

Poland and the Local Poles in the Free City of Danzig between the two World Wars

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The Free City of Danzig was one of the peculiar European regions in the period between the two World Wars under the administration of the League of Nations. This was the present-day area of the city of Gdańsk and its vicinity. Danzig had a special legal status. This study attempts to capture one of the specific aspects of this complex issue – the relationship between local administration and the local Poles, and the Polish state agencies. Through the presentation and analysis of the situation of this “city” of special status, the reader may obtain an insight into the procedures of one of the first transitory crisis management operations of the international community and into the life of the minority population.

Keywords: Polish minority, transitory international management, League of Nations, legitimacy, Danzig, immunity, high commissioner

The minority issue as reflected by international law

The birth of modern national identity at the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries, followed by the rise of new national sentiments as well as the everyday presence of the minority issue has caused increasing disturbance in the relationship of Europe’s traditional Great Powers over the past 200 years. With this, a new set of problems began to be outlined in international relations, despite the fact that the “modern” (national) minority rights had not even been raised prior to World War I. Legally, there were no national minorities; only the case of religious minorities in the Balkans was controlled in the second half of the 19th century. Frequently, the minority issue was preferred to be neglected in international relations. “Nationalism emerging in the 19th century was the hotbed of modern minority rights and the dissatisfaction of minorities has been – to this very day – one of the most disquieting driving forces in the evolution of international relations.”² In the 19th century, the Great Powers still made some attempts to normalise and regulate the situation of minorities living in Central and Eastern Europe in terms of religion, but these endeavours

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2 SZALAYNÉ SÁNDOR 2003: 49.

and international agreements failed at the dawn of the 19th century. “An English Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, attempted to make the point already with the title of one of his works that nations were the ‘products’ of modernisation: he spoke of the ‘invention of tradition.’ He argued that the symbols and rituals honoured today as traditions were deliberately created in the European countries in the last third of the 19th century in order to damp class conflicts generated by capitalism. For Hobsbawm, nations were neither ancient, nor natural.”³

Nothing demonstrates the importance of this subject matter better than the fact that the perpetrator of the Sarajevo assassination sparking World War I regarded himself as a political activist belonging to the Serbian minority. This fact and the outbreak of World War I made Great Powers face the severity of the problem and open the eyes of the other international legal actors to the need to address the minority issue.

One of the main goals of the negotiations following World War I was the creation of a new system of states and to that end it was considered inevitable that the issue should be addressed and regulated, in which the main role was given to the newly-born League of Nations.⁴

The League of Nations or the “Champion” of the International Minority Protection System

The League of Nations (largely referred to as “Népszövetség” [Alliance of Peoples] in Hungarian terminology) established by the peace treaties can be referred to as a milestone in international relations being transformed as one of the consequences of World War I.

The League of Nations played a decisive role, and perhaps it may be claimed that it opened up new dimensions in international administration and in the regulation of the situation of national minorities. The League of Nations came into being with the execution of its Covenant⁵ signed in January 1919, and was the first intergovernmental body whose principal mission was to maintain international peace and security. The tragedy of World War I spectacularly demonstrated that the alliance systems established earlier by the Great Powers (Concert of Europe, Triple Alliance, Entente cordiale) were unable to build up an efficient and lasting security system, moreover they led the world into a hitherto unprecedented conflict. Therefore, in 1919 there was a need for an organisation capable of preventing the outbreak of another war of this type over the longer term.

The initiative is associated with the name of Woodrow Wilson, who in his famous Fourteen Points⁶ envisaged permanent and just peace as the foundation of

