

Stephan Stach, *Nationalitäten aus der zweiten Reihe. Konzepte und Praktiken zur Einbindung nationaler Minderheiten in Pilsudskis Polen (1926–1939)*, Göttingen, 2024, Wallstein Verlag, 412 pp.

The historiography of the interwar period has long lacked a monograph on the minority policy of the Polish state. Although many works have been written in the last four decades about its various aspects, as well as about the situation of individual national minorities, more than 45 years have passed since the publication of the last and, until recently, only monograph on the policy of the Second Polish Republic towards its citizens who were not ethnic Poles. Although that work remains a significant scholarly contribution to this day, there is no doubt that the topic has long deserved another study – if only because in the 1970s, when Andrzej Chojnowski conducted his research, a large number of sources were not available to scholars and the freedom of publication was restricted by communist censorship.¹ The latest monograph by Stephan Stach, a German historian with considerable experience in researching Poland's recent history, including Polish-Jewish relations and the memory of the Holocaust, fills that gap.

A foreign historian who undertakes research on an important, complicated and controversial topic in the modern history of another country – and the Second Polish Republic's policy towards national minorities certainly is one such topic – finds himself in a more difficult position than native scholars. Even apart from the necessary fluency in a foreign language, he or she is not only obliged to gain familiarity with the extensive literature on the subject, which they largely do at the earlier stages of their education and academic career, but also to assimilate the social, political and cultural context of the phenomena or events he or she is analysing. Without this, it is not infrequent

¹ A. Chojnowski, *Koncepcje polityki narodowościowej rządów polskich w latach 1921–1939* (Wrocław, 1991).

that a foreign scholar makes oversimplifications or factual errors, adopts a posture of moral superiority toward the studied country or, on the contrary, is seduced by its charms and overlooks the darker sides of its past. In my view, Stephan Stach has managed to avoid these pitfalls in an exemplary manner. His monograph is fair and unbiased. It contains many critical observations on Polish policy towards national minorities, but is neither an indictment, nor an apotheosis.

In line with the subtitle, the timeframe of Stach's analysis is set between the beginning and end of the dictatorship of Józef Piłsudski and his successors. Restriction of the research to the period of *Sanacja* distinguishes Stach's approach from that of Chojnowski, whose monograph also discusses in detail the Polish policy towards national minorities in the years 1921–6. In practice, however, this difference is not decisive, as Stach devotes the first chapter of his monograph to the period before the coup d'état in May 1926. Although it serves primarily as an introduction, in which the author presents competing visions of the reconstruction of the Polish state in 1918–21, as well as the most important conflicts concerning the participation of national minorities in Polish political life (with a special focus on the parliamentary and presidential elections in 1922 and the assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz), the reader will find here the most critical facts about minority policies of the period.

Stach's monograph is also distinguished from Chojnowski's book by the approach to the problem it examines. The German historian analyses not so much the agenda of key actors and state structures, but the activities of institutions and figures in the 'second row' who, as expert bodies or think-tanks, had an indirect influence on the state's minority policy. His field of interest includes the Institute for the Study of Nationality Affairs [Instytut Badań Spraw Narodowościowych], which had been founded already in early 1922 by the left wing of the Piłsudski camp as a non-governmental organisation, as well as two state institutions established shortly after the coup d'état in May 1926: the Commission of Experts on National Minorities and Eastern Provinces [Komisja Rzecznawców do spraw Mniejszości Narodowych i województw wschodnich] at the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, and the Nationalities Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs [Wydział Narodowościowy Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych]. After 1926, they tried to develop and implement a new policy towards national minorities (in particular Ukrainians, Belarusians and Jews) under the guise of *Sanacja*. This new approach was meant to convince ethnically non-Polish citizens that loyal cooperation with the state could be beneficial to them. In this way, one of the key sources of internal instability in interwar Poland would be removed. Stach devotes five chapters of the book to the activities of these institutions. There, he investigates new initiatives in minority policy and their gradual decline, which began only months after Piłsudski's coup

d'état and finally led to the collapse of rapprochement. Only the last two chapters of the monograph go beyond this interpretative pattern. In them, Stach discusses cases of practical implementation of minority policy after 1926 towards the Jewish minority and the Ukrainian inhabitants of Eastern Galicia.

Stach's focus on institutions and individuals in the background required the use of a specific methodology and the identification of appropriate historical sources. The author refers to his approach as "institutional and biographical". His analysis encompasses both the institutes and commissions mentioned in the previous paragraph and the people who worked in them. His goal was to reconstruct the network of actors influencing Poland's interwar nationality policy and the interactions between them. Stach bases his research on a broad range of sources. These include not only materials from Polish state authorities, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Council of Ministers' Praesidium, but also documents from the collections of individuals who were actively involved in shaping minority policy behind the scenes. Among them, the files of Stanisław J. Paprocki and Aleksander Hafftko, a journalist of Jewish origin employed by the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs, are particularly noteworthy. Stach was the first to treat both of them as objects of study. In his monograph, he also drew upon a wide range of interwar journalism, from daily newspapers to specialist periodicals devoted to nationality policy.

