

**The Impact of Inclusive and Extractive Institutions on Poland's Economy  
and Quality of Life Before and After World War Two: A Virtuous and  
Vicious Journey through Historical and Personal Evidence**



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## **Abstract**

Poland's political and economic institutions differed greatly before and after World War Two. This report examines how its inclusive institutions during the interwar period and its extractive institutions under communism impacted Poland's economy and quality of life. The interwar period perfectly demonstrates how inclusive institutions benefit a nation and its people, while communist Poland thoroughly illustrates how extractive institutions harm a country and its populace. Using both historical evidence and personal accounts by Polish natives, I conclude that Poland was far more successful as an independent nation than under communist rule.

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## Introduction

Poland's political and economic institutions differed greatly before and after the Second World War. Although WWII occurred only two decades after the First World War, the interwar period was the first time in over a century that Poland was an independent state; from 1772 to 1918 Poland had been partitioned and its people lived as subjects of the Emperor-King of Austria, the German Kaiser, and the Russian Tsar.<sup>1</sup> But upon attaining its independence in 1918, the "Second Polish Republic" had no frontiers, no established territory, no government, no constitution, and no international recognition<sup>2</sup>. The country did not experience civil wars or mass violence as in Russia or Germany, but Poland was already on the verge of collapse before it was even a week old. Poland not only needed a renovated infrastructure such as new roads, railways, and bridges, but it required a new stable government and strong democratic leadership to prevent any further partitioning of the country, and to protect its peoples<sup>3</sup>. Fortunately, Poland acquired a constitutional parliament and a primary inclusive leader which delayed the country's collapse until 1939. Following WWI, Poland could have easily fallen apart having a limited political institution, but the country did not collapse due to the impeccable leadership by the Sejm, or Parliament, and, most importantly, by Józef Piłsudski, Poland's Chief-of-State. Their leadership was short-lived, though, and by WWII, Poland had lost its independence once more.

What caused Poland's collapse? Why did Poland's independence last only two decades? The proximate answer is hostile neighbors, but the ultimate answer is how Poland's leaders handled the hostile neighbors. According to Jared Diamond, an evolutionary biologist and historian, various civilizations throughout human history may have collapsed due to five key

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 109.

<sup>2</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 113.

factors – environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbors, friendly trade partners, and response to environmental problems<sup>4</sup>. Of the five factors, hostile neighbors were the main cause of Poland's collapse in 1939, in addition to environmental damage and the country's response to its environmental problems; but Poland's leaders played the most important role in the country's fate. The Second Republic's leaders both prevented its immediate collapse as a newly independent state, and later contributed to its failure. Its government and leaders frequently changed from 1918 to 1935, and so did its values. At the start of its independence Poland's leaders were inclusive, while towards the end of its independence they were extractive. These contrasting values directly relate to Poland's collapse because inclusion benefits a society, while extraction harms a society. Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson, economists and authors of *Why Nations Fail*, define inclusive economic institutions as the following:

Inclusive economic institutions are those that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish. To be inclusive, economic institutions must feature secure private property, an unbiased system of law, and a provision of public services that provides a level playing field in which people can exchange and contract<sup>5</sup>.

Inclusive economic institutions are supported by inclusive political institutions, while extractive economic institutions “are designed to extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society to benefit a different subset.”<sup>6</sup> Extractive leaders exploit their citizens for their own personal monetary gain, while inclusive leaders want to help their peoples.

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<sup>4</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005): 11.

<sup>5</sup> Daron Acemoglu, James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2012): 74-75.

<sup>6</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 76.

Poland had mainly inclusive political and economic institutions during the interwar era but varied by ruling period: the beginning of the Second Republic (1918-1921); the Constitutional Period (1921-1926); the Sanacja Regime (1926-1935); and the inevitable collapse (1935-1939)<sup>7</sup>. After the Great War, Poland had a limited government, but it had a leader. Józef Piłsudski was considered a national hero by the Polish people for his courageous military actions, and for being the “last of Poland’s leaders to defeat the Russians in battle,” referring to his victory during the Polish-Soviet War in 1920.<sup>8</sup> Piłsudski was a socialist who had one aim in life – the freedom of Poland. He devoted his whole life to Polish Independence believing that “if a nation were not free and independent, its energies would be used not for its own benefits but for the benefits of its masters”.<sup>9</sup> Piłsudski was clearly very inclusive, but he was a military leader. His greatest military achievements came from the Revolution of 1905-1906, where he gained the reputation of a fearless patriot; the Great War, during which Poland gained independence under his campaign; and the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, where he ultimately saved Poland from Russia.<sup>10</sup> Impressed by the scale of Russia’s manpower and natural resources, Piłsudski believed that Poland’s main threat came from their eastern neighbor.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Piłsudski focused all his attention on keeping Russia out of Poland and ignored Germany from the west – a fatal mistake. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland marking the beginning of WWII in Europe and the end of Poland’s independence.

Piłsudski was not the only one with power in Poland during the interwar period, though. Although he was appointed Chief of State on November 14, 1918, in March 1921 a new Constitution was inaugurated greatly reducing the powers of the President in fear of one man

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<sup>7</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 115-129.

<sup>8</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 147.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 145.

gaining too much power.<sup>12</sup> The Constitution instilled a parliamentary regime called the Sejm which lasted only seven years. The Sejm had many problems such as bribery, embezzlement, and even the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz – the first president of the Second Republic – only five days after taking office in 1922.<sup>13</sup> These examples illustrate only a few of the Sejm’s corruptions. The Sejm was not entirely fruitless, though. A modern state had to be built quickly once Poland attained independence, and the Sejm helped create an Army, a legal system, an education system, a civil service, parliament and country-wide political parties, a financial system, state industrial and commercial sectors, and a united transport and communications network.<sup>14</sup> Although Piłsudski found the parliamentary leaders incompetent, these were major successes for the Sejm.

Although Poland ultimately lost its independence at the start of the Second World War, its leaders between 1918 and 1939 quickly and successfully rebuilt Poland out of its devastated state from the Great War. Poland’s leaders – the Sejm and Józef Piłsudski – could have exploited the population for their own personal and financial gain, but instead significantly improved Poland’s economy without impairing the quality of life for its citizens. Therefore, Poland’s interwar leaders worked for the people instead of themselves, making its political and economic institutions inclusive. Poland lost its inclusive institutions following Piłsudski’s death, though, when his successors failed to prepare the country for the inevitable WWII, and Poland’s government slowly transitioned into a communist regime.

Following World War Two, Poland’s political and economic institutions were largely extractive due to its shift in government. The Communist party became the only political party legally recognized within Poland due to the Soviet Union’s involvement with Poland during the

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<sup>12</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 123.

war. Because Poland had been previously partitioned between Prussia, Germany, and Russia, the latter two countries still wanted Poland's territory two decades after it received independence. On August 23, 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a public pact of Non-Aggression which not only refrained the two countries from violence between one another during wartime, but also secretly divided Poland along the rivers Narew, Vistula, and San as territorial arrangements for after the war's end.<sup>15</sup> Although Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to help Poland, their main concern involved defeating Germany, which would also stop the spread of Nazism.<sup>16</sup> This ultimately meant allowing the Soviet Union to take complete control over Poland by 1945. As a result, Joseph Stalin implemented communism in his new territory, which would last for the next forty-four years. According to Stalin himself, introducing communism to Poland was "like fitting a cow with a saddle," indicating that the Polish people strongly disagreed with their fate.<sup>17</sup>

Communist Poland was unlike its interwar period; its leaders were no longer inclusive, and instead abused their power. Because the Communist party was the only political party in Poland, it had no political opposition, creating an unequal distribution of power. The party stayed in power by rigging elections, and disposing of anyone who threatened their power. These factors made Poland's political and economic institutions extractive because power belonged to a single political party. While inclusive institutions allow the people to choose their leaders by voting, Poland's government did not allow its citizens to choose their leaders, although the country did have mandatory rigged elections. This corruption directly proves that Poland's political, and therefore economic, institutions were extractive. The Communist party also helped

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<sup>15</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 3.



industrialize Poland, which ultimately improved its economy, but at the expense of the people. Therefore, Poland's leaders following WWII were not as effective as its interwar rulers.

