

Demographic situation in Poland in 1918-1939

The demographic situation in Poland in the period discussed was a consequence of the influence of the following factors:

- 1) demographic and socio-economic situation of Poland as it was under partitions;
- 2) demographic losses caused by the First World War
- 3) modernization of Poland launched after gaining of independence (year 1918)
- 4) key social issues of the Second Polish Republic

In the previous part of the report diversity and the pace of modernization was addressed in the three united parts of Poland, influenced by different models of society and involved in the modernization process of the state in a drastically different way (Okólski 2004). The demographic situation of Poland can be best analyzed according to the paradigm of the demographic transition, a concept which is “binding” in demography and sociology (Okólski 1990, Holzer 1999).

The modernization starting in the 19th century (basically in the Western Europe) resulted in a specific for it pattern of population change called the demographic transition, which, in the end, was not completed in the inter-war Poland (even in the Polish People’s Republic). The theory presents change of demographic processes from a dynamic perspective, namely as gradual transition from the traditional pattern of reproduction, to the modern pattern of reproduction. Demographic change is closely linked to modernization, progress, emancipation and economic development of a given society.

At the beginnning of the 20th century in all regions of Poland traditional reproduction of population prevailed. Demographers emphasize that the so called traditional pattern of population reproduction, called also “wasteful”, is characterized by an incredibly high level of fertility and mortality (including infants and children).

Therefore, such phenomena are analyzed in this paradigm as deaths, life expectancy, births, fertility, natural increase. Reproduction behaviour of people is determined by a broadly understood natural environment. Physiologically high fertility was an answer to mass mortality caused by plagues, famine, wars and natural disasters (see table 1,2).

Table 1. Vital statistics for Poland in 1909-1911 and 1931-1935 by voivodeship (province) per 1000 inhabitants

YEAR, VOIVODSHIP	MARRIAGES	BIRTHS	DEATHS	INFANT DEATHS	NATURAL INCREASE
1909-1911					
Central	7,4	38,8	21,7	-	17,1
Eastern	7,3	38,3	23,0	-	15,3
Western	6,8	37,9	18,6	-	19,3
Southern	7,6	39,0	24,8	-	14,2
1931-1935					
Central	8,2	26,8	14,0	128,0	12,8
Eastern	8,5	30,2	14,4	118,0	15,8
Western	8,5	25,8	13,4	148,0	12,4
Southern	8,5	28,0	16,3	157,0	15,7

Source: Small Statistical Yearbook 1938, Warsaw

In Poland in the middle of the 19th century life expectancy amounted to about 29 years; at the end of the 19th century: 41,7 years for men and about 45 years for women; and in 1927 about 52 years¹. Dramatic social, economic and political consequences of partitions had repercussions in the Second Republic of Poland. Modernization in Wielkopolska (western part of Poland, Prussian partition) resulted in a breakthrough in mortality; in 1850-1858 a male infant was to survive on average for about 27 years, and

¹ Life expectancy in Europe in the Middle Ages was about 30 years, and at the beginning of the 20th century only over 50 years. Women entered into marriage at 18 years of age, and they were about 40 when giving birth to their last child. Therefore, the interval between the date of marriage and the birth of the last child was 22 years. This meant that a woman would bear children throughout all of her childbearing age. Total fertility rate (number of live births per woman) was very high and amounted to more than 6.

a female infant for about 28,5 years. The situation improved radically at the end of the 19th century. Life expectancy amounted to, respectively, 41,7 and 44,9 years. This level was higher than the one in the whole Prussia and Austria and almost equal to the one registered in Italy. There was a small distance between Wielkopolska and England, France and Switzerland. In the years 1910/1911 life expectancy for a girl equalled over 59 years, and over 52 years for a boy. Infant mortality rate was also lower in this part of Poland than for example in Galicia or Warsaw (Okólski 2004). As the data in Table 1 demonstrate, in all parts of Poland before the gaining of independence there is a very high birth rate and a high death rate (lower, however, than birth rate) which results in a fast natural increase on the Polish territories. Results of social modernization are reflected already in demographic parameters in the years 1931-1935. However, death rate, and especially infant mortality, is very high, which is a proof of the country's underdevelopment (see table 1 and 2).

Table 2. Vital statistics for Poland in 1921-1937 per 1000 inhabitants

year	marriages	births	deaths	infant deaths	natural increase
1921	11,7	32,8	20,9	-	11,9
1925	8,1	35,2	17,8	-	18,5
1930	9,4	32,5	15,5	142,0	14,2
1937	8,0	24,9	14,0	136,0	10,5

Source: Small Statistical Yearbook 1938, Warsaw

As far as fertility is concerned, on the territory of Poland under Prussian partition at the beginning of the demographic transition (decrease in mortality, high birth rate) higher marital fertility was noted than on other Polish territories. In the first years of the 20th century birth control appeared here first, followed by consequent decrease in fertility. The births per 100 women in the Western part of Poland in 1931-1932 amounted to 9,8, in the Central voivodeship 10,7, in the Eastern 12,4 and 11,0 in the Southern. In Galicia (southern part of Poland, Austrian partition) Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was 6,2. In most countries of Western Europe TFR around the year 1930 equalled

about 60 (60 births per 100 women of procreation age). Information about vital statistics by religious affiliation, including birth rate, can be found in table 3.

Table 3. Vital statistics for Poland in 1937 by religious affiliation per 1000 inhabitants

	marriages	births	deaths	infant deaths	natural increase
Roman Catholic	8,2	25,0	14,0	141,0	11,0
Greek Catholic	8,7	27,7	17,4	168,0	10,3
Orthodox	7,7	27,3	13,7	132,0	13,6
Evangelical	8,8	20,0	14,8	158,0	5,2
Jewish	6,4	19,2	10,5	46,0	8,7

Source: Small Statistical Yearbook 1938, Warsaw

According to the data from the years 1931/1932, total fertility rate in western voivodeships amounted to 3,17, in central voivodeships 3,42, in southern 3,59 and in eastern 4,02. Significant influence on the introduction of birth control had protestant religion (Prussian partition). The highest fertility was among the Greek Catholics, living in the former Lvov voivodeship (4,95).

In independent Poland (for example in 1927) life expectancy unfortunately falls to about 52 years, which is a sign of deterioration of the physical quality of population, ruined by war and poverty. According to the data of the census from 1921 Polish population amounted to 27,2 millions, the majority of which lived in the country (75 percent), and for 66 per cent agriculture was the source of maintenance. As much as 33,1 per cent of population of 10 years of age and above were illiterate; the lowest percentage was observed in western voivodeships (4,2 per cent); in eastern parts of Poland there were as many as 65 per cent of illiterates. Poland was then economically underdeveloped and there was overpopulation in the country. Unemployment was very high and generated huge poverty and, consequently, mass emigration in search for livelihood. Unemployment and poverty were accompanied, as the data demonstrate, by

high birth rate and high infant mortality rate. An answer to the high natural fertility was the emergence of the issue of abortion in the interwar Poland (see report).

Forerunners of the demographic transition in the interwar period meant replacement of the traditional reproduction of population by the so called modern pattern of reproduction. There was a slow, qualitative transformation, from the “wasteful” reproduction, to the “economical” reproduction. Changes affected patterns of fertility and mortality which, in Western Europe (and later in other parts of it) are one-way, continuous and irreversible.

Data about the number of the population of Poland in 1800-1960 is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Population of Poland in 1800-1960

Estimation within the borders from 1.01.1938				Censuses and estimations within current borders		
1800	1850	1900	1939	1945	1950	1960
9,0	13,6	25,6	35,1	23,9	25,0	29,8

Source: Statistical Yearbook 1939 GUS, after: Holzer (1999)

In 1900 on the area of 389,7 thousand square kilometers there were 25,11 million inhabitants; in 1938 34,85 million. After the end of the war (change of borders as a result of the Jalta and Potsdam treaty) on the area of 312,7 thousand square kilometers there were about 24 million inhabitants in 1946 and in 1960 29,8 million.

In the interwar period over 30 per cent of the citizens of the Polish Republic were not Polish. Ukrainians, Belarusians, some Lithuanians in eastern parts, were in minority. Germans inhabited the area of the former Prussian partition, whereas Jews lived in the cities of central and eastern Poland. Some of those minorities polonized and considered themselves locals (Landau, Tomaszewski 1999).

As it was already emphasized in previous reports, one of the most important issues of the Second Polish Republic was the fact, that Poland was an agricultural country – about 70 per cent of its inhabitants lived in the country, which was agriculturally overpopulated. In 1939 agriculture was the source of maintenance for 60 percent of the population, whereas only 27 percent of the population lived in cities. The most numerous social stratum were peasants, constituting, together with their

families, more than a half of the country's population. Agricultural overpopulation was estimated in 1935 at about 2,5 million people, and the number of seasonal workers at about 2 millions. In order to relieve the situation in the country peasants were offered seasonal emigration (which was often illegal, from 50 thousand to 100 thousand per year), to Germany or overseas. According to the data provided by Holzer (1999) in 1919-1938 over 2 million people emigrated from Poland, whereas repatriation amounted to 870,3 thousand. In this number about 1260 thousand left for the European countries, about 810 thousand returned from them. The most intense departures occurred in 1919-1925 and 1926-1930.

Variation in intensity of the demographic transition in the interwar period was influenced by two key factors: 1) diverse level of modernization, inherited from the period of partitions (with clear advantage of western regions over other parts of Poland) and 2) complex cultural diversity (religious, ethnic).

The course of socio-economic and demographic processes is a system of connected vessels. Demographic changes are always an answer to social and economic transformations. Data presented in this report point to poor modernization changes which generate, between others, a huge challenge for social work and activity in the field of development by the state. Work in this field was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, which brought about huge population and socio-economic losses.

References:

Holzer, J.Z. 1999. Demografia [Demography]. PWE. Warsaw

Landau, Z., Tomaszewski, J. 1999. Zarys historii gospodarczej Polski 1918-1939 [Overview of the economic history of Poland 1918-1939]. Książka i Wiedza. Warsaw
Small Statistical Yearbook 1938 GU

Okólski, M. 2004. Demografia zmiany społecznej [Demography of social change]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar. Warsaw

Okólski, M. 1990 (ed.). Teoria przejścia demograficznego [Theory of the demographic transition]. PWE. Warsaw