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“Closing the Abyss of Moral Misery”: Poland, the League of Nations and the Fight against the Trafficking of Women and Children

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Abstract

The study focuses on the emerging Second Polish Republic and its involvement in the international fight against the trafficking of women and children under the auspices of the League of Nations. In conflict with all neighbouring states, Poland was highly dependent on support from the new Western Entente-backed international system and in turn had to adhere closely to existing conventions and newly negotiated international policies. Using the example of the ratification process of the League of Nations International Convention against the Traffic in Women and Children of 1921, the study shows that internationalism in the interwar period had a significant impact on national policymaking and state-building. Thus, it provides a better understanding of how anti-trafficking efforts in Poland interacted with policies deployed by the League of Nations and how international and transnational activism affected the construction of state institutions.

Keywords

Poland – League of Nations – traffic in women and children – interwar period – state-building

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These are our sisters, bones from our bones and blood from our blood.
Let us go to them, let us bring them out of decay, let us give them our

hands, wipe away their tears, and fill their hearts' yearning for warmth with confidence. Here the whole world must be rebuilt, here the abyss of misery must be buried, and the abyss of moral misery must be closed.



With¹ these words, Stanisław Posner, a Polish lawyer and abolitionist, described the misery of women and girls who had been trafficked for prostitution (Butler 1904: 10). Even before the Polish State came into existence at the end of the First World War, the trafficking of women was already seen as a considerable social problem that was profoundly connected with the viability of the Polish nation (Jakubczak 2020: 8–9). Hence, the fight against trafficking in interwar Poland became deeply intertwined with the idea of a morally and physically healthy nation-state. As the eugenic movement rose to prominence in Poland, its proponents sought to ensure the biological strength and health of the new generation of Polish citizens. These Poles should abdicate “moral sins” such as prostitution and criminality so that a new, modern Polish nation could be rebuilt (Stauter-Halsted 2015: 343–344). As did many of her contemporaries, Stanisława Paleolog, who would later become head of the Polish Women’s Police, claimed that these sins were imposed on the Polish nation by foreign powers and that “prostitution was not a product of social relations within the country, but came from without, developing with the infiltration of foreign influences. The partitioning powers had, she asserted, allowed trafficking and prostitution as part of a strategy aimed at the ‘lowering of cultural and moral standards’ of the nation” (cited in Petrucci 2015: 341).

The territorial rearrangements and creation of new states in East-Central Europe after 1918 had fundamentally changed routes of migration, turning Poland into a hub for the emigration not only of Poles and Jews, but also refugees fleeing the Russian Civil War. For this reason, the League of Nations considered Poland an important “supplier” of women and girls for prostitution abroad. According to information obtained from various sources during an investigation into the Traffic in Women and Children by the League of Nations (1924–1926), Poland was identified as one of the chief European centres of the traffic both at the national and international level. Investigators found overwhelming evidence of a steady flow of girls from Poland to France and Latin America (WL, 41BS/7/2/08 Box FL128 [1927], 125). In a July 1925 appeal to railway officials to assist in combating traffic, the Ministry of the Interior issued

1 The research for this article was generously funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

the following statement (No. T.B. 7/24): “There is no country in the world where traffic in women and children is spreading more than in Poland. The fact that in some South American states the word ‘Polka’ (Polish women – JN) is synonymous with ‘Prostitute’ is proof that a great number of victims of this traffic originate from Poland” (LNA, S177/32 [1924]. Appeal). Yet not only national and international elites were deeply concerned with trafficking from Poland. The Polish press frequently reported on the scale of the danger of prostitution and the traffic in women and children, but also on the efforts of the Polish government and of voluntary associations, as this exemplary excerpt from the socialist newspaper *Robotnik* shows:

Trade in “live goods” is taking on alarming proportions in Poland. Hardly a week goes by in which the police stations, the Office of the Polish Committee for the Fight of Traffic in Women and Children and the editorial offices of newspapers are not alarmed by new cases of the disappearance of young girls from various social spheres. We must not, therefore, close our eyes to danger; we must not, this being a sensitive matter, dispose of this matter in silence. Our society, which cares about the welfare of the young generation, should shake off its indifference about the fall of morality and the fact that there are people among us who, in order to earn money, undertake such repulsive activities as “human trafficking.” An important weapon in our hands is to make young people aware of the ambushes that await them.

ROBOTNIK - CENTRALNY ORGAN P.P.S., 2 NOVEMBER 1927: 5

Although anxieties over trafficking resurfaced after the First World War amidst a broad sense of moral and political crisis, attempts of Polish social activists to participate in the emerging international campaigns against the trafficking of women and children dated back to the pre-war period. In the activists’ view, the most significant causes for trafficking were the multitude of pathologies that were entangled with prostitution, such as the spreading of venereal diseases, alcoholism and pornography, which they feared would inevitably lead to the nation’s downfall. The attainment of independent statehood, which led to the formation of a state that integrated the partitioned areas previously under the rule of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, thus added a second objective in efforts to fight the trafficking of women and children in Poland: to facilitate the construction of an institutionally and legally integrated, coherent state, based on moral foundations. The historian David Petrucci goes so far as to say that the campaign against the traffic in women and children represented a vital step

in achieving independence, where this traffic “served as a salve for the country’s moral insecurities” (Petruccioli 2015: 341–342).

This article, therefore, seeks to reconstruct the impact of the League of Nations’ international anti-trafficking efforts on the Polish Republic’s fight against the trafficking of women and children. Focusing on the early period of Polish statehood before Józef Piłsudski established authoritarian rule (1919–1926), the article reconstructs the main arguments of the Polish political and civilian representatives who took an active role against this trafficking. It puts a particular focus on these representatives’ arguments for and against the importance of ratifying the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children of 1921 (International Convention, 1921). To put the convention’s stipulations into action would have meant considerable changes to the social welfare system of the Polish state at a time when political, economic and security issues seemed more important to the nation. Honing in on this debate raises a series of questions that broaden our understanding not only of the fight against the trafficking itself, but also of the broader social, political and international history of interwar Poland: We learn which arguments dominated the discourse around the production of international norms and their implementation into national laws and policies. We also learn how the League’s efforts to fight this traffic influenced Polish legislation and the building of institutions and how far Poland’s contribution to the fight against the trafficking of women and children was linked to different concepts of Polish society and the nation. Given the fundamental changes in the post-1918 international system, this article also sheds light on how Poles viewed their contribution to the fight against trafficking as a pledge of a positive role of their new state in the wider world. To answer the above research questions, the article probes the records of the sessions of the Polish Sejm and Senate and complements these with newspaper articles and legal texts, reconstructing both public and legal debates around efforts to fight this traffic.

Existing historiography has hitherto studied the interwar fight against traffic in women and children either as an international or as a national struggle. However, they have rarely emphasized the impact of the dynamic relationship between the League and its member states in national contexts. Although scholars from the English- and German-speaking world have shown interest in transnational aspects of the history of the fight against trafficking and respective projects of international cooperation, they have done so rather with a focus on the “white slave trade” before the First World War (Bristow 1977; Walkowitz 1980; Guy 1995; Dalley 2000; Vries 2005; Donovan 2006; Pliley 2014; Attwood 2015). Yet important studies have recently begun to shed light on the involvement and impact of the League of Nations on the international fight

against interwar traffic in women and children (Gorman 2007; Leppänen 2007; Limoncelli 2010; Pliley 2010; Knepper 2011, 2012; Legg 2012; Rodríguez García 2012; Laite 2017; Knepper 2011, 2016).

However, there is still a considerable dearth of historical research on the fight against the trafficking of women and children in interwar Eastern Europe, although H. Wilson Harris considered the region the true epicentre. His influential landmark study of 1928 raised global awareness of the work of the League of Nations against the trafficking of women and children and concluded that, as compared to Eastern Europe, this traffic was a problem of little significance in most of Western and Central Europe and the United States (Harris 1928). Recently, studies have started to emerge on discrete aspects of the trafficking of women and children in Eastern European countries in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as in related fields such as prostitution (Hetherington 2014; Petrunov 2014; Jakubczak 2020). Yet these studies differ vastly in terms of their methodological and thematic focus.

Interwar Poland has received hardly any scholarly attention outside the country itself. As of yet, no studies exist in non-Polish languages on the history of interwar era trafficking of women and children in Poland and the fight against it. However, recent studies in related fields have hinted at the significance of anti-trafficking policies for much broader issues. Most importantly, in her study on the history of prostitution in pre-World War I Poland, Keely Stauter-Halsted (2009, 2011, 2015) has noted that the perception of prostitution in early twentieth-century Poland changed from primarily a moral failing to an economic instrument, which had considerable implications for anti-prostitution policies.

The problem of traffic in women and children in the Second Republic of Poland, in particular in relation to international organizations and transnational cooperation, is taken up much less frequently in Polish historical studies, but several discrete case studies exist (Szczygłowski 2005; Gołdyn 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2013; Antonów 2013a, 2013b, 2019; Zakrzewski 2015; Dulak 2016). Polish historians have showcased the profound connection between the fight against the traffic in women and children in the Second Polish Republic and campaigns and initiatives that aimed to solve other social problems (Glensk 2014) such as prostitution (Sikorska-Kulesza 2004; Rodak 2006; Grata 2013; Krzemiński 2013; Kuźma-Markowska 2013; Lipska-Toumi 2014), venereal disease (Bołdyrew 2011; Rodak 2017) and public health (Cianciara 2011; Magdalena Gawin 2006, 2008, 2011). Polish interwar legal reforms (Głogowski 2014) concerning prostitution were thus always conceptualized as a means to deal with broader administrative issues, such as policing (David Petrucci 2015).

No studies exist so far that systematically trace the interaction between the League of Nations and other international organizations with the Polish interwar state apparatus. As recent scholarship has highlighted, the League of Nations provided a means for the continuation of the principles of imperial rule. Not only could the British and French Empires instrumentalize the League (Pedersen, 2015) but the League also absorbed certain functions and networks of the collapsed empires of Central and Eastern Europe (Becker/Wheatley, 2021). Thus, interwar nation states and internationalist projects such as the League of Nations cannot and should not be regarded in opposition to each other; rather, the interwar states had a significant interest in furthering internationalism and did not pursue an agenda that would deliberately undermine the League (Sluga 2013). We can safely postulate that this was particularly true for those new states that emerged from the collapsed empires and were under the constant fear of territorial revisionism. As historians have shown, the League – and the victors of the Great War – had a considerable interest in promoting the economic, social and political stability of these states to safeguard them from German and Bolshevik influence (Clavin 2013; Marcus 2018). However, we know little about how internationalism and state-building interacted in this region.

To shed light on the relationship of anti-trafficking efforts and the building of the Polish state, the article expands on broader approaches towards the history of the newly established interwar states. It builds on studies that place at centre the “nationalizing state,” which strove towards a hitherto non-existent ethno-cultural homogeneity (Brubaker 1996). However, it expands this concept, taking the modern state’s homogenizing tendency more broadly into account. Scholars of state-building and nationalism have emphasized that modern states seek to achieve a degree of congruity of state and society through economic, cultural and social policies. Building on Ernest Gellner’s concept of “cultural striving” (Gellner and Breuille 2013: 137–43),² D. L. Sheth argues that “this homogenizing tendency, through which the state seeks a cultural basis for its rule, is intrinsic to all modern states. In a plural, multi-ethnic society such a cultural basis does not become available to it unless it succeeds in transcending the prevailing pluralities and creates for itself a political culture of citizenship, universalizes formal

2 Ernest Gellner characterises this tendency of the modern state as cultural striving. This means a striving for the creation of a high (literate) culture, which is expected to weaken all other sub- group identities and thus homogenise them into a new cultural identity as nationals and citizens belonging to a national state.

education and opens up the opportunity structure by equalizing life-chances of individuals in the society” (Sheth 1992: 425).

Poland represents a particularly well-suited case study for the study of “cultural striving.” With the profound and extensive changes in Europe brought about by the First World War, the culture and vitality of nations increasingly moved to the centre of concern. The post-war period is often regarded as a time of moral fears and cultural and moral crises (Plach 2006: 18). For more than a century, the territory of the Second Polish Republic had been under the imperial rule of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, resulting in the application of fundamentally different social policies and legislation. The Second Polish Republic thus tried to reconstruct the state out of three different and divided polities. This, however, was an extremely challenging task. Poland suffered considerable damage during the First World War and, until 1921, was involved in border wars with neighbouring states. Poland’s peasantry, the largest part of the population by far, suffered from poverty. The economy underwent hyperinflation. Ineffectual and unstable governments collapsed in quick succession. The magnitude of these challenges led many Poles to link the ostensible shortcomings of the new Polish state to a deeper moral crisis (Petruccioli 2015: 341–342). Eva Plach has identified a lack of historical studies on the post-war moral trauma of Eastern European societies, which she attributes to these numerous political and economic crises that followed the war (Plach 2006: 20). Furthermore, she posits models of femininity and expressions of gender identities as bound to concepts of morality – and morality itself in turn as a reflection of “the quality of Polish citizenship and of the very essence and vitality of the nation” (Plach 2006: 23).

The League’s efforts to fight trafficking built on pre-war efforts to codify international law. Already in the late nineteenth century, the international community had begun to increasingly concern itself with the fate of young girls and women who were forced into prostitution and often also abducted abroad as a result of the white slave traffic (Doezema 1999). The traffic became subject to international regulations as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, when the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic of 18 May 1904 (International Agreement, 1904) and the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic of White Slaves of 4 May 1910 (International Convention, 1910) were adopted. The First World War halted further efforts in this direction, which then experienced a renewed upswing through the order of the Versailles Peace Treaty and under the administration of the League of Nations.

The League considered the problem of white slavery to be of such concern worldwide that from its very establishment – entrusted by its covenant “with

the general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children” (Art. 23 c, The Covenant, 1924) – it began to collaborate with all old and newly established states. Earlier attempts to find an international solution to the problem of trafficking before the war, which had taken the form of diplomatic conferences staged during the years from 1899 to 1914, had been of mixed success because their agreements and conventions did not meet with sufficient compliance among those countries tasked with executing them (Rodríguez García 2012: 102–103). The League’s first initiative regarding the fight against trafficking was the organisation of an international conference in June 1921. This conference, which took place in June 1921 and was attended by representatives of 34 nations, resulted in a new international convention and the establishment of an Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children to take charge of this matter (LNA, C.52.M.52.1927.IV. [1927], 8; LNA, C.484.M.339.1921.IV. [1921], 112). Great Britain, France, Japan, Spain, Rumania, Denmark, Italy, Uruguay and Poland were invited to appoint representatives to this Advisory Committee (Knepper 2011: 92–93).

Poland was the only country among those newly established as part of the post-war peace settlement. Its membership in this group was thus far from obvious. According to the French representative Léon Bourgeois, the League’s Council had initially planned to invite Germany but had then chosen to prefer Poland based on the fact that emigration from Central Europe was being carried out via Danzig rather than Hamburg, and that Danzig served as the main outlet for emigration from Poland (LNA, C.445.M.265.1922.IV. [1922], 26–27; “Traffic in Women and Children. Appointment of a Permanent Committee” 1922: 111–113). This means that geographical considerations were the main reasons for Poland’s inclusion in the committee.

The Polish Government decided to nominate Stanisław Posner, the author of the passionate quote in the article’s introduction, as its delegate for the Advisory Committee, a position he held until his death in 1930 (LNA, R647/12/13720). Posner had been one of the first Polish activists before the First World War to support the women’s movement and the abolition of prostitution and to fight the trafficking of women and girls. He was a successful Polish lawyer of Jewish descent as well as a socialist activist, senator and vice-marshal of the Senate of the Second Polish Republic. His contemporaries held him in high esteem for his political and social commitments and his efforts in the struggle for a free and independent Poland (Weychert-Szymanowska, May 1930: 3–4). In 1902 already, Posner published his first book on the trafficking of women and children, “At the Abyss” (*Nad Otchłanią*), which drew attention to the fight against prostitution and the trafficking (Posner 1903). He was a staunch supporter of the League of Nations and

believed sincerely that the work of the League would lead to success: “Let us be cheerful because not only have we lived to see such a time that has witnessed the formation of the League of Nations, but we are also contributors to this progress, and the Geneva Protocol includes and will always include the signature of the Republic of Poland” (Posner 1925: 15).

As a consequence of the Minorities Treaty between the Principal Allied and Associated Powers and Poland (Minorities Treaty, 1919) (the so-called “Little Treaty of Versailles”), which Poland signed on 28 June 1919 under pressure from the Entente, the Polish state was not only obliged to protect its national minorities, but “to adhere within twelve months of the coming into force of the present Treaty to the International Conventions specified in Annex I” (Art. 19, Minorities Treaty, 1919). These included the international agreement of 18 May 1904, and the international convention of 4 May 1910, regarding the suppression of the White Slave Traffic. Further, Poland had to “adhere to any new convention, concluded within the approval of the Council of the League of Nations within five years of the coming into force of the present Treaty, to replace any of the international instruments specified in Annex I” (Art. 19, Minorities Treaty, 1919).

In September 1921, at the second ordinary session of the Assembly of the League of Nations, a third international convention, based on the recommendations of the International Conference on Traffic in Women and Children in June 1921 and supplementing the provisions of the earlier agreements, was signed by representatives of 33 states (LNA, C.52.M.52.1927.IV. [1927], 8). This meant that by adhering to the Minorities Treaty Poland also had to join the League of Nations’ fight against the trafficking of women and children and ratify and implement the 1921 Convention – whether it wanted to or not. The League itself regarded the signing of the three conventions as a demonstration of Poland’s solidarity with the international order and as an expression of the fact that Poland’s views did not fundamentally differ from those of other countries (LNA, R3032/11B/1619 [1928], n.p.). Poland ratified the aforementioned Agreement of 1904 as well as the Convention of 1910 as early as January 1921 (Dz.U.1922/nr 87/poz. 783). It was therefore from this moment obliged to adhere to these.

The League’s new International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children from 1921, however, was more contentious. The Polish Government did in fact sign it in Geneva in 1921, but did not ratify it until three years later in 1924. As an explanation, Stanisław Posner used the committee’s session in March 1923 to draw attention to the difficult situation Poland had found itself in since the end of the war, to which he attributed this delay. He stated that

the Geneva Convention of September 1921 had been signed, but not ratified because the Polish Diet had been concerned with vital constitutional measures which had had to take precedence over every other form of legislation. A bill, however, was now before it and had already been accepted by the Polish Cabinet; it would very shortly become law. [...] Poland had three penal codes and a committee was now engaged in unifying these. The legal measures stipulated in the Convention had, therefore, not yet been put into force.

LNA, C.225.M.129/1923.IV. [1923], 10

Since the Polish state had only come into existence when the war had ended, the implementation of the conventions' recommendations posed a considerable challenge for the Polish government. However, Poland was making every effort to do so as quickly as possible, Posner claimed. As a reason for this delay, Posner emphasised that the empires that had ruled over the three partitions of Poland had neglected the moral welfare of their Polish subjects (LNA, C.225.M.129/1923.IV. [1923], 10). The Polish discourse around the traffic in women and children initially rested on the assumption that the partition powers had promoted trafficking to demoralize the Polish nation and thus consolidate their rule through a divide-and-conquer-policy (LNA, C.225.M.129/1923.IV. [1923], 10). Nonetheless, the Polish government could refer to pre-war legal frameworks that had been enacted in the individual partitions to combat prostitution and trafficking (LNA, C.46.M.22.1921.IV. [1921]; see also: Lipska-Toumi 2014: 119–120). In Congress Poland – the region around Warsaw that had been under Russian rule until the First World War – initiatives of Polish doctors had led to the abolition of brothels (so-called 'licensed houses') as early as 1910. In 1919, the Ministry of Public Health extended this act of abolition to the whole country (LNA, R3032/11B/1619 [1928], n.p.; AAN, 15/241 [1933], 121–122). This earned Poland considerable respect among representatives at the League of Nations, who praised: "Although in 1919 Poland had not yet acceded to the Agreement of 1904 or to the 1910 Convention, unlike the other states' parties there she was already acting in the spirit of these international agreements" (LNA, R3032/11B/1619 [1928], n.p.).

The success of these measures was also specified in Poland's 1922 annual report to the League of Nations, which stated that as a result of "the abolition of licensed houses in Poland, the influx of prostitutes from abroad has almost entirely ceased" (LNA, R3032/11B/1619 [1928], n.p.; see also: LNA, S177/32 [1924]. Annual Report, 40–44). It is, therefore, no surprise that the Polish government and its representative Posner were keen supporters of the abolition of the system of state-regulated brothels within the Advisory

Committee: “The Committee’s primary object was to combat the traffic in women and children, and this proposal would hit the traffickers in their most vital part – their purses. Traffickers would lose a great part of their trade if foreign women were prevented from entering licensed houses. The Council and the Assembly desired to see the total suppression of these houses and this was the first step towards it” (LNA, C.225.M.129/1923.IV. [1923], 21). Thus, Poland could look back on considerable experience in this field and used it at the international level to collaborate with other countries in the fight against the traffic in women and children. This experience allowed the Polish delegates to the League to articulate Poland’s specific purpose as an experienced contributor to international efforts to fight trafficking. Bound by the provisions of the international conventions of 1904 and 1910, the Polish Government rather swiftly began to take measures to combat the traffic in accordance with the principles contained in these two conventions (RP11/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923]; Macko 1927: 286).

Within Poland’s commitment to the agreements and conventions, a variety of components coalesced, which can be regarded as small but significant elements of the process of Polish state-building. Some of the first measures aimed at creating an administrative structure in the state were directly related to trafficking and migration movements after the First World War. Most of these measures took place through the Polish Emigration Office (*Urząd Emigracyjny*). The Emigration Office positioned state officials at the most important railway stations and at Polish consulates across Europe. It cooperated closely with the Polish Association for the Protection of Young Girls (*Polskie Towarzystwo Opieki nad Dziewczętami*) and made sure that all groups of emigrants were escorted by chaperones who looked after women and young girls on board ships (AAN, 503/3.4/765, 29).

In addition to that, the Second Polish Republic formed a special bureau within the Department for Public Order and the Police of the Ministry of the Interior. This bureau, which acted under the name Central Bureau for the International Fight against the Trade in Women and Children in the Republic of Poland (*Centralne Biuro Międzynarodowego Zwalczenia Handlu Kobietami i Dziećmi w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*), was based on the stipulations of the 1904 Agreement. The scope of the office’s activities was broad. Its primary task was the collection of information on the trafficking of women and children and their recruitment for prostitution abroad. It also compiled data that could facilitate the tracking and punishment of persons involved in this traffic. Moreover, it supervised the state police authorities concerning the maintenance of a central criminal record of persons involved in this trade, their associates, suspects, etc. The Central Bureau was designed to be in direct correspondence with the

relevant bodies of other countries and the General Secretariat of the League of Nations in Geneva on executive matters relating to the fight against trafficking (*Gazeta Bydgoska*, 14 November 1929: 4; RPII/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923]; LNA, S177/32, 52).

However, the Central Bureau was not the only national institution dedicated to the fight against trafficking. In 1922 the Society for Combating Racial Degeneration and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (*Towarzystwo Walki ze zwyrodnieniem rasy*) established the so-called Polish Committee for Combating Traffic in Women and Children (*Polski Komitet Walki Handlem Kobietami i Dziećmi*). The founding of this committee was largely due to the initiative of Dr. Witold Chodźko, a eugenicist and public health expert who served as Poland's first Minister of Public Health and delegate to the League of Nations. Chodźko created the committee in close collaboration with the Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (AAN, 503/3.4/765, 38; RPII/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923]). The Committee was specifically created to unify all the activities of those existing associations that fought against trafficking at a national level, but also to serve as a node in a network of internationally co-ordinated efforts, as the press reported when announcing its founding:

We cannot consider the fight against the traffic in women as rationally organized here. Although there are several private philanthropic societies, their activity is minimal due to a lack of funds and discrepancies in the work of individual societies. [...] Such a committee would also serve as a link between the government and the individual societies and be in a position to communicate with international institutions of the same kind and, in the first place, with the London-based international office for the fight against the traffic in women and children. Apart from the main committee, there would be numerous provincial committees, which extend their activities throughout Poland. The main and provincial committees must be in constant contact with administrative and executive offices for the fight against trafficking in women and children, with representatives of, among others, labour and social welfare, public health and foreign affairs, and their bodies such as immigration points, sanitation and consulates. The Committee has the support and assistance of our government authorities.

KURJER POLSKI, 5 OCTOBER 1922: 11

Stanisław Posner presented the aforementioned efforts at the League's Advisory Committee's meeting, highlighting the establishment of the Polish Committee and the abolition of licensed houses. Regulations that would govern

employment agencies were in the process of consideration, Posner added, and anti-trafficking laws were soon to be drafted. These laws would contain additional regulations put forward by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) specifically concerning emigration. This meant, Posner proceeded to emphasize, that three ministries were concerned with measures to combat the trafficking: the Ministry of the Interior, with which the Central Authority was affiliated, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which was closely in touch with the Polish Committee, and the Ministry of Justice, which was in charge of drafting anti-trafficking laws. Besides, three voluntary organizations facilitated anti-trafficking efforts: a Catholic, a Protestant and a Jewish organization, all of which could draw from considerable experiences in this struggle. The Advisory Committee greeted Posner's report with “great satisfaction” (LNA, C.225.M.129/1923.IV. [1923], 10).

A couple of weeks before the meeting of the Advisory Committee, a draft of the ratification act of the League's convention of 1921 was sent to the Polish Sejm by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with a request for its discussion in the next Sejm session. A closer look at the ratification process reveals the close interaction of anti-traffic efforts with the broader processes of state-building. The draft of the ratification act pointed out that Poland was the European country that was the most vulnerable to the trafficking of women and children. As evidence, lawmakers emphasized the fact that “the Polish language is resounding in almost all brothels of Central and South America, as well as in the near and far east, where Polish girls from Constantinople were found, in Calcutta and Yokohama. In Poland, as we know, there were nodal points of this trade before the war, and nowadays there are still numerous agencies and transport companies” (RPII/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923], 2).

Polish lawmakers added that traffickers had encountered numerous obstacles due to the difficult conditions brought about by the war but, with the improvement of railway connections and travel conditions, this was already in the process of changing. At that time, the traffic in women and children was mainly seen as a result of poor education, poverty and lack of housing. These social factors were aggravated by exploitative seduction, repulsion to work and the lack of social legal protection, which had to be remedied. The draft stated further that the actions against the trafficking of women and children would be guided “not only by general ethical principles or eugenic guidelines for the preservation of the race from degeneration, but above all by the social needs of the social classes and by the purity of family relations, which constitute an organizational unit of society, as well as the legal and administrative order in a constitutional state – the government of the Republic of Poland” (RPII/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923], 3). Not least, the draft shows that despite

the proliferation of a variety of different and competing concepts of what the Polish state should look like, it is safe to say that the concept of an ethnically homogenous nation-state became dominant. However, this did not mean – at least in the early years of the Polish Republic – the marginalization or elimination of foreign ethnicities and unviable people from society in the first place, but rather the creation of a morally and physically healthy nation based on the fundamentals of a Christian way of life.

The draft further criticized especially the lack of legal measures due to the different criminal legislation of the three empires that had divided Poland, which was seen as the main obstacle concerning the criminal prosecution of traffickers. This required the Sejm of the Republic of Poland to introduce, through an amendment, a uniform criminal law under the provisions of the Geneva Conventions for the prosecution of criminal activities throughout the territory of the Republic of Poland (RPII/1/405 [Druk Sejmowy] [1923], 3).³

The Sejm decided to forward the draft to the Sejm Commission for Foreign Affairs (*Komisja Spraw Zagranicznych*) and to the Sejm Commission for Social Welfare (*Komisja Opieki Społecznej*) (RPII/1/36 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1923], XXXVI/11). One year later on 5 February 1924, during the 96th session of the Sejm, both commissions reported on their examination of the draft ratification law in front of the Sejm. The Commission for Foreign Affairs was unanimous in its support for the ratification. In its members' understanding, this convention combined all the measures taken by individual countries to fight the traffic. These measures were expected to be implemented by any "normally developing" country (RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/11).

This convergence of national efforts within the framework of the new 1921 convention was seen as a precondition for the success of any concerted action, even within the individual nation-states. Therefore, the matter of ratification was "not so much a political matter for Poland as a matter of cultural equivalence with societies which take certain measures to raise the level of their moral culture" (RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/11). The act of ratification was described as the incorporation of Polish efforts in this field into the general measures of all "cultured" countries, which had already ratified the Convention and carried out the activities stipulated in the Convention (RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/11). Ratification was thus seen as Poland's entry ticket into a community of states defined by civilization, culture

3 This was the case until 1927, when president of the Polish Republic released a declaration *o karach za handel kobietami i dziećmi oraz za inne popieranie nierządu* (Lipska-Toumi 2014: 150–53).

and morality. This shows that for the newly established Polish State, belonging to Europe and being a state of ‘European character’ was of utmost importance, and this aspiration for a full-fledged position in the European order of states became a decisive factor for Poland’s engagement in the League of Nations and the relevant committees that fought the trafficking of women and children.

Besides, the Commission for Foreign Affairs argued for a quick ratification, noting that the ratification would not signify a rupture, but represented a continuation of the ratification of the 1904 and 1910 Conventions, which was already completed in 1919. The commission attached great importance to the establishment of a “uniform penal law” in the fight against the trafficking of women and children that transcended the old partition boundaries and thus facilitated the creation of an all-Polish legal code (RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/12).

Maria Holder-Eggerowa, a Polish social activist and member of the Sejm and Polish Committee for the Fight against the Traffic in Women and Children, who spoke on behalf of the Commission for Social Welfare, criticized the fact that none of the institutions committed to combating trafficking had dealt with the matter vigorously enough. Moreover, Polish criminal law failed to hold guilty parties to account. Holder-Eggerowa, who was highly regarded among Polish politicians as a consequence of her pre-war work as a founder of orphanages, claimed that the current social and economic conditions in Poland, such as excessive prices, poor living conditions, lack of work and, at the same time, a lack of culture and education in broad sections of the working class, formed the basis for the spread of this crime. According to Holder-Eggerowa, it was necessary to set all gears in motion to destroy this scourge, which she viewed as the greatest catastrophe any society could face (RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/14).

