Broken Land:
Everyday Life and the Reconstruction of the Polish Countryside, 1914-1939

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DISSERTATION
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Dla mojej mamusi
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAN Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of New Documents)
ANK Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie (National Archive in Kraków)
APP Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (State Archive in Poznań)
CTR Centralne Towarzystwo Rolnicze (Central Agricultural Society)
CZMW Centralny Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej (Central Union of Village Youth)
KGW Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich (Circle of Rural Housewives)
MOS Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej (Ministry of Social Welfare)
MSW Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych (Ministry of the Interior)
MRiDP Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Dóbr Państwowych (Ministry of Agriculture and State Property)
MRiRR Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych (Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform)
PSL Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People’s Party)
PSL-Piast Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Piast (Polish People’s Party Piast)
PSL-Lewica Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Lewica (Polish People’s Party Leftists)
PSL-Wyzwolenie Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Wyzwolenie (Polish People’s Party Liberation)
PZP Polski Związek Przeciwdrużliczy (Polish Anti-Tuberculosis Society)
SCh Stronnictwo Chłopskie (Peasant Party)
SL Stronnictwo Ludowe (People’s Party)
ZHRL Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego (Department of History of the Rural Movement)
ZML Związek Młodzieży Ludowej (Union of Folk Youth)
ZMW Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej (Union of Rural Youth)
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<td>ZMW RP Wici</td>
<td>Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej Rzeczypospolitej Polski Wici (Union of Rural Youth of the Polish Republic Wici)</td>
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SUMMARY

“Broken Land” traces the everyday lives of Polish-speaking farmers as they navigated their way through Poland’s transition from subjects of the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires to citizens of an independent nation-state. Covering the period 1913-1939, it explores this moment of social and cultural contestation, telling a story of grass-roots rural activism that rebuilt the physical, moral, and social character of the Polish village in the face of political instability, stymied land reform, abject poverty, and lasting imperial structures. It argues that Polish-speakers farmers’ attitudes toward Polishness was still limited during the partitions and the First World War, and that though Second Republic leaders tried to bridge villagers’ gaps in national belonging via standardization schemes, it was mainly through local activism that farmers came to embrace the idea of Poland and Polishness more closely.

Beginning with an examination of the rural home front during the First World War, the dissertation then considers how interwar political leaders tried to make legible to themselves the vastness of the countryside. From there, it focuses on rural misery and the social origins of rural unrest and activism. The final chapters consider the activism of rural youth and women more closely. The dissertation decenters the political and diplomatic perspectives that dominate interwar Poland’s historiography, and instead offers a social-historical perspective through the lens of everyday life to understand how ordinary citizens experienced the reconstitution of the interwar Polish state.
1. **INTRODUCTION: ON BROKEN LAND**

1.1 **Introduction**

In the waning months of the Great War, many Polish-speakers could already sense that the war’s end was near, and that the reconstitution of an independent Polish state, after over a century of tripartite partition, was imminent. Once news of the war’s end had reached Polish cities and provinces, newspapers from across the political spectrum echoed Slavic bard Adam Mickiewicz’s romantic notion of Poland as the “Christ of Nations,” announcing the state’s resurrection. Others likened the rise of the new Poland to that of a phoenix emerging in a glorified state from the ashes of imperialism and total war. In letters, newspapers, and radio broadcasts, journalists proclaimed “the unification of partitioned and oppressed Poland,” and Polish-speakers from across the former imperial lines welcomed one another to their now shared capital in Warsaw to build the new state, “with longing souls and open hearts.” Fraternity, unity, and ebullient cheer were almost ubiquitous. Across the infant country, nationalist parades marched down city streets, soldiers began to return home. The quest for normalcy had begun.

This sense of solidarity, however, was short-lived. Unifying a nation once divided and recently destroyed proved to be a monumental task for government leaders and local inhabitants alike. In addition to a starving populace, a crumbling infrastructure, an immature political system,

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2 *Piast*, 20 October 1918, 4.
and skyrocketing inflation rates, Polish-speakers also had to contend with palpable social and cultural divisions. One farmer reflected on such fissures saying, “Externally we look united, especially after the collapse of the partitions, but internally our differences are great…people find it difficult to see any commonalities, despite speaking one language and belonging to one nation—to one state.”³ In short, after one-hundred-twenty-three years of partition, including several of total war, Poland, her people, and her lands were broken. Nowhere was this fracture more palpable and evident than in the Polish countryside.

“Broken Land” traces the everyday lives of Polish-speaking farmers as they navigated the transition from subjects of the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires to citizens of an independent nation-state. Covering the period 1914-1939, it explores this moment of social and cultural contestation, telling a story of grass-roots rural activism that rebuilt the physical, moral, and social character of the Polish village in the face of political instability, stymied land reform, abject poverty, and lasting imperial structures. As such, it offers a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people in the Second Republic and they ways they viewed their national identity, relationships with the state, and plans for the future of the countryside. I argue that Polish-speaking farmers’ attitudes toward Polishness was still limited during the partitions and First World War, and that though Second Republic leaders tried to bridge villagers’ gaps in national belonging via standardization schemas, it was mainly through local activism that farmers came to embrace the idea of Poland and Polishness more closely. For the first time in their history farmers across Polish territory could engage fully in associational life—through rural youth organizations, agricultural

³ “Chłopi! Poznajcie się i zjednoczcie się!” Wyzwolenie, 12 September 1926, 1.
circles, and housewives’ groups. The nation-wide explosion of these organizations connected farmers from across Poland, forging a strong rural voice in the infant country.

This rural voice, however, was not monolithic. The cacophony that enriched village life between the World Wars meant that there was no unified rural vision for the future of the countryside, much less for the Polish nation, and that deep social and cultural divisions were more characteristic of Polish rural society. This study traces the mechanisms through which these social and cultural fissures were bridged though never completely eliminated during the interwar years. Looking at rural political agitation, the state’s post imperial transition of power and land reform efforts, and the activism of rural youth and women, I detail the process by which Polish farmers navigated the country’s post-imperial terrain. In debates they conducted across generational and gendered lines, villagers devised ways to practice their citizenship and challenge centralizing forces that came from Warsaw. Using everyday life to access the strategies farmers used in the transition from subject to citizen, “Broken Land” takes us on a journey through villages—in rural homes, fields, schoolhouses, and community centers—to understand how ordinary people, against considerable odds, worked to rebuild their communities in their own vision. At the center of this vision was the celebration of rural life and society, and the claim that the future of Poland could move forward only if the countryside was leading the way. Thus, this dissertation examines the conditions for rural activism in village society that allowed for an undereducated, politically immature, and sometimes nationally indifferent populous to rise in importance and influence in the interwar period.

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During the partitions, rural civil society existed to limited degrees and varied greatly by partition. Agricultural Circles, for example, were founded in Prussian Poland and expanded into Austrian territory, but these organizations flourished and proliferated in the interwar period.
To tell this story, we begin with the First World War. The experience of the Great War has been characterized as only “a minor apocalypse” for the country’s urban population, particularly those in Warsaw. Yet, the opposite was true for Poland’s rural inhabitants. By war’s end, most farmers’ fields lay fallow, craters peppered the countryside, and shortages in seed and human and animal labor threatened harvests for years to come. Mothers and young children grieved over the losses of their husbands, fathers, and siblings. And some, still hoping against all odds that their relatives might yet return, paid to take out heart-wrenching classified advertisements in newspapers begging for information on the whereabouts of their family members. Though some could celebrate the return of their relations, oftentimes these emotions were stifled when soldiers arrived home maimed and disfigured—disabled in battle and rendered unable to work and provide for their families. For farmers, this meant one less person would contribute to household earnings, while still consuming scarce resources. Indeed, for many, despite the independence of the Polish state, the end of the war was no cause for celebration. Reflecting on this bittersweet postwar reality, farmer and former soldier Jan Polaniak wrote,

It was autumn, but in the people’s hearts spring had blossomed. Poland had awakened from a long sleep of captivity. The young and the old rejoiced. All around it smelled of the youth of spring, people’s souls were imbued with joy. The nation broke off the shackles of bondage, and stood up again to work. Soldiers returned home from the front and captivity. Many among them did not return; many a mother and wife cried pitifully,

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their most beloved son or husband did not return—the poor fellow had died. He laid his bones far away from his loved ones. Many of them now rest among foreigners.\(^7\)

At the same time, the early years of the Second Republic were wracked with myriad problems that arose out of Poland’s partitioned past. From the moment of the state’s rebirth, some seven currencies circulated, four different legal codes managed law and order, over one-hundred political parties agitated for elected office, and no government institutions existed that oversaw the entire country. Post World War I Poland’s infrastructure also reflected its former physical divisions. The newly unified country included three separate railroad systems with various sized gauges that could not link to one another, making cross-country travel difficult. With no easy access to major cities like Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, and the historically cosmopolitan Free City of Gdańsk, now under multi-national jurisdiction, provincial regions often remained disconnected from new social, cultural, economic, and political developments until infrastructural improvements could be implemented.\(^8\) Interwar Poland remained, in many ways, partitioned.

Poland’s divided history had enormous consequences for the rural sphere. Because the partitioning powers emancipated peasants at various stages over the course of the nineteenth century, farmers, generations later, had uneven access to arable land. Russian imperial authorities’ decision to emancipate peasants, for example, came with villagers’ ownership of sizeable allotments, typically double the size of those in Austrian southern Poland and 1.8 times larger than in Poznania, in the German partition.\(^9\) Similarly, advances in rural technology differed across former imperial lines. In former German provinces, agriculture boomed not only because of

\(^7\) Jan Polaniak, “W pogoni za chlebem,” vol. II, Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego (ZHRL)/P-21/1.
technological developments in farming, but also because the region was the least damaged during the Great War. Accordingly, farmers across Poland enjoyed varying levels of wealth, and remained heavily stratified. And because farmers’ ethnic backgrounds reflected the richness of Poland’s historic diversity, linguistic and cultural differences often came in tandem with growing ethnic strife.\(^{10}\)

The Polish state that emerged from the ashes of the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires in 1918 was a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious society. With many national groups vying for political, social, and cultural recognition, the answer to who was Polish was ever-changing. Many, of course, did not consider themselves members of the Polish nation, despite holding legal Polish citizenship. The results of the 1921 census demonstrate the diverse interwar Polish population. Ethnic Poles accounted for about sixty-nine percent of the population while Ruthenians constituted fifteen percent, Jews nearly eight percent, Belarusians four percent, and Germans three percent. The remaining one percent was constituted by Russians, Czechs, and Lithuanians, as well as local peoples without national identity.\(^{11}\)

Country society included a whole host of characters, including landowning nobles, rural intellectuals, clergy, Jews, and a multiethnic array of farmers. The most populous of these—the farmers—numbered some seventeen million people, or sixty-five percent of the country’s total

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\(^{11}\) “Pierwszy Powszechny Spis Rzeczypospolitej Polski,” (Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 1931), 56.
population in 1921. These predominantly Polish-speaking smallholders of interwar Poland are the subjects of this study. The “Poland” farmers imagined was a community that heralded the physical land of the countryside and the spirit of the rural dweller as the embodiment of the nation. For smallholders, nobles’ conceptions of a mythical Poland, especially one that until 1918 had existed only in literature and patriotic songs, were difficult to grasp. Instead, farmers constructed an image of the nation that was much more material, based primarily in the land over which they had dominion. Still, farmers’ national sentiment continued to be in flux in the interwar period and though some farmers would claim to be members of the Polish nation, what is less clear is whether they would always be able to recognize the Polishness of their co-nationals, especially those who came from across imperial lines. During the First World War, for example, rural political leaders in Galicia called on their constituents to support the war effort, if only to bring their brethren located in Russia into the national fold, and teach them about their shared Polishness. Because the countryside was vast and included various religious and ethnic groups, I often use language to designate distinct sectors of the diverse rural population, though this too is problematic because of the frequent bilingualism or language hybridity of farmers, especially those who lived in borderland regions in eastern and western Poland.

“Broken Land” shows how farmers’ turn inward to reconstructing their own communities allowed for a nation-wide rural conversation about the future of the Polish countryside. The interwar period marked the explosion of countless rural organizations, ranging from sports teams, to youth groups, to women’s advocacy associations that together, with local village governments (and sometimes without) strived to elevate the culture of the countryside. When farmers felt that

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12 Olga Narkiewicz, *The Green Flag: Polish Populist Politics, 1867-1970* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), 170. In 1921, rural dwellers made up seventy-five percent of the Polish population. Of this, sixty-five percent were employed in agriculture, forestry, or other similar occupations.
national politics had forgotten or ignored them, they learned to perform their citizenship at the local level.

1.2 Historiography

This dissertation brings together several historiographical trends and intervenes in a number of debates in current historical literature about World War I and the interwar period in Eastern Europe, including rural studies, family and youth history, gender history, and the history of imperialism. In general, the First World War and the interwar period remain understudied moments in East-Central European historiography. Only in the past decade or so have scholars begun examining more closely the experiences of East-Central Europeans on the eastern war and home fronts during World War I.13 A more recent trend—the development of urban home front studies during the First World War—has decentered historians’ focus on the warfront, and instead privileged non-belligerent populations such as women and children as objects of study.14 These texts have sought to identify local power negotiations between ordinary subjects and their imperial states to demonstrate the power that “women of lesser means”15 and “home front men”16 wielded during wartime. English-language historiography of Poland has only since the recent centennial of

15 Davis, Home Fires Burning, 2.
16 Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 258.
the outbreak of the First World War considered the Polish experience during the Great War. English-language historians have continued to decenter the warfront from their narratives, and have focused on the experience of occupation, the fluidity of Poles’ imperial and national loyalties, questions of ethnic and gender relations, and issues of memory.\(^{17}\) Polish-language historiography, however, remains bound to military and political historical perspectives, with few exceptions.\(^{18}\) The collapse of the Eastern European Empires following the Great War and the subsequent creation of nation-states in their shadows, has also only recently received attention from scholars. A new generation of historians has focused on issues of statecraft, politics, citizenship, and ethnic relations.\(^{19}\) Among the most common themes include the population’s transition from former


imperial subjects to national citizens, analyzing the creation of categories into which people were
placed by officials of the nascent states.\textsuperscript{20}

The end of the First World War and the collapse of the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires brought about the resurrection of the Polish state, a moment that many who identified as Poles celebrated with grandiose nationalist celebrations and parades. But behind this façade of unity and hyper-nationalism lay the reality of rebuilding a war torn and divided nation-state. Works written in English in the 1970s about the founding moments of the Polish Second Republic tend to stress the weaknesses of the state focusing on the political chaos, economic insecurities, and multiethnic problems that characterized interwar East-Central Europe.\textsuperscript{21} In Communist Poland, scholars applied Marxist theory to the interwar period, and the resultant historiography was dominated by studies of capitalists’ economic usury and capitalism’s failure. In the case of the interwar Polish countryside, studies tended to stress landowners’ exploitation of farmers, as well as an indelible brotherhood between agricultural and industrial laborers.\textsuperscript{22} As a rule, most


historiography of interwar Poland has privileged political, economic, and diplomatic perspectives, to the detriment of a social historical one.

Political histories of the Polish countryside have also dominated the field. Scholars have addressed the lifespan of individual rural political parties in Poland, though such studies stress rural leaders to the detriment of the larger rural experience. Thanks to new perspectives offered through borderland studies and examinations of national and political indifference, scholars are now encouraged to question national metanarratives of rural populations. Prior to this, however, studies of rural nationalism in Europe generally used modernization theory to explain the trickling down of nationalist sentiment from “modern” urban intellectuals and nobles to “backward” peasant populations, negating farmers’ own agency in the construction of the nation. Refreshingly, in the past three decades, scholars of rural nationalism in Poland have taken a social historical approach to demonstrate that farmers’ nationalism was not an imposition from above, but rather the result

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of a constant negotiation between local laws and mores, and nobles’ construction of the nation.\textsuperscript{26} These studies of rural nationalism in the Polish lands, however, are situated in Galician Poland and are entirely focused on the period before the outbreak of World War I, leaving open the question of Polish rural nationalism in the German and Russian partitions and in the period following the country’s independence. More broadly, European historiography of the rural question in the interwar period has focused mostly on villagers’ populist and agrarianist political movements and their turn to proto-fascism.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast, this dissertation demonstrates that rural society was comprised of multiple political parties and that village populations were at the forefront of social change.

Thanks to sociologists and anthropologists, we have access to Polish rural voices through the tomes of memoirs collected in the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{28} These studies have included generational analyses of village life in Poland and have inspired other scholars to continue writing about family life in rural settings.\textsuperscript{29} Histories of the family and childhood have been complemented by an increasing number of gender histories in East Central European


By and large, however, these books center on the experience of urban women, discussing only tangentially rural gender relations. Even works that discuss the rise of the “Modern Girl”—a figure historians have constructed as seemingly ubiquitous across space—focus on her urban characteristics, understanding the countryside either as site of her origins or something for her to consume through leisure and play.\(^{31}\)

In telling the story of the everyday lives of Polish-speaking farmers, this dissertation offers new directions for research. My study begins with the First World War, amidst the countryside, where wartime conditions varied greatly from urban spaces. For one, the Polish countryside was the site of most major battles during the first year of the war and the consequences of destroyed lands, not to mention a lack of human and animal labor, had a lasting effect on the countryside for years to come. The Polish story of the First World War generally focuses on the nationalist and irredentist agenda of Józef Piłsudski’s legionnaires. My study, in contrast, refocuses historians’ attention not on a predetermined Polish nationalism, but on the various ways farmers were torn between their imperial and national loyalties. Indeed, few rural Poles could imagine an independent Poland or recognize the Polishness of their brethren across imperial lines, suggesting

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that the construction of rural nationalism that Keely Stauter-Halsted has discussed remained an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. I am interested in understanding the ways the nascent Polish state considered the transition from imperialism to democracy, and the ways government officials sought to remove Poland of former imperial structures and legacies from the countryside, including social welfare mechanisms and tenant farming agreements. In attempting to make sense of the vastness of the countryside and wield its own authority over its new lands, the Polish state, I argue, needed to dissolve the lasting presence of its former imperial overlords. That this story is told, in part, by farmers themselves, reveals to us ordinary rural citizens’ perceptions of the nation-state and their place within it.

The stress on everyday life taken in this dissertation allows me access to farmers in the private sphere—in their homes and in their fields—where they negotiated ongoing tensions between generations, their migrating relatives, and genders, and where they were compelled to organize to bring about a more productive and modern countryside. Like other studies, I consider the discord between generations, and argue that rural youth used their perceptions of the ideal rural body to claim that they were the best prepared to carry Poland into the future. Likewise, rural woman, whom I argue played the part of new women and modern girls, were important activists in the interwar village, demonstrating that they were not just the passive consumers of urban cultural phenomena, but among the creators of parallel rural cultural ones. Throughout the dissertation, I consider the post-imperial context in which rural Poles lived. This perspective helps explain how farmers reacted to the fall of the partitioning powers and their relationship to the resulting Polish state. It shows how much villagers’ activism was in part a result of Poland’s partitioned past and the consequences of living in a fledgling democracy where they, despite being the most populous of the state’s citizenry, were relegated to the margins of interwar Polish society.
1.3 On Everyday Life in the Polish Countryside

Before continuing, it is necessary to explain the everyday life approach that I have taken in narrating the lives of Polish farmers in the Second Republic. Since its inception around the 1970s as an offshoot of Marxist-inspired social history, the history of everyday life (in German, *Alltagsgeschichte*) has sought to recover, as Alf Lüdtke explained, “the life and survival of those who have remained largely anonymous in history—the ‘nameless’ multitudes in their workaday trials and tribulations, [and] their occasional outbursts.”32 Inhabitants of the rural sphere are an ideal population to study using the theoretical and practical tenets of the history of everyday life if only because they have often remained silenced in the historical record. Indeed, as we will see, the villagers on which this study focuses, were marginalized not only by the historical record, but also by the circumstances of their own society. In short, they and their stories were never meant to be the stuff of history.

For practitioners of this approach, studying everyday life allows historians to focus on “small units” while revealing and understanding these units in the context of larger historical phenomena.33 This does not mean the categorical rejection of metanarratives or high politics, but rather it asks us to decenter the focus of such structures and processes and to consider how they were experienced and lived by ordinary people. In the following pages, I am interested in how we can tell the story of the end of the partitions and subsequent state-building of Poland’s Second Republic, not through the lens of diplomacy and high politics, but through the stories and voices

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33 Ibid., 15.
of the farmers on whom such processes had such a profound effect. The result is a story that recreates the resurrection of the Polish state by imagining what it might have meant for an otherwise unremarkable person living in a truly remarkable time.

Some historians have conceived of everyday life as that which constitutes the “unofficial relations of power” that undermined state authority, while others have described it as “everyday interactions that in some way involved the state.” In writing this dissertation, I have adopted an approach that considers farmers’ explicit interactions with the state, though in some circumstances, the state is only tangentially related to local events as they unfold. The study highlights what some might consider mundane occurrences—farming techniques and exercising—that were central to farmers’ daily experiences in interwar Poland to demonstrate the new meaning these activities took on, especially for rural youth and women.

1.4 Why Farmers Are Not Peasants (Unless They Want To Be)

Readers of this dissertation will also notice that I have opted not to refer to the subjects of my study as peasants. In the cases where the term is used, it is either used to describe pre-emancipated serfs or is a translation from the original Polish *chłop* that some farmers still used well into the period under analysis. *Chłop* carries with it significant baggage associated with the long-lasting enserfment of people who worked the land. Subject to the power of their local landlords, peasants in the Polish lands, were not considered full citizens until their emancipation over the course of the 19th century. Thus, to refer to farmers as peasants by the interwar period

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36 The premier work on the emancipation of Polish-speaking peasants is Kieniewicz, *The Emancipation of the Polish Peasantry*. Peasants in Prussian Poland were emancipated slowly during the first two decades of the 19th century. In Austrian Galicia, peasants gained
is inaccurate and anachronistic. Still, the farmers I study frequently used the term and its adjectival form, *chłopski*, in their own self-descriptions. That they used such vocabulary is a marker of the strength of feudalism’s legacies in interwar Poland, but also reveals something about farmers’ own insecurities about themselves. In the pages that follow, we will encounter a population that was constantly struggling to find its place in the context of Polish society and the Polish nation. The lasting use of *chłop*, therefore, denotes farmers’ own difficulties in seeing themselves as equal citizens of the reconstituted state.

But to think that *chłop* was an acceptable title all farmers adopted and used is a mistake. Instead, it was quite polemical. As we will see, over the course of the interwar period, smallholders increasingly referred to themselves as *rolnicy* (farmers) and their profession as *rolnictwo* (agriculture), marking a distinct change in their self-perception. This new self-definition, I argue, was the result of young farmers’ increased access to scientific agricultural education and technological advancement that separated them in very real ways from their less modern ancestors. Most frequently, such a transition manifested itself in generational tensions. In short, rural youth often considered themselves to be farmers, but might still have seen their parents as peasants. The process of “converting” peasants into farmers took years to “complete,” extending deep into the post-World War II era. Even today, villagers might use *chłop* or its feminine forms, *chłopka* or *baba*, to describe someone, though now it is most often considered a pejorative.

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emancipation in 1848 as a result of the People’s Spring. In Russian Poland, peasants were not emancipated until 1864.

1.5 **Sources and Methodology**

Studying the everyday lives of Polish farmers during the interwar period poses several problems for the historian. As readers of this dissertation will learn, though illiteracy rates of rural Poles shrank during the period in question, ordinary farmers left few extant sources. Moreover, studying something as amorphous as everyday life requires archivists to maintain collections that few, perhaps, would consider historically important. Still, I was lucky to find, sometimes unexpectedly, a treasure-trove of documents despite archivists’ protestations that they had nothing for me to review.

Before explaining my sources and methods in more depth, it is necessary, first, to comment on the accessibility and existence of sources that pertain to interwar Poland. The 1939 invasion of Poland by the Nazis and Soviets resulted in the destruction of many documents. As one can imagine, the government documents that historians of interwar Poland would want to access, were housed in filing cabinets of offices across the country, many of them destroyed by the artillery or air bombardment at the start of the war or during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Those documents that survived the war have been preserved in archives, but many more were lost forever. This dissertation, and arguably all histories of interwar Poland, will perhaps offer more questions than answers if only because the information we so desire is gone. I experienced this firsthand when upon locating the finding aid to the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (*Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych*, MRIRR) collection housed in Warsaw’s Archive of New Documents (*Archiwum Akt Nowych*, AAN), I learned that most of the collection’s documents are from the period of the 1930s; the rest were lost during the war.

Still, the sources that are housed in archives are numerous. This dissertation is the result of research conducted using collections primarily housed in Warsaw (at the AAN and the Archive of
the Department of the History of the Rural Movement (Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego, ZHRL), but also Poznań (at the State Archive in Poznań, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, APP) and in Kraków (at the National Archive in Kraków, Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie, ANK). Upon beginning my research, my primary concern was to find as many rural voices as possible. As a result, the dissertation focuses less on traditionally studied rural leaders about whom volumes have already been written such as Wincenty Witos or Tomasz Nocznicki and their respective political parties (though they do make an occasional cameo appearance), and privileges the ordinary, and sometimes even nameless, villagers inhabiting the countryside. To access such individual voices, I have made use of “ego-documents,”—letters, essays, poems, and memoirs—produced by Polish villagers themselves. Thanks, in particular, to contemporary scholars’ interest in rural society, we have access to an especially rich collection of farmers’ essay competition submissions. Critical reading of these essays is crucial because villagers wrote them oftentimes with their audience in mind in the hopes that a favorable answer to a prompt would win the competition’s grand prize. These essays do, however, reveal a glimpse into farmers’ personal thoughts and opinions, and demonstrate, in many cases, sincere openness and candor.

Letters to the editor found in a bevy of rural newspapers also offer similar access to villagers’ thoughts and ideas. These sources must also be taken with a grain of salt. Brian Porter-Szűcs once warned me that historians run the risk of encountering fabricated letters that newspaper staff wrote and subsequently published incognito. Luckily, in most circumstances, I was able to locate the originals of such letters—some even rife with farmers’ orthographic errors and editors’ corrections—and make use of them in my analysis without fear of their inauthenticity. Other portions of newspapers also proved to be especially useful in constructing my narrative. The growing rates of villagers’ literacy during the interwar period resulted in an increased demand for
information and coincided with the explosion of the rural press. Thus, historians have access to a wide variety of newspapers and periodicals, usually weeklies or biweeklies, geared toward village readers that run the gamut of the political spectrum.

While these sources, often produced by villagers and rural sympathizers, allow access to a great deal of the innermost thoughts of rural dwellers, they are often, nonetheless, self-censored. With this in mind, I frequently found that government documents provided even more personal information than farmers themselves would ever have allowed in their own writings. My most providential discovery of such materials, for example, was an enormous stack of housewife assessment surveys that the Polish state and various agent groups conducted specifically with the intention of gathering information about the private lives of village women and their families. These surveys included the most exciting minutia, such as the daily schedule (complete with an hourly breakdown!) of the rural housewife’s activities, the types of food she fed her family on a regular basis, even the number of pairs of underwear she and her family owned. Such surveys allowed me, not only to reconstruct the living conditions of Polish villagers, but also think more deeply about why the Second Republic collected such information in the first place. Other government documents, specifically the state’s correspondence with individual farmers provided not only insight into farmers’ expectations of the new state, but also helped me reconstruct the state’s image of its rural citizens. Additional government materials used to construct the dissertation include excerpts of court proceedings, internal ministry correspondence, and government-collected statistical information.

1.6 Chapter Outline

This dissertation is made up of seven chapters. The first and last chapters serve as the introduction and conclusion, respectively. The remaining five content chapters are organized both
thematically and chronologically. Each take on a different aspect of rural everyday life in interwar Poland beginning with the start of the First World War and the immediate postwar reaction to independence before ending with the outbreak of the Second World War. Together they tell the story of local rural activism, focusing on individual voices, showcasing villagers’ agency in choosing for themselves and their families their own paths for the future.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two—The War at Home—focuses on the rural home front during the First World War. Here, I assess questions of farmers’ imperial and national loyalties, arguing that villagers were more concerned about their immediate material needs rather than Polish independence as the war’s outcome. During the war, the difficult material situation—a result of destroyed fields and a lack of human and animal labor—left a lasting legacy on rural productivity, Polish nationalism, and social relations years into the interwar period. Chapter Three—The Second Republic Meets the Countryside—examines the early years of the reconstituted Polish state and looks at how government officials tried to make legible to themselves the vastness and diversity of rural Poland. I first trace government efforts to remove imperial structures from the countryside and the effects of such policies on farming communities. From there, I assess the ways state ministries sought to improve and reconstruct the rural sphere—itself a sort of internal colonization—examining how the state inserted itself into rural affairs. I argue that the Second Republic leaders used the data they collected to gain and create knowledge about its rural citizenry and that this production of knowledge was a crucial component of exhibiting its newly established authority.

The presence of the state in the countryside did not go unchallenged, however. The rural response to the state’s efforts is discussed in Chapter Four—The Villagers Speak. This chapter reassesses the origins of rural unrest in the interwar period, revising historiography that focuses on
the economic, cultural, and political factors that led to rural activism and protest. I demonstrate how historians have overlooked the social backdrop in which villagers’ unrest and their resultant activism and protest existed, and explain rural agitation in the context of anti-urban, anti-noble, and anti-state sentiments. Chapters Five and Six examine specific cases of farmers’ involvement in their local communities. Chapter Five—Family Matters—traces the rise of rural youth in interwar Poland. It argues that village youth’s activism was a result of generational tensions within the rural home that led to significant familial discord. With a special focus on leisure, physicality, and temperance, it shows how young villagers imagined themselves to be better Polish nationals than their parents, and, as a result, were the only ones properly equipped to bring the Polish countryside into the future. Similarly, Chapter Six—Modern Girls and New Women—assesses the rise of rural women in interwar Polish villagers and argues that by the end of the interwar period, the rural movement had become increasingly feminized. This chapter deurbanizes historians’ constructions of modern girls and new women, demonstrating these urban types also had rural parallels. Rural women’s activism, though oftentimes tied directly to the rural home, also extended beyond the confines of the village, suggesting that women villagers increasingly became active and practicing citizens of the Second Republic. The final chapter—The End and the Beginning—considers the changing meaning of Poland to farmers during the Second World War and how interwar legacies of village activism informed the rural agenda in the postwar era.
2. THE WAR AT HOME: POLISH VILLAGES THROUGH TOTAL WAR

The roar of the cannons, set just outside their home, did not scare them; they were used to it.
-Piast, 28 February 1915, 9.

2.1 Introduction

Shortly after the outbreak of the Great War in July of 1914, several of Tomasz Nocznicki’s young neighbors nervously visited the leftist rural leader at his home in the village of Lipie, located some thirty miles southwest of Warsaw. Concerned about and visibly shaken by the war’s start, the fresh-faced group, many of whom now faced conscription into the Russian Imperial Army, bemoaned the hostilities, “regretting that the war would destroy the country.”¹ In their lament, the young farmers feared the certain death and destruction that awaited the countryside and its inhabitants. All too aware that their fellow farmers—family members and dear friends—would make up the majority of the Polish-speaking rank and file of the belligerent imperial militaries, they feared their generation’s existence was at risk. Nocznicki listened to his neighbors’ list of concerns, but regarded them with little empathy. In his response, he sugarcoated nothing and rather blithely retorted, “Of course, the entire living generation could be destroyed, but Poland will be free.”² As a longtime, outspoken proponent of Polish national independence with a reputation for being somewhat indelicate and uncompassionate, Nocznicki was not one to mince his words. Both parties—Lipie’s youth and Nocznicki himself—left their exchange unsatisfied and disgruntled that day.

¹ Tomasz Nocznicki, “Moje wspomnienia z ubiegłego życia,” Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego (hereafter ZHRL), P-18, 45. Nocznicki (1862-1944) was an outspoken leader for Polish independence since he became a member of the National League (1904-1906). From 1909-1914, he was the president of the Stanisław Staszic Society of Agricultural Circles, and later became a co-founder and leader of the Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe “Wyzwolenie” (Polish People’s Party “Liberation”) from 1915-1916 in the Congress Kingdom. From 1922-1927, he was a Member of Parliament before serving as a Senator from 1928-1930. He died in 1944 in Słomniki.
² Ibid.
For the group of young farmers, Nocznicki’s quip was far from the comforting guidance, and message of hope and security they were expecting. It was not only the crassness of the leader’s message that the village youth found so problematic, its irredentist nature was likely even more off-putting. For the vast majority of rural Poles, the commencement of the Great War did not inspire thoughts of an independent Polish state which had not existed since 1795. Rather, the war’s outbreak produced a profound fear of starvation, disease epidemics, displacement, loss of life, and wartime destruction. Focusing on the real material and human losses they faced, villagers could hardly consider the more abstract idea of an independent nation-state. That Nocznicki believed the war to be an opportunity for a national resurrection was hardly typical, especially among the Polish-speaking rural population. Of course, considering that Nocznicki wrote his memoir toward the end of his life, it is also very likely that he added his supposed confidence in Poland’s reemergence long after the reconstitution of the state.

Nocznicki’s great disappointment stemmed from his belief that his neighbors had too jejune an understanding of the war. Too blinded were they by the losses they would face, he reckoned, that farmers could not comprehend the war’s wider potential and impact for a national resurrection. As a result, he feared that their naïveté would sound the death knell of even just the idea of an independent Polish state. In his memoir, Nocznicki rather heroically and proudly proclaims to have known from the onset of the war that Poland’s phoenix-like rising was imminent,

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3 The Prussian, Austrian, and Russian Empires partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795) a total of three times, first in 1772, then in 1793, and finally in 1795. Following the third partitioning, no independent Polish state existed until 1918 when Poland’s Second Republic was founded following the collapse of the partitioning empires after the First World War. For more on the partitioning of Poland and the development of Polish culture over the course of the 19th century see Piotr S. Wandycz, The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795-1918 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972).
and was aggravated that so few of his fellow farmers, if any at all, thought similarly. Lamenting Polish villagers’ indifference toward an independent Polish state, he wrote,

I must say that from the beginning of the war, I knew that Poland would be a battleground, I knew that our country, that these our quiet villages would go up in smoke, but I was strengthened by the hope that our country, that our nation, would take advantage of this. Unfortunately, influenced by what I saw around me, that hope was shaken. Those people, the ones I had around me, did not think at all about any independence.4

Nocznicki’s frustrations toward his neighbors were comparable to those felt by other nationalist leaders in East-Central Europe.5 For a whole host of reasons, rural populations in the multiethnic empires of the region were indifferent or ambivalent to nationalist causes. As we will see in the case of rural Poles presented in this chapter, the national indifference farmers exhibited during the Great War resulted from a complex combination of imperial and military loyalties combined with an ambivalence toward state authority and a growing concern over quality of life issues and material losses. For most rural Polish-speakers, more time was spent worrying about access to food, arable land, seed, and livestock, while thwarting disease and wartime destruction, than which state was in power and the theoretical existence of an independent Polish nation-state. Over the course of the First World War, Polish-speaking villagers embraced, but also rejected their imperial overlords, flirted with and simultaneously renounced the idea of an independent Poland, but most importantly tried under the most dire of circumstances to go about their everyday lives. That Polish-speakers, particularly those living in the countryside, differed so widely in their vision of the future of Poland, convincingly demonstrates that the reemergence of an independent Polish nation-state was hardly an inevitable phenomenon.

When news of the outbreak of the Great War reached Polish lands, Polish-speakers’ reactions were overwhelmingly somber and macabre. In contrast to the reveling crowds that celebrated the proclamation of war on Munich’s Odeonplatz or those gathered to watch the grandiose parades of military might that passed through Berlin’s boulevards, little about the war’s beginning seemed hopeful for Poles.\textsuperscript{6} Since the late eighteenth-century partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by its imperial neighbors—Austria, Prussia, and Russia—Poles of all social classes lived divided from their national brethren. Because the war made military enemies of the Russians against the Germans and Austrians, the Polish lands located on the margins of these bellicose empires, became one site of the war’s Eastern Front. Divided geographically, but also exhibiting competing imperial, military, and even national identities, the Polish situation during the First World War tested all sorts of loyalties. With Imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary waging war against Tsarist Russia, Poles found themselves in the middle of a poorly understood war as one another’s enemies. For Polish nationalists, the war was a lesson in fratricide, a veritable civil war where Pole fought against Pole on behalf of imperial powers that had for too long oppressed them. They feared the destruction of Polish land and lives. Their fears were justified.

Mere weeks into the war, entire swathes of the Polish countryside already laid in ruins. As the first “total war,” there was little distinction between the war and home fronts.\textsuperscript{7} Armies entered

\textsuperscript{6} Peter Fritzsche, \textit{Germans into Nazis} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3, 13-16. Images of Europeans, particularly Germans and Brits, celebrating the start of the war are common. All too frequently, however, historians have used such depictions to generalize about some sort of shared European excitement associated with going to war. Realistically, more Europeans generally lamented the various declarations of war than celebrated it. For more on this important reality see, Michael S. Neiberg, \textit{Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{7} For more on the characteristics of a “total war” and its historical development see Arthur Marwick, ed., \textit{Total War and Social Change} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988) and John
villages, pilfered them for badly needed resources and, in their retreat, oftentimes razed them to their muddy foundations. Rural newspapers published articles reporting the extent of the ongoing destruction, decrying in ominous detail its ill effects on “the most vulnerable Polish people.” By October of 1914, readers of Piast, a Kraków-based rural conservative newspaper, would find out, if they had not already experienced these effects first hand, that Galicia’s fate was bleak: “Destroyed villages, the wasted possessions of hundreds of thousands of peasants, land ruined for tens of years, hunger and disease—these are the effects of war that can be seen in three-quarters of our country.”

Over the course of the war, this very real threat to Poles and the territories they inhabited loomed over their heads.

Polish-speaking farmers, however, were hardly passive in their response to the war. Whether they were mobilized into imperial military battalions, took active leadership positions in their communities back at home, or went about their work in their fields, villagers and their contributions to the war effort were a key component of wartime politics. This chapter offers a window into the lives of Polish farmers during the Great War. It begins by analyzing how leaders at both the imperial and, more importantly, local levels tried to convince villagers to support the war effort. Representatives of the imperial powers as well as local Polish leaders played to farmers’ imperialist and nationalist sympathies, to the extent that they harbored any, in an attempt to garner rural support for the war. Sometimes convincing, but oftentimes not, these attempts demonstrate that farmers’ support was understood as a key component for wartime successes.

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The chapter then moves to an analysis of everyday life in the wartime Polish village. As we will see, the first year of war wrought significant havoc on the Polish countryside, leaving fields and villages laid to waste. As is typical of a “total war,” the boundaries between the war and home fronts were completely blurred and the experience of battle, especially the death and destruction that accompanied it, became part and parcel of the fabric of everyday life. Even when the warfront moved out of the historic Polish lands in the summer of 1915, the damage caused by various battles was done, and insufficient resources were made available to recuperate the war-torn lands. As war waged on and civilians grew fatigued of the culture of shortage and sacrifice they were living, Polish rural social relations began to disintegrate. Farmers began to turn on one another, grew increasingly suspicious of urban Poles, and lost more and more faith in the efficacy of the imperial states that ruled over them. Thus, after the war, when the Second Polish Republic emerged as a fledgling, democratic nation-state, it did not bring about the triumphant resurrection of the unified Poland that nationalists had hoped for. Instead, characterized by social disintegration and cultural distance, the new nation-state was still very much a broken land.

2.2 Rural Mobilization and Imperial Loyalties

As they began to mobilize resources and convert their economies to meet wartime needs, the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires turned to their multiethnic subjects for support. To lure the hearts and minds of the people, imperial leaders played into specific imperial and nationalist sympathies to convince Poles of all social classes to back the war effort. Jesse Kauffman has described this process arguing that imperial leaders, particularly Germans, “had never lost sight of the fact that Polish opinion would be of importance in any central European war.”

Accordingly, all three partitioning powers offered Poles a deal of semi-autonomy in the event of a

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successful war outcome in exchange for their support, promising to unite the partitioned Polish lands for the first time in over a century. Russian Grand Duke Nicholas even went so far as to issue a manifesto on 15 August 1914 addressed to Russian Poles claiming, “The Russian troops bring to you the happy message of reconciliation. May the frontiers disappear that divide the Polish nation, thus making of them a unity under the sceptre of the Emperor of Russia! Under that sceptre Poland will be reborn, free in religion, in language and in self-government...”\textsuperscript{10} And on 5 November 1916, after they had pushed out the Russian military and occupied former Russian-Polish lands, the German and Austrian Imperial Governments issued a joint statement declaring the formation of a Polish Kingdom in the shadow of the tsarist empire. Keenly aware that support from the bottom was as necessary as strong leadership at the top, imperial leaders wasted no time in striking all kinds of deals in exchange for Polish backing.

Unsurprisingly, the ways Poles reacted to these appeals were varied and complex. This spectrum of Polish responses depended on a number of variables, including the particular partition in which one lived, one’s social class, and the degree of one’s sense of national belonging, among other factors. Polish rural opinion reflected the various political and ideological interpretations found more generally in Polish-speaking society, but as we will see, added another layer of complication. Historian Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz has argued that in Galicia, when it came to understanding the fate of Poland during the Great War, Poles belonged to two groups.\textsuperscript{11} The first of these groups was a branch of the “Kraków conservatives and the so-called Polish democrats.” This group, Dunin-Wąsowicz argues, advocated the “Austro-Polish solution.” This solution sought to link the Kingdom of Galicia with the Austro-Hungarian Empire in such a way that replaced the

\textsuperscript{10} Quoted in Kauffman, \textit{Elusive Alliance}, 26.

dual monarchy with a triple monarchy, elevating the political status of Poles and Poland within the imperial government. The second group he identifies, the so-called “Independence Camp,” was a coalition of various political groups including the Galician Socialists (PPSD), populists from both branches of the rural movement, and groups of progressive democrats. As the name suggests, the Independence Camp advocated for a separate Polish nation-state, exclusive of an imperial system. Despite the differences, both factions supported the war effort as a means to two very different ends.

Though both groups were dominated by the intelligentsia, they also enjoyed some rural membership. A significant number of village youth, for example, who at the start of the war reportedly sided with leftist radicals, were motivated by a romantic “longing for their own independent state.” Newspapers from the rural left published articles calling on Polish farmers leave their farms and join the imperial militaries to take up the fight for independence stating, “Remember that we are Poles and so the top obligation, the intended purpose of our work is the liberation of our Fatherland.” Still, irredentist movements were much less popular than programs

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13 In December, 1913, because of internal ideological differences, the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (the Polish People’s Party), split into two separate groups. The *PSL Lewica*, led by Jan Stapiński, was the left-wing faction, while *PSL Piast*, the right-wing faction, was led by Jakub Bojko and Wincenty Witos. For more on the causes and consequences of this split see, Narkiewicz, *The Green Flag*, 131-143.
15 Józef Kaźmierczak, “Niech żyje Polska,” *Przyjaciel Ludu*, 23 August 1914, 2. The 23 August 1914 issue of *Przyjaciel Ludu* was the final issue of the newspaper published during the war. In an attempt to curb irredentism, Austrian censors banned the publication of the newspaper. This resulted in a significant silencing of the radical left in Galician Poland, thus allowing the typically pro-imperial, more conservative faction of the rural press to expand in both distribution and leadership. Part of the draw of the rightwing newspapers, as Dunin-Wąsowicz points out, is that it also printed the names of the killed, missing, and wounded in each of its weekly installments over the war.
that supported imperial loyalties. In each of the partitions, rural Poles generally supported their imperial leaders and even willingly joined their militaries. In Russian Poland, for example, German imperial forces found that Polish-speaking farmers were “generally loyal to the Tsar, despised ‘their’ nobility, and were not interested in nationalism.”

In the Austrian context, conservative rural leaders pointed to commonly accepted notions of Franz Jozef’s imperial paternalism, suggesting that a more realist response to the war, that is, fighting as Poles on behalf of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was a demonstration of loyalty and support. Such examples have led scholars to argue that, “Central Europe in 1914 was still overwhelmingly a world of imperial loyalties.”