I have chosen to focus the first part of this report on the interwar period of Poland because it perfectly demonstrates how inclusive institutions benefit a nation and its people. Plenty of research has already been done on other significant periods in Polish history, such as World War Two or the Holocaust, and I am not declaring that the interwar period is any more important, but this era – 1918 to 1939 – has less written about it. Therefore, through primary sources, such as the *New York Times*, and secondary sources, such as scholarly articles and books, I conclude that Poland's leaders during the interwar period were very successful in improving Poland's economy and the general quality of life due to its inclusive practices. The second part of this report will focus on Poland under communism following the Second World War. Although Poland's communist history is well-known, it truly illustrates how extractive institutions harm a country and its citizens. Through interviews with my parents, who were both born and lived in Poland during its communist regime, and secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, I also conclude that Poland's leaders following WWII successfully improved Poland's economy due to industrialization, but also worsened the quality of life due to its extractive habits. Therefore, my goal is to compare and contrast how inclusive institutions – during the interwar period – and extractive institutions – during communism – affected Poland's quality of life and economy.

## Prospering Independence: Piłsudski and the Sejm, 1918-1939

After 123 years of foreign control by neighboring countries, Poland finally received independence following the Great War. Although the fighting officially ended on November 11, 1918 and the Regency Council appointed Józef Piłsudski Chief of State, Poland's independence became officially recognized by the Treaty of Versailles in January 1919. President Woodrow Wilson declared Poland an independent state in his Fourteen Points at the Paris Peace Conference:

XIII. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.<sup>18</sup>

The thirteenth point secured some of Poland's frontiers – a major task and achievement for Piłsudski following WWI – and gave Poland complete political and economic independence, which allowed Poland to either prosper or fail depending on its leaders' actions. Fortunately, Piłsudski's "democratic" leadership benefited the devastated country, and Poland quickly advanced economically and politically from its previous state over the next twenty years.

Józef Piłsudski displayed promising leadership even before he received power in 1918. Due to his passion for Polish Independence, Piłsudski led a major uprising against the Russian Empire in 1905, who Piłsudski believed to be Poland's main threat to independence. He and Roman Dmowski, a nationalist, led a massive insurrection in Łódź, a major industrial city in Poland, in June 1905, resulting in 500 deaths and over 1,000 wounded.<sup>19</sup> According to the *New York Times*, "the Polish organizations are not seeking for separation, but want a constitution

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<sup>18</sup> Marvin Perry, Matthew Berg, James Krukones. *Sources of European History Since 1900* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011): 71.

<sup>19</sup> "500 Were Slain in Łódź," *New York Times* 1857-1922, (June 28, 1905): 2.

which would give to Poland an autonomous government.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Piłsudski’s violent attempts were not entirely harmful because he wished to secure Poland’s independence. But in 1907, the Revolution ended in Poland’s defeat, and Poland remained under Russia’s partial control. Piłsudski did not give up, though. He continued to show encouraging leadership during the Great War.

During the war, Piłsudski assembled military legions, and sided with the Central Powers to fight against Russia. Due to Piłsudski’s initial aid, the German and Austrian emperors declared on November 5, 1916 that the Polish Kingdom be restored within conquered territories, but be led by the Regency Council – “the nearest approach to self-government that the Germans had allowed”<sup>21</sup> – before a new King was chosen<sup>22</sup>. Members of the Regency Council included Cardinal Alexander Kakowski, Prince Zdzisław Lubomirski, and large landed-estates owner, Joseph Ostrowski.<sup>23</sup> This indicates that Germany trusted a variety of wealthy and traditional leaders and preferred men of different backgrounds with different ideas. The Regency Council established a Council of State consisting of a premier and twelve ministries including education, finance, military, and social institutions.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the Regency Council helped prepare the government framework for Poland’s independence.

Although Piłsudski fought alongside Austria and Germany, he did not entirely support them: in the summer of 1917, Piłsudski refused his allegiance to Germany and Prussia and was arrested. He was released at the end of the war, and on November 14, 1918, the Regency Council appointed Piłsudski *Naczelnik Państwa*, or Chief of State – a double position of President of the

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<sup>20</sup> “Found Anarchy in Poland,” *New York Times* 1857-1922, (July 3, 1905): 2.

<sup>21</sup> J. Szapiro, “Poland and Piłsudski,” *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 8, no. 4 (July 1929): 379.

<sup>22</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 114.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph C. Gidyński, “Private Property Rights to Dwelling Houses in Post-War Poland,” *The Polish Review* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 21.

<sup>24</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 113.

Republic and Commander-in-Chief of the army.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Józef Piłsudski had the most power in Poland directly following the Great War, but his power would be soon divided by the new Constitution in March 1921.

Piłsudski's power in Poland after WWI divides into three main periods of control: the beginning of the Second Republic (1918-1921); the Constitutional Period (1921-1926); and the Sanacja Regime (1926-1935). For Piłsudski, the most important task following the war was to secure Poland's borders. Many of Poland's frontiers were already secured by the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, but from 1918 to 1921, Piłsudski, being a military man, fought six border wars: Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, western Ukraine, twice in Germany, and most importantly with the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> As Piłsudski pushed eastward, the Soviet Union pushed westward, and the resulting war became known as the Polish-Soviet War of 1920: Piłsudski's last big military accomplishment. Due to Poland's unfortunate position between Germany and Russia, Poland was viewed as the "Red Bridge" – Poland linked Russia to Germany and the other advanced industrial countries in Europe. In order to expand its own industry, Russia needed to conquer Poland and its most productive cities, but Piłsudski stood in the way. By severing communications, the three Soviet armies disintegrated, and Poland won. As a result, the Treaty of Riga was signed on March 18, 1921 dividing land between Poland and the Soviet republics, and finally completed Poland's territorial struggle.<sup>27</sup>

Józef Piłsudski did not have complete power following WWI, though. Due to universal suffrage – achieved in 1918 – elections were held on January 26, 1919 to elect the first *Sejm*, or

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<sup>25</sup> Szapiro, "Poland and Piłsudski," 379.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 118.

Parliament, of the Second Republic.<sup>28</sup> Poland's political scene was very diverse, though, and was balanced between the Right (the National Democracy), the Center (the Polish Peasant Party Piast, the Christian Democracy, and the National Workers' Party), the Left (the Polish Socialist Party, the Polish Peasant Party Liberation), and the national minorities' parties.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the Sejm had many dynamic figures: Ignacy Daszyński, a socialist veteran; Wincenty Witos, a Peasant leader; Father Eugeniusz Okoń, a priest; Wojciech Korfanty, a Christian Democrat; Róża Pomerantz Meltzer, the first woman deputy; and Yitzhak Gruenbaum, a Zionist leader.<sup>30</sup> Afraid that Piłsudski might gain too much power, the Sejm created the new Polish Constitution in March 1921, marking Piłsudski's next period of power until 1926 – the Constitutional Period. The March Constitution “made the President of the Republic a tool of the Legislature and reduced his military functions to those of a titular commander-in-chief debarred from leading the army in time of war.”<sup>31</sup> Piłsudski disliked the idea of less power, though, and therefore did not run for the presidency. He instead endorsed Gabriel Narutowicz's presidency which ended in tragedy. As a result of the assassination, Piłsudski's disappointment in the new Parliament grew; the murder illustrated national hatred incited by the nationalist majority of the Sejm – the Right, Piłsudski's opposition.

Due to Piłsudski's growing disappointment in the Sejm, he initiated a coup d'état on May 12, 1926 against President Stanisław Wojciechowski and Prime Minister Wincenty Witos instilling his own regime: the Sanacja Regime. Piłsudski chose a new president, Ignacy Mościcki, who remained President until September 30, 1939, shortly after Germany's invasion.

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<sup>28</sup> Dieter Nohlen, Philip Stöver, *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Publishers, May 2010): 1491.

<sup>29</sup> Lucien Ellington, *Eastern Europe: An Introduction to the People, Land, and Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005): 25.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 132-133.

<sup>31</sup> Szapiro, “Poland and Piłsudski,” 379.

Piłsudski's coup d'état resulted from five main reasons: the lack of balance between the legislative and the executive; a dominating legislative; a continuous lack of a working majority in the parliament; unstable governments succeeding each other; and a deficient Constitution as far as the definition of the President's power is concerned.<sup>32</sup> Piłsudski stated that "the Sejm unjustly possesses control which the Government should have. The President is not permitted to select even his valet or his maid, much less his ministers."<sup>33</sup> As a result, Piłsudski installed a new regime, the Sanacja – meaning political "health"<sup>34</sup> – which remained in power until his death in 1935. Critics have called the Sanacja regime a dictatorship, but one cannot compare Piłsudski to dictators like Joseph Stalin or Benito Mussolini. "He maintained all the political institutions which were created before his access to power, and he wanted any change in the Constitution of Poland to be made legally and constitutionally."<sup>35</sup> As "dictator," he still could not "force new laws on the parliament" and "could not change the routine of the Prime Minister's Office."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Piłsudski's regime was not a real dictatorship even though he took power by force in 1926 because he did not have absolute control of Poland and shared his power with Ignacy Mościcki.