Holder-Eggerowa argued that the convention had to be ratified and implemented as a matter of urgency so that Poland could assume its international responsibilities and become a full-fledged member of the international system. She also pointed out that to fulfil the international obligations it was necessary to pass suitable laws to protect women and children and penalize criminals. She urged the Sejm to pass a preliminary penal law even before the integration and codification of the legal codes of the three partitions of Poland. She closed her presentation with the resolution that the Sejm should adopt a temporary penal code before the formal unification of the criminal law took place. This was not only in the interest of the government but also of all social organizations, society and self-government: “We must immediately begin to destroy the great evil and [...] we can do this with the strength of the whole of society”

(RPII/1/96 [Stenogram Sejmu] [1924], XCVI/14). The Sejm accepted the law of the ratification of the convention of 1921 as well as the resolutions of Mrs. Holder-Eggerowa.

A week later in the Senate, the second chamber of the Polish parliament, Stanisław Posner spoke on behalf of the Commission for Foreign Affairs on the draft ratification act and demanded that the bill and the resolution should be confirmed without amendment (RPII/1/46 [Stenogram Senatu] [1924], XLVI/3). Posner added a critique that the law should have been submitted for consultation much earlier. With astonishment, he pointed out that it had taken no less than 30 months to present the bill to the Senate:

I note with regret that the carelessness with which the Polish government is fulfilling its duty in this matter is very bad. It was very reluctantly taken up in the deliberations of the Committee for the Fight against Trafficking in Women and Children at the League of Nations. But this is what happened and I am very pleased to confirm that the Committee and the League of Nations can finally be informed that Poland has fulfilled its obligation, that the signature which it put under the Convention in September 1921 was not without significance.

RPII/1/46 [STENOGRAM SENATU] [1924], XLVI/4

He also put pressure on the solving of legal problems concerning penalties for the trafficking of women and children before any broader and more time-consuming efforts to unify Poland's criminal code – by waiting any further, he claimed, Poland would violate the convention's ratification which it had committed itself to.

Finally, with the Senate's unanimous approval on 13 February 1924, the Convention of 1921 was ratified and work on the draft of the bill concerning the penalties for the trafficking of women and children began. The long time it took the government, political institutions and social organizations to reach an agreement are well illustrated by this three-year delay in ratifying the League's convention. Yet it was not the last instance of significant political contention around the legal basis of the fight against trafficking of women and children, as the law on penalties for these crimes introduced a year later suggests. The Ministry of Justice's draft of 13 March 1925 was thoroughly criticized for allegedly being inconsistent with the 1910 and 1921 conventions and not imposing satisfactory penalties for this crime. It was sent back to the Sejm's Legal Committee on 2 April 1925. It did not return, however. The regulation of the penalization of traffic in women and children was ultimately carried out

by way of a presidential decree introduced two years later (Grata 2013: 257–258; RP/II/1/192 [1925], CXCV/5–CXCV/12). By now, the political and institutional setting had changed fundamentally: After the coup of May 1926, Poland became an authoritarian state committed to the country’s moral, political, social and cultural “recovery” (*Sanacja*). The democratic Poland established in 1918, increasingly regarded as ineffectual, fragmented, corrupt and immoral, had failed to fully ratify and codify a law designed to help overcome the country’s moral crisis. In this constellation, the fight against Traffic in Women and Children posed at the same time a considerable challenge and an instrument to create state structures and thus further state-building.

The League attributed great significance to Poland’s participation in the fight against the trafficking of women and children due to its geographical position in politically transformed Europe, which put the new state at the centre of emigration and trafficking routes. To Polish activists, the delay in ratifying the convention of 1921 thus recklessly called Poland’s membership in the European order of states into question. While this delay would seem to indicate an unwillingness of the Polish politicians to deal with the country’s moral crisis, the reasons rather reveal the context of these efforts in broader state-building processes. Other existential issues of the young state took precedence over the fight against trafficking, and the fight also hinged on legal frameworks that had not been created yet. The fight against trafficking was fundamentally intertwined with efforts to overcome the effects of the partition power’s rule over Poland, which represented the central challenges of Polish state-building: the creation of a uniform penal code as well as projects of “cultural striving,” which aimed at enhancing education, purging moral failings, and thus achieving a “pure” and homogenous nation-state. Poland’s membership in the League led to the establishment of several state and non-state anti-trafficking institutions with broad remits. This involved mainly the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. Institutions and committees were built and regulations were drawn to be able to adhere to the 1904 Agreement, the 1910 Convention and the 1921 Convention. Especially the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs worked closely with the Emigration Office and supported public institutions which were involved in the fight against the traffic, like the Polish Committee for Combating the Traffic in Women and Children. Thus the fight against the trafficking of women and children had impacts on the self-perception of the Polish nation, its position in the League of Nations and its perception by the community of states.

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