But how genuine were these imperial loyalties and on what were they based? Were they, in fact, rooted in actual concern for the success of Poles’ imperial overlords, or were they more practical, or even opportunistic? An analysis of rural Poles during the First World War indicates that a third faction of Poles existed in between those who supported the partitioning powers and those who called for outright Polish independence. This third, mostly silent, and therefore less identifiable group, was perhaps the most populous of the three: those who were indifferent to the war’s outcome. Those villagers who fell within this category did not necessarily see any utility in an independent Polish nation-state, until their material needs necessitated one. For this group, the

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state that lorded over them was less important than whether they had access to the material needs they required for everyday life. In this sense, it did not necessarily matter to them the outcome of the war—whether the victorious state was Austrian, German, Russian, or Polish—so long as their needs were met. When the material needs required for everyday life were lacking or non-existent, farmers’ supportive attitudes toward the current state power floundered and they sought out alternative political arrangements. Thus, when the Empires, hampered economically by the war, could no longer provide the goods and social services needed to maintain a fruitful Polish countryside, specifically, adequate seed, animal and human labor, and arable land, rural Poles searched for and supported a new political order. In short, it was materialism and not necessarily national or imperial loyalties that changed villagers’ attitudes and helped bring about an independent Poland at the end of the First World War.\(^\text{19}\)

During the Great War, rural Poles were a largely imperially and nationally indifferent group who would rather have worked in their fields undisturbed by high politics, than promise their support to any one particular group. To be sure, some farmers did consider themselves the Kaiser’s or Tsar’s subjects, others thought of themselves as strictly Poles, while others even assumed both distinctions, but many hardly considered how they chose to identify as reason to mobilize in any organized way. Thus, a case study of rural Poles during the First World War can add to scholars’ understanding of national indifference or ambivalence.\(^\text{20}\) According to Tara Zahra

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\(^{19}\) Michael Seidman has discussed at length the centrality of materialism to wartime success in the context of the Spanish Civil War. See Michael Seidman, *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

\(^{20}\) Gary Cohen first introduced the idea of national indifference in his monograph, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). However, in the past decade or so, a new generation of scholars have added a great deal more understanding to the complexities of national indifference making particularly important strides as they explored its historicization, methodology, and meaning. Perhaps the most influential of
national indifference can “describe several different kinds of behavior” that “could entail the complete absence of national loyalties as many individuals identified more strongly with religious, class, local, regional, professional, or familial communities, or even with [an imperial] dynasty, than with a single nation.”\textsuperscript{21} In the case study presented here, we see that even those rural Poles who assumed an association with Poland and Polishness did not always see the utility of an independent Poland, suggesting that it was difficult for many to imagine a post-imperial world and a free Polish nation-state, or that it simply was not on their practical list of priorities. As we will see, support for one’s empire did not necessarily mean acceptance of the imperial order, nor did disapproval mean a rejection of it. Instead, what mattered was the extent to which everyday life was less negatively affected by the ongoing war.\textsuperscript{22}

The difficulty that befalls historians of national indifference however is locating instances of indifference in archival sources. As Zahra has written, “Indifference to nationalism was rarely a memorable historical event. It was not typically recorded in newspapers, broadcast in speeches and political manifestos, memorialized through public monuments, or celebrated with festivals and songs… National indifference therefore appears most clearly at the moments that nationalists mobilized to eliminate it.”\textsuperscript{23} The sheer volume of rural newspaper articles that called for rural mobilization as well as imperial and local leaders’ numerous attempts to mobilize local populations to action suggests that rural politicians were overwhelmed by the level of villagers’ ambivalence toward the war effort. Together, rural political leaders and their parties’ corresponding newspapers

\textsuperscript{21} Zahra, \textit{Kidnapped Souls}, 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Such was also the case in urban centers, especially Warsaw. See Blobaum, \textit{A Minor Apocalypse}, 58-100.
\textsuperscript{23} Zahra, \textit{Kidnapped Souls}, 5.
worked hard to impress upon their otherwise indifferent rural readership and constituents the importance of active participation in the war effort. Such a task was especially difficult when support demanded significant sacrifice on farmers’ behalf. To bolster farmers’ participation in the war effort, rural leaders played a witty game of rhetorical imperial politics underlined by popular and familiar notions of Polish romanticism to explain the importance of war. This rhetoric suggests that rural support was crucial in maintaining the *status quo ante*, and was even believed to help bring about more liberties for Poles.

In Galician Poland, it was not uncommon to hear rural leaders invoke the name of the dreaded Russian Empire to convince farmers that the war was worth fighting. Claiming that the Austro-Hungarian monarchy needed to send Poles to fight against “our nation’s eternal enemy, our eternal oppressor,” village politicians claimed that the war was to be understood as one of vengeance against Russia for all the injustices it had historically imposed upon Poles.²⁴ Though quite a powerful sentiment, one that could easily resonate with a wider populace than just farmers, such rhetoric was also rife with contradiction. Rural leaders explained to their mostly uneducated constituency that since the late eighteenth-century partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Poles were subject to excessive exploitation because of tsarist oppression. Newspaper journalists confirmed these statements stating, “Twice since the partitioning of our Fatherland, have we fought against the northern tyrant, with the bloody tsar, and twice have we surrendered. THE HISTORY OF THE RUSSIAN PARTITION IS ONE BLOODY PAGE that stretches from the Vistula to the frozen Siberian lands, from the Warsaw Citadel, through penal labor in the Urals, to the cold region of the Arctic Ocean.”²⁵ In painting the Russian Empire as the

²⁵ Ibid.
enemy of Poles since time immemorial, politicians and journalists reminded or perhaps even taught Galician farmers of the failed romantic uprisings of the Poles against Russia in November 1830 and January 1861. In contrast, in an unsurprising moment of historical amnesia and in order to paint their home empire and its German ally in a more positive light, leaders made no mention of the strict Germanization policies imposed upon Poles in the German partition, nor of the 1846 Galician Uprising during which Austrian officials enticed Polish-speaking peasants to massacre members of the Polish landowning class, the group that was then the only politically Polish group in Galician society.26 In this war, relations between Polish-speakers and their imperial leaders had to remain unmarred by the pen of history.

Attacking the Poles’ “eternal enemy” was not only a matter of exacting revenge on Russia for oppressing its Polish minority. It was also a matter of protecting Polish “civilization” and culture from the perceived “darkness” and “backwardness” that characterized Russian imperial space. Early in the war, rural leaders reminded Polish farmers that “Millions of the Polish nation, who for close to one and half centuries have remained in relationship with the Austrian Monarchy and the German State, have reached outstanding [levels] of cultural development.”27 How this message of such high cultural development resonated with rural Poles, particularly those living in Galicia, is questionable considering that Galicia was the most poverty-stricken region of the Habsburg Empire. Likewise, in Prussian Poland, the use of the Polish language was heavily

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27 “Do Narodu Polskiego!...” *Piast*, 16 August 1914, 1.
restricted. This whitewashing of German-Polish and Austro-Polish relations, however, was a necessary tool used to help garner support for the war against Russia. At the same time, it helped explain the potential effect farmers in Austrian and German territory could have on their brethren in the Congress Kingdom.

In an appeal to his “brother peasants,” PSL Piast politician Andrzej Średniawski, who hailed from Górna Wieś outside of Myślenice in Lesser Poland, advocated the war against Russia if only to protect the Polish farmers living there, with the end goal of bringing them into the fold of the Austrian Empire. “It is obvious,” he wrote,

that in the Kingdom it was not allowed to write in any publication, in any book, about Poland, nor of our great past, and that is why the national identity (świadomość narodowa) of the rural people there is not awakened. This identity is necessary to awaken fervor there, and only our riflemen, sons of Galician peasants, can manage to awaken it. They should intervene there as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{28}

Średniawski’s statement is telling for two reasons. First, it both assumes Galician farmers’ national identification as Polish and, also acknowledges the uneven development of national identity among the Polish-speaking rural populations of partitioned Poland. Średniawski assumed that because of a lack of access to writings and book about Poland and its history, villagers in Russian Poland were largely unaware of their supposed Polishness compared to their Galician co-nationals. This dearth of “print-capitalism,” a key component of the development of national identity, as Benedict Anderson has theorized, resulted in an enormous population of nationally unaware, and perhaps even indifferent, farmers.\textsuperscript{29} Secondly, but perhaps more importantly, Średniawski saw the duty of

\textsuperscript{28} Adam Średniawski, “Do Braci Chłopów!” 	extit{Piast}, 16 August 1914, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{29} For more on the centrality of print-capitalism to the development of national identity see Benedict Anderson, 	extit{Imagined Communities} (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 37-46. Anderson’s hypothesis is confirmed by the memoir of Galician peasant Jan Słomka in 	extit{From Serfdom to Self-Government: Memoirs of a Polish Village Mayor, 1842-1927}, trans. William John Rose (London: Minerva, 1941). When discussing the development of his own Polish national identity, Słomka wrote, “I myself did not know that I was a Pole till I began to read...
nationally aware Polish farmers to fight against Russian troops to serve as the national mentors of their rural brethren. On the surface, Średniawski’s appeal is a call to Galician villagers to take up arms against Russia for the protection of other Poles. More realistically, however, his statement suggests a much more profound nationalist fear, that is, that because Russian Poles were largely unaware of their Polishness and were thus at risk of being lost to the Polish nation forever, something had to be done to bring them into the national fold. In this sense, Średniawski’s words are more paternalistic in manner, demanding support for farmers in Russia, not necessarily out of need or even philanthropy, but rather because on the sliding scale of nationalist identity, they were at the bottom. Galician farmers, some of whom since the late nineteenth century adopted and adapted their own sense of Polishness, saw their co-national brethren in Congress Kingdom as their national inferiors. In this sense, nationalist activists could treat nationally indifferent or ignorant rural Polish-speakers not as national equals, but as subjects capable of being nationalized. Bridging this gap of uneven nationalist development in the rural sphere across Poland would become the focus of rural leaders in Poland’s Second Republic.

This playing of empires off one another was not only a rhetorical tool of the Galician political leadership. In Russian Poland, satirical anti-German songs and poems entered even the most ordinary person’s repertoire during the war, particularly amongst the Polish-speaking rank and file of the Russian military. One such poem, “A Greater Poland Peasant to a Prussian,” written originally around 1908, but popularized during the war when it appeared in satirical anti-German books and papers, and I fancy that other villagers came to be aware of their national attachment much in the same way,” 171.

30 On the development of Polish nationalism among peasants in Galician Poland, see Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village*. One limitation of Stauter-Halsted’s work, however, is that the population she studies is still the upper echelon of Galician rural society, suggesting that the nationalist identification of the lower social stratum of the village was either still in development or even non-existent.
pamphlets, referenced both German colonization policy in Eastern Prussia and historic battles between Polish- and German-speaking peoples to demonstrate the longstanding antagonisms between the two national groups. In its opening, the poem calls attention to Prussian colonization policies that sought to displace Polish farmers from Eastern Prussian land only to be replaced by German ones, reading, “In villainous ways, / You decreed that from their fathers’ lands, / The Polish folk be exiled. / And now, Prussian viper, you want / For the peasant to protect his cottage gates / From revolution”.

Though German colonization policies failed largely in part because of a German-speaking farmers’ unwillingness to leave their homes, it was nonetheless a major point of contention between Polish-speaking farmers and their German imperial leaders, and thus a topic easily exploitable to engender Polish anti-German fervor. Through its vivid imagery of bloodied peasants shackled to their cottage gates, the poem also depicts in gory detail how Polish farmers might fare under German rule. In this way, the poem served to encourage Polish villagers to take up “their scythes, their flails” and march against their Prussian oppressors, and thus support their Russian imperial neighbor instead.

Though the attempts of both imperial and local leaders to rally farmers to support the war effort and enlist in the imperial militaries were somewhat successful, they were not always indicative of any sort of outright loyalty or nationalist ideology. To be sure, rural Poles did join the rank and file of their respective imperial militaries. Of the 3,376,000 estimated Poles serving in the empires’ armies during the First World War, the majority were of rural background. In the

German Army, for example, 450,000 of the estimated 780,000 enlisted Poles were farmers.\textsuperscript{33} And relatively few farmers joined the ranks of General Józef Piłsudski’s Polish Legions in Galicia.\textsuperscript{34} If villagers were less inclined toward imperial or national sentiments, however, how and why did so many of them willingly join the ranks of the imperial armies? For those who were politically supportive of their imperial governments, working on behalf of the empires was understood as obligatory. But for those whose feelings were more ambivalent, the source of motivation is difficult to determine. In some instances, it was opportunism, rather than a genuine sense of military and political support, that drove farmers to support the imperial state. In this sense, Polish villagers exhibited a high degree of personal agency in their decisions to join the imperial armies.

Military service offered farmers respite from the ordinary routine of rural life and in some cases provided them with much needed education and special training that was otherwise unavailable in the countryside. Many saw enlistment as an opportunity to travel abroad, experience new cultures, and in some cases, even leave their family homes permanently. In this sense, enlistment into the military was not always an action taken out of any sort of particular loyalty or even sense of duty, but rather a farmer’s own decision to expand his horizons and move beyond the confines of his home village.\textsuperscript{35} In an essay he wrote in 1935, farmer Antoni Zieliński, who owned and operated a farm outside of Poznań credited his experience in the German military


\textsuperscript{34} In November of 1914, of the 11,480 Polish Legionnaires, only 825 (7.18\%) were farmers. From February 1915 to April of 1916, farmers made up 12.5\% of the 6, 298 Legionnaires, however considering that farmers made up nearly sixty-five of the Polish-speaking population, this is still considerably small. Ibid., 116.

\textsuperscript{35} The issue of Polish loyalty in the German military during the First World War has recently come under historical inquiry. For a case study of Polish soldiers’ behavior and loyalty in the German Army see Alexander Watson, “Fighting for Another Fatherland: The Polish Minority in the German Army, 1914-1918,” \textit{English Historical Review} 126, no. 522 (2010): 1137-1166.
during the First World War for his ability to read and learn modern farming techniques. After returning from the war, Zieliński began to use his newly acquired farming skills on his family farm and sometimes criticized his father’s more traditional farming practices. Similarly, enlistment also brought with it increased benefits for soldiers’ families. Soldiers’ wives, known as *rezerwistki*, received increased state aid compared to other members of society in exchange for their husbands’ military service. For example, if a soldier had a wife and four children, his family could expect to receive five *kronen* and sixty *häller* daily. Aware that war would bring increased hardships, these important increased funds could have been motivation enough for farmers to enlist.

As we can see, immediately following the outbreak of war, both imperial and local rural leaders worked to garner support for their home empire’s war effort. Playing to both imperial and national sympathies, which often fell upon deaf ears, these leaders tried to give meaning to a war that rural society understood poorly. When men did enlist in the imperial militaries, it was not always out of genuine imperial loyalty or because of overwhelming national sentiments, but rather because joining the military offered better life opportunities, even under the threat of war and death, than did life on the farm. But while imperial and local leaders waxed on with romantic notions of sacrifice and heroism at the warfront, the home front was facing a new, darker reality. Within weeks of the war’s outbreak, the line between the warfront and home front ceased to exist.

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37 “Zasilki dla rodzin powołanych do wojska,” *Przyjaciel Ludu*, 9 August 1914, 2. State aid for soldiers’ families started on the day of enlistment and ended on the day the soldier returned back home. If a soldier was killed in battle, went missing, or was taken prisoner, family welfare payments were eliminated.
2.3 The Countryside as Home Front

In contrast to the Western Front of the Great War, the Eastern Front, despite being significantly more deadly and dynamic, has received little attention from scholars. More recently, historians of East-Central Europe have begun to fill this lacuna providing us with Eastern Front studies, though this historiography remains comparatively scant. Still, the majority of social histories of the First World War are concerned with soldiers’ experience on the warfront and home front studies have only recently begun to enter academic discourse. The attention that scholars such as Susan Grayzel, Belinda Davis, Maureen Healy, and Robert Blobaum have paid to the experience at the home front are invaluable in understanding the experience of mostly women, children, and the elderly during the Great War. However, these studies are focused primarily on the urban home front and thus leave open for analysis, the case of the rural experience. How did

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38 The occasion of the centenary of the outbreak of the war resulted in a influx of World War I studies. For a historiographical analysis of the field that lists many (though not all) of the recent scholarship on the war see Alan Kramer, “Recent Historiography of the First World War,” parts I and II, Journal of Modern European History 12 (2014): 5-27, 155-174. Maria Bucur estimates that 6,000,000 soldiers and more than 6,000,000 civilians lost their lives on the Eastern Front compared to 3,000,000 soldiers and 50,000 civilians on the Western Front in Maria Bucur, Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth Century Romania (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 51.


40 See Susan Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), Davis, Home Fires Burning, Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire, and Blobaum, “A City in Flux,” and “A Different Kind of Home Front.”

Polish farmers experience the Great War? How did the war affect the rural landscape in the both the short- and long-term? And how did farmers fare as producers and providers, but also consumers, of state-rationed foodstuffs?

To write about the Polish rural experience during war, however, requires an explanation of the term “homefront.” Susan Grayzel observed that the concept of the home front emerged during the First World War as people tried to create an imagined separation between the belligerent and domestic spheres. The distinction between the two spheres, however, was often fluid. During the Great War, soldiers and civilian populations saw and experienced the war in unprecedented ways, encountering the supposedly separate spheres whenever they walked into military hospitals, received postcards, or drank Ersatz coffee. Even in situations where the home front did not experience the destruction of war, for example Vienna, the homefront-warfront binary existed as an imagined construct. But unlike Vienna, the Polish lands, in particular the countryside, were not afforded the luxury of being distant from the warzone; they were, instead, the site of mass carnage and destruction. In rural Poland, the line between warfront and home front did not exist.

Thus, to speak of a Polish “home front” is, to some extent, a misnomer. Though the term has its English-language origins in the First World War and even has a German cousin in Hinterlandsfront, the Polish language lacks an equivalent word that adequately describes the domestic realm during wartime. The closest translation, tył or tyły frontu, literally the rear or the front’s rear, connotes the back section of a warfront where military supplies and medics’ tents were kept and stationed far out of reach of the enemy’s artillery fire. To reference the goings-on of the

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42 Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War, 11.
43 Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy, 8.
44 Ibid., 5. Healy takes great care in differentiating between Heimat, Hinterland, and Hinterlandsfront, the three German words similar in meaning to “home” that circulated around wartime Vienna.
rural sphere, sources simply used the more collective *wsi* or *wioski* (villages), rather than connoting a wholly separate sphere distant from, but related to the war. But why did this more domestic meaning not come about in Poland during the First World War and how might we come to characterize the Polish rural home front despite this linguistic lacuna?

The case of Polish villages at wartime demonstrates quite clearly the lack of separation between the war and domestic fronts. Nearly every major battle and military operation that took place in the historic Polish lands occurred in the countryside and the war negatively affected nearly ninety percent of the territory of the future Polish Second Republic. For rural Poland then, when it came to the beginning months of the war, there was virtually no difference between the war and home fronts. The story of the Polish countryside during the war, especially in its first year, is not one of bucolic peace separated from the realities of war, but rather one of death and destruction. War was a lived experience of everyday life in villages, not something that had to be imagined in state-driven propaganda, literature, or postcards. When, in the summer of 1915, the front moved out of Polish territory, the memory of living through the harshest carnage of the war, and the fears that informed and characterized farmers’ wartime mentalities during its initial months, remained very much alive. The destruction caused by the first year of the war alone irrevocably changed the rural landscape, affecting the fertility of the soil, and thus the quality of the yield of subsequent harvests.

2.4 **Everyday Life at War in Rural Poland**

The first year of the war was the most bellicose for the Polish countryside. Within weeks of troops’ mobilization, trenches and bomb craters peppered the once lush fields and entire villages fell empty and laid in ruins as hundreds of thousands of farmers fled their family farms in search

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45 Molenda, “Chłopi polscy w 1914 roku,” 114.
of safety. Starvation and disease spread rapidly and few felt hopeful about their future. PSL-Piast leader Wincenty Witos described this general despondence saying,

And what with the land? This holy, Polish, beloved land-nourisher (**karmicielka**), full of craters and trenches, harrowed with bullets and horse hooves… that could once sustain half the world, will not have bread for its children now. It will not have [bread] because its once fertile ground and beautiful meadows are today one great stinking puddle covered with the numerous tombs of fallen warriors. The people, devoid of any livelihood, without roofs over their heads, without clothing and shoes, distraught and exhausted, without any medical assistance…are beset by different diseases which are running increasingly rampant.⁴⁶

For farmers, the destruction of land took on an almost spiritual meaning and they reacted emotionally as they witnessed its ruin. To them, their land was a God-given gift over which they were given dominion. In turn for nurturing and working it, the land provided them with everything they needed—food, water, wood for shelter—and to see it recklessly destroyed resulted in crippling fear and panic for their future prospects. Unskilled and unable to fall back on any real professions, farmers feared that the war would destroy their livelihood and they risked personal financial ruin.

Perhaps one of the most pervasive fears villagers had was the sudden and random intrusion of enemy soldiers into their home villages. As a matter of practice, the occupation of villages was hardly ever a strategic end goal of military operations. Instead, village invasions were often treated as a means to an end, a step on the way to a much more strategically important city, in particular Warsaw. Armies in retreat would often destroy villages as they passed through to ensure that their enemy following behind entered rural wastelands. As a result, the onslaught of roving imperial armies into villages was often quick, though incredibly destructive. Invading armies pillaged villages of any food and material goods they could find, and pilfered and slaughtered livestock that was not yet requisitioned. As Russian troops retreated from the Germans during the summer of

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1915, they wreaked havoc in villages through which they passed. Sensing that the Germans would soon overtake their territories, they recklessly destroyed the countryside, showing utter disregard for their former imperial subjects and calling into question Grand Duke Nicholas’s extension of a Russian-Polish friendship. When the Russians invaded Lipie during their retreat from the Germans on 19 July 1915, Tomasz Nocznicki and his neighbors were forced out of the village and fled for their safety to nearby forests, waiting for the Russians to leave. When he returned just two days later, he surveyed the damage. “On 21 July 1915, I returned home,” he wrote,

The whole neighborhood was entirely empty, there was not a single living soul anywhere. Everything, the whole once sizable and vibrant village was destroyed, even the orchards were scorched—all that remained were the chimneys and brick walls, where there were such. All that was left of my farm was a brick granary covered by a piece of sheet metal. I began to feel weak.47

As if damage to their farms and fields was not enough, random acts of violence against villagers was also common. Jan Polaniak, a farmer who enlisted in the German military recalled a moment when his battalion commanded by a German Oberleutnant, encountered a Polish-speaking farmer who was returning from Russian territory. When asked to identify himself and why he was coming from behind enemy lines, the farmer explained that he was returning from bringing his son, who was watching the cows graze in a nearby field, a cloak to shield himself against the falling rain. Polaniak explained that, “The Officer did not attempt to investigate this matter, instead, in front of all of us, he shot him twice in the eyes. This stunt was lodged into my memory. I thought to myself, ‘You son of a bitch (skurwysyn), wait until I show you how you shoot innocent people, just wait until we see one another on the front lines.’”48 In Austrian-Poland, rumors of Russian violence against civilians invoked both fear and hatred of the Russian military.

In September of 1914, for example, an article claimed that the Russians sent Cossack divisions into the eastern provinces of Galicia where they locked women and children in their homes and set them aflame.\(^49\) Whether or not such stories were true is difficult to confirm, but it was enough that they were discussed openly to instill fear of barbaric soldiers and paint an image of innocent Poles as helpless victims.

Overall, damage to the Polish countryside was enormous and unprecedented. It was also random and uneven. Of the three Polish partitions, Galicia and the Congress Kingdom saw the most damage, whereas in Prussian Poland, destruction was mostly concentrated in the Warmian-Mazurian province. Historians have documented this unevenness by analyzing the number of rural buildings destroyed in each region. In just the first year of the war, in the Kingdom of Poland, 275,751 farm buildings (not including noble manors) were destroyed, accounting for some 11.2\% of the total number of rural buildings registered.\(^50\) During the same time frame, in western Galicia, 69,716 rural residential dwellings were destroyed in addition to 119,265 farm buildings. In the sixty western Galician counties, 680 of the 1323 rural *gminy* were “completely destroyed.”\(^51\) Whereas, in east Prussia, over the course of the entire war, battles destroyed some 1,900 villages

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\(^{49}\) “Straszne okrucieństwa Rosyan,” *Piast*, 13 September 1914, 7.

\(^{50}\) Przeniosło, *Chłopi Królestwa Polskiego w latach 1914-1918*, 47-56. These statistics do not include numbers from the Suwałki region as well as four counties of the Siedle district of Congress Kingdom.

and 39 towns and cities. All told, the digging of trenches and the explosions of artillery shells negatively affected some 91 million cubic meters of Polish land.

The total destruction of so many villages and cities resulted in an upsurge of Polish evacuees and refugees. In the first four months of the war, the Habsburg State forcibly removed some 400,000 people from the province of Galicia and sent the majority to refugee camps in Moravia and Styria. Similarly, in the Kingdom of Poland, Russian state officials removed between 800,000 and 900,000 people, 100,000 of whom were villagers. Many farmers defied imperial evacuation orders and chose instead to leave only temporarily before returning to their homes. Boasting rural defiance in the face of imperial might, rural journalists explained that so few farmers left their villages because, “our kind prefers to stay on our own lands rather than let them go, even if we do not know what awaits us.” Nonetheless, millions of displaced rural Poles wandered through the countryside looking for work and some even crossed the borders of the partitions suggesting that during wartime borders were relatively unsecure and porous. Those farmers who returned to find their homes in ruins lived among the rubble seeking shelter in whatever dwellings they could find, while others opted to live in forests and bomb craters. “Along

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57 Jan Molenda estimates that nearly 4.5 million people from Galicia and the Congress Kingdom were displaced during the war, either by military recruitment or the migration of the civilian population. See Jan Molenda, “War, Children and Youth: The Impact of the First World War Upon the Changes in the Position of Children in the Peasant Family and Community,” Acta Poloniae Historica, 79 (1999): 165.
the road,” Polaniak recalled, “we saw peasants who, with their families, slept in the forests hiding from the whizzing bullets, having with them all their livestock such as cows, sheep, and Hutsul ponies.”

This suffering, especially that of rural women and children, was a common trope reified by dramatic stories published in the rural press. One such story, about a mother and her three half-naked children crowded together in the ruins of their barn paints a familiar picture of wartime destruction and sacrifice that resonated with an increasingly feminine readership. The story takes place in the wintry Galician countryside, somewhere in an anonymous village located near a large forest. As the story goes, eight weeks into a fierce battle, the mother and her children are ordered not to leave their shelter lest they encounter a daily barrage of flying bullets and exploding shrapnel or fall into a newly formed bomb crater. Surviving on only a few frozen potatoes that the mother found on the barn floor—the leftovers from a cow that once stood in the place where she and her children now hid—the small family’s situation is dire. But in demonstrating how seemingly normal this scene was, the story continues, “The roar of the cannons, placed outside their home, did not scare them; they were used to it,” poignantly demonstrating just how blurred the lines between home and war were. All that separated the young family from the ongoing battle were the walls of their dilapidated barn. Moreover, the subtitle of the story, “An Image from the Terrain of Battle,”

59 Jan Molenda argues that women increasingly gained basic reading skills in order to read newspapers. Part of the motivation associated with this was that many newspapers, in particular Piast, listed the soldiers who were dead, wounded, and missing in action. According to Molenda the circulation of Piast exploded from just 8,000 newspapers to 81,000, and credits part of this increase to the increased of women readers. At the same time, because letter writing was an important part of the wartime experience, the war necessitated a rise in literacy and writing skills. See Jan Molenda, “Zmiany roli kobiet w rodzinie chłopskiej w warunkach I wojny światowej,” Pamiętnik XV Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyko w Polskich, Małe ojczyzny na kresach II Rzeczypospolitej 3 (1995): 42.
shows even more clearly the inability to distinguish between the belligerent and domestic realms. That the story is vague in its location, occurring only in a village near the woods in the middle of the “terrain of battle” suggests not only that the lines between home front and warfront were non-existent in the Polish countryside, but that such occurrences were also a generalizable experience.

The story, focusing as it does on a mother and her three small children while their father is away fighting heroically in the war, worked to reinforce traditional gender roles. Helpless and suffering, the wife yearns for the return of her husband, even dreaming about him in her sleep. She longs for his letters and worries terribly when she has received no word from him in several months. To be sure, such situations were all too real for many families. Even years after the war, desperate family members took out classified advertisements in newspapers asking for information about the whereabouts of their husbands and sons. Nonetheless, this feminine helplessness and perceived passivity is not a fully accurate characterization of women’s wartime activities. During the war, women increasingly transgressed traditional gendered constructions of femininity as they took on new leadership positions, and increased their activity in the fields (to the extent that it was possible) and in the rural public sphere.

The wartime dearth of men in the countryside was the result of both military recruitment and labor migration. The consequences of these two forces resulted in a skewed gender and age imbalance at the homefront. Now dominated by women and children, this extra-feminine and extra-young domestic sphere resulted in a new space for women and youth in the countryside. For rural society, heavily dependent on the gendered division of labor, this meant a significant transformation in the private, domestic sphere. In the absence of men who usually tended to the

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61 Grayzel argues that one of the characteristics of home front literature is that it reifies traditional gender roles, creating an imagined feminine home front and a masculine war front within which gender roles are neatly defined. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 13.
fields, women and children were tasked with planting and harvesting crops, no easy feat when animals were requisitioned by the state or killed by invading armies, and fields were destroyed during bloody battles. Without work animals, women took on the yoke of the plow themselves, hitched it to their backs, and pulled it through the soil. Józef Moksal remembered that in the spring of 1915, “Our horses had been taken for the war, so my mother and older sisters hitched themselves to the yoke and instructed me to hold the reigns and that’s how we plowed—the fields needed to be sown, that is how we harvested everything too, and thrashed the wheat with flails—all the work ordinarily done by men.”

In addition to this transformation in domestic labor, women were also instrumental in maintaining the rural public sphere, sometimes even holding leadership positions in local village governance. On a much larger scale, the Union of Rural Youth (Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej, ZMW), the first rural youth organization founded in Congress Kingdom Poland in 1912, would have gone bankrupt and closed its doors if not for the overwhelming support of young women who made up seventy percent of its membership during the war years.

Women’s increased presence in the fields and rural community during the war, though praised by most of Polish society, was not always appreciated by the men whose roles they displaced. In 1917, soldier Józef Zbiegieł wrote a letter to the editors of Piast addressed to the newspaper’s “Dear Female Readers.”

Why yes, you work hard enough, this we know, but tough! This will be useful to you. In times of peace, I heard many times how some of you would say that “My man doesn’t do anything, that I don’t get any help from him, etc.” But now you know what it means to be without him. After the war, when your husbands return, you will respect them more, and there will be peace and harmony in the home.

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Zbiegel’s letter reflected his and others’ fear that women’s changing roles in the countryside had transgressed too far beyond the traditional roles they were otherwise meant to fulfill. These perceived changes in his traditional masculinity, and by default women’s femininity, threatened to uproot generations of patriarchy that characterized Polish rural life. Other critics of women’s transgressive roles questioned their ability to raise children without their husbands, claiming that a whole generation of fatherless children, especially boys, would grow up without paternal authority and discipline, and consequently turn to hooliganism.\(^{65}\) Once gender roles were transformed in these ways, women’s increased experience and knowledge about both the public and private spheres of rural society guaranteed for them new roles in rural culture throughout the interwar period. In this way, the wartime transformation of traditional gender roles helped set the wheels in motion for the increasing feminization of the rural movement in interwar Poland.\(^{66}\)

To be sure, during the early months of the war, Polish-speaking farmers lived under desperate circumstances. Without arable land and inhabitable buildings, and separated from loved ones through displacement and military service, the wartime rural experience was bleak. Even after the summer of 1915, when the German military pushed the Russians out of the territory of the Congress Kingdom, and battles ceased to take place on Polish soil, the memory of the early months of the war, the fear of random attacks, and the stresses of everyday life continued to hamper farmers’ abilities to fulfill their social and economic functions as producers of food. As a result, they began to feel the weight of external pressures as non-rural Polish society grew increasingly antagonistic toward its rural brethren. And when the German and Austrian states failed to provide

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\(^{65}\) Molenda, “War, Children, and Youth,” 175-177.

\(^{66}\) This will be discussed, at length, in Chapter Six of this dissertation.
aid in satisfactory ways, farmers grew increasingly disenchanted with the war and their imperial leaders.

2.5 War Fatigue and the Culture of Sacrifice

As war waged on, farmers grew more and more vocal as they articulated their impatience with its sluggish progress. They complained regularly about the day-to-day difficulties brought about by the war, missed their family members who were off fighting in foreign lands, and lamented that the war went on longer than the three months initially estimated. In January of 1915, one newspaper reported that “This is currently a war of “fatigue” both for those who are fighting, but also for those who have remained at home, it is tiring to everyone, nations and states.” With little improvement in farmers’ daily circumstances, the lament continued, “This is now no longer a fight for soldiers, cannons, and bayonets, this is a fight for bread, for food.” Criticism of military leadership also grew, resulting in one reporter suggesting that the only generals who were actually capable of winning the war were “Generals Mud and Hunger.” Tired of patriotic and heroic calls to arms and sacrifice, and calling instead for the imperial states to make good on their promises of aid, villagers grew jaded by the wartime experience.

Recognizing farmers’ disillusionment, newspapers lamented that “there is no time for despair (zalamywanie rąk)” and “no time for investing too heavily in an uncertain future, because that will get us nowhere” claiming instead that, “it is the responsibility of those whose will has brought the people to this defensive position, to go about the most energetic of work, in order to come to the people with aid, obtaining it, for all of their sacrifices incurred for the good of

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67 “Jak długo potrwa wojna?” Piast, 16 August, 1914, 9.
69 “Walka ‘na chleb,’” Piast, 14 February 1915, 8.
the state, and it would behoove the state, if possible, to remove any effects of this disaster, even if it is only partially capable of doing so."

In return for the many sacrifices they had to make over the course of the war—taxing requisitioning programs, lack of food and materials, and the loss of life—farmers expected their state powers to intervene and provide them with aid. When that aid was less than satisfactory, unevenly distributed, and late or non-existent, villagers’ impressions of and loyalty towards the power and sovereignty of their imperial overlords began to change, and the states began to lose the badly needed legitimacy necessary to lead their respective empires effectively.

Farmers’ most common complaint, as evidenced in their memoirs, letters, and newspaper articles, was that rural Poland lacked virtually everything that was necessary to produce food. State requisitioning programs, practiced by each of the partitioning powers, added extra pressure on villagers who, in addition to feeding their own families, were required to feed the citizenry of the imperial states. And because the Polish countryside was riddled with trenches and bomb craters, the prospect of producing food adequate for one’s family, let alone enough to feed an entire empire, was a daunting, seemingly impossible one. As imperial leaders failed to meet farmers’ needs for aid, their faith in the state declined and public opinion about the war began to change from bad to worse.

For farmers, sacrificing for the war effort was their part of their legal obligation. In December of 1912, for example, the Viennese Parliament passed two bills that outlined subjects’ obligations in the event of a war. These laws specified that all citizens up to age 50 were required to make some sort of sacrifice toward the war effort, in the form of material or monetary goods or military or other volunteer service. The laws also obliged imperial subjects to give Austro-

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Hungarian troops whatever was requested of them whether it be food, arms, animals, and even shelter. At the beginning of the war, such policies were generally accepted largely based on the notion that the food and livestock farmers offered up would be used to help feed soldiers, perhaps even their own family members. Both imperial and local Polish leaders rallied farmers to action and called on them to support their militaries, equating their war efforts back at home with those of the soldiers at war. “We remember,” proclaimed the President of the Kraków Farmers’ Society, “that THIS WORK IS AS NECESSARY AND IMPORTANT AS THE BATTLES THEMSELVES, and that within a sufficient food supply, for the country as for the army, lies HALF OF THE VICTORY.” With such policies in place, the home front and its inhabitants were fully mobilized for the war, and even perhaps took pride in their ability to contribute to it. Food production was considered a wartime duty, bringing ordinary people in close relationship with the goings on of the imperial state.

Wartime requisitioning was a legal rural obligation, and farmers did, albeit begrudgingly, agree to the militaries’ requisitioning campaigns. Part of the reason why farmers were relatively willing to participate so actively in state requisitioning and military housing policies was that the state promised compensation for villagers’ offerings. For the desperately poor villagers, any extra income was a welcome addition to the family’s meager finances. When villagers boarded soldiers, Austrian imperial officials designated, to the final gram, how much food housewives were to serve them to receive full remuneration from the state. In exchange for three square meals a day

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72 “Wynagrodzenie na oddane wojsku usługi,” Piast, 9 August 1914, 10.
74 Maureen Healy argues that the issue of food and its consumption was a central factor in negotiating new relationships between the state and women and children during the First World War. In her estimation, these new relationships aided in the fight for the state’s recognition of women as full citizens. Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy, 33-34.
consisting of seven hundred grams of bread, two servings of coffee (each with twenty grams of roasted coffee and twenty-five grams of sugar), four hundred grams of fresh pork, and one hundred forty grams of vegetables or starches, farmers could expect to receive one krona and seventy-nine häller. To prepare the meals, the housewife was expected to use no less than thirty grams of salt, half a gram of pepper, twenty grams of pig’s lard, and five grams of onion. She was also to serve the soldier no less than five hundred grams of wine or three-quarters of a liter of beer.75 The state sent villagers explicit instructions, delineating how each meal was to be served, specifying the portion sizes expected for each individual meal. Similarly, for boarding state-owned livestock, villagers could reasonably expect to receive two häller daily per beast of burden (horses and cows) and one heller daily per sheep or pig.

The most common items that the imperial militaries requisitioned from farmers were wheat, cows, pigs, and chickens for military consumption, and horses to serve in the cavalry or to pull military supplies at the warfront. Various types of wheat could yield for farmers anywhere between twenty-three and thirty-nine kronen per metric quintal.76 Prices for larger animals, such as horses and cows, were negotiated based on the health and quality of the animal, in addition to the length of time that it was borrowed by the state. And finally, for each metric quintal a cow or pig weighed, farmers could receive one hundred eight and one hundred sixty kronen, respectively. At the onset, then, villagers could expect to be handsomely compensated for their multiple sacrifices. Military requisitioning organizers paid farmers immediately in cash, though in more

75 “Wynagrodzenie za Umieszczenie Bydła w Stajni” and “Utrzymanie Żołnierza na Kwaterze.” Przyjaciel Ludu, 9 August 1914, 2. Individual meals could also be offered at the following rates: for breakfasts, twenty-five häller; for lunches, one krona and fifteen häller; and for a meatless dinner, sixty-nine häller.
76 “Wynagrodzenie za Powody i Zwiewcze Zarekirowane Przez Wojsko,” Ibid. For comparison, a metric quintal is about two hundred-twenty pounds.
financially troubling times, especially later in the war, farmers received vouchers that they could trade for money at a later date. Vouchers, however, were rarely paid in full or even cashed out at all, and military officials often bamboozled mostly illiterate farmers out of the full amount.\textsuperscript{77} Even more troubling, when in late 1915, the Kingdom of Poland fell into German hands, vouchers issued by the Russian government went unfulfilled, adding to farmers’ disillusionment with the state.

The mass requisitioning of animals and foodstuffs, however, was a double-edged sword for Polish farmers. While they might have received compensation for their goods, the scale at which requisitioning was carried out resulted in a lack of the supplies and animal labor that was required for satisfactory food production. Without adequate grains and seeds to sow, horses or cattle to plow fields and produce fertilizer, or cows and goats to produce milk, farmers were more and more underprepared to handle the coming growing season. This, coupled with staggeringly little arable land meant that each subsequent harvest was poorer than the last. As a result, mass starvation sprawled across the Polish lands.

To voice their concerns, villagers often appealed to local and state authorities for help, suggesting at least an implicit trust in civic institutions. Most often, they asked for deliveries of seed, animals, and building supplies, or a momentary pause of the states’ requisitioning programs. One such request for supplies from June of 1916 addressed to the Chief of the Board of the Civil General Government of Warsaw, for example, asked that “Due to the deeply felt and enormous shortage of milking cows in the country, it would be greatly desired to bring in higher quantities of milking goats.”\textsuperscript{78} The memo then suggests that the delivery of the goats to Polish territory could come from Norway, by way of the German imperial government. Such memos demonstrate that

\textsuperscript{77} Molenda, “Chłopi polscy w 1914 roku,” 119.
\textsuperscript{78} Memo to Chief of the Board of the Civil General Government of Warsaw, 1916, AAN/47/89, 112.
in return for the sacrifices they bore, rural Poles expected organized state support and aid to help offset the negative effects of the war. Yet, this example is even more telling of the nature of rural-imperial state relations for one more important reason. That the memo is written in 1916, a year after the expulsion of the Russian government from the Polish lands and the establishment of the Imperial General-Government of Warsaw, shows that rural Poles were less inclined to care about which state was in power, so long as their needs were met. Appeals such as the one above suggest rural Poles’ ambiguous loyalties to state power and their implicit trust in new political arrangements, whatever their origins, to provide them with better material conditions.

As the rural situation grew increasingly desperate, Polish rural politicians from Galicia, in an attempt to curtail their constituents’ outrage, repeatedly appealed to Vienna asking for intervention. Among their demands included the dissolution of the voucher payment system, asserting instead that requisitions were to be paid in full and in cash; that any horses not yet requisitioned by the state remain in farmers’ possession or at least the minimum necessary for farm work; free food deliveries to the poorest of the poor; the free delivery of food items, building materials, and fuel by train; the rebuilding of burned and destroyed farms and the reconstruction of demolished bridges and roadways; and the expansion of organized sanitary and medical aid to curb the growing rates of communicable diseases. To survey the state of individual farms and the countryside as a whole, local Agricultural Circles also conducted assessments in which farmers could explicitly describe their everyday experiences during the war. Agricultural Circle leaders advised their neighbors to answer the surveys “accurately and quickly,” so that they could be sent

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to the Kaiser, the Minister of War, and to the head of command of the Kaiser’s army for review and a possible response in the form of social aid.\textsuperscript{80}

To be sure, state agencies did provide financial aid to farmers in the form of insurance payments as well as social welfare. In just the first year of the war, Russian authorities in the Congress Kingdom paid out three million rubles in insurance payments to rebuild any buildings destroyed over the course of the war and in December of 1914, allocated another twenty million rubles in credit for the reconstruction of destroyed communities. In 1916, to help rebuild the Kingdom of Poland after the destructive outing of the Russians, German authorities allocated nearly seven million marks in lumber to needy Poles. And in Galicia, the National Reconstruction Office paid out nearly 900,000,000 \textit{kronen} for rebuilding Galician infrastructure while the Department of War Credits made available half a billion more in credit.\textsuperscript{81} Despite this effort to provide imperial citizens with aid, Polish villagers continued to perceive their day-to-day situation as worsening.\textsuperscript{82}

Requisitioning was a constant requirement of Polish-speaking farmers over the course of the entire war and thus a constant reminder of the war’s and states’ interference in farmers’ everyday lives. Faced with a culture of sacrifice and lacking any substantial finances or supplies to turn this experience around, rural leaders called for requisition reform from the state. Too often these requests fell on deaf ears or were answered with empty promises. By 1917, rural leaders rebuked the Austrian imperial leadership claiming, “Promises are not enough!” explaining further that if the state did not pass a budget that provided satisfactory aid to Poles, the Polish

\textsuperscript{80} “Zabiegi Towarzystwa rolniczego,” \textit{Piast}, 8 November 1914, 9. I, unfortunately, could not find these surveys in the archives in Poland.

\textsuperscript{81} Molenda, “Chłopi polscy w 1914 roku,” 125-126.

\textsuperscript{82} “Coraz gorzej (na polu gospodarczym),” \textit{Piast}, 12 May 1918, 3.
representatives in Vienna would turn the budget down, reminding Austrian officials that, “without the Poles, it will not pass.”

Turning increasingly desperate, farmers who suffered from starvation, disease epidemics, and war fatigue began to search for scapegoats on whom they could blame the war. Because of their perceived worsening conditions, a culture of rural scapegoating and social defamation soon developed. This would ultimately lead to a broken rural society, one that trusted no one—not the state, not political leaders, and not even one’s neighbors.