Poland's Government changed once more following Piłsudski's death in 1935. The Sejm adopted a new constitution in April 1935, which "moved in the direction of intensified authoritarianism" like much of Europe and the world.<sup>37</sup> The April Constitution gave more power to the executive branch of government, and, therefore, gave more power to the President – an

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<sup>32</sup> Szapiro, "Poland and Piłsudski," 376.

<sup>33</sup> Szapiro, "Poland and Piłsudski," 382.

<sup>34</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> Szapiro, "Poland and Piłsudski," 380.

<sup>36</sup> Szapiro, "Poland and Piłsudski," 382.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 126.

authoritarian factor.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Piłsudski had some influence in this decision since he had always wished the President hold the most power. But Piłsudski's successors were not ready for a full-scale war which would inevitably happen due to Poland's geographical position. While Poland quickly attempted to create a state-controlled armaments industry, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a public pact of Non-Aggression – Poland's death warrant.<sup>39</sup> As a result, Poland's successful independent state was about to come to an end.

## Reforms

Perhaps the simplest way to determine how successful Piłsudski's government and the Sejm were in saving Poland from immediate economic and political collapse following the Great War is to review the reforms made by both powers. Poland's major reforms during the interwar period involved agrarian reform and the improvement of working conditions. Agrarian reform includes "land reform or redistribution, and government policies, intended to promote the desired agrarian structure." In 1918, Poland's agricultural population – peasants – constituted 63% of the country's population, and increasing poverty of the peasantry due to overpopulation and underemployment called for agrarian reforms.<sup>40</sup> According to the 1921 census, two-thirds of Poland's land was cultivable, from which 13,479,552 hectares were owned by peasants and the remaining 6,125,826 hectares belonged to large landowners, the state, or the Church; this latter area was the only land which could be redistributed to the peasants.<sup>41</sup> Due to internal conflict between Piłsudski, a socialist, and the Sejm, led by mainly National Democrats, land was

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<sup>38</sup> J.H. Harley, "The New Polish Constitution," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 15, no. 43 (July 1936): 138.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 129.

<sup>40</sup> Sarahelen Thompson, "Agrarian Reform in Eastern Europe Following World War I: Motives and Outcomes," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 75, no. 3 (August, 1993): 840.

<sup>41</sup> Witold Staniewicz, "The Agrarian Problem in Poland between the Two World Wars," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 43, no. 100 (December, 1964): 23.

gradually but peacefully transferred to peasants for almost two decades. Over three million hectares of land were redistributed from the landowners to the peasants without creating tension between the groups, unlike in the USSR, but Poland's population increased by 8 million inhabitants between 1921 and 1939, and the amount redistributed was not enough for the increasing population.<sup>42</sup> The real solution involved moving away from an agricultural industry and moving towards urbanization.

### **The Central Industrial District**

Piłsudski wanted to strength Poland economically, socially, and militarily by industrializing the country. According to Jared Diamond, modernizing a country industrially and ecologically can help a civilization avoid future collapse, as long as its leaders value the future of the nation.<sup>43</sup> For example, two nations may have leaders who value its future, but if one leader values its people and their future, and one leader values only himself or herself, then the first nation would survive and the second nation would inevitably collapse. Of course, environmental awareness is a more recent concern; therefore, leaders prior to WWII were not interested in modernizing countries ecologically. In interwar Poland, Józef Piłsudski clearly valued Poland's citizens and their future because his government developed an economic plan in 1928 which would benefit the national economy, fix the unemployment problem, and prepare Poland in case of future hostility. As a Socialist, Piłsudski's plan, named the Central Industrial District, or COP, called for a "state-owned industry whereby steel foundries, arms works and chemical enterprises were to be set up," in addition to a new port and the extension of the railway system to improve coal and raw material transportation.<sup>44</sup> These innovations, although similar to the USSR, would

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<sup>42</sup> Staniewicz, "The Agrarian Problem in Poland," 26.

<sup>43</sup> Diamond, *Collapse*, 341.

<sup>44</sup> Staniewicz, "The Agrarian Problem in Poland," 27.



initiate urbanization and industrialization in Poland, aiding it later on during wartime. The COP would also be located as far away as possible from Poland's borders to protect it from any German or Soviet Union aggression: in central Poland creating a triangular district between Rzeszów, Kielce, and Lublin.<sup>45</sup> But the plan was put into effect eight years too late because it was a large investment – a fatal mistake. If the plan were put into effect in 1928, Poland would have been better prepared for the Great Depression the following year, and would have been better prepared for WWII. The plan created jobs and an armament industry, but Poland's Minister of Finance – a division of the Sejm – decided to follow a policy of deflation which required cutting back such large investments. Their policy stayed in effect until 1936, when the new Minister of Finance, Kwiatkowski, initiated the COP, but it was already too late to save Poland from the German invasion only three years later.

### Agrarian Policy

The agrarian policy put in place by the Sejm greatly benefited Poland and its peasantry, though, and adhered to the following guidelines: “dividing up the bigger estates, consolidating scattered strips of land, liquidating servitudes, improving the land, supporting the development of peasant farms by granting credit through the banks, pursuing a price of policy advantageous to the peasants, and by re-organizing and extending educational and cultural facilities to raise the cultural level of the peasants and encourage them to modernize their farming methods.”<sup>46</sup> Dividing the large estates created new independent peasant farms and increased the size of small existing farms, while consolidation improved the peasants' economy since farmers would tend to one large piece of land instead of several small patches of land. In order to improve the land and increase productivity, lands subject to flooding were drained, and the agrarian policy also

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<sup>45</sup> Grzegorz Gorzelak, *The Regional Dimension of Transformation in Central Europe* (Routledge, 2012): 39.

<sup>46</sup> Staniewicz, “The Agrarian Problem in Poland,” 27

educated the peasantry to decrease illiteracy because educated peasants “would be able to farm much more profitably.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, the agrarian policy strove to aid peasants and not the landowners, which made Poland’s economic institution very inclusive.

### Work Reform

Piłsudski and the Sejm also improved the working conditions of Poland’s citizens. Because Poland was divided before 1918, each partition followed different work laws in accordance with its respective governing country. Although Russian Poland had the largest industrial areas, it was the worst administered for industry in comparison with German Poland and Austrian Poland. Russian Poland’s bureaucracy “so eagerly suppressed every endeavor of the Polish workpeople to help themselves” and executed safety regulations only in larger factories and mines. They had no system of insurance and “actually forbade the collection of funds for supplying the most necessary services of a public and social nature,” such as fixing roads, water, lighting, buildings, and drainage.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, German Poland and Austrian Poland permitted trade unions and had some system of insurance for workers.<sup>49</sup> The hardest task for Piłsudski and the Sejm following WWI was combining each partition under one set of regulations. But he and the newly created Ministry of Labor succeeded in helping Poland’s workers.

Piłsudski and the Ministry of Labor initiated many work reforms that led to even better working conditions than in the United States prior to WWII. Within a few days after the establishment of the Second Republic, workers in Poland won the eight-hour workday, overtime,

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<sup>47</sup> Staniewicz, “The Agrarian Problem in Poland,” 28.

<sup>48</sup> J.H. Penson, “Labour Conditions in Modern Poland,” *The Slavonic Review* 1, no. 3 (March, 1923): 574.

<sup>49</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 574.

and the forty-six-hour work week – six days of work with Sunday off.<sup>50</sup> Trade unions were legalized, and the State established social insurance with free medical attendance in cases of distress. By 1923, “registered unions had all legal rights, could enter into contracts, could sue and be sued, hold real property, receive legacies, make collective arguments, and so forth.”<sup>51</sup> The Ministry of Labor also helped fix the unemployment crisis and industrial unsettlement after the war in three steps: (1) to bring together offers of employment and applications for employment in each district; (2) to exchange the supply and demands of work in their respective districts with the needs of other districts; (3) the acceptance of applications for employment abroad – the most important step.<sup>52</sup> From 1920 to 1925, a total of 92.2 thousand Polish people migrated to both European and non-European countries in search of work in all industries.<sup>53</sup> This figure increased towards the late 1920s as well. Because many Polish people searched for work abroad, the State offered protection from the exploitation of a distant and comparatively unknown labor market – a very inclusive ideology.<sup>54</sup> Wages were also fixed according to the cost of living. In October 1922, the average cost of living for a family of two adults and two children was 4,109 Polish marks, which is over twenty times what it was in 1920.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, wages were raised in order for Poland’s citizens to survive. The Ministry of Labor clearly wanted to help and protect its citizens. Overall, Piłsudski’s and the Sejm’s reforms in interwar Poland, benefited the national economy and its people.

