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# Negotiated Filtration: The Surprising Fate of Poland's Postimperial Civil Servants

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The collapse of the three empires governing divided Poland after the First World War left thousands of imperial civil servants out of work and forced to recalibrate their political affiliations. Those who did not flee with retreating armies faced a rigorous filtration process that screened them for loyalty, stressing their commitment to 'Polishness'. This article argues that despite what has been characterised as a nationalising state, the early years of the Polish Second Republic witnessed a negotiated filtration process, in which functionaries demonstrated their commitment to Poland by appealing to a combination of non-national characteristics, including ties to locale, to professional acumen, and to the civil service in general. Officials who were not ethnically Polish thus succeeded in retaining their positions in the government hierarchy. This surprising outcome of post-imperial vetting suggests that lingering elements of respect for national difference continued to resonate in postwar Poland and that pressure for an ethnically pure nation-state was far from universal.

Perhaps no other country had such numerous and great difficulties in organizing its administration as Poland.<sup>1</sup> (Stanisław Wojciechowski, President of Poland, 1922–6)

At the moment independence was granted, there was an immediate necessity to create a complete administrative apparatus and to appoint several thousand new administrators.<sup>2</sup> (Roman Hausner, office director of Ministry of the Interior)

On the afternoon of 31 October 1918, representatives of the Polish Liquidation Commission seized power from Habsburg military authorities in Cracow, ending over a century of foreign rule in the Polish lands.<sup>3</sup> In a dramatic public ceremony, officials symbolically tore imperial eagles from officers' caps and confiscated their weapons. Elsewhere, crowds stripped royal portraits from the walls of municipal buildings as imperial bureaucrats fled their offices. Similar scenes played out in Warsaw, where young boys in legionnaire caps disarmed German soldiers on the streets and Governor-General Beseler was unceremoniously escorted out of the Belweder Palace. Contemporary observers recalled the scene with unconcealed delight. 'Everyone is feverish', recounted one memoirist. 'The mood is

<sup>1</sup> Stanisław Wojciechowski, *Moje Wspomnienia*, Part II, ed. Jerzy Łazor (Warsaw: Museum Historii Polski, 2017), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Roman Hausner, *Pierwsze dwudziestolecie Administracji spraw wewnętrznych* (Warsaw: Drukarnia Gaz. Adm. I P.P., 1939), 131.

<sup>3</sup> The Polish Liquidation Commission (*Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna*) was established in Cracow on 28 Oct. 1918, and directed to maintain order in the territories of the former Austrian part of partitioned Poland and to manage the district's administration until the central government in Warsaw was ready to take charge. The Commission was dissolved on 26 Mar. 1919. See Marek Przeniosło, *Polska Komisja Likwidacyjna, 1918–19* (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Humanistyczno-Przyrodniczego Jana Kochanowskiego, 2010).

unusually joyful, we are getting rid of the occupier, the partitioning power has accepted defeat.<sup>4</sup> But not all residents of the nascent Polish state experienced the moment of ‘liberation’ with such glee. Polish-speaking members of the Austrian general staff reacted with visible dismay at their loss of stature. Some, like Colonel Murowski, addressed the Commission with tears in his eyes, declaring himself to be ‘both a Pole and an officer’ of the Habsburg army. Drawing his revolver, Murowski swore he ‘had taken an oath not to give up his weapon, and that if anyone tried to take it by force, he would kill them and then shoot himself’. The crisis was only averted when Murowski was presented with a signed copy of the imperial war ministry’s disarmament order, the authenticity of which somehow convinced him that the authority of the emperor still stood.<sup>5</sup>

Colonel Murowski’s distress at ending his years of service to the emperor was but one reflection of the personal and professional upheaval the change of regime wrought among lifelong imperial functionaries of the three imperial regimes that had ruled Polish territory since the late eighteenth century. Amidst collapsing state structures and disbanding grand armies, those who had sworn loyalty to the defeated empires struggled to come to terms with the new order, mourning the loss of status, honor, and prestige. Public servants in successor states across East Central Europe and beyond experienced similar distress as the birth of new polities threatened longtime state employment and political identification.<sup>6</sup> The transition was particularly challenging for government workers who had become minorities in nationalising states, such as the Ukrainians, Russians, Czechs, and Jews who found themselves residents of the Polish Second Republic. For them, the end of imperial diversity and the rise of a unitary nation-state signalled a potentially catastrophic adjustment, one that threatened to displace them from professional positions and deprive them of a stable income.

Just weeks after the dramatic transfer of authority in Cracow and Warsaw, for example, government authorities detained the postmaster of Jarosław in eastern Poland, one Karol Rudeński, and two of his associates. The men were accused of spying for Ukraine, interrogated long into the night, and deposited in the notorious Dąbie internment camp near Cracow.<sup>7</sup> Rudeński and his colleagues joined thousands of other imperial functionaries displaced from administrative posts in the early weeks of Polish independence, accused of terrorism, espionage, or simply disloyalty to Poland. Such cases came as stark reminders of the dramatic inversion of power relations in post-imperial Central Europe, where previously subject populations imposed harsh reprisals on the longtime ruling cohort.<sup>8</sup> Similar purges played out across the region as Hungarian notaries lost their positions in Slovakia and Romania, German-speaking magistrates were sacked in Yugoslavia, and Italians and Czechs were ousted from posts in the new Austrian Republic.<sup>9</sup> Jews came under intense scrutiny, their loyalty to new states challenged at every turn.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Kamińska, *Ścieżkami wspomnień* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1960), 145–46, quoted in Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 233. British diplomat Sir Esmé Howard recorded similar observations during his visit to Warsaw in Feb. 1919. ‘The enthusiasm of a people raised unexpectedly and almost miraculously like Lazarus from the dead ... was such that it carried me, at last, away.’ Howard of Penrith, *Theatre of Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1936), 2: 320, in M. K. Dziewanowski, *Poland in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 85. For more on the transfer of power from the German occupation government in Warsaw, see Jesse Kauffman, *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 191–219.

<sup>5</sup> Zygmunt Lasocki, ‘Z dni przewrotu’, *Zygmunt Lasocki Portfolio*, Polska Akademia Umiejętności [Polish Academy of Sciences], Cracow, sygn. 4105, 19–23.

<sup>6</sup> For more on post First World War government transitions outside Europe, see Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie, Starostwo Grodzkie Krakowskie (National Archive in Cracow, Cracow District Office, hereafter ANKr StGKr) 26 (29/218/26), 1–25.

<sup>8</sup> Teki Zygmunta Lasockiego, Polska Akademia Nauk, sygn. 4105, 22–3.

<sup>9</sup> Rok Stergar, ‘Continuity, Pragmatism, and Ethnolinguistic Nationalism: Public Administration in Slovenia during the Early Years of Yugoslavia’, in Peter Becker, Therese Garstenauer, Veronika Helfert, Karl Megner, Guenther Steiner and Thomas Stockinger, eds., *Hofratsdämmerung? Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2020), 179–91; Gábor Egrý, ‘Negotiating Post-Imperial

The scope of these professional displacements is unsurprising if we conceive of 1918 as a moment of sharp transition, in which administrative systems were transformed from imperial to national priorities. Indeed, the post-Versailles caesura has been compared to the collapse of Nazi Germany and the Revolutions of 1989 as a sort of ‘zero hour’ when entire governmental systems and societies changed almost overnight. East Central Europe saw everything from voting rights to fashion, gender relations to music and painting shift in the postwar-1918 period.<sup>10</sup> The construction of new nation-states and mandates out of whole cloth was one of these disruptions. But if we cease to imagine the end of empire as a complete substitution of one administrative system and set of cultural phenomena with another, and instead focus on continuities between types of regimes, or even adaptations of older practices to accommodate new conditions, a much more complex picture of the postimperial moment emerges. Such a perspective challenges scholarly efforts to proclaim 1918 as a clean break between an era in which Europe’s land empires dominated and a period characterised by self-governing nation-states.<sup>11</sup> Recent work on the construction of the post-Versailles order, the decline of imperial political culture, and the violence that ushered in the successor states does little to explain the non-national or extra-national imaginaries of many who shaped the new political order.<sup>12</sup> The mental recalibration required of government employees after their change of status and the resistance many offered to the vision of ethno-national governance suggests that the embrace of unitary nationalism in the post-Versailles era may not have been as immediate as we have previously understood.<sup>13</sup>