2.6 Internal Enemies and the Dissolution of Rural Society

Even after the Eastern front shifted east, bringing significant separation between farmers and villages from actual battles, the war continued to impact the day to day ebb and flow of village life. Exacerbated by the lack of access to food, seed, animals, and labor, villagers grew increasingly irritated by limitations the war placed upon them. But in the absence of clear external enemies, that is, foreign soldiers or even imperial leaders, villagers soon turned on one another and other co-nationals. War then became a struggle, not just against external forces, but a contest for badly needed resources between villagers. Thus, farmers saw among themselves their greatest competitors, and the communal fabric of rural society began to unravel. In addition to the breakdown of rural social structures, we can also observe a similar crumbling of urban-rural relations. Urban Poles accused their rural counterparts of hoarding desperately needed foodstuffs, while rural Poles complained that the pressures of farming for the entire population were too great and lamented that they were required of providing food for urban Poles’ who contributed little to rural livelihood. And as internal rural relations and urban-rural relations dissolved, Polish farmers lost faith in the leaders who governed them and grew increasingly wary of state interference in their lives.

As we have already seen, wartime placed unprecedented pressures on the civilian, rural population, particularly when it came to food production and requisitioning. In a culture that was so characterized by a lack of even the most basic goods, it is not surprising that some more needy farmers turned to more desperate measures to procure items. As a result, wartime crime rates soared, resulting in a new panic among villagers. Farmers penned letters to newspaper editors describing what they perceived as a new phenomenon in the village: the rising crime rate resulting from a lack of empathy and compassion for one another. “There is a great unhappiness, that is brought to light only during the war, that does not manifest itself on other occasions,” one letter began,

There are villages where the people have allowed themselves to plunder others’ belongings. Today, hundreds of peasant men and women have been arrested, guilty of robbery. This is one of the nastiest occurrences, for which the entire Polish people are ashamed. Thankfully, these are only rare exceptions, occurring only in villages where vodka is plentiful, but rural newspapers are not.\(^4\)

It is unlikely that rural crime was a new phenomenon that only manifested itself during wartime. More realistically, it is probable that wartime crime took on a different meaning considering farmers’ increased sacrifices and needs. Because of the breadth of wartime suffering that resulted from a lack of access to food, land, and shelter, farmers perceived their criminal brethren to be uncompassionate bandits who cared little about the needs of others. Thus, in this sense, instead of suffering together, those who turned to crime were no different from the foreign soldiers who ransacked villages during military skirmishes. Ashamed, and lamenting that farmers were capable of such inconsiderate pillaging, more virtuous villagers addressed the need for wartime solidarity saying, “In the areas that are most affected by the war, we should count on the fact that this

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\(^{4}\) “Wstyd!” Piast, 21 February 1915, 4.
common misery in which we all found ourselves brings us all closer together.”85 But little could be done to curb the growing rates of village crime. As rural conditions worsened, and farmers’ desperation grew, such calls for social solidarity went unfulfilled and farmers continued to find other scapegoats to blame for their misfortunes.

Once praised in the rural press for their sacrifice, rezerwistki, or the wives of soldiers, quickly became a source of jealousy for other poor villagers who had to contend with doing without. As conditions at home worsened, and more and more villagers became victims of the war, the fight for social aid became increasingly tenuous. Rezerwistki, because they received extra aid from the government, became a convenient enemy of rural society and farmers soon began to call for more egalitarian social aid distribution standards.86 Resenting rezerwistki’s access to aid, newspapers claimed that “Today, even the affluent have become poor…,” and “Today nearly every family has the right to aid, because virtually everyone has lost something as a result of the war, such that this aid is necessary.”87 This turn against rezerwistki was a common phenomenon, one that parallels the experience of “women of lesser means” that Belinda Davis describes in Home Fires Burning. Like Berlin’s most desperate and poorest women, rezerwistki became a central part of rural social and political discourse, as well as a marker by which to measure the efficacy of social aid.88 But unlike Davis’s “women of lesser means” who enjoyed the support and empathy of Berliners, especially of middle- and upper-class status, the rezerwistki of Poland’s rural society

85 Ibid.
86 Maureen Healy shows a similar “dissolution of community” in Vienna. She claims that as tensions over food and access to other material goods grew more strenuous, the Viennese slowly turned on themselves, leading to the breakdown of social relations at the homefront. Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy, 73-81. For more on the rezerwistkis’ experience in wartime Warsaw see, Blobaum, A Minor Apocalypse, 171-198, and “A Different Kind of Homefront.”
87 “Zasiłki dla rodzin powołanych rezerwistów,” Piast, 28 February 1915, 2.
88 For more on “women of lesser means,” see Davis, Home Fires Burning, 56-64.
were seen as economic leeches who sucked too much out of the states’ economic lifeblood, leaving what was perceived to be next to nothing for everyone else.

With criminals and rezerwistki at the center of Polish rural social disintegration, villagers sought to scapegoat other populations to bring farmers together rather than continue to divide them. To do so, some turned to markedly anti-Semitic rhetoric that painted Jews as farmers’ ultimate competition, claiming that any bad blood between farmers only served to destroy rural social relations while elevating the status of Jews. Such rhetoric centered particularly on economic relations between Jews and farmers. Considering that Jews typically held jobs as middle-class merchants, craftsmen, and tradesmen, they often interacted with farmers, especially when buying crops and livestock from them. The middling position of some Jews in Polish society and their perceived economic position as a step above that of the rural lower-class placed Jews in competition with farmers for social and, more importantly, economic upward mobility. Thus, faced with dissolving social relations, rural commentators with more unifying agendas sought to pit Jews and farmers against one another. J.K. Tatera, in an early 1918 letter entitled, “Must the peasant be the peasant’s enemy?” described how the breakdown of rural social relations benefitted Jews to the detriment of farmers. Criticizing farmers’ jealousy of one another, Tatera explained that this mutual rural envy served only to put back money in the hands of Jews. “A peasant opened a store,” he wrote, “and because of his own work and thrift, it turned out that his store was doing well and the peasant-salesman was making money, but instead of being excited that business was passing through peasant hands, his closest and farthest neighbors looked jealously at him from their windows. And what’s worse, their jealousy crystalized in the form of support of other, non-Polish
businesses, led by the sad principle: ‘If I don’t have it, then you don’t get to have it, just let the Jews have it!’”

Tatera’s rhetoric, however, was hardly unifying. Not only did it seek to exacerbate and instigate anti-Jewish sentiment and action, including store boycotts, it also sought to destroy a necessary component of rural life. The relationship between Jews and farmers, albeit sometimes tense and peppered with instances of hatred and anti-Semitism, was largely one of ambivalence. Because rural-Jewish relations were heavily dependent on economic transactions, these regular interactions normalized Jews and peasants to one another and most had no problem with patronizing Jewish shops, particularly when they had already regularly held their custom. Destroying this relationship, more realistically, only threatened the economic life of the village much more than it helped it. Nonetheless, Tatera’s attempt to turn farmers on Jews in the name of rural solidarity demonstrates just how divided rural social relations had become by 1918.

Social relations within the village were not the only ones to disintegrate as the war went on. As farmers turned against one another, relations between farmers and other social classes saw similar degrees of dissolution and were most manifested in the wartime divide between the rural and urban spheres. As the war progressed, relations between the city and countryside began to break apart as new jealousies, resentments, and rumors threatened the ties between the two. In early December of 1915, for example, while walking through Myślenice, a town in Galician Poland, Aleksander Klęp, a farmer from Górska Wieś eavesdropped on a conversation between two

men whom he identified as “non-peasants” discussing the “reality” of wartime conditions in the countryside. “What could possibly be hurting peasants now?” one of the men decried, “A peasant raises a cow, sells it, and gets six hundred kronen or more, he sells hogs and takes three hundred kronen a head, he has money, he has wheat for flour, he has cheese, butter, eggs, and even takes social aid. No one has it like the peasants!” Klęp, so enraged by the comments he overheard, imagined bribing a nearby police officer to arrest the two men for their slanderous words, but instead went home and penned a letter to the editors of Piast intent to set the record straight. In his letter, Klęp wrote:

If you were to come visit me, this is what you would see. I have a three morg farm. Our little home is falling apart. I have one cow and a calf. There are four of us in the house. Every day I go out in search of work. I take a pension from my military service. And yet, in your estimation, my dear non-peasants, I am some great nobleman! Listen further! In order to buy life’s absolute necessities… my wife had to sell our last drop of milk, our last eggs, because how else can we get money? … You get sugar rations which are significantly more easy to collect [in the city]. In April, between the four of us, we received two sugar ration cards which were only good for a half a pound of sugar, so that on Easter I couldn't even drink tea and we had to eat tasteless cabbage… with potatoes and that is how we live day by day… And there are tens of thousands like me. Are you still jealous of us, my dear non-peasants?

Klęp’s experience in Myślenice that day was not uncommon. As the conversation between the two men demonstrates, urban prejudices often claimed that in times of war, the countryside was significantly more prosperous and affluent than the city. In the urban imagination, rural peoples, having direct access to fresh crops and animals, could easily hoard foodstuffs in their barns and cellars while their urban brethren starved in city streets, or at the very least, stood in food lines waiting for bread and other precious goods that were otherwise considered to be abundant in villages. Across the Polish lands, it was commonplace to hear urbanites lament the

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92 Ibid.
deplorable conditions of cities while speaking disparagingly of the supposed greed of villagers. At the same time, farmers lamented their economic positions as producers of food, arguing that urban populations only demanded food, doing little to nothing to earn it, while they toiled away and received less in return. By their reckoning, urban populations were not as deserving of food rations considering that they were only its consumers, and had no comprehension of the sacrifice villagers had to endure to produce it.

The divide between the city and countryside was most obvious, however when urban leaders, particularly in German occupied territories, attempted to send urban children to villages, claiming that life there was much more suited for the psychological, biological, and national development of children. Completely unaware of the destruction of the countryside and the lack of access to food and schooling in rural areas, Polish leaders had no idea that children who were moved by the Village for the Children (Wieś dla Dzieci) campaign, often suffered from lack of food, clothing, and education, that is, the same social ills faced by village children. Instead, they romanticized the traditional bucolic imagery of the village and asserted that it would help keep children close to the natural Polish world, and by consequence away from the dangers, ills, and unnatural components of the city creating, as a result, good Polish children. The Village for Children campaign thus reflected the utter ignorance of urban dwellers to the living conditions of their rural brethren. When such divides existed, it was significantly easier to develop all sorts of rumors, jealousies, and other fallacies that helped break down the fabric of the urban-rural relationship.

But above all, the most crushing and important relationship to breakdown was that between the imperial powers and their Polish rural citizenry. As we have seen, over the course of the war,

93 “Wieś dla Dzieci,” AAN/52/837.
farmers heard from imperial and local rural leaders about the important of rural sacrifice for the war effort and despite their general disillusionment with the war, they proceeded to offer what they could, when they could, with little protest. Too often, however, they went without, and when state-driven aid came, it was hardly enough to satisfy the hunger that blanketed the Polish countryside. Farms lost their efficacy, millions of people were displaced, and disease and hunger were an all too familiar occurrence. When farmers felt they had sacrificed too much and received too little in return, they lost faith in the power of their respective imperial states. Unsurprisingly, the mass destruction and chaos caused by war was enough to bring farmers to their knees and while many grew despondent and pessimistic, just as many became irate and vengeful.

As we have seen, just months into the war, farmers grew disillusioned with imperial politics, lamenting that they only resulted in the suffering of the poorest of the poor. For many, the culprits of the war were not just the failures of international high diplomacy, but more tangibly the nobles, that is, the imperial leaders who went to war. Though he was only six years old when the Great War began, Józef Moksal remembered his mother crying when news of the war’s outbreak reached their village. Even at his young age, her haunting words had a profound impact on him:

I came into the house and asked my mother what was going on and holding back her tears, she said, “my son, a bloody war has been started by some nobles for their enjoyment, while the people will go and die… the crying you hear is the wailing of the mothers, wives, and children who will endure this human carnage.”

For Moksal’s mother, the war was nothing more than the folly of noblemen for which the peasantry would have to pay. In this sense, the German and Austrian Kaisers and the Russian Tsar were the ones ultimately responsible for dragging the Polish folk through the war. Their power, as a result, was brought into question from the very beginning.

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94 Józef Moksal, ZHRL, P-8a, 23.
The power of the state was also brought into question through the waning loyalty of Polish farmers-turned-soldiers. As they returned home for respite or marched through Polish villages with their battalions, an increasing number of soldiers witnessed the carnage wrought upon the countryside by the war. These firsthand perspectives of the desolate countryside helped bring together the domestic and warfronts for soldiers who were otherwise away and, in some cases, led to soldiers questioning the war and their leadership. As he walked through a decimated and smoldering village, farmer and soldier Jan Polaniak reflected on his feelings about the war and its utility. “There before my eyes,” he recalled, stood a man dying of grief as he watched his entire life’s work burn. He struggled to understand what he was seeing, and his heart only weakened at the site of his entire livelihood aflame. And there were probably many more like him. Where is the earthly justice that they talk about from the pulpit until the walls of the sanctuary rumble? How can any of the belligerents say that they are right? I assert that no one is right.95

Farmers’ and soldiers’ wartime experiences, especially when it came to the witnessing of the ruin of their beloved homes, helped turn villagers against the war. With little support from the most populous strata of society, imperial leaders could not continue a war without significant appeals to their most vulnerable populations. Without a way to pay for or even market these appeals effectively, imperial leaders could not expect farmers to support a war that had caused them too much heartache and crippled their personal lives for the foreseeable future.

If the outlook for wartime solidarity between farmers, the urban and rural spheres, and the state and its citizens was bleak, then the postwar outlook was bleaker. Even after the fall of the imperial states and the birth of a nascent, Polish democracy, Polish leaders faced an uphill battle of uniting a population that had been divided for so long. And after a prolonged period of exacerbated tenuous social relations during the war, the ability to rebuild new and formidable

social and cultural Polish networks was no easy task. The birth of the Polish Second Republic was hardly the unifying phenomenon that it was hoped to be. Instead, interwar Poland very much remained a broken land.
3. THE SECOND REPUBLIC MEETS THE COUNTRYSIDE: STATE LEGIBILITY, AUTHORITY, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RURAL POLAND

Also ignorant of the village is the government to whom the peasant is very different, when he is not bound by it.
-Jan Sondel, 1934

3.1 Introduction

Despite what Tomasz Nocznicki recalled, there was nothing inevitable about the rise of the interwar Polish state. No one alive at the time of the state’s reconstitution had any living memory of a once independent Poland, and few Polish-speakers even considered independence as a possible outcome of the Great War. Poland’s surprising return to the geo-political map of Europe was heralded by leaders of the new state, who decreed that Poland, befitting Christian tropes and symbolism, had arisen from the dead, emerging now in a more perfected form. But when the new state’s leaders began to arrive in Warsaw to begin governing, the gravity and precariousness of their new positions soon manifested, and the frustration of independence soon replaced its short-lived excitement. Divided for over a century, Poland and her citizens developed differently across the partitions, and leaders quickly realized that they would have to learn about the vastness of the state’s lands, the diversity of its people, and the variety of laws and mores that kept the balance of everyday life. In short, the most immediate problem government leaders faced, beyond financial difficulties and political immaturity, was that they were largely ignorant of their citizenry and the environs of their new territory. At the same time, the intensifying cultural distance of the state’s multiethnic population prompted leaders to consider how they might come about unifying and Polonizing the people living within their realm.

Though the partitioning powers had for several decades conducted their own measuring and assessing of their Polish-speaking citizens and territories, information covering the entirety of the Second Republic was nonexistent. Thus, the new Polish government (in its various iterations
over the interwar period) only had access to incomplete information regarding its new holdings. This meant that for much of the Polish political leadership, the newly reified Poland existed mostly as an abstraction rather than something concrete. In this sense, it was necessary for the state to make legible to itself the people, places, and things, that now fell under its dominion.\(^1\) With so much political, economic, social, and cultural diversity within its realm, the state—made up of its various ministries—together with its agents (medical professionals, ethnographers, sociologists, lawyers, etc.), embarked on a journey of knowing and understanding the new nation-state. In doing so, government leaders could begin, at least they thought, to establish their sovereignty and better control and rule over the fledgling democracy.

How did government officials attempt to make sense of and try to unite the diverse and divided countryside? How did they establish control and sovereignty despite tremendous insecurity? How did they react when they were introduced to the abject poverty that crippled village life? And what plans did leaders have for the reconstruction and modernization of the rural sphere? This chapter answers these questions by focusing on the moments of interaction between the Polish state and the village. It begins first by analyzing the concept of state legibility, and follows through with an analysis of the sorts of methods Polish officials and their agents used to administer various assessments and surveys. Here we will encounter a state with an internalized sense of inferiority that attempted, however it could, to establish its sovereignty and dictate order from the center. One way ministers tried to do this was to order the liquidation of former imperial structures from rural

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\(^1\) I am inspired by James Scott’s concept of legibility from *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1. Scott claims that one component of the modern state is the attempt to make legible to itself the people, places, and things that fall into its realm. By Scott’s estimation, this process of legibility is inherently limiting and risks the destruction of local culture for the sake of oversimplifying reality, and making it easier to measure and ultimately control.
Poland, most importantly the removal of German tenant farmers from the lands they had farmed for generations. From there, the chapter examines the state’s various modernization schemes meant, in no small part, to bring widespread reforms, but also standardization to the rural sphere. It focuses on the nation-wide scientific assessments that served primarily to survey the “level of civilization” in the countryside. These surveys resulted in widespread modernizing public works projects that focused on everything from well water to housing standards to animal and human welfare.

To the state’s credit, part of the motivation for surveying its lands was not just to understand local cultures, but also to assess the level of damage incurred during the First World War, especially in its eastern and southern territories. Indeed, the results of various government-sponsored surveys and village assessments called for badly needed rural redevelopment and reconstruction, including erecting new modern wells and farm buildings (specifically homes and barns), built in ways that scientists and hygienists claimed provided safer drinking water and more comfort to people and animals alike. In the aftermath of the Great War, Polish officials capitalized on the resulting destruction and seized the opportunity to enter and reconstruct the village in new, modern ways. And though these projects were primarily focused on physically rebuilding rural infrastructure, they also provided a space for the state to wield significant control over the rural population. The pages that follow are not meant to give an exhaustive account of every rural-state interaction. Instead, they provide an excerpt of such interventions that demonstrate government officials’ piecemeal approach to improving rural conditions and their attempts to unify the diverse rural sphere. Beleaguered by financial strain and local pushback, governmental attempts to

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2 Wyłączenia z m. państw. na cele szkolnictwa rolnych, ferm rolnych, pół doswidz. i ogniska kultury rolne, 1919-1927,” AAN/13/357.
modernize and unify the countryside were slow and sometimes unsuccessful. Nonetheless, they
demonstrate the centrality of the rural sphere to the government’s agenda.

Before the chapter begins, it is important that we understand what exactly constitutes the
state, the main subject and actor of the study presented here. Interwar Poland, like the other nascent
states to emerge from the footprints of the historic East-Central European Empires, was established
first as a democracy and functioned as one from 1919 to 12 May 1926, when Marshal Józef
Piłsudski staged his successful coup. Before the establishment of the Marshall’s Sanacja regime,
fourteen separate governments ruled the Polish lands, four of which were led by leaders Leopold
Skulski and Wincenty Witos of the Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, the largest and most influential
of the populist parties.3 Led early by prime ministers partial to rural parties, the state created the
Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych, MRiRR)
to help tackle the questions posed by land reform and rural revitalization. Other government
ministries, specifically the Ministry of Social Welfare (Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, MOS) and
the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych, MSW) worked closely with the
MRiRR to bring social aid and technological advancement to village. State ministers could not
assess the countryside on their own, however, and instead enlisted the help of an army of other
specialists including medical professionals, lawyers, ethnographers, sociologists, teachers, local
political leaders, and police forces, among others, to take full inventory of rural Poland and its
environs. Together with government ministries, these forces helped create a growing Polish

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3 Skulski served as Prime Minister from 13 December 1919 to 9 June 1920. Wincenty Witos
served three times. His first term lasted from 24 July 1920 to 13 September 1921, his second
from 28 May 1923 to 14 December 1923, and his last lasted just four days from 10-14 May,
1926. Piłsudski’s coup interrupted Witos’s third premiership and displaced him after two days of
fighting.
bureaucracy that wielded increased power over all of Poland’s citizens, imposing upon village communities a centralizing vision of rural modernity.

3.2 **To Know and To Govern: Surveys, Knowledge, and Authority**

In his study of statecraft, *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott claims that one component of the modern state is its attempt to make legible to itself the people, places, and things that fall into its realm. In studying the founding moments of the Polish Second Republic, the concept of legibility clarifies the nascent state’s actions and motivations in attempting to make sense of Poland. To overcome their partial blindness to their new realm, government leaders sought to simplify and centralize codes of law, taxation schemas, roads and railroads, and the Polish currency into a unified and centralized system. These quests to standardize and flatten rural diversity should not be taken as a sign of statist might, however, but rather a reflection of and reaction to leaders’ internalized sense of inferiority and inadequacy, and their fear of transient power. Indeed, it was the weakness of the interwar state—its poverty, political immaturity, and partial blindness of its citizens and environs—that motivated government leaders to conduct such measuring schemes.

The measurement of the Polish people and its lands was not unique to interwar Poland. Since at least the late eighteenth-century partitions, the German, Austrian, and Russian Empires (like most world empires of the time) collected information about their acquired Polish territories. Using a series of “investigative modalities” such as surveying and cartography, these empires could produce what was considered practical, scientific knowledge about their new subjects that they subsequently used to manipulate populations and justify their rule.\(^4\) The motivating factor of

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\(^4\) Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5. “An investigative modality,” Cohn writes, “includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and
this production of knowledge was the supposed centralization and solidification of power over the newly acquired lands. The measuring of Polish speakers and their environment aided in developing tropes of Polish backwardness that helped, in part, to justify the Empires’ expansion into and takeover of the historic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. More recent historiography has discussed the Eastern European Empires’ various methods of assessing the Polish lands, and has even begun to delve into the ways the partitioning powers, especially the German Empire, tried to impose new cultural values on Poles as part of a civilizing mission. In their collection of information, the imperial states could gain important knowledge about the people and environs within their realm, with which they could proceed to rule and manipulate the population. It is important, however, to remember that this knowledge was largely constructed based the state’s needs and seldom reflected lived reality. In the aftermath of the First World War, like the imperial powers that preceded it, the reconstituted Polish state also embarked on its own assessment and measuring of its peoples as it sought to centralize its power and unify its diverse citizenry.

Some of the investigative modalities of the colonial project are quite general, such as historiography and museology, although they might include very specific practices such as the location and description of archaeological sites. Other modalities, such as survey and the census, were more highly defined and clearly related to administration questions.” (5). Discussing the power of the survey further, Cohn writes, “The survey as an investigative modality encompasses a wide range of practices, from the mapping of India to collecting botanical specimens, to the recording of architectural and archeological sites of historic significance, or the most minute measuring of a peasant’s fields” (7).

Recently, historian Kathryn Ciancia has shown how the interwar Polish state, with the help of many intermediaries, especially border guards, used similar tactics to “civilize” the eastern Polish borderlands known as the kresy. In her study of Volhynia, Ciancia shows how “Poles utilized ideas about modernization, Europeanness, and civilization to justify Polish rule over the Ukrainian and Jewish populations of Eastern Poland” and argues that “Poland had its own ‘Wild East,’ a demographically non-Polish land in which Ukrainians and Jews were placed on a lower rung of the civilizational scale.”

Inspired by Ciancia’s approach, this chapter investigates the state’s civilizing mission and embrace of modernization more broadly, focusing on its assessment of and subsequent intervention in all of rural Poland, not just the kresy.

Government officials led efforts to standardize, measure, and assess the rural sphere for two reasons. The first was to gauge the enormity of the damage that resulted from the Great War. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Polish countryside, especially in its southern and eastern regions, was decimated. With villages destroyed, and fields pockmarked with craters and the remnants of trenches, state leaders surveyed lands before taking on massive reconstruction projects that were meant, in no small part, to rebuild and simultaneously modernize the countryside. Together with a cadre of specialists including doctors, scholars, educators, engineers, and other professionals, political leaders sought to turn what they perceived to be a backward and static rural sphere, and transform it into a more modern, scientific, and productive entity. In this way, the state capitalized on the villages’ destruction to champion widespread modernization plans that sought to bring new technologies, living standards, and ways of life to farmers and their families.

But the process of modernizing the countryside was not just a consequences of state philanthropy or benevolent paternalism. Instead, the second reason for state intervention in the

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6 Ciancia, “Poland’s Wild East,” 2.
village was that it was also an opportunity to wield power and unify the countryside from the top. As ministerial officials sought to make the rural sphere legible by collecting statistics, assessing rural housing, and testing well water, they seized the opportunity to impose new laws and standards that ranged from the forcible removal of tenant farmers from their leased lands to new requirements for human and animal residences. Though at first glance, government representatives implemented these policies for the betterment of rural society, such actions were often meant to demonstrate the state’s might to both internal and external observers. In showcasing Polish sovereignty, for example, various administrations tried to dissolve the last remnants of imperial structures that might have remained in place since the fall of the partitioning powers. This post imperial transitional process helped establish Polish authority and sovereignty within the international community while also destroying ties that the Polish lands might have had to their former imperial overlords. Such a process had a particularly negative impact on farmers, especially German tenant farmers, who lost claims to lands and animals in Poland after the dissolution of the partitioning powers.

Much more than just being an outward demonstration of power, efforts to measure the countryside allowed for the intervention of centralizing influences meant to quash local cultural differences, a result, in part, of the period of the partitions. Indeed, the state used these assessments specifically to produce knowledge about the countryside that it could then use to promote its modernizing and centralizing agendas. Utilizing a language of civilizational development, government leaders implemented their own “civilizing mission” to bring “culture” (as they defined
it), to the countryside. This imposition of new standards, though veiled in terms of cultural and civilizational development, only reified the imagined backwardness of the countryside. As technological advancement spread across the Polish lands, villages and their inhabitants were left chasing ever-changing goals and requirements that only reinforced what they had lacked.

Despite the chaos of the early years of the Second Republic, the state was surprisingly prepared to begin the assessment and surveying of the Polish countryside nearly immediately after its reconstitution. This was because state ministries, especially the MRiRR, MOS, and MSW, enlisted the help of Polish-speaking scholars, medical professionals, local leaders, and policing forces that had already had extensive knowledge and experience in social data collection. Indeed, these new state agents had gained significant social power during the partitions when, in the absence of an independent Poland, they functioned as what Keely Stauter-Halsted has described, a “shadow state,” that is “public actors [who]… operated behind the scenes and away from the gaze of imperial overlords, providing an opportunity for Poles to experiment with social transformation agendas even before taking active roles in official administrative hierarchies.”

These interlocutors had already served in various capacities as social engineers intent on improving life in Polish-speaking society during the partitions. In the interwar period, they entered public life in a more active and visible way, no longer functioning away from the state, but rather in

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7 Kathryn Ciancia has examined the Polish “civilizing mission” in the eastern borderlands of Poland, commonly referred to as the kresy. The Second Republic did not limit its quest to improve rural culture to the ethnically heterogeneous eastern borderlands, however. Instead, I argue that this process occurred across Poland, even in places considered more economically developed and culturally homogenous. On examples of the imperial civilizing across the world see, Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann, eds. Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India (London: Anthem Press, 2004), Alice L. Conklin, A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), and Michael Falser, ed., Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery (Dordrecht, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015).

8 Stauter-Halsted, The Devil’s Chain, 7-8.
relationship with it. With the increasing professionalization of these positions, the state could guarantee for itself a new cadre of highly trained agents throughout the interwar period. However, the influence these professionals and scholars had over rural affairs complicated the notion of state authority. As we will see, it was sometimes precisely these professionals and scholars working for the government who guided the ministries’ agendas in redeveloping rural Poland.

Assessments of the countryside varied in scope and purpose. At first, the MRiRR was interested only in assessing public estates that the state had inherited from the defunct partitioning powers. Ministry officials’ goal was to assess the level of damage these lands that had served as enormous imperial farms. Here the MRiRR focused on surveying the loss of animal and plant life, the destruction of machinery, and the lasting damage caused to the fields. But in their assessments, state officials soon came in contact more frequently with local inhabitants, mainly farmers who suffered from poor hygiene and a lack of food, and who also lived amidst destroyed villages. Only after this did the government turn its attention to improving the conditions of rural life, focusing specifically on modernizing the countryside, improving farmers’ access to fresh water, and the physical reconstruction of rural infrastructure. Within this quest to improve rural culture was a two-part implicit agenda to standardize the countryside, and gain access to the intimate lives of Poland’s rural citizens. In this sense, we can trace a transformation of Polish state interests in the rural sphere, from the utilitarian purpose of assessing wartime damage to the personal manipulation of Poland’s rural citizens. And it is on this transformation that the remainder of this chapter focuses.

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3.3 The Dissolution of Imperial Structures

In the immediate years following the First World War, many Polish-speakers from government officials to the most ordinary of citizens—felt that Poland’s independence was precarious. The Soviet threat, before Poland’s success in the Polish-Soviet War, was especially menacing. And the political chaos of the first presidential election that ended with Eligiusz Niewiadomski’s assassination of the first Polish president, Gabriel Narutowicz, forced the infant country to test the limits of its democratic stability early on.\(^{10}\) With both internal and external threats unsettling Polish peace, members of the political leadership thought it necessary to demonstrate the state’s sovereignty and might over its new territories. As a result, government leaders’ reaction to an internalized sense of their unpreparedness to rule included a politically and judicially complex process of dismantling imperial structures that had ruled them for over a century. Across Poland, ministerial leaders organized local imperial liquidation committees that made recommendations for the removal and requisitioning of former imperial holdings.\(^{11}\) In doing so, they sought to nationalize and therefore standardize the Polish lands and their territories.\(^{12}\) This process took place in myriad ways, and included, for example, changing the language of street signs, removing former imperial bureaucrats from their positions, and creating new government ministries that oversaw the entire country.\(^{13}\) In the countryside, the liquidation of such structures

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\(^{10}\) On the interplay of anti-Semitism, nationalism, and violence in the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz, see Brykczyński, *Primed for Violence*.

\(^{11}\) “Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna w Krakowie,” 1918-1919, Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie (ANK)/207/3 and ANK/207/7. See also the collections of the Head Liquidation Office in Warsaw (Główny Urząd Likwidacyjny w Warszawie), AAN/35 and the Liquidation Committee of Former Russian Legal Matters (Komitet Likwidacyjny do Spraw b. Rosyjskich Osób Prawnych), AAN/37.

\(^{12}\) For more on the relationship between standardization and nationalization in a rural context see Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*.

\(^{13}\) The German occupiers of Warsaw during the First World War already began changing the language of street signs from Russian to Polish in 1915. Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 62.
had potentially life altering consequences for rural inhabitants, and threatened the status of rural-state relations in Poland’s crucial first years. Removing the Second Republic of its imperial legacies proved to be a complicated task, not only because of the level of bureaucrats’ subjectivity involved, but also because it complicated government leaders’ claims for authority. In Poland’s rebirth, farmers questioned the role of the state in their daily lives, and sought to clarify their mutual relationship. As we will see, the removal of imperial structures, though touted as a necessary step in the reconstitution of Poland, had sometimes deleterious effects for Poland’s farmers.

The first target of the state’s imperial liquidation campaign were enormous tracts of former imperial estates inherited from the partitioning powers. These lands, in addition to being the private property of the Kaiser and other royal family members, also served as massive farms worked by hundreds of thousands of farmers, of all ethnic backgrounds, in service to the imperial governments.14 Once in Polish hands, they became the first lands of which the state took inventory. The surveying of these estates, supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property (Ministerstwo Rolnictwo i Dóbř Państwowych, MRiDP),15 began immediately thanks to wartime efforts to educate geometers who could help settle borders and survey lands after the war.16 The ministry’s first agenda item was measuring and surveying the damage caused by the First World

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14 These lands were, in part, the former royal territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that became the property of the imperial governments upon partitioning.
15 Originally founded as the Ministry of Agriculture and Royal Property (Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Dóbř Koronnych), the MRiDP was renamed pursuant to the resolution of the Regency Council’s Council of Ministers on 22 November 1918. In July 1923, under the leadership of PSL Prime Minister Wincenty Witos, the ministry underwent another name change. Renamed the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, the new name reflected Witos’s main agenda of passing satisfactory land reform. As the ministry’s original names suggest, the focus of their work was administering state-owned lands.
16 Letter from the Agricultural Society in the Kingdom of Poland to His Excellency the Chief of the Citizens Committee of Warsaw, 13 April 1916, AAN/47/87/12.
War, not only to rebuild the countryside, but also to bill the German government for the damages caused as per the War Guilt Clause of the Treaty of Versailles. Assessing these lands included not only understanding the physical area of the regions themselves, but also the flora and fauna that inhabited them, and the buildings, farm equipment, rivers, lakes, mountains, and other natural formations found within their bounds.¹⁷

These lands, once thoroughly assessed, were intended to be parcelized for various public works projects, including schools, community centers, libraries, government buildings, and eventually as farmland that could be sold to villagers. In this parcelization process, officials sought to dismantle the massive former imperial estates, thereby demonstrating the end of the partitioning empires’ ownership of rural territory.¹⁸ In doing so, they managed to increase farmers’ approval of the governmental powers, though as we will see, this approval was temporary and shallow. Local government councils wrote to the MRiDP (and later the MRiRR), requesting a parcel of land and included in their request a plan for its redevelopment.¹⁹ On the surface, such a program looked like the first steps of the modernization of rural Poland. Indeed, new schools, libraries, and community centers were badly needed components of rural infrastructure and few questioned the program’s existence and intentions, that is, until the state encountered local village residents.

¹⁷ “Inwentarze żywe i martwe,” 2 March 1921 - 22 October 1923, AAN/13/320; “Straty wyrządzone na majątkach państwowych przez b. okupantów,” 1919 to 20 December 1919, AAN/13/322, “Sprawy: Straty wyrządzone przez b. okupantów,” 1921-1930 AAN/13/323, “Straty wojenne wyrządzone w wojnie polsko-sowieckiej,” 12 September 1920 – 21 July, 1921, AAN/13/325. In addition to billing the German government for wartime damage incurred, the Polish state also had to credit the German state for any lands and materials that came into Polish possession after the First World War in accordance with Article 256 of the Treaty of Versailles.

¹⁸ “Wyłączenia z m. państw. na cele szkolnictwa rolnych, ferm rolnych, pół doswiad. i ogniska kultury rolne, 1919-1927,” AAN/13/357.

¹⁹ “Wygłoszenia z maj. państw. na cele szkół rolnicze,” AAN/13/360.
As state officials would soon find out, the former imperial estates were not empty farmlands waiting to be developed into school buildings and town halls. On the contrary, in former German territory especially, they also served as the homes of many tenant farmers who contracted land from the imperial government as part of the empire’s colonization of the Polish lands. 

Almost immediately, government officials sought out ways to remove the German-speaking tenant farmers from these territories and nullify their contracts. On 14 July 1920, political leaders set forth regulations that voided all contracts between former imperial powers and tenant farmers. Legally bound to land that had likely been farmed by their ancestors for several generations, many German-speaking farmers were not keen to leave their homes, and the Polish government soon found itself embroiled in a fiery judicial fight over its own sovereignty. As state leaders understood it, the contracts signed between tenant farmers and the former German government were cancelled the moment the empire dissolved. To accept them, they believed, only gave credence to the remnants of imperial power and influence in the region. But the state could not simply pass sweeping legislation that removed tenant farmers from their lands, not least because such laws might violate the Minorities Treaty signed at the Paris Peace Conference. In a letter dated 12 January 1922 to the General Prosecutor, the Council of Ministers expressed its desire to remove tenant farmers from their lands as quickly as possible in accordance with the stipulations put forth in Versailles. “The aspiration of the state,” the letter read,

is the entire removal of German tenant farmers, in line with the resolutions of the Treaty of Versailles… As regards those who have not voluntarily left, we must avoid even the slightest appearance that we have not been scrupulous in respecting the rule of law. For

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20 On the German colonization of Polish lands see Hagen, Germans, Poles, and Jews.
21 The German-speaking tenant farmers in question were migrants from the German Empire who had settled in eastern Prussia during nineteenth-century colonization attempts. As of the reconstitution of the Polish state in 1918, they automatically received Polish citizenship. They were, effectively then, part of the German-speaking minority in Poland. For more on Germans in interwar Poland see, Chu, The German Minority in Interwar Poland, 63-114.
this reason, the government will not carry out the expulsions through administrative proceedings, but rather relevant cases will be handled judicially. Only once the final judgements have been rendered will the government convene the evictions, though in doing so, it will also consider humanitarian principles, in particular, postponing winter evictions for the summer season so as to not deprive people of a roof over their heads.22

Such judicial battles between the government and German-speaking tenant farmers demonstrated the precariousness of Polish political power, but also provided an opportunity for the new judicial system to test the limits of its authority. To solidify their power, state leaders hoped that judges would rule in their favor, but because the interwar Polish judicial system had no tradition of juridical precedent, judges’ rulings were always the individual decision of a single adjudicator. In a heated court battle between the Polish government and Walter and Marjanna von Osten of Trzeciewnica, for example, the state claimed that the von Ostens’ leasing contract with the former German Empire was null and void, and asked that the tenants leave their lands immediately.23 The von Ostens beseeched the court for mercy, claiming that their family had worked the land for generations (as their last name suggested), and more importantly that their expulsion would mean financial ruin and cause extreme difficulty as they did not have other skills on which to fall back. Having lost the first case, the von Ostens along with their lawyer, Dr. Koppa, appealed the decision and in January of 1922, proceedings began in the Poznań Court of Appeals.

Despite their appeal the court upheld the original decision, claiming that such regulations were supported by Article 256 of the Treaty of Versailles that stipulated the financial guidelines of the ceding of German lands to the Allied Powers and Poland.24 In its ruling, the court confirmed...
Polish ownership over the territories in question and claimed that this authority superseded contracts signed with the imperial state. The von Ostens’ case was not a unique occurrence. In the Pomeranian Voivodeship, government officials asked one-hundred-thirty-two tenant farmers to leave voluntarily, though all but ten families dismissed the regulation and took the government to court. All but four of these families were judicially required to leave their rented lands immediately, while the others were permitted to remain until the expiration of their lease.\(^25\) After the leases expired, however, they too were required to relocate.\(^26\)

German tenant farmers were not the only victims of state-led attempts to make legible the territories and possessions that had come under the new Polish government’s jurisdiction. Polish-speaking farmers were also subject to the confiscation of any goods—material and living—that the German imperial government had provided as part of wartime aid. At the same time, such policies became another way to reject any signs of German imperial benevolence in what had been occupied territories during the Great War. On the one hand, Polish farmers soon erupted in anger at the possibility that any animals and products they had been given just to make ends meet could be taken away on the government’s whim. On the other hand, according to the government’s reckoning, these animals were not the property of the farmers who housed and fed them, and

\(^{25}\) The Department of the Pomeranian Voivodeship Office of State Property to the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, 28 September 1921, AAN/13/510. Documents regarding the legal proceedings of German tenant farmer Kurt Brandt’s fight with the state (dated 3 December 1921) can also be found in this same collection, beginning on page 124.

\(^{26}\) In contrast to the post World War II eviction of Germans from Polish territory, German tenant farmers were not required to leave Polish territory, but rather only the lands they had previously leased. They were free to remain in Poland if they chose to. State documents do not specify whether German tenant farmers chose to remain in Poland or if they migrated elsewhere.
benefitted from the food and milk they provided, but rather of the state. Like the lands leased out to German tenant farmers, these animals were only meant as temporary allotments to help farmers with their daily labors. Those affected appealed to their local officials for clemency in such matters. In many instances the state formally denied their requests or demanded that farmers prove ownership, oftentimes imposing an undue burden for villagers who did not always have such records readily available.

Even cows could not escape ministers’ gaze. In an appeal written in July 1919, farmer Jan Focht of Lipiny in Ciechanów County, claimed that the German government had lent him a cow at some point during the war, only to find that the Polish state would remove her and five other cows from neighboring Młock before selling them at a public auction. Focht rejected the state’s policies for two reasons. His first protestation was that he alone had cared for the cow since he had received her. He argued that he provided her food and shelter with no compensation from either state power and that this meant that he was entitled to keeping her. A second and more important reason demonstrated the contingency of wartime on farming communities. Focht claimed that the cow was still a heifer, and with no eligible bulls in the area (a consequence of wartime requisitioning), she had remained calfless and consequently incapable of producing milk. As a result, he had spent the past few years feeding her, but received nothing in return. When she was taken away, Focht saw years of invested money go with her. He wrote, “For this entire time, I have gotten no use or profit from the cow on account of her being a heifer, and have only [spent] money on [her] feed, and now that the state has taken her, I am left without any means of making a living to support my family.”

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27 Jan Focht to the Office of the Minister of Agriculture and State Property, 9 July 1919, AAN/13/319.
The investigation into Focht’s heifer affair took only a few months to resolve and local officials found that he was neither entitled to recompense nor to the return of the cow. Claiming that his appeal was baseless and even absurd, the Ciechanów district head (starosta) explained, “Jan Focht’s request is not only pointless after the liquidation of the cow… but also all the more undeserving of any consideration because he possesses cows of his own.”

Despite Focht’s ownership of other cows and the exaggeration of his post-confiscation poverty, his case showcases the tensions between the state and farmers regarding the removal of animals and goods over which the state had legal ownership. Other farmers, including Feliks and Konstancja Januszewski of Miastkowo in Łomża County, faced similar hardship when a mare they had been granted was listed for confiscation. In their appeal written by Konstancja (Feliks was illiterate), the Januszewskis wrote that should their mare be taken away, “in this circumstance our family would be utterly ruined… without any means of livelihood.”

Moreover, she contended that the state had no claim to the animal because Konstancja and her husband had “acquired [the mare] in good faith from the occupants,” indicating that they had purchased rather than rented her. But it was only after the Januszewkis could provide proof of purchase that their mare was removed from the state confiscation registry. The post imperial transition of power, thus, had nerve-wracking consequences for farmers who relied so heavily on animal labor, and caused extreme stress for farmers whose lives were already precarious due to poverty, hunger, and rampant disease. Early on, the state did little to ingratiate itself towards its most vulnerable populations.

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28 Ciechanów Starosta to the Inspector of State Estates in the Płońsk, Płock, Ciechanów and other Counties, 26 February 1920, AAN/13/319.
29 Konstancja Januszewka to the Office of the Minister of Agriculture and State Property, 1919, AAN/13/319.
For many farmers, the transition of power also brought about questions of the state’s obligations to rural citizens. If during the war, farmers were required to supply the imperial states with food, animals, and materials as part of their requisitioning burden, then after the war, farmers appealed to the Polish state for the compensation of those goods that went unpaid. As we saw in the previous chapter, the imperial powers often deceived farmers into thinking that debts would be paid in the future and in some cases swindled the illiterate who could not read credit statements from the full amount owed. When the war ended, farmers argued that the Polish state inherited not only the partitioning powers’ land and animals, but also their debts, and was thus responsible for repaying any arrears owed to them. Caring very little about the implications of the transition of power from empire to nation-state, and instead demanding pecuniary justice, farmers claimed exploitation and financial ruin and turned to the Polish government for answers. In his letter to the MRiDP dated 16 March 1920, Ignacy Brajnert from the village of Osmolin and the owner of a 10 morg farm, requested that the Polish state repay the outstanding debts of the imperial states for their requisitioning of the gravel and stones removed from his property during the war.30 Brajnert’s request, however, fell on deaf ears when just four months later the state responded to him with a negative reply.31 Offering no explanation, the MRiDP closed the matter and provided Brajnert no other recourse. He, like countless others, was left powerless to retrieve money rightfully owed to him, and suffered because of wartime policies, even well after the war had ended.

In its infant years, the new Polish state did not do well in establishing a positive rapport with its rural citizens. In its quest to legitimize and demonstrate its authority in the countryside through the removal of former imperial structures, it marginalized the rural population, forgetting

31 Internal Correspondence of the MRiDP, 2 July 1920, AAN/13/319, 18-19.
that farmers were largely ambivalent to state power, caring much more about their material conditions. Because rural-state relations were dependent on farmers feeling that they were adequately taken care of and had the materials necessary to farm effectively, state officials’ removal of certain farmers from rented lands, the confiscation of animals, and the failure to repay villagers for their wartime sacrifices, only worked to turn smallholders against the state early on. Realizing the potential for rural civil unrest, state leaders, especially high ranking members of the MRiDP (later the MRiRR), MOS, and MSW, spent the remainder of the interwar period devising plans they thought would improve conditions in the countryside to help quell any negative sentiment. This required, however, the ongoing presence of the state in rural affairs, with was often met with even more rural dissatisfaction.\textsuperscript{32}

### 3.4 On Rural Backwardness: The State Imagines the Countryside

The resultant destruction of rural Poland during the First World War provided government leaders with a justification for their increased presence in the countryside. Indeed, as they encountered more and more villagers during the early surveying of former imperial estates, they realized that they would also have to focus their efforts on reconstructing rural infrastructure and society. In doing so, the state capitalized on the wartime decimation of the village to introduce what they considered new, scientific, and modern technologies and advances meant to improve not only the quality of rural life, but also increase food production to the benefit of the entire population.\textsuperscript{33} These new technologies also had standardizing consequences that sought to

\textsuperscript{32} Chapter Four will deal with farmers’ responses to the ongoing presence of the state.

\textsuperscript{33} Dominic Berry has argued that in the British and Welsh contexts, agricultural modernity was a product of the Great War. Focusing on the scientific study of seeds in the immediate years after the Great War, he demonstrates how the Seed Testing Stations of postwar Britain helped standardize agriculture across the United Kingdom. Dominic Berry, “Agricultural Modernity as a Product of the Great War: The Founding of the Official Seed Testing Station for England and Wales, 1917-1921,” \textit{War & Society} 34, no 2 (2015): 121-139.
homogenize rural culture across the Polish lands. For example, government leaders developed building guidelines that mandated the construction of windows in rural buildings, and even stipulated how far barns should be from homes and sources of water sources to minimize the outbreak of disease. The rhetoric leaders used to rationalize the introduction of this “agricultural modernity” to the countryside, oftentimes only reinforced tropes of rural backwardness, validating further their interference in the rural sphere. To be fair, many of the state’s interventions did bring positive changes to rural life, but in doing so invited the state to blur the lines between the public and private spheres as it sought even more knowledge about rural dwellers. This section focuses on how state ministries and their agents imagined villagers and used depictions of rural poverty and backwardness to rationalize their ongoing presence in village life.

Contemporary government documents and scholars’ reports reflected officials’ and intellectuals’ beliefs that rural inhabitants were helpless, distrustful, and backward, and depended on the benevolence of the state for survival.34 These tropes, combined with farmers’ very real abject poverty helped depict villagers and their communities as social projects, almost entirely ignoring smallholders’ own ingenuity and innovation. In this way, centralizing forces and influences from the state flowed unidirectionally into the village as the state tried to civilize Poland’s rural population. To be sure, it was difficult to overestimate the poverty of rural Poland, but as we will see, state officials and scholars tended to blame poverty not on the social inequalities of interwar society and the social and economic remnants of serfdom, but rather squarely on

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34 In his report from a visit to Rudy, a village in the Wieluń County, on 13 August 1921, ethnographer R. Gajewski rather blithely wrote, “There I encountered the distinctive psychology of a peasant—distrust.” Report of R. Gajewski on his visit to Wieluń County, 17 August 1921, AAN/47/385, 20.
farmers’ supposed laziness and lack of motivation. To this end, state-rendered imaginings of the farmer and rural life gave the state reason enough for involving itself so deeply in village society.

The state’s reification of rural backwardness came directly from the top. On 1 May 1919, at a meeting of the Council of Ministers, top state officials discussed their agenda in the countryside, and focused on what they considered to be the inherent deficiencies of rural Poles. In their meeting, the ministers claimed that “the apathy of the folk especially in villages” was “an evil” that could only be reduced with state intervention which they considered “the true remedy.” Reflecting on both farmers’ poverty and “lack of initiative,” officials decided that the state would lead the reconstruction of rural infrastructure in the hopes that villagers would “be able to feed themselves from their own production as soon as possible.”

To catalyze rural productivity, state officials planned to build public works projects including schools, town halls, and roads that they believed would not only put farmers back to work, but also “elevate rural culture” that they believed was so poorly developed.

Central to the stigmatization of the rural sphere were scholars of various disciplines, especially sociologists, anthropologists, and economists, whose extensive research into village life provided the state with measured assessments of the countryside. With these scientific and

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36 Extract from the Protocols of the 61st Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland on 1 May 1919, 9 May 1919, AAN/13/682, 1.
37 “Przekazywanie ziemi dla szkół rolniczych,” 13 January 1922 - 13 October 1925, AAN/13/559.
38 Indeed, the interwar period saw the explosion of ethnographic studies of rural Poland. Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki and his American colleague William I. Thomas, for example, helped create the field of empirical sociology at the University of Chicago based on their research into villagers’ lives in and through migration to the United States. William I. Thomas, et al., *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954). Znaniecki returned to Poland and trained a new generation of rural sociologists and
professional analyses “proving” village backwardness in hand, state officials could claim that their presence in village affairs was a matter of social welfare, and was necessary for the revitalization of the countryside. Prominent among these scholars was economist Jan Sondel who used his experience growing up on a farm in Krzyżanowice Wielkie in Lesser Poland to enhance his scholarly writing with almost psychological analyses of his subjects. In one of his most influential pieces, Sondel acted as a rural flâneur, and took his readers—other academics and state officials—on a walk through a typical Polish village. His work described, in enormous detail, the grit and grind of rural life with special focus on the poor conditions under which farmers lived, but was also replete with quotations from his interviews that highlighted what he observed to be farmers’ lack of initiative and motivation. Casually inviting his readers to stroll along with him in the countryside to witness its many deficiencies he wrote, “Let’s go this way to the first good village out of the city.”

We enter the village along the municipal road. Now the road itself already leaves enough to be desired. In the rain, it devolves into a swamp so it is difficult to walk across. The horses sink into the mud almost up to their eyes. Farmers break their carts and destroy their clothing and shoes, but the ditches do not allow for the drainage of accumulated water. Can it be that people lack the strength to fix it? Or that there are not enough horses? Of course not! The excess of labor in the countryside has become almost proverbial and there are enough horses. One could easily and without cost repair the road. But there lacks one thing, a person with the understanding and will to do so.

Sondel’s research of rural economics led him to believe that villagers lacked the personal will and motivation to better their living situations. For this reason, he claimed that farmers needed ethnographers in Poznań. Lwów also became a center of rural studies thanks to Franciszek Bujak who founded Polish rural economic history.

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39 Jan Sondel (1895-1975) was an agricultural economist, lawyer, social activist, and professor at the Higher School of Agriculture and the Higher School of Economics in Wrocław.


41 Jan Sondel, Braki gospodarcze i kulturalne wsi jako punkt zaczepy dla pracy społecznej (Lwów: A. Gojawiczyński, 1934), 7-9.
social welfare and state support because without it, they would only continue to live in squalid conditions. When Sondel asked a villager why he lived in such conditions, he reportedly responded, “I know that this is wrong, but that’s just the way it is, and I can’t bring myself to do anything about it.” Reflecting on this conversation and how to remedy farmer’s lack of motivation, Sondel wrote, “He lacks a strong will. [Guiding] an appropriate adjustment of will—that is the most important task of the social worker.” Sondel’s research was not meant only to report on the status of rural life, but rather to guide other researchers and state officials to expand social work and welfare practices. He used rural poverty as a lens through which observers could understand villagers as backward and in need of aid, thereby only reinforcing negative stereotypes of village life. Dealing a final blow, he observed, “You have to want [to change], but this unfortunately is not easy in the village.”

The work of scholars such as Sondel helped, in part, to reinforce stereotypes of rural backwardness, and state officials could use these scholarly assessments to justify their increased presence in the countryside. Relying on a small army of specialists to report on the quality of life in Poland’s villages, MRiRR and MOS leaders could then begin to impose their own agendas for improving rural society. In leaders’ view, farmers’ inability to improve their own ways of life were personal faults that required professional assistance in the form of social work, and medical advocacy, in addition to the reconstruction of rural infrastructure. Over the course of the interwar period, the countryside was the site of massive state-led rebuilding campaigns that were touted as necessary for the physical and civilizational development of rural Poland. When state leaders believed that farmers were incapable of rebuilding and revitalizing their own communities, they stepped in as supposed reformers, trying to replace local activism.

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42 Ibid., 6, 10.
3.5 “Civilizing” the Countryside

The revitalization of the Polish countryside was a central goal of the interwar state. Even when led by non-rural party premiers, governments recognized the centrality of rural economic development to Polish affairs. Under the auspices of the MRiDP, the MOS, and the MSW, the state managed to help revitalize and renovate key components of rural life. As we will see, one of the integral components of rural reconstruction was the utilization of cutting-edge scientific technology and rational approaches to rural redevelopment that helped modernize farming techniques and brought new standards of health and hygiene to village homes. These massive undertakings provided the opportunity for the state to impose new regulations on rural communities, and in doing so, attempted to standardize the rural experience across the Polish lands. As a result, the state could try to make more sense of the otherwise tremendous diversity that characterized rural Poland.

3.5.1 Preparing for Revitalization

State-led efforts to improve the countryside following the First World War were broad and wide-reaching, though they were also sometimes unorganized and slow. As the new state scrambled to get the economy moving again, many challenges arose that threatened Poland’s economic efficacy. With nearly ninety percent of the lands within the boundaries of interwar Poland somehow negatively impacted by the First World War, state-wide reconstruction proved to be an enormous undertaking. As ministry officials increasingly realized the magnitude of the work needing to be done, they invested resources to train groups of laborers and civil servants who could aid in the management of such revitalization projects.

Among the state’s primary concerns was catalyzing villagers’ return to farming. Influenced by a starvation epidemic, the government quickly organized the distribution of seed to farmers
across the Polish lands, though because of wartime damage, any meaningful, large-scale farming was initially only possible in the western territories. Seeds and seedlings came from as far as Erfurt, Germany and included everything from wheat to potatoes to beets. In one instance, state officials organized the delivery of four hundred wagons of seed and twelve hundred wagons of potato seedlings that were meant to fulfill the needs of some ten thousand farmers. The MRiDP also worked with the American Red Cross in the hopes that the partnership would result in the delivery of some five hundred tractors from the United States, though the ministry was cautious not to rely too much on foreign aid. To this end, the MRiDP created the Department of Agricultural Reconstruction (Wydział Odbudowy Rolnictwa) whose “top assignment was the distribution of aid in the planting of fields, including providing the most devastated farms with seeds and livestock.”

State officials quickly realized, however, that the mere distribution of seed was not enough and more comprehensive action needed to be taken. By the early 1920s, then, revitalization of rural Poland included the rebuilding of its infrastructure and the civilizational development of its inhabitants.

Since Poland had inherited enormous imperial estates discussed earlier in this chapter, it had significant land holdings that could be used for rural redevelopment. This redevelopment

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43 Order for plant bulbs and seeds from Ernst Benany in Ehrfurt, Germany AAN/13/682.
44 “Krótkie sprawozdanie w sprawie pomocy rolnej dla gospodarstw zniszczonych przez wojnę,” AAN/13/683.
45 Extract from the Protocols of the 61st Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland on 1 May 1919, 9 May 1919, AAN/13/682. Government officials were afraid that asking for too much foreign aid would develop a culture of reliance, but more importantly, also invite more foreign political and diplomatic influence than they wanted.
47 “Zezwolenia policyjne na budowę budynków na wsi,” Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (APP)/4616/400.
included the explosion of public works projects that included everything the clearing of forests to make space for more land, building and fixing roads, and constructing schools, hospitals, and local community centers. State officials claimed that the revitalization of rural infrastructure might help improve rural culture, and bring an increasing number of villagers in communion with the state. To achieve these massive construction goals, the state hired out-of-work agricultural laborers and seasonal workers, trained them in relevant fields such as masonry, handed them the necessary tools, and sent them to work. In doing so, government officials suggested that farmers might gain encouragement and motivation to work, and recognize their central role in the infrastructural development of the countryside.\textsuperscript{48}

In addition to training a new generation of manual laborers, government ministries also developed training programs that birthed a cadre of civil servants who functioned in service of the state. These new civil servants helped carry out state-ordered mandates in rural areas. Educated in scientific agriculture, water testing, and health and hygiene, for example, these new graduates became the face of the state’s involvement in the countryside as they were the keepers of state-mandated standards in rural society. In addition to functioning as rural inspectors, their responsibilities also included “examining the extent of [wartime] damage, being thoroughly familiar with the needs of the inspected, collect statistical data on the damaged areas, to develop proposals that will help offset the effects of the damage, and to provide aid.”\textsuperscript{49} Interest in such positions among farmers was so great that organizations such as the Circle of Rural Housewives (\textit{Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich}, KGW) had received hundreds of letters asking for information about

\textsuperscript{48} Extract from the Protocols of the 61\textsuperscript{st} Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland of 1 May 1919, 9 May 1919, AAN/13/682, 1.

\textsuperscript{49} Training Guide for Rural Inspectors of the Department of Rural Reconstruction of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, AAN/13/6219, 1-2.
training programs, becoming course instructors, and what sorts of books to read to be up-to-date on agricultural and technological developments.⁵⁰ Equipped with manual laborers and trained civil servants, the state could focus its work in the countryside.

3.5.2 **Rebuilding Rural Infrastructure**

Interwar Polish leaders led massive nation-wide rural reconstruction campaigns that reached into every corner of the infant country. These projects focused on the development and redevelopment of both public and private spaces and demonstrated the state’s increased interest in the personal lives of its citizens. The construction of rural school buildings and hospitals, for example, was the result of not only the terrible need for such facilities, but also because politicians claimed to need to civilize the rural population. Likewise, increased interest in the personal habits of citizens led the state officials to carry out assessments in health, including sexual health, domestic hygiene, and water quality. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the revitalization of rural infrastructure through the construction of schools, hospitals, rural homes and barns, and community and private wells.

State officials were most interested in expanding the number of rural schools in the Polish lands for at least two reasons. The first of these was, of course, to provide increased educational opportunities for village students who were the future of the countryside and could be educated in civics, the humanities, and the sciences. For the most promising students, education provided the benefit of upward social mobility, and an escape from rural life, if necessary. Educational and rural activist, Stanisław Leśniowski, explained that the importance of expanding rural education in Poland was so that schools could “prepare youth from the wide masses of the folk to elevate the

The rise of agricultural schools in rural Poland revolutionized the countryside in that it helped professionalize young farmers and contributed to significant disruptions in patriarchal structures. It also provided for the expansion of scientific agriculture in subsistence farming, and provided new techniques for mothering and childrearing in the domestic realm.

The second reason rural schools were so important was because they became a laboratory for state officials and rural activists who could engage students early on in practicing what were considered appropriate and healthy habits. Schools taught a variety of lessons on health and hygiene, home economics, and animal welfare in the hope that students would bring these lessons home to their family farms and serve as a sort of example for their family members. Along these lines, schools were also the main targets for pamphlets and posters that touted new techniques and standards that specialists agreed should be followed if villagers wanted to live healthy lives. In short, the education of rural dwellers became a multifaceted enterprise that helped bring the Polish countryside into accordance with contemporary international and national standards.

The Ministry of Social Welfare played an active role in rural education as well as the development of rural hospitals and clinics. During the interwar period, the MOS organized health and hygiene courses across the Polish lands. These classes were taught in local community centers and school buildings and were also available for distance learning, allowing for the proliferation of information across rural Poland. That information was available, however, did not always translate into action. Indeed, the MOS was strategic in bringing medical professionals and government employees to the countryside to assess levels of physical and sexual health, domestic

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51 Protocol #2 from the meeting of the Educational Ministerial Commission calling for the Development of a Network of Lower Agricultural Schools, 5 October 1919, AAN/13/5599.
52 The social effects of agricultural education are discussed in detail in Chapters Five and Six.
hygiene, and test drinking water to ensure that citizens were up-to-date on state-mandated standards. The results of their research, however, showed just how underserved the population had been and how living conditions across the Polish lands varied from satisfactory to dangerous.

Among the MOS’s primary goals was to increase the number of hospitals and state clinics in the most underserved regions, in particular eastern Poland. In its 1933-1934 report on the Białystok Voivodeship, MOS officials found that the entire province had only 399 hospitals meant to serve its 1,749,423 inhabitants. Broken down by specialization, this meant one doctor per 4400 patients, one dentist (223 total) per 7800, one surgeon (125 total) for every 13,900, and one midwife (396 total) for every 4400.53 Medical professionals feared not only that patients who sought care would find it too late, but that they would choose to seek it from other nonprofessional sources, namely rural woman who often acted as midwives and witch doctors. Indeed, the increased professionalization of medical professionals sought to remove traditional structures of healthcare and child delivery from the countryside and promoted what Rima Apple has described as scientific motherhood, that is, the reliance of professional medical advice in childrearing versus traditional methods of folk medicine.54

To overcome the rampant explosion of disease across rural Poland, the MOS coordinated what it called “rationally organized modern treatment methods” that included not only the building of more local state-run medical clinics, but also the creation of mobile units that could travel to the most remote regions and provide aid. Funded partially by the American-based Rockefeller Foundation, these mobile units were made up of three syphilologists, one pediatrician, one

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54 On the concept of scientific motherhood see Rima Apple, “Constructing Mothers: Scientific Motherhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” Social History of Medicine 8 (1995): 161-178. The transformations in motherhood and the increased influence of medicine in rural Poland will be discussed more in Chapter Six.
optometrist, and one neurologist.\textsuperscript{55} As the ratio of syphilologists to other medical professionals suggests, state officials were particularly concerned about the spread of syphilis in rural counties, and syphilologists came to wield significant power over rural dwellers. Researchers for the Rockefeller Foundation found that in the Stanisławów Voivodeship, for example, migrant workers were required to provide a clean bill of health from their doctors in the name of “a more exact supervision of venereal patients.” Only after proving that “they are not affected by [syphilis]” could they be permitted to travel to other parts of the country for work.\textsuperscript{56}

When MOS officials and medical professionals could not reach venereal patients in Stanisławów, they sought the help of the region’s mostly Greek-Catholic clergy to aid in the battle against syphilis. This, once again, complicated the notion of state authority, demonstrating that local power structures were crucial to carrying out the government’s agenda. The Rockefeller Foundation’s report explained that,

\begin{quote}
With the object of preventing the spread of the disease, the Greek-Catholic Bishops Headquarters at Stanisławów issued an order—on the demand of the Palatinate’s Health Office—that the clergymen of communities situated in districts affected by syphilis should require health certificates of those who are going to be married, given by official doctors and further the Bishopric made an appeal to the clergy enjoining them to cooperate with the anti-venereal campaign by means of adequate information given to the inhabitants. Popular pamphlets concerning venereal diseases were delivered to the official and district doctors in order to be distributed among clergymen, teachers, and other persons who could give suitable information to the country people.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

On 10 November 1925, when during a conference on sexual health in Poland sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior, representative of the Rockefeller Foundation Dr. George Bevier suggested that patients be taught about contraception, his colleagues agreed, but religious authorities

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{55} Protocols of the Conference on Endemic Syphilis in the Counties of the Stanisławów and Kraków Voivodships on 10 November 1925, 11 December 1925, AAN/15/528.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 4-5.
\end{flushright}
dissented. With religious and medical authorities closely monitoring the sexual habits of its
citizenry, priests’ and doctors’ roles in rural society became even more pronounced. The resultant
shift in treatment, from traditional folk medicine to more professionalized sorts had significant
social consequences as private medical information quickly became the stuff of state authority.

Ministers’ interest in the personal health of its rural citizenry was also apparent in their
ever-increasing gaze into the rural home. Across the Polish lands, MOS agents and scholars
conducted village walkthroughs meant to assess the levels of civilization in rural regions. These
domestic visits included an interview with the housewife, a tour of her home, and taking an
inventory of the family’s possessions, including the numbers of forks or pairs of underwear a rural
family owned. The assessments later became fodder for the state’s justifications of its
involvement in rural domestic affairs and were used to create new health and building standards
for village dwellings. Under the auspices of the MOS’s Department of Village Hygiene (Wydział
Higieny Wsi), government officials and scholars used scientific knowledge and technology to bring
rational change to the interwar village. The state assessed the level of rural cleanliness in myriad
ways, including collecting information from scholars’ research, requiring local governments to
self-report, and sending individual inspectors into villages. With this information, it could deepen
its knowledge of rural life, and blur the lines between the public and private spheres in more
profound ways.

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58 Protocols of the Conference on Endemic Syphilis in the Counties of the Stanisławów and
Kraków Voivodships on 10 November 1925, 11 December 1925, AAN/15/528.
59 For examples of home visit cards see, “Działalność Centralnej Organizacji i Kółek Rolniczych
na polu higieny na wsi. Sprawozdania, kwestionariusze sprawozdawcze z lotnych
pięciomiesięcznych kursów zdrowia i odwiedzin domowych, podania o zapomogi, czasopismo
60 “Ankietka dotycząca znaczenia kobiety-gospodyni w karłowatem gospodarstwie wiejskim,”
1934, AAN/47/1148.
To combat this pandemic filth, for example, MOS officials organized health courses across the country. These courses, taught by medical professionals, hygienists, and social workers were meant to increase villagers’ access to information regarding domestic tidiness, but there were often too few courses offered to effect any real change. In 1936-1937, for example, only 345 health classes were offered across the country, amounting to only two to three courses per county. And even if more courses had been offered, it is unclear whether villagers would attend them at all. Concerned that such information was not reaching its intended audience, the MOS and other rural organizations organized domestic assessments that reviewed farmers’ clothing, the conditions of their homes, and their daily diets.

At the same time, village governments were required to conduct their own assessments, write detailed reports of their findings, and send them to the MOS where they would be processed and filed. The results of these reports, if positive, resulted in little government action, whereas poor reports were an invitation for state intervention. In some cases, when provincial governments did not want to be bothered by central state authorities, they doctored their reports to reflect significant strides and successes in maintaining health and hygiene at local level. But for some villagers, state intervention was a welcomed presence that signified action, rather than the otherwise passive response of local village administrations. As a result, local governing bodies were held to standards from both central state authorities and their constituents.

In one instance, for example, village officials in Słomiń were betrayed by their neighbor, Joanna Kolacińska, who claimed that her local leaders had lied in their report. Kolacińska protested the report’s findings, especially the notion that the water in a ditch near her home was so clean that she and her neighbors used it to wash their undergarments. A state-appointed health and hygiene auditor named Dr. Zmigród arrived in Słomiń shortly thereafter and upon further investigation
penned a letter to the MOS’s Department of Health Services, claiming that Kolacińska’s accusation was correct. “It does not reflect reality that the folk wash their underwear in the ditch as the application claims,” Żmigród wrote. “[Because] it is located at the bottom of small decline, the ditch is full of muck from the entire village and no one can wash their underwear there.” Żmigród’s recommendation for Słomiń’s leaders was to improve access to clean water in the village by “building outhouses and wells where there are none, stop the dumping of milk canisters into wells, and to make coverings for wells without them.”

Żmigród’s focus on water cleanliness is not surprising given Europeans’ interest in water and epidemiology since the mid-nineteenth century when English physician John Snow studied the relationship between disease outbreaks and water quality. Unlike Warsaw which had a water filtration system since 1886, rural infrastructure had not yet caught up and relied entirely on well water. Concerned about disease outbreaks, MOS officials scoured the countryside in an attempt to modernize wells across the Polish lands and by 1938 had formally organized rural drinking water initiatives. Headed by the Committee on Issues of Rural Culture (Komitet do Sprawy Kultury Wsi), drinking water programs sought to provide safe drinking water, but also quick and easy access to water for extinguishing fires. Across Poland, MOS officials traveled from village to village meeting with local mayors and county executives to distribute pamphlets, tables, and brochures that provided scientific information regarding the connection between health and water quality. They increased the number of water sanitation controllers, standardized the minimum

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61 Dr. Zmigród to the Ministry of Social Welfare Department of Health Services, 7 September 1935, AAN/15/779.  
62 Ibid.  
63 For more on Snow and his findings see, Sandra Hempel, The Strange Case of the Broad Street Pump: John Snow and the Mystery of Cholera (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
requirements for water access and for well construction, and even provided special credits to farmers who rebuilt their antiquated ones.64

State concerns regarding rural hygiene also extended to the construction of outhouses. New building standards passed by the MOS required that outhouses be built away from sources of water, as well as a standard number of meters away from rural dwellings. MOS officials believed that waste could remain contained and neither flow into streams and rivers nor be tracked into the home. Outhouses were to be kept clean and the hole covered, while also equipped with mesh windows to provide ventilation. To keep odors and germs at bay, farmers were required to periodically treat them with peat or lime.65 At the same time, requirements for outhouses were also the state’s way of waging “rational attacks on flies,” which health and hygiene officials credited with the spread of cholera, dysentery, and tuberculosis, among other diseases.66 In addition to ensuring the cleanliness of outhouses, new regulations directed farmers to cover manure piles with peat or soil, to cover trash cans and empty them regularly, to keep a tidy home, and to keep food covered and stored in a cool, dark place.67

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64 “Wnioski w sprawie zaopatrzenia ludności wiejskiej w dobrą wodę do picia przyjęte przez Komitet do Spraw Kultury Wsi,” 23 March 1938, AAN/15/155.
65 Even toilet paper became an issue of national interest. A company called Pigment had begun printing advertisements on toilet paper and government officials were concerned of the ink’s toxicity and its potential effects on user’s most tender regions. Despite Pigment’s protestations that the ink used was non-toxic, and other specialists’ confirmation of its safety, MOS official, Dr. J. Adamski, warned consumers against it not only because of its potential health hazards, but also because it disintegrated too easily and was not effective. Pigment to the Ministry of Social Welfare; Eberhardt to the Ministry of Social Welfare Department of Health Services; Dr. J. Adamski to Government Commissioners, June-September, 1935, AAN/15/779, 130-131, 133.
66 The Minister of Social Welfare to Voivodes on the Battle with Flies, 1938, AAN/15/785. The MOS had implemented a four-year campaign for fighting flies from 1934-1938. Officials claimed that their efforts had been successful especially in teaching farmers how to better manage domestic hygiene.
67 Regulations for Conditions to Reduce the Number of Flies in Villages, 1937-1938, AAN/15/785.
With the maintenance of the exterior of the rural home sufficiently rationalized, specialists began to take interest in its interior. Concerned primarily about farmers’ domestic hygiene, state officials and scholars of various types created guidelines and standards that they expected farmers to follow within the home. Active dissension from these guidelines was an invitation for a home visit and even more intervention from state authorities. One of MOS officials’ goals was to reverse seemingly irrational methods of home management. For example, hygienists stressed for the removal of cows, pigs, and chickens from homes especially during the wintertime, when animals were often kept inside to protect them from the bitter cold. Others sought to improve ventilation. Only during the interwar period were windows that opened standardized into building requirements. Prior, windows that did not open (or exist), and a lack of chimneys meant that everything in the home was covered in a thick layer of soot, people included. To make matters worse, because old wives’ tales threatened that drafts and moving air could bring disfigurement or even death, little was done to air out homes on even the hottest summer days.

Since the end of the First World War, state officials and hygiene specialists advocated rebuilding rural homes in a rational manner, that is, in a way that “suited the needs of the inhabitants, with a well-planned placement of rooms.” In her book on the management of rural homes, Helena Byczyńska-Tyszkowa, argued that blue prints “thus must be thought out thoroughly, so that every detail of the house be practical and serve the [family’s] needs.” This rationalization of household design included building houses at proper angles that would maximize or minimize

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68 Blueprints for modern barns with windows that open can be found in AAN/13/6210.
69 Helena Byczyńska-Tyszkowa, Dom wiejski i jego urządzenie (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Towarzystwa Oświaty Rolniczej, 1935), 15. The introduction of her book tells us that “Byczyńska-Tyszkowa is known among Polish housewives as a highly respected and popular facilitator of agricultural courses.”
70 Ibid., 17.
sunlight. For this reason, Byczyńska-Tyzszkowa recommended building bedrooms in the south-eastern part of the home so that it could enjoy maximum sunlight in morning hours and that light of the late summer sunset did not disturb a family’s slumber. Day rooms, she insisted, should be built on the other side of the house from the bedroom so as to not disturb sleep. And kitchens, she explained, were best built in the north-west corner of the dwelling where they would not get too hot in the summer months.\textsuperscript{71}

3.6 Conclusion

State officials’ scientific approach to rural reconstruction created a new yardstick by which civilization and culture was measured in the countryside. With villages in desperate need of aid, both social and economic, the state involved itself more closely with the intimate matters of rural life. In doing so, it could attempt to standardize rural life, thus bridging social and cultural gaps across the Polish countryside. Though these projects were touted as positive and modernizing, they also reminded farmers and their social betters of rural backwardness, portraying villagers as helpless victims of their own poverty incapable of bettering themselves. In this way, the state could justify its presence in rural affairs. Farmers, however, were not passive recipients of state authority and in their own ways, managed to challenge state authority over the course of the interwar period. This negotiation of power and villagers’ responses is the focus of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 19.
4. THE VILLAGERS SPEAK: RURAL MISERY AND THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF FARMERS’ UNREST

Never have farmers so urgently needed help, never have they stood as close to their ruin as they do now. -W. Marczuka, Wołyń, 1935

The greatest obstacle to a better tomorrow is that, in front of every smallholder, stands a chessboard. -B. Skurka, Postawy, 1935

4.1 Introduction

Throughout the interwar period, Polish farmers were starving, destitute, and living in abhorrent conditions.¹ These conditions worsened during the so-called “years of crisis” (1929-1935) when, unable to sell their agricultural products at competitive prices, and burdened with high interest rates on loans and land taxes, villagers had few meaningful sources of income. With little money to provide themselves, much less their families, with even the most basic of goods, villagers were fed up with what they perceived to be the state’s empty promises of social aid and rural rejuvenation. Farmers’ calls for help, they claimed, had fallen on deaf ears, and their patience had worn thin. Despite officials’ protestations that rural conditions were ever-improving, village realities reflected a more discouraging scene. One farmer, W.W.² of S. in Sandomierz County who lived on a four-hectare farm with his seven other family members wrote about his frustrations


² The majority of sources referenced in this chapter come from the results of a questionnaire that the CTR administered to smallholders. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, only their initials are used. “Analiza materiału ankietowego dotyczącego położenia gospodarstw małorolnych, 1935,” 1935, AAN/47/1156.
toward government leaders’ ignorance of rural suffering and their inept handling of village affairs. “In newspapers,” he began,

they write various articles based on speeches from Ministers that say how the crisis in the state has vanished. I, however, assert that this is not at all how it is, but that the crisis in the countryside is growing day by day. Because the prices of agricultural… goods keep falling, and because [the minsters] get to collect the same pensions, they have a great life, while farmers die of hunger…³

W.W.’s lament reflected farmers’ rejection of government rhetoric that touted the supposedly successful elevation of rural civilization thanks to various ministries’ growing interest and presence in the everyday lives of rural inhabitants. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, Ministry of Social Welfare, and the Ministry of the Interior, in addition to a whole host of doctors, economists, and ethnographers, studied every aspect of rural society, sometimes in minute detail, to make the countryside and its inhabitants legible to the nascent government. Ministry officials justified their nearly constant presence in the countryside as a way to facilitate rural reconstruction and desperately needed land reform, yet the political chaos of the Sejm and later, the anti-rural policies of Piłsudski’s Sanacja regime, stymied any possibilities for real rural rehabilitation.⁴ With increasing awareness that the countryside was growing more and more destitute while other spheres of society reportedly profited, farmers lost faith in federal and provincial leaders, and sought out new opportunities for rural change, with many turning to local activism and even protest.

Dealing with a peppering of farmers’ strikes since the state’s founding, leaders of the Second Republic faced significant struggles quelling the episodic agitation of their rural citizenry.

⁴ On the chaos of democratic politics in interwar Poland see Polonsky, Politics in Independent Poland, 1921-1939. For a discussion of the problems of agriculture and Sanacja in interwar Poland in Watt, Bitter Glory, 196-209.
Since the first outbreak of farmers’ agitation in 1919 to an almost nation-wide strike in 1937, Poland’s villagers had become a thorn in the side of government officials. The sheer size of the countryside and its inhabitants, however, made them impossible to ignore. As villagers grew increasingly agitated toward their decreasing prospects, their anger turned to action. This chapter discusses the social origins of such rural unrest, focusing on farmers’ various laments concerning their place in the urban-rural divide, anti-noble sentiment and their role in the Polish nation, and their disappointment in, and questioning of, the efficacy of the state. It argues that the social conditions in which Poland’s farmers found themselves during the interwar period, but especially from 1929 to 1935, helped, in part, to set the stage for an increasingly impassioned and even resentful rural populace. Growing rates of rural cynicism reflected farmers’ disappointment in the false promises leaders told them of the new state’s commitment to working on behalf of its citizens. With little evidence of real change in the countryside, farmers considered the interwar Polish state as much an imposition as its imperial predecessors.

Early scholars of interwar Polish rural economics and history, largely Marxist in tradition, have explained this rural unrest (some even called it radicalization) as the byproduct of farmers’ economic exploitation at the hands of noble landowners who manipulated the proletariat agricultural working-class. This interpretation, influenced by the communist context in which it

5 In 1921, seventy-five percent of the population lived in the countryside. Of these, sixty-five percent were employed in agriculture, forestry, and allied occupations. Numerically, this means that some seventeen million people lived and worked in the countryside. In comparison, less than four million people worked in industry, and less than three million were employed in trades. Narkiewicz, *The Green Flag*, 170.
was produced, equated rural and urban laborers’ suffering, and strived to show an undeniable connection between farmers’ and workers’ plight to factor farmers more easily into the communist vision. This chapter takes issue with this conflagration of rural and urban workers, and argues, in part, that a portion of villagers’ anger was derived directly from a perceived and imagined view that urban conditions were exponentially better than their own.

More recently, historian Thomas Adams has broken from this Marxist economic perspective and contextualized Polish rural revolt, specifically the Peasant Strike (Strajk Chłopski) of 1937, in cultural and political terms, arguing that villagers’ turn to protest and violence was the result of rural leaders’ connection to worldwide agrarianism movements. In Adams’s estimation, it was not the economic degradation of the Polish countryside that led villagers to revolt, but rather political leaders’ belief that a shift away from the anti-rural Sanacja regime to an agrarian democracy was the only way to ensure the full enfranchisement of Polish rural society. Leaders of the left-wing branch of the People’s Party (Stronnictwo Ludowe, SL), the primary populist political party following the 1931 unification of the Polish People’s Party Piast (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Piast, PSL-Piast), the Polish People’s Party Liberation (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe Wyzwolenie, hereafter Wyzwolenie), and the Peasant Party (Stronnictwo Chłopskie, SCh) organized and staged the strikes in an attempt to reestablish Polish democracy. Though Adams

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argues that rural strikes were strictly political in nature, he also concedes that the economic conditions for rebellion were a powerful catalyst for villagers’ action. Most problematic, however, is Adams’s assumption of farmers’ political consciousness, not accounting for some villagers’ disenchantment with or complete indifference to political structures.

Taking into consideration the economic, cultural, and political backgrounds in which villagers’ activism took place, this chapter considers the social genesis of rural cynicism in interwar Poland. To begin, it starts with a brief overview of the economic and political situation of the Polish countryside. From there, it moves to an analysis of some of the laments that smallholders identified in essays and questionnaires. Specifically, farmers harbored intensifying anti-urban sentiments that were, to some extent, a construction of real and imagined differences that they identified between themselves and their urban co-citizens. Unsurprisingly, these anti-urban sentiments could also take on anti-Jewish characteristics. Farmers also exhibited a disdain for the upper classes, partly because they believed large landholders were not negatively affected by the price cuts of agricultural goods, but also because they feared nobles were trying to institute a new wave of serfdom. After looking at rural grievances against the landowning class, the chapter considers rural anti-state rhetoric and argues that farmers were increasingly distrustful of the Polish state and felt no particular connection to it. Together, with the economic deprivation and political chaos that characterized rural life in interwar Poland, these sentiments helped pave the way for social unrest in the countryside. The result of this unrest was the fomenting of rural definitions of Polishness that catalyzed villagers to develop new ideas about their role in the new state. In short, if the new state did not work for them, they found new avenues to ensure their needs were met, especially through the expansion of local organizations that will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.
4.2 The “Triple Crisis” in the Polish Countryside

In his study of the rise of French rural fascism or pseudo-fascism, Robert Paxton claims that the origins of rural unrest in interwar France stemmed from the “triple crisis of the… peasantry.”\(^8\) The threefold conditions that contributed to the rise of the French rural right, he argues, were firstly, the Great Depression’s devastating global economic impact on the prices of agricultural goods, secondly, a nation-wide underappreciation for the cultural life of rural France, and lastly, unsatisfactory political representation and a lack of strong rural leadership. Paxton’s “triple crisis” framework serves as a helpful model for understanding rural unrest in much of interwar Europe, though the model cannot be applied to the Polish case study without considering the uniqueness of the Polish example. In short, like their French rural brethren, Polish-speaking farmers were also affected by the “triple crisis,” though admittedly in different ways. Like in France, rural Poles felt that their state had turned its back on them, and the Great Depression caused agricultural prices to remain low. In contrast, however, the political crisis of the Polish countryside was not one of underrepresentation, but rather of overrepresentation. Accordingly, the following section applies Paxton’s model to the Polish case, but not without further contextualization and appreciation for the peculiarities of interwar rural society in Poland.

4.2.1 The Great Depression

The magnitude of the Great Depression’s impact on European agriculture was enormous as prices of farm products dropped to staggeringly low numbers long before they ever affected other economic spheres. In Poland, farmers had finally begun to recover from the economic deprivation of the First World War before the depression hit. Having worked to regenerate vast

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\(^8\) Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism*: 11-50. I offer the conditional “pseudo-fascism” because Paxton is not convinced the Greenshirts were true fascists, but rather a group that rallied around their shared bitterness and dissatisfaction with the French state.
swathes of destroyed and fallow land, to return to farming despite a lack of access to seed and animals, all while dealing with the enormous problem of an underemployed overpopulated countryside, farmers had imagined that the worst was behind them and they would begin to profit at rates similar to, if not better than, the prewar years. As Zbigniew Landau has shown, by 1928, the growth of agricultural production was set to increase. Indeed, “it was falling prices and not falling output that constituted the main feature of the agricultural crisis.” Even at the height of the “years of crisis,” from 1930 to 1934, the production of wheat, a staple of Polish agricultural production increased in comparison to the years 1926-1930. At the same time, the amount of arable land also increased, thanks to the felling of forests and the sale of imperial estates, from 16.5 million hectares in 1929 to 17.1 million in 1935. And the number of animals, especially pigs, was also growing. While increases in the number of cows nationwide were incremental and fluctuated somewhat, the numbers of pigs in the Polish countryside rose by nearly forty percent.9

Even though the production of rural goods increased, or remained stable, in the years following the stock market crash, the prices of these goods dropped significantly. The most devastating decline in prices that promised the ruin of the Polish countryside was that of wheat. In 1928, one-hundred kilograms of wheat could yield a farmer nearly 47.4 złote at market, only to drop to 16.1 złote by 1935 (a sixty-six percent drop). To make matters worse, the opening of other agricultural markets especially in Canada, Argentina, the United States, and Australia, increased the supply of wheat worldwide so that the market was oversaturated and demand remained low. Similar decreases in prices were observed in beef which dropped from 212.3 złote per one-hundred kilograms to 59.7 złote (a fifty-seven percent drop) during the same time frame. Similarly, the price of pork also fell dramatically from 212.3 złote per one-hundred kilograms in 1928 to 77.1 in

1935 (also a sixty-six percent drop). In simpler terms, “in order to receive the same amount of money, the farmer had to sell in 1935 three times as much as in 1928.”

The low returns on rural products meant that farmers’ incomes also plummeted to such extreme levels that many had to make difficult decisions between feeding their families or feeding their animals. One unidentified farmer recalled going to the farmers’ market in Dynów in Rzeszów County only to see that the villagers selling their “fattened pigs” were, by comparison, nothing more than “skeletons.” Commenting further he wrote,

> Why is the owner of such fat pigs so skinny? To settle your curiosity, you must go to that village and see how the farmer lives and how his pigs live. And what do you see? The farmer who has multiple miserable children denies himself and his children with only a tablespoon of milk and bread, they eat moldy potatoes with some sour rye, and the best food is left for the pigs… And if one compares him to a criminal for taking better care of his animals than his children, he looks at you with tears in his eyes and says, “I am forced to do this, friend; if I don’t raise pork and I don’t sell it, then I have nothing with which to pay my bills and they will indemnify me, to say nothing of buying shoes and clothing. Back in the day, with this kind of pig, I could cover the house, pay the bills, drink a litkup, and even put some away in my pocket in case of emergencies, but nowadays it’s not enough for the same bills.”

Statistics confirm farmers’ financial concerns and show that the average income of smallholders dropped sixty-five percent from 506 złote in 1928-1929 to 143 złote at the height of the “years of crisis.” Even more importantly, farmers were also burdened with significant debts, and owed enormous amounts of money to banks and independent creditors (approximately one-third of loan granters) who prior to the Great Depression, had freely offered loans because of the predicted agricultural market boom. The MRiRR calculated that in 1931, the total number of farmers’ loans totaled 3.85 billion złote, rising to 4.273 billion by 1933. By comparison, the total rural income in 1933 was 1.5 billion złote, resulting in a 2.773 billion złote deficit. Loan interest

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10 Ibid., 29.
rates varied between thirty-six and one-hundred-eighty percent annually and even government attempts to forgive debts were unhelpful as the amount of money owed was still too much for villagers to bear. As a result, many farmers went into foreclosure and their lands were auctioned off.  

Foreclosure was a constant fear for indebted farmers such as D.A. from Lesko County who wrote, “Neither the shrapnel nor grenades on the front were as frightening to me as just the thought that creditors can throw me and my family off our beloved farm.”

To make ends meet, villagers were forced to sell not only their excess products, but also those necessary for their own consumption, choosing starvation and destitution over foreclosure. J.W. of K. in Pińczów County, resorted to selling off portions of his meager rye crop, just to be able to afford his four children’s books for school. “I don’t know if we will live to see the harvest,” he bemoaned. “Just like last year, I had to sell one meter of rye to buy books for the children. Every year, different books; you burn the old ones, and must buy new ones. The children go to school without anything to eat, because we don’t even have enough for bread. Their clothing is very poor because we have nothing with which to buy it. If someone donates some old boots or clothing—then they go in them.”

Even eighty-year-old G.J. from Nowy Sącz County reflected that in all his years of life, “I have never seen this kind of poverty and misery.” And though farmers begged MRiRR officials to intervene in the market and help regulate the prices of agricultural goods, their complaints went largely unanswered. K.J. of R. in Bochnia County, for example, exclaimed that government and social intervention was “not only requested but urgently needed” and that the

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“widest possible land reform” legislation be passed “which in my opinion would be the most radical medicine for the problem of overpopulation.”\textsuperscript{16} Comprehensive land reform, however, never came.

4.2.2 \textbf{Fearing the End of Rural Culture}

The Great Depression ruined the economic prospects of the Polish countryside and it also affected its cultural standing in Polish society. The destitute conditions in which rural Poles lived marred their national reputation, presenting them as a dirty and unenlightened mass, largely underappreciated among non-farming Poles. This rejection of rural lifestyles and the resulting low social standing of village society, the second component of Paxton’s “triple crisis” model, affected not only outsiders’ view of the countryside, but it also resulted in farmers’ self-rejection. This self-rejection permeated villagers’ psyches so deeply that they began to fear that their way of life was dying out. Wary of their precarious life prospects, farmers were concerned that they would soon be forgotten to the rest of Poland and her history.