3 EGEDY 2007: 72.

4 SZALAYNÉ SÁNDOR 2003: 49.

5 Grotius 1933.

6 History Learning Site s. a.

international cooperation. Naturally, following the American initiatives and ideas, the British and French also came up with their own, many of which were incorporated into the Covenant entering into force in January 1920. At the same time, the Covenant became an integral part of the Paris Peace Treaties envisaging the maintenance of international peace and security.⁷ Its most important provisions included guarantees for territorial integrity and political independence, disarmament, regional agreements and, most importantly from the viewpoint of our subject matter: the protection of minorities.⁸ It is important to underline that only the losers and the East Central European successor states were made to sign the treaties concerning minorities. The League of Nations, as an international body with a general competence, had the task of developing and enforcing the system of minority protection. Compliance with the minority protection agreements was part of the peace treaties creating the new states, but they did not formally constitute a separate category, yet the new states could not have been established without them. It is important to note that this was the first attempt in international law and at the same time a “systemic attempt that wished to ensure the protection of minorities on an international basis”⁹ Naturally, neither the drafting nor the execution of the resolutions and the various provisions was a simple process. This is best demonstrated by the fact that no deliberate, coherent policy came into being envisaging long-term cooperation, and the internal contradictions of the Paris Peace Treaties only added to the problems. The absence of efficient and collective work was a sign of weakness.¹⁰ And, if we take a closer look at the final text of the Covenant of the League of Nations in the context of this study, it is revealed that: it contains no provisions concerning minority rights. Traces of the recognition of these rights can be found in some drafts of the Covenant (the draft of the German International Law Society and of the Swiss and the German Governments), moreover, they were also included in the 17, and the 21-point programmes of U.S. President Wilson.¹¹ It can therefore be said that there was no consensus on a broad and wide-ranging regulation of the protection of minority rights and on all participating states. To offset this, bilateral or multilateral agreements concerning minority protection were concluded within the Paris peace conference in 1919, which to date constitute the legal sources of international minority rights. At the same time, it is important to clarify that the Covenant of the League Nations and the minority protection provisions came into being in most cases (as chapters or so-called annexes) constituting inseparable parts of the individual peace treaties. In the light of all this, it can be claimed that the system established by the League of Nations was not a universal system for the protection of minorities, and that is why the Covenant of the organisation does not include itemised minority protection norms. The organisation played a role in

7 BLAHÓ–PRANDLER 2005: 48.

8 BLAHÓ–PRANDLER 2005: 49.

9 SZALAYNÉ SÁNDOR 2003: 36.

10 BLAHÓ–PRANDLER 2005: 50.

11 SZALAYNÉ SÁNDOR 2003: 67.

monitoring the application of the peace treaties, including the minority protection clauses.

Danzig as reflected in historical Polish statehood

To understand the changes in the destiny of the population of the Free City of Danzig in the period between the two world wars and particularly that of the minority Polish population, we need to look back to a more distant past: Danzig, or Gdańsk in Polish, used to be one of the most important Hanseatic cities on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Its foundation is unclear, the first written records about the city date back to 997, when Saint Adalbert began to preach the Gospel here.¹² It is highly probable that the city itself was founded by the princes of Pommerellen (Upper Pomerania), who raised it to be their capital. With the end of the reign of the princes of Pommerellen in 1309, the Teutonic Order took control of the city until 1354. Then, the city broke away from the Teutonic Order and became a republic. In actual fact, however, it was under the protection of King Casimir of Poland, who granted several privileges to the city.¹³ As a consequence, a public law relationship was established which bound Danzig to the historical Polish statehood. Later on, the city held a both legally and economically privileged position within the Polish Noble Republic. One of the main reasons for this was that Danzig supervised and controlled a decisive part of the foreign trade of the Polish–Lithuanian state.¹⁴

In 1734, in the War of the Polish Succession, the city was captured and heavily taxed by the Russians and the Saxons due to the joint intervention of the Russian and the Habsburg Empires. In 1772, at the time of the first partition of Poland, Danzig continued to keep its status of free city, but the Vistula estuary became a Prussian possession. At the time of the second partition, however, the city was forced to surrender to the armies of the Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm II, and on 7 May 1793, Danzig was also subjected to the rule of Prussia, which abolished the old self-government of the rich merchant city. A rather centralised model of governance was then introduced which, however, did not last long because the city became an “independent” republic subject to French rule between 1807 and 1815.¹⁵ This took place as a consequence of the Peace Treaties of Tilsit.¹⁶ The French decided not to annex the city to the Grand Duchy of Warsaw that they set up, but rather to manage it separately, and entrusted its administration to a French general Francois Joseph Lefebvre.¹⁷ The administration of the first “Free State of Danzig” (1807–1814) was thus a curious blend of archaic traditions of governance and modern French influences.