The dramatic loss of status for officers like Colonel Murowski raises questions about how the overall collapse of empire was experienced by those who bore the bulk of its governing responsibility – members of state bureaucracies as well as lower-level imperial employees. As representatives of new national states, government workers became ciphers for the disorientation of regime change. The ways public employees navigated these troubled waters tell us much about the lingering remnants of imperial thinking that survived the rise of the nation-state. Uniquely, the Polish state had to accommodate three separate imperial legacies in shaping its governing structures, the Austrian, German, and Russian, each with a different model of officialdom. The personnel selected to fill bureaucratic

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Transitions: Local Societies and Nationalizing States in East Central Europe’, in Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 15–42. Research on the fate of former imperial employees, laws, and administration has become a veritable cottage industry in recent years. For an overview, see Magdalena Gibiec, Grzegorz Hrycink and Robert Klemtowski, eds., *Rozpad Imperiów: kształtowanie powojennego ładu w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1918–22* (Wrocław: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2020); and Becker et al., eds., *Hofratsdämmerung?*

<sup>10</sup> Florian Kühner-Wielach and Sarah Lemmen, ‘Transformation in East Central Europe: 1918 and 1989: A Comparative Approach’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 23, no. 4 (2016): 573–9.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, ‘Empires after 1919: Old, New, Transformed’, *International Affairs* 1 (2019): 81–100.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). On the contradictions of the Wilsonian moment for nationalists across the African and Asian colonial world, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); on regionalism, see Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), and Jagoda Wierzejska, ‘Toward the Idea of Polishness: Implications of 1918 for the Former Eastern Galicia, 1918–1939’, *Przegląd humanistyczny* 4 (2018): 71–94; on changing understandings of groupness after Versailles, see Eric D. Weitz, ‘From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions’, *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1313–43; Jochen Böhrer writes about post-imperial violence in Central European successor states in *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> On the continuing multi-national attitudes among government employees in Central European successor states, see Gary B. Cohen, ‘The Austrian Bureaucracy at the Nexus of State and Society’, in Franz Adlgasser and Fredrik Lindström, eds., *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond: Bureaucracy and Civil Servants from the Vormärz to the Inter-War Years* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019), 49–65; Judit Pál and Vlad Popovici, ‘Representatives of the Central Authority and County Administration in Transylvania (1867–1925)’, *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 4 (2023): 458–73; and Francesco Magno, ‘Law between Nationalism and Regionalism: The Integration of the Transylvanian Juridical Field in Greater Romania (1918–1927)’, *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 3 (2022): 828–49.

posts and to staff social service and technical positions would become markers of the country's transition from empire to nation-state. Across the lands of the emerging Polish Second Republic former soldiers, county and district administrators (*województwo* and *starostowie*), municipal employees, postal clerks, and railway workers faced a disorienting swirl of changes as empires crashed around them, leaving unclear political subjectivities, uncertain livelihoods, and diminished professional attachments. Tens of thousands of royal functionaries, who had been trained in the imperial metropolises and had collected salaries, benefits, privileges, and prestige (not to mention pensions) from their posts, were forced to choose between joining departing armies and helping build the new Polish infrastructure.

The scope of this professional disruption is understandable given the long embrace of empire in the Polish lands, especially among Poles in Habsburg Galicia.<sup>14</sup> After all, Poles had worked at all levels of the Habsburg civil administration, including serving regularly as ministers of the interior and ministers of religion. They were also employed in lower-level positions during the latter years of the Russian Congress Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> And they served on the citizens committee and the Regency Council that governed Warsaw during Germany's wartime occupation.<sup>16</sup> This legacy of imperial service and the ethos that accompanied membership in a professional cohort of state administrators would be one of the casualties of the transition to successor states. Those who opted to remain in their positions were subjected to a rigorous filtration process that screened for national 'belonging', potential disloyalty, and wartime transgressions before affirming continued employment.

Yet, as I will show, despite these vetting procedures, many of them focused on affirming the 'Polishness' of future staff, the fate of government workers who did not fit the nationalising agenda of the new Polish state was often unpredictable. My research reveals that, despite orders from the central government to purge non-Poles from the country's nascent bureaucracy, after a brief flurry of attacks on 'foreign' personnel, many officials were quietly reappointed. A study of post-imperial functionaries in the Polish Second Republic thus highlights tensions between local and national administrators as the country's leadership worked to stitch the divided state together into a coherent national whole. It emphasises the agency of displaced employees, who sought to write themselves into the civic community of postwar Poland, claiming loyalty to the state – or sometimes to the professional cohort of civil employees, if not to the Polish nation. And it tells the story of Polish nationals serving in far-flung administrative posts of prewar empires who refused to return 'home' to independent Poland, so entrenched had they become in local culture abroad. In short, by focusing on the fate of government workers, I suggest that some members of the nascent Polish administration viewed 'loyalty' in broader terms than ethnic attachment or performance of national affiliation. Beyond the campaign to eliminate suspicious 'foreigners' from public positions lay a Polish polity that, at least for a time, recognised multiple ethnic communities and tolerated a relatively inclusive government apparatus. The homogenising, colonising discourse of interwar public life masked a lingering sense of belonging, based not on titular ethnic identity but on professional ties, local attachments, and other extra-national sentiments.

The Polish Second Republic was not unique in its incremental implementation of a nationalised administration, yet the implications of this negotiated transition have yet to be fully explored. Historians have documented the continued employment of ethnic minorities in German Austria, Romania, and the Slovenian republic of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, where non-national workers were often rehired in lower-ranked positions. But this continuity is generally attributed to short-term personnel shortages and the need for expertise in imperial era legal codes. Over time, most functionaries could retain their positions only by showing evidence of having attended patriotic schools, speaking the national language at home, or being married to a member of the dominant ethnic group. The retention of minority workers was generally deemed a temporary pragmatic solution

<sup>14</sup> Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 58–63; Iryna Vushko, *The Politics of Cultural Retreat: Imperial Bureaucracy in Austrian Galicia, 1772–1867* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), 3–18.

<sup>15</sup> Andrzej Chwałba, *Polacy w służbie Moskali* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1999) [2014].

<sup>16</sup> Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*.

to staffing shortages and not a reflection of the ethos of service in the new regimes. In many cases, such as in the Austrian and Russian Empires, employees from some minority groups had already been ousted during the wartime frenzy over suspected spies and traitors.<sup>17</sup> Everywhere, the expectation was that the new successor states of East Central Europe would ultimately pursue a nationalising agenda at every level of their administrative hierarchies.

Nowhere was the issue of nationalising the state apparatus as fraught as in the case of postwar Poland.<sup>18</sup> Scholarship on the Second Republic has stressed the country's exclusionary tendencies directed at the almost one-third of the population deemed ethnic minorities.<sup>19</sup> This was a government, according to Kathryn Ciancia, that marshalled attitudes of superiority and condescension toward Ukrainian-speakers and Jews alike into a mental map of civilisation that placed Poles at the apex. Non-Polish residents could reside in the new state, she suggests, but not as equal citizens.<sup>20</sup> Such studies dissect the anatomy of discriminatory government policies, tracing the intellectual genesis of exclusionary practices and exposing contemporary perceptions of national groupness.<sup>21</sup> Arguably, these attitudes found their genesis in the increasingly nationalising agenda of the empires governing Polish territory.<sup>22</sup> According to this view, Polish officials were eager to sack Germans and Russians from government positions partly as retribution for Polish treatment in the fallen empires. Even in the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy, where cultural pluralism was valued and Poles managed to climb to the highest imperial posts, a creeping trend away from 'national indifference' manifested in the last decades of the empire.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, despite the nationalising rhetoric employed in Poland's postwar government directives and beneath the façade of official rhetoric, a more complex picture emerges of ethnically mixed, blurred, or layered cultural identification. Not everyone working in government offices or applying for state benefits presented with a clear ethnic attachment, and many who were committed to Ukrainian, Jewish or German causes nonetheless remained supportive of the Polish state in its early years – and continued their employ in the civil administration. Moreover, in Poland as elsewhere, there were good reasons to retain national minorities, at least in lower-level government posts. In what

<sup>17</sup> For Russia, see especially Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens During World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> On states conceived by their dominant élites as predominantly of and for particular nations, yet as 'incomplete' or insufficiently national nation-states, see Rogers Brubaker, 'Nationalizing States in the Old "New Europe" – and the New', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 2 (1996): 411–37.

<sup>19</sup> According to Norman Davies, 'the political stance of the leading circles was unashamedly nationalist' and "'Polishness" became the touchstone of respectability', leaving very little space for the cultural expression of other ethnic groups. *God's Playground. A History of Poland. Volume II: 1795 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 404. Ezra Mendelsohn argues that 'most Polish leaders adhered to the slogan, "Poland for the Poles" ... Non-Poles would have to conform, suffer in silence, and in the end either emigrate or undergo Polonization'. *The Jews of East-Central Europe between the Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 37. And Paul Brykczynski reminds us that by the early 1920s, leaders of all the country's major parties agreed that cabinets should consist exclusively of ethnic Poles. *Primed for Violence: Murder, Antisemitism, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Poland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 131–56.