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<sup>50</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 578.

<sup>51</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 578.

<sup>52</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 578.

<sup>53</sup> Cezary Kukło, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Cecylia Leszczyńska, *History of Poland in Numbers* (Warsaw: ZWS, 2014): 98.

<sup>54</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 578-8.

<sup>55</sup> Penson, “Labour Conditions,” 582.

## Poland in Numbers

Due to limited information regarding additional reforms initiated by Piłsudski and the Sejm in interwar Poland, I will analyze the effects of any reforms through numerical data. In 2014, Warsaw, Poland issued a catalogue displaying key figures about Poland from before 1795 until 2010. All numbers are based on available censuses and sample surveys, but not all data had been collected. Therefore, my conclusions are based on available information subject to certain years depending on the topic at hand. According to the following statistics, Poland experienced a significant improvement in the quality of life and economic growth during the interwar period. An improvement in the quality of life is determined from a decrease in the infant death rate, extended life expectancy, and a decrease in illiteracy. Poland experienced modest economic growth due to improvement in land efficiency and work productivity, the development of road and air transport and decrease in railway transport, a growing foreign trade turnover, and the fact that Poland transitioned from a food importer to a food exporter.<sup>56</sup> As a result, life in Poland improved greatly under the leadership of Piłsudski and the Sejm.

### Improved Quality of Life

I will first analyze how the quality of life in Poland improved. In 1920, the average number of infant deaths per 1000 live births was 187, while it decreased to 142 in 1930.<sup>57</sup> Over the course of a decade, the mortality rate of infants decreased by 24% and, therefore, increased the overall population in Poland. Life expectancy also lengthened. In 1922, the life expectancy of males and females was 47.8 and 50.3, respectively, while in 1931-1932, the life expectancy increased to 48.2 and 51.4, respectively.<sup>58</sup> Although the increase is small, it still shows progress

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<sup>56</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 92.

<sup>58</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 96.

in the quality of life. Illiteracy also dropped by 33% between 1921 and 1931.<sup>59</sup> This decrease in illiteracy resulted from the agrarian policy initiated by the Sejm in 1921. Enhanced medical care also indicates that the quality of life in Poland improved between WWI and WWII. Between 1910 and 1938, the number of doctors available per ten thousand people rose by 79%.<sup>60</sup> During the same period, the number of beds in hospitals available per ten thousand people rose by 114%.<sup>61</sup> Compared to the industrialized countries France and Germany, Poland had a smaller amount of deaths caused by cancer, heart disease, accidents, and suicide in 1936.<sup>62</sup> These statistics regarding medical care show that reforms must have been made to hire more doctors, build more hospitals, and deliver an overall healthier quality of life. The Polish government – either Piłsudski or the Sejm – created reforms to benefit the welfare of the Polish people. Therefore, these reforms helped the citizens of Poland, not strictly those in power.

### Economic Growth

The next set of statistics I will analyze will reveal how reforms contributed to economic growth in interwar Poland. Employment in industry grew between 1930 and 1938, with a small dip in 1933 due to the Great Depression: from 1930 to 1938, the amount of people working in industry increased by about 20%.<sup>63</sup> The unemployment rate also decreased from 16.3% in 1934 to 12.7% in 1938.<sup>64</sup> This data shows that the unemployment rate in Poland decreased due to growing industry; more jobs outside agriculture were available. Although the largest fields of industry in Poland were textile, metal processing, and food, Poland's main exports were hard coal and crude petroleum. "Poland – apart from Czechoslovakia, Germany, and the United

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<sup>59</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 190.

<sup>60</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 173.

<sup>61</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 177-8.

<sup>62</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 182.

<sup>63</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 316.

<sup>64</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 135-6.

Kingdom – was a net exporter of coal. In 1929, net exports constituted 29.7% of the country’s production (in the United Kingdom – 31.7%, in Germany – 15.8%, in Czechoslovakia – 6.7%).”<sup>65</sup> As a major producer of crude petroleum, Poland was also one of Europe’s largest suppliers of natural gas.<sup>66</sup> This data indicates that Polish homes must have used coal for heat and petroleum for gas since the country had an abundance of those resources. On the other hand, production of electricity was not as standardized in Poland as compared to Germany between 1925 and 1938. Germany produced an average of 646% more electricity than Poland during that period – a massive difference.<sup>67</sup> This data shows that although Poland began to industrialize, it still did not compare to Germany, a very industrialized country. Most citizens also most likely did not have electricity in their homes. Perhaps the greatest economic achievement in Poland was its growing GDP per capita in US dollars from 1920 to 1938. During that period, its GDP per capita rose by over 200%.<sup>68</sup> Other countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom also had growing GDPs, but theirs did not skyrocket as Poland’s did. This indicates that Poland’s leaders successfully led the country out of its devastation following WWI. Overall, the statistics show that Poland’s society and its economy did not collapse after the Great War, but its leaders mended its issues through improvements to the quality of life and industrialization of the nation.

## Poland’s Virtuous Circle

Between 1918 and 1939, Poland’s economic and political institutions followed mainly the virtuous circle. According to Acemoglu and Robinson, the virtuous circle supports the *rule of law*: “the principle that laws should not be applied selectively or arbitrarily and that nobody is

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<sup>65</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 327.

<sup>66</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 329.

<sup>67</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 360.

<sup>68</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 553.

above the law.”<sup>69</sup> The rule of law allows for the emergence of pluralist political institutions where many parties share power, and “laws and constraints apply to all of them, lest one party start amassing too much power and ultimately undermine the very foundations of pluralism.”<sup>70</sup> This idea was reflected in Poland’s government during the interwar period due to its many active political parties. Not one individual had the most power, even Piłsudski. The rule of law also “introduced the idea that people should be equal not only before the law but also in the political system.”<sup>71</sup> Piłsudski strongly believed in political equality: men, women, and minorities had the right to vote. He did not care if the people of Poland did not share ethnicities, origins, or religion. He believed in a “multinational nation,” where “ethnic and cultural variety within the nation should be a source of strength and vitality.”<sup>72</sup> As long as the citizens of Poland were loyal to the country, he wanted them to be part of the nation. Therefore, Piłsudski believed in equality, making him an inclusive leader.

According to the virtuous circle, “if the laws applied equally to everybody, then no individual or group, [not even Piłsudski or the Sejm], could rise above the law.”<sup>73</sup> If one party has more power than another, the virtuous circle becomes imbalanced. In relation to interwar Poland, the March Constitution of 1921 reduced the executive branch’s power in fear of Piłsudski gaining too much power. Although the legislature had more power before 1935, it consisted of many political parties in order to induce political equality. As a result, no political party held the most control over Poland. Although some historians may argue that Piłsudski led a dictatorship after 1926, he continued to share power with members of the Sejm and did not force new laws into Poland as a traditional dictator would. For example, his Central Industrial District

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<sup>69</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 305.

<sup>70</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 307.

<sup>71</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 333.

<sup>72</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 138.

<sup>73</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 308.

plan was not enforced until after his death. The plan could have saved Poland during WWII if implemented earlier, but Piłsudski did not force it into effect. Therefore, Piłsudski's government was not a dictatorship – an extractive and vicious circle ideology.

Pluralism, a main component of the virtuous circle, is also displayed during interwar Poland. Pluralism “creates a more open system and allows independent media to flourish, making it easier for groups that have an interest in the continuation of inclusive institutions to become aware and organize against threats to these institutions.”<sup>74</sup> An explosion of creativity occurred within the Second Republic of Poland. The pure sciences, the social sciences, and the arts all excelled in the 1920s and 1930s. Warsaw became a central hub for intellectual circles consisting of mathematicians, economists, anthropologists, linguists, musicians, directors, philosophers, and portrait painters. These individuals survived the 19<sup>th</sup> century partitions, and they were the “vital bridge between the old and the new.”<sup>75</sup> They transmitted their wisdom and knowledge to the younger generations, making them a vital asset to Poland's education. No longer was education censored during the interwar period as it had been under Russian rule. As a result, independent ideas and media flourished freely in Poland, strengthening the virtuous circle. The allowance of uncensored new ideas also supported the process of positive feedback involved with the virtuous circle. The process of positive feedback makes it more likely for inclusive institutions to persist and even expand.<sup>76</sup> If ideas are repressed, a nation's institutions would become extractive, as in the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires – two absolutist regimes. Repression occurs when leaders do not wish to share power and feel threatened by others, including the elite and the people. In relation to Piłsudski, because he would no longer have the most power in government as President after the March Constitution, he simply did not run for

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<sup>74</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 309.

