

[The Pursuit of Polish Homogeneity following World War II](#)

Discussion published by Emmanuel Dalle Mulle on Thursday, February 20, 2020

H-Nationalism is proud to publish here the fourth post of its “Minorities in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives” series, which looks at majority-minority relations from a multi-disciplinary and diachronic angle. Today’s contribution, by John Kulczycki (University of Illinois at Chicago), looks at the efforts of post-WW II Poland to homogenize the population of the so-called Recovered Lands in the west of the country.

At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, the three Great Powers had the task of demarking Poland’s western border. During the plenary session on 21 July, President Harry Truman decried that the Soviets had already handed over eastern Germany to the Poles.^[1] On his insistence, the conference communiqué stated that “the final delimitation of the western frontier of Poland should await the peace settlement.” Yet, a provision approving “the transfer to Germany of German populations” undermined this caveat.^[2]

Polish nationalists claimed eastern Germany on historical grounds as part of the Polish kingdom during the tenth to fourteenth centuries.^[3] Government officials referred to the territories collectively as the Recovered Lands (*Ziemie Odzyskane*), an unconscious part of ordinary speech even after the fall of communism.^[4] Polish nationalists also claimed the area on ethnic grounds. As the Polish ambassador in Moscow informed his British and American colleagues on 10 July 1945, “Fairly large territories with a preponderating Polish element were not included within the boundaries of Poland in the years 1918-1939.” “[S]he has to return to her primordial lands, and to continue the old political tradition . . . as a national state.”^[5] Integration of the Recovered Lands required the “transfer” of Germans, but the retention of “autochthons,” i.e., indigenous German citizens of Polish origin.

Identifying Autochthons

How to recognize Polish elements who lived under German rule and cultural influence for centuries? Many residents of the Recovered Lands identified primarily with their religion and region and were nationally indifferent or without an irrevocable attachment to a nationality despite the nationalizing efforts of the Nazi regime during the war, when national or ethnic identity could mean the difference between life and death.^[6]

On 19 February 1945 an organization of enthusiasts of westward expansion, the Polish Western Union (*Polski Związek Zachodni*), advocated “nationality verification” based on a variety of criteria: active participation in the struggle for Polishness and membership in a Polish organization, knowledge of the Polish language and its usage in daily life, and evidence of Polish origin, such as a Polish-sounding surname and Polish family ties and traditions.[7]

Lacking guidelines from the central government, regional authorities pursued their own approaches.[8] On 22 March 1945 Silesian Governor Aleksander Zawadzki directed officials to protect “Polish souls” by issuing provisional affidavits of Polishness to applicants who “unquestionably belong to the Polish nationality.”[9] These “Polish souls” had to present a document certifying membership in a Polish organization or the testimony of three individuals of unquestioned Polish nationality. A further directive on 7 April 1945 added the use of Polish in the home and in prayer as well as the ability to read and write in Polish and ordered the formation of special commissions of local individuals “of undoubtedly Polish nationality” to decide who should receive Polish citizenship.[10]

In Mazuria, however, Plenipotentiary Jakub Prawin on 24 April 1945 called on Poles of local origin to register for provisional affidavits of membership in the Polish nation.[11] On 26 May 1945 his deputy instructed officials that a lack of documentation of Polish origin, such as a Polish-sounding surname, or an absence of Polish national consciousness, as when applicants declared themselves to be Mazurs, should not prevent certification as members of the Polish nation. Officials could also waive the requirement of a minimal knowledge of Polish in exceptional cases for individuals connected to the Polish nation. Nevertheless, officials were to examine an applicant’s past so as not to protect “foreign elements, enemies of the Polish Nation, or those encumbered with anti-Polish activity.”[12] If approved by a local Polish Nationality Committee, the applicant received a permanent affidavit of Polishness.

