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Signs of Impending Disaster (1935–9)

‘It is possible to murder a great number of Jews but it is impossible to massacre the entire Jewish population.’
(From a speech in the Polish Sejm by Jewish deputy Minzberg in Dec. 1936)

After Pilsudski’s death in 1935, anti-Semitism in Poland once more entered a dynamic stage. It was again used by the opposition as a supplement to its so-called ‘national policy’, which called for the economic expropriation of the Jews while assuring the Polish nation that this would provide bread for the hungry. At the same time, the government camp – the National Unification (OZON) bloc created in 1936 under the auspices of the government – in its search for ways of extending its base within Polish society, began to use anti-Semitism as an instrument of state policy (Oberlaender, 1935).

The regime came to look upon anti-Semitism as a way of deflecting public attention from the essential social issues. It also had to match the anti-Jewish programme of the National Democrats in order to win greater support. In its propaganda campaign, the government told the peasants that a solution to their economic plight could be found in their replacement of Jewish hawkers in the towns and in the ‘polonisation’ of commerce. It proclaimed the necessity of ousting Jews from the positions they held in the economy, and the necessity for the emigration of a great part of Polish Jewry was expressed officially by Polish ministers on many occasions (Mahler, 1942, p. 140).

In 1935, under the government of Prime Minister Kości triumphed, anti-Semitic propaganda sharply increased. Government circles were keen to make apologetic statements in the official press denying allegations that the government was friendly toward the Jews. In collusion
with the government, new extremist organisations which demanded the radical solution of the Jewish question, came into being. The Jews, they said, should be expelled from Poland and their property confiscated without indemnity. One of the representatives of this trend, Mosdorf, proposed the following solution to the agrarian problem: large landholdings would be distributed to peasants and the landowners indemnified from the proceeds of the confiscated estates of the Jews expelled from the cities.

The radicalisation of anti-Semitism in Poland was to a great extent affected by the German model and in many cases was patterned on Nazi ideology and practice. The Aryanisation in different forms of various organisations and professional unions continued in the late 1930s and almost up to the day of the outbreak of the war. The anti-Semitic programme of the extreme wing was a mixture of all prevailing anti-Semitic doctrines, including some borrowed from the Nazi movement in Germany. The popular Dziennik Narodowy and other Polish newspapers began to praise the Nuremberg laws: ‘Anyone who understands the Jewish question and has a feeling of national pride, must admit that this [German] way of solving the [Jewish] problem is wise and correct’ (Dziennik Narodowy, 20 Sep. 1935).

One of the founders of the ONR (Obóz Narodowo Radykalny – National Radical Camp), the well-known Polish admirer of Hitler, Bolesław Piasecki, who was also the editor-in-chief of the anti-Semitic Akademik Polski, very often praised Hitler and his anti-Jewish policies on the pages of his paper. It is worthwhile noting that the same Piasecki, who collaborated with the Germans during the war, was one of the ‘builders’ of ‘socialist’ Poland and later became a member of the Polish State Council.

In 1937, the youth of the Stronnictwo Narodowe (NS) and the National Radical Camp (ONR) were screaming nationalistic slogans and committing acts of physical violence against Jews. The ‘young’ of the National Democratic Party (Endek), who as a group were beginning to take over the leadership of the party, did not hide their admiration for fascism. ‘Fight with Germany but not with Hitlerism’ was one of the slogans, and a resolution of the Supreme Council adopted in February 1936 called for using the same method which led National Socialism to power in Germany (Terej, 1971, pp. 72–3). In its attitude toward the Jews the ONR did not differ much from Nazi ideology, and very often expressed its spiritual identification with Nazism. This is what the central organ of the ONR, Szczerbiec, wrote on 25 April 1933: