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Rehearsals for democracy

Student life in Central and Eastern Europe, 1919–1923

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

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Executive summary

Supported by a Brian Simon grant from BERA, our project investigates the social and political dimensions of student life in the aftermath of the First World War. In doing so, it explores the possibilities for, and obstacles to, forging a democratic culture within university settings. This report focuses on a case study of interwar Poland. The history of the Second Polish Republic exemplifies the transformation of the international order after 1918, yet it also illustrates the challenges that resulted from these changes. In particular, the report highlights the intense antagonisms that shaped Polish student activism in the early 1920s. Our initial work demonstrates the potential for further research along comparative and transnational lines.

1. Introduction

According to Brian Simon (1987), the British student movement became explicitly concerned with political issues during the 1930s, when it was faced with the rise of fascism. In this context, Simon pointed to the relationship between student activism and the defence of democracy. Undoubtedly, the ideological polarisation and high political stakes of that time invested the political debates among university students with particular urgency. Yet a broader European perspective indicates the crucial nature of developments in the *preceding* decade: across many countries, the reshaping of national and international politics after 1918 profoundly affected student life and its potential role in fostering – or hampering – the development of a democratic culture.

Involvement in student politics enabled young people to rehearse their participation in a pluralistic system, as universities were spaces where competing visions of the future were being articulated and debated (Gevers & Vos, 2004). Moreover, at a time of limited access to higher education, student politics involved protagonists who, in many cases, expected to take on future leadership roles in politics, public administration, academia and the professions. However, while debates and disagreements in university settings suggested that, at least in theory, universities could allow young adults to engage in open exchanges and encounter different views, in practice, the interwar years were characterised by contrasting developments: in many countries, significant parts of the student body promoted anti-democratic ideas and sought to exclude some of their peers on the grounds of culture, ethnicity or 'race'.

Our project focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, whose interwar history exemplifies this ambivalence. Within the region, Czechoslovakia was the sole country where democracy survived beyond the early 1930s. This development seemed to confound earlier expectations. In the 1920s, nation-building across the new or reconstituted states of Central and Eastern Europe was entwined with the development of multi-party systems and the construction of higher education systems that expanded after the hardships of the immediate post-war years.

Our project builds on aspects of our previous work. Individually, we have shown how British student activism offers fresh insights into voluntary action and its history in modern Britain (Brewis, 2010; 2014) and how an examination of international student politics advances our understanding of internationalism and its pasts (Laqua, 2017; 2021). Moreover, collaboratively, we have highlighted the Great War's legacies for British higher education, tracing the entry of ex-servicemen into British higher education (Laqua & Brewis, 2018; Thompson et al., 2022). In doing so, we have explored issues such as student culture (Brewis et al., 2020) and university access (Green et al., 2020). One motivation that underpinned our BERA project was to apply key questions from our earlier work to different countries and regions.

2. Research design

Our project pursues three overarching objectives:

1. To explore the relationship between higher education and the making (or unmaking) of democratic societies.
2. To advance understanding of student activism at a major historical juncture (the aftermath of the First World War) and in a region (Central and Eastern Europe) whose political and social fabric was subject to drastic transformations after 1918.
3. To contribute to a broader examination of European student life from 1919 to 1929.

The Brian Simon grant provided seed-corn funding for ongoing work towards these objectives. As the duration of the BERA-funded research was time-limited (October 2023 to April 2024), we adopted a case-study approach, focusing on Poland. The subtitle of a recent edited volume on East Central Europe during the interwar period identifies 'the fate of minorities' and 'the failure of democracy-building' as two major challenges within the region (Ramet, 2020). The Polish case exemplifies both aspects.

The very creation of the Second Polish Republic was entwined with wider changes, including the collapse of multinational empires and the attempt to establish a European order based on nation-states (Steiner, 2005). Moreover, like other states that emerged from the reconfiguration of the international map, Poland's cultural and ethnic composition was far from homogenous: while 69.2 per cent of respondents to the 1921 census described their identity as Polish, the survey confirmed the diversity of a population that encompassed Ukrainians (14 per cent), Jews (10.5 per cent), Belarussians (3.9 per cent), Germans (3.9 per cent) and several smaller groups, including Lithuanians (Stachura, 1998). The actual share of minorities was probably even higher, as parts of the contested Polish–German and Polish–Lithuanian border regions did not feature in the census, and as some members of minority groups may have been reluctant to affirm their identity.

Yet it is not only because of minority politics that the Polish case is suitable for a case-study approach: it is also instructive because of the fragility of the country's political system. Having been created as a parliamentary democracy, a coup led by state founder Józef Piłsudski in 1926 curtailed the power of the Polish parliament (*Sejm*), and oppositional groups faced growing restrictions in subsequent years (Prażmowska, 2013). Shortly before Piłsudski's death in 1935, the adoption of a new constitution confirmed the shift towards authoritarianism.

Poland's higher education system had a history that distinguished it from other countries in the region: following the Polish partitions of the late 18th century, Poland had been under Prussian, Russian and Habsburg rule. In the 19th century, Germanisation and Russification policies caused obstacles to Polish higher education, whereas universities in the Polish-populated parts of the Habsburg monarchy became significant seats of Polish learning (Surman, 2018). One distinct challenge for the Second Polish Republic involved the construction of a national higher education system out of formerly disparate parts. In other respects, however, the Polish experience mirrored broader European patterns. For example, in most countries, students only constituted one to two per cent of their age cohort (Ringer, 2004). Poland was no exception in that regard, with 39,255 people enrolled in higher education in 1923/1924 (Tomaszewski, 2022). Likewise, as with other European nations, university access for young women had been a story of 'difficult beginnings' (Kolbuszewska, 2017), but also of subsequent growth. In 1934, women made up 28 per cent of the Polish student population (Tomaszewski, 2022), equalling or exceeding their share in many other European countries at that time. Finally, as was the case elsewhere, the question of national minorities particularly affected educational institutions in borderlands, which in interwar Poland included the Stefan Batory University in Vilnius (known in Polish as Wilno and now the capital of Lithuania) as well as the Jan Kazimierz University and Technical University in Lviv (known in Polish as Lwów and located in present-day Ukraine).

Our work was largely literature-based, reflecting our intention to prepare the ground for our future enquiries. To ensure the inclusion of literature in Polish, we recruited a Polish researcher who supported our work (Agata Blaszczyk). In surveying existing publications, we considered the following questions:

- What implications did the end of the First World War and the re-establishment of a Polish nation-state have for university access?
- How did the First World War (and/or the post-war conflicts with neighbouring states) affect those who entered higher education after 1918?
- To what extent did conflicts regarding nationhood and 'race' play out at Polish universities?
- What were the respective strengths of democratic and anti-democratic student organisations?
- What were the structures to represent student interests locally, nationally and internationally?

3. Findings & discussion

3.1 LEGACIES OF RECENT MILITARY CONFLICT

The memorialisation of the First World War was a feature at universities in different countries (Irish, 2015). In Poland, however, commemoration was particularly complex because Polish people had fought in different armies. This aspect partly explains the relative 'marginalisation of the Great War in interwar Poland' and the extent to which public commemoration emphasised 'the subsequent state-building wars, uprisings, and the war against Soviet Russia' (Mick, 2016a, p. 234). The conflicts in question, which shaped the republic's borders, included wars with Ukraine (1918–1919), Lithuania (1920) and Soviet Russia (1919–1920) as well as uprisings in the Polish–German borderlands of Upper Silesia.

Students played a prominent role in these conflicts. The impact of the border wars was acutely felt in Lviv, where Polish students had contributed to the wars with the Republic of Ukraine, the Soviet Republic of Ukraine and Soviet Russia. The young participants of these conflicts figured prominently in subsequent remembrance, forming part of a 'political cult of the dead' (Mick, 2016b, p. 235). For example, a centenary publication for Lviv's Technical University suggested that the institution bore testimony 'to the city's day of defeat and its days of glory', citing inscriptions on the walls of its central staircase, which featured 'long columns of names of the defenders of Lwow', and a monument in the courtyard, dedicated 'to the youth of Lwow who fell in the war of 1918–1920' (Wituszewski, 1945, p. 32). The prioritisation of these conflicts for remembrance testifies to a wider issue: the extent to which the armistice of November 1918 barely inaugurated a 'post-war' era across Europe (Gerwarth, 2016).

3.2 CHALLENGES FOR POST-WAR DEMOCRACY

The associational features of Polish student life allow us to trace wider patterns of both participation and conflict. During the interwar years, student self-help organisations – the so-called *Bratnie Pomoce* or *Bratniaki* – were present at most Polish colleges and universities. Such organisations built on pre-war traditions of mutual help, organising welfare and a broad range of social activities (Bogacz, 1931).

By the 1930s, however, most *Bratniaki* branches were dominated by the All-Polish Academic Youth Organisation (*Związek Akademicki Młodzież Wszechpolska*), a body whose prominence underscored the appeal of aggressive nationalism within the Polish student body (Tomaszewski, 2022). Founded in 1922, the All-Polish Youth was closely aligned with National Democracy (*Narodowa Demokracja* or *Endecja*), a movement led by Roman Dmowski, who championed an exclusionary ethnic nationalism. From the late 19th century, Dmowksi's ideas contrasted with those of Józef Piłsudski, who is often seen as the 'founding father of modern Poland' (Zimmerman, 2022). Unlike Dmowski, Piłsudski espoused federalist visions that evoked the legacy of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Snyder, 2012).

The presence of competing ideological currents within the student body manifested itself in a diverse student press, with publications that promoted competing views (Pilch, 2001). Moreover, the country's political polarisation triggered disputes about which groups might represent students at the national level (Pilch, 1997). For example, in 1925, an overview of Polish student life noted the existence of one national union dominated by the All-Polish Youth, with support from monarchist and Catholic forces, but also a rival venture that drew support from centrist, left-wing and minoritised students (Bełcikowska, 1925).

The driving force behind attempts to counter the All-Polish Youth was the National Youth Organisation (*Organizacja Młodzieży Narodowej*, OMN), whose history dated back to the 1880s. In the 1920s, the OMN supported Piłsudski's policies and, in doing so, adopted a more inclusive approach to national minorities. In 1927, the National Youth Organisation fused with other groups, creating the Organisation of Polish Democratic Youth (*Związek Polskiej Młodzieży Demokratycznej*, ZPMD). According to Micewski (1969, p. 160), it was a 'peculiar body' that had 'developed out of the old pre-war nationalist youth movement' but, during the interwar years, 'was … associated with one of the groups on the left wing of the Piłsudski camp'. In 1930, Piłsudski's followers founded another youth organisation, the Youth Legion – Academic Union of Labour for the State (*Legion Młodych – Akademicki Związek Pracy dla Pánstwa*), which had paramilitary features and sought to appeal to left-wing youths (Micewski, 1969; Pilch, 1997).

Ultimately, the existence of these camps highlights competing visions in Polish politics: one that adopted an aggressive form of ethnic nationalism, and another that was more inclusive but, through its association with state leader Piłsudski, supported policies that curtailed democratic freedoms.

3.3 CHALLENGES FOR COEXISTENCE

By the 1930s, the All-Polish Youth dominated at universities, which underlines the difficult circumstances for national minorities. Jewish students were subjected to extensive political attacks and sometimes physical violence. In the 1920s, they made up a significant share of the student body in disciplines such as dentistry, medicine and law. Yet already in this early period, they faced various forms of discrimination, as some student groups sought to curtail their access to higher education. One prominent attempt involved demands that Jewish medical students be allowed to use only cadavers supplied by the Jewish community (Aleksiun, 2012). There were also broader calls for a 'numerus clausus' – that is, a defined cap on the number of Jewish students – all the way to demanding their total exclusion (Brykczynski, 2016; Natkowska, 1999; Rudnicki, 2004). In the mid-1930s, some institutions started to segregate Jewish students through the introduction of so-called 'ghetto benches', which 'became a symbol of the isolation of Jewish students at Polish universities' (Aleksiun, 2014, p. 134). In several cases, physical attacks resulted in the deaths of Jewish students, from Vilnius to Lviv (Aleksiun, 2019; Piłatowicz, 1991).

Even before the worsening of antisemitic violence in the 1930s, some Polish students pursued their studies abroad (Falek, 2011). Moreover, in places such as the University of Warsaw, the number of Jewish students drastically declined during the interwar years (Majewski, 2016). National figures confirm this picture: whereas in 1921, Jewish students had made up 23.2 per cent of the university population, their share had dropped to 8.2 per cent by 1938 (Aleksiun, 2014).

These developments highlight a wider issue, namely the rise of political antisemitism in the interwar period (Hagen, 1996). Other minorities also experienced various obstacles. In 1931, a state-backed account sought to counter accusations of educational discrimination against Ukrainians, noting that, altogether, 2,175 Ukrainians were attending Polish higher education institutions (Feliński, 1931) – yet, even in Lviv, Poles vastly outnumbered their Ukrainian peers. Seeking to circumvent marginalisation within the official system, some Ukrainians attended an underground university in Lviv or joined an exiled 'Free University' in Vienna and, later, Prague (Magocsi, 2010). However, shared experiences of hostility rarely triggered alliances between students from different minorities. For example, Natalia Aleksiun (2014, p. 136) has noted the 'complex relations' between Ukrainian and Jewish students.

Another level of complexity concerned Polish student activism in the Free City of Gdańsk/Danzig, which was under League of Nations administration from 1920 to 1939. Polish students made up nearly a third of the local student body, and the university's *Bratniaki* organised self-help activities to counter the discrimination that they experienced vis-à-vis the German majority. However, by the 1930s, the local *Bratniaki* promoted discriminatory practices itself, namely towards Jewish students at the university (Bara, 2005).

3.4 HISTORIES OF INTERNATIONALISM

While these examples testify to the virulence of nationalism within universities, the history of interwar Poland also indicates the potential appeal of internationalism. Polish student leaders were strongly involved in the *Confédération Internationale des Étudiants* (CIE; International Confederation of Students) which brought together student representatives from different countries and was itself a product of the post-war order (Laqua, 2017). In 1924, Warsaw hosted the second CIE congress and an associated sports venture, the Student World Championships (Gallien, 2020).

Involvement in the CIE is interesting for two major reasons. First, it highlights the importance accorded to Polish representation within international settings. For example, the Warsaw congress attracted much official backing as well as coverage in national newspapers such as the *Kurjer Warszawski* (1924). Indeed, to ensure participation in the CIE, Polish student organisations temporarily put aside their antagonism and established a joint Foreign Commission (Bełcikowska, 1925). Polish efforts to use student politics for international representation were boosted by the election of Jan Baliński-Jundziłł, a Polish student leader, to the CIE presidency.

Second, Polish involvement in the CIE highlights some of the ambivalent features of interwar internationalism. At one level, the Warsaw congress exemplified broader internationalist ambitions, with a raft of resolutions that sought to promote student mobility and exchanges across national borders (Commission de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1924). Yet the event also highlighted the presence of nationalism within internationalism. For instance, German student leaders – who embraced a *völkisch* nationalism in this period – attended the Warsaw congress, attracting some controversy. Moreover, in 1931, another Polish student leader, Jan Pożaryski, was elected CIE president (Gallien, 2020) – at a time when the All-Polish Youth, of which Pożaryski himself was a member, was dominant in Poland (Tomaszewski, 2011). The use of international platforms by a variety of student groups from across Europe offers fruitful opportunities for further research.

4. Conclusion

Our case study of interwar Poland shows that student histories can shed light on wider historical transformations, from the construction of new nation-states to the role of political and ethnic antagonism in undermining the development of a democratic culture. While university students were a small part of their age cohort, policymakers and political movements placed significant expectations on them, making universities an arena in which broader social, cultural and ideological tensions played out.

Moreover, the Polish case study problematises notions of student activism. Involvement in student politics enabled one segment of Polish youth to rehearse their participation in a pluralistic system, but significant parts of the student body promoted anti-democratic, antisemitic and, indeed, misogynistic ideas. The example thus challenges the widely held perception of student activism as a predominantly ‘progressive’ phenomenon.

Our project has used a case-study approach to facilitate future work in this field. The Polish example indicates that we need to understand these developments in terms of their broader international dimensions – because of parallels with developments elsewhere, because of the importance of wider European contexts, and because of the commitment of Polish student activists to fostering transnational ties. There is much scope for future comparative research into student organisations in the fragile new nation-states of interwar Europe.

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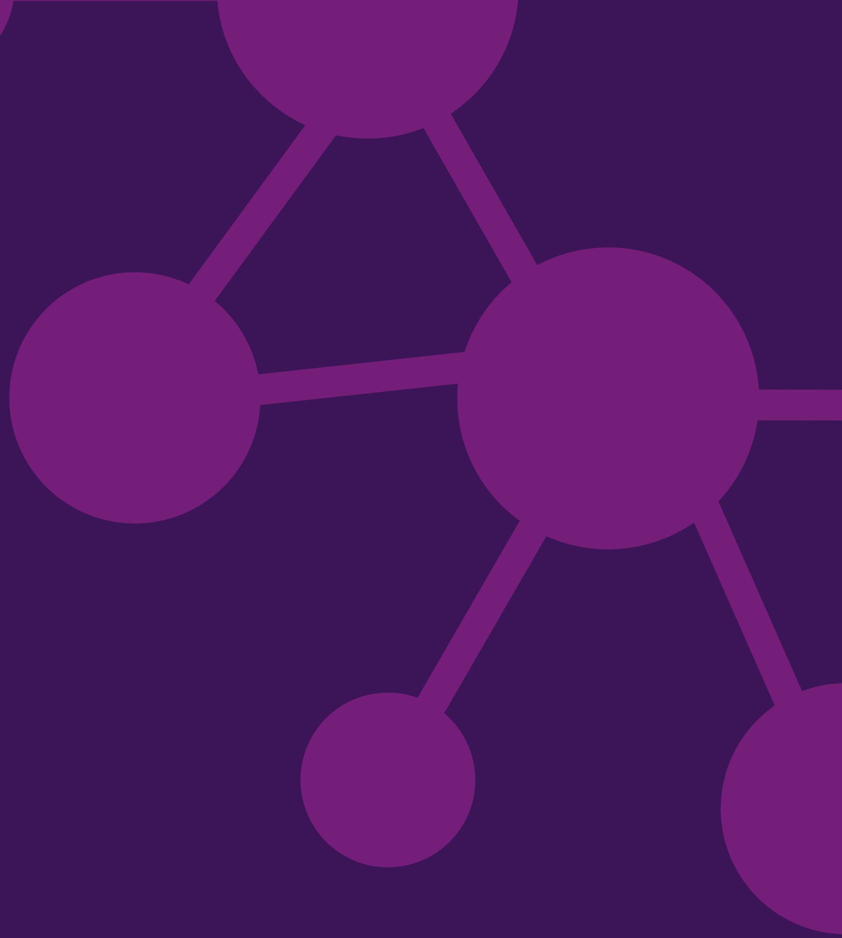

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