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> For a more general argument about the nationalist trajectory of politics across Eastern Europe in the period, see John Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> For Russia, see Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*. For Germany, see Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). And for Austria, see Ulrike von Hirschhausen, 'From Imperial Inclusion to National Exclusion: Citizenship in the Habsburg Monarchy and in Austria 1867–1923', *European Review of History – Revue européenne d'histoire* 16, no. 4 (2009): 551–73.

<sup>23</sup> Recent work by Therese Garstenauer and Ulrike von Hirschhausen has shown that the ethnic disaggregation of government workers had already begun before 1918 and was particularly acute during the First World War's food and refugee crises. Therese Garstenauer, 'Multinational Legacies: National Affiliations of Government Employees in Post-Habsburg Austria', in J. Chovanec and O Heilo, eds., *Narrated Empires: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 213–36; and Hirschhausen, 'From Imperial Inclusion to National Exclusion'.

follows, I explore the results of army and police investigations into the suitability of rehiring former state functionaries who were members of ethnic minorities. The cases include former municipal workers, post office employees and railway men, as well as teachers and cashiers in imperial banks, all expelled from their positions because of suspicions of disloyalty. The filtration process was in response to central government directives tasking police and military councils to remove ‘foreigners’ from influential state positions. Suspects were typically arrested, interrogated, and incarcerated in a string of civilian internment camps spread across the country. Yet prisoners and their families were often able to challenge their incarceration in their own voices. Documentary evidence, including appeals from wives, parents, employers, local governors, former neighbours, and the accused themselves, reflects a sense of internees’ commitment to Polish society and the new Polish Republic, often while affirming membership in a minority ethnic group.

These statements are, to some extent, performative. The stakes were high in the adjudication of lustration cases, where a defendant’s future employment hung in the balance, and the accused and his supporters were called upon to employ all manner of arguments to protect his future. The testimonies were designed to convince authorities of an appellant’s loyalty and cannot be taken purely at face value. As John Deak has noted about post-imperial Austrian bureaucrats, ‘questions of citizenship were ... immediately combined with questions of existence. Employment meant payment of salary. Recognition of service meant the payment of pensions.’<sup>24</sup> In short, the strategies used by former public employees to write themselves into the Polish national community were likely driven at least in part by economic considerations and fear of losing their livelihood. At the same time, appeals were not always successful and many were rejected out of hand.<sup>25</sup> So what accounts for the successful attempts to overturn dismissal and arrest? Which tropes were most effective in petitioning for continued employment, and what does this tell us about the political culture of the newly independent Polish state?

### Functionaries as Personification of Empire

The life stories of government functionaries represent a unique opportunity for assessing the arc of post-imperial belonging. Trained to serve as the very embodiment of the empires that employed them, government workers were expected to represent the state itself, rather than the emperor or his family, and to rise above ethnic or confessional bias in their decisions.<sup>26</sup> Their commitment to enlightened imperial rule and the deep sense of identification they shared with the fallen empires helps explain the struggle many faced in adjusting to the new order. Those working in administrative offices at war’s end were part of a system that had been created just as the eighteenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Republic was collapsing and that had been refined in the very empires that had absorbed Polish territory. Embedded in a rigid hierarchical structure, officials served as the meeting point between the state and its subjects. Men with specialised knowledge and formal degrees filled positions that recruited increasingly from non-noble members of the bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup> As the

<sup>24</sup> John Deak, ‘Fashioning the Rest: National Ascription in Austria after the First World War’, in Payk and Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles*, 129.

<sup>25</sup> The records for postwar internment camps located in Warsaw’s Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe [Central Military Archive] indicate that appeals from Ukrainian detainees were often rejected in the short run, yet by 1926 all internees were released from confinement and most returned to their home districts.

<sup>26</sup> This commitment to state rather than nation was likely more prevalent in the multi-national Habsburg Monarchy than it was in the last decades of the German and Russian Empires. Therese Garstenaue, ‘The Life Courses and Careers of Public Employees in Interwar Austria’, in Josef Ehmer and Carola Lentz, eds., *Life Course, Work, and Labour in Global History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2023), 156–7; Peter Urbanitsch, ‘The High Civil Service Corps in the Last Period of the Multi-Ethnic Empire Between National and Imperial Loyalties’, *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 33, no. 2 (2008): 193–213.

<sup>27</sup> Increasingly, especially in the last decades of Habsburg imperial rule, women were also employed in state service, although almost exclusively in lower-level, manual labour and clerical posts, positions that did not require university education. This was largely because of the difficulty women faced in obtaining a *matura* degree and matriculating into legal faculties. A total of 17.5% of civilian government employees in the Austrian Monarchy were women in 1910. See Garstenaue, ‘Life

bureaucracy mushroomed, its members formed a brotherhood of similarly trained personnel committed to a shared ethic of service.<sup>28</sup>

Austrian Emperor Joseph II was passionate about shaping a civil service that stood apart from the royal family, justly enforcing laws without prejudice or avarice. For Joseph, as for his contemporary Frederick II in Prussia, government positions could neither be purchased nor inherited. Rather, service brought its own rewards in the form of modest salaries, regular promotions, a guaranteed pension, and most especially, social respectability. The dramatic expansion of government functions and the rise in the number of public employees in the latter years of the nineteenth century meant that the ethos of state service and professional camaraderie arguably extended to thousands of lowly postal clerks and railway workers by the eve of the empire's collapse. By contrast, Catherine the Great's Russia maintained a system of inherited office holders that was only slowly infiltrated with educated members of the rising middle classes, making it an institution of limited social mobility across the region.<sup>29</sup> The administrative structures employing personnel from the railway men to postal officials, customs agents to village notaries, were therefore well established when power was transferred to Polish rulers in 1918. The ethos of national neutrality had certainly waned by the eve of imperial collapse, with government employees increasingly embracing ethnic difference and particular posts often being reserved for members of a given nationality. But the commitment to serving the imperial *state* remained constant.<sup>30</sup>

Research on the experience of former imperial administrators in new national governments offers insight into the multiple ways national belonging was understood in the postwar world. For example, very few non-German officials were forcibly purged from service in the Austrian Republic. Instead, most retained their positions due to a shortage of qualified personnel.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the governments of Romania and Slovakia were relatively conciliatory, also permitting former functionaries of Magyar descent to linger in their positions at the local level because of personnel shortages.<sup>32</sup> And in post-imperial Czechoslovakia, some competent German staff were permitted to remain in their positions initially to ease the transition to new government priorities.<sup>33</sup> Overall, Aviel Roshwald concludes, it was not unusual for new states in East Central Europe to retain old elites, who often held power by 'latching on to the rhetoric and imagery of nationalism'.<sup>34</sup> Yet studies of state employees who retained their positions for pragmatic reasons or because they were able to 'perform' national

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Courses', 55; Therese Garstenauer, 'The Conduct of Life of Austrian Civilian Government Employees', *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond*, 219; and Waltraud Heindl, 'Einige Streiflichter zur Lage der Frauen im öffentlichen Dienst nach 1918', in Becker et al., eds., *Hofratsdämmerung?*, 45–52.

<sup>28</sup> Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 58–63; Vushko, *The Politics of Cultural Retreat*, 3–18.

<sup>29</sup> Werner E. Mosse, 'Russian Bureaucracy at the End of the Ancien Régime: The Imperial State Council, 1897–1915', *Slavic Review* 39, no. 4 (1980): 616–32.

<sup>30</sup> Pieter M. Judson, 'Introduction', in Pieter M. Judson and Marsha L. Rozenblit, eds., *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 2–4; Garstenauer, 'Unravelling Multinational Legacies', 215–19.

<sup>31</sup> Garstenauer, 'Unravelling Multinational Legacies', 228–29. Rok Stergar contrasts the fates of functionaries in democratic Austria and Slovenia, stressing the impact of cultural versus 'biological' definitions of citizenship on arbitration decisions. Stergar, 'Continuity, Pragmatism, and Ethnolinguistic Nationalism', 189.

