union's formation became December 3, 1922, the day its first general assembly was held in Berlin.

In 1924, the Union of Poles in Germany was instrumental in the creation of the Union of National Minorities in Germany. The Union of Poles was also member of the World Union of Poles Living Abroad (known as Światpol, chaired by Władysław Raczkiewicz), established in 1934 in Warsaw to maintain ties between all Poles living abroad and their country of origin while remaining loyal to their countries of residence.

In the 1920s, the Union was represented in the Prussian Parliament, in which two Polish deputies, who were also the Union's members, served two terms of office. The Union's members were also sitting on city councils. However, no Pole ever made it to the Reichstag. Generally, the Polish minority was increasingly indifferent towards national issues. A large proportion of Poles had no interest in the activities of Polish organisations, societies, and educational and cultural institutions, and over time succumbed to Germanisation.

Organisationally, the Union of Poles in Germany consisted of five so-called districts based in Opole (Silesia), Berlin (covering Central Germany and Hamburg), Bochum (Westphalia and Rhineland), Olsztyn (Warmia and Masuria) and Złotów (Kaszuby, Babimojskie and Złotowskie). The number of contributing members of the Association fluctuated from 32,000 in 1924 to 45,000 in 1930 only to decline to 30,000 in 1938. The Union's first president, Stanisław Sierakowski, was replaced by Fr. Bolesław Domański (the parish priest in Zakrzewo in Ziemia Złotowska) in 1931. After his death in April 1939, the position was assumed by Stefan Szczepaniak. A key role was played by Jan Baczewski (member of the Prussian Parliament between 1922 and 1928, associated with the Christian Democrats in Poland, who retired from political life in 1934) and Jan Kaczmarek (secretary general of the Union, main organiser and ideologist of the Congress of Poles in Germany in 1938), the two being constantly at loggerheads. After Piłsudski's coup in 1926, the Union divided strongly over its assessment of the Sanacja regime policies. Some of the members were particularly infuriated over the imprisonment of Wojciech Korfanty in 1930 and the Brest trial.

The Union of Poles in Germany was involved in all spheres of Polish national life within the Reich. It published its own press. The main title (since 1925) was the *Polak w Niemczech* monthly (previously, in 1924, *Biuletyn Związku Polaków w Niemczech*) with a circulation of 10,000 to 20,000. Its last editor-in-chief was Edmund Osmańczyk. The regional titles included *Dziennik Berliński*, *Nowiny Codzienne*, *Gazeta Olsztyńska*, *Głos Pogranicza* and *Kaszub*. Materials for *Leksykon Polactwa w Niemczech* were being gathered.

Polish organisations had their own banks and cooperatives. They pursued educational and cultural activities. Throughout the interwar period, the German authorities sought to throw sticks in the spokes of such operations, especially of Polish schools. Youth and academic societies, including Sokół and scout organisations, were also active. The Union put considerable store by nurturing religious life in the Polish language. The primates of Poland extended spiritual care over Polish Catholics in the Reich.



The Union's activities gained the support of the Polish diplomatic corps - the legation (and then embassy) of the Republic of Poland in Berlin and Polish consulates. Such support included substantial funding.

In 1932-1933, the Union of Poles in Germany adopted an emblem known by the Polish name *rodło* (a neologism that merged the word *rodnica*, which is Polish for family, and the word *godło*, which means emblem). The emblem depicted the course of the Vistula River shown in white against a red background with the location of the city of Kraków marked appropriately.

Polish activists in Germany and their organisations faced deprecation and even hostility on the part of German authorities and institutions. German nationalist organisations would at times engage in violence and terror against Polish members. The Union's revival coincided with a relaxation in Warsaw-Berlin relations a few months after Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933. Paradoxically, this was also the time when the membership declined. On November 5, 1937, an identically-worded Polish and German language declaration on the rights of national minorities was issued. On that day, Adolf Hitler received representatives of the Polish national movement, whereas President Ignacy Mościcki received a delegation of the German minority in Poland. The document banned assimilation, especially of the young generation, while bestowing on both minorities the right to use their national language in institutional and personal life, the right to associate in minority organisations and the right to run schools with native language instruction. The declaration prohibited harassment on the grounds of minority membership. As it soon turned out, the principles remained largely on paper only.

A few months later, on March 8, 1938, the Union held a great Congress of Poles living in Germany that brought together some 5,000 delegates and nearly 200 guests representing Polish diasporas from other countries. The Congress adopted the so called "Five Truths of Poles", which were: "1. We are Polish. 2. The faith of our fathers is the faith of our children. 3. All Poles are brothers. 4. A Pole serves its nation every day. 5. Poland is our Mother, and you cannot speak poorly of your Mother".

The crisis in Polish-German relations in the spring of 1939 dramatically undermined the standings of Polish organisations in the Reich. Anti-Polish aggression erupted, manifested through disruption of church services and meetings, assaults and destruction of property, searches, forced evictions and arrests. The Union took part in with the general census in Germany scheduled for May 17, 1939, which was carried out amidst pressure and rampant manipulation. The census ultimately "demonstrated" that Germany's Polish minority only numbered 14,000. In the following weeks, boycotts of Polish merchants and craftsmen were stepped up. The Gestapo's seizure of the "Strzecha" house in Racibórz, the seat of Polish organisations in this city and its area, caused major outrage in Poland. The library and records of the Racibórz house were confiscated, the building itself was handed over to Hitler-Jugend.

After the invasion of Poland by the Reich, between 1,200 and 2,000 Union members were arrested. Some of them would later be released due to the lack of incriminating evidence. Approximately two hundred of those arrested would later die, some sentenced by courts and executed "for treason against the Reich", others murdered in Gestapo buildings and concentration camps.



On September 7, 1939, Polish members of the Union were told that their organisations had been shut down. The closures affected 4 printing houses, the editorial offices of 14 magazines, 60 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 14 kindergartens, all libraries, Polish community centres and clubs and 35 financial and lending institutions. The assets of these organisations were confiscated.

Pursuant to the ordinance of the Council of Ministers for the Defence of the Reich of February 27, 1940 (headed by Hermann Göring), any existing Polish organisations in the Reich were disbanded while the formation of any new ones was banned.

The Polish national movement in Germany was not revived until after World War II in a very different time and very different circumstances.