12 DAVIES 2006: 12.

13 DAVIES 2006: 14.

14 HALÁSZ 2015: 142.

15 HALÁSZ 2015: 142.

16 DAVIES 2006: 521.

17 LOEW 2003: 73.

Primarily, this stemmed from the fact that the French allowed the leaders of the city to re-establish their so-called “ancestral liberties” and institutions of pre-1793 era, while the Danzig leadership committed to upholding the provisions of the French Code Civil adopted in 1804. As a result, the French legal acts and solutions slowly infiltrated the management of the city’s life and continued to shape the life of the Free City of Danzig.¹⁸

The aforementioned military governor, General Lefebvre and the presence of the French army greatly influenced the balance of power, let alone the fact that the French were in charge of customs administration too, which was of importance from a tactical (military) point of view.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the population of the Free City of Danzig was able to operate and direct its own administrative institutions: its Senate, the autonomous city court of justice and the College of the Hundred, which was sometimes referred to as “the third estate” or class.²⁰ The judicial body consisted of 12 persons and it regularly made its verdicts in judicial councils of three. Although these bodies all had a substantial impact on the legal development of Danzig, legislation was primarily within the competence of the Senate. The Senate evolved from the so-called old city council at the end of the 18th century; it was headed by the president, who in fact replaced the old mayor. First, it had 12, then 22 members, essentially the mayors of the city districts. This body was the primary executive body of the “free city”, and the city officials owed their allegiance to this body. The various committees greatly assisted the work of the Senate; with the progress of time, they specialised continuously until their operation became professional.²¹

The first free state of Danzig, however, could only survive for seven years, from the Peace Treaties of Tilsit to the Vienna Congress.²² At the end of the Napoleonic era, the city’s population continued to trust in retaining the free city status, but they were disappointed because Danzig was re-annexed to the rule of the Prussian King on 3 February 1814, so it constituted a part of Germany in general and Prussia in particular until 1918, and for about 104 years, it progressed under the German flag.²³ It is a fact that over a century, the people of Danzig were integrated into the new German state, so in 1919 they no longer wanted to be annexed to a reborn Poland.²⁴ As a result of the decision of the Great Powers victorious in World War I, Danzig was granted a peculiar historical role. This was a crucial period for the Polish minority, because they were granted various and decisive privileges in a “state” which, due to the German majority of the population, did not wish to be subject to Polish influence.

18 HALÁSZ 2015: 142.

19 Related to the continental blockade against the British.

20 The existence of the latter body is dated from the 16th century, representing primarily the interests of urban citizens, merchants and artisans. Its role was gradually enhanced and this held also for the period between 1807 and 1815.

21 HALÁSZ 2015: 143.

22 LOEW 2003: 79.

23 Pangea 2014.

24 HALÁSZ 2015: 143.

The free city of Danzig under the aegis of the League of Nations

As a result of the decision of the Great Powers victorious in World War I, Danzig became an independent city state, safeguarded by a high commissioner appointed by the League of Nations.²⁵ Until 1920, it was the capital of West Prussia (Westpreussen);²⁶ the war, however, substantially changed the situation of the city and its population. During the war, Wilson's 13th point called for the establishment of an independent Polish state,²⁷ which was to have access to the sea. Several arguments were raised for this, primarily ethnic and economic interests. If we study the ethnic aspect first, the official explanation was that more Poles lived in this area than Germans.²⁸ As subsequent research revealed, this argument was slightly faulty, because the Kashubs were also included among the Poles.²⁹ Naturally, the Germans did not accept the data of the census, nor did the Poles, who also had their doubts about the authenticity of the data recording the number of the German population. The other argument was economic, according to which "one of the guarantees of Polish independence is access to the sea, because this way Poland's exports would not be at the mercy of the German port cities".³⁰

However, access to the sea could not be realised without the separation of the German territories and for this reason, West Prussia was divided into four separate parts in 1919.³¹ The eastern part with its centre at Marienwerder was left under the control of Germany, but for administrative purposes, it was integrated into East Prussia. The central part of West Prussia together with the Hel peninsula and the coast became part of Poland; customarily this area was referred to as the Polish Corridor. Finally and most importantly for this study, the Free City of Danzig was created.³² The victorious states found themselves in a very difficult position strategically because they knew that they could not annex it to Poland as 95% of the city's residents were German speaking,³³ at the same time, it could not remain part of Germany because its strategic and economic significance was far too great.