Polish villagers’ low social standing, in contrast to other Western European rural societies, was, in part, the result of a legacy and lived memory of serfdom.\textsuperscript{17} Having only been emancipated in the second half of the nineteenth century, some farmers still remembered a life of political disenfranchisement, leading to a tremendous distrust of the upper classes. As W. Cieszyński of Łańcut explained, “Peasants don’t trust anyone anymore, because everyone has already screwed them.”\textsuperscript{18} To make matters worse, since the rise of the new state, rumors of a return of serfdom

\textsuperscript{17} On the legacies of serfdom in interwar Poland see, Krzysztof Rey, “Uwagi w sprawie przeżytków feudalnych w rolnictwie Polski międzywojennej,” \textit{Ekonomista: Czasopismo poświęcone nauce i potrzebom życia} 2 (1956): 110-128.
\textsuperscript{18} W. Cieszyński, “Opisy gospodarowania (męskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1146.
spread rapidly throughout the countryside, further expanding the fissure between classes. Still, others observed that the cultural position of rural Poles and the economic deprivation that they faced was nothing short of another form of serfdom, except that this time, it was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Rural activist Stanisław Miłkowski expressed, in no uncertain terms, his fears that the economic deprivation of rural society would cripple villagers’ sense of freedom. “These conditions,” he wrote, “help bring about in various ways, a gradual shift in the burden of the crisis upon agriculture, creating new forms of serfdom, of slavery.\footnote{19}"

This cultural hangover and social distance manifested itself not only in economics and politics, but also in language. For example, the title \textit{pan} or \textit{pani} (lord or lady, later mister and missus) was reserved only for the Polish nobility, and was only democratized to include all social classes under state socialism.\footnote{20} Thus, noble landowners would refer to villagers by their first names, other informal personal pronouns, or even more pejorative terms, while the latter could never imagine referring to their social betters as anything other than \textit{pan} or \textit{pani}. If, as Longina Jakubowska argues, the Polish nobility understood “culture” to mean only “gentry culture,” and tasked themselves with “guarding it against intrusions of nonculture, or \textit{chamstwo} (boorishness),” then it was impossible for rural society to ever be accepted in the noble imagination and history of the Polish nation.\footnote{21} S.Sz. from a village outside of Kielce responded to the division between nobles’ culture and villagers’ supposed \textit{chamstwo}, arguing that farmers were integral to the nobles’ beloved version of Polish history. “It was not Kordecki’s miracle or the Miracle on the Vistula that

\footnote{21} Ibid., 15. Jakubowska further explains that, “\textit{Chamstwo}, conceptualized by the gentry as an irrevocable property of peasants and uneducated masses, came to signify… all rude and uncivilized behavior.”
saved the fatherland,” he wrote, “but the blood of peasants... this is why the boors should be respected.”^-22 Though nobles’ construction of Polish national iconography included rural tropes such as regional costumes, pottery, songs, and dances, this remained only an imagined romanticization in literature. In more personal interactions, nobles looked down upon villagers, oftentimes with disgust.

This cultural rejection of rural society extended far beyond conversational niceties, however. One of the more obvious exclusions of village culture occurred in school curricula that seemingly bypassed rural history and villagers’ contributions to the country. A young activist from village B. criticized the lack of rural history in national curricula, and complained that the version of Polish history he learned at school was incomplete because it did not contain the history of people like him. “We still have Polish history in school,” he began.

It’s Polish history, but it’s not the entire history of Poland, just the history of past wars, battles, uprisings, famous leaders, heroes, kings, etc. But why is it that the history of the Polish peasant has been forgotten? After all, he too belongs to Poland and he takes part in her activities. Indeed, it is because of him that Poland exists, he gives her life, and it seems to me that this is reason enough to have earned respect. But unfortunately, he is forgotten about, erased from the pages of heroes. This cannot be, we need to make sure that we are apologized to and are written into the book of our Fatherland into which everyone [else] is written. Starting tomorrow, we should be included on paper in capital letters.\(^23\)

\(^{22}\) S.Sz., “Analiza materiału ankietowego dotyczącego położenia gospodarstw małorolnych, 1935,” 1935, AAN/47/1156. S.Sz. is admittedly a remarkable example because of his use of historical interpretation in his response. Augustyn Kordecki was the abbot of the Monastery at Jasna Góra during the Swedish invasion in 1655. In the winter of that year, he led a successful defense of the monastery during the Second Northern War (1655-1660). The Miracle on the Vistula refers to Józef Piłsudski’s successful defense of Warsaw against the Red Army during the Battle of Warsaw in 1920. It was the definitive battle of the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1920) that formally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Riga in 1921. For more on the Polish-Soviet War see, Norman Davies, White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish Soviet War 1919-1920 and the Miracle on the Vistula (London: Random House UK, 2003) and Adam Zamoyski, Warsaw 1920: Lenin’s Failed Conquest of Europe (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).

\(^{23}\) Chałasiński, Młode Pokolenie Chłopów, vol. 4, 493.
For those farmers who never attended schools such lacunae in school lessons were hardly an issue. Instead, one of the most common concerns that villagers expressed was questions of their future. Nervous that conditions would continue to deteriorate, they feared that the days of the Polish countryside and rural culture were numbered. One farmer, J. Stefańczyk, expressed his dismay matter-of-factly, asking “What will come later? I mean, you can’t just walk around for ten years in the same shoes, slippers, or shirts.” The idea that the countryside would eventually crumble and cease to exist was considered increasingly possible because of the steadily growing stream of rural internal migrants to cities. Leaving the countryside in search of new job opportunities, former villagers flocked to their new homes in Warsaw, Kraków, and Łódź and the national urban population began to grow. Most concernedly, it was often young, undereducated youth who chose to reject their rural lives in the hopes of finding work, raising even more concerns that the countryside would grow increasingly tired, old, and unable to work.

Also disconcerting were the everyday ways in which farmers felt their livelihood and the future of the countryside slipping away from them. Many feared, for example, that even if they could see the end of the economic crisis and return to a time of more profitable agricultural prices, the lasting effects of the “years of crisis” would still be felt for years to come and their children would be worse off in the future. W. Cieszyński, for example, commented on the plight of young rural children saying, “You see so many old dwarf farms with five or six children… and all you see is poverty, you see them naked, barefoot—in one shirt. You don’t even want to believe that these are our Polish children—so miserable.” Villagers’ economic despair meant that they could not afford luxuries such as education, resulting in even more concern that their progeny was

destined to become part of the hordes of landless, unemployed, and uneducated villagers who
scoured the countryside looking for work. 26 W.J. from Iłża County, for example, regretted his
marriage and children, complaining that he would have never married and started a family had he
known his economic prospects would be so poor. Instead, he wished he had left his home village
altogether and taken “a walking stick and gone to wherever my eyes would lead me.” 27

Reflecting on how the economic situation had affected village life, W.J. also observed that
because many members of the new generation felt they could not afford to get married, it was now
a regrettably all-too-common occurrence to see so many “thirty-something-year-old maidens” in
the countryside. This, he reported, resulted in a decrease in the number of births in his village.
More importantly, however, he claimed that farmers were starting to see prospective children as a
burden. “Now we are seeing something in the village that we have never seen before,” he wrote,
“fewer children are being born, because as they say, ‘What good are they?’” 28 Such personal
observations were concerning to a population that feared its potential extinction. Still, others
argued in favor of limiting family sizes if only to help control the problem of rural overpopulation.
In addition to seeing demographic concerns in strictly financial terms, Czesław J. from Opatów
County also argued that it was as much in the best interest of a family to limit the number of births,
as it was in the state’s. As an outspoken critic of large rural families, he decried, “If they cannot
figure out the problem of unemployment in the future, then we must limit the number of births,
because I believe, that it is better for the state to have one healthy, lively, and therefore, prosperous

26 K.J. “Analiza materiału ankietowego dotyczącego położenia gospodarstw małorolnych, 1935,”
1935, AAN/47/1156.
27 W.J. “Analiza materiału ankietowego dotyczącego położenia gospodarstw małorolnych,
28 Ibid.
citizen instead of four unemployed weaklings or beggars who are a burden on society.” This language is strikingly similar to that of the eugenicist thinking of the period, suggesting that such influences had already entered village discourse.

While most farmers blamed external factors for their low social status, others lamented their rural brethren’s passivity and lack of motivation to even attempt to change their standard of living. Ż.Sz. from outside of Wadowice complained that other farmers were too complacent and indifferent to the disintegration of the countryside and were thus, just as complicit in its destruction as any politician, loan shark, or nobleman. Instead of taking matters into their own hands, and actively working toward change, Ż.Sz. explained that his neighbors just, “expect something, something extraordinary like a ‘Messiah,’ whom they do not know themselves know, but just believe, will come and save them from this misery.” If even farmers were sometimes too indifferent to their own plight, how could others remain motivated to fight in their name?

4.2.3 The Crisis of Overrepresentation

The third crisis that Paxton observed in 1930s rural France was what he called a “crisis of representation,” that is, that French farmers suffered from both a lack of political representation and strong leadership. If the problem of rural France was a lack of political representation, however, then the political crisis in interwar Poland was an overabundance of it. This is where conditions in the Polish countryside differed from the situation in the French village described by Paxton. In contrast to the Polish lands where rural political parties had existed since the late-nineteenth century, the first political party that claimed to represent exclusively the rural French was only

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founded in 1928 as the French Agrarian and Peasant Party.\textsuperscript{31} Polish farmers, on the other hand, could choose to join a whole host of political parties, agrarian or non-agrarian, from all sides of the political spectrum. Indeed, as farmer Jerzy Probosz the village of Istebna, Poland joked, “Where there are two Poles, there are three political parties.”\textsuperscript{32}

During the interwar period, Polish populist politics were dominated by three political parties. The most important and largest was PSL-Piast founded in 1914 and the home party of three-time Polish premier Wincenty Witos. On the political spectrum, PSL-Piast leaned to the center-right and was exceptionally hostile to the left, a symptom of its capitalist principles, but also its rampant anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{33} PSL-Piast’s primary oppositional party, Wyzwolenie was founded in 1915 in Russian Poland as the Polish People’s Party, but remained a separate party after the reconstitution of Poland in 1918 primarily because of its ideological differences with PSL-Piast. Wyzwolenie, initially founded by Tomasz Nocznicki, sided most often with the Polish Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna), though it promulgated an agenda of social agrarianism. It was, in contrast to PSL-Piast, hostile to the Church and welcoming of ethnic minorities. The SCh, however, was not formed until 1926 after politicians in Wyzwolenie disagreed with one another over whether to support Piłsudski’s May 1926 coup. The schism, led by Jan Dąbski resulted in the creation of a new pro-Sanacja rural party. Though the SCh initially

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{31} Paxton, \textit{French Peasant Fascism}, 37. On Polish rural political parties see, Narkiewicz, \textit{The Green Flag} and Stauter-Halsted, \textit{The Nation in the Village}, 60-78.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Jerzy Istebna, “Konkurs Państwowego Instytutu Naukowego Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie na opisanie działalności Kółka Rolniczego,” 1938, AAN/2576/8, 30.
\item \textsuperscript{33} For example, in a 1922 statement to Piast members, Witos attacked the political left saying that their newspapers only exist to “lie and mislead peasants.” He even went so far as to call Jan Stapiński, the leader of the Polish People’s Party—Left (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe—Lewica, PSL-Lewica), an “old Judas in a new job.” In his attacks, he also referred to PSL-Lewica’s newspaper as \textit{Przyjaciel Brudu} (Friend of Filth), a play on words of the paper’s official name, the \textit{Przyjaciel Ludu} (Friend of the People). Wincenty Witos, “Stary Judasz przy nowej robocie,” 1922, AAN/1247/108.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
supported the coup, by 1929, after seeing no benefit to rural interests from the new government, they too joined PSL-Piast and Wyzwolenie in opposing Sanacja.\textsuperscript{34}

The result of this pluralism was not strong rural representation, but rather a cacophony of voices that hindered the growth and consolidation of rural political power. Though the parties’ individual agendas were more similar than they were different as each of them abided by agrarianism’s pro-democratic principles, their bickering resulted in a divisive political environment. As early as 1918, Wincenty Witos had already stymied attempts at unifying the top rural political parties having boycotted a meeting organized by Wyzwolenie and PSL-Lewica, deciding instead to seek out support from the right-wing members of the Endecja.\textsuperscript{35} In the 1928 parliamentary elections, he once again rejected unification, denying the SCh’s call for a united rural front. He then chose, instead, to join with his Chejno-Piast coalition allies, the Polish Christian Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{36} Finally, on 15 March 1931, in the aftermath of the Brześć arrests—Piłsudski’s radical attempt to squash his political opposition—populist leaders merged the three parties into the People’s Party (Stronnictwo Ludowe, SL). Though this external unification was reportedly welcomed by party constituents, it did little to solve years of populist in-fighting. Indeed, the creation of the SL was perhaps too little, too late as many farmers had already grown so weary of high politics. As Witos himself observed,

\begin{quote}
The news about the alliance of populist parties, which had hitherto led such bitter fights among themselves, made a strong impression on the countryside and was warmly welcomed. On the one hand, the peasants expected a lot from the new party; on the other—they were delighted that the long and scandalous quarrels, which often affected families,
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{35} Narkiewicz, The Green Flag, 196-197.

\textsuperscript{36} “Dlaczego chłopi wybory do Sejmu przegrali?,” 1928, AAN/1250/112.
would at last stop. But there were many sceptics among the peasants, who foretold that the alliance will not last long, because it was an unhealthy creation.\textsuperscript{37}

Farmers’ skepticism was, in part, the result of years of political impotence, but also, as Witos observed above, the effects such political ineffectiveness had on their everyday lives. In their own words, villagers expressed how they thought the overabundance of political options exacerbated a breakdown of social relations in village culture. Too many political voices, they contended, resulted in losing focus on the issues that mattered most to local communities, including social aid, education, and rural reconstruction. Antoni Topór from Delastowice in Dąbrowa County, for example, claimed that he advocated for the founding of an Agricultural Circle in his home village in an attempt to quell the political divisiveness he explained was affecting the efficacy of local education efforts. “I thought that founding an Agricultural Circle in my village would reconcile the variety of rural politics,” he explained.

Because in our village, when it comes to the state of agricultural education, we [remain] relatively low, even though we have political organizations such as the Zw. Symp. BBWR and Kolo Ludowe Piast, and youth organizations: Kolo Mł. (WICI) and the Kat. Stow. Mł. Męsk. and the K.S.M. Żeńśk… The Circle should have already long been in the village regardless of political tinge.\textsuperscript{38}

Topór’s frustration laid in his dissatisfaction with the political divisions that hindered the expansion of agricultural education in the countryside, but was also a realization that these fissures cut deeper into the social fabric of Delastowice’s communal culture. His panacea for the rancor of village in-fighting was a decisive turn away from village politics, and the establishment of an apolitical organization. Topór was not the only one to express his disdain for village politics. W. Cieszyński echoed Topór’s sentiments opining, “The greatest miseries of the village—are the

\textsuperscript{37} Quoted in Narkiewicz, The Green Flag, 204-205.
political battles.”39 Offering an even more damning condemnation of village politics, S.Sz. from Kielce County lambasted rural politicians’ inefficacy saying, “There are many like me… who also live a life of misery. Witos promised them agricultural reform, they drowned in the marshes of Pinsk, froze at Berezina, baked in the Ukrainian sun—they have nothing—they curse the name of Poland and those who have fought for it.” 40 Farmers even perceived Witos’s three-time premiership as ineffective, exacerbating rural frustrations with national politics from the beginning.

The “triple crisis” framework Paxton outlines is a helpful first-step in understanding the economic, cultural, and political background of rural unrest in interwar Europe. Though the French examples he provides are not entirely replicated in the Polish case, the framework offers a general pattern to explain the worsening conditions of village life. Yet, like the work of the scholars mentioned in this chapter’s introduction, Paxton’s framework lacks a social analysis that considers other reasons for rural activism. In the Polish case, the economic, cultural, and political backdrop of rural unrest tell only part of the story. In addition, the social laments and antagonisms in the countryside also help explain the rise of rural turbulence. To address this lacuna, we must consider how rural-urban relations and farmer-noble relations influenced villagers to grow increasingly angry. How did the historically low rapport between nobles and farmers affect day-to-day relations in the countryside and conceptions of landownership? How did these social tensions help prompt rural Poles to turn their backs on the state?

40 S.Sz., “Analiza materiału ankietowego dotyczącego położenia gospodarstw małorolnych, 1935,” 1935, AAN/47/1156. Here the author makes specific references to major battles during the First World War in which farmers fought. The Pinsk marches, also known as the Pripet Marshes, the historic origin of the Slavic peoples, were the site of a battles between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Armies and were a considerable geographic hindrance during the war. Berezina, here, refers not to the 1812 Battle of Berezina during Napoleon’s invasion of imperial Russia, but rather the successful Polish capture of the Russian town of Berezina during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919.
4.3 **The Social Origins of Rural Unrest**

This chapter argues that in addition to the economic, cultural, and political problems that plagued the countryside, there were several social factors that also gave rise to episodic waves of rural unrest and even action. In this sense, we can revise Paxton’s “triple crisis” framework to include a social component, suggesting that the rural crisis in Poland, and perhaps across Europe, was fourfold. In the years between the two World Wars, farmers in rural Poland frequently voiced their disdain, usually in letters and essays solicited for competitions. This section focuses specifically on these villagers’ voices and considers the nature of their complaints, many of which can be grouped into three categories. The first of these was anti-urban sentiment. Smallholders often used constructed perceptions of urban life as a yardstick for measuring their own living conditions. These perceptions included a romanticization of urban life, setting imagined scenes of city dwellers sauntering down clean boulevards or sipping coffee in Varsovian or Krakovian cafes, against their own dark and dismal realities in the countryside. Oftentimes, encapsulated in these anti-urban feelings, were explicit anti-Jewish statements, resulting in an exacerbation of ethnic, but also rural-urban relations.

The second of these categories, specifically anti-noble sentiment, extends beyond nobles’ rejections of rural culture described above. Just as the Polish nobility could not factor Polish farmers into their conception of the nation and subsequently rejected rural culture as mere boorishness, so too did farmers express similar feelings about their social betters. In doing so, however, they also stressed their contributions to the Polish nation, specifically their indelible and intimate relationship with Polish land. And lastly, the final category of rural laments can be characterized as anti-state. As we have already seen, interwar rural Poland suffered from an overabundance of political parties whose in-fighting and unwillingness to unify until 1931 resulted
in tremendous inefficacy. While also voicing concerns about the character of rural affairs, farmers also contended that the Sanacja regime was ineffectual and they became increasingly wary of state structures. Most importantly, farmers began to turn their backs on the rampant militarism of the Piłsudski government.

4.3.1 The Image of the City in the Rural Imagination

The interwar period was a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization in Poland. Tens of thousands of rural migrants moved to growing cities where they could cultivate a new urban life far away from the comforts or discomforts of the village. The result of this dramatic population movement was a cultural, economic, and social exchange as ideas, money, and people moved between the rural and urban spheres. Despite these exchanges, however, the countryside and city remained, to a large extent, separate worlds. For example, urban Poles often claimed that rural migrant workers were too rural for the city, while their rural counterparts claimed they were too urban for the village.41 As a result, seasonal migrant workers existed in a liminal space between the two spheres, and only seldom bridged the gaps between these social arenas. Further, in cities, rural migrants tried to replicate their home communities, socializing and intermarrying most frequently with others of village backgrounds, furthering their social isolation from their urban brethren. Cultural distinctions, including lack of education and rural dialects, also served to distance rural Polish-speakers from urban ones. Despite these divides, however, both parties relied on the other for self-definition, oftentimes romanticizing the opposing milieu to emphasize their own plight.

Regardless of the national setting, the countryside has long been the subject of intense romanticization by inhabitants of urban spaces. As Celia Applegate has demonstrated, the German idea of *Heimat*, that is, the close relationship a person shares with a certain familiar, local space—one’s homeland—which was most commonly found somewhere in the countryside, was constructed to reconcile the rapid and often unsettling industrialization and urbanization of the German lands with the rural landscapes and traditions to which Germans clung.\(^{42}\) In the Polish context, the romantics of the early nineteenth century and the neo-romantics of the *Młoda Polska* movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped bring about a false elevation of Polish rural culture locating authentic Polishness within the *lud* or folk.\(^{43}\) The images of rolling hills, lush forests, fertile fields with abundant crops, and wide open blue skies of the bucolic world, paired with scenes of happy families dressed in colorful regional folk clothing singing patriotic songs, served to transcend the dismal life one found in the perverse, corrupt, and dangerous city. What these romantics failed to see, or perhaps chose not to see, was that the countryside shared in this dismal reality. Instead, as we have seen, this idealized rural experience was perhaps better characterized by poverty, malnutrition, overcrowding, filthy conditions, poor harvests, and backbreaking hard work. But this sort of romanticizing was not unidirectional. Like the urbanites who romanticized rurality, so too did villagers romanticize urbanity, oftentimes with similar motivations. What we can observe, then, is a series of competing romanticizations that resulted not only in a complete misunderstanding of the urban and rural spheres, but also in a breakdown of social relations.


In many ways, villagers constructed idealized images of the city as a way to voice concerns about the conditions of rural life. To be sure, rural actors did not want to duplicate the urban setting in their villages, but rather, they wanted to level the city’s and village’s social, cultural, economic, and civilizational playing fields. The idealized city, therefore, oftentimes remained the yardstick by which rural society measured itself. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find farmers’ appeals for improvement in the rural press that were rife with exaggerated descriptions of village backwardness. The youth periodical *Młoda Wieś* (The Young Village), for example, featured hyperbolic characterizations of village life noting, “That the village is unenlightened is a fact that has been known since the beginning of time.” Indeed, villagers lamented that urbanites lived among what they imagined were the bright lights and broad, clean boulevards of the city, while they were forced to reside in filthy conditions among animals, spend hours doing backbreaking work, and still live a life that was characterized by poverty, both economic and cultural. T.J. of Gorlica County, for example, bemoaned the lack of opportunities for cultural experiences in the countryside, which he imagined were otherwise abundant in the city, saying, “[there is no talk] of the movie theater, because it’s not available for [villagers], [we] have no right to a cultural life, especially when everything is unreachable to [us].” The result of this romanticization was a palpable rural jealousy whereby farmers longed for the attractions and adventure of city life without having to leave their own homes. As one farmer, B. Gogola, stated explicitly, “Let us not be surprised that the countryside is jealous of the city, because the life of the farmer is as gray as the land he works.”

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That the prices of industrial goods rose while agricultural ones plummeted only reinforced rural stereotypes of an ever-affluent city. Forced to purchase industrial items for their farms, desperate Polish villagers took out high interest loans to pay for heavy farm equipment. The result, unsurprisingly, was an ever-deepening rural poverty where people “don’t have any light in their homes at night because they can’t afford kerosene and matches due to the low prices of agricultural goods, and the high price of industrial” ones.\(^47\) Because the prices of industrial goods were so high, farmers believed that the urban working class flourished at the very same time that they were suffering. Wage statistics show that in 1929, the average rural income was 643 złote compared to 1038 złote for urban Poles. By 1935, the economic downturn affected both urban and rural spheres, though city dwellers still earned more than their rural counterparts, making 572 złote annually compared to farmers’ 254.\(^48\) In understanding these income disparities, however, it is important to remember that city dwellers had to purchase all the food they consumed, while farmers’ access to food included whatever was growing in their gardens. Thus, we can begin to trace a further breakdown of an already tense urban-rural relationship.

Though early scholars claimed that a deeply ingrained fraternity between rural and urban laborers resulted in a mutual empathy between the two, farmers’ answers to questionnaires suggest that they saw the urban working class, not as brothers in their exploitation and plight, but rather as the handsomely-supported beneficiaries of government social welfare programs.\(^49\)

\(^{48}\) Landau, “Polish Countryside in the Years 1929-1935, 37.
what he considered an economic injustice, W.J. of Iłża County wrote, “It is very bad in the countryside, especially for smallholders and the landless, because in the cities the unemployed receive some sort of benefits, but there is no talk about the rural unemployed. Yet, government representatives tell us on their trips that it is already much better—but we do not feel this—no—we just suffer. And to what end, we do not know.”

Similarly, M.S. of Łęczyna County echoed W.J.’s sentiments in his own essay, saying, “A worker in the city has aid, he has insurance for his old age or in case of illness, but no one thinks about the rural worker, because he has a fortune, he has his own land. He is not entitled to welfare laws. He is completely removed from these laws.”

If even the urban unemployed were so generously aided while villagers had even more limited access to aid, then they found it difficult to identify between the two groups any sort of shared misery.

In addition to complaining that the urban unemployed enjoyed access to welfare payments, Polish farmers also suggested that urban work was easy and effortless in comparison to their daily labor. The increasing mechanization of industrial labor required, they argued, little knowledge and could be completed by even the least educated person. Compared to farming, which, they claimed, required scientific knowledge of agriculture, and specific and tedious planting and harvesting schedules, Polish farmers believed that urban labor was mindless at best. Satirical cartoons even presented urban workers as doltish no-nothings who could not perform even the most basic of

(1982): 57-75. These authors’ interpretations, focused solely on political parties, do not interrogate how individual farmers imagined urban laborers. Indeed, rural and workers’ political parties did oftentimes work together, like Wyzwolenie and the PPS, for example, but this political relationship did not always result in widespread mutual sympathy among ordinary constituents.


tasks such as chopping wood, let alone be responsible for an entire harvest.\textsuperscript{52} In short, city dwellers were considered too urban, that is, too separated from the natural world. In some cases, the harshest criticism of urban dwellers was reserved for former villagers who had forsaken the countryside for the city. In these cases, critics claimed that those who had left the countryside did so because they could not handle the difficulties they faced and chose instead the easy way out by selling their lands because “it is easier to be a guard for a Jewish tenement house, than to farm under the constant pressures of expenses and local and county taxes.” The result of this exodus of farmers, M.S. from Lwów County explained was “the continuous fall” of the countryside.\textsuperscript{53}

The rural anti-urban image, in addition to falsely romanticizing city life, also took on an anti-Jewish component. Indeed, the image of a swindling Jewish shopkeeper, factory owner, or loan creditor was common in farmers’ descriptions of urban life, and they often blamed Jews for the rural plight. Instances of foreclosure highlighted the economic anti-Semitism of rural Poles. In such instances, farmers who fell behind on their loan payments and were forced to give up their lands to pay hefty arrears were commonly portrayed as victims of greedy Jewish creditors who preyed on poor villagers in an attempt to turn Polish lands into Jewish ones. Indeed, claims that foreclosed land was falling into “non-Polish hands,” were powerful messages that further crystallized the need to curb Jewish influence in rural society.\textsuperscript{54} Likewise, farmers also claimed that Jewish “cartels” regularly up-sold agricultural goods, far beyond their market value and warned their rural brethren to not be so naïve when dealing with Jewish businesses. Expressing his

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Młoda Wieś}, 1 May 1931, 11.
\textsuperscript{54} W. Cieszyński, “Opisy gospodarowania (męskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1146.
disdain for Jewish merchants, W. Marczuka of Wołyń told his fellow farmers of what he considered to be the Jews’ sleazy business dealings.

Business is in the hands of Jews who artificially lower the prices of goods. The villager is always without any support, he is not organized, he remains a victim of this Jewish speculation. When he is forced to pay his loans on time, oftentimes he must sell his wheat in the autumn at a very low price, only to buy back this same wheat in the spring when he needs it, paying a few times greater. That’s how it was for me, in the autumn, I sold [some wheat], but in spring I bought [it] and paid more.\textsuperscript{55}

To compete with Jewish shopkeepers and ensure that “they are barely prosperous,” farmers suggested that local agricultural circles expand their mission beyond serving as cultural organizations, and include an economic component to their mission by opening village stores owned by farmers for farmers.\textsuperscript{56} Through this rhetoric, villagers called for a greater cooperation between individual farmers, but also entire communities, arguing that only through the expansion of rural cooperative networks could they finally remove Jewish economic influence from village life once and for all.

Villagers’ anti-urban sentiment, manifested in a romanticization of city life and a simultaneous anti-Semitic rhetoric, was as much a reflection on urban life as it was on rural life. Indeed, in voicing their disdain for urban culture, the supposed ease of work, and the economic prosperity of city dwellers, smallholders revealed even more about their own fears and self-perceptions. The belief that the city was prospering, while the countryside continued to falter, was a powerful component of rural unrest. Explaining that villagers were all too aware that other spheres of society were benefitting from their destitution, Ž.Sz. wrote, “People look, and they


\textsuperscript{56} Jan Szczerbowski, “Konkurs Państwowego Instytutu Naukowego Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie na opisanie działalności kółka rolniczego,” 1938, AAN/2576/10, 14-22.
know, that not everyone in Poland is suffering. They know that others abound in everything—in work and in food—sometimes to the point of excess, and they play around while others must look upon their starving and ragged children. They know, that it was not always like this, and that it will not always be like this.”

4.3.2 Anti-Noble Sentiment and the National Meaning of Land

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the relationship between villagers and the nobility was fraught with tension in interwar Poland. Between the lived memory of serfdom and nobles’ cultural rejection of rural society from their construction of the Polish nation, the state of relations between farmers and noble landowners was weighed down with centuries of historical animosity. While many farmers feared that they would be left out of the construction of the Polish nation and their memory wiped from history books, others were less concerned with such theoretical questions, and focused more on the day-to-day impact of such precarious social relations. As Keely Stauter-Halsted has shown, rural reformers and politicians had, since the late nineteenth century, worked to demonstrate to nobles, intellectuals, and to farmers themselves that even the most remote villager was equally equipped to be a Polish national. These issues, however, were rarely considered in ordinary farmers’ everyday lives. Above all else, the most pressing concern regarding villager-noble relations was one of land ownership. While the nobility had long been historic landowners and farmers only recently emancipated, the question of whether land was owed to farmers became the central contention between them and nobles. This section focuses on villagers’ anti-noble sentiment centering on their more immediate concerns regarding nobles’

58 On the construction of Polish national identity among the peasantry see Stauter-Halsted, The Nation in the Village.
influence and power in the countryside, but also on the ways rural leaders explained rural society’s contribution to the Polish nation.

As we have seen, the emancipation of Polish peasants over the course of the nineteenth century did not mean the erasure of feudal structures. Instead, nobles’ economic and political cache extended into the interwar period, affecting the social landscape of village life. Because of overpopulation and limited migration options, the numbers of landless villagers were high and many sought out employment on landowners’ enormous estate farms, choosing to work excruciating hours for meager pay. When J.W. worked on an estate outside in Limanowa County, he was paid a measly eighty *groszy* or five kilograms of rye after a grueling fourteen-hour day harvesting the ripened crops. For him and his fifteen-person household, these wages were hardly enough to sustain the family’s most basic needs.59 Another J.W., this time of Pińczów County recalled an episode in the autumn of 1934 when, in desperation, his wife and daughter went to the fields of the local estate to gather the spikelets of picked wheat stalks strewn about on the ground. They, together with other poor villagers, sifted through the stalks searching for any remaining grains of wheat that had not been harvested only to be beaten by the manor administrator who ordered them to leave. As the villagers fled in fear, the administrator ordered that the spikelets be tilled into the soil and “the poor [things] collected nothing,” J.W. lamented.60 That nobles and their administrators could resort to violence without much recourse demonstrates continued power and hegemony of the nobility and their agents, despite peasant emancipation several generations before.

Despite these harsh work conditions and the threat of violence, the rising desperation of rural society meant that there was always a willing cadre of landless or underemployed villagers waiting at the gates of estates looking for work. Thus, because they employed so many villagers, the noble manor houses and their accompanying estates performed an important function in the rural economy. In addition to employing villagers, they also produced tremendous amounts of food that was shipped directly to towns and cities, feeding non-rural populations. As a result, few conservative political leaders, Piłsudski included, fought for their complete dissolution in fear that losing them would result in a decline in production and create difficulties in satisfying the growing demand for food outside of the countryside.\footnote{Wojciech Roszkowski, “Large Estates and Small Farms in the Polish Agrarian Economy between the Wars (1918-1939),” \textit{Journal of European Economic History} 16, no 1 (1987): 75-88.} Conservative leaders were not, however, concerned solely with urban access to food. Because they themselves were frequently wealthy landowners, it behooved them to fight against the dissolution of their estate lands. The result of this was that virtually no land reform legislation had been passed, despite leaders’ promises that estate lands would be parcelized and sold for low prices or even distributed for free.

Smallholders, thus, resented the idea that large manor estates turned a profit while they resorted to “boil[ing] water in empty herring barrels” just to flavor their food.\footnote{Landau, “Polish Countryside in the Years 1929-1935,” 41.} As promises of land reform went unfulfilled, villagers grew increasingly angry over the continued presence of noble landowners in the countryside, and became louder in their demands for the distribution of estate lands amongst small and medium sized family farms. To be sure, the Sejm had attempted to pass land reform legislation, though the results of this legislation were unsatisfactory to the rural population. In 1921, for example, noble estates accounted for 30.4\% of the total area of Poland, decreasing to 25.9\% in 1931, and finally to 24.3\% in 1938, suggesting that piecemeal attempts at
land reform had, in fact, taken place.63 Yet, with so many landless farmers scattered about rural Poland, even these attempts were incomplete.

More importantly, Polish villagers were angry that nobles had access to lands at all. By their reckoning, farmers were the only ones who were worthy of being landowners because of their intimate relationship to the land. They imagined this relationship to extend far beyond its practical implications for their livelihood, and argued instead that they were spiritually connected to it. God, farmers, and the land existed in a triangular relationship, whereby villagers believed God had endowed them with land and charged them with dominion over it. This belief played out in important spiritual liturgies throughout the calendar year, oftentimes coinciding with the natural change of seasons. In the beginning of the summer, for example, farmers would bring soil from their fields to Sunday mass, where the priest would ask God to bless the soil and produce a good harvest. Returning to their work in the fields, they would subsequently scatter the blessed soil returning it to their lands while reciting a short prayer. After the harvest was complete later that year, they would return to church once again, this time with a basket of their bounty of root vegetables and wheat, decorated with ribbons and flowers, thanking God for the food their land had produced.

This supernatural connection to land resulted in an upsurge of rural nationalist and defensive language that targeted nobles as a scourge on the countryside and ultimately the nation. As early as 1916, some village leaders had begun to equate their land to the nation, claiming that “the loss of even a little piece of the fatherland constricts the nation…shows a lack of love for the nation, and only digs deeper our nation’s grave.”64 For farmers, then, the nation was a tangible

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63 Roszkowski, “Large Estates and Small Farms in the Polish Agrarian Economy between the Wars (1918-1930),” 77-78.
thing, something that they could grasp and something that they alone, by nature of their very physical labor, could experience uniquely. When Mickiewicz and Chopin were inaccessible and when villagers were ridiculed for their folksy Polish, the physicality of the land was a comforting substitute to remind them of their Polishness. In their understanding, therefore, the nation existed, at once, as an imagined community and as a material entity, found in the fields that one could physically work to produce food that in turn fed and nourished the people living within its borders. It was through their unique relationship to a material nation that peasants could justify, to themselves, nobles, and intellectuals, that they were equally equipped to be good, Polish nationals. In fact, in some ways, at least in their own imagination, it even made them better nationalists than nobles and intellectuals.

The issue of land ownership served as a platform for voicing rural concerns about their noble co-nationals. Villagers claimed that land reform was necessary if only to return Polish land to its most rightful owners, that is, those who worked it. Indeed, the first statute of the land reform legislation as it was drafted by representatives of PSL-Piast read, “The owners of land can only be the people who are actively engaged in working it,” a bold attempt at stripping away the historic rights of noble landowners.65 Rural political leadership used a marvelously acute knowledge of Polish history to demonstrate that nobles were historically disloyal to the Polish nation. The late-eighteenth century partitions of Poland, they argued, were the fault of the Polish nobility who had continued to gain power from Polish monarchs and failed to centralize a Polish state against the ever-centralizing powers of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Nobles could not be trusted with Polish lands and certainly not with passing land reform because they had been responsible for its

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partitioning over a year ago. Rural leaders, thus, had imagined the partitioning of Poland as the literal selling of Polish lands to foreign powers, equating this loss of Polish land with the death of the nation. Had nobles cared anything for the land and the nation, they reckoned, they would not have given it away so freely. As a result, rural Poles could claim moral authority over land and the nation in ways that nobles could not.

4.3.3 Turning Away from Piłsudski’s State

The final lament that rural Poles voiced reflected their negative feelings toward the state, specifically Piłsudski’s Sanacja regime. Few politically conscious farmers supported Piłsudski’s successful coup in May of 1926 and, of the rural political parties, only members of the SCh officially endorsed the change in power. Members of Piast, on the other hand, were especially outraged by the ouster of Wincenty Witcz just three days after his third government came into power. The dissolution of Witos’s coalition government and the rise of Piłsudski’s Sanacja regime ushered in a new political order, where political parties, though permitted to exist (except the Communist Party), wielded little actual power. The decline of democracy in Poland had important implications, especially for rural society, as farmers once again felt that their needs and voices were relegated to the margins. Even those who were not politically active or even conscious expressed their concerns regarding the inefficacy of the state, some even longing for its complete removal from rural affairs. By the end of the interwar period, inhabitants of rural Poland had grown so tired of state impotence that they had begun to turn their backs on it. This anger culminated in an almost nation-wide strike in 1937, the implications of which so seriously unnerved government leaders that they resorted to violence to quell the masses.

Villagers’ anti-state sentiment manifested itself in myriad ways. There were those who, in their laments, beseeched the state for a more effective presence in rural affairs. Concerned that Pilsudski’s rural policies had largely benefited the upper classes of which he was a part, some farmers begged the MRiRR, for example, to focus more on the immediate needs of the poorest smallholders. Others called for the government to intervene in the market and for “redemption from all outstanding arrears and current taxes,” so that “from time to time a farmer can buy himself some pork fat so that he can have more strength to work and raise healthy children.” In addition to frequently requesting forgiveness from loans and taxes, villagers’ also asked for increased access to veterinary and medical care, lowered school costs, and aid in the emigration process.

Frequently, villagers demanded the complete removal of the state from rural affairs. Tired of ignorant state officials’ interference in village society, many farmers grew weary of the presence of the state in their lives. Wiktorya Twarożanska, for example, minced no words when she expressed her disdain for state workers who knew nothing of the countryside, saying “You men in those Varsovian halls, get off your high horses and let us live!” Similarly S.Sz. of Kielce County chastised state officials even more harshly when he posed the question, “What do you say to them—those who arm themselves with patience, and wait—for what? We want social justice. Otherwise leave the peasant alone.”

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reflected not only farmers’ dissatisfaction with the state of political affairs, but also the extent to which the state affected their daily routines.

As the state expanded its structures, including the growth of regional and local governments, the resultant “insolent bureaucracy” also angered farmers. Required to fill out forms and stand in lines while waiting for bureaucrats to process their paperwork for aid, smallholders often complained about the amount of time wasted in such offices, time that could better be spent working their fields or tending to their animals. “Today, you only go from office to office, from bureau to bureau looking for help,” W. Cieszyński wrote, complaining that the state had now become an imposition. Perhaps the most problematic issue of all was, that for all the ministries focus on improving civilization and conditions in the countryside, the fruits of this labor did not always turn into satisfactory results. Indeed, the more the state toyed with rural affairs, the more farmers grew impatient with it.

The rampant and endemic poverty of the countryside was an all too frequent reminder of the state’s inability to take care of its rural citizenry. Even the most sincere attempts at providing aid fell short of farmers’ tremendous need and few farmers imagined a prosperous future for rural society. Indeed, many pined for the “good old days,” when even if Poland was not independent, farmers benefitted from favorable market prices. If Robert Blobaum is correct in claiming that the Stolypin reforms in post-1905 Russian Poland resulted in a rural economic boom, then it is unsurprising that farmers longed for these times, despite Poland’s partitions. This further

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confirms, as we saw in the second chapter, that farmers cared very little for high politics when their basic needs were not met. Instead, they chose to “complain and curse Poland and the Sejm.”

Rural poverty took on even more meaning when villagers were asked to join the ranks of the military. Many farmers rejected the increased militarization of interwar Poland under Piłsudski’s command largely because they felt they had nothing to fight for. Questioning how the Marshal could expect farmers to become soldiers, Ż.Sz. asked, “Can the military manage to turn a citizen into a soldier in a matter of months if he has gone from misery, to the military, only to return to misery again? Definitely not. And since this misery is seventy percent of the state, this is state affair… and competent agents should start working on this seriously.” Likewise, K.J. from Bochnia County questioned whether Piłsudski would really want poor farmers in his military since they would likely be indifferent to his command. “Because after all,” he began, “in the event that the entire state’s borders are threatened, the type of citizen who will be defending the borders is the type who has something worth defending, instead of the kind who [is] indifferent because he owns nothing except a miserable life.” That farmers, who made up a majority of interwar Polish society, began to turn their backs on Piłsudski and his government leaders, suggests that the legitimacy and power of the state was itself in a precarious situation, despite earlier postwar hopes farmers placed in it.

73 “Podatek majątkowy,” AAN/1250, 618.
4.4 Conclusion

On August 16, 1937, left-wing SL leader Stanisław Mikołajczyk organized an almost nation-wide strike of farmers and agricultural laborers.\textsuperscript{76} Demanding the return of democracy and the dissolution of the Sanacja regime, the strike marked the culmination of farmers’ dissatisfaction with the state. Taking up pitchforks and political banners, they withdrew from the fields and took to the roads. Historians have described the causes of this strike and its many predecessors as economic and political in nature, but as this chapter has shown, there were also social implications for rural unrest in interwar Poland. In addition to the economic misery and political chaos that characterized village life, poor urban-rural relations and a growing distrust in the Polish nobility and government helped catalyze farmers to action. Though the 1937 strike, and the strikes before it, did not result in the overthrow of Sanacja or in the establishment of an agrarianist government, it did, however, demonstrate the power and centrality of rural affairs to interwar Poland. It also showed that, when pushed to the limits, farmers were hardly passive, but rather ready to take action when necessary.

This action, however, was not always practiced through strikes and protests, but also through local activism. Indeed, in the face of an inept government that seemingly cared little for the most populous and vulnerable sphere of Polish society, villagers took it upon themselves to improve their living conditions in the countryside. As we will see, it was through this activism that

farmers came to embrace both local and national connections more deeply. Their efforts, specifically those of village youth and women, will be considered in following chapters.
5. FAMILY MATTERS: GENERATIONAL TENSIONS AND THE BATTLE FOR THE RURAL BODY

Through the young village, to a strong people’s Poland.
-Motto of *Młoda Wieś*

5.1 Introduction

Passing effective agricultural reform while having to embark on the physical reconstruction of the Polish countryside, particularly after the First World War, was a colossal task. As we have seen, it required, though rarely received, the full cooperation of politicians, scientists, doctors, the clergy, teachers, local rural leaders, and of course, the participation of Polish farmers themselves. Indeed, the cacophonous voices of specialists, top rural figures, and ordinary villagers added to the confusion and slow-paced change that characterized postwar village life. Reacting to this gradual rate of change, a new group in rural society came to the forefront of the village community: rural youth. Tired of what they perceived to be the countryside’s inherent backwardness, young farmers adopted a progressive agenda of rural reconstruction that, in contrast to the physical redevelopment of village infrastructure shepherded by political leaders, centered on improving farmers’ own spiritual, intellectual, and physical nature. This closer focus on the rural mind and body reflected young farmers’ understanding that the resurgence of the village was only possible with the improvement of the rural person. As a result, young villagers led widespread health and hygiene campaigns, championed temperance movements, and sought out new educational opportunities. In their reckoning, rural youth believed that only by coupling the physical reconstruction of their environment with the growth and development of the rural person, could they swiftly carry the Polish countryside, and therefore Poland, into a bright future.

Unsurprisingly, their path was fraught with tension. Whether they were conscious of it or not, Poland’s rural youth worked to tear asunder patriarchal hierarchies, question generational
authority, and transform traditionally accepted gender roles. The result of their actions was the creation of a new-found space for rural youth in the Polish village, made possible sometimes as a result of the displacement of once otherwise revered village elders. As we will see, young villagers often framed their criticisms of rural society in the language of generational difference and familial misunderstanding. In this sense, their efforts to improve their quality of life was as much a frustration with the political and economic status quo as with their own elder family members whom they accused of being “unenlightened” and “backward.” This led to a slow breakdown of familial relations in the interwar Polish countryside, facilitated by discussions of which generation could best lead the Polish countryside.