<sup>75</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 153.

<sup>76</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 332.



presidency instead of repressing others. Therefore, Poland's political scene was not in danger of extraction and supported the process of positive feedback. Poland's government followed the virtuous circle until 1939, when poor preparation for war led to the nation's demise. By 1945, Poland no longer had an inclusive government that revolved about the virtuous circle; its new leaders were very extractive, and Poland remained in the vicious circle until the end of communism in 1989.

## **Hitting Home: Poland under Communism following WWII**

“December 12, 1981 was my name day.<sup>77</sup> That night I had a party at my apartment with all my friends, which lasted until about two in the morning. But by that time it was already *godzina policyjna*,<sup>78</sup> or curfew, which we didn't realize because we didn't know that martial law would start that midnight, December 13, 1981. So we had a party, and were, therefore, all awake after midnight that night. At the end of the party, we decided to walk our friend to a taxi nearby, not knowing that martial law had officially begun. Our friend drove off in the taxi, and your father and I walked home. On our walk back, three armed soldiers with a dog stopped us; they told us ‘Good evening, can we see your IDs,’ but we didn't have our IDs. We were just walking back home from a nearby taxi stand; that normally would have been no problem. But the soldiers wanted to take us with them to jail. They asked us who the police man in our area was, and your father told them the name. We then pointed at our window where we lived, explaining that we live in the area. The soldiers continued to ask us questions like who is the landlord, in order to see if we were telling the truth, and again we answered truthfully. They wrote down everything

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<sup>77</sup> In Poland, *imieniny*, or name day, is “the feast day of the saint after whom a person is named” (dictionary.com). Celebrants receive gifts, and celebrate with large gatherings of friends, family, and even coworkers. Until recently, name days were more important than birthdays in Poland.

<sup>78</sup> Literal translation: “time of the police”

and let us go. We went home and still had no idea what had just happened; we didn't understand why the soldiers stopped us. We woke up the next morning, turned on the TV, and there were no Sunday morning cartoons but only President Jaruzelski. He was dressed in his military uniform, and was saying that martial law was in effect. Then we heard some strange noise outside; we looked out the window, and saw military tanks in the streets. It was all very scary.”

As a first generation Polish-American, my parents were born in 1955 and had lived in Poland during its communist period until they escaped to America in 1984. Due to their first-hand experience with communist Poland, I was able to interview my parents about what life was like under such leadership. Because the term “communism” has a negative connotation in the United States, I must clarify that Poland’s situation was nowhere as brutal as other countries under dictatorship or communist rule following WWII. According to Norman Davies, although communist Poland was not favorable, it did not compare to the “gratuitous violence of Afghanistan or El Salvador,” the “wholesale social terror” in Hungary after 1956, or the “systematic purges” in Czechoslovakia after 1968.<sup>79</sup> Although the Polish did not experience such events following WWII, they did live in constant fear of being arrested, or even secretly murdered by the Government. I decided to open this section with a story by my mother Alexandra Bieniarz describing her memory about Poland’s first night under martial law. She and my father remember that night and first day as one of the scariest moments living in Poland before escaping to America in 1984. Neither they nor the Polish people knew where Poland was heading, but they did believe in one thing: Solidarity.

Solidarity, or *Solidarność* in Polish, was an independent self-governing trade union put into effect in August 1980. It functioned as a labor union, social movement, and patriotic

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<sup>79</sup> Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 27.

organization. With about ten million members and led by Lech Wałęsa – Poland’s future President – Solidarity focused on the problems of wages, prices, and work conditions by negotiating with authorities.<sup>80</sup> Because Poland was a communist country, the state controlled everything; it was the only employer. After several strikes took place around Poland due to poor work conditions, Wałęsa negotiated with the authorities and came to an agreement – known as “The Twenty-One Demands” – that would limit state control in the work force in addition to granting basic human rights, thus establishing Solidarity. The organization’s success only lasted one year, though. From 1980 to 1981, Solidarity gave the Polish people a taste of freedom by protecting independent journalism, publishing, and social research.<sup>81</sup> But outside this year of liberty, Poland had neither the freedom of speech nor freedom of the press. According to my mother, “the worst thing for me living under communism was that you couldn’t speak badly out loud about your thoughts on the government, whether you liked the President or not, you could not speak loudly about them. You could not say out loud that America is good, and Russia is bad. If the cops heard you say either of those things, you would go to jail. And that’s what happened to your father’s father in 1982. He was having a beer with a friend at a restaurant, and they were talking loudly about how the Polish government was bad. The police arrested him for one night; he came home the next day. Living under communism was that bad, because you couldn’t speak out loud your feelings about the government.” Solidarity openly opposed the communist government, though. Since it was a legally recognized labor union, members of Solidarity were allowed to publish, distribute, and read books and journals not submitted to state censorship.<sup>82</sup> My father recalls learning about the Katyn Forest massacre<sup>83</sup> during this year of

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<sup>80</sup> Jakub Karpinski, “Poland: Rebuilding Social Life,” *World Affairs* 150, no. 3 (Winter 1987-88): 192.

<sup>81</sup> Karpinski, *Rebuilding Social Life*, 195.

<sup>82</sup> Karpinski, *Rebuilding Social Life*, 194.

freedom – all negative acts by the Soviets had been censored before Solidarity. This freedom of the press ended on December 13, 1981, though, when martial law began.

Martial law, or *stan wojenny* in Polish, resulted from the Communist party's fear of losing power in Poland. Because Solidarity temporarily gave freedom of the press to the Polish people, several negative truths about the Soviet Union were being published. As a result, the Soviet Union was given a very poor image throughout Poland as the Polish people discovered the truth. Therefore, martial law was put into effect to “crush the opposition” – Solidarity.<sup>84</sup> As a result, those in the Solidarity movement were forced into hiding during martial law, and formed an underground leadership of the union; its aim was to restore Solidarity as a legal national organization with the ability to negotiate with authorities as during before December 1981. Lech Wałęsa continued leading the underground Solidarity movement, but he also lived in constant fear. In an interview with Wałęsa in 1983 for the *Harvard International Review*, the Solidarity leader appeared very nervous and cautious about his answers. Multiple instances during the interview he refused to answer a question in fear of saying anything against the Polish government. For example, Wałęsa stated, “Any answer which has a little bit of hatred against our governments or our friends is dangerous. I'm afraid of such articles. Recently, I haven't given any political interviews.”<sup>85</sup> Clearly, the Communist party intimidated all of the Polish people, even the leaders. Those brave enough to speak out against the government “disappeared.” According to my parents, people who posed a threat to the Communist party were called in for “questioning,” but were instead beaten, killed, and buried in the basements of various buildings. My mother recalls the unearthing of bodies and bones in her hometown Opole: “There is an area

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<sup>83</sup> During WWII, the Soviet Union's secret police executed thousands of Polish state officials, intelligentsia, and others that deemed a threat to Joseph Stalin.

<sup>84</sup> Karpinski, *Rebuilding Social Life*, 192.

<sup>85</sup> Lech Wałęsa, Tony Gardner, “An Interview with Lech Wałęsa,” *Harvard International Review* 6, no. 2 (Nov, 1983): 23.

in Opole where movies used to be shown outside, kind of like a drive-in. At some point, the land was dug up for new construction, and a large amount of bodies and bones were found in the ground.” This was a common occurrence in large cities around Poland, showing that under martial law, the Communist party intended to keep a firm grasp on Poland by terrorizing, even killing, the people. Of course, the bones found may have resulted from the Nazi invasion during the 1930s and 1940s, but bodies which would have decayed by the 1980s were also found indicating that some remains were possibly also from the “disappearings.” But martial law officially ended on July 22, 1983, and Poland’s struggle for better living and work conditions continued.