In February 1920, Danzig came under British occupation, indirectly guaranteeing the patronage of the League of Nations over the new state. Poland continued not to recognise the separation of the city and did not give up its claims to it. In this, the

25 LOEW 2003: 98.

26 LOEW 2003: 79.

27 History Learning Site s. a.

28 528,000 Poles against 385,000 Germans (see Pangea 2014).

29 "This group of people has its own identity and derives its language from Pomeranian. Poland does not recognise them as a separate nationality; it was expressly hostile to them during the years of socialism, questioning their loyalty to the socialist state. Around 1920, the German, Polish and Kashubian population were not sharply separated, they mostly lived in mixed neighbourhoods in West Prussia" (Pangea 2014).

30 Pangea 2014.

31 NÉMETH 2013.

32 Pangea 2014.

33 HALÁSZ 2005: 250.

Poles could rely on the French, for whom the strengthening of Poland with a port city was a substantial issue of national security.³⁴ On 15 November 1920, the League of Nations officially recognised the Free City of Danzig as a new European state, and organising the management and administration of the city under the auspices of the organisation began.³⁵

The structure and operation of the city administration

Under the Peace Treaty of Versailles ending World War I, Danzig became an independent entity, and this document provided for its fate and organisation in several clauses. A separate chapter dealt with the fate of the area devoting exactly seven articles to Danzig.³⁶ Under Article 100, Germany renounces its claims and rights arising in relation to the area in favour of the Allied and Associated Powers, as a result of which, based on Article 102, the Allied and Associated Powers declared Danzig to be a free city and placed it under the protection of the League of Nations. Furthermore, with a view to establishing a constitutional framework, according to the provisions of Article 103, this power was granted to the High Commissioner of the League of Nations and the regularly elected representatives of the city. From the viewpoint of our subject matter, of particular relevance is the provision that in the case of any legal dispute arising between the Free City of Danzig and Poland concerning the peace treaty, or any agreements or covenants supplementing it, the High Commissioner shall act in the first instance.³⁷

With regard to the situation and legal standing of the Polish minority, the provisions of Article 104 were of the greatest importance, under which the peace treaty obliged the Polish Government and the Free City of Danzig to enter into an agreement with the participation of the Allied and Associated High Powers. This agreement had to enter into force simultaneously with the establishment of the Free City of Danzig in accordance with the following provisions and objectives: “(1) To effect the inclusion of the Free City of Danzig within the Polish customs frontiers, and to establish a free area in the port; (2) To ensure to Poland without any restriction the free use and service of all waterways, docks, basins, wharves and other works within the territory of the Free City necessary for Polish imports and exports; (3) To ensure to Poland the control and administration of the Vistula and of the whole railway system within the Free City, except such street and other railways as serve primarily the needs of the Free City, and of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communication between Poland and the port of Danzig; (4) To ensure to Poland the right to develop and improve the waterways, docks, basins, wharves, railways and other works and means of communication mentioned in this Article, as well as to lease or purchase through

34 NÉMETH 2003: 328.

35 LOEW 2003: 104.

36 Grotius 2013.

37 Grotius 2013.

appropriate processes such land and other property as may be necessary for these purposes; (5) To provide against any discrimination within the Free City of Danzig to the detriment of citizens of Poland and other persons of Polish origin or speech; (6) To provide that the Polish Government shall undertake the conduct of the foreign relations of the Free City of Danzig, as well as the diplomatic protection of citizens of that city when abroad[...]"³⁸ Finally, the treaty was executed on 9 November 1920 and entered history as the Peace Treaty of Paris. Under the provisions of the Peace Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Paris, the Free City of Danzig became an independent "state" which was, however, restricted in certain rights. The articles reveal that its foreign affairs were handled by Poland, and in addition, Poland was granted control over the railway network and communications and supervision over the port. The Polish post office continued to operate in the city; and the Poles were also responsible for land defence. In 1922, the mandatory customs union was also established between the two states, which provided even more leeway for Poland to "exercise power" over the free city.

The legal standing and everyday life of the local Poles

The territory of the Free City of Danzig included virtually the entire Vistula Delta, except for the right bank of the river Nogat. The total area of this separate entity was 1,966 square kilometres, and it had a population of approximately 366,000 early in the 1920s. Later, this figure reached 400,000. In terms of the ethnic distribution of the population, several different figures are available. According to the German census data earlier referred to, the Polish speaking population made up about 4–5%, while according to other sources, it reached 10%. When the city became an independent international entity, this latter percentage made up about 12,000 people, which increased to 25,000 by the time of the census ten years later.³⁹ According to more recent estimates, the share of the Polish speaking population of Danzig just before World War II was about 12–20%. In addition to the disputed census data, the presence of the Kashubs also complicate the issue. Kashubs were frequently counted with the Poles, even though they are members of a separate West Slavic group of people, who lived in the area of the Vojvodina of Pomerania during the stormy centuries of history. The Kashubs characteristically derived their language from Pomeranian, and have an independent identity.⁴⁰ The problem was caused by the fact that at the time of the establishment of the Free City of Danzig they were not sharply separated from the Poles, they mostly lived in mixed neighbourhoods in West Prussia.

The territory of the Free City of Danzig consisted of Danzig itself, three neighbouring towns, 252 villages and altogether 63 farmsteads or manors. It was

38 HALÁSZ 2015: 144.

39 HALÁSZ 2015: 144.

40 Today, 5,100 people in Poland identify themselves as Kashubs, including Donald Tusk, President of the European Council (see www.nyest.hu/hirek/kik-azok-a-kasubok).

not a negligible factor that because of the Polish institutions established in the city and the Polish influence, Polish had to be used as an official language. So, it can be established that the population of the Polish minority increased during the prosperity of the Free City of Danzig.⁴¹ The legal standing of the Polish minority was governed by the Paris Treaty between Poland and Danzig and Article 4 of Danzig's Constitution.⁴² According to these provisions, although the official language was German, legal and administrative instruments were in place to ensure the free national development of the Polish speaking part of society. This meant the use of the mother tongue in education, local administration and the administration of justice. No Senate dared to alter these provisions until 1939. A major part of the Polish minority was incidentally bilingual, so many of them found employment at the post office or on the railway network.⁴³ However, the issue was not nearly as simple as this, as several groups of different status could be found within the local Polish community, each of which were subject to different regulations. Persons enjoying diplomatic immunity constituted an important part of the local Polish community; their number was not large (moving between 50 to 70 people), their situation and legal standing was regulated by the mother country, that is, Poland. The majority of them joined the diplomatic missions of the Polish state, or the postal services or one of the customs offices, also in Polish hands.⁴⁴ Thanks to diplomatic immunity, this group of the Polish minority was virtually untouchable. The situation was different for Polish civil servants and government officials who, although employed by various local authorities of the Polish state, were subject to local legislation and the jurisdiction of the local authorities. Although this group of Poles did not enjoy diplomatic immunity, they did not regard the Danzig authorities as their superiors, but continued to report to the head of the Polish agency providing work for them. Their number was around 15,000–16,000.⁴⁵ The next Polish group consisted of professionals, merchants and entrepreneurs, about 2,000–3,000 people, who were fully subject to the Danzig jurisdiction. The Polish Government was unable to achieve “extra-territorial” status for them. Finally, we should not forget about the Poles living in the territory of the Free City of Danzig, who could be said to be natives because they had been living in the territory for a long time and taking on the Mazurian–Kashubian dialect. It is difficult to quantify them as they were largely merged with the Kashubian population. They, similarly to the previous group of the Polish minority, were governed by the Peace Treaty of Paris between Poland and Danzig and Article 4 of the Danzig Constitution.⁴⁶