This palpable generational distance was the topic of Ignacy Solarz’s headlining article in the inaugural issue of Wici, an interwar periodical for Poland’s rural youth.¹ Promising that village youth could find their own voice if only they joined the Union of Rural Youth of the Polish Republic Wici (hereafter ZMW RP Wici) he wrote,

> We have long lived under one roof with our elders—we have helped one another, drawn on their support, and tried as hard as we could to blend their experiences with our own. And this would have probably continued had not a stranger, had not something “bad” stirred without our home. A kind of weakness has come upon our elders; their once rational and sincere thoughts have vanished, leaving in place only thoughts of backwardness and greed. Between us and them a stranger has entered, an uninvited spirit has come and now we no longer understand one another. This spirit broke our kinship and sense of unity and we became strangers in our home… Must we endure and accept these conditions? We have

¹ Ignacy Solarz (1891-1940), was born in the village of Olpiny. As a soldier in the Austrian Army during the First World War, Solarz was badly wounded and released from military service. From 1916-1921, he studied at Jagiellonian University and earned his bachelor’s degree in agricultural engineering. He worked as a teacher in a number of agricultural schools before founding an agricultural University in Szyce in 1924. In 1928, he and a number of his colleagues, namely Zygmunt Załęski, Adam Bień, Franciszek Wójcicki, Józef Niećko, Wincenty Gortat broke from the Central Union of Rural Youth Centralne Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej, (Central Union of Rural Youth, hereafter CZMW) and created the ZMW RP Wici. He was a victim of the Palmiry Massacre, having been killed in 1940 as part of the Nazis’ plan to execute Polish intellectuals.
called and are patiently waiting for our elders to recognize our youth. We await parental understanding, support, and a common path. They have failed us.²

A cynical reading of Solarz’s lament would suggest that he wrote it to play on the heartstrings of his disenchanted and angsty teenage audience. But, if taken seriously, his words express the more powerful and generalizable sense of social dislocation rural youth felt even within the comforts of their own homes, let alone an entire country.

As a result of these feelings of perceived foreignness and familial distance, rural youth began to carve out for itself a new role and place in village society, turning inward toward their generational cohort for support. The creation and subsequent proliferation of rural youth organizations and their corresponding periodicals over the course of the interwar period placed young villagers in conversation with one another, allowing them to recognize their shared interests and identities. Transcending regional and former imperial boundaries, these organizations and their writings helped create a community of youth across Poland who looked more at their inherent similarities than their perceived differences. This discursive “imagined” community, coupled with more and better educational options and increased opportunities for movement across the Polish lands, narrowed the social and cultural gap between rural youth, even if the result was a more disjointed home life.”³

What or who, then, was the “stranger” Solarz so passionately identified as the culprit in this familial disintegration? In what ways did rural youth consider their parents and elders backward and greedy? How did young farmers’ vision for the future of Poland compare to that of their parents? And more importantly, what was so new about this wave of generational tensions, a largely ubiquitous experience common across time and space, that makes it worthy of historical

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³ Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6.
analyses? This chapter answers these questions by tracing the development of rural youth grassroots activism following the First World War. It argues that young farmers’ agenda was one that focused primarily on the emotional, intellectual, and physical development of the rural person and that this agenda was inspired in part by the generational tensions that pervaded the rural home. As we will see, such generational tensions were ubiquitous across the Polish countryside, and were a phenomenon that united rural youth at a time when social and cultural relationships needed to be forged after the divisions of the partitions.

In response to what they understood to be the faults and failings of their elders, rural youth embarked on a campaign of physical fitness, educational discovery, and political awareness. The chapter begins first with a look at the birth and growth of rural youth organizations that helped give rise to a distinct category of rural youth in Poland. Next, it explains the conditions that made the rise of rural youth activism possible by focusing specifically on the legacy of the Great War, the creation of a press for rural youth, and the effects of rural education on young farmers specifically, and village society more generally. As we will see, increased educational opportunities, particularly in the form of agricultural schools and universities, transformed young villagers’ self-identity and helped professionalize new farmers. Because education was the catalyst for so much change among rural youth, the rest of the chapter focuses specifically on how young farmers took their new educational lessons and adapted them into their everyday lives. Thus, the latter half of the chapter deals with key issues that were central to the young rural agenda: the proper use of leisure time in the rural schedule, improved health and hygiene, temperance movements, and political activism. What we will see, then, is that in unprecedented ways over the course of the entire interwar period, rural youth managed to become one of the most active
proponents of change and progressivism in the social landscape of the Polish village. Their agenda was also closely connected to rural youth’s imaginings of the nation.

Histories of childhood and youth have enjoyed considerable attention from historians and boast a rich historiography. These scholars have sought to historicize the cultural construction of childhood and youth, demonstrating the dynamism of these categories over time and space. In the Polish context, thanks to Józef Chałasiński’s magisterial four-part anthropological tome, *Młode Pokolenie Chłopów: Procesy i Zagadnienia Kształtowania się Warstwy Chłopskiej w Polsce* (*The Young Generation of Peasants: Processes and Issues in Shaping the Peasant Stratum in Poland*), interwar Polish rural youth have enjoyed very specific attention from scholars. In his volumes (in

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particular 3 and 4), Chałasiński uses the memoirs of rural youth to trace the transformation in self-
identity that young farmers experienced during the interwar period, that is namely, the shift in their
perceptions of citizenship and their place in the Polish nation. This chapter builds on Chałasiński’s
contributions and focuses primarily on the agenda for which rural youth advocated. However,
instead of offering an organizational history of rural youth groups, it instead looks at the overall
increasing influences young farmers has in interwar village society.

5.2 Defining Rural Youth in Interwar Poland

This chapter argues that the interwar period marked the creation of youth as a category in
rural Poland. For this reason, it is necessary that we understand specifically what is meant by the
term “youth” in the context of the case study presented here. To be sure, it is difficult to impress a sociological or even biological definition of youth on the actors presented in this study because Polish villagers often transgressed these boundaries. Ignacy Solarz, for example, while an integral part of the rural youth movement, could not have been considered a youth in biological terms by the time he penned the article mentioned above. Yet, his writings and activism suggest that he took part in young villagers’ worldview and shared in their ideals and goals perhaps more than those of his own age group. Similarly, rural teachers and some clergy were likely a generation or two older than the youth they led and with whom they shared so many interests. As a result, in following the example Richard Ivan Jobs and David M. Pomfret, I prefer a looser definition of the

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6 At the time of its publication, Solarz was 37 years old.
“What counts as youth,” they write, “is whatever contemporary actors understood that category to mean.”

Employing this broader understanding of youth allows us to trace not only the behaviors and attitudes of people who were biologically young, but also those who “embod[ied youth’s] symbolic qualities” whatever their age.

But who, then, were the young villagers that stand at the heart of this chapter? What were their ages, social backgrounds, and ethnic make-up? The actors on which this case study is focused were both men and women, of various social and ethnic backgrounds, who to some degree shared in a similar worldview that privileged the role and position of youth in rural society. It is difficult to know definitively the ages of the young farmers active in the rural youth movement as information on organization membership is scant. A 1925 survey of the membership of 447 local branches (some 12,000 members) of the Union of Rural Youth (Związek Młodzież Wiejskiej, hereafter ZMW), however, did show that 55.7% of the members were under the age of twenty-one and approximately 76.8% were twenty-four and under. Interestingly, rural youth organizations seldom had age requirements, and instead, members often phased or aged themselves out of these organizations, choosing to join the local chapters of the Agricultural or Housewives’ Circles, or more probably, to focus fulltime on their farm work. Once young farmers married or took on the responsibilities of farming from their parents, they were often too busy to participate in the activities their local youth groups hosted. For this reason, these groups often had a high rate of

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8 Ibid.
9 To be sure, there were very likely many Polish rural youth who were not members of village youth organizations. Unfortunately, however, we have precious little information regarding these young villagers, thus the actors around which this chapter focuses are those who were members of rural youth groups.
10 Mioduchowska, “Ruch młodzieży wiejskiej w niepodległej Polsce,” 147.
attrition. This pattern further suggests that the assignation of whether a villager was still considered a youth was a self-selected one.

Questions of age and gender aside, the social and ethnic make-up of rural youth organizations reflected the diversity of the interwar Polish state. Villagers from all social backgrounds were eligible for members in the rural youth organizations which had open membership rules. In the same 1925 survey mentioned above, of the total ZMW members surveyed 8,497 identified themselves as farmers of all different sized landholdings (itself a source of social diversity), 1,431 as craftsmen, 513 as agricultural laborers, 587 as rural intellectuals (teachers, clergy, etc) and 979 gave no profession. In addition to such social diversity, rural youth organizations could also claim some percentage of ethnic differentiation as well. Though at its founding in mid-1912, the ZMW was a strictly Polish organization whose only requirement was that the applicant be a Roman Catholic, but the mid-1920s, membership was extended to young farmers who identified themselves as Byelorussians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians as well. The Volhynian chapter of the Union of Folk Youth (Związek Młodzieży Ludowej, ZML), even published its newspaper *Młoda Wieś* in both the Polish and Ukrainian languages. Noticeably absent from these groups were Polish-Jews.

Interestingly, unlike other rural newspapers such as *Piast*, that espoused a more conservative, often anti-Jewish rhetoric, rural youth organizations and their corresponding newspapers were largely silent on the Jewish question in interwar Poland. There are likely two reasons for this. Firstly, though Jews were intricately involved in business relationships with Gentiles (farmers often sold their excess crops and goods to Jews), they tended to live in larger

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11 Ibid., 144.
12 *Młoda Wieś: Czasopismo Wołyńskiego Związku Młodzieży Wiejskiej*, 1929-1939, Biblioteka Narodowa (BN)/P.30249
towns and cities. Thus, it was less likely that Jews were part of the geographical world of rural youth, thus making it more impractical for a young Jewish man or woman to travel into villages for chapter meetings. Secondly, interwar Poland also boasted a bevy of youth organizations that specifically served the country’s Jewish youth.\textsuperscript{13}

Political, ethnic, and religious divisions were typically not part of the rhetoric of interwar rural youth organizations. That rural youth organizations accepted a diverse group of members suggests a relative open-mindedness among rural youth for whom, evidence suggests, popular notions of traditionalism or national divisions were less important. Defining its quest and purpose to its readership, the ZMW’s main newspaper \textit{Drużyna} claimed that the organization was specifically apolitical. “Like it was then, so it is now,” the newspaper proclaimed, “there is no place for feuds and friction within \textit{Drużyna}. All arguments about politics and the party are to be excluded. We will not entertain any disputes regarding religion or social class. We want to work, be shaped, and be educated together. A free, independent, and strong Poland needs as many socialized, smart, and capable citizens as it can, [those] who grow up from the young.”\textsuperscript{14} In general, most of the presses for rural youth tended to stray away from politically or ethnically divisive topics, and instead focused on more neutral ones, including increasing educational opportunities, new techniques in farming and animal husbandry, and agenda-drive topics, such as health and hygiene, what to do in one’s leisure time, and the negative effects of alcohol on one’s body.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} For more on Jewish youth organizations in interwar Poland, see Sean Martin, “Jewish Youth Between Tradition and Assimilation: Exploring Polish Jewish Identity in Interwar Kraków,” \textit{The Polish Review} 46 (2001): 461-477. Jewish youth organizations, like the Polish ones in this chapter, were also focused on the physical and mental health of the mind and body. On the centrality of sports on interwar Jewish culture see, Ezra Mendelsohn, ed., \textit{Jews and the Sporting Life} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Drużyna}, 20 August 1918, 2.

\textsuperscript{15} One notable exception to this is \textit{Orka} that was politically socialist and advocated for a political revolution led by a united front of workers and farmers.
Drużyna’s apolitical nature, however, was short-lived. As the political climate in interwar Poland grew more tense, especially around the time of Marshall Józef Piłsudska’s May 1925 coup, political infighting among the group’s leaders resulted in a splintering of the ZMW into a number of other organizations.

5.3 The Rise of Rural Youth Organizations

The emergence of rural youth organizations across Poland reflected a new European-wide wave of youth activism in the interwar period. Across the European continent, young people of all ethnic groups, social classes, and political persuasions founded organizations that served primarily as social outlets, and only later adopted more political and intellectual agendas. In Galician Poland, prior to the outbreak of the First World War, members of local chapters of village Agricultural Circles, in conjunction with representatives of the Society of Folk Schools (Towarszystwo Szkoły Ludowej) founded youth branches of their already well-established village organizations. Drawing on examples from the popular gymnastics-focused Falcon Clubs and the more militaristic Polish Riflemen’s Teams (Polskie Drużyny Strzeleckie), rural youth groups’ original founders meant for the organizations to serve as an opportunity to steep village youth in and expose them to more cultural activities. For this reason, the organizations were originally founded as performing choral and theatrical groups.

16 For more on the rise of youth organizations and activism in interwar Europe see, Susan B. Whitney, Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
17 For more on the rise of Agricultural Circles in Galician Poland, see Chapter Six of Stauter-Halsted, The Nation in the Village.
That these groups were originally founded in Galicia is unsurprising as the Viennese government had been relatively lax in allowing minority groups to found their own civic organizations. Conversely, when such youth choruses and theaters formed in Russian Poland, it was difficult to “choose [acceptable] pieces and directors,” and it was “even harder to get permission from the government to perform any theater.” 19 For this reason, these groups functioned clandestinely in prewar Polish communities, often performing patriotic plays and songs in secret. Though they enjoyed significantly more freedoms in Austrian Poland, one of the pressing problems that plagued these groups was their lack of centralization. Because each group was administered by its local Agricultural Circle chapters, they were often reduced to puppet organizations rather than opportunities for rural youth to think for themselves and form their own social agenda.

Seeing the need for a centralized youth movement, rural ethnographer Adam Chętnik and his colleagues Aleksander Bogusławski and Antoni Piątkowski successfully carried out the first attempt at a centralized youth organization in March of 1912 in Russian Poland. Together, the trio published the first Polish language periodical for rural youth entitled \textit{Drużyna} and thus founded the first iteration of the ZMW. 20 The ZMW and its corresponding publications advocated an agenda meant to “awaken within rural youth a spirit of nationalism and patriotism, spread education, [develop an interest] in reading magazines and books, self-education, the fight against backwardness and addictions, and sports and tourism.” 21 Local village leaders argued against the formation of centralized rural youth organizations claiming that such organizations were “immoral”

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20 For more on the founding of the ZMW see Mioduchowska, “Drużyna, 1912-1921.” I use the phrase “first iteration” because the ZMW went through several organizational changes over the course of its history, especially as state powers came and went in 20th century Poland.
because they resulted in the “weakening of family relations.” As opposed to village leaders who dominated youth in local organizations, leaders and members of local ZMW chapters chose to meet their young constituents at their own levels. Recognizing the need to bolster young villagers’ interest in joining the ZMW, former village school teacher W. Lewandowski wrote, “If we are to gain the interest of youth, then for now we have to start with things that are most accessible to them, we have to give them that which they like, that which they love.”

Because of the restrictions placed on Polish institutions in the Russian partitions, the ZMW conducted its meetings in semi-secret and organized clandestine reading groups where members read officially banned books purchased on the black market and kept in secret libraries.

Already under pressure as a result of Russian censorship laws, the ZMW was wracked with even more uncertainty when the First World War erupted. During the war, the organization nearly collapsed as many of its members were summoned to the warfronts. Only because of the tenacity of young rural women who took on the leadership roles of local chapters did the ZMW avoid closing its doors entirely in this period. Thanks to them, the organization experienced gradual growth during the war, increasing its number of registered chapters from sixteen in 1916 to fifty-four just one year later. Though a nominally apolitical organization, one that accepted members of all political persuasions, the ZMW did espouse a pro-independence agenda and called for the reemergence of a Polish state. Since few Polish farmers shared in this agenda, such early support for Polish irredentism played an important role in the breakdown of family relations after the war.

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24 Ibid.
25 Mioduchowska, “Ruch młodzieży wiejskiej w niepodległej Polsce,” 141.
as rural youth claimed that they were better Polish patriots than their parents, and thus capable of leading Poland into the future more effectively.

When the war ended and a fledgling Polish state emerged, the ZMW came under the purview of the Central Agricultural Society (Centralne Towarzystwo Rolnicze, CTR) and began to expand even more. With this new sponsor, the ZMW underwent a name change and became the Central Union of Village Youth (Centralny Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej, CZMW). By 1928, just ten years after the birth of the Second Republic, the CZMW boasted 2,500 registered chapters and some 75,000 members spread across all of the interwar Polish state.²⁶ By this time, however, political infighting between CZMW leaders led to its eventual splintering. As new rural youth organizations came into existence and began to publish their own periodicals, the predominance of the CZMW waned.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, the most dramatic change in the development of rural youth organizations came in May 1926 when Józef Piłsudski staged a successful coup of the government and replaced it with his Sanacja regime, effectively ending democratic rule in Poland.²⁸ At first, the overwhelming majority of the CZMW leadership was sympathetic to the new regime, hoping for progressive political and economic changes that would benefit rural Poland. But the euphoria of the 1926 moment and the unity of the CZMW quickly began to wane, giving rise to two new rural youth organizations. The first, the Union of Folk Youth (Związek Młodzieży Ludowej, ZML), was

²⁶ The CZMW was strongest in central, eastern, and southern Poland.
²⁷ There are many excellent institutional histories of many of rural youth organizations founded in interwar Poland. See footnote 5 for those titles. Nearly every youth organization had a corresponding newspaper in rural Poland. The ZMW (later CZMW) first published Drużyna 1912 on a bi-weekly basis. The ZML founded in late 1920s ran its publication Młoda Wieś from 1927-1939. The Independent Academic Society for Folk Youth founded its publication Orka in 1925. And the CZMW RP WICI published its periodical Wici from 1928-1939.
²⁸ For more on the cultural history of Piłsudski’s coup and his Sanacja regime, see Plach, The Clash of Moral Nations.
founded by leaders of the conservative party PSL Piast and largely sympathetic to Piłsudski. By 1928, the regime had officially adopted and sponsored the ZML which accordingly had begun to espouse a more militaristic rhetoric. But not everyone was so enthusiastic about the coup. In fact, as we saw in Chapter Four, by 1928, after just two years of Sanacja, many rural youth, along with most other rural Poles were agitated and pessimistic about their place in the new regime. In June of 1928, some CZMW leaders and their loyal members, citing dismay toward what they believed to be Piłsudski’s anti-agrarian policies, called for a return to a democratic Poland. With such deep ideological and political rifts within its leadership and member base, the CZMW fractured, giving birth to the ZMW RP Wici.29 The new organization and its complementary periodical, Wici, were highly critical of Piłsudski and called for his ouster. This left-leaning branch of the rural youth movement quickly gained a mass following and became the main competitor of the CZMW.

Despite their political differences, however, each of the organizations followed strikingly similar social programs. At the heart of their plan was an agenda that focused not just on the physical rebuilding of the Polish countryside, but also called “for the moral, spiritual, and physical resurgence of the village.”30 As a whole, rural youth organizations and their mass membership actively campaigned for a holistic approach to bettering the Polish villager. For them, improving the rural person—mind, body, and soul—was the key to bringing Poland into the twentieth century. The outbreak of the Second World War, of course, put an abrupt end to these organizations and thwarted them from seeing the eventual fruits of their labor.31 In the short time after their founding, however, rural youth organizations provided young villagers with an important voice and the

30 Młoda Wieś, 20 November 1927.
31 After the Second World War, only the CZMW, again renamed the ZMW, was revived under the communists. It still remains today.
opportunity to move beyond the confines of their particular villages and start to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective.

5.4 **The Rise of Youth in the Village**

There is no doubt, then, that young villagers flocked to become members of rural youth organizations, in the two decades of the Polish Second Republic. What is less clear, however, is why this phenomenon occurred at all. Why did the interwar period mark a significant break from the organizational habits of young villagers of the previous generation? As Maria Mioduchowska explains, “The rural youth movement had no tradition, it was a new phenomenon in the history of the village… and began the process of liberating the youth who until this time had not yet been liberated.”

Though it might not have had much of a tradition in the Polish lands, interwar rural youth movement also did not spring up from any primordial ooze, and did not exist in a vacuum. Instead, there were a number of underlying factors and features specific to the interwar period that paved the way for its arrival and speedy expansion. This section discusses four specific factors that allowed for the rise of rural youth in interwar Poland, namely the experience and legacy of the Great War, the expansion of rural education and agricultural schools and universities, the rise and spread of the young rural press, and more personally, a general sense of hope shared among young villagers about their future and the future of Poland.

5.4.1 **The Legacy of the First World War**

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the outbreak of the First World War brought with it many changes to the day-to-day operations of the family farm. Most importantly, the palpable dearth of able-bodied men meant that women and the young took on new responsibilities and jobs that, under

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32 Mioduchowska, “Ruch młodzieży wiejskiej w niepodległej Polsce,” 139.
normal circumstances, would have been otherwise carried out by their husbands, fathers, and older siblings. Because the whole family—from children to the elderly—were involved in routine farm work, the loss of even one member resulted in a redistribution of another’s labor expectations.\footnote{Włodzimierz Mędreczki deftly explains the work with which children and teens were tasked in the rural Polish family. At the age of four or five, young children were given basic household chores to complete. By six or seven, young boys and girls began regular working habits, primarily as shepherds, first of geese, then pigs, then cattle and ultimately horses. As they grew older, they were given added responsibility, often under the supervision of older siblings or their parents. As Mędreczki concludes, “the family and the village community did not include a division into a world of adults and a world of children.” See Mędreczki, “The Shaping of the Personality of Peasant Youth,” 108.} With young men and women in a position to make important decisions like what to plant and when to harvest it, for example, fathers and elder siblings were oftentimes displaced in the postwar rural household. Thus, one of the most important consequences of the war was the weakening of patriarchal structure. If husbands and fathers did come back, family members had to renegotiate these new roles, resulting in significant friction in the rural family, particularly between young people and their parents. Familial relations were especially tense in instances where the patriarch came back from the war maimed or disfigured and was unable to work, but still insisted that he be at the helm of the family farm and in charge of the decision-making process. It is in these moments of familial discord that we can see the seeds of a rising rural youth movement begin to germinate.

At the same time, young men’s military experience also often resulted in less than harmonious family relations. As newly conscripted soldiers got a taste of the world outside the village and gained a more worldly education, they often grew increasingly more critical of rural life. Antoni Zieliński recalled his reactions to his father’s farming techniques when he returned home from his service in the German Imperial, and later, Polish Armies. Reflecting on his tense return home he wrote,
My father kept one pitiful cow and two horses, that he periodically brought to the city to carry bricks, sand, coal, etc. The cows, pigs, chickens, all of them of miserable breeds, were poorly and irrationally fed. Thus, they did not bring in any income. Today, many of our neighbors in the area still keep the same inventory and their farms remain in the same condition as my father’s once did. It was probably very difficult for my father to hear the words written above, but he was happy I learned to take advantage of my time in the war in northern Germany, eastern Prussia, Belgium, and France and later in 1920 in Podolia, Ukraine and the Vilnius Region.\textsuperscript{34}

For Zieliński, then, the war proved not only an opportunity to see new parts of the world, but also an important chance to learn new technical skills to which he was previously ignorant. When he returned home, his newly gained knowledge base informed his observations of his family farm and caused him not only to criticize it, but also to enact change within it. Thus, he questioned years of generational authority, introducing new modern, scientific techniques of rational farming to his family farm, admittedly much to the chagrin of his father.

In this way, whether rural youth were fighting on the frontlines or toiling away on their farms, the wartime experience irrevocably affected their social positions in the countryside. Returning patriarchs found themselves replaced by a new generation of farmers, eager to continue proving themselves capable of administering the family farm and village community. Newly gained skills replaced old folk lessons, and once those skills were reinforced with a scientific agricultural education, the gap between tradition and modernity at home began to grow wider and wider. This weakened patriarchal structure helped, in part, in providing a new space that young villagers soon came to occupy.

5.4.2 The Rise of Agricultural Schools and Universities

The second factor that led to the genesis of a rural youth movement in Poland was the expansion of the rural education system. Though they originated around the turn of the twentieth

\textsuperscript{34} Antoni Zieliński, “Opisy gospodarowanie (męskie), 1935, AAN/47/1146, 169-170.
century, agricultural schools and universities because to open in greater numbers after the birth of
the Second Republic.35 These institutions were separate schools, beyond the elementary level, that
offered young farmers an advanced education in specifically agricultural lessons.36 As a result of
the gendered division of rural labor, schools were often gender specific. On the one hand, courses
for young men, varied in length from several hours to several months and the subject matter ranged
from generalized topics like soil upkeep and animal breeding to more specialized lessons, such as
bee keeping. Women, on the other hand, while also exposed to courses in farm management and
agriculture, most often took classes that ranged in topics from proper food handling and
preparation, to maintaining the rural home in a more hygienic fashion, to scientific motherhood
and proper childcare. The majority of these lessons took place in brick and mortar schools, though
in many cases, because of the demanding work schedules of their prospective students, coursework
could even be completed remotely. In these instances, students would receive the necessary
readings and lessons in the mail and send back their written work for evaluation. Educational
opportunities, therefore, could reach as many potential students as possible, whatever their
physical setting.

Early on, however, school administrators faced significant struggles in expanding rural
education beyond the state-mandated elementary level. It was especially difficult to entice students
to attend more school beyond what was already legally expected of them. With a life of farming

35 By the 1928-1929 school year, there were 127 agricultural schools in Poland—86 served
young men, while 41 served women. Anna Józefowicz, Rola społeczna matki w rodzinie
wiejskiej w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej (Białystok: Trans Humana, 2011), 126.
36 Though it was not included in the state’s general curriculum, elementary schools in rural
communities often included age appropriate courses in agriculture to help students better
understand their farm work. Agricultural schools, however, provided education that was solely
dedicated to agricultural science, teaching sophisticated classes far beyond the scope of the rural
schoolhouse.
presumably ahead of them, and the daily work that it required, it was not easy for students to find
the time and resources to attend an agricultural school, let alone a university. To help offset the
cost of a continuing education, local Agricultural Circles often raised funds to sponsor the most
promising candidates from their communities. School schedules also became increasingly flexible
to accommodate young villagers’ demanding work routines. In an advertisement for their courses,
the Stanisław Staszic Council of Agricultural Courses of the Museum of Industry and Agriculture
in Warsaw boasted in capital letters that, “WITHOUT LEAVING YOUR HOME AND WORK
ON THE FARM, EACH OF YOU CAN EASILY AND AFFORDABLY FINISH
AGRICULTURAL SCHOOL.”

In addition to providing more flexible school schedules to combat low attendance rates,
rural reformers sought to excite prospective students about the possibility of learning in general.
Aleksander Bogusławski, for example, suggested village libraries invest in more entertaining
books, rather than solely technical ones. A more accessible and captivating reading selection was
especially important in starting early reading habits, he argued, particularly for a population that
was only just beginning to enter a more literate world. Early readers, he claimed, would become
the next generation of agricultural scholars, but before they did so, they had to find a love of
learning first. “At first books should not be too serious and solely academic,” he wrote, “because
these sorts of books bore the still inexperienced reader and could scare him from reading
entirely.” More flexible school schedules with an expanded curriculum, coupled with a growing
number of willing students, educational opportunities became increasingly more realistic for rural
youth. Those who participated in organizations like the CZMW or ZML were constantly

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37 Flyer advertising agricultural courses, AAN/47/599, 8. Original emphasis.
38 Report of Aleksander Bogusławski, “Sprawy Młodzieży Wiejskiej,” 22 November 1918,
AAN/47/385, 3.
bombarded with advertisements for agricultural schools in their group’s respective periodicals; unsurprisingly, agricultural schools near villages with active chapters tended to have higher enrollment rates. In Bogusławski’s words, “Knowledge intoxicate[d] them like a shot of vodka does a sober person.”

If it was difficult to recruit students to fill classrooms, it was just, if not more difficult, to find teachers to place at their helm. School directors often complained of a systemic lack of quality teachers to teach sophisticated agricultural science at an advanced level. Though teachers were one of the most important influences in the lives of village youth, they too were the products of uneven educational systems. Local village teachers were generally poorly trained, and were not equipped to teach at advanced levels. In his report on the state of agricultural schools in Poland, Bogusławski wrote, “Young people prepare themselves for these courses and desire to take advantage of them, but keeping them is quite arbitrary. Young teachers do not know how to exploit this enthusiasm adequately. This is because they do not have programs, or guidance, or teaching aids, and the result of this is that young people are slowly being discouraged from learning and reading.” As a result, the interwar state spent tremendous resources in the continued education of rural teachers. These state-driven educational programs offered specialized courses for the men and women who were hired to teach in agricultural schools, but themselves lacked any specialized training in such

39 Ibid., 4-5.
topics.\textsuperscript{42} Government guidelines for creating a network of agricultural schools reflected on the dearth of quality teachers and the need for their continuing education claiming, “The development of vocational education, and especially the creation of a network of vocational-agricultural schools has created a critical condition in the demand for teaching staff of these schools. The previous political conditions did not allow for the normal development of agricultural education, and ...[there was] an influx of candidates not able to satisfy this demand because they were not educated teachers, they did not have proper educational training...”\textsuperscript{43} Thus the purpose of these courses was “the preparation of teaching personnel for... agricultural schools... who will have theoretical and practical professional training.”\textsuperscript{44} Equipped with a new battalion of newly educated and reeducated teachers, agricultural schools could begin to transform the social and cultural landscape of the Polish village.

With teachers newly trained in curricula deeply rooted in agricultural science and a willing and eager student population, scientific agricultural education began to expand across the Polish lands. One of the most important consequences of this broadened and more specialized educational system was the professionalization of agricultural labor. A diploma from an agricultural school or university was proof positive of students’ newly gained expertise in farm management and agriculture. With the professionalization of farm labor, village youth increasingly referred to themselves as \textit{rolnicy} (farmers), rather than the more pejorative \textit{chłopi} (peasants), linguistically ridding themselves of centuries of stigma that the latter title carried. More importantly, the education of young farmers increased their influence in the village’s agricultural affairs. In his

\textsuperscript{42} Protocol No. 2 of the meeting of the Ministerial Committee set up to develop a network of lower agricultural schools, 2 September 1919, AAN/47/357.
\textsuperscript{43} Guidelines for Organizing Teaching Personnel in Lower Agricultural Schools, AAN/47/357.
\textsuperscript{44} Project for Courses of Teachers of Agricultural Schools, AAN/47/357.
memoir, a student from Kobryń, in what is today Belarus, described his social ascent in his village after he completed a number of veterinary classes:

I came home and only a few days after I took those courses, they held a special meeting where not a single villager was missing because everyone was so interested to hear about what I had seen and heard at school. I had to explain and remember everything… They asked me questions about all kinds of various things, I answered everything I could… Later on, I started to read a little bit about veterinary matters and decided to open up a small veterinary pharmacy which was paid for by the Farmers’ Circle and by villagers’ donations… In the summertime, it was apparent that we had all these supplies and medication, but no one knew how to use any of them, and it became my responsibility to administer medication and perform minor procedures. My first instance was with a bull valued at 120 złote that I had to save from bloating. While I mixed the medication I also asked God that it work, and I succeeded on the first try.45

That all of Kobryń’s villagers came to learn from their young neighbor marks a dynamic shift in the power structure of rural society facilitated by education. Through even his rudimentary knowledge of veterinary medicine, the young author was able to climb the rural social ladder and become a central actor in the daily operations of his co-villagers’ farms. Because a sick animal meant taking a potential economic hit, maintaining the health of livestock was crucial to a family’s finances. Such specialized knowledge replaced old folk remedies and increasingly divided rural society into two factions: those who were educated and therefore modern, and those who were uneducated and therefore clung to their old habits. In many circumstances, these lines were most distinctly drawn between generations.

For a graduate of an agricultural school to come home and suddenly introduce new farming techniques to his or her family members was especially jarring for elder generations who had learned to work the farm through physical labor and experience, not from books and lectures. Still, to do so reflected a new self-assuredness within newly graduated young farmers, one that heightened their sense of self and helped them carve a new space for youth in the village. In his

letter to the editors of *Młody Rolnik*, a youth-oriented insert in the *Gazeta Gospodarska*, Stanisław Gomółka of Kąkolewnica in the Lublin Voivodship and a student at the agricultural school in Stara Wieś near Siedlce, reflected on his increased sense of self that came with going to an agricultural school. “Before I went to agricultural school,” he wrote:

I only did the work on the farm that my father ordered me to do just so that I would not have to find a job. I did everything that was required of me thoroughly, mechanically—I worked like a machine set up without a deeper understanding of what I was doing… and it was often like this that I just did things because it was what the neighbor did, even if it was to the detriment of the future harvest or the farm, and I did it like that because that is how the neighbor did it, and the neighbor did it like that because some other neighbor did it that way… but he didn’t know where he learned it from. Before going to school, I read many publications. I was only interested by political writings, and was indifferent to agricultural ones, firstly because I largely didn’t understand them, and secondly because I could not believe that a man in Warsaw knew more than me. Before attending [school], I approached different types of work with little desire… Today, however, I no longer look at my neighbors, and instead do what needs time as required by the farm or the plant. I am no longer a machine, I have a penchant for work because I understand the language of the farm and the plants and if I ever had to give it up, I would suffer… I understand agricultural publications and books, they now take first place, I have a little agricultural library worth about 100 złote… This one year [at school] taught me more than ten years at home, I stopped being a thoughtless machine. I learned to think, to love my land, and understand her words.46

Gomółka’s touching words suggest that taking classes not only helped heighten his own self-esteem and abilities to think for himself, but also aided in finding a new appreciation for village life and farm work. At the same time, they also reflect the displacement of community laws and mores, especially traditional farming methods, in favor of more scientific farming practices. As a result of his new advanced education, Gomółka was no longer subject to his neighbors’ gaze, and could for the first time in his life begin to think and act independently. In this sense, agricultural schools fomented tensions at home by giving rural youth a new voice, and indeed, as Gomółka

46 Stanisław Gomółka to the Editors of *Młody Rolnik*, 3 December 1928, AAN/47/559, 13-14.
suggests, a whole new vocabulary with which to combat the perceived backwardness of elder generations.

Much to rural youth’s chagrin, major changes in the operations of the farm were often implemented slowly, if at all. As Włodzimierz Mędrecki has explained, “Changes required the consent of the farmer (and most frequently also his wife). This holds true for basic decisions concerning land integration and reclamation, the structure of the crops, the selection of a horse or cow, the model of new farm machinery. As late as 1939, the binding principle proclaimed that ‘once you are on your own farm you can make changes, but until then do as you are told.’”47 As a result, young farmers often complained that their elders were not advancing with the times, and instead held onto their antiquated farming techniques. In this sense, young villagers often claimed that parental generations were not progressive enough and threatened to hold the countryside back from any real positive change. Conversely, parents and other village elders could just as easily claim that they had years of practical knowledge that far exceeded the theoretical knowledge their children gained from books and lectures. As a result, advanced agricultural education was not always met with familial support.

In addition to their mission to educate Poland’s young villagers, agricultural schools also served as institutions meant to socialize students into well-informed, productive citizens of the new state. In this sense, schools were meant not only to educate, but also “raise capable citizens, who can manage to raise and lead not only their own farming business, but also the collective [village] economy.”48 For this reason, school administrators sought to create an academic community that taught valuable scientific lessons and reflected the sorts of responsibilities its

48 “Cel i zadania jedenastomiesięczne szkoły rolnicze,” 18 October 1916, AAN/47/87, 205.
students would have once their academic experience had ended. A report on the objectives and tasks of eleven-month agricultural schools, for example, claimed that school was not just about classes and lectures, but more importantly, about more intangible lessons such as civility and citizenship. It read,

Schools should not [just consist of] classes and lectures ex cathedra, but on the contrary, the student should unconsciously feel that this year of his life that he spends at school reflects the atmosphere of an ideal life that should reign in every home. The whole atmosphere of the school should be marked by a spirit of citizenship, a cultured environment, and physical labor, so that all of these good educational assets result in mental self-reflection and a healthy coexistence among friends. All this should create a pattern, a pattern for which students should strive once they leave school. This pattern should not deviate from the essential conditions capable in the countryside… but on the contrary show them what the village can be, and how the development of the village should work.\textsuperscript{49}

Aware that with increased schooling students might be tempted to leave the village community for perhaps the more enticing and mysterious city, teachers and school administrators tried to elevate the image of the countryside. Focusing on its ideals, rather than its faults, and framing the rebuilding of the Polish countryside as an honorable project that required educated and capable citizens, rural leaders hoped that students would be inspired enough to remain on the farm and help rebuild village society. Education, therefore, was a key aspect of rural rejuvenation. It helped pave the way for monumental change in the village as young farmers began to seek out not only improvements in village infrastructure, but also within themselves and their generational cohort.

Armed now with advanced scientific knowledge and lessons in civility and citizenship, young farmers moved farther away from more familiar traditional folk knowledge. In this way, they began to break down the patriarchal structures of authority that underlay rural family life for centuries. The increasing education of rural youth, for all of its power to create a newly professionalized agricultural labor force, simultaneously resulted in a more disjointed home life.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
While new graduates flaunted their diplomas and argued for more rational and scientific agricultural techniques, their elders likely claimed that they had more knowledge from the school of life, that is, their practical experience in running the farm far exceeded the theoretical knowledge of their children. In this way, education was a catalyst for familial disintegration and helped pave the way for the rise of rural youth in interwar Poland.

5.4.3 The Press for Rural Youth

As we have seen, both the Great War and the expansion of professional rural education led to the dissolution of familial bonds in the interwar Polish countryside. One of the effects of this dissolution was that rural youth began to feel displaced and misunderstood. Because of these feelings of foreignness, young villagers began to turn inward and look within their own generational cohort for comfort, understanding, and a sense of community. This community was facilitated through the expansion of the rural press for young villagers, the third factor that promoted the rise of the rural youth movement. As youth periodicals were founded and as their circulation increased, the community of rural youth became increasingly more interconnected. Readers of Wici, Drużyna, Młoda Wieś, among others, were active participants who wrote countless letters, poems, and songs and sent them into their chosen newspapers for possible publication. The result of this expanding press was that young villagers began to exist in a discursive community, one that transcended the bounds of their small, local communities, and placed them in the center of a wider network of like-minded peers on whom they could rely for support and advice. As Stanisław Michalski observed, rural organizations and their corresponding presses, “were institutions that integrated the community of rural youth with a supralocal
Thus, the more young villagers interacted on a discursive level, the more they were able to imagine themselves as a part of a larger, and more influential whole. For rural youth, this whole was an image of the Polish nation in which they were the leaders.

In a letter addressed to the readers of *Młody Rolnik*, a young farmer who identified himself only as Bejot wrote about his desire to learn more about his fellow peers scattered all over Poland. In it, he beseeched other youth to write about their personal lives, in particular techniques they used in farming practices and how they spent their free time. Young Bejot wrote,

> We have embraced the entirety of Poland, from sea to sea, from the highest mountain to the vast plains… And suddenly, the thought came to me that in this same way we must get to know everyone more closely and love them more dearly... Maybe we will learn something more interesting, thus do not have regrets and write to “M.R.” [By reading about] such practices in the life of a farmer, taken from all over Poland, we can diversity our writings, and at the same time learn more and familiarize ourselves with one another. And so, young friends, get to work!"

Bejot, like other young writers, craved a community beyond his local village. This want to connect to a community larger than his own had increased meaning for him, in particular because he acknowledged the social and cultural distance that separated Polish citizens the country over. In penning his letter, then, he hoped that he could begin to bridge these gaps and build a community of rural youth who learned from and accepted their peers’ differences. For Bejot, the time was right to build a discursive network of young farmers who could grow more familiar with one another, and overcome their differences.

Like Bejot, Stanisław Gomółka took part in the discursive community of rural youth. Gomółka was so impressed with the letters his peers Zosia and Helcia had written about their experiences at their local agricultural schools, that he began to wonder if they might be able to

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51 Bejot to the Editor of *Młody Rolnik*, AAN/47/559.
help him encourage girls in his home village of Kąkolewnica to attend similar ones. Lamenting what he reported was girls’ lack of enthusiasm toward education, he wrote, “When I suggest that they go to school they respond that it is not necessary for them because their mothers did not go to school and that they still know how to boil potatoes. They do not yet understand that from those same potatoes you [can learn] to make all sorts of meals. If Zosia and Helcia would like to help me with this, then I would willingly give them the addresses of some girls in my village [so they] could write to them directly about taking advantage of agricultural schools.”

Here, we see Gomółka turn toward this peers for advice and support. Reading about Zosia and Helcia’s experiences was so moving to him, that he hoped other girls in Kąkolewnica might benefit in the same ways. In this way, we can see the effects the rural press had on connecting rural youth with one another beyond the village and inside their own rural communities. Newspapers encouraged their readers to write letters and articles, and in doing so, helped create a community of rural youth who could cross the borders of their local villages. Gomółka, though physically located in Kąkolewnica, was no longer bound to it as he once was; through the press and its wide distribution, he was connected to Zosia and Helcia, and countless other peers across the entire Polish state.

5.4.4 The Hope of Youth

With this new community came a generalizable sense of hope about the future of the Polish countryside. This renewed sense of faith and optimism was the fourth factor that helped contribute to the new role of rural youth in village society. Like young Poles across the newly established country, village youth “were not content to live on the euphoria of independence regained after more than a hundred years. They wanted to go further, to rebuild the social structure of the Polish

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52 Stanisław Gomółka to the Editors of Młody Rolnik, 3 December 1928, AAN/47/559, 12.
state and to rectify injustices, and to put the country on the road to development.” Believing that “the future of village is the future of Poland,” rural youth sought to better their living standards, personal health, and opportunities for upward social mobility and they did so with a remarkable sense of optimism. In the poems, songs, and letters they wrote and published in their periodicals, rural youth extolled, and to a certain extent romanticized, the virtues of rural life. Even in instances where the young criticized their elders, such commentary was not meant to be a condemnation of the village, but only the perceived backwardness of their parents. In most cases, rural youth saw their future in the countryside and few could ever imagine leaving it. Galvanized by the possibilities for change, young rural Poles imagined a prosperous life for themselves in the countryside. Solarz capitalized on these feelings of hope and a bright vision of the future when he wrote, “Now is the time to part... We go now on our own will, to our own farms. We will build our own homes... We will fend for ourselves... we will remain strong in difficulties, temper our muscles, and find ways to improve man and citizen.”

To be sure, this collective hope was, in part, a reaction to young farmers’ internalization of their perceived social inferiority. Though the partitioning powers granted peasant emancipation gradually over the course of the nineteenth century, social prejudices toward the lower classes were ever present. Feeling displaced from a collective sense of national belonging, rural youth complained that, “even today, when it comes to the overall perception of the peasantry in reborn Poland, we must still bear the burdens of this noble past... Still lingering in their view, is that the peasant has a different and deficient spirit.” In this way, the activism of rural youth not only

53 Andrzeja Micewski, “Polish Youth in the Thirties,” 159-160.
54 Młoda Wieś, 20 November 1927.
56 “Rola młodzieży włościanskiej w dobie obecnej,” Młoda Wieś, 20 November 1927, 2.
served to raise their own sense of self, but also to prove to their social betters, that they were no longer the benighted people their ancestors once were. Thus, the overwhelming attention young farmers paid to the resurgence of both the rural person and his or her physical environment was the result of their encounter and confrontation with their perceived inferiority in comparison to the rest of Poland, particularly the social elite.

Though the rural youth movement in Poland had no tradition, it did not occur randomly without causes and consequences. Beginning with the First World War, rural youth took on new responsibilities at home and in doing so questioned the patriarchal authority and structures on which the village had relied for centuries. Likewise, through their increasing education, young farmers began to professionalize farming in Poland and turned away from traditional methods of farming in favor of more modern, scientific ones. In doing so, they began to develop within themselves a new self-assuredness that helped embolden them to take on new positions in rural society. And thanks to the expansion of the rural press, young villagers could begin to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective whole. This new community gave them support and encouragement during times when they felt displaced or misunderstood at home. Together, this new community grew from one that was primarily discursive and imagine, to one that was tangible and real. With an overwhelming sense of hope and a positive outlook on the future, they believed that they could bring the countryside, and by default Poland, into the twentieth century.

5.5 Reforming the Rural Mind and Body

One of the central arguments of this chapter is that the interwar period marked the creation of youth as a category in rural society. In unprecedented ways, rural youth became an unavoidable voice in the countryside, actively working to bring significant change to the village. Unlike their elders who focused primarily on the necessary reconstruction of the physical village, that is, farm
buildings, churches, town halls, and schools, young farmers agitated for change in the rural person. This specific focus on the mind and body, reflected not only their want to improve what they understood to be their own weaknesses, but also the inherent weaknesses of their elder generations. As a result, the rhetoric surrounding nearly every position they took focused on pointing out the faults of their elders to justify what they perceived to be real change. In this way, in their rise to become an indelible force and advocate for change in the countryside, young villagers pushed the limits of patriarchy and village traditions in favor of science and reason.

In improving the rural person, young farmers sought to make changes in the everyday lives and habits of villagers. Accordingly, their agenda focused specifically on the proper use of one’s leisure time, maintaining one’s physical health through exercise, and abstaining from alcohol. This turn toward improving the body reflected European-wide interest in the social engineering of groups, especially early eugenicist thinking. In their quest to become better versions of themselves for the purposes of being good citizens of the state and members of the nation, rural youth believed that their physical and moral health were key to building an enhanced rural society. However, in embracing such improvements, rural youth managed to target and isolate their elders, creating divisions in rural society that undermined familial cohesion.

5.5.1 **The Proper Use of Leisure Time**

Regarding historians’ growing interest in leisure, Rudy Koshar has observed that, “The history of leisure has been inextricably intertwined with the history of work, and it is primarily the

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social history of the manual laboring classes that has directed attention to the way in which the advent of industrial capitalism created new conflicts over the control of time.\textsuperscript{58} This has generally meant that such studies focus on the urban working classes and see the countryside primarily as a site of or destination for leisure, rather than looking at how rural laborers saw and understood their own down time. In contrast to urban manual labor, its rural counterpart already had a considerable amount of leisure time built in. Because so much of farm work depended on the presence of the sun, the natural process of solar movement often dictated when work could and could not be done. Similarly, work in fields was largely seasonal, requiring significant time and attention in the spring for planting, and late summer and autumn for harvesting. This meant that the winter months, and indeed the time it took for crops to grow was considerably free for villagers. To be sure, wintertime was often a moment of great labor migration as Polish farmers frequently left their villages in droves to look for work in cities at home and abroad. But for those who did not, the main responsibilities included domestic work and taking care of animals, leaving significant amounts of idle time.

Thus, in the case study here, we can see how rural youth and their leaders expected their peers and indeed farmers of all ages to use their free time. According to rural youth activists, the winter months, with their short days and long nights, provided the young with just enough time to adopt what they considered bad habits, more specifically alcohol consumption that could lead to alcoholism, and gambling that could lead to major debt and similar addiction. Indeed, in the case of rural Poland, the proper use of free time was so central to the agenda of rural youth that it became the impetus for a renewed effort to include and implement exercise into daily life, beyond

already rigorous farm work. Similarly, it also served as the basis for widespread temperance movements.

The need for more structured leisure time was first noticed by teachers of rural schools. Having observed that children and the young quickly absorbed the questionable habits of their parents, educators and school administrators worked diligently to reverse these negative influences. To do so, they organized group activities, in particular theater troupes and choruses, and planned age-appropriate outings to keep the young busy, but also to teach them lessons about civility, group work, and when possible Polish history and traditions. Outings also served as an opportunity for the young to go beyond the confines of their villages and see more of Poland, thus connecting residents of what had been separate empires in their pursuit of shared cultural icons. Common trips included pilgrimages to Częstochowa to see the legendary icon of the Black Madonna, and to nearby cities and large towns. A report on the purpose of well-planned and purposeful leisure found that

During playtime and free time, students should not be left to the fate of random thoughts, but instead, those times should be purposeful and intense. Our rural youth do not know how to play and they do not know games; the older generations, [when they hear] the word fun, comprehend only dancing, vodka, or playing card games. It is necessary to counteract this and teach the village to play; fun should also, to the extent that it is possible, promote the need to create groups—singing and theater groups—that together balance out the role of individualism, and act a counterbalance to the egoism… that afflicts our village. Even reading—reading books and especially magazines—should also be supervised, not only so that a student will learn to read, but also that [he or she] will implement it [into their lives] and not abandon it once they leave school.59

But educators could realistically only go so far in effecting any real change in the domestic life of their students. Because education, though legally mandated, was often low on the priority list for rural students and their families, especially during busy work seasons, teachers’ facetime with their

59 “Cel i zadania jedenastomiesieczne szkoły rolnicze,” 18 October 1916, AAN/47/87.
students was often uneven and episodic. For this reason, it fell upon rural youth themselves to continue the lessons they learned in schools. To counter these negative influences, they participated in their local youth groups, organized team sports, and performed musical and theatrical pieces, often under the guidance of a local teacher or their parish priests.

This general sense of degeneracy, however, was not only observed by local rural leaders and schoolteachers. On the contrary, young villagers were also keen social observers who commented on the behavior of both their peers and elders. Janek from Sichów in Lower Silesia, for example, wrote a letter with much dismay explaining how his peers around him spent their winter nights, oftentimes neglecting their responsibilities in exchange for “fun.” “The young play cards,” he began,

They smoke cigarettes, they use all of the curses “under the sun”—having all kinds of “fun.” According to them, this is “groovy” (morowy)... In the tavern, a bunch of them sit in front of shot-glasses. Some youth... stumble around the village... and sing drunkenly... In these villagers’ barns stands a poor cow, covered with a threadbare sackcloth, shivering from the cold. Somewhere, a group of chickens huddles together in a dark corner.60

For Janek, these activities were all the more problematic because they were done in front of the “elders while they napped near a warm stove,” suggesting that parental oversight at home was minimal. Janek’s scathing analysis of his peers, however, contrasted with his observations of those who were part of Sichów’s rural youth groups. About these youth, he wrote, “Many of them go to the community center (dom ludowy) and prepare for theatrical productions, others listen to the radio to hear the orchestra play, [and others] check out books from the organization’s library.”61

Janek’s comments confirmed what many rural leaders had hoped for, that is, that rural youth organizations successfully offered their members alternative types of entertainment beyond less

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61 Ibid., 10
wholesome activities such as drinking, gambling, and gallivanting aimlessly around the village. In this way, they could hope to achieve a more conscious cohort of youth who did not shirk responsibilities and grew up to be productive members of the village community.

Taking seriously the biblical passage that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” rural youth and their leaders advocated strongly for active, rather than passive leisure time. Free time was meant not only to relax from their difficult work schedules, but more importantly to participate in activities for personal and communal growth. From this concern grew widespread campaigns to include exercise into daily life, and fight alcohol production and consumption to ensure that the future generations of Polish farmers would be healthy and moral citizens for the state and members of the nation.

5.5.2 The Countryside Turns to Exercise

Entrenched in the rhetoric regarding the proper use of leisure time was an inherent focus on the physical body of rural youth. The demand of rural labor, of course, necessitated that farmers be in good, if not excellent, condition to ensure that they could carry out their daily tasks and work the fields to produce a healthy harvest. Also wrapped up in these discussions were debates regarding the relationship between healthy bodies and the health of the nation. Rural youth and their mentors understood their physical health to be directly related to the strength of the Polish nation and accordingly advocated for expanded physical education. In addition to state-driven physical education policies, rural youth also took responsibilities for maintain their own bodies, founding inter-village sports leagues and engaging in various sport competitions. And once again, much of the rhetoric used to promote physical fitness focused on differentiating themselves from their elder generations whom they considered morally and physically weak.
Though the Polish sport and exercise movement had its founding moments in the middle of the nineteenth century, it grew in popularity and became central to the Polish government’s efforts to create a physically fit populace in the interwar period. In 1867, the Polish Sokół movement was founded in then Galician Poland, and combined “physical exercises and gymnastics with patriotic education.” Just over two decades later, in 1889, Jordan clubs, named after Galician physician Henryk Jordan, provided Cracovian and Leopolitan youth with an opportunity to participate in games and physical exercises. These early sports clubs planted the seeds that would blossom into the Polish soccer clubs still in existence today, in particular, Kraków’s Cracovia and Wisła clubs. Participation in sports leagues, however, was especially important for the new Polish state. As Britta Lenz explained, “Competing in the international arena functioned first and foremost as a marker of national independence and sovereignty but also as an attribute for a modern nation.” For this reason, physical education experienced a wide expansion in schools during the interwar period and under Sanacja, “Physical education came under the control of the Ministry of Military Affairs, and key positions in Polish sports were occupied by leading military staff.” In this way, the Polish rural turn to physical fitness and exercise reflected sports’ growing popularity and importance in interwar Poland.

Physical fitness thus had a long history of being understood as an expression of Polishness and often took on an irredentist nature. As Andrzej Gąsiorowski explains, “The Polish sport movement was launched in 1919 as an attempt at national self-defense against the repressive activities of the German militia.” During the Greater Poland Uprising of 1918-1919, Poles sought

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to improve their physical health to protect themselves against German military forces. Thus, physical health became an important marker in the fight for Polish liberation. Echoing this heroic sentiment, young rural Poles’ turn to health and hygiene was an expression of their commitment to the nation against any impurities, physical and moral.

In exercising, young villagers could demonstrate their support of the new nation in their everyday lives. Because Piłsudski’s government officially sponsored the ZML, its publication Młoda Wieś focused heavily on boosting the physical and social health of Poland’s villagers. In its first issue, the editors printed an article on the importance of physical education that read, “Sports, exercise, and leisure are precautionary measures against any ailments, though we are still young and healthy, they will allow us to remain healthy in the future. A person needs health, not only for their own happiness, but to be strong and healthy citizens for the nation-state. Sources suggest that the rural sports movement was widespread across the Polish countryside and was enjoyed among both young men and women. Almost every issue of Drużyna, Wici, and Młoda Wieś included photographs sent in by villagers engaged in community sports or exercised activities. Young farmers wrote to newspaper editors about their various exercise routines and offered commentary on the physical health of their peers in their local youth group chapters. Some even wrote in with results of inter-village sport competitions, boasting about their village’s victories. The ZMW and ZML even hosted outdoor summer camps for both male and female villagers in which leisure time was spent at play. Even winter weather was not to prevent young rural Poles

64 For more on the relationship between everyday life and nationalism see, Rogers Brubaker et al., Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Brubaker and his co-authors argue that it is ultimately through everyday experience, as much as political debate and cultural revival, that ethnicity and nationalism are produced.
65 “Potrzeba wychowania fizycznego,” Młoda Wieś, 20 November 1927, 10.
66 “Potrzeba wychowania fizycznego” Młoda Wieś, 15 October 1928, 8.
from keeping their bodies physically fit. *Młoda Wieś* printed various exercise regiments that could be completed at home and also advocated playing winter sports.\(^67\)

In a letter he wrote explaining why sports and physical fitness were so important to him, S. Szypiński wrote,

> Sports develop in us a noble pride in overcoming difficulties and obstacles, they offer us independence and perception, sharpen our sense, instill in us a sense of discipline, chivalry, and deep thought, and give us the ability to subordinate self-interest, that is to act as a team. Sports develop in us the will to overcome the innate laziness of generations... Finally sports give us a healthy zeal for life. These enormously important character traits are neither given to us at home nor at school.\(^{68}\)

For Szypiński, sports and exercise were necessary not only to improve his own physical health, but also because they were a kind of social education. They instilled in him character traits that he valued and believed made him a better member of rural society. But even more importantly, his physical health set him apart from other members of rural society, who by his estimation, were inherently lazy. Szypiński’s active lifestyle, along with all other young farmers who supported the rural sport movement, promised to bring about a healthier and more robust countryside, populated by a social group they believed were finally worthy of calling themselves Poles.

### 5.5.3 The Young Fight Against Alcohol

But rural youth did not stop at improving their own physical health. Equally important to reconstructing a new, robust rural society was maintaining its morality. Young farmers, therefore, became active in village temperance movements, and in some cases were even successful in banning the sale of alcohol in villages. To be sure, temperance movements had a long tradition in the Polish countryside, dating back to the nineteenth century. These efforts were often coupled with anti-Semitic rhetoric, warning farmers that the consumption of alcohol only served to benefit

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\(^{67}\) “Jak wykorzystać zimę?” *Młoda Wieś*, 15 January 1931, 2.

\(^{68}\) “Sport jako czynnik wychowania społecznego,” *Młoda Wieś*, 15 October 1931, 6.
the local Jewish tavern keeper who was almost always described as a swindler who took advantage of drunk and poor farmers.69 Though the rural rhetoric regarding temperance was devoid of the Jewish component, it discussed the important of sobriety for the purposes of creating a strong and formidable farmer who was necessary to rebuild the Polish nation-state. A 1928 article in *Młoda Wieś* details the results of a referendum vote in two hundred thirty-nine rural municipal districts across Poland concerning the sale of alcohol. Proclaiming the results of the vote as a “happy announcement,” the article explained that only forty-four districts voted against the banning of the sale of alcohol in their villages “once and for all” and that “Reason is victorious in 195 districts!”70

This was, admittedly, a small victory, but had deep meaning for young villagers active in temperance movements and organizations.

Sources indicate that reformers explained alcohol in two ways in Polish rural society. On the one hand, it was portrayed as an evil, a danger to one’s physical and moral health. On the other hand, it was seen as a disease, one that needed careful rehabilitation. In describing alcohol as a danger, an image published in *Młoda Wieś* suggests that there were two roads down which alcohol can take a person. Labeled in blocked letters with the word, “BAZNOŚĆ!” (ATTENTION!), the left side of the drawing features farmers producing moonshine in their homes and selling it illegally. The ultimate result of such actions, it warns, is imprisonment. In the panels on the right, it depicts farmers who drink alcohol excessively, and tries to dissuade drinking by showing a long, difficult illness or blindness, and eventual death.71

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At the same time, young villagers were taught that alcoholism was a serious disease, one that needed to be treated with effective rehabilitation. As medicine and science became increasingly more influential in rural society, doctors’ presence in the temperance movement began to grow. About alcoholism one doctor wrote,

Alcohol is as infectious as smallpox and cholera: it is better and easier to prevent it than to fight it… Alcoholics need to be sent to hospitals and rehabilitated. Even foreign countries (America, England, and Switzerland) have special institutions for the rehabilitation of alcoholics, and they can even be sent the by court order.\textsuperscript{72}

It is here that we can see the influence of eugenicist thinking on the part of Polish rural society. About the Polish eugenics movement, Magdalena Gawin has observed that it was dominated by “left-wing and liberal advocates of state welfare” who “believed it was possible to build a harmonious and advanced society, free from social problems such as alcoholism…\textsuperscript{73} This liberal and progressive ideology expressed by eugenicists influenced rural temperance movements in expressing that alcoholism was a disease that needed to be treated effectively, and not simply considered a social evil.

Additionally, both perspectives expressed the problems of alcoholism in relation to the family. Eugenicist physicians “argued that the smallest dose of alcohol, if consumed during sexual intercourse, adversely affected the body of the conceived child. The progeny not only of alcoholics, but also of people sporadically consuming alcoholic, were born weak and degenerate.”\textsuperscript{74} Articles in the rural press saw the negatively effects of alcoholism in slightly more gendered terms, blaming women who drank for the weaknesses in rural society.\textsuperscript{75} The health and hygiene of the family was

\textsuperscript{72} “Walka z pijaństwem—Leczenie pijaków,” \textit{Młoda Wieś}, 1 July 1931, 3.
\textsuperscript{73} Gawin, “Progressivism and Eugenic Thinking in Poland, 1905-1939,” 167.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{75} “Wpływ pijaństwa rodziców na potomstwo,” \textit{Młoda Wieś}, 15 March 1931, 11-12
seen as a mother’s primary role. For her to drink, and therefore shirk her responsibilities, was one of the most serious transgression with which she could be charged.

Reacting to what they believed were the inherent weaknesses of their elder generations, Poland’s rural youth embarked on a journey of physical fitness and health. From their attempt to transform the ways their peers spent their leisure time grew widespread sports and temperance movements. Though their rhetoric was often wrapped in the language of generational tensions, young villagers also believed that only by being strong and physically fit could they manage to bring Poland into the future. Because they believed that the state of their physical bodies were metaphors for the health and state of the nation, many refrained from life’s more tempting indulgences.

In unprecedented ways, the interwar period saw the rise of the influence and voice of rural youth in Poland. Clamoring for more than just the infrastructural reconstruction of the village, they embarked on a mission for the spiritual, moral, and physical resurgence of the rural person. This focus on the body, mind, and soul of the villager, marked by a turn toward science and reason, was only possible in the wake of the First World War as opportunities for expanded professional agricultural education and the rise of a young rural press helped shape their social agenda. Though their fight was often fraught with tension, and though they often clashed with their elders at home and in the larger village community, young farmers managed to effect real change in the Polish countryside. Rural youth’s turn toward science, marked by their introduction of scientific agriculture to their family farms, disturbed centuries of traditional farming lessons passed on from generation to generation. At the same time, embracing physical fitness and health, and understanding it in the language of nationalism, allowed rural youth to imagine themselves as the only generation capable of moving Poland forward into the twentieth century, but more
importantly the only one that was able to fight for her honor, should it ever come under attack. For rural youth, then, the only path to a strong Poland, was through the young village. At the same time, rural youth’s social reform agenda, youth organizations’ activists, and press organs managed to bring young villagers together, and in doing so, helped dissolve some of Poland’s cultural and social divisions after the partitions.
6. MODERN GIRLS AND NEW WOMEN: DAUGHTERS, HOUSEWIVES, AND THE FEMINIZATION OF THE RURAL MOVEMENT

For a rural girl or woman to be different, that is, to be of the now…we must see that all the wrongs against girls be erased, and then repaired. And there are so many.
-Jagóśka H., 1933

On the farm, the reason and skillful cooperation of women is the complement to the work of men and a condition for the true elevation of village culture and family life.
-Regulations of the Circle of Rural Housewives (Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich)

6.1 Introduction

In January of 1933, a social commentator of rural affairs who identified herself only as Gawędziarka or “the storyteller” penned a fiery and biting editorial in which she repined what she saw as the lack of “new women”\(^1\) in the Polish countryside. “Everything has been changing lately,” she observed,

> The law, our obligations, state regimes, ways of life, and people’s thoughts—technological inventions, especially in the city—the spirit of people is changing… but the spirit of rural women remains almost exactly as it has been for years… All this so-called mental and material culture has gone topsy-turvy and shown us other gains, other values, other ways—only the type of the rural women has remained almost unchanged for years.

Blaming cultural and social norms that underappreciated women’s education and relegated girls to lives as wives of brutish husbands, and mothers to multiple screaming, dirty children, our storyteller bemoaned the lack of opportunities rural life provided for women. Claiming that farming had changed significantly and that rural home economics required women to know basic business skills to make efficient and profitable fiscal decisions for their families, she argued that

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village patriarchal structures had kept women away from such crucial knowledge and made them reliant on a husband who was likely more educated, if only marginally.²

Simultaneously, her reflection turned inward as she faulted previous generations of rural women for accepting these oppressive conditions. Calling for their disappearance from rural society, if only to make space for a generation of progressive modern new women, she wrote, “The current type of rural woman must disappear, and from the young must arise a new type of woman—bold, brave, smart, economical and thrifty, hard-working and well-socialized, who knows not only how to manage her home and garden, but also knows what good can benefit the entire village, and knows how to better the life of the community. We, the young, must somehow awaken to life the sleeping cells in our brains and revive our hearts so that the new type of woman can be mustered up, and adapt to these new conditions.”³ In this sense, the piece’s scathing accusations of the strictures of gender relations in the countryside were as much a rallying cry for women’s increased activism as it was an uneasiness of their life prospects. For some, it confirmed women’s new attitudes toward their positions in rural society, while for others it offered novel interpretations of those roles in village life. Far from being passive members of society, Gawędziarka wanted rural women to be activists who toppled antiquated prejudices about gender and worked for the betterment of the entirety of the countryside, starting first at home in their modest country cottages, and then expanding into their local village councils, community centers, and agricultural circles.

In positing that there were no new women in the Polish countryside, however, Gawędziarka was somewhat shortsighted. Since at the least the outbreak of the First World War, village women

³ Ibid.
were becoming, knowingly or not, new women and their daughters “modern girls” as they took on new roles in the absence of their husbands and fathers, respectively. Tracing how women’s activism continued, this chapter argues that over the course of the interwar period, the Polish rural movement became increasingly feminized. This new feminization was the result of women’s growing access to education, migration, and work outside of the family farm. The chapter focuses on two related “characters” whom I argue emerged in Poland’s villages (and the world over) at the time—the rural new woman and the rural modern girl. As we will see, the rural new woman and the rural modern girl were similarly constructed versions of femininity in the interwar countryside. Both figures were progressive types who took advantage of women’s increasing access to education to learn about new technological advancements in agriculture and other skilled labor. There only differences were largely that of age and motherhood. The archetype of the rural new woman was embodied in a housewife and mother who turned to science and reason when tending to her family. The rural modern girl, in comparison, also held tightly to technological advancements, but also imagined her life beyond the confines of the home, if sometimes only temporarily. Together these figures helped weaken patriarchal structures and paved new paths for women in Poland’s villages. As active members of their communities, they expanded their influences in both domestic issues such as education and home economics, and outside of the home in village administration and community development. In doing so, women of all ages steadily

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4 In the 1920s, “modern girls” emerged around the world as a type characterized by her androgynous style and transgressive behaviors. Contemporaries often used the archetype of the “modern girl” to explain how social upheavals such as the First World War impacted gender roles, sexuality, and femininity in the post-war era.
came in more contact with the nascent nation-state, and through this relationship, developed further into citizens of the democratic Second Republic.\(^5\)

Away from the political arena, rural women and their daughters embraced new technologies and ways of thinking that reflected contemporary global society’s most modern innovations, including novel techniques in maintaining personal and domestic health and hygiene, food preparation, childrearing, and labor. Heeding the advice of doctors, scholars, and fellow female activists, village women chose, in many cases, to forgo decades of practices passed down maternal lines for professional, medical advice. As Rima Apple has argued, this turn to scientific motherhood was not inconsequential.\(^6\) Though scientific advice and new standards in childcare increased women’s responsibility for raising their offspring, it simultaneously made them reliant on medicine and science for instruction and limited mothers’ autonomy in childrearing. At the same time, it caused palpable generational fissures that alienated certain segments of the rural population, especially elder generations. Thus, the novel scientific influences that characterized early twentieth-century Poland specifically, and Europe more generally, changed forever the social landscape of rural society and gave women a new language with which to justify their decisions, and negotiate between modern, scientific and traditional, folk sources of authority. For this reason, one of the arguments of this chapter is that rural women, specifically in their role as mothers and housewives, transformed into new women.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Rima D. Apple, “Constructing Mothers.” According to Apple, “Scientific motherhood is the insistence that women required expert scientific and medical advice to raise their children healthfully,” 161.

\(^7\) For a sampling of texts on the connections between new womanhood, housewifery, and motherhood see, Katarzyna Sierakowska, “Maternity in Inter-war Poland: Visions and Realities,” *Women’s History Review* 14 (2005): 119-131, Apple, “Constructing Mothers,” Judith Smart,
Historians of women and gender have written extensively about the construction of new women and modern girls in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in nearly every corner of the globe.\(^8\) One of the limitations of this existing literature however, is that in almost every


instance in which historians have described them, new women and modern girls have been understood to be strictly urban, and largely middle or upper class phenomena. In the Irish case, for example, contemporaries constructed modern girls as the urban counterpart of the “comely maiden,” the pious, quiet village girl who did not know much of anything, and who was comfortable to live a hermit’s life tucked away in a small hamlet. To the extent that the countryside factored into the life of the conventional new woman or modern girl, it existed primarily as a site of leisure and thereby consumption, that is, a place where they could go on trips, hike through the forests and mountains, and run frivolously through open fields before returning to their urban homes. In these studies, the countryside is also sometimes portrayed as the site of the origin of new women and modern girls, that is, their pre-modern selves. In this characterization, women’s transformation into their new modern identities was only possible once they had forsaken the village, and sought out the adventure and opportunity associated with cities. In short, historians have yet to delve deeply into the ways rural women embraced modern, scientific discourses and became influential political and social activists on the forefront of change in their respective locations.

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9 Ryan, “Constructing ‘Irishwoman,’” 263.
10 See especially Christiane Harzig, ed., Peasant Maids—City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), Barbara Alpern Engel, Between the Fields & the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Fidelis, “‘Are You a Modern Girl?’”
To rectify this historical oversight, this chapter deurbanizes these phenomena and contends that new women and modern girls, whom historians have so diligently located in cities all over the world, had rural sisters. The women at the heart of this chapter, I argue, were equally as modern as their urban relatives, though perhaps in different ways. Like their city-dwelling counterparts, rural women of all ages also transgressed traditional gendered stereotypes, focused on the physicality of their bodies, and blended local, national, and international influences into their own definitions of what it meant to be modern. For this reason, this chapter contextualizes new womanhood and modern girls specifically in the rural sphere and traces how village women imagined themselves as modern political, social, and cultural actors. Indeed, to compare rural women’s experiences to that of their urban sisters is to immediately cast a dark and weighty shadow on village women’s efforts to be modern. Thus, it is necessary to understand rural women’s interpretations and manifestations of modernity in their own right.

The chapter begins first by explaining the factors that allowed for changes in women’s roles in rural Poland, including their activism during the First World War, expanded opportunities for girls’ and women’s education, villagers’ increased access to migration, growing possibilities for work beyond the family farm, the state’s growing interest in the role and place of the rural housewife in Polish society, and the expansion of rural women’s organizations. From there, it focuses on rural housewives’ activism and their transformation into new women. Because the chapter argues that rural women and girls became both local and national activists in the interwar period, we focus on the ways they balanced their work and family life in the public and private spheres taking on several social causes that resonated with other European trends of the time.  

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12 On the theoretical meanings of the public sphere see Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans.
Then it traces the simultaneous emergence of the rural modern girl, elucidating how young women imagined their role in the future of Poland. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of consequences of women’s roles in the Second Republic and beyond.

6.2  **The Paths to Women’s Emergence in Rural Poland**

Since at least the mid to late nineteenth-century Polish women, almost always from the intellectual and upper classes, had been functioning as social activists, undertaking a variety of roles that ranged from social worker, to educational and labor advocate.¹³ Women’s increased visibility in Polish society, in addition to the rapid rate at which palpable social and cultural change had spread across the European continent, no doubt, led to increased Polish interest in, and perhaps, bewilderment regarding the so-called “woman question.”¹⁴ To the extent that rural women were part of such activism, they remained largely the recipients and subjects of the social aid offered by their noble and intellectual betters. By the interwar period, however, rural women were steadily becoming activists in their own right.

6.2.1  **Rural Women’s Mobilization During the First World War**

The mobilization of women at the outbreak of the First World War gave rural women a taste of authority and power in the absence of men. As we have seen in Chapter Two, men’s conscription into the various imperial armies meant that women of all ages and social class were

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expected to fulfill the social and economic roles ordinarily performed by men. In the countryside, where life was so closely organized along a gendered division of labor, the resultant dearth of men made it necessary for women to step into roles as primary decision makers in domestic and village affairs and as field laborers, in addition to tending to their already onerous daily chores at home. Out of the home and away from the fields, women took up men’s roles in local agricultural circles and rural youth organizations, some even serving as chapter presidents or in other positions on executive councils. Men’s return from the warfront, however, did not mean the return of the prewar status quo. On the contrary, rural women continued to function in key roles in village life, and fought to keep the power they had embraced during the war. Indeed, men found it oftentimes difficult to reintegrate into a society that had adapted to their absence. At the same time, women’s newly granted political enfranchisement immediately following the war gave even more credence to women’s continued influence in rural affairs.

6.2.2 Rural Women’s Education and Migration

The second factor that contributed to the rise of women in the countryside was increased access to education. The resurrection of the Polish state following the First World War brought about a nationalized education system that, in addition to offering compulsory education for children, also provided new and expanding opportunities for women beyond school age to take courses in modern health and hygiene, childrearing, food preparation, and even economics. Though women’s agricultural education began in the years preceding the Great War, it took on new meaning during the war years. In the absence of their husbands and fathers who normally made farming decisions and worked most frequently in the fields, housewives and young women
were expected to learn the science behind agriculture to ensure rich harvests. With the war lingering and fields destroyed, the necessity to produce enough food grew increasingly dire. To send young women to agricultural schools, then, was an investment in wartime food production.

After the war, the Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Reform Rolnych (Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, MRiRR) built and opened schools for women on property that had been former imperial land holdings and by 1929, there were forty-one women’s agricultural schools across Poland. Despite the growth of such schools, Polish educational leaders debated about whether women’s education beyond the compulsory level was necessary. In responding to naysayers at an executive board meeting of the Society for Women’s Agricultural Education (Towarzystwo Gospodarczego Wykształcenia Kobiet), women’s education advocate Wanda Czartoryska argued that women should be instructed in two-year agricultural schools that could teach topics beyond housekeeping, cooking, and childrearing and include scientific and practical lessons in agricultural science, economics, and even business administration. In this way, even if young women had chosen to become housewives, they could have a scientific understanding of farming and animal

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15 “Warunki przyjęcia,” 14 May 1916, AAN/47/185. Requirements for acceptance into such programs were not terribly demanding, though they did come with potentially prohibitive costs. For example, in 1916 the girl’s school in Okuniew, a village twenty-two kilometers east of Warsaw, accepted students if they could demonstrate that they had reached seventeen years of age, carried themselves with adequate moral and physical aptitude, could furnish a transcript that confirmed their successful completion of the sixth grade (or a homeschool equivalent), and could pay two installments of 500 rubles that covered a student’s housing and course materials. “Theory” classes, that is, lecture-style courses were conducted for two to three hours a day, followed by a five- to seven-hour practicum, daily.

16 State-led efforts make use of former imperial estates is discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation. See also, Józefowicz, *Rola społeczna matki w rodzinie wiejskiej w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, 126. In comparison, eighty-six agricultural schools were dedicated to the education of rural men.

17 Essay about the importance of educating rural girls, APP/3230/595.

18 “Wyłaczenia z.m. państw. na cele szkolnictwa rolnych, ferm rolnych, pól doświad. i ogniska kultury rolne,” 1919-1927, AAN 13/357.
husbandry, economics, and food production that could prove beneficial and efficient at home. Women who imagined a more professional life for themselves, one beyond housewifery, could also attend schools and take courses that taught more specific skillsets such as bookkeeping and cheese-making, allowing women to pursue careers in local businesses and dairies.

Women’s motivations for seeking further education varied, though almost all records indicate that women who enrolled in continuing education courses saw their decision as one that not only benefitted their families and the community, but also themselves. For many, the ability to learn a wider variety of skills beyond that offered at the elementary level provided students a newfound self-esteem and sense of purpose. M. Małachowska from Złoty Potok in Częstochowa County, for example, wrote to the editors of Gazeta Gospodarska (Farming Gazette) expressing her love of learning and farming and explained that she was intent on becoming a teacher at an agricultural school. Her motivations extended beyond just a desire to learn more, however, and included making money, suggesting that Małachowska might have sought a life beyond that of the conventional rural housewife. “Having a love for farming,” her letter began,

I would like to finish agricultural school, and even become a teacher in one. Thus, please inform me, where in Poland there are schools specifically organized for the education of agricultural school teachers and how long the program would take… Circumstances are such that I am forced to finish such courses or school program as quickly as possible, so that I can find a job and begin making money.19

Women’s boosted self-esteem, however, was also met with generational dismay. In describing the personal value and meaning of her education, but also its implications for family life, Emilja Markowa of Bystra in Biała County claimed, “I farm completely differently from my mother. My mother planted only potatoes… wheat and cabbage. I, once again, will plant

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19 M. Małachowska to Editors of Gazeta Gospodarska, 1929, AAN/47/383.
vegetables: carrots, beets, sugar snap peas, cucumbers, tomatoes, and strawberries.”  

For Markowa, her educational experience and indeed what she called “the new system of farming,” set her apart from generations of otherwise uneducated women who continued to farm using what she considered traditional, that is, non-scientific methods. Having taken nutrition courses, Markowa and countless others like her, began planting a wider variety of fruits and vegetables, and it became even more popular for housewives to plant lush gardens and orchards in which they grew much more than the typical staples of potatoes and cabbage. Consequently, education, though heralded as a path to progress, also meant that some would be left behind. Women’s schooling provided a new language of difference in the countryside as the rift between those women who considered themselves modern and those they considered traditional became increasingly palpable and caused significant social fissures in rural communities. Access to scientific knowledge and practice revolutionized mothering and housekeeping, and replaced traditional practices with modern ones. As one housewife observed, “We respect the old customs, but their darkness we drive out with books and newspapers.”

Still, this increased access to education did not mean that schools were filled to the brim with eager students. Farm labor did not easily allow for someone to attend school and be absent from the farm for months, or even years, at a time. Two year schools, the gold-standard of women’s agricultural education, required significant time away from home at great cost to one’s family, and

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20 “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1147, 148. Women often commented that they farmed differently from their mothers, especially in their decision to plant vegetables beyond potatoes and wheat. Emilia Tatarowa of Barwald Średni outside of Kraków wrote, “I planted vegetables… whose value my mother and neighbors did not know.” “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 11 February 1935, AAN/47/1147, 160.
22 During the 1928-1929 academic year, 5,245 students were enrolled in Poland’s 127 agricultural schools. Of these students, 3,725 were men and 1,520 were women. Józefowicz, Rola społeczna matki w rodzinie wiejskiej w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, 126.
few families were in positions to allow their sons and now their daughters to attend extended schooling. To accommodate women’s work schedules, organizations such as the Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich (Circle of Rural Housewives, KGW) would host individual courses in local communities that women could attend more easily. Though a less official model of education, such courses grew in popularity as they allowed women to expand their knowledge base. That these courses were most often taught by women’s peers meant that they were no doubt a more personalized and accessible experience.

Most frequently, however, parental pushback hindered girls’ access to educational and profitable work options. Jagośka H. who hailed from a village in Częstochowa County lamented her parents’ refusal to equate her need for an education to that of her younger brother. She expressed her dismay and frustration in a letter to the rural youth newspaper, Młoda Wieś (The Young Village),

There was a bit of extra money and my parents decided that one of us should be sent to an agricultural school… My heart was filled, I wanted to understand the world, to learn something. But my brother got to go—though he is younger, though I begged, and though he was indifferent to it. Alright, so it’s not bad that he got to go, but why not me, why? What if I turn out to be a poor housewife with a better educated [husband], on a progressive, and modern farm, then they will all look at me and call me a “stupid village woman.”

Fearing that she might be unprepared to handle the challenges of the modernizing countryside and be relegated to the life of a rural housewife, Jagośka wrote a scathing review of girls’ socialization, arguing that parents and elder generations in general needed to appreciate girls more and offer

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23 In addition to costing a family the price of tuition, sometimes a hefty fee, the loss of an able-bodied laborer meant losses in production. In some cases, families would have needed to hire laborers, posing an additional financial burden. Regarding school costs, the only records I have found date back to 1916. To attend the women’s school in Okuniew, Poland a village twenty-two kilometers east of Warsaw, students were required to pay two installments of 500 rubles. Costs reportedly covered both room and board and course materials. “Warunki przyjęcia,” 14 May 1916, AAN/47/185.

24 “O nowy typ kobiety wsiowej,” Młoda Wieś, 28 February 1933, 12.
them the same opportunities afforded their sons. Later she called for the correction of gender inequality in the rural sphere saying, “For a rural girl, or woman, to be different, that is, to be of the now (terażniejsza)... we must see that all the wrongs against girls be erased, and then repaired. And there are so many.” She ended her letter somberly asking, “Are parents just kinder to their sons than they are to their daughters?” Jagońska, and many girls like her, understood that increased life opportunities were possible through the growing educational options afforded to women. Though she, as far as we know, did not fair too well in being able to attend school, other women found learning to be precisely the liberating experience they hoped it would be.

In pursuing their educations, rural women became temporary migrants to towns and cities, where they could get a taste of life beyond the confines and comforts of their local communities. And increased educational opportunities also meant that women could pursue alternative careers to farming and find employment in local businesses, dairies, and schools. These alternative work options and the growing possibilities for the migration of rural women were the third and fourth factors that helped feminize the rural movement in Poland. As migration historians have shown, Polish peasant migration skyrocketed after their emancipation from serfdom over the course of the nineteenth century. To combat growing rates of landlessness and to seek out occupational

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25 For example, in a response to a letter requesting information on women’s agricultural schools, the editors of Gazeta Gospodarska suggested that a prospective student apply to the Janina Karłowicz Private Institute for Women’s Agricultural Education in Lwów, to a year-long course in bee-keeping and gardening in Warsaw, or to the Women’s Agricultural Seminary in Pniew in Poznań Voivodeship. Letter from Editor of Gazeta Gospodarska to Karol Kloc, AAN/47/383.

opportunities beyond the farm, former peasants flocked to towns and cities at home and abroad. Rural women were no exception. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries saw increased movement of village girls and women to Poland’s cities where they easily could find poorly paid employment as nannies, housekeepers, shop girls, and waitresses, with some even resorting to prostitution in more desperate times.  

During the interwar period, rural women’s migration continued, and had powerful consequences for women’s understanding of their place in Polish society.

Social and political activists of the time saw women’s educational and labor migration as an opportunity for women to loosen the strong tethers of patriarchy that for too long had oppressed them. This was especially meaningful for Helena Florkowska, a member of the socialist-leaning Stowarzyszenie Akademickie Niezależnej Młodzieży Ludowej (Independent Academic Society for Peasant Youth) who advocated that rural women, especially girls, learn trades not only to liberate themselves from the patriarchal and capitalist structures of the countryside, but also from the manipulation of bourgeois families for whom they would likely serve as housekeepers and nannies. In learning skills such as sewing, embroidery, and specialized food production, Florkowska reckoned, young rural women could be saved from exploitive work as laborers on noble estates and even more importantly deliver themselves from the social and moral dangers associated with urban life where they would undoubtedly “fall to the clutches of prostitution.” “The darkness of our village girls is a common phenomenon,” she reported,

Bourgeois women like girls from the village. They are healthy, and thus work hard for her, and for a miserable income. Bourgeois women think that village girls are not “too smart”—that they can’t manage to organize themselves or negotiate for a raise… Our task is to bring these wrongs to light and form together masses of girls to fight for a better future. Rural

(Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Iberyjskich i Iberoamerykańskich Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego and Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego, 2006).

girls…fight for your rights—for equality.  

Should they have chosen to migrate to towns and cities, rural women could fulfill alternative economic roles, at least in theory.

Migration, however disruptive, risky, and perhaps even terrifying as it was, did sometimes result in positive changes, especially as outside influences infiltrated formerly isolated village networks. For Emilia Tatarowa, time away from Poland living and working in the United States gave her an opportunity to learn how American housewives prepared food and cared for their homesteads. Having migrated to the United States, she and her family returned to their farm in Barwałd Średni, a village some thirty-three kilometers outside of Kraków sometime following the Great Depression in 1929. Though she was not abroad for very long, the experience had a lasting impression on her as she implemented homemaking techniques that she learned while away. “In the United States,” she reflected, “every housewife, that is farm woman (farmerka), preserves food for the entire year. I had the opportunity to see [one housewife’s] entire pantry set up with shelves on which there were close to one thousand jars with compotes, comfitures, fruit juices; mixed in with them was a plethora of canned jellied chicken meat.”

Following the example of her American hostess, Tatarowa returned to Barwałd Średni and began to stock her own pantry with preserved fruits, vegetables, and meats that she and her family could enjoy throughout the year.

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30 My research suggests that increased educational opportunities and migration experiences taught rural women to plant a varied assortment of fruits and vegetables as opposed to just potatoes and cabbages in their home gardens. Though food preservation was probably not new to rural life in Poland, the assortment of foods that were preserved seemed to mark a distinct change from the past.
Tatarowa’s return migration, and indeed that of other returnees, was key in bringing change to outdated farming routines.\textsuperscript{31} With a nearly constant ebb and flow of people, ideas, and goods, women did not even have to emigrate from their local villages to feel the effects of migration in their homes. It sufficed even to have a relative or neighbor who migrated for outside influences to manifest themselves in the day-to-day activities of rural communities. Emilja Markowa reflected on how her husband’s return migration affected her methods of farming and housekeeping saying, “My husband taught me the new system of farming because he [has worked] all over the world—in Germany, across all of Austria, and Canada so he’s seen how they farm all over.”\textsuperscript{32} In this way, even without leaving their homes, rural women could be exposed to consequential alternatives to farming that improved their country gardens’ harvests. As a result, Polish villagers, through the migration of people and ideas, were forced to negotiate the confluence of local, national, and international influences that characterized the interwar village community.

Still, there were circumstances where migrants did not return home or chose to break their ties with their families back in their home villages. In such instances, non-migrants could no longer rely upon a steady flow of goods and ideas, much less money that could be used to improve the farm, its buildings, and buy new seed or animals. As a result, it was necessary for women to find alternative sources of income to supplement their family’s meager earnings. Surprisingly, the distance traveled was not a factor in whether money was sent back home. Katarzyna Ptakowa’s


\textsuperscript{32} Emilja Markowa, “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1147, 148.
husband, Sebastjan, for example, left their two-and-a-half-hectare farm in Burletka to work as a laborer in Kornatka only a few kilometers away. Sebastjan’s original decision to migrate for work was prompted largely by the fact that four of his five children still lived at home, and together with their mother, could easily manage the small farm without his aid. As a laborer, however, Sebastjan was paid only in kind and was offered housing and food in exchange for his work. Consequently, he could contribute none of his earnings to the family farm. To make ends meet, then, Katarzyna took on additional work as a seamstress, earning an extra fifty to seventy złote a year.  

6.2.3 The State and Motherhood

The state’s increased interest in the social and national role of women as mothers was another factor that helped give rise to rural women in Polish society. As we have seen in Chapter Three, leaders of the Second Republic focused much of their efforts on collecting and producing information regarding its newly acquired territories and inhabitants. State ministries, especially the MRiRR and the MOS specifically targeted rural housewives and led nation-wide efforts to assess the “level of civilization” in the countryside. In doing so, the MRiRR subjected rural women to home assessments that collected information about them regarding the quality of their homes, their

33 Ankieta dotyczące znaczenia kobiety-gospodyni w karłowatem gospodarstwie wiejskim - Katarzyna Ptakowa, AAN/47/1148.
overall cleanliness, diets, clothing, and daily schedules. What is more, the MRiRR conducted no such assessments of men’s roles in the rural home, demonstrating even further that rural women were central targets of state-led village assessment and revitalization campaigns.

The increased attention that the interwar state and its agents paid to Poland’s rural housewives reflected women’s dual social position as private individuals and public citizens. As the mothers and wives of the largest social group in Poland, they were subject to special scrutiny to make sure they were raising children to be good Poles who loved their country and exhibited great pride in it. But these increased social pressures to perform and act in certain ways served as a double burden for women who were already considered lowly and not professionalized. Rural women’s newspapers, especially the Głos do kobiet wiejskich (Voice to Rural Women) demonstrated this increased social and national burden, filling their pages with articles that detailed how housewives should act, raise their children, keep their homes, and even what sorts of men they should marry. One article, for example, called on women to find good husbands and not to take this responsibility lightly. They were to weigh his character, nobility, and integrity, among other features, to ensure that their children would hold his same elevated stature. The article continued,

Rightly, in former Poland, before a marriage was concluded, [women] paid attention to a “good nest.” This good nest is her home, where she is a queen and a lawmaker. If she does not allow for dirty actions or dirty talk, then there will be none of it…Let us stand firmly by our faith and Fatherland, and bring up our children with these [good] ideals… by raising good children we will see our Fatherland reborn, free, and happy.36

35 Ankieta dotyczące znaczenia kobiety-gospodyni w karłowatem gospodarstwie wiejskiem, AAN/47/1148.
This Polish version of “republican motherhood”—a concept embodied in the Matka Polka or Polish Mother, motif—did not just stop at raising children with particularly Polish national values. In addition to raising little nationals, Poland’s rural housewives were expected to exhibit the highest standards of health and hygiene in their homes and barns, engage their children with only the most up-to-date and modern childrearing techniques, and cook healthy meals for their family, all while maintaining a household and farm. Instructions in home keeping, for example, called on women to air out their homes at least once a day—a task that was meant with intense bewilderment as many held onto traditional stories of drafts leading to all sorts of ailments from colds to disfigurement. KGW conferences organized around health and hygiene even included displays set up to demonstrate what a hygienic home looked like. Specialists called on improved personal hygiene habits, reminding rural women that bathing regularly was important not only for hygienic, but also social purposes. “And bathing?” one article read, “It’s really a shame to think that there are grown people who, for entire summers, do not know what a bath is… Dirt and stench are [nature’s] chosen company. Try it out for yourselves, ladies, go and wash yourselves and look at what the water draws off you.”