### **Life in Poland: A Family Odyssey, 1955-1984**

In order to fully understand life in Poland under communism, I interviewed my parents about their experiences. My mother Alexandra Bieniarz was born on April 9, 1955 in Opole, Poland, where she lived with her two brothers, one sister, and parents in a 660-square-foot apartment (fig. 1). She shared one small bedroom with her three siblings, while her parents occupied the living room. Although my grandmother and aunt still live at the same address today, it was very difficult for six people to live in that apartment due to its small space. My mother remained in that apartment until she married my father Wojciech Bieniarz in 1976, when she moved in with his immediate family. My father was born on April 7, 1955 in Opole, Poland, where he lived with his brother and parents in a slightly smaller apartment – about 600-square-feet – but this apartment had two bedrooms instead of one meaning that each room was even smaller than my mother’s family’s apartment. Although this may have seemed like an upgrade to my mother’s previous living situation, my father’s apartment housed his parents, his brother, and

his sister-in-law, totaling six people in this smaller apartment. According to the *Poland in Numbers* catalogue previously discussed, the average number of persons living per dwelling in 1960 was 4.1, while by 1978 the average number of persons was 3.7.<sup>86</sup> This initially suggests that my parents lived in slightly worse conditions than the average Polish person during the 1960s and 1970s, but because Opole used to be a German territory, all apartment buildings in

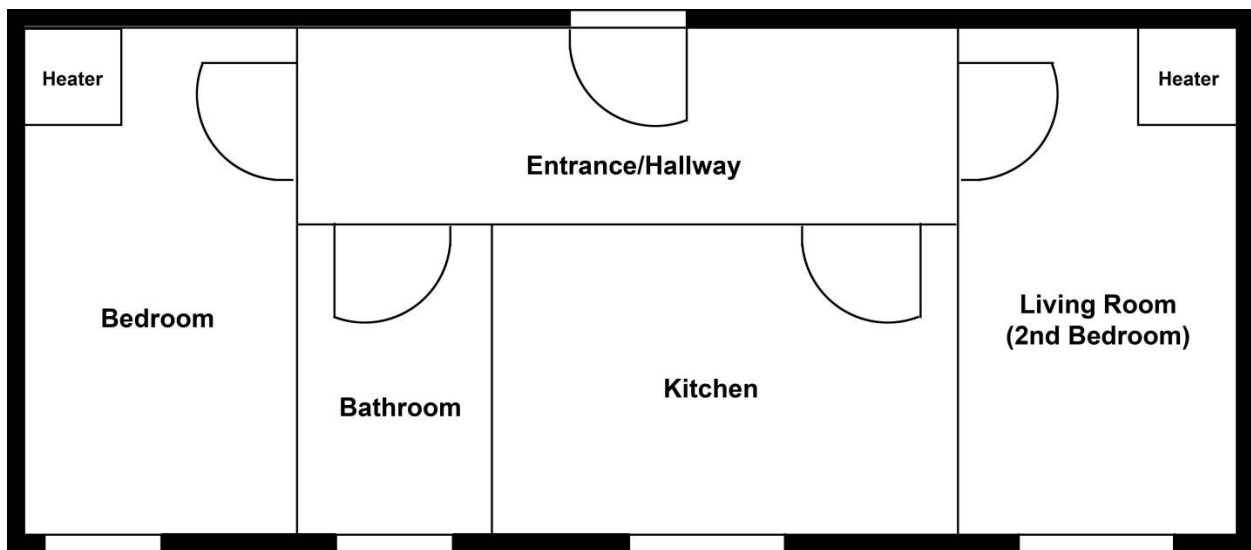


Figure 1: My mother's family's apartment in Opole, Poland, 1955-present (660 square feet, 20 feet x 33 feet)

Opole were more industrialized than buildings that belonged to Prussia or Russia during the Partitions. My parents stated that they had running water because they lived in the city, while in the countryside, citizens depended on well water. Although sinks only ran cold water, my parents would boil it and put the warm water in a basin for immediate use. They also used coal for heating, which continued to be the only heat source into the 1980s. Therefore, my parents lived in a small but sufficient apartment in Poland.

### Censored Education

Both of my parents completed high school in communist Poland, which was heavily censored and controlled. My parents were forced to learn the Russian language starting in middle

<sup>86</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 167.

school until they finished high school, and they were taught false and distorted history. My mother remembers how her teachers lied to her: “We didn’t know for forty or fifty years after the [Second World] war that the Soviet Union attacked Poland. They never taught us that at school. I didn’t find out the truth until I was an adult! I found out in America while watching movies after Communism went down, and I thought ‘What the heck is September 17? I don’t know this date from school.’ I never knew this in Poland, and we left Poland over thirty years after the war ended. Thirty-nine years later we still did not know that the Soviets attacked Poland on September 17. We only knew about Hitler. That’s what Communism was teaching us. They were constantly lying to us.” My father added, “We also learned that thanks to Russia, we won the war.” Of course, it was not only Russia that helped win WWII but all of the Allies. America was specifically shunned by the communist system in Poland, though. According to my parents, the television always broadcasted beautiful images of Russia and its people, but also showed homeless people in New York City. The Communist party tried to make America seem like a terrible, poor, and dirty place, while Russia was the most wonderful place on Earth. As a result, the Soviets attempted to convince the Polish people into not wanting to go to America. Because the Communist party had control over the education system and the media in Poland, they could censor any information they did not want the Polish population to know: anything negative about the Soviet Union. If nothing was censored, the Polish people may have revolted, which the Communist party feared. Therefore, their control on education and the media made them an exclusive political institution – a component of the vicious circle which will be later discussed in detail.

Although education was censored, most professors in universities did not agree with the material they were forced to teach. According to Andrej Wroblewski, a high-energy physicist at

Warsaw University's Institute of Experimental Physics, "In Poland, it was never required that you be in the Party in order to become a professor. There were 54 full professors in the physics department, and only one was a Party member."<sup>87</sup> Clearly, a majority of professors were actually not Communist party members, but were forced to teach material against their will. Perhaps the non-Party professors wished that they could teach their own material and ideas, but of course, this was not allowed until Solidarity. Due to the temporary freedom of speech during Solidarity, scientists "used their computers to make short-range TV broadcasts in their neighborhoods – sending messages like 'Solidarity Is Alive!' to local TV screens."<sup>88</sup> This indicates that professors and scientists strongly opposed censorship, and were eager to voice their own opinions. Therefore, educators did not support censored education, but were forced to teach what the Government wanted.

### **Work in Communist Poland**

After completing high school, my parents were not able to continue their education, and as a result, began working at twenty-one years old. According to my father, the entrance exam for universities required knowledge of a second language, and the only other language my parents knew at the time was Russian, but they were not sufficient enough in it to pass. Therefore, instead of continuing their education in Poland, my parents went to work. My mother worked as a bookkeeper at a pharmaceutical distribution center until she was twenty-nine years old, while my father worked as a buyer for a transportation company until the same age. They worked for eight hours a day, six days a week, and were paid once a month, which made it difficult to save any money. But my parents did receive a lot of vacation days, which for my

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<sup>87</sup> Steven Dickman, "Solidarity Pays Off for the Elites of Polish Science." *Science*, New Series 260, no. 5115 (June 18, 1993): 1747.

<sup>88</sup> Dickman, "Polish Science," 1747.



father was the “only good thing about communism.” Employees would receive a whole month of vacation days per year: twenty-six days plus four Sundays. While two of those weeks could be used for miscellaneous vacation days, the other two weeks could be used towards discounted trips within the Eastern Bloc, including East Germany. My parents took advantage of this opportunity by visiting the mountain resorts Zakopane and Karpacz, in addition to the Baltic Sea and Bulgaria (refer to figure 2 for all locations identified in this report). By offering discounted vacations to the Polish people, the Communist party kept the people not only happy, but united. Citizens living in communist countries were only allowed to visit other countries in the Eastern Bloc, which prevented people from leaving Soviet-influenced territory, and created a strong bond



Figure 2: Map of Poland, present-day

within the populations. Uniting the communist countries helped the Party avoid any threats of rebellion since the people were restricted from leaving. Sick days were another issue, though, because they could not be used towards vacation days. Although medical care was essentially free in Poland – people who worked had a small amount of their paycheck go towards medical care – the care was still very behind and insufficient. My parents recall that if you became ill, you would need to obtain an “L4 paper,” or proof of illness, from a doctor. This suggests that the Communist party did not trust the Polish people, and kept an eye on every individual at all times, no matter how minuscule the detail. As a result, the ruling Party could keep a tight control over the Polish people.

### **Inadequate Consumer Goods**

Consumerism in communist Poland was also very similar to that of East Germany, another Soviet-influenced country. According to a Stasi report analyzing the reasons for attempted escape from the GDR, the following two factors were also relevant in Poland: continuing problems with consistent supply of quality consumer goods, and the possibility of obtaining certain goods only through “connections.”<sup>89</sup> My parents recall how difficult it was to purchase food and other consumer goods like furniture, clothes, and electronics. With each paycheck, my parents received food coupons to buy limited amounts of food per month like bread, sugar, butter, flour, meat, and even alcohol. According to my father, “You would go to the store, and see empty shelves. You could buy some cheese or vinegar, but hardly anything else without these food coupons.” Standing in line for meat was another common occurrence: “Sometimes I would wait for hours for some ham or kielbasa, only to be turned away because the butcher ran out. We would then sometimes go to our parents and ask for food because we no

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<sup>89</sup> Perry, *Sources of European History Since 1900*, 420.

longer had anything.” Clearly, the Polish people experienced a very serious food shortage – one of the reasons many people wished to escape as my parents later did.