As already mentioned, the number of the Polish population increased between the two World Wars, primarily due to Polish clerks. According to the data of the

41 HALÁSZ 2015: 144.

42 BÖTTCHER 1997: 163.

43 LOEW 2013: 209.

44 HALÁSZ 2015: 146.

45 HALÁSZ 2015: 146–147.

46 HALÁSZ 2015: 146.

1923 census, the total headcount of the population was 366,730, of which 13,656 were of Polish descent. The most important institutions at the time were the Polish Village and the Society of the Friends of Sciences and Arts established in 1922. These two institutions and the Railway Directorate enabled the Polish minority living in a structured manner to obtain work, and to achieve some economic “upswing” through the Polish banks and trading companies.⁴⁷

The High Commissioner, the leader appointed by the main bodies of the League of Nations, played an important role not only in the life of the “city state”, but also in the lives of its minority residents. He was authorised to approve the Constitution of the city state, and to take action in disputes arising between the city and Poland.⁴⁸ It was an established practice that “the Council of the League of Nations mandated the Polish commissioner for Danzig to study the situation of the free city and to submit their report at the forthcoming meeting of the Council.”⁴⁹ As far as the League of Nations was concerned, the appointment of a leader intended to be neutral was understandable as the goal was to create an efficient, smoothly functioning state, which would also take international interests into account. However, the “outsider” official was confronted with difficult tasks. Naturally, the absence of knowledge about local relations, political parties and the “personal” interests of the city could be a major handicap to both the new leadership and the population. The League of Nations subordinated the locally elected People’s Assembly (Volkstag) to the direction of officials of foreign origin (primarily, British, Italians, Swiss and Danes), which resulted in a certain limitation and partial marginalisation of socio-political forces.⁵⁰ Of the High Commissioners appointed to head the city, Sean Lester was the one, who paid greater attention to the Polish population regarding minority issues. At the time of his appointment (1 January 1934), he was rumoured to be highly actively interested in the actual state of minority affairs. “[...] his contributions to the Minority Subcommittee of Committee VI of the Assemblée revealed a decidedly pro-minority orientation. In circles here he is known as a person who conscientiously discharges the tasks entrusted to him or undertaken by him; however, the circumstance that he does not speak German and has absolutely no knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe is going to greatly hamper his mission in Danzig.”⁵¹

Sean Lester had a relatively stable position in the life of the city; prior to the expiry of his usual 3-year mandate, his appointment was extended by an additional year, and in May 1936 the Royal Hungarian Representation next to the League of Nations reported highly positively of the person of the High Commissioner in Geneva: “[...]”

47 LOEW 2013: 194–195.

48 RUHNAU 1988: 125.

49 Hungarian National Archives 1936a.

50 RUHNAU 1988: 127.

51 Hungarian National Archives 1933.

Sean Lester received commendations from the British, the Poles and the French as a faithful guardian of the Constitution of the Free City.”⁵²

At the same time, the fact that the Danzig Government frequently expressed the demand not to have the position of the High Commissioner filled, cannot be neglected. This was submitted to the League of Nations on several occasions, but the attempts failed every time. As an alternative, limitation of the powers of the High Commissioner was raised “[...] so as to enable the smooth operation of the Danzig Government at least in domestic policy. It is also known that it was discussed that the High Commissioner to be appointed should be Polish. Concerning this, Baron Weizsäcker expressed the view that such a solution would not really be desirable as the High Commissioner is called *inter alia* to make neutral decisions also in the Polish aspects of Danzig.”⁵³

As revealed by the above, the Polish minority had to enforce its rights in a rather difficult situation; this was perhaps best formulated by András Hory (at that time, Extraordinary Ambassador and authorised minister) in his Warsaw report of 1936: “[...] There were several incidents in Danzig with detrimental effects on the Polish–Danzig relationship. So, currently the Polish Government has undertaken a role of intermediary between Danzig and the League of Nations on the one hand, and has urged a solution to Danzig problems (in particular the protection of minority) directly affecting Polish interests on the other hand.”⁵⁴