<sup>32</sup> Egry, 'Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions', 15–42.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Klečáček, 'Im Dienste des neuen Staates? Beamtenkarriere im Prozess des Aufbaus der tschechoslowakischen Staatsverwaltung 1918–1920', in Becker et al., eds., *Hofratsdämmerung?*, 137–54; Cohen, 'The Austrian Bureaucracy', 64–5. See also the 'patchwork of local transitions' described by Leslie Waters in the Hungarian context, where government workers transferring from former Slovak territory successfully retained their positions based on situational loyalty (including language spoken at home) rather than conceptions of 'race' alone. 'Adjudicating Loyalty: Identity Politics and Civil Administration in the Hungarian-Slovak Borderlands, 1938–1940', *Contemporary European History* 24, no. 3 (2015): 351–74.

<sup>34</sup> Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, the Middle East and Russia, 1914–23* (London: Routledge, 2002), 198–200. On Egyptian filtration of former Ottoman officials of Syrian background, see Jeffrey Culang, 'Ordering the "Land of Paradox"', in Marcus M. Payk and Roberta Pergher, eds., *Beyond Versailles: Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and the Formation of New Polities after the Great War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019), 99–123.

belonging do little to explain the broad acceptance in the Polish Second Republic of functionaries who explicitly embraced non-Polish subjectivities while proclaiming loyalty to the new regime. The remainder of this article considers how the transformation of the Polish civil administration can demonstrate that the slide into national exclusionism was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, as more recent scholarship has shown, post-imperial ethnic hybridity and respect for cultural difference continued through the post-Versailles period in some realms of government practice.<sup>35</sup>

### Out of Post-Imperial Chaos, National Order ... or?

In the early days of November 1918, there was no army, no state police, no gendarmerie, no administration. (Zygmunt Lasocki, head of Polish Liquidation Commission)<sup>36</sup>

Across the new states of East Central Europe, November 1918 brought chaos and a continuation of wartime suffering.<sup>37</sup> Returning soldiers were greeted by food shortages, long bread lines, and a population emaciated from long years of deprivation. German and Austrian armies withdrew from Polish territory, leaving urban gangs to roam the streets.<sup>38</sup> Many government functionaries fled with evacuating armies, fearful of retribution from the desperate local population. Crowds released their pent-up resentment toward Austrian gendarmes, seeking revenge for draconian war requisitions and unpaid military allowances. To gain control over the situation, members of the Polish transition team forcibly removed district administrators (*starostowie*) from across western Galicia (former Austria) and set about sacking police officers who lacked ‘proper’ education or legal training.<sup>39</sup> In their place, a new administrative structure linked to the Warsaw government was established to be staffed with certifiably ‘Polish’ officials.

With the exception of former Habsburg Galicia and some lower-level positions in the Russian-ruled Polish Kingdom, most offices in the new bureaucracy lay vacant after the exodus of imperial administrators. By far the greatest personnel shortage was in the three western districts of the former Prussian Empire, where few native Poles had served and some 4,500 German-speaking officials had retreated with the army, leaving an entire administrative structure to be staffed with personnel possessing unimpeachable ‘Polish’ credentials.<sup>40</sup> This process of ‘polonising’ the state bureaucracy began even before the formal end of hostilities. During the last year of war, the Regency Council, a provisional government appointed by German occupiers to administer formerly Russian-controlled

<sup>35</sup> On the absence of clear national attachment among the population of interwar Poland, see Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe*, esp. 14–15. Patrice Dabrowski also notes that ‘the definition of what it meant to be Polish’ in the early years of independence ‘was not universally agreed upon’. *Poland: The First Thousand Years* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 392. On the fluid identification of many post-imperial residents, see also Dominique Kirchner Reill, *The Fiume Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Zygmunt Lasocki, *Wspomnienia* (Cracow: Nakładem Autora, 1931), 14–18.

<sup>37</sup> On the chaos of the transition, see especially M.B.B. Biskupski, *Independence Day: Myth, Symbol, & the Creation of Modern Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 232–40.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, *Odzyskany śmietnik: Jak radziliśmy sobie z niepodległością w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2022); Andrzej Chwałba, *1919: Pierwszy rok wolności* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo czarne, 1919); and Maciej Górny, *Polska bez cudów. Historia dla dorosłych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2021). Böhler also discusses the rampant paramilitary violence that characterised the postwar years, in *Civil War in Central Europe*.

<sup>39</sup> Adam Próchnik [Henryk Swoboda], *Pierwsze piętnastolecie Polski niepodległej* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1957), 19. Between 1 July and 1 Sept. 1919, some 915 lower police and 26 higher officials were let go from their positions. Wojciechowski, *Moje Wspomnienia*, 125–6.

<sup>40</sup> Janusz Mierzwa, ‘Unifikacja, modernizacja, opresja. Przemiany aparatu administracyjnego II Rzeczypospolitej’, *Zeszyty naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne* 147, no. 4 (2020): 720–21; Janusz Mierzwa, ‘Wkład Galicji w niepodległość Polski’, in Dorota Michaluk, ed., *Drogi do niepodległości narodów Europy Wschodniej, 1914–1921* (Ciechanowiec: Muzeum Rolnictwa im. Ks. Krzysztofa Kluka w Ciechanowcu, 2018), 33. On the exodus of German functionaries from the western provinces, see Richard Blanke, *Orphans of Versailles: The Germans in Western Poland, 1918–1939* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 32–53.



Polish territory until a German ruler could be appointed, had begun placing ethnic Poles in positions formerly held by tsarist officials. They first transferred well-trained bureaucrats from Austrian Galicia to key positions, then turned to members of the provincial elite (including aristocratic landholders and lawyers) who had little formal training or administrative experience. Functionaries trained in Galicia were also relocated *en masse* to former Prussian territory.<sup>41</sup> In Galicia itself, the existing county administrators were left in place if they 'had not disgraced themselves by cooperating with the partitioning powers' or where there was no public pressure to remove them.<sup>42</sup> These options for recruiting local administrators still left thousands of government posts unfilled in the early months of independence.

The new Polish state began life on a war footing and battles over Poland's borders in the early years of independence would complicate the rebuilding of administrative structures, placing added pressure on questions of loyalty and perceptions of national belonging. Even before the peace treaties were signed in Paris, Polish military forces were at war with the West Ukrainian State, the Ukrainian People's Republic, and Czechoslovakia, a set of conflicts that pitted Polish forces against ethnic groups that had long comprised 'inside others' in the historic Polish lands. By February 1919, a full-out military conflict with Bolshevik Russia raged in the east. In this atmosphere of heightened national security concerns, the War Ministry pressured civilian leaders to cleanse the nascent bureaucracy of potentially disloyal foreign influences. The threat of spies and collaborators infiltrating government service intensified Warsaw's attention to questions of loyalty in its staffing decisions. Border conflicts meant that public employees who had once been colleagues were cast into the status of enemy aliens, making their continued presence in government administration inherently threatening. Polish authorities were particularly concerned about Greek Catholic functionaries whom they feared were cooperating with the Ukrainian breakaway republic, Czechoslovak or German nationals during the conflicts over Cieszyn and Silesia, and Russians who might be serving as agents of the Bolshevik state. Lithuanians were presumed saboteurs during the battle for Vilnius, and the odd Hungarian stood accused of plotting terrorist attacks. Everywhere, administrators who appeared 'out of place' for reasons of national affiliation were subject to legal proceedings and potential dismissal.

Anxieties were particularly acute about 'foreign' staffers in low-level government positions such as in post offices and on train lines, where they could influence the conduct of the military affairs. Indeed, a few weeks before the arrest of the three postal clerks in Jarosław, the military wing of the Polish Liquidation Commission circulated a list of some 200 ostensibly pro-Ukrainian public employees suspected of spying for the West Ukrainian state. The document included judicial officers, financial directors, security guards, and even janitors and caretakers of government buildings. But particular attention was paid to railway men and postal employees whom security officers believed were positioned to disrupt the transport of supplies to the front or obtain military secrets through access to telephone and telegraph exchanges. In other words, the very functionaries who had formed the core of the Habsburg communication system were now at the centre of a battle over loyalty to the Polish state.<sup>43</sup>

The consequent roundup of Ukrainian employees helped populate the half dozen civilian internment camps across the country that had been converted from wartime POW facilities. A railway janitor by the name of Tadeusz Horodycki, for example, was presented as a 'known Ukrainian chauvinist' who had donated 1,000 crowns to the Ukrainian war effort and sought to break through the front lines of the Ukrainian occupation zone, presumably to aid the enemy. Horodycki was arrested, dismissed from service, and sent to the internment camp at Wadowice. A similar fate awaited Roman Kryniwicki, who worked as a customs official along the German-Polish border and was 'known as

<sup>41</sup> Hausner, *Pierwsze dwudziestolecie Administracji*, 139, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Mierzwa, 'Unifikacja, modernizacja, opresja', 720–22; 'Wkład Galicji', 31–33.