Whereas elsewhere the initial directives meant that whoever is not Polish is German, in Mazuria the authorities recognized as Polish all who were not German, requiring little more than a declaration of loyalty. This took into account the region’s unusual character. Mazurs spoke an archaic form of Polish, but unlike most Poles, they were overwhelmingly Protestant. The Nazis classified them as “racial Germans” without a process of individual verification. Indeed, Mazuria was a hotbed of Nazi support. Therefore, Polish activists in Mazuria favored a preemptive collective recognition of

Mazurs as Polish citizens instead of individual verification, excluding solely those individuals unquestionably German.[\[13\]](#)

Because of a rigid definition of Polishness as well as the perception of Mazurs as Germans, officials balked at carrying out the directives. On 7 June 1945 Prawin threatened officials with sanctions, admonishing them:

Let the Polish citizen remember that the Kashub, Pomeranian, Warmiak, Mazur—we all, despite these or other religious, political, or social beliefs, are children of one blood of fraternal clans and Polish tribes, and this without regard to whether our closer or more distant compatriots are today conscious of their Polish origin or not. . . . I categorically direct you to register as Poles . . . all individuals identifying themselves as Kashubs, Pomeranians, Warmiaks, Mazurs without demanding of them additional declarations in this regard and to recognize those so registered as Polish citizens.

Revocation of citizenship could only occur after its bestowal: if “it is proven in an administrative and legal way that someone himself consciously of his own criminal instinct acted against Poles and Poland, then of course the Polish citizenship granted him will be withdrawn.”[\[14\]](#)

On 20 June 1945 the Minister of Public Administration, who had jurisdiction over the Recovered Lands, addressed the issue of nationality verification, authorizing governors and plenipotentiaries to issue provisional three-month affidavits of citizenship pending verification to those who inhabited the territory before the war and “belong to the Polish nationality” following a declaration of loyalty. But he did not define the criteria for membership in the Polish nation, except for specifically excluding former members of the Nazi party and “fascist-Nazi criminals.” On 23 June 1945 the director of the Legal Department of the provisional parliament, argued that the criteria should be left to administrative and public security organs, which had the necessary information to separate Poles from Germans, and any regulation should await the peace treaty between Germany and the Allied powers.[\[15\]](#)

Obstacles to Differentiating Germans from Poles

Initially, Governor Zawadzki advocated recognizing only those who “unquestionably belong to the Polish nationality.” By October 1945 he admitted, “No paragraphs and

no directives clearly reveal who should be regarded as a Pole and who as a German—in such cases the Polish conscience must decide.”[\[16\]](#) But the officials responsible for verification came mostly from prewar Poland and had no knowledge of conditions under German rule. Furthermore, their competence and integrity frequently declined the lower one went down the administrative hierarchy. Many simply regarded the autochthons as Germans and often targeted for expulsion those with homes and farms that officials could confiscate for themselves or others from prewar Poland. As a result, the mass expulsion from the Recovered Lands that reached its apogee in 1946 included many who qualified for Polish citizenship.

A report on 2 June 1947 of the Department of Inspection of the Ministry of Recovered Lands went to the heart of the matter: “The greatest difficulty in asserting whether a given individual is of Polish origin or not is the lack, or even the impossibility of creating an objective criterion that would differentiate a German from an autochthon.” Furthermore, the decisions concerning verification varied widely. “For some the fact of having a Polish name is enough, and for the authorities to acknowledge the Polishness of others, knowledge of the Polish language and, say, one witness confirming the applicant’s Polish origins is not enough.” “Especially dangerous is the fact that at times individuals already verified are suddenly deprived of their certification of Polish nationality because of a denunciation that the autochthon speaks German at home or has postal contact with Germany and therefore is a German, not a Pole.” Many autochthons “prefer to leave as Germans bearing their Polishness in secret rather than as spurned to whom the right to Polishness was denied and to whom is pinned the mark of treason in the eyes of their fellow Germans.” In addition, “unregulated matters of property” prevent an autochthon deprived of his property from applying for verification: “in practice the greatest number of denunciations is inspired or directed by the current Polish occupants, who in case the autochthon is verified would have to return this property.”[\[17\]](#)

The End of Mass Expulsion

In July 1947 the British refused to accept the last 50,000 Germans that the Poles wanted to expel to the British zone of occupied Germany. In October 1947 the Soviets announced that mass resettlement to their zone would end in November 1947.[\[18\]](#) The imminent halt to mass expulsion focused attention on autochthons who refused to apply for nationality verification.