The religious situation of the Polish minority

Sixty percent of the population were Protestants, belonging to the Lutheran Church of the Old Prussian Union. The majority of their pastors remained loyal to the new Nazi regime after 1933, so the parish and its members did not suffer any particular atrocities. Catholics made up forty percent of the population; they established the Bishopric of Oliwa in 1925. The first Bishop in office was Edward O’Rourke, who administered his diocese until the NSDAP party gained power, and once the party gained on muscle, he was forced to resign. His place was taken over by Carl Maria Splett, whose activities are rather controversial. During the war, he was forced by pressure from above to prohibit the use of the Polish language in Church life and in preaching, that is, within his Church. Finally, he collaborated with the Nazis, for which he was condemned after 1945, then in 1956 he was able to emigrate to West Germany.⁵⁵

In 1923, there were roughly 7,500 Jews living in Danzig, of whom 2,500 were Polish citizens. Their headcount tripled since the 19th century. Because of the new arrivals, however, they did not constitute a homogeneous community. Relatively many of them

52 Hungarian National Archives 1936c.

53 Hungarian National Archives 1936a.

54 Hungarian National Archives 1936b.

55 LOEW 2013: 209–210.

were East European refugees, arriving in the city only at the end of the Czarist era, or after World War I, and most of them were not German-speaking. Among them, one could find adherents of assimilation to Poles and Germans as well as Zionists. Consequently, the city served as the venue of many important Jewish congresses between the two world wars, in addition to having a Jewish theatre functioning in Danzig. After 1933, a Jewish Cultural Society was established.⁵⁶

Political relations

The goal of the League of Nations was to establish a peaceful and secure environment, which would not allow another conflict or the outbreak of war. Nevertheless, it enabled every German political party to run for the local elections, respecting the wishes and interests of the population of the new state. Thus, the most influential parties, the German National Party (DNVP), the Social Democrats and the Centre Party, all participated in the elections. The members of the Senate were the representatives elected from amongst their candidates who were responsible for the proper functioning of the executive.⁵⁷ Initially, this system functioned smoothly and it seemed that thanks to international supervision the German and Polish interests could prevail equally (or proportionately). In the 1920s, a Parliament of 120 members was elected, with a coalition of the German national civic parties ruling, frequently in opposition to the party of the Polish minority, the so-called *Mniejszosc polska*. The minority party kept on declining, while the Social Democrats gained on strength in the second half of the 1920s, and the Centre Party joining forces with the Catholics and the Liberals achieved a majority. In the meantime, the local German Social Democrats made several attempts to improve their relationship with the Polish minority; this, however, was prevented by the onset of the world economic crisis and the opposing interests of German citizens.⁵⁸ With the progress of time, every German party wished to accede to Germany under the leadership of the head of the Senate, Heinrich Sahn, but with NSDAP coming into power in 1933, balance of power shifted in the German-speaking city.⁵⁹ Despite the supervision of the League of Nations, the Centre Party shifting to the right and NSDAP won over the followers of the other parties in the name of the politics of unity, eliminating all the other democratically functioning parties and taking over full control of the city. Finally, they managed to have the Nuremberg racial laws adopted in a state which, in principle, was administered by the League of Nations.⁶⁰

Ultimately, only two Polish MPs remained in opposition in the Senate; the Social Democratic Party was gradually dissolved, and finally the Centre Party. The measures

⁵⁶ LOEW 2013: 209.

⁵⁷ Pangea 2014.

⁵⁸ LOEW 2013: 191–194.

⁵⁹ Lemo 2015.