<sup>43</sup> The list included 43 Ukrainian railway workers, 84 postal employees, 99 security guards, 38 tax authorities, and 27 court officials. Letter from the Military Department of the Polish Liquidation Commission to the police headquarters in Cracow, dated 14 Dec. 1918. ANKr StGKr 25 (29/218/25), 475.

a declared Ukrainian', having circulated false news about military developments.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, former public servants and their families were sent back 'home' to the rump states of Austria, Hungary, Russia and Germany, where they joined the rising numbers of unemployed white-collar workers. Officials were often given only a few days to pack their belongings and vacate their apartments to make room for 'national' administrators competing for housing in Poland's administrative centres. Once back 'home', many expelled government workers were forced to find other jobs or take early retirement to accommodate the swelling ranks of former imperial bureaucrats seeking posts.<sup>45</sup>

As the difficult winter of 1918–19 wore on, the mass arrest of accused disloyal state employees continued, often prompted by anonymous complaints of suspicious behaviour, overheard criticisms of the Polish state, or simply the use of foreign languages in government offices. Hundreds of schoolteachers, train conductors, and gendarmes found themselves incarcerated, many with birthplaces inside Polish territory. Soon, whole categories of government workers were subject to disciplinary action. In January 1919, the Polish Liquidation Commission demanded a complete list of all 'foreign born' residents, both civilian and military, with an eye to expelling them from the country.<sup>46</sup> In February, all Czech railway workers were officially released from service.<sup>47</sup> The following month, the Polish army declared Ukrainian border guards 'hostile to everything that is Polish' and recommended their dismissal.<sup>48</sup>

In some cases, bureaucrats themselves attacked their coworkers, as when Cracow city administrators held a mass meeting to demand the thorough screening of all public employees to root out 'foreign' sympathisers. Attended by officials from the army, the courts, the *Sejm* [parliament], and government ministers, the meeting passed a resolution demanding the *Sejm* investigate the qualification of all civilian workers serving the central government. Attendees were particularly concerned about eliminating 'foreign officials' from the former Austrian lands lest they harm the new state.<sup>49</sup> Soon after the meeting, employees at the Chrzanów post office denounced as 'politically suspect' a Greek Catholic colleague and demanded an immediate review of his ostensible anti-state activities.<sup>50</sup> Cracow's municipal council ordered the 'immediate and careful investigation of all functionaries of Ukrainian, Czech, or Jewish background currently working in Cracow state offices', with an eye to determining if they were 'hostile and unfavourable to the Polish nationality and dangerous to the Polish state' and, if such suspicions were confirmed, 'to intern them immediately'.<sup>51</sup> In response, the mayor proposed the expulsion of *all foreign subjects* from city limits, casting them as 'enemies from the point of view of Poland's well-being'.<sup>52</sup> Local newspapers added fuel to the flames, demanding the immediate internment of all foreign nationals to prevent them from giving away political and military secrets.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Letter from police headquarters in Oświęcim to general headquarters of the army in Cracow, dated 9 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 663.

<sup>45</sup> Therese Garstenauer found that 1,733 government officials and about 4,000 railway workers from the old empire relocated to Austria from other successor states between 1918 and 1921. Not all of them found equivalent work after resettling and many were forced to retire early or find non-government positions. 'Unraveling Multinational Legacies', 229–30.

<sup>46</sup> Memo from Zygmunt Lasocki, head of the Polish Liquidation Commission, to the director of Cracow police, 16 Jan. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 207.

<sup>47</sup> Circular from the director of the state railway in Cracow, 8 Feb. 1919, ANKr StGKr 24, 439–42.

<sup>48</sup> Police in Oświęcim to General Headquarters of the Army in Cracow, 9 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 661–65.

<sup>49</sup> *Czas*, 25 Feb. 1919, report of Sunday, 23 Feb. meeting in Sokol meeting hall, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 93–95.

<sup>50</sup> Case of Mikołaj Kunicki, 28 Feb. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 31–33.

<sup>51</sup> The resulting list of foreign service employees included 42 'functionaries of Ruthenian [Ukrainian] nationality' in the postal service and 39 general 'city functionaries of the Greek Catholic religion', along with 12 functionaries of Czech nationality, including a municipal locksmith, city manager, and railway inspector. Cracow administrative council to chief of police, 3 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 40, 29/218/40, 313.

<sup>52</sup> Cracow mayor to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 22 Apr. 1919, ANKr StGKr 30, 201–9.

<sup>53</sup> 'Szpiedzy czeszy i ukraińscy', *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*, 29 Jan. 1919; 'Szpiedzy Czeszy i Ukraińscy', *Głos Narodu*, 28 Jan. 1919.

### Return and Recalibration of Loyalty

The postwar exodus of imperial functionaries and the arrest of those suspected of foreign ties created a dire shortage of staff in the new state's bureaucracy. Apart from hiring untutored provincial elites, another possibility for filling vacant posts was to call on functionaries who had been evacuated as refugees to the interior of Russia and Austria during the war and who were awaiting permission to repatriate. The return of thousands of low-level government workers, especially railway men, postal clerks, and municipal employees, was essential for staffing the country's heavily damaged infrastructure. But the Warsaw government insisted on extensive screening of all repatriates crossing into Polish territory in order to filter out spies, the politically disloyal, and anyone suffering from contagious diseases. Thousands of railway workers alone were living beyond the borders of Poland at war's end. Most were stuck in the interior of Russia awaiting their 'turn' in the repatriation process.<sup>54</sup> Vetting former imperial railway workers was particularly fraught because of their ethnic heterogeneity and because of concern over their disproportionate influence in times of war and civil unrest. Tension was particularly high during the Silesia uprisings and plebiscite in 1921–2, when suspected German loyalists working in the railway system threatened the country's stability.<sup>55</sup> Of the total of 34,000 railway men of Polish nationality employed before the war, roughly 22,500 or two-thirds had reportedly been evacuated and were living outside the borders of the state when the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was ratified in April 1918. The Polish government was eager to facilitate their return so they could fill positions in the country's heavily damaged rail network, but the process was slow as each applicant had to be cleared of anti-state suspicions or Bolshevik sympathies.<sup>56</sup>

But triage on the eastern border was not the only issue slowing the return of qualified government employees. Authorities were also shocked to discover that large numbers of former imperial officials living in Russia had little interest in returning to Poland. Despite a steady trickle of railway conductors, engineers, guards, and controllers streaming back to Polish territory during the early months of independence, many more railway workers, judges, state engineers, and foresters stationed in Kharkiv, Odessa, Baku and elsewhere across the former empire reportedly had 'little nostalgia or hunger for the homeland'. These longtime Russian state functionaries preferred to remain where they had family ties, business connections, and could send their children to prestigious institutions of higher learning.<sup>57</sup> As *Kurjer Warszawski* explained, many Poles had moved deep into Russia to take up jobs in government service because 'Russia, relative to its huge size and quickly growing administrative and economic needs, did not produce enough intelligentsia', whereas Poland 'had neither an army nor a bureaucracy of its own'. Thus Poland 'gave Russia officers and functionaries by the masses', the exact number of which was not known. Many hundreds of these well-entrenched bureaucrats had opted not to return 'home' to the newborn Polish state, preferring instead to remain where they had longtime ties.<sup>58</sup>

The fate of postwar functionaries also contributed to growing criticism of the state itself. Government officials who remained in Russia blamed the new Polish administration for their difficult circumstances, complaining of the state's unwillingness to replace discontinued imperial salaries after

<sup>54</sup> 'Instructions for the right to return to country', sent to the Regency Council Representative from the Central Office for Re-Emigration in Moscow, 30 July 1918, Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of New Records, hereafter AAN], Przedstawicielstwo Rady Regencyjnej Królestwa Polskiego w Rosji [Representation of the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland in Russia, hereafter PRRKPwR], 02/509/137, 45–51.

<sup>55</sup> File of railway functionary, Kroh, accused of serving the German state police, 15 Sept. 1920, Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe [hereafter CAW] I.371.5/A.100, 60; telegram to Warsaw Ministry of Military Affairs, 8 Jan. 1921, CAW I.371.5/A.100, 24.

<sup>56</sup> 'Z życia kolejarzy', *Echo polskie*, 12 May 1918, nr. 85; 'O powrót do kraju', *Dziennik narody*, 24 May 1918. The former article lists 22,500 railway men in exile within Russia and the latter refers to 80,000 rail workers, perhaps suggesting differences in professional categories or with the latter including estimated numbers for the men's families.

<sup>57</sup> 'Powrót uchodźców z Rosji', *Kurjer Warszawski*, 13 Apr. 1918; 'Reemigracja inteligencji polskiej z Rosji', *Kurjer Warszawski* (25 Mar. 1918).

<sup>58</sup> 'Appeal of a Polish citizen for permission to return to the country, July 1918', AAN PRRKPwR, 02/509/141, 8–9.

the Russian Revolution. Those who opted to return often faulted the nascent government for delays and chaos on the border. Just as disorder and insecurity in wartime Vienna contributed to a decline in popular support for the Austrian emperor, so the dysfunction of postwar Poland eroded allegiance to the Polish state, especially among those who belonged to the privileged cast of prewar officialdom.<sup>59</sup> The very individuals the state depended upon for governance suffered disenchantment with its services after repeated unsuccessful appeals for assistance.

Functionaries who did return from exile struggled along with the rest of the population to make ends meet. Starvation-level food shortages continued through the winter and spring of 1919. The central government offered little assistance, but instead discontinued wartime allotments, closed food kitchens, and provided salaries that lasted barely a week into the month because of rampant inflation.<sup>60</sup> Administrators joined crowds protesting the new government, including in Brzesko, where a mob demanded the new government issue back pay. In Cracow and Tarnów, functionaries appealed unsuccessfully for a reinstatement of imperial war rations.<sup>61</sup> And in Jasło and Biała, local officials demanded the immediate reopening of war kitchens to keep homeless and unemployed former functionaries from complete destitution. As riots broke out across Polish territory, governors feared mass violence if the new state was unable to repay delayed benefits to former imperial employees. Desperation prompted declining trust in local government, according to observers, who described a 'sharp and active opposition to authorities'. County administrators requested the distribution of funds to feed this population and avoid future unrest. 'Particular care is needed for the families of officials', they stressed.<sup>62</sup> As the Polish Liquidation Commission head in Myślenice noted, 'the situation of public functionaries [here] has become nearly hopeless'.<sup>63</sup> If Poland was to gain the favour of its residents, it would need to earn it by providing for civil employees who had once worked for defunct imperial bureaucracies.

### The Empire Fights Back

As a unitary national state at war with most of its neighbours, the central Polish administration in Warsaw sought to staff ministerial, local government, and technical positions with patriotic Polish nationals. It ordered thorough reviews of functionaries across the country, investigating political loyalty, connections to non-Polish organisations, and involvement in 'foreign' military efforts. Investigators interviewed supervisors and coworkers in railway stations, post offices, and municipal buildings, producing meticulous reports that documented the prewar and wartime activities of each staff member, their marital status (focusing on the ethnicity of their spouses and the language they spoke at home), and their religious affiliation. Public employees were asked to sign loyalty oaths to keep their jobs.<sup>64</sup> Based on these reports, dozens of Ukrainian speakers, Czechs, Germans, and Jews were summarily dismissed from government service on suspicion of harbouring anti-state attitudes.

<sup>59</sup> On the 'fatherless society' and the decline of imperial authority in war-time Vienna, see Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. 258–99.

<sup>60</sup> The so-called 'war kitchen' programme that had supported thousands of hungry war invalids, widows and orphans shut down with the withdrawal of imperial troops and thousands of residents faced starvation without the supplement. Letter from mayor of Cracow to the Polish Liquidation Commission, Department of Public Health, 13 Dec. 1918; telegram from Tarnów mayor, Social Welfare Committee in Lwów, ANKr, 29/207/8, 97. On the use of public kitchens by lower-level state functionaries during the war, see Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse*, 109.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from mayor of Cracow to the Polish Liquidation Commission, Department of Public Health, 13 Dec. 1918; telegram from Tarnów mayor, Social Welfare Committee in Lwów, ANKr, 29/207/8, 97.

<sup>62</sup> Starostwo in Jasło to Department of Health and Social Welfare in Cracow, 27 Feb. 1919; Starostwo in Biała to Department of Social Care in Lwów, 11 Mar. 1919, ANKr Komisja Rządząca Wydział Opieki Społecznej w Lwowie, 29/207/8, 39, 51–52.

<sup>63</sup> PKL Commissioner in Myślenice to PKL Department of Social Welfare in Cracow, 9 Jan. 1919, ANKr Komisja Rządząca Wydział Opieki Społecznej w Lwowie, 29/207/8, 117–18.

<sup>64</sup> Janusz Mierzwa, *Starostowie Polski międzywojennej* (Cracow: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze 'Historia Iagellonica', 2018), 362.

For many, this meant long stays in civilian internment camps. The threat of loss of livelihood or even deportation hung in the balance, making the testimony of internees and the appeals on their behalf all the more urgent.

And so it was that arrested and incarcerated former imperial functionaries fought back. Over time, accused public employees devised strategies for defending their positions without explicitly proclaiming a commitment to the ethnic nation. Especially in southern Poland, where police had been trained under the Habsburg Monarchy's embrace of equality under the law for members of all national groups, suspicions of anti-Polish activity were thoroughly investigated, complete with interviews of the accused, eye-witness reports, and character references. Police reports and internee testimonies contain examples of civic commitment not directly tied to Polishness, but that cleared the respondent from suspicion of disloyalty. Civil functionaries of Ukrainian, Czech, or German background were often released from internment after making their statements; many were reinstated in their previous positions, though often in a slightly different capacity or location. Importantly, government investigators themselves often demonstrated an extra-national commitment to the pursuit of justice and the cultivation of responsible workers, even in cases where the employee in question spoke a first language other than Polish.

To begin with, former government staff often proclaimed a lingering commitment to imperial practices even as they transferred their affiliation to the new regime, an attitude many argued reflected their sense of civic responsibility. Those who had served the fallen regimes protested that they were committed to the *idea* of government service, and that as longtime employees of the former empires they had demonstrated their credentials for continued employment. Experience in public service with its unique ethos was deemed a transferable credential that could survive regime change. Ukrainian railway conductors arrested for anti-state activities made it clear, for example, that they did not see themselves as guilty of 'committing any harm against the Polish state or the Polish people'. Their wives submitted detailed statements on behalf of their interned husbands, noting that the men had served faithfully *in the Austrian railway service*. In the moral universe of these employees, a lifetime of loyal work for the Monarchy demonstrated their professional qualifications.<sup>65</sup> How could they be suspected of anti-state behaviour if they had consistently led their lives in harmony with the requirements of government service?

Such claims of transferrable loyalty were often accompanied by statements of support for the Polish state even while affirming belonging to a minority *nation*. This was the second technique for claiming the right to continued employment in the Polish bureaucracy. The Greek Catholic postal employees arrested in Jarosław, for example, insisted in their depositions that despite their membership in the Uniate rite, they 'would never do anything to harm Poles'. The men were released from internment after a thorough investigation by Habsburg-trained police investigators, who found that 'there was no evidence that they acted to the detriment of the Polish state in their service positions'.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, ten Ukrainian railway conductors who were abducted from their homes in Lwów the night of 14 December 1918 and transported to Dąbie camp declared they were 'not in the least way guilty of committing harm against the Polish state', as evidenced by the fact that several of their sons were serving as volunteers in the Polish army.<sup>67</sup> The surprising element in these deliberations was not the arrest itself, but rather the degree of self-fashioning the internees managed under interrogation. Ukrainian speakers, Czech-speakers, Germans, Jews and Russians consistently embraced their cultural distinctiveness while proclaiming support for the Polish state. Identification with non-Polish or non-Catholic communities did not diminish their avowed sense of belonging to Polish society or commitment to serving the Polish state, nor did it damage their ability to work in a government job. Rather, prewar officials effectively mapped imperial loyalty onto the nation-state as a means of demonstrating their allegiance to the new order. The most surprising result of the

<sup>65</sup> Letters of appeal from wives of Ukrainian internees at Dąbie, 18 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 541–42.

<sup>66</sup> ANKr StGKr 26 (29/218/26), 1–25.

<sup>67</sup> Letter of appeal from Ukrainian railway conductors to the PKL, 18 Dec. 1918, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 503–42.

filtration process was that ethnic minorities were declared qualified to serve in the government's administration and then authorised to resume their positions in the state bureaucracy.

Even in cases where former government employees made no attempt to perform national indifference, but rather embraced their membership in minority national movements, investigators often authorised continued state employment. When the police chief of Oświęcim investigated several Ukrainian railway functionaries accused of smuggling goods along the Polish-German border, he accused them of having 'a hostile disposition to everything that is Polish'. His report references several department heads who accused Ukrainian-speakers and Jewish workers of being politically 'not reliable' based on their smuggling activities (a practice many Polish nationals also engaged in). Yet under interrogation, one of the employees – a Ukrainian-speaking postmaster at the train station – responded to accusations that he was a pro-Russian Ukrainian activist, declaring himself a staunch Ukrainian but assuring the investigator that he would 'do nothing against my [Polish] brothers since this would be committing a sin'. The testimony seemed to have sufficed, and the official kept his position. A second accused Greek Catholic (Ukrainian speaker) proved after a thorough investigation that he had 'conducted himself well', was married to a Polish woman, and was cleared of any suspicion of disloyalty. Intriguingly, official police instructions mandated that the railway station and especially the customs office be staffed with 'trusted people, proven to be of Polish nationality', yet the authorities stopped short of arresting, interning, or dismissing *all* Ukrainians.<sup>68</sup> Some were able to avoid harsh punishments simply by stating their commitment to Polish brotherhood and their belief in the authority of the Polish state without themselves claiming to be ethnically Polish.

Such vigorous proclamations of support for the new Polish state among national minorities may have arisen partially from a commitment to the principles of civil administration that carried over from training under Habsburg rule. Indeed, most former government workers vetted by the new regime had been under the employ of the Habsburg crown with its peculiar ethos of government service. Scholars have demonstrated that the code of ethics uniting imperial employees extended to their private lives, where they were expected to behave morally or risk dismissal.<sup>69</sup> The presumption of high moral standards and dedication to duty seems to have carried the day in many decisions about continued employment in independent Poland.

Government functionaries were frequently able to defend their positions simply because they possessed specialised knowledge or professional competence deemed indispensable to the functioning of the state. As Darren M. O'Byrne has argued, civil employees with expert training have often side-stepped concerns about ideological affinity during regime change, including the transition from the Weimar Republic to Nazi rule.<sup>70</sup> In the Polish case, supervisors referenced the need for professional expertise in justifying the proposed retention of non-Polish employees. When Cracow's police chief ordered the 'immediate and careful investigation' of all functionaries of Ukrainian, Czech and Jewish background employed by the city in spring 1919 to determine if they were 'hostile and unfavourably inclined to the Polish nationality and dangerous to the Polish state', for example, he received a list of twenty-nine Greek Catholic (Ukrainian speaking) city workers and twelve Czechs. Municipal administrators insisted that all the Ukrainians were 'essential in their official positions',

<sup>68</sup> Police director of Oświęcim to general headquarters of the army in Cracow, 9 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 25, 29/218/25, 661–65.

<sup>69</sup> Therese Garstenauer, 'The Conduct of Life of Austrian Civilian Government Employees in the First Republic', in Adlgasser and Lindström, eds., *The Habsburg Civil Service and Beyond*, 213–31.

<sup>70</sup> In the German case, bureaucrats protected their positions by leaning on their expertise without fully embracing the political priorities of the new order. "Self-Coordination" and Its Origins: Civil Servants and Regime Change in 1933 and 1918/19', *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1 (2024): 70–83. A similar compromise between political loyalty and specialised expertise characterised the early years of Soviet rule. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 83–85. And Hungarian-speaking notaries were often kept on in postwar Romania because of their knowledge of local laws and administrative practices. Magno, 'Law between Nationalism and Regionalism'; Pál and Popovici, 'Representatives of the Central Authority and County Administration in Transylvania'.

as were all but three of the Czechs. More broadly, of the over 6,000 functionaries the Polish Ministry of the Interior listed as working in a county or provincial level administrative post across Poland in 1922, a significant minority were not ethnically Polish.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, even during a war with the Ukrainian state and after a brief conflict with Czechoslovakia, Polish investigators could still conclude that functionaries maintained a firm commitment to their professional responsibilities and thereby qualified as loyal to the new regime.

This prioritisation of professional expertise over ethnic affiliation played out at the highest levels of government administration. One former district judge from Halicz in eastern Galicia, detained by Polish gendarmes and interned in the Strzałkowo camp, proudly shared his background as a former justice of the peace and district judge in Hrubieszów, near Lublin, during the short-lived Ukrainian Republic. Władysław Kurczak represented his service as a contribution to civic life in the region, one that allowed him to ‘soften the orders of the military authorities’ and protect the population from the excesses of Ukrainian rule. An unapologetic Ukrainian nationalist, he nonetheless insisted he had ‘never been an enemy and [was] not hostile to the Poles’. For Judge Kurczak, Ukrainian patriotism and Polish civic attachment could exist side-by-side as parallel self-identifications. In this case, despite evidence suggesting he was a ‘Ukrainian radical during Austrian times, belonged to Ukrainian organizations ... and took a lively part in the national rebirth’, camp administrators treated him with leniency. Their benevolence may have stemmed partly from Kurczak’s explicit anti-Austrian activities, including having headed up a ‘ragged band of local peasants’ that disarmed Austrian military authorities and confiscated a half million crowns from the local tax office. Thus, although he admitted to having served in the Ukrainian state administration and helped organise the defence of Lwów, he was not accused of explicit violence against Polish residents and thus was found not to have ‘wronged residents of Polish nationality’. Partly because of his professional credentials, Polish authorities seemed to want to keep Kurczak on side, characterising him as ‘a person who is clever, energetic, and determined’, rather than alienating him and driving him further toward Ukrainian radicalism.<sup>72</sup>

For similar reasons, Russian-identifying railway workers were able to retain their positions even as the Polish government warned of Bolshevik spies and saboteurs after the Polish-Bolshevik War. The Polish national railway commissioner issued a ‘secret’ memo in November 1921, expressing concern about Russian ‘Orthodox enemies’ infiltrating Polish territory and warning officials to beware of ‘foreign elements’ as they filled government posts along the frontier. To discourage the employment of Russian personnel, the Interior Ministry imposed strict citizenship requirements for railway employees. Local supervisors pushed back, complaining of ongoing labour shortages, and evincing little animosity toward their Russian colleagues. In the end, the Warsaw government softened its position on undocumented railway workers, declaring them to have an ‘unclear’ status. Those without papers were threatened with transfer outside the district, but not dismissal. They were asked to demonstrate competence in spoken and written Polish within six months or face removal.<sup>73</sup> The continued employ of Russian nationals is emblematic of the atmosphere of compromise and accommodation within the new Polish administration – or perhaps simply the state’s desperate need to keep the trains running. Either way, a tolerance for non-national workers continued well into the post-imperial transition.

Continued state employment could also be assured by demonstrating ties to a particular locale within the Polish space. For many, the simple desire to return home and take up work they had done before the war was enough to clear them of suspicion. One internee in the Strzałkowo internment camp penned a poignant appeal based on his credentials as a railway guard and his attachment to his native region in northeast Poland. Filimon Dobrolinski, a functionary on the Belarusian railway

<sup>71</sup> Management committee, administrative department to the police director in Cracow, 3 Mar. 1919, ANKr StGKr 40, 29/218/40, 330–87. Nationality is not listed on these government documents, but we know that 164 local and provincial administrators were Greek Catholic [Ukrainian identifying], 62 identified as Orthodox [Russian], and 61 were Jewish. Another 102 were Protestant, which may suggest they were German speakers. Hausner, *Pierwsze dwudziestolecie*, 139.

<sup>72</sup> Władysław Kurczak request for release from internment, Strzałkowo POW Camp, 1 Nov. 1919, CAW I.336.1.10, n.p.

<sup>73</sup> Secret transcript from the Director of Polish Railways, Warsaw, 26 Nov. 1921, AAN MSW [Ministry of Internal Affairs] 1358 (02/09/1358), 224–25.

line, was arrested during the Polish-Russian war and accused of aiding the Bolsheviks. Dobrolinski's defence combines several strategies in his claim for Polish belonging. First, he touts his loyal and consistent service *to the Russian state*, noting that during his many long years on the railway line, he was 'never suspected of anything' nor 'excused from service'. Next, he demonstrates his support for the Polish state, if not the Polish nation, by including in his appeal testimony from the camp commander that speaks to his 'political morality', suggesting that even if he did not identify as a Polish national, he was not inclined to harm the state. Third, his file includes a reference from the supervisor of the railway guards in Brześć, testifying to Dobrolinski's professional competence and hard work. And finally, he concludes his statement by proclaiming that all he wanted was to be permitted to return to his place of birth in the village of Sucharewicz.<sup>74</sup> Here and elsewhere, we see no statement of Polish patriotism nor performance of Polish national subjectivity. Rather, appellants like Dobrolinski held that it was enough to be of high moral standing, to be a responsible worker, to be above political suspicion, and to have a stated attachment to a particular *Heimat* within Poland. These were adequate criteria for state service in Poland during its early years.