For many, however, these expectations were more constructed pipe dreams than reachable goals. Rural commentator and scholar of village economics Jan Sondel explained the difficulty

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rural women faced in trying to reach the standards of motherhood that the state and medical professionals placed on them. In reflecting on his many walkthroughs of rural southern Poland, he focused on the grit of rural life and discussed how important, yet difficult, it was for rural women to keep up with ever changing expectations of health and hygiene. Telling his readers of the emaciated children in tattered clothing around the village and his need to sidestep streams of manure flowing past a rural home after a heavy rain, he discussed the centrality of rural housewifery to hygienic standards of living. “Let us go from the outside into the hut,” he wrote,

In the hallway, there is a mess because that’s where the chickens have their coop. We go inside. Dirty. The housewife bustles about from the early morning to late at night and she still can’t seem to manage everything. The children are dirty, the bedsheets have long since seen water and soap. The windows are closed. The petite children are home alone because mom and dad are in the fields. Thousands of flies sting us. This raises poor reflections on the issue of hygiene. It is true that to maintain cleanliness on a farm is not easy. You can constantly wash children and they will constantly be dirty… But still, with good will and organization you can achieve good goals in terms of domestic hygiene. This all relies on the housewife. The issue of domestic hygiene and family life is one of the most neglected parts of rural life.³⁹

With state officials and scholars paying so much new attention to rural mothers, it is not surprising that village women became more influential actors in the social and cultural landscape of the countryside.

6.2.4 The Rise of Rural Women’s Organizations

Much of rural women’s activism in the Polish countryside was driven by their involvement in the Circle of Rural Housewives (Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich, KGW). As members of the KGW, rural women could organize in greater numbers and wield their influence more powerfully over domestic affairs in Poland, while also carving out for themselves new niches in village society. Uniting under their common roles as mothers and housewives, KGW members grew in confidence

³⁹ Sondel, Braki gospodarcze i kulturalne wsi jako punkt zacępy dla pracy społecznej, 11.
and knowhow as they shaped rural Poland in their own image. Though most active from within their local branches and villages, rural women also took on nation-wide causes. Among the KGW’s activities including running village daycares, advocating for girls’ and women’s increased education especially by teaching health and hygiene courses, organizing nation-wide temperance campaigns, and planning trips and pilgrimages across the newly unified country. As sociologist Anna Józefowicz explained, “The Circles elevated the level of farming in the countryside, widened education, and taught social solidarity and patriotism amongst the mother-housewives of the village.”

Women’s organizations in rural Poland date back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when they were founded as the feminine counterparts to the male-dominated Agricultural Circle. In 1866, following the founding of agricultural circles just four years prior in Piaseczno, a village in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, then part of German Poland, women of the same village, founded an organization called the Society of Housewives (Towarzystwo Gospodyń). And eleven years later, in 1877, socialist activist Filipina Plaskowicka founded the KGW in Janisławice, a village outside of Łódź, then under Russian occupation. By the interwar period, Plaskowicka’s organization grew across rural Poland, though it enjoyed its greatest membership numbers, chapters, and activities in what had been Russian territory. Nonetheless, the KGW boasted wide regional diversity and no less than six separate rural housewives’ organizations existed after the First World War. Though they functioned separately in the 1920s, by 1930 the regional

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40 Józefowicz, *Rola społeczna matki w rodzinie wiejskiej w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, 137.
41 Despite the organization’s socialist origins, the KGW’s membership reflected the gamut of Polish political diversity by the interwar period. Though it was sanctioned by Piłsudski’s *Sanacja* regime, it remained independent of the government.
42 The KGW had two branches in Warsaw and published both the *Głos do kobiet wiejskich* and the *Poradnik dla Gospodyń Wiejskich* (Guide for Rural Women). In Greater Poland, rural housewives formed the *Związek Włościanek Wielkopolskich* (Greater Poland Society of Women
organizations centralized into the Central Organization of Rural Housewives’ Circles (Centralna Organizacja Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich) and published Przowodnica as the group’s main newspaper.

Members of the KGW tended to range in age from twenty to sixty, and membership in the organization was voluntary. As a result, the numbers of registered housewives fluctuated, sometimes quite widely. In 1930, for example, the KGW had 100,000 registered members (just two percent of the total number of rural housewives in Poland). By 1934, that number shrank by more than half to 48,400 across 2,400 chapters, only to increase again to 99,455 members across 4,221 chapters by 1938.43 Though membership rates were relatively low compared to the general population, and though they were clearly volatile over the interwar period, it is likely that the ideas and influences promulgated by the KGW, especially through their publications, reached a far wider audience than the number of total registered members suggests. Explaining the breadth of Przowodnica’s influence in rural Poland, for example, Józefowicz explained, “In times of crisis in certain villages, this publication was the only printed word that would have passed through the hands of rural housewives.”44 In short, it was not necessary for a rural housewife to be a formal member of the KGW for her to embrace modern ideas about housewifery, childcare, and agriculture. Regardless of its membership rates, the KGW played a central role in the feminization of the rural movement in Poland, nurturing women’s activism and providing a space for them to contribute their own ideas in recreating the Polish countryside.

Farmers) and published both the Poradnik Gospodarskiego (Farming Guide) and Dobra Gospodyni (The Good Housewife). In Pomerania, they founded the Zreszenie Pomorskich Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich (The Pomeranian Association of Circles of Rural Housewives). Silesian village women created their own chapter of the KGW and published the Przewodnik Gospodyni (Housewives’ Guide). And in Lwów, rural women founded the Związek Kół Gospodyń Wiejskich (Society of Rural Housewife Circles) which published the Głos Gospodyni Wiejskiej (The Rural Housewife’s Voice).

43 Józefowicz, Rola społeczna matki w rodzinie wiejskiej w Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej, 132.
44 Ibid, 134.
Founding documents of local chapters demonstrate that housewife circles were established not only to act as social outlets for rural women, but also to elevate their status in the countryside. Indeed, KGW members hoped to show that their work was equal to that of men and confirmed this goal in their organizational manifesto arguing, “on the farm, the reason and skillful cooperation of women is the complement to the work of men, and a condition for the true elevation of village culture and family life.” Such organizing allowed rural women to hold influential leadership positions in a society in which they were largely undervalued and often taken for granted. Local chapters of housewife circles were administered by a ten-person executive board of rural women that served a three-year term. In addition to typical positions such as chairwoman, vice chairwoman, secretary, and treasurer, members could also hold a position as one of six councilors. Councilors were specialized positions in which women oversaw the chapter’s work in childrearing, health and hygiene, home economics, farm economics, gardening and planting, and social welfare. Indeed, far from being the passive victims of oppressive patriarchal structures, rural women pushed back against a male-dominated society. Similarly, rather than simply being the subjects of state-wide organizational assessments and the general gaze of their social betters, rural women embraced but also struggled against the centralizing forces that came from various urban and academic centers. As local activists, they became loud advocates for social change, arguing at every level on behalf of rural Poland. If proposed changes and standards were antithetical to their agenda of building a modern countryside that embraced local cultures and ways of life, they stood in firm opposition to them. Around rural Poland, village women began to find their voices, and in doing so, became new women.

6.3 **The Real Housewives of Rural Poland**

Rural housewives were inundated with knowledge and information regarding science and medicine’s latest technologies in farming, childrearing, and homemaking. Constantly under the gaze of the state and medical professionals who wanted to ensure that rural children were raised to be good and healthy Polish nationals, rural mothers were crucial social targets in the state’s various schemes to modernize the countryside. This flow of power and influence was not unidirectional, however. Instead, rural mothers negotiated legal and medical guidance with their own sense of judgement and became active participants in the rebuilding of the Polish countryside, oftentimes using new technology and knowledge to make informed decisions about their homes. In this way, the housewife became a real player in domestic politics, and could provide a powerful voice and counterpoint to her husband’s traditional role as the head of the household.

Historically, rural men in Poland often consulted their wives for counsel, and in some cases allowed them to hold the family’s purse strings, though husbands remained the final voice in financial matters. During the interwar period, however, we can observe a weakening of such patriarchal structures. In the work traditionally done by women, sources indicated that women less frequently sought out men’s permission to change procedure than before. Calling on women’s increased acceptance as decision-makers and rural activists, KGW member Stefania Bojarska wrote, “True, this is not so simple, but our women have tremendous energy and strongly desire a better life… it is high time that in the social and economic work of the village we see not only rural men, but also housewives.”

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46 See Chapter Three for more on state-sponsored rural modernization plans.
When asked what sorts of changes she had already implemented on her farm after taking some KGW agricultural classes, Katarzyna Ptakowa claimed that she had increased food production by utilizing new farming technology in her vegetable garden, that she began raising only purebred cows, and that she had started selling the milk they produced directly to a dairy. And when asked about sorts of changes she would still like to implement, she expressed her desire to build a new and modern barn and chicken coop equipped with windows (as she had learned that light was necessarily for animals’ wellbeing) as well as rebuild for herself and her family a new home.\textsuperscript{49} Likewise, Julianna Gałosz of Cisiec in Żywiec County credited her access to KGW newspapers and courses for the modernization of her farm. “I came to make these changes for the better,” she reflected, “when I came across agricultural writings, listened to lectures, and joined the [local] housewife’s circle which even chose me as the chairwoman.”\textsuperscript{50} Among other changes women reportedly made included planting gardens, deciding to build barns so that animals would no longer live with humans, creating nutrient rich compost piles, and changing the family’s and animals’ diets to reflect dieticians’ professional advice.

KGW members’ reactions to the swift changes taking place in the countryside were largely positive, though not unproblematic. Z. Kaczyńska, for example, praised what she saw as modernizing processes taking place in shabby country homes across Poland. Her reaction reflected the general sense of possibility and excitement that spread across the Polish state in the immediate years after its reconstitution, though falsely romanticized and overgeneralized the prosperity of rural society. “In multiple old huts,” she wrote, “new machines replace old ones, though sometimes at extreme cost; old painted chests are today replaced with wardrobes. In [our] small cottages,

\textsuperscript{49} \phantom{} Ankieta dotyczące znaczenia kobiety-gospodyni w karłowatem gospodarstwie wiejskim—Katarzyna Ptakowa, AAN/47/1148.
\textsuperscript{50} \phantom{} Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1147, 142.
small windows are vanishing as they build bigger and brighter ones, roofs are shingled, and we almost always have a tiled stove. One room is now kept for parading [guests] and it is so wonderful to enter! These are not the old cramped and stuffy chambers. Praise God, that now the farmer can live properly, praise God that he can now afford this.”

To be sure, however, Kaczyńska’s claims of rural prosperity were exaggerated. In letters and essays, rural women overwhelmingly lamented the lack of funds necessary to complete all the improvements they had planned for their homes and farms. Joanna Rybarska of Potrzebowice, for example, remarked, “I know that the misery of farmers can be fixed with progress and a rational farm, but in addition to work and good intentions, we still need money.” The interwar village was poverty-stricken, and epidemics and starvation threatened farming families’ lives. But with such a bleak reality, it was not difficult to see any positive change as a panacea to rural deprivation. If anything, these nation-wide problems catalyzed rural women into further social and political action.

To relieve women of their many duties during the day, local KGW chapters organized village daycares to which mothers could send their children. At the helm of these nurseries were graduates of women’s agricultural and childcare schools who exposed children to structured playtime, fed them nutritious meals, and taught them to sing and recite songs and poems from memory. In a letter to the central KGW office in Warsaw, Marja Jamrozińska, the chairwoman of her local KGW chapter in Kłomnica, wrote that she hoped their nursery could become a prime example of community activism, and demonstrate to women across rural Poland the benefits of founding KGW branches in their own villages. In extolling the wonders of Kłomnica’s nursery, she explained that it was run by an educated professional childcare provider, Franciszka

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51 Z. Kaczyńska, “Jak się należy zachować w towarzystwie i w domu,” *Głos do kobiet wiejskich*, 2 January 1921, 1.

52 “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1147, 143.
Auguścikowna, who was a graduate of the Narcyza Żmichowska Childcare Seminary (*Seminarium Ochroniarskiego*) in Częstochowa. Together with her staff, Auguścikowna cared for about fifty children, ages three to six. Though the nursery was officially open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., children were often dropped off as early as 7 a.m. In addition to eating three times a day, (children were served baked goods at 10 a.m., lunch at noon, and a snack at 3 p.m.), they could also play in the nursery’s large playground with the provided balls, blocks, and reins. Each of the children even had their own cup from which they drank milk.\footnote{Marja Jamrozińska to the Circle of Rural Housewives Central Office, 20 January 1929, AAN/47/383, 200.} Such nurseries offered rural mothers the opportunity to tend to their daily chores without having to worry about their young children’s whereabouts. They could trust that, in attending the local nursery, children were tended by childcare specialists who helped teach them healthy habits from a young age. Starting such lessons early on, Jamrozińska hoped, would help the children maintain these practices later in life, and eventually transform standards of living in the countryside.

Though certainly active at home, Poland’s rural housewives were hardly bound to their village communities. Instead, those active within the KGW were also important social activists travelling across Polish villages campaigning for any number of social issues. Unsurprisingly, they were particularly vocal in the rural temperance movement. Working closely with village youth organizations, rural women actively campaigned to shutdown village taverns. Like nineteenth-century rural temperance movements that were organized largely against Jewish barkeeps, anti-alcohol activists pushed for sobriety in the name of social and national degeneracy—a result of the influence of European-wide eugenics movements. Though the menace that the Jewish bartender
historically embodied did not vanish from rural discourse, it was subsumed within larger imagery of alcohol’s negative impact on the young nation, just barely thriving after the partition period.

The fight against alcohol was addressed specifically in gendered terms, placing women at the forefront of the action to end its production and sale. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, temperance activism spiked as an epidemic of nationwide hunger spread across the newly unified country. Temperance activists called on rural women to report or shutdown their husbands’ secret home distillery operations in the name of starving women and children. Commenting on the need for women to join in the temperance movement, Włodzimierz Bzowski wrote, “The fight against alcoholism has, as is commonly said, an ally in the woman. Why that is does not need to be explained. Suffice it to say that alcoholism ruins families… Today, when it comes to battling secret distilleries, rural women must stand up.” He continued, “It is criminal, that in such difficult times as now, wheat is being used to make poison. In cities, poor children pray ‘give us this day our daily bread,’—and in thousands of village cottages, that which makes bread for the poor is being destroyed.” He concluded by saying, “The Circle of Rural Housewives should join with the Society for Sobriety (Towarzystwo Trzeźwości) in order to increase their social power… [In this way] hand on heart, rural women, if they wanted, could say that they crushed this dragon.”

Women’s drinking was discussed with even more gravitas. Focusing specifically on alcohol’s negative impact on unborn children, campaigns against women’s alcohol consumption were wrapped in nationalist language. Dr. Władysław Chodecki warned rural women of their national obligation to remain sober throughout their pregnancies. “A resurrected Poland is calling on all in a loud voice,” he wrote, “Be restrained and be sober so that you can work because on this

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hangs the fate of the state. Alcohol is the enemy of the resurrected Poland!... Do not drink, and shine as an example of sobriety if you love your children and Poland! Pregnant and nursing women should completely abstain from alcohol; its every drop is poison for the mother and child.”

In addition to partnering with the Society for Sobriety, KGW members also joined the ranks of other organizations, specifically the Polish Anti-Tuberculosis Association (Polski Związek Przeciwgruźliczy, PZP) to fight the spread of epidemic disease in the Polish countryside. Focused specifically on reducing the risk of infection spread through filthy living conditions, the PZP published playful and accessible documents, especially poems and rhymes, geared toward the rural housewife that included lessons on how to prevent tuberculosis from infecting her family. Advocating domestic and personal hygiene, one poem warned, “Change often your bedsheets and underwear/ Because germs before cleanliness easily scare.” Rural women activists called on improving standards of hygiene not just for their personal benefits, but also because they reflected on the overall health of the nation. Wiktorya Twarożanka of Sowliny outside of Limanowa lamented the standards of hygiene in her local community and feared that Poland’s international reputation would be sullied by what she considered Polish “savagery.” “What will the future of our children be when they are raised in such filth?” she grieved, “We cannot live like savages. What will other countries say about us Poles when they see that we have so little education, and so much filth and poverty?” To combat rural deprivation, KGW members scoured the Polish countryside conducting home assessments, offering their peers recommendations for improving their quality of life and standards of living. These surveys offered rural women unprecedented

56 “Jak żyć należy ażeby ustrzeć się gruźlicy,” AAN/47/383, 118.
access to their peers’ intimate lives with the expectation that they were properly judged and their lifestyle recorded for the public record. This new power to assess and report, however, sometimes resulted in a public and social shaming, and slowly rural women were not just subject to the gaze of the state and medical professionals, but also their neighbors.

For all the reported benefits KGW membership and activism supposedly brought, they also resulted in varying levels of social anxiety and even the disintegration of social networks. Among the fears rural housewives exhibited was a loss of domesticity. Though they were reportedly taught new domestic techniques and introduced to modern technologies and conveniences, some women feared that the proliferation of these changes would replace their role in the home. The building of KGW sponsored village bakeries and dairies, for example, though touted as modern conveniences meant to deliver the housewife from the labor-intensive activities of bread baking and cheese and butter making, while providing employment for young unmarried women, posed a perceived threat to the housewife’s traditional homemaking role.  

In her discussion of these conveniences, Stefania Bojarska discussed the difficulty of persuading other women to participate in the collective building of such businesses. “It will not be easy,” she warned, “to persuade our neighbors to share their resources for the creation of a more convenient life.” For their part, however, few rural women reflected on the contradiction of adding modern conveniences to their lives, that is, instead of offering them respite from some of their domestic tasks, the presence of village dairies and bakeries meant that housewives could spend more time on other home projects,

58 Emilija Markowa, for example, claimed, “I only make butter for myself now because it just pays more to sell the milk directly to the dairy.” “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/ 1147, 160. In this sense, the growth of dairies also forced rural women to renegotiate their role in the local market economy.

including sewing, food preparation, housework, and animal care, a far cry from the emancipation they had originally predicted.⁶⁰

Rural women’s embrace of modern farming technologies also resulted in increased competition amongst their neighbors. Peering through their kitchen windows, uneducated rural women were exceptionally interested in their neighbors’ new housekeeping and farming techniques and became both inquisitive and distrustful of their new work practices. At the same time, they also fell victim to the more “modern” neighbor’s gaze as she could now judge her friend for being “backward” and unscientific. In KGW members’ essays about their farms, essayists discussed their less than positive impressions of their neighbors who had not yet farmed according to the new standards. Julianna Gałosz, for example, boasted that “I am improving the entire house and farm… and want to work better than my neighbors who often try to replicate my patterns [of practice].”⁶¹ Emilja Markowa’s neighbors, on the other hand, mocked her ingenuity in preserving food to last the winter. Because she did not need to prepare meals nearly as frequently in the wintertime, they accused her of being a “slacker” (próżniak) who shirked her responsibilities as a wife and mother. This new competitive spirit was an unwelcome byproduct of the introduction of new technologies and helped create new languages of difference that widened social and cultural fissures in rural communities.

In the years between the World Wars, Poland’s rural housewives worked hard to bring about social and cultural change to village life. Their rise in local politics and social influence

⁶¹ “Opisy gospodarowania (żeńskie),” 1935, AAN/47/1147, 142-143. Both Julianna Gałosz and Joanna Rybarska used strikingly similar language to explain their neighbors’ interest in their farming practices, suggesting that essayists were keenly aware of formulaic answers that the essay awards committee would find favorable.
demonstrated a marked feminization of the rural movement, a striking change from the male dominated world of rural politics. In their roles as mothers and wives, farmers and educators, village women helped build a new and progressive countryside that despite its many successes, also disturbed village social networks and patriarchal structures. In this new era of women’s suffrage, political activism, and social experimentation was born a ruthlessly powerful female voice in Polish politics and society.

6.4 The Modern Girl’s Guide to the Countryside

Modern Girls emerged the world over beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century as a type most familiar to us by their “bobbed hair, painted lips, provocative clothing, elongated bodies, and open easy smiles.” In some cases, they were sex icons and fashion idols who featured on the pages of style magazines, starred on the silver screen, and crooned seductive tunes to live audiences in smoky cabaret halls. In others, they were early feminists—educated, liberated women who had long since thrown off the yoke of patriarchal oppression and carved out for themselves an independent life. Indeed, to the extent that historians have compared them to new women, the modern girl existed not as the embodiment of modernity, but instead a sign of its crisis. With their androgynous features and laissez-faire lifestyle, modern girls have typically been described as transgressive characters who “appeared to disregard [traditional] roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother,” to live a life of vapid luxury that focused more on the consumption of goods and their individual desires, than on any communal or familial needs. But this image of

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62 Weinbaum, The Modern Girl Around the World, 1-2. In Warsaw, female cabaret singers who embodied the urban image of the modern girl were called girlsy. For an especially evocative study of the girlsy who performed on the Varsovian cabaret stage, Holmgren, “From the Legs Up,” 13-29.

63 Stevens, “Figuring Modernity,” 82-83.

the modern girl is specifically urban and does not account for the social and cultural differences that rural young women experienced in their encounter with modern influences.

In the case of Poland, the rural manifestation of the modern girl was in many ways a younger prototype of the older new woman. Contrary to historians’ perceptions of modern girls as embodiments of the crisis of modernity, rural modern girls in Poland were similarly activist in their participation in the rural movement. The modern girl of rural Poland was better educated than previous generations of young village women, sought out opportunities beyond the domestic sphere, though if she could help it remained within the confines of rural space, and played an active role in the social and cultural life of the countryside. Like her urban cousins, the rural modern girl also pushed the limits of traditional gender roles and focused on the physicality of her body. Though she was undoubtedly affected by the modernizing and globalizing influences of urban, Polish, and international European culture, the rural modern girl managed to imbue these cultural exchanges with local and rural meaning. In this sense, the modern girl on which this section focuses was at once rural, local, Polish, and cosmopolitan.

In addition to de-urbanizing the construction of the modern girl, the focus on a rural equivalent allows us to complicate our understanding of young women’s emergence and modernity in at least two ways. Firstly, it challenges the secularization thesis that presents “religion as disappearing in the face of modernity.” As Margaret Allen has argued, “This [thesis] locates religion as belonging to the ‘world of tradition’ that is juxtaposed to and ‘destined to be superseded by modern ‘rationality.’” Yet, the modern girls of rural Poland (much like their mothers) were actively pious Catholics who oftentimes used parish-organized trips and pilgrimages as opportunities to go temporary beyond the village, and as they understood it, know more about

65 Allen, “‘That’s the Modern Girl,’” 83-96.
Poland the world. Jagośka H., mentioned above, for example wrote about her trip to Częstochowa as a wonderful life experience beyond her home village, and reflected that such a pilgrimage only whet her travelling appetite and hoped that she could continue to traverse the Polish lands. And secondly, though the modern girl has almost always been written about as a consumer of goods, the rural modern girl found liberation, not in consumption, but in fact, in production. Like their mothers, young women advocated for rural girls’ access to an education that stressed not just domestic skills like housekeeping, cooking, childrearing, but more economically beneficial ones like commercial cheese-making, dairy administration, and bookkeeping. With such skills, young women could ostensibly find work beyond the family home for several years before potentially becoming a wife and mother later in life.

One of the hallmarks of rural modern girls in Poland was their ability to negotiate at once their rural, local, Polish, and cosmopolitan identities. Indeed, young village women sought to contextualize themselves within wider European circles and showcase the ways they reflected such values. Young women even explained that something as folksy as embroidery was a highly cosmopolitan art form that showcased not only local, rural practices through regionally “specific patterns, assortments of colors, and methods of execution,” but also taught girls about other European embroidery techniques including the English, Madeira, Renaissance, Richelieu, Viennese, and Danish styles with which they could decorate their homes and show off their European flare. As a result, embroidery could not be considered the work of an unskilled, no-thing village girl, but rather a young, talented, and well-informed European woman. And for this, she could demand a reasonable price to boot.

66 “O nowy typ kobiety wsiowej,” Młoda Wieś, 28 February 1933, 12.
67 “Roboty ręczne kobiece,” Młoda Wieś, 30 September 1930, 12.
In addition to exposing rural Polish girls to European-wide folk traditions, learning to embroider was also considered a source of pride in one’s self. The hard work and determination that went into producing a finished product, young girls explained, boosted their self-esteem and made them feel as though they were using their idle time productively, producing new and beautiful pieces with which they could decorate their homes. For others, it was a love of interior decorating that drove girls’ penchant for handwork. Lodzia Floriańska of Wyszkowa in the Masovian Voivodeship expressed her love of embroidery saying, “I think that rural women should know how to embroider because I think it is beautiful when a house is decorated in handmade pieces, instead of being replaced with manufactured embroidery which is expensive and often not practical.” Lodzia and others like her were likely consumers of popular rural home and style publications such as Helena Byczyńska-Tyszkowa’s Dom wiejski i jego urządzenie (The Rural Home and its Furnishings) in which the author, a popular rural culture and style commentator claimed that “It is not enough to only care about the comfort of one’s home, but also to make sure that it is entirely embellished to give it an aesthetic appeal that will so greatly raise one’s spirits.” In this way, even rural girls who were likely too poor to participate in any level of consumption like that of their urban counterparts, could still feel as though they were part of a consumer culture.

Aside from working or attending school, young girls also participated in rural youth organizations that proliferated across interwar Poland. In general, such groups were open to both young men and women and espoused relative gender equality, that is, members of both sexes could be part of the organizations’ local and national administrations. Membership to a particular group, and there were many to choose from, allowed rural youth the opportunity to engage with one

68 Byczyńska-Tyszkowa, Dom wiejski i jego urządzenie, 5.
69 Youth culture and youth organizations were discussed at length in Chapter Five.
another on a number of different levels, including through the organizations’ magazines, sports and essay competitions, and also through cultural activities. And, as we will see, it was in these organizations that young women also came to negotiate their rural, local, national, and international identities.

The expanding press for rural youth coupled with rising rates of rural literacy, meant that young women began to exist in a discursive community, one that transcended the bounds of their small, local communities, and placed them in the center of a wider network of like-minded peers. As we saw in Chapter Five, rural organizations and their corresponding presses offered rural youth access to a supralocal community. Thus, the more that young women interacted on a discursive level, the more they were able to imagine themselves as part of a larger rural and perhaps even Polish community. Even writing into a magazine brought all kinds of feelings of anxiety and excitement to otherwise poorly traveled girls. Stefka, who hailed from a village outside of Kielce, for example, was so thrilled and nervous to write into her favorite magazine, *Młoda Wieś*, that she began her letter addressed to her “Dear Girlfriends,” saying, “When I think that you all are going to read what I write, I get goosebumps.”70 She then went on to explain how she spent her time at home during wintry nights and how her local chapter of the ZML managed to decorate the village in time for Christmas. Before ending her letter, she wrote, “This is how it is by us, how is it in other parts [of Poland]? Write in.” For Stefka and other letter writers, the press allowed her to explain her local traditions, and at the same time access others without even having to leave her home. Indeed, she could be a local village girl who imagined herself part of a larger Polish community.

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70 *Młoda Wieś*, 1-15 February 1932, 14.
Perhaps one of the difficulties of tracing the rural modern girl is that unlike her urban counterparts, she was neither the subject nor the target of rural newspapers advertisements. Instead, most ads in rural youth magazines, to the extent that there were any, were limited largely to schools recruiting new students or farm equipment companies announcing their new products. And though this means that it is not possible to discuss rural girls’ consumption habits or how they were depicted in advertisements, the rural press did spend a substantial amount of time focused on young women’s physical fitness and girls’ bodies. Health professionals treated rural youth and indeed young women differently from others because farm work was already so physical, and some even claimed rightly that women’s work was significantly more intense than men’s.71 But because rural work was already so labor intensive, the expansion of physical fitness was not meant just to improve one’s health or body, but also to engage in quality, structured leisure time that was rationally informed and refrained from what were considered negative activities like drinking, gambling, and playing cards.

To teach young women about fitness, rural youth associations organized girls’ summer camps in which participants could spend their days in the outdoors playing new sports and learning rational ways to spend their free time. At the women’s camp outside of Gostynin, the day’s activities began at 7 a.m. when girls practiced gymnastics to “stretch their muscles and build up energy.” By 8 a.m., breakfast was served with one participant writing, “Here’s where the repeaters show up. You probably don’t know what a repeater is, but that’s the girl who could eat three breakfasts with the most modest expression, or two lunches, and it’s always too little for her, she’s always hungry. There are so many repeaters.”72 Other articles suggested the sports that girls would

71 “Wychowanie fizycznie kobiet na wsi,” Młoda Wieś, 28 February 1937, 8.
72 “Obóz żeński federacji ZMW,” Młoda Wieś, 30 September 1930, 10.
most likely enjoy playing, including basketball, swimming (which was the most ideal activity as it also promoted hygiene), and in winter, ice skating, skiing, and sledding. At the same time, physical activities need not be only sports related, but could include more culturally and regionally specific activities such as dancing and horseback riding. Dancing, for example, it was suggested, should include both regional and national dances, once again allowing young women to showcase both their local and national identities. In this sense, dancing was not just a way of staying fit, but also a way to display one’s identity. Likewise, visits to the Hucul Łódź Horse Stable was also considered a way to garner more regional knowledge about Poland, and also participate in sport. Hiking trips through the mountains or forests were also recommended and touted as a welcome respite from the day’s hard work.

Through their education, labor, and participation in rural youth organizations, interwar Poland’s young rural women came to be Modern Girls. Transgressive in their demands for equality and modern in their quest for scientific and rational approaches to fitness and farming, they came to play an important role in the social and cultural resurgence of the Polish village following the First World War. They envisioned for themselves and others a forward-thinking and progressive countryside that was influenced by urban, national and international cultures, but also true to its rural and local character.

6.5 Conclusion: Women of the Second Republic

Rural leaders realized early on that women were an integral part of Polish postwar reconstruction, especially in the interwar village. Recognizing their position as mothers, housewives, and farmers, local administrators saw women as the crucial backbone of rural society and urged them to embrace their new civic identities. Women’s full political enfranchisement,
awarded in the 1919 Constitution, gave them a new legal status in the young Polish nation-state.\footnote{Anna Żarnowska has written on the possibilities and limits of women’s political activism in the Second Republic. See Anna Żarnowska, “Women’s Political Participation in Inter-war Poland: Opportunities and Limitations,” Women’s History Review 13 (2004): 57-68.}

Writers for the rural women’s press, itself a marker of an increased feminine influence in the countryside, harnessed these themes of women’s citizenship calling on women to recognize their new place in the country and assist in rebuilding an independent Poland. In the first issue of \textit{Głos do kobiet wiejskich}, the newspaper’s editors called on women to maintain the energy of their wartime activism and continue it on into the postwar period. “In this current moment, when we are creating a new state,” they opined,

\begin{quote}
We are bringing harmony and order in our country… This is also the responsibility of Polish women in the building of an independent Polish state, and none of us can shirk our obligations… The war fundamentally changed our living conditions… Not only farmers, but also housewives, must adapt to these conditions (especially) in properly educating the children, directing the farm, and administering the homestead… On top of that, each of us is obligated to participate in collective life as a citizen of our own country.\footnote{“Nasza placówka,” \textit{Głos do kobiet wiejskich}, 11 January 1920, 1.}
\end{quote}

Heeding this call for active participation in the recreation of an independent Poland, rural housewives transformed into new women. They became leaders in their homes and local villages and embraced science and technology, but in doing so, never gave up their particularly rural flare. Posing as examples for their daughters, Poland’s rural housewives-turned-new women came to influence rural affairs in unprecedented ways. Likewise, rural modern girls transformed the social expectations required of young women. They sought out opportunities beyond the farm, demanded equality in educational advancement, and fashioned for themselves an identity that combined any number of rural, regional, national, and international influences. By the end of the interwar period, the stage for women’s equality in the rural affairs was set. After the Second World War, communist
propaganda would espouse rural women’s equality, made most famous by the image of the *traktorzystka*.\(^7^5\)

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\(^7^5\) On gender relations during the early post-World War II period in Poland see, Fidelis, *Women, Communism and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*. Fidelis argues that though the *traktorzystka* was an evocative and powerful image in Communist propaganda, the image eventually fell out of vogue as post-WWII Polish society began to resort to more traditional gender roles.
7. CONCLUSION: THE END AND THE BEGINNING

After every war
Someone has to clean up.
Things won’t
Straighten themselves up, after all.
-Wisława Szymborska, “The End and the Beginning”

7.1 From Subject to Citizen

This dissertation has argued that over the course of the interwar period villagers came to embrace Poland and perceptions of Polishness more closely because of their growing participation in local activism. If, during the partitions and the Great War, Polish-speaking farmers had uneven access to the nation because of imperial, social, and cultural divisions, then the interwar period allowed them, for the first time, to have a national conversation about constructing Poland in their own vision.Reacting to the social and cultural fissures caused by years of imperial partition and the new interwar Polish state’s failures to adequately provide for rural citizens, Polish farmers began to debate their place in national and local contexts. The debates over this new rural vision of Poland were played out in picket lines and protests, but also in rural homes, schools, and community centers, crossing genders and generations. In defining what Poland meant to them, Polish-speaking farmers entered a new relationship with one another that spanned the entire country, connecting with each other for the first time in over a century. At the same time, it allowed them to navigate their place in the new state, performing their citizenship in local ways with national implications.

Tracing how these debates played out in farmers’ everyday lives allows us to decenter Poland’s transition from an imperial hinterland to a nation-state from the political and diplomatic lenses. In doing so, we can understand the ways ordinary people themselves experienced their shift from imperial subjects to national citizens. As we have seen, this transition could have meant losing a cow or land to the nascent government, or being able to write to youth newspapers with a
national audience for the first time, or even longing for the “good old days” of a pre-war world. These instances, though perhaps mundane to the outsider, had profound meaning for rural Poles for whom the interwar years had enormous consequences. The rights associated with universal political enfranchisement, the growing rates of rural education and literacy, and the explosion of rural civil society helped forge a new image of the villager-citizen who could contribute to the construction of Polishness in ways not possible before. Indeed, Poland’s “broken land” and its consequent divisions and hardships, were perhaps never quite repaired during the interwar period, and the outbreak of the Second World War would forbid us from seeing what could have been, but the debates villagers conducted among themselves and their leaders suggest that Polish-speaking farmers were willing participants in navigating a new Poland.

That farmers came to overcome some of the divisions that once separated them did not mean, however, that village society became an agreeable monolith. On the contrary, as farmers negotiated these early fissures, questions of rural groupness only transformed in nature. In addition to being played out at the center in Warsaw, rural debates continued in the peripheries of the new state—in village homes, community centers, and schools. There, villagers confronted generational tensions and gender divisions, conducting debates about the future of the countryside through these lenses. As we have seen, rural youth, buttressed by a new generation of scientific mothers, came to see themselves as the bearers of the countryside, rejecting established patterns of rural practice, and thereby questioning patriarchal structures. Likewise, the increasing feminization of the rural movement placed women at the center of village politics. Thus, if at the beginning of the interwar period, farmers were discussing their place in the new state, by the end of it, they were also asking about their place in their families.
This focus on local politics and transformations is important because it allows historians to reconceive of rural politics in the interwar period. Histories of Second Republic Poland tend to marginalize rural politics, focusing instead on the debates between those faithful to Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski. As a result, rural parties are typically considered unworthy of attention, despite having broad constituencies. Indeed, from the perspective of the political center, it might well have been that rural parties were ineffective. Even when Wincenty Witos and Leopold Skulski held their premierships in the years before Piłsudski’s coup, for example, they were not able to bring about land reform in the country. And when rural leaders united their parties in 1931, the resultant conglomeration was perhaps too little, too late. The various failures of rural political leaders, however, should not be the only litmus test for analyzing change and progress in the countryside. For this reason, this dissertation has argued that farmers experienced tremendous transformation at the local level that was sometimes not visible at the center. When we take into consideration the explosion of interwar rural activism, we can see the everyday components of state-building in the countryside.

Though an independent state lasted for only a generation, the lessons villagers learned during this short period were consequential for the future of the countryside and for Poland. On 1 September 1939, the Nazis invaded the Polish lands and seventeen days later were joined by the Soviet Army. The two powers overwhelmed the Polish military and after its capitulation, the state once again ceased to exist. As during the Great War, Polish farmers were asked to sacrifice in the name of an independent Poland—men and women joined the underground and were active fighters, while others returned to the fields to feed soldiers and people living in badly destroyed cities.¹ The

¹ “Projekty, dekrety, korespondencja, dotyczące organizacji rolnictwa,” August-September, 1939, AAN/13/157.
countryside also became a refuge for those fleeing the devastation of urban centers, among these refugees were Jews escaping ghettoization and transports to death camps. As we have seen, during the First World War, few farmers could imagine an independent Poland and found it difficult to be motivated to fight on Poland’s behalf, but by the outbreak of the Second World War, independence was all they could talk about. If, as we saw in Chapter Four, rural Poles felt that they had nothing to fight for and turned their backs on Piłsudski’s state, what did it mean for rural Poles to sacrifice for Poland? What, in fact, did Poland mean to them during the Second World War that it had not during the First?

Having lived through the devastation of the Great War and worked to reconstruct their lives in the its aftermath, Polish villagers had finally found, thanks to their own work and activism, something to protect. These short years of independence taught a new generation of rural Poles—those who came of age and matured during the interwar period, were more educated than their elders, and had increased access to civil institutions and local organizations—that their future was closely intertwined with the physical state of the Polish lands. To fight for Poland, then, was for them a fight for their lives and villages, that is, for their homes, fields, community centers, schools, and daycares. This Poland, in contrast to the imagined Poland they were asked to fight for a generation before, was more tangible and constructed in their own image. Any threat to these integral components of rural life—components that they themselves had worked to create, build,
and see flourish—was an attempt on their livelihood. Accordingly, some farmers declared that they would “fight to the last drop of blood against anyone who jeopardized the interests, Honor, and Dignity of the Polish Nation.”

A study of the everyday lives of Polish-speaking farmers during the interwar period, then, allows us to understand how villagers’ daily labor, participation in local politics and community building, and even family debates and generational tensions, were part and parcel of the reconstruction of a dynamic Polish countryside. True, interwar Poland was born and died on the battlefield, but it thrived and matured in the years between. These years, though cut short by a second war, were crucial to the future of Poland. When the Second World War would come to an end in September of 1945, a new generation of Polish villagers could build upon these interwar legacies of local rural activism, and usher in an era that would, once again, attempt to mend Poland’s broken land.

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Fonds No. 15  Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej w Warszawie (Ministry of Social Welfare in Warsaw)
Fonds No. 35  Główny Urząd Likwidacyjny w Warszawie (Head Liquidation Office in Warsaw)
Fonds No. 37  Komitet Likwidacyjny do Spraw b. Rosyjskich Osób Prawnych (Liquidation Committee of Former Russian Legal Matters)
Fonds No. 47  Centralne Towarzystwo Rolnicze i inne organizacje rolnicze (Central Agricultural Society and other agricultural organizations)
Fonds No. 52  Rada Główna Opiekuńcza w Warszawie (Central Welfare Council in Warsaw)
Fonds No. 1246  Polskie Strojnnictwo Ludowe Piast (Polish People’s Party Piast)
Fonds No. 1249  Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej “Wici” (Union of Rural Youth of the Republic of Poland “Wici”)
Fonds No. 1250  Stronnictwo Chłopskie (Peasant Party)
Fonds No. 2576  Konkurs Państwowego Instytutu Naukowego Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego w Warszawie (State Institute for Rural Agricultural Education in Warsaw Contest)

ANK: Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie (National Archive in Kraków), Kraków

Fonds No. 29  Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna w Krakowie (Polish Liquidation Committee in Kraków)

APP: Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (State Archive in Poznań), Poznań

Fonds No. 3230  Starostwo Powiatowe w Śremie (District Authority Office of Śrem)
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ZHRL: Zakład Historii Ruchu Ludowego (Department of History of the Rural Movement), Warsaw

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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Modern Central and Eastern Europe, Modern Poland, the Holocaust, Polish-Jewish Relations, European Jewish History, Youth and Childhood History, Imperialism and Decolonization, LGBT History, the History of Everyday Life, the History of Sport and Leisure

EDUCATION

Ph.D. 2017 – History, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL
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M.A. 2011 – History, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

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PUBLICATIONS

Book Reviews
Review of Robert E. Alvis, White Eagle, Black Madonna: One Thousand Years of the Polish Catholic Tradition. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. (Forthcoming)
www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41596

FELLOWSHIPS and HONORS

2017 UIC Excellence in Undergraduate Mentoring Award
2016  UIC History of Poland Scholarship
2016  UIC Graduate College Student Presenter Award
2015  UIC Polish National Alliance Endowed Research Award
2014  UIC History of Poland Scholarship
2014  UIC Polish Resistance Armia Krajowa Foundation Scholarship
2013  ASEEES Kathryn W. Davis Graduate Student Travel Grant
2013  Fulbright IIE, Student Research Grant
2013  Kościuszko Foundation Graduate Research in Poland Scholarship (declined)
2012  UIC Polish National Alliance Endowed Research Award
2011  UIC History of Poland Scholarship
2011  UIC Stefan and Lucy Hejna Family Summer Research Fellowship
2011  UIC History Doctoral Award
2010  Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) Award (Yiddish)
2010  Foreign Language Enhancement Program (FLEP) Award (Yiddish)
2010  MSU Department of History Summer Research Fellowship (declined)
2009  Michigan State University Recruitment Award
2009  La Salle University Senior Academic Award in Sociology
2008  La Salle University John S. Grady Honors Scholarship

TEACHING and RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record
HIST 199 – Chicago and the World (Spring 2018, introductory course for international students)
HIST 233 – History of Modern East Central Europe and the Balkans (Spring 2018)
HIST 234 – History of Poland (Spring 2015, Fall 2017)
POL 101 – Elementary Polish I (Fall 2017)

Teaching Assistant
HIST 101 – Western Civilization since 1648, UIC, (Spring 2016)
HIST 233 – History of East-Central Europe and the Balkans, UIC, (Fall 2013, Fall 2015)
HIST 234 – History of Poland, UIC, (Spring 2014, Spring 2017)
IAH 202 – Europe and the World, MSU, (Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Fall 2010, Spring 2011)

Research Assistant
University of Chicago, Department of History, Fall 2013 - Spring 2014
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  • Gathered reading materials and set up Blackboard site for study abroad course on the history of Galicia
PRESENTATIONS and LECTURES

Conference Panels Organized

Conference Papers and Roundtable Participation
Roundtable participant on panel entitled, “Teaching Polish and Polish-American History,” 75th Annual Polish American Historical Association Conference (in association with the 132nd Annual American Historical Association Conference), January 4-7, 2018
“A Tale of Two Villages: Legibility, Control, and the Reconstruction of the Polish Countryside, 1918-1939,” 49th Annual Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, November 9-12, 2017
“They were used to it.”: Polish Villages during the First World War,” All Quiet on the Eastern Front? Research Workshop, Jagiellonian University, Institute of History, Kraków, Poland, October 24-26, 2014
“For the moral, spiritual, and physical resurgence of the village’: Youth Culture and Generational Tensions in the Interwar Polish Countryside,” 4th Annual International Polish Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, October 15-17, 2012

Guest Lectures and Invited Talks
“Poland Resurrected: The Rise and Fall of the Polish Second Republic,” Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, June 20, 2016
“The People’s Spring: The Revolutions of 1848,” HIST 101—Western Civilization since 1648, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, March 29, 2016

“Rozdarta ziemia: życie codziennie polskiej wsi i dziedzictwo imperializmu, 1914-1939” (Broken Land: Everyday Life and the Legacy of Imperialism in the Polish Countryside, 1914-1939), invited by the Towarzystwo Naukowego Doktorantów Wydziału Historycznego Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego (The Jagiellonian University History Doctoral Students’ Association), Kraków, Poland, October 29, 2014

“Poland’s Second Republic: Problems and Solutions after the Great War,” Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, June 16, 2014

“Unified Poland?: The Legacy of Empire and the Problems of the Polish Second Republic” HIST 234 – History of Poland, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, April 2, 2013


PROFESSIONAL and UNIVERSITY SERVICE

Article Reviews
- The International Journal of the History of Sport

Advising
- Graduate Advisor of the UIC Undergraduate History Society, 2010-2011

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- Co-Organizer of the Workshop in Gender and Sexuality in Eastern Europe, 2012
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LANGUAGES

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MEMBERSHIPS

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