⁶⁰ Pangea 2014.

and decrees of NSDAP drove the Jews out of posts in public administration, leading to the self-liquidation of the local Jewish community; only 1,660 of the 11,000 people remained in the area, the others emigrated in the hope of a better life.⁶¹

Hermann Rauchschnig took over control of the Senate from Heinrich Sahn, who – although close to the Nazi Party – endeavoured to remain relatively independent. Finally in 1934, he decided to resign his position to avoid becoming an NSDAP puppet, and emigrated through Poland. His place was taken over by Arthur Greiser, who as president of both NSDAP and the Senate, enjoyed full territorial control over Danzig. Only Sean Lester, then High Commissioner of Irish origin, tried to support the opposition parties in order not to allow the Nazis to take over the whole city.⁶²

However, these endeavours were unsuccessful, international peace and security was shaken to its very foundation; laws were adopted which subsequently led to ethnic catastrophe. Naturally, the lack of success of administration by the League of Nations cannot be attributed exclusively to the shortcomings of the organisation. In addition to problems and shortcomings of administration, other reasons also had a role in the failure of the League of Nations. One such reason was the intensification of German and Polish clashes in the city, which offered a favourable opportunity for Hitler and Stalin to launch World War II.⁶³

On the eve of World War II, Germany openly demanded the return of the city of Danzig, from which the League of Nations and primarily the Poles fully dissociated themselves and the Polish soldiers still remained in their place. It is well-known that World War II began right here with the siege of the small fortresses of the Westerplatte peninsula which, after the relative calm of two decades, brought total destruction to this proud city. After 1945, the population was almost fully replaced. Most of the Germans fled before the arrival of the Red Army, while those who stayed were in for many trials and violence when the front passed through. The new Polish power insisted on the relocation of the Germans still living there. This took place in 1945–1946. Of the indigenous German residents of the city, only a few hundred managed somehow to verify themselves and remain in the city. They were largely replaced by persons resettled from the Polish territories annexed by the Soviet Union, but many came also from the central Polish Voivodinas. As a result, the pre-World War II residents, whether of Polish or German nationality, therefore represented only a few percent of the total population after 1945. The new social life of the city was dominated largely by Polish middle class and intelligentsia from Vilna (Vilnius) and its vicinity.⁶⁴ The new Poles also had to blend in with the old in a city with a different image. But that is a different story. The point is that the Free City of Danzig as an

61 LOEW 2013: 207.

62 LOEW 2013: 207.

63 NÉMETH 2003: 329.

64 LOEW 2013: 233.

independent state entity disappeared forever. Not only the Polish political parties but also the victorious powers insisted on this because of its symbolic significance.

Table 1: Election results in the Free City of Danzig between 1919 and 1935

	1919	1923	1927	1930	1933	1935
Voter participation rate	70.0%	81.6%	85.4%	89.1%	92.1%	99.5%
Changes in the number of representatives of the respective parties holding a seat in the leadership of the city						
National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP)			0 0.8%	12 16.4%	38 50.0%	43 59.3%
German National People's Party (DNVP)	34 28.2%	34 28.1%	26 20.6%	10 13.6%	4 6.3%	3 4.2%
German Social Party		7 6.2%	1 1.2%			
Various middle class groups	22 18.5%	18 15.3%	22 19.8%	11 16.1%	0 0.5%	0 0.1%
Centre Party	17 13.9%	15 12.8%	18 14.3%	11 15.3%	10 14.6%	10 13.4%
Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	40 33.3%	30 24.1%	42 33.8%	19 25.2%	13 17.7%	12 16.1%
Communist Party of Germany (KPD)		11 9.1%	8 6.4%	7 10.2%	5 6.8%	2 3.4%
Polish minority	7 6.1%	5 4.4%	3 3.1%	2 3.2%	2 3.1%	2 3.5%

Source: LOEW 2013: 203.

Summary and conclusions

International intervention continues to be a sensitive issue to this day, particularly in an area where the minority question is a crucial one. After World War I, when the Free City of Danzig became “part of” Poland, the Poles remained a minority within the city itself, and the issue of minority rights for Poles in Danzig constituted the subject matter of international agreements. The extent to which the League of Nations as the entity responsible for the transitory administration of the territory fulfilled the hopes of the great powers is very difficult to determine. It is even more difficult to say whether the designated agencies of public administration discharged their tasks well, in any case, the administration of the territory functioned through long years. The referendum and World War II prevented the League of Nations from continuing to supervise and administer the region. The Free City of Danzig was one of the first and at the same time the last region in the history of the League of Nations to ever be controlled by it.

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