Importantly, evaluations from former supervisors and attestations of high moral standing and professional competence were common components of disciplinary hearings and applications for professional advancement in the old empires. In this sense, the use of such strategies and their resonance with administrative superiors in the postwar Polish government suggest that post-imperial East Central Europe continued to rely on lingering extra-national practices. Well into the 1920s, even after the conclusion of multiple border wars, state and society in the Polish Republic could still accommodate minoritised populations in the administrative apparatus, including those serving as frontier guards and in other positions where they came into daily contact with ordinary citizens.

Despite the impact of perustration processes in the early years of the new republic, a distinct pattern of arbitration and challenge to these procedures arose in the halls of Polish governance. Many officials who had been dismissed in the postwar transitional frenzy were able to negotiate their way back into professional life. Successful resistance to lustration cases drew on the ability of terminated workers to demonstrate their dedication to the larger calling of government service, even in cases where they could not or preferred not to claim loyalty to the Polish nation as a cultural attachment. Former officials often reached out rhetorically to their colleagues during interrogations, appealing to a joint concern for the priorities of the state, the shared camaraderie of life in the bureaucracy, or emphasising the skills and expertise they could offer in rebuilding Poland. The values internees shared with their interlocutors meant that they sometimes found a sympathetic ear when pleading their cases and that their 'defences' could resonate enough for them to be reinstated in their jobs, at least temporarily.

To a great extent, the particular tropes dismissed government workers used to defend themselves against expurgation might have found their roots in values they had inherited from long years of government service. Their training, education, patterns of thought and practice helped create a loose cohort of like-thinking functionaries across the socio-economic spectrum, uniting those in lower-level positions with their colleagues in more senior posts. As Francesco Mango has argued for the Romanian case, 'the multi-national empires left a substantial legacy, composed of judicial culture, professional networks, and institutional habits' that continued to resonate long after the collapse of Central European imperia.<sup>75</sup> All of these lingering imperial-era attitudes helped challenge the nationalising agenda of the region's successor states. As wartime expectations of increased welfare benefits pushed successor states to expand government functions, bureaucracies across the region swelled to

<sup>74</sup> This file suffers from significant water damage so the end of Dobrolinski's story is unclear. Filimon Dobrolinski to director of Strzalkowo Camp, 12 Nov. 1919, CAW I.336.1.10, n.p.

<sup>75</sup> Mango argues, following Bourdieu, that the pursuit of professional interests, as well as the 'corporate spirit', often outweighed any sense of nationalism among post-imperial functionaries. Gary Cohen has also made a case for considering imperial functionaries as a 'corporate body' whose training and professional ethos carried over into service in the post-Habsburg successor states. Magno, 'Law between Nationalism and Regionalism', 828–30; Cohen, 'The Austrian Bureaucracy', 54–59.



accommodate new services. Specialists trained under the old empires could hardly be terminated casually in this atmosphere of growing public sector need. Partly for this reason, the legacy of imperial practices continued to resonate, often refracting the nationalising trend that was so pronounced elsewhere in the new states.

Over time, of course, an important new trajectory would emerge, eventually reshaping the Polish national service. After the first few years of independence, non-Polish administrators (those who did not embrace Roman Catholicism or use Polish as their first language) were slowly eased out of leadership positions and forbidden from supervising colleagues of Polish ethnicity. Even staff who proved they were no threat to national security were reduced in rank or forced to relocate away from 'dangerous' borderland areas. Beginning in 1922, the Railway Commission introduced ethnic criteria for staffing regional offices, mandating vacant positions be filled by ethnic Poles and that units staffed by a majority of 'persons of foreign extraction' be led by Poles.<sup>76</sup> This rubric established the genesis of an ethnic hierarchy in state service, one in which power holders from prewar imperial regimes were permanently reduced in rank and authority because of who they were – not their level of professional competence. The power dynamic between ethnic Poles and 'minorities' was slowly being inverted. Such was the fate of the postal employees arrested in Jarosław on Christmas day 1918, all of whom were relocated to western Poland after their release from internment. It was also the outcome of Judge Kurczak's case, in which the Ukrainian lawyer was transplanted from his home in Halicz to his birthplace of Dobromil, some 200 kilometres to the west.<sup>77</sup> And it was the resolution in cases where Russian nationals on the eastern railway who could not document Polish citizenship were moved west, away from the border with Bolshevik Russia. This pattern suggests that many non-Polish state employees who wished to continue service for the Polish government could be retained, though not without a painful vetting period and a humiliating process of demotion and transfer. An important shift had occurred in the power distribution within government administration.

## Conclusions

The transition from empire to nation-state was unsettling for many who lived through it. Recalibrating public loyalties, adjusting to new laws, and working within new administrative structures represented distinct challenges for most residents of postwar Central Europe. For government employees whose entire professional existence was upended, the adjustment was particularly acute. Those who opted to remain in their prewar positions faced a painful lustration process that placed them in the unfamiliar position of appellant rather than adjudicator of the law. Even in the chaotic early years of Polish administration when comparatively liberal regulations permitted many non-Polish nationals to maintain their government jobs, former imperial functionaries underwent rigorous, humiliating and often physically debilitating investigations. They were temporarily removed from their jobs and whisked away in the dark of night to police cells and decrepit prison camps where they often lay neglected for months. Their families suffered a lack of income and the threat of deportation, and those who eventually demonstrated their credentials for serving in the new government were frequently reduced in rank or transferred away from their home communities. This article has argued that the negotiations that unfolded between officials in the central administration, on the one hand, and lower-level functionaries, on the other, over the latter's future brought to light multiple, overlapping understandings of civic belonging left over from imperial situations. Some of these alternative forms of groupness reflected lingering professional attachment or even growing class-based affinities. But even as these overlapping forms of identification evolved in the early years of republican life, it was possible to work within the state bureaucracy enforcing government laws while speaking another language at home or confessing a religion other than the dominant one.

<sup>76</sup> Director of the Railways memo, 26 Nov. 1921, AAN MSW 1358 (02/09/1358), 224.

<sup>77</sup> Report of information division of the Strzalkowo Camp regarding Władysław Kurczak, 29 Nov. 1919, CAW I.336.1.10, n.p.

Much of this would change by the mid-1920s, but that is not to suggest that the hegemony of ethnic Poles in public life was a foregone conclusion. Quite the contrary. In fact, repeated attempts, including by Marshal Józef Piłsudski after his May 1926 coup, to concentrate the bureaucracy in the hands of 'native' Poles faced challenges from local officials who fought to keep their experienced, loyal, locally-based employees in place.<sup>78</sup> Interwar Poland was a state in limbo, one in which the fine outlines of citizenship had yet to be affirmed. National belonging was a learned practice for many public employees and for the wider public alike, one that developed over time and through repeated interactions between the state and private individuals. The filtration of government workers was part of a much larger process of negotiation that helped define the new state and the subjectivity of its citizens. Recognising that both the government bureaucracy and many of its employees existed in a liminal state as living remnants of the fallen empires allows us to understand that newly reborn government structures and those employed in them had to be suffused with new meaning after Versailles. The negotiated filtration process outlined here was one means by which post-imperial belonging was forged. It was not enough that the central organs of power might have preferred an ethnically 'pure' governing apparatus; on the ground and in the offices and train stations across Polish territory, loyalty to the state, professional expertise, and local affiliation bought temporary membership in the broader civic community of Poland. Only time would tell how long it could be maintained.

Exploring the process of post-imperial bureaucratic disaggregation, and its subtle and unexpected turns, shows that the composition of post-Versailles nation-states was less predictable and more variegated than scholarship suggests. The first decade of postwar East Central European polities saw a blending of governing systems that displayed elements of imperial era respect for national difference, a heightened recognition of local loyalties, and an emphasis on professional competence over ethnic exclusion. Even as the vetting of government employees grew harsher by the second half of the interwar period, the memory of competing subjectivities – imperial, national, local, professional, and class – arguably continued to inform interwar thinking. Examining regime change through the lives of former imperial functionaries reminds us that the desire for an ethnically pure nation-state was far from universal. Not all ethnic Poles embraced the loss of imperial era heterogeneity and not all national minorities opposed it. This essay has surveyed some of the non-national reactions to the harsh filtration practices introduced in the early months of Polish independence and has explored the layered sense of belonging many postwar residents of Poland embraced. It reminds us that the rhetoric of government officials in Warsaw and in the pages of xenophobic newspapers did not always reflect the sentiment of lower-level or regional officials, their families, or ordinary residents across the country. If we let government proclamations stand in for the sentiment of entire societies, we risk losing sight of the multiple narratives lying beneath hegemonic discourses without acknowledging the voices of dissent beyond the state.

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<sup>78</sup> Mierszwa, 'Unifikacja, modernizacja, opresja', 721–25.