In addition to the food shortage in Poland, the country also had limited quality goods like furniture, clothes, and electronics. According to my parents, loans were usually required to buy any furniture because it was difficult to afford such expensive commodities with one payment. There were also no choices available – two or three simple styles – and the same furniture was seen in all stores and homes. Clothing also had very few options, and my parents recall that everyone wore the same style of clothing, such as dull grey pants. Most articles of clothing could be bought in regular stores, but shoes could only be bought with coupons as with food. According to my mother, the material of all clothing was also very poor, and she continues to send socks from America to her brother in Poland today. Electronics were also very difficult to purchase in Poland. My parents had a black and white television until they came to America because most stores did not sell color televisions. Only two programs ran on the television, though: either Russian movies or one American movie on some Saturdays, always a Western. Radios and tape recorders were common, though. My parents also had a washing machine for clothes but no dryer due to limited space in their apartment. Very few people had cars, too. My parents did not own a car because cars were very expensive; if they bought a car, they would not have been able to afford a ticket out of Poland later in 1984. Poland manufactured only three car brands – the Warszawa; the Syrena; and the Polonez, a “luxury” car – which prevented competition with car companies in other countries. As a result, cars were very expensive and very few people could afford to own one.

Similar to the German Intershops, Poland also had a chain of hard currency stores called Pewex. Pewex sold Western goods, and required currency equivalent to the USD called *bony*,

which could be purchased at the Polish bank. My father recalls shopping for jeans at Pewex: “My uncle came to visit from Canada a few times, and he would bring US dollars with him, which could be used at Pewex. Pewex was very expensive, so we could only afford a few things like jeans, which cost about five USD. It was very expensive in złoty, though, since 140 złoty was one USD during the 1980s, and one pair of pants from Pewex cost about one month’s wage. Sometimes if we ran out of coupons for food at the normal Polish stores, we would go to Pewex, too, but only if we were desperate.” Clearly, Pewex was a convenient yet expensive alternative to regular shopping.

### **Connections and Bribes**

In addition to coupons and Pewex, having connections were necessary to obtain certain items in Poland – a common complaint. During my interview with my parents, they described three instances where they used their connections in order to acquire basic necessities. Their first example involves my father and his work experience: “As a buyer for a transportation company, it was my job to buy all types of car parts from suppliers. These suppliers were all across Poland, though, and sometimes I would have to travel for days just to buy a small washer or bolt. When I would call these different suppliers asking if they had the part I needed, they would usually say they either don’t have it, or they maybe have it. This meant that when I arrive for the part, I would have to bring a present, such as chocolates or vodka, as a bribe. That was ridiculous, though, because the part was not for me, but for my company. My job basically required me to bribe other companies.” Although this story does not explicitly involve my father having connections with another individual, it shows how bribery – a very corrupt act – played a vital role in acquiring items or services. More relevant to having connections in order to obtain certain goods is my father’s second story: “I knew a guy who used to work with me at the transportation

company but quit and became a butcher. One time when I was waiting in line for meat at the meat shop, I noticed that the butcher was my old coworker. I waved to him, and when he noticed me, he called me up to the front of the line and gave me his finest ham. I didn't have to wait for hours like everyone else that time." This example demonstrates how having connections with the butcher helped my father avoid "standing in line" for meat – a very tedious task. My mother also gave me an excellent example of how having connections benefited not only her but her friend: "When I was working at the pharmaceutical company, I had a lot of access to all types of medicines. One day your father told me that his coworker's mother had a stomach ulcer and was in desperate need of medication. Normally, going to the doctor for a prescription could take weeks, but they came to me for help. I got her the medication, and a few days later she gave me two oranges as a thank you for helping her. Fresh fruit was not common at the grocery store, so this was a real treat for me." This example not only illustrates how someone used my mother as a connection for medication, but also shows how difficult it was to obtain sufficient medical care immediately. Bribing doctors was very common throughout Poland, as my mother also explained to me, but if someone could not afford to bribe, it was important to have relations who could help you otherwise.

### **Poor Environment**

Industrialization in Poland also significantly affected both the country's environment and the people's health. Opole, Poland housed a major cement factory called *Cementownia Odra*, which not only produced a lot of cement, but pollution as well. My mother explained that, "Once a week, I would have to clean the outside of my apartment's windows because of that factory. The cement the factory made would collect on our windows to the point where we couldn't even see outside. There was so much cement in the air that it made people very sick, too. My grandpa

used to work in that factory, and died when he was only sixty-two from lung cancer. He breathed so much of the cement that he got cancer.” The factory was built in 1951, and clearly did not have efficient air ventilation or environmental codes. This suggests that the Government may not have instilled substantial regulations regarding proper work conditions, and instead profited off the employees without thinking about their health. Mining also greatly impacted the environment. My father’s grandparents lived in Bytom, a small town about 100 kilometers away from Opole, which contained the Hohenzollern Coal Mine. On visits to Bytom, my father remembers how dirty his grandparents’ house became due to the coal mining: “It would take about one week to clean two rooms and a kitchen from the black soot. Everything was covered.” This illustrates how Poland’s heavy industry significantly contaminated the environment; the soot was not only on the outside of buildings, but inside homes as well.

### **Arbitrary Voting Rights**

The last important topic my parents told me about life in communist Poland was the voting experience. According to my parents, voting was 100% mandatory for everyone in Poland over the age of eighteen, both men and women. If you did not go to vote, the police would come to your house and escort you to the polls. But only one political party openly existed in Poland at the time – the Communist party. Therefore, every name on the ballot belonged to the Communist party, and you could only “vote” for those members. The votes also did not matter because the Party members already discussed among themselves who would fill which position. This illustrates a very corrupt political institution because the citizens of Poland could not choose who their leaders were. My father remembers his voting experience: “You would walk into this room with a long table and five communist party members sitting and watching you. They would give you a ballot with a few names from the communist party, but you didn’t choose any one. You

just read the names, nodded, and put the ballot into a box on the table. There was a voting booth, too, but no one was allowed to use it. If you wanted to use the booth, it meant that you wanted to choose a name, which would get you arrested. We were all forced to agree with the current political situation unless you wanted to go to jail. Since it was mandatory to vote, it looked as if 100% of the Polish population voted for the Communist party. It all looked good on paper, but the other countries that were not communist did not know what was really happening. I remember that after every voting day, the television announced that 99% of the population voted to avoid suspicion. Some people could not vote because they were too old or too sick, but it still looked like 99% of people voted for communism.” This perfectly illustrates how corrupt the political situation in Poland was. Citizens were forced to “vote,” but could not actually vote for who they wanted. As a result, those in power stayed in power, which created a vicious circle.

## Poland in Numbers

Previously, I analyzed numerical data from Warsaw, Poland’s *Poland in Numbers* catalogue in order to determine the effectiveness of government reforms during the interwar period. Because the catalogue also contains data pertaining to post-WWII, I will now analyze the effects of the Communist party present in Poland through my findings. Due to a shift towards industrial societies, Poland experienced a change in the sources of income, urbanization, growing consumption, and a strong development of the services sector.<sup>90</sup> These changes directly affected the population’s living and work conditions, both positively and negatively. Although the numerical data may suggest that the quality of life in Poland and its economy improved during communism, the country still experienced corruption in all service sectors, significantly harming

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<sup>90</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 37.

Poland and its people. Therefore, the quality of life and economy in Poland did not improve as quickly under communism as it had under the leadership of Piłsudski and the Sejm.

### Reduced Quality of Life

After analyzing the numerical data available for post-WWII Poland, I will first compare my findings regarding the quality of life in Poland with my interwar period findings. During the interwar period, Poland's quality of life partially improved due to a decrease in the infant death rate, extended life expectancy, and a decrease in illiteracy. These trends continued following WWII. From 1950 to 1990, the number of infant deaths per 1000 live births decreased by 83%,<sup>91</sup> while life expectancy continued to increase: in 1950 the life expectancy of males and females was 58.6 and 64.2, respectively, while in 1990, the life expectancy increased to 66.2 and 75.2, respectively.<sup>92</sup> Illiteracy also dropped to a mere 2.2% by 1970 indicating an increase in the amount of educated persons in Poland.<sup>93</sup> Clearly, these numbers at first glance illustrate that the quality of life improved under communism, but Poland's health statistics state otherwise. Medical personnel – doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and nurses – continued to increase, allowing cheap or free medical care, but the care was very unsatisfactory, and ultimately inefficient, as proven through reviewing the number of deaths by various causes in 1962 and again in 1988. Although the number of deaths caused by tuberculosis and infectious diseases decreased by 79% and 92%, respectively, from 1936 to 1962, the number of deaths caused by cancer, heart disease, and accidents increased by 111%, 25%, and 34%, respectively.<sup>94</sup> It is unclear if industrialization or a polluted environment is to blame, but these figures do suggest that poor medical care and unsafe work conditions may be a factor. The next set of findings certainly supports my claim:

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<sup>91</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 92.