The sad record of the minority policy of Piłsudski and his supporters is familiar to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the history of interwar Poland: the political camp that proclaimed the equality of all citizens before the state and dissociated itself from Polish nationalism ended up as an authoritarian regime, brutally pacifying Ukrainian villages, destroying Orthodox churches, and discriminating the Jewish minority, by either banning ritual slaughter or accepting bench ghettos at universities. Stach does not question this record in principle, but convincingly demonstrates the ambiguity of Polish policy towards national minorities after 1926. His analysis shows that the proponents of a liberal approach to Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews (other minorities absorbed them to a lesser extent) developed a surprisingly modern and efficient institutional base, particularly in the Institute for the Study of Nationality Affairs. Despite the increasingly unfavourable circumstances, they were able, at least until Piłsudski's death, to influence state policy and, perhaps more importantly, maintain contacts with key figures within the national minorities. The decomposition of the Piłsudski camp in the second half of the 1930s and the seizure of power by a group centred around Edward Rydz-Śmigły dealt a fatal blow to that influence, as the latter adopted a radically nationalist programme to strengthen their own political position.

Stach's monograph also documents the frailty of the foundations on which Polish state policy towards national minorities was based after 1926. This is not solely due to the fact that an authoritarian regime could abolish or deprive

any institution of its influence at any time. After all, not all Piłsudski's supporters were in favour of a liberal approach to national minorities, and the Marshal himself quickly lost his taste for uncertain political experiments. Of equal importance was his conviction that every internal threat had to be met with repression for the state not to be seen as weak. When these repressions fell on national minorities or their political organisations, as was the case with the outlawing of the Belarusian *Hramada* in 1927 or the pacification of Ukrainian villages in Eastern Galicia three years later, this resulted in each case not only in a deterioration of relations between the minority in question and the state, but also – as Stach demonstrates – in the loss of influence by supporters of liberal minority policies. Shortly after *Hramada* was outlawed, the Commission of Experts on National Minorities and Eastern Provinces ceased to convene at all. Tadeusz Hołówko, the most important advocate of rapprochement with the national minorities among Piłsudski's supporters, was appointed head of the Eastern Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which deprived him of the possibility of publicly criticising government policies (pp. 104–8). The pacification of Eastern Galicia in 1930 had a similar side-effect. Another important advocate of Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, Henryk Józewski, was dismissed from the post of Minister of the Interior (pp. 171–2). The Nationalities Department of the ministry was then utilised by the new Minister, Felicjan Sławoj-Składkowski, as an instrument of repressive state policy towards the Ukrainian population. To pre-emptively silence the Institute for the Study of Nationality Affairs, its head, Stanisław J. Paprocki, was called up for military exercises that lasted several weeks (pp. 175–7). The final act of this process occurred in the aftermath of the dictatorship's turn towards nationalism, which took place in the second half of the 1930s. The head of the Nationalities Department at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Henryk Suchenek-Suchocki, was then forced to resign, and the Institute for the Study of Nationalities Affairs lost any real influence on those in power (pp. 246–55).

As Stach rightly emphasises, however, the gradual withdrawal by the Polish authorities from a policy of reconciliation with national minorities after May 1926 was not solely the result of changes within the *Sanacja* camp. External factors also played an important role in this evolution. National minorities were infiltrated by Germany and the Soviet Union, which effectively incited them to anti-state activity, as the long-term goal of these two states was to revise the borders established in 1919–21. From the late 1920s onwards, this was compounded by the terrorist activity of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which deliberately targeted the figures involved in Polish-Ukrainian talks, like Hołówko. To make matters worse, the state authorities limited their room for manoeuvre by yielding to pressure from conservatives who, after 1926, sided with Piłsudski and showed reluctance to make any concessions to national minorities. The conservatives fought

against plans for a settlement with Ukrainians and Belarusians to secure their land in the eastern areas of the country. As Stach demonstrates, the daily newspaper *Słowo Wileńskie* and its columnist Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz played a particularly infamous role in this short-sighted campaign (pp. 104, 123–4, 203–4, 235–8).

Adverse external factors did not, of course, justify the brutal repressions or even petty harassment that the Polish dictatorship deployed against national minorities – but they certainly set the limits of its political capabilities. Had Poland not been ruled by Piłsudski and his supporters, it, too, would have been unable to tolerate the anti-state activities of national minorities. However, it probably would not have had to respond to them with violence based on collective responsibility. It is impossible to say today whether the more conciliatory policy proposed by Hołówko, Paprocki, and others from their milieu would have proved effective. However, as Stach has demonstrated in captivating fashion in his monograph, alternative concepts of such a policy and the tools for pursuing it were within the grasp of state authorities.

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