In 1947 Silesia, with the largest concentration of autochthons, saw the most vigorous campaign of “re-Polonization,” based on the assumption that autochthons

were essentially Polish. Yet, troubling signs of German influence and incomplete re-Polonization persisted. The Ministry of Public Affairs blamed primarily German machinations and falsifications during verification.[\[19\]](#) In the last months of 1947 nationality commissions reversed 1,062 decisions affecting individuals verified as Polish, and 14,650 cases were pending. Contrary to the law, the commissions revoked citizenship without the approval of local officials. The governor, however, saw the expulsion of Germans as more important.[\[20\]](#)

With the end of mass expulsion, the authorities faced the problem of thousands of autochthons not yet verified as Polish. In Olsztyn province, formerly Mazuria, Governor Mieczysław Moczar resorted to repressive measures in the so-called “Great Verification.” On 8 January 1949, he declared, “We desire with all our strength not to lose a single Pole, but we must be very severe in relation to those who are espousing pro-Nazi propaganda,” a reference to those defending Mazurs or resisting verification.[\[21\]](#) The administration mobilized local cadre together with the militia and security forces to target over 20,000 autochthons with various forms of pressure, including physical force.[\[22\]](#) Indeed, on 30 March 1949 the International Committee of the Red Cross informed the Ministry of Public Administration of an increasing number of complaints, mainly from Mazuria, of German citizens forced to request Polish citizenship.[\[23\]](#)

Superficially, Moczar made progress. A report on 1 April 1949 claimed that nearly 19,000 natives were verified in the previous three months.[\[24\]](#) But the use of force and repression strengthened the aversion of Mazurs to Polish officialdom and their existing situation, and they generally continued to identify as Germans.[\[25\]](#)

The Epilogue

Too late for most Mazurs, declarations of regional and national identities became officially possible when the 2011 census allowed inhabitants to indicate one or two national-ethnic identities. No Mazurs identified themselves as such, but 44.4 percent of those who declared a Silesian identity gave it as their sole identity as did 30.4 percent of Germans. Superficially, the postwar nationality policies succeeded: 94.8 percent of Poland’s population declared Polish as its sole identity.[\[26\]](#) This success came in part through the more or less forced departure and alienation of many who could have been loyal citizens contributing to Poland’s reconstruction after the war had these policies and their implementation been different.

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[1] United States, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers* [hereafter cited as FRUS]: *The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), 2:208-213, 216-221.

[2] Ibid., 357, 480, 1151. The Polish nationalist leader Stanisław Grabski credited Stalin and Molotov with Poland receiving “fully that what we sought,” repr. in Stanisław Kirkor, “Listy Stanisława Grabskiego (1941-1949),” *Zeszyty Historyczne* 19 (1971): 70.

[3] FRUS, *The Conference of Berlin*, 1:757-777.

[4] — A young Polish historian at the International Congress of Historical Sciences, Montreal, 1995,

admitted that he used the term as a matter of habit without being conscious of its political implications.

[5]

___ FRUS, *The Conference of Berlin*, 1:762, 766.

[6]

___ Recent studies on Central Europe question a natural, progressive nationalization of a people. Most relevant is James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008). Tara Zahra lists other studies, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 94n2.

[7]

___ Tadeusz Baryła, *Warmiacy i Mazurzy w PRL: wybór dokumentów: rok 1945* (Olsztyn : Ośrodek Badań Naukowych Im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 1994), 4-6; Czesław Osękowski, *Społeczeństwo Polski zachodniej i północnej w latach 1945-1956: procesy integracji i dezintegracji* (Zielona Góra : Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna im. Tadeusza Kotarbińskiego, 1994), 90; Grzegorz Strauchold, *Polska ludność rodzima ziem zachodnich i północnych. Opinie nie tylko publiczne lat 1944-1948* (Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 1995), 17, 19, 34; Zenon Romanow, "Kształtowanie się polityki władz polskich wobec ludności rodzimej ziem zachodnich i północnych w latach 1945-1946," unpublished paper [1996?], 1-2.

[8]

___ Grzegorz Strauchold, *Autochtoni polscy, niemieccy, czy--od nacjonalizmu do komunizmu (1945-1949)* (Toruń : Wydawn. Adam Marszałek, 2001), 37, 45.

[9]

___ Quoted in Romanow, "Kształtowanie się," 3.

[10]

___ Ibid.; Jan Misztal, *Weryfikacja narodowościowa na Ziemiach Odzyskanych* (Warszawa : Państwowe Wydawn. Nauk., 1990), 192-193, 201; the quote is on 201.

[11]

___ Wojciech Wrzesiński, "Proces zasiedlania województwa olsztyńskiego w latach 1945-1949," in *Problemy rozwoju gospodarczego i demograficznego Ziemi Zachodnich w latach 1945-1958*, ed. Bohdan Gruchman and Janusz Ziółkowski (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1960), 177.

[12]

___ Baryła, *Warmiacy*, 36.

[13]

___ Quoted in Leszek Belzyt, *Między Polską a Niemcami: Weryfikacja narodowościowa i jej następstwa na Warmii, Mazurach i Powiślu w latach 1945-1960* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 1998), 83.

[14]

___ Baryła, *Warmiacy*, 37-38.

[15]

___ Ibid., 42-44; the quote is on 42.

[16]

___ Quoted in Ingo Eser, "Niemcy na Górnym Śląsku," in *Niemcy*, ed. Borodziej and Lemberg, 2 324.

[17]

___ Excerpt, Boćkowski, *Niemcy*, 403-404.

[18]

___ Włodzimerz Borodziej, "Wstęp: sprawa polska i przemieszczenia ludności w czasie II wojny światowej," in *Niemcy*, 1:97-98.

- [19] Excerpts, Borodziej and Lemberg, *Niemcy*, 2:501-503.
- [20] Piotr Madajczyk, *Przylączenie Śląska Opolskiego do Polski, 1945-1948* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 1996), 216-217.
- [21] Quoted in Belzyt, *Między Polską a Niemcami*, 163.
- [22] Strauchold, *Autochtoni*, 168; Belzyt, *Między Polską a Niemcami*, 163-164.
- [23] Borodziej and Lemberg, *Niemcy*, 1:346-347.
- [24] Belzyt, *Między Polską a Niemcami*, 163-168; Claudia Kraft, "Wojewodschaft Allenstein," in *Die Deutschen*, ed. Włodzimierz Borodziej and Hans Lemberg, vol. 1, *Zentrale Behörden. Wojewodschaft Allenstein*, ed. Borodziej and Kraft (Marburg: Verlag Herder-Institut, 2000), 475-476.
- [25] Leszek Belzyt, "Zum Verfahren der national Verifikation in den Gebieten des ehemaligen Ostpreussen 1945-1950," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 39 (1990): 262; Andrzej Sakson, *Mazurzy - społeczność pogranicza* (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1990), 128-129.
- [26] Główny Urząd Statystyczny, "Przynależność narodowo-etniczna ludności—wyniki spisu ludności i mieszkań 2011," *Materiał na konferencję w dniu 29.01.2013 r.*, 3, http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/Przynaloznosc_narodowo-etniczna_w_2011_NSP.pdf.