<sup>92</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 96.

<sup>93</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 190.

<sup>94</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 182.



from 1962 to 1988, the number of deaths caused by all these health concerns increased significantly. Diseases of the respiratory system, such as tuberculosis, increased by 131%; neoplasms, such as cancer, increased by 292%; diseases of the circulatory system, such as heart disease, increased by 882%; infectious and parasitic diseases increased by 33%; and injuries and poisonings by external cause increased by 215%.<sup>95</sup> These numbers clearly show that Poland suffered from poor medical care, unsafe work conditions, and unclean living conditions in general. Therefore, one can suggest that the Communist party did not oversee substantial health and work reforms during their rule; they ignored many of the people's needs.

### **Economic Growth**

I will also compare my findings regarding Poland's economy after WWII with my previous interwar period findings. Although employment in industry continued to grow after 1938, the amount of people working in industry surprisingly decreased by about 16% from 1960 to 1989.<sup>96</sup> It is unclear why the amount decreased since international emigration also significantly decreased due to difficulty in leaving Poland under communism. According to *Poland in Numbers*, a total of 78.6 thousand people left Poland in search of work between 1936 and 1938, but only 37.7 thousand people emigrated between 1951 and 1960. The amount of people who emigrated continued to decrease to 22 thousand people per decade between 1961 and 1980.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps more jobs were available in Poland during those decades, which prevented its people from emigrating, but in reality, leaving Poland permanently was difficult unless to another communist country. The statistics do not indicate where the Polish people emigrated to, but it most likely was not out of the Eastern Bloc. The unemployment rate in Poland between

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<sup>95</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 183.

<sup>96</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 318.

<sup>97</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 98.

1960 and 1980 was also virtually 0% because in a communist country, everyone has a job.<sup>98</sup> Although it looks good on paper for a country to have a 0% unemployment rate, in reality a “job” could consist of sitting at a desk and doing nothing.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, at first glance these statistics suggest that Poland’s employment rate drastically improved under communism because everyone had work, but the work was not always productive.

Production of electricity, cars, and lorries also increased considerably following WWII in Poland. Electricity production increased by 262% from 1938 to 1950 and continued to increase, but this was still nothing in comparison to countries like Germany – both West and East.<sup>100</sup> Road vehicle production especially increased between 1950 and 1990, though. During this time range, passenger car production increased by over 10,000%, while lorry production increased by over 2,500%!<sup>101</sup> These numbers indicate that Poland underwent significant industrial productivity, but again do not compare with countries like France, West Germany, and the United Kingdom. Although passenger car production increased, the numbers do not indicate what percentage of Poland’s population owned a car. As previously noted by my parents, cars were very expensive, and not many people owned a car in Opole, which was a city. Therefore, the statistics may be misleading. Poland’s GDP also continued to increase after 1938. Between 1950 and 1980, Poland’s GDP increased by 135%, indicating again that Poland had high industrial productivity.<sup>102</sup> By 1990 the GDP decreased by 11%, which could be due to the changing government, but that is also uncertain. Overall, the statistics conclude that Poland’s economy significantly improved due to industrialization, but only at the expense of the bulk of the Polish

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<sup>98</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 135-6.

<sup>99</sup> Wojciech Bieniarz, interview by author, Vernon, CT, September 9, 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 361.

<sup>101</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 386-7.

<sup>102</sup> Kuklo, *Poland in Numbers*, 553.

people and their quality of life. Therefore, while Poland's economy improved under communism, the quality of life greatly declined for most Poles.

## Poland's Vicious Circle

Between 1950 and 1984 – the period most relative to my parents' lives in Poland – Poland's economic and political institutions followed the vicious circle. Unlike the virtuous circle, the vicious circle is supported by the *iron law of oligarchy*: “the overthrow of a regime presiding over extractive institutions heralds the arrival of a new set of masters to exploit the same set of pernicious extractive institutions.”<sup>103</sup> Although Poland's government was not defined as an oligarchy, it still followed the vicious circle because its economic and political institutions were extractive – a main component for the vicious circle – and the same political party remained in power for over forty years. According to Acemoglu and Robinson, extractive political and economic institutions enrich a few at the expense of many, and keep abuses of power unchecked.<sup>104</sup> Extractive institutions rig elections in order to remain in power, because with power comes economic riches. As a result, “extractive political institutions thus tend to create a vicious circle because they provide no line of defense against those who want to further usurp and misuse the power of the state.”<sup>105</sup> This idea directly reflects Poland's government following WWII, because the Communist party greatly misused its power. As my father previously explained, voting in Poland was mandatory but superficial. Citizens were not allowed to nominate candidates or even choose a name on the ballots. This allowed the Communist party to stay in power since no one questioned the elections' results in fear of being arrested.

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<sup>103</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 366.

<sup>104</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 343.

<sup>105</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 344.

The reason that Poland's government remained extractive for four decades without major threats to power is because the Party prevented large inequalities in the Polish society. According to *Why Nations Fail*, "when extractive institutions create huge inequalities in society and great wealth and unchecked power for those in control, there will be many wishing to fight to take control of the state and institutions."<sup>106</sup> As a result, civil wars, strikes, and other means of rebellion can occur when the people feel unequal to those in power. The Communist party attempted to keep the Polish population happy by providing incentives like discounted vacations, but this temporary joy among the people did not last long. By 1980, workers' strikes were taking place all over Poland, marking the beginning of the Solidarity movement and the end of Poland's extractive period. Solidarity proved that vicious circles are not unbreakable, but are resilient.

## Conclusion

Within a century, Poland's political and economic institutions transitioned from inclusive to extractive, ultimately impacting the country's economy and quality of life. As a newly independent nation following the Great War, Poland's leaders – Józef Piłsudski and the Sejm – quickly repaired the devastated country with its people in mind. Due to Poland's limited infrastructure and government framework at the outset, those in power could have easily exploited the population for their personal and financial gain, but they instead developed crucial reforms which largely benefited Poland's economy and quality of life. Piłsudski and the Sejm worked together to create agrarian reforms, which industrialized Poland's economy, and work reforms, which improved working conditions for all workers, both male and female. In addition to these reforms, numerical data proves that living conditions improved during the interwar

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<sup>106</sup> Acemoglu, *Why Nations Fail*, 366.

period due to a decrease in infant mortality, an increase in life expectancy, and fewer deaths due to health problems or injuries. The numerical data also proves that Poland experienced economic growth after WWI due to its decreasing unemployment rate, its rise in industrial employment, its flourishing coal and petroleum exports, and its increasing GDP per capita in US dollars. Clearly, Poland's leaders wished to improve Poland's economy but not at the expense of the people. This indicates that the country's political and economic institutions were inclusive, leading Poland about a virtuous circle. Piłsudski also shared his power with the Sejm, which was represented by multiple political parties. Because no one individual or political party had absolute power in Poland during the interwar period, no leader could abuse his or her power. As a result, Poland's inclusive institutions followed a virtuous circle until the Second World War.

After WWII Poland's institutions became extractive, leading the country out of its virtuous circle and into a vicious circle. Instead of having multiple political parties, Poland was led by only the Communist party. Although the economy continued to grow under communism, the quality of life in Poland significantly declined due to poor health care and insufficient work regulations. As a result, Solidarity emerged in 1980 after numerous workers' strikes demanding better working conditions took place throughout Poland. Communist Poland also censored education, had inadequate consumer goods – which partially required connections and bribes to obtain anyways – and a poor environment. Its elections were also rigged, which made voting rights arbitrary. Because the Polish people could not vote for their leaders due to fear of being arrested, the Communist party stayed in power unopposed, making the country's institutions very extractive. Therefore, Poland fell into a vicious circle once communism took control. While historical evidence proves that Poland's quality of life and economy improved during the interwar period due to the nation's inclusive leaders, personal accounts by my parents show that

living conditions declined during the second half of the twentieth century due to Poland's extractive rulers. As a result, Poland was far more successful as an independent nation than